

# Racism and American Politics

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*In the article entitled, "Racial Identity Returns to American Politics," "The New York Times" attempts to explain why the US working class is being drawn to racial and ethnic issues over economic ones (Wed, Jan. 6, 2016).*

However, the NYT casts doubt on any meaningful analysis by the second sentence, stating that this question

"has long bedeviled analysts on the left, troubled that people who would largely benefit from a more robust government seem so often to vote for right-leaning politicians ..."

By the third paragraph, readers are told that the Republican primary is "evolving from one surprise to the next." Yes, racial politics is always a surprise unless we explore how racism and economic exploitation are linked in American history.

The NYT gives us the familiar tropes, of course: voters "nostalgic for the country they lived in 50 years ago," and working people fearing that social services go predominantly to Blacks. But we must move beyond this familiar ground so comforting to Wall Street if we expect to understand how racism is perpetuated by our political system.

One book that does this very well is "Sundown Towns: The Hidden Dimension of American Racism" by James W. Loewen. Describing the reasons that towns from Maine to California expelled their black populations beginning around 1890, Loewen cites the waves of immigration that brought so many ethnic groups to this country. The Democrats, the "White Man's Party," capitalized on immigrants' desire to be labeled "white" by running candidates who attacked African Americans as lazy, untrustworthy, and sexually menacing. This period was also the time of the Gilded Age, and the concomitant rise of an extremely wealthy elite. Did both political parties attack African Americans to divert attention from the obscene gap between the wealthy and the working people of our country?

Most whites living in towns and suburbs across America do not know what a sundown town is. They take their ethnic homogeneity completely for granted, attributing it to economic differences and not to racist terror. But in the years following 1890, Blacks were run out of these same towns, their houses and all their belongings usually burned. Signs were then put on the highways, reminding travelers that no African American was allowed in town after the whistle blew at 6 pm. The last sundown law in the country was overturned in Stamford CT in the 1950's. According to a recent Brookings Institute report, the Stamford stands out in another area as well. It has the worst ratio of any large metropolitan area in the country when it comes to the gap between highest and lowest wages paid.

Ronald Reagan's use racism for political power is better understood than what went on during the Gilded Age. Millions of Americans were urged to think of "welfare queens" as Black women supposedly taking advantage of the system. Not so readily acknowledged, however, is how Reagan's appeal to racist hatred masked the beginning of what is being called the "Second Gilded Age." Wages began their decades long decline for all workers while Reagan was blaming Black people on welfare. Clinton continued this attack on African Americans by gutting welfare, and enlarging the "War on Crime," that would end up incarcerating a whole generation of Black men. As real wages continued to fall, both political parties and the media scapegoated the nation's poorest and most oppressed minority, people of color. White, middle class America was shown a steady stream of local TV news, with Black men on the run and our nation's white police force in steady pursuit.

Michelle Alexander's penetrating analysis of this system-wide racism, "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," is a must read even for progressive thinkers. The systemic racism she details is much worse than anyone dared to think, with millions of Black lives sacrificed to political expediency as well as to corporate profit.

While our newspaper of record scratches its head about how racial identity got mixed up with politics, let us look closer at the relationship between the New Jim Crow and the Second Gilded Age. Sanders represents progressive efforts to force the wealthy elite to share their often ill gotten wealth with the workers of this country.

Trump preaches racism, identifying various minorities that have destroyed the American Dream. Which candidate does our media, including the NYT cover more? And are we once again seeing the evils of racism perpetrated to protect the tiny minority of billionaires at the very top?

*Fred Nagel, a veteran and political activist, has written for Z Magazine, Mondoweiss, and War Crimes Times (a publication of Veterans For Peace). He also hosts a show on Vassar College Radio, WVKR ([classwars.org](http://classwars.org)).*

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