

# Racial Inequality, Institutional Discrimination: The “Great Awakening” in Global and Class Context

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*From 1972 to 2010, at three church-related colleges and one public university, I was among the professors of sociology teaching concepts that provided the foundation for the current racial awakening in the United States. In courses on Race and Ethnic Relations, I taught the concept of institutional discrimination, describing it as involving common institutional patterns that perpetuate racial inequality, even when the intention is not to do so; exemplified by the use of SAT scores in college admissions. I told my students that it is racist to say or think that “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough,” but classifying the belief as a subtle form of racism by some individuals, rather than as an example of “systemic racism;” and I noted that social inequalities also are rooted in class factors.*

I was formed in the early 1970s in the African-American intellectual tradition of black nationalism, which did not focus on white racism; but on the need for black empowerment and black consciousness to confront and transform global colonial and neocolonial structures, which have their particular manifestations in the United States. In accordance with this teaching, I developed several courses that emphasized the colonial and neocolonial structures of the world-system and the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements of the Third World. Unfortunately, these dimensions are rarely included in today’s racial awakening, even though they relate to the most profound aspects of the meaning of race in the modern world.

The reductionism of the racial awakening

I am saddened to observe that, in today’s racial awakening, the typical concepts of standard academic courses on race relations in the not-so-distant past have evolved to an overly racialized and inaccurate description of U.S. contemporary reality, while the most important dimensions of the meaning of race are not seen. I have been so deeply disturbed with today’s racialized narrative and its taking of the U.S. left by storm, that I began to look for alternative sources of intellectual nourishment. I have initiated extensive reading of articles in magazines of traditional conservatism (to be distinguished from neoconservatism), such as *Chronicles* and *The American Conservative*. To my surprise, I have found that many of the articles were informed by extensive reading in history and literature, and they displayed considerable common-sense intelligence as well as a sense of humor.

I also found that one does not have to be formed in black nationalism to see the intellectual and political limitations of today's racial awakening, which some have called the "Great Awakening," a disparaging play on words that references the American religious revivals known as the "Great Awakening," which in its second manifestation from the late eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, was characterized by extreme emotionalism and hellfire-and-damnation preaching. With respect to what some have called the "Woke Ideology," I find myself in agreement with Zach Goldberg, doctoral candidate in Political Science at Georgia State University, cited in the pages of *Chronicles*. Goldberg describes the ideology as a Manichean conceptualization that divides "a diverse, multiethnic society into oppressed and oppressor categories on the basis of skin color." He maintains that it is "a theory of racism that misrepresents facts about the world while stigmatizing any effort to criticize those facts as racist."

The analytical weakness of the Woke ideology ought to be clear to historians and social scientists. It downplays consistent societal efforts since the Civil Rights Law of 1964 and the Voting Rights Law of 1965 to eliminate racial discrimination, which have resulted in the removal of previously existing barriers in many institutions and areas of life, and which have created a new reality for the black middle class. Some articles, for example, jump immediately from slavery or the Jim Crow segregationist era to the killing of George Floyd. In general, an attempt is not made to place discussion of racism today in the context of a careful analysis of significant changes since the 1960s.

The Woke ideology bypasses the two most important prophetic voices of the African-American movement of the twentieth century, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, both of whom called for a direction fundamentally different from that implied by the Woke ideology. Malcolm, an advocate of self-help, emphasized the development of the black community through black control of its economic, political, and cultural institutions. King, following the civil rights gains of 1964 and 1965, turned to the development of a multiracial alliance against poverty in the Poor People's Campaign.

The limitations of the current racial awakening are illustrated by the 1619 Project of *The New York Times Magazine*. The project lacks understanding of the political-economy of slavery, and therefore, it cannot explain how slavery in the Caribbean and the U.S. South contributed to the spectacular economic ascent of the nation, from which all Americans today benefit materially, including blacks and the advocates of the Woke ideology; its moralistic focus on slaveholders and slave traders of that time misses the central historical and economic point. Moreover, the project does not see that conquest and exploitation are in no sense unique to Western Europeans or whites; and that conquest and exploitation have been a prevailing human tendency since the Agricultural Revolution, providing the foundation for great empires and civilizations.

In addition, the 1619 Project sets aside the anti-imperialist projection of the leftist governments and movements of the Third World, which for the past seventy years have declared the need for humanity to cast aside the historic human pattern of conquest and to forge an alternative to the European-centered capitalist world-economy, an alternative based on cooperation and mutually-beneficial trade. The 1619 Project, therefore, does not formulate a national plan based on the appropriation of insights emerging from peoples of color beyond U.S. borders.

And the Woke ideology has destructive political consequences. Although it influences white

liberals to some extent, it has the opposite effect on white moderates and conservatives. It thus deepens divisions among the people and stokes racial polarization.

The power elite, defending its interests, promotes the racial awakening

The Woke ideology has the support of the political establishment. Politicians invoke its rhetoric; the media editorializes in its defense; and corporations promise to reform in accordance with its teachings. There is a reason for this: The Woke ideology functions to channel popular anger and discontent in a manner that does not threaten elite interests, which is especially important in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the Occupy movement.

As Jeff Groom writes in *Chronicles*, “The establishment’s race narrative has redirected the rage of Occupy Wall Street and saved the regime from a reckoning.” He maintains that the Occupy movement, which “was generally devoid of any mention of race,” and which declared the corporate elite as the enemy of the 99%, has been transformed and redirected by corporations and the media, such that the whole left has been subsumed into the race narrative.

The leftist popular movement today, in the context of the pandemic-induced economic crisis, focuses not on economic injustices but on “*racial* oppression and injustice.” The central problem is not defined as “rule by the elites” but as “the enduring reign of white supremacy.” Consistent with Groom’s analysis, Goldberg presents extensive empirical evidence indicating that the media played a central role in stimulating the racial awakening.

The power elite today confronts unprecedented threats to its privileged position. The European-centered capitalist world-economy is unsustainable, as a result of it having reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth. The elite increasingly turns with desperation to imperialist wars of aggression, financial speculation, and Orwellian ideological manipulation, while Third World governments are increasingly united in their just call for an alternative, more democratic and sustainable world-system. During the last 75 years, popular movements have been able to take political power in various nations, and some have developed sustainable alternative projects, such as China, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Bolivia, (projects that U.S. intellectuals, of both the left and the right, ought to spend more time studying).

At the present time, the United States is vulnerable to the popular taking of power, inasmuch as it is a declining hegemonic power, experiencing intensified conflicts among its classes and interests. Therefore, the U.S. power elite must devise strategies to channel popular rebellions, preventing them from becoming a unified project seeking control of the federal government. Stoking racial and ethnic divisions among the people, through identity politics and the Woke ideology, is a logical course of action.

When we study revolutionary processes throughout the world, we find that the pre-revolutionary situation is characterized by chaotic and undirected rebellion, when a wide variety of idealist and contradictory ideas are in the air. No leader is present to put forth an accurate interpretation of the nation’s history and its current problems and divisions, and to unify the people in support of a comprehensive set of intelligent proposals. But then something happens to galvanize the rebellion to revolution, such as a disastrous war, an earthquake, or some other crisis.

In the case of Cuba, the galvanizing event was the attack on the Moncada military barracks by a group of 126 revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro. The attack failed; but it aroused the nation. The unfolding of events in the aftermath of the attack provided Fidel the opportunity to present a manifesto and a platform, calling the diverse sectors of the people, each called by name, to a unified struggle to overcome their common and particular problems, each analyzed accurately; as the entire nation watched, listened, and read.

The financial crisis of 2008 had all the ingredients of a galvanizing event. The indifference of the power elite and the political establishment to the needs of the working and middle classes as well as to the long-term productive needs of the nation had been increasingly evident since 1980. With the crisis of 2008, the reckless financial speculation of the corporate and financial elite now stood dramatically exposed. The people rebelled, and the Occupy Movement came into being. An accurate concept was formulated: the 99% against the 1% corporate elite. And a few concrete proposals in defense of the people were put forth.

But unlike Moncada, leaders did not emerge to have presence on the national scene. A manifesto interpreting the nation's history and a platform with a comprehensive package of realistic and intelligent proposals were not disseminated. In part, this was due to the lack of preparation for the historic moment by intellectuals and activists. But perhaps, with more time, prepared leaders would have emerged. And perhaps this possibility was eclipsed by an elite-supported emphasis on race, exploiting the divisions and confusions among the people.

What should be done?

I like what Goldberg says,

“Working to ensure that Americans of any background aren't unjustly victimized by the police and have access to quality health care, schools, and affordable housing doesn't require the promotion of a 'race-consciousness' that divides society into 'oppressed' and 'privileged' color categories. To the contrary, it requires that we de-emphasize these categories and unite in pursuit of common interests.”

In various essays written over the past several years, drawing upon study of victorious popular revolutions in various lands, I have argued that we need to form an alternative political party that would see the taking of political power, through democratic electoral means, as a long-term project, and that would focus in the near-term on the education of the people, through the dissemination of pamphlets and the organization of regular face-to-face discussion and study meetings; including a manifesto that interprets national and human history, and a platform that puts forth a comprehensive and realistic program of specific proposals.

It would form its interpretations and proposals on the basis of consciousness of the experiences of all of the peoples of the nation and the world. It would call to participation peoples of all colors (including whites) and all workers (including union, non-union, and self-employed workers), intellectuals, professionals, businesspersons, homemakers, and farmers that that pertain to the 99%. It would explain the necessary role of the state in the economy and in the creation of conditions that ensure the protection of the social and economic rights and needs of the people.

And it would explain the need for an anti-imperialist foreign policy that respects the sovereignty of nations, as the only possible foundation for world peace. It would sponsor extensive and respectful debate and discussion among the people with respect to complex and divisive issues, such as abortion, gender identity, sexuality, gun ownership, family, religion, and patriotism, seeking national consensus in regard to courses of action.

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