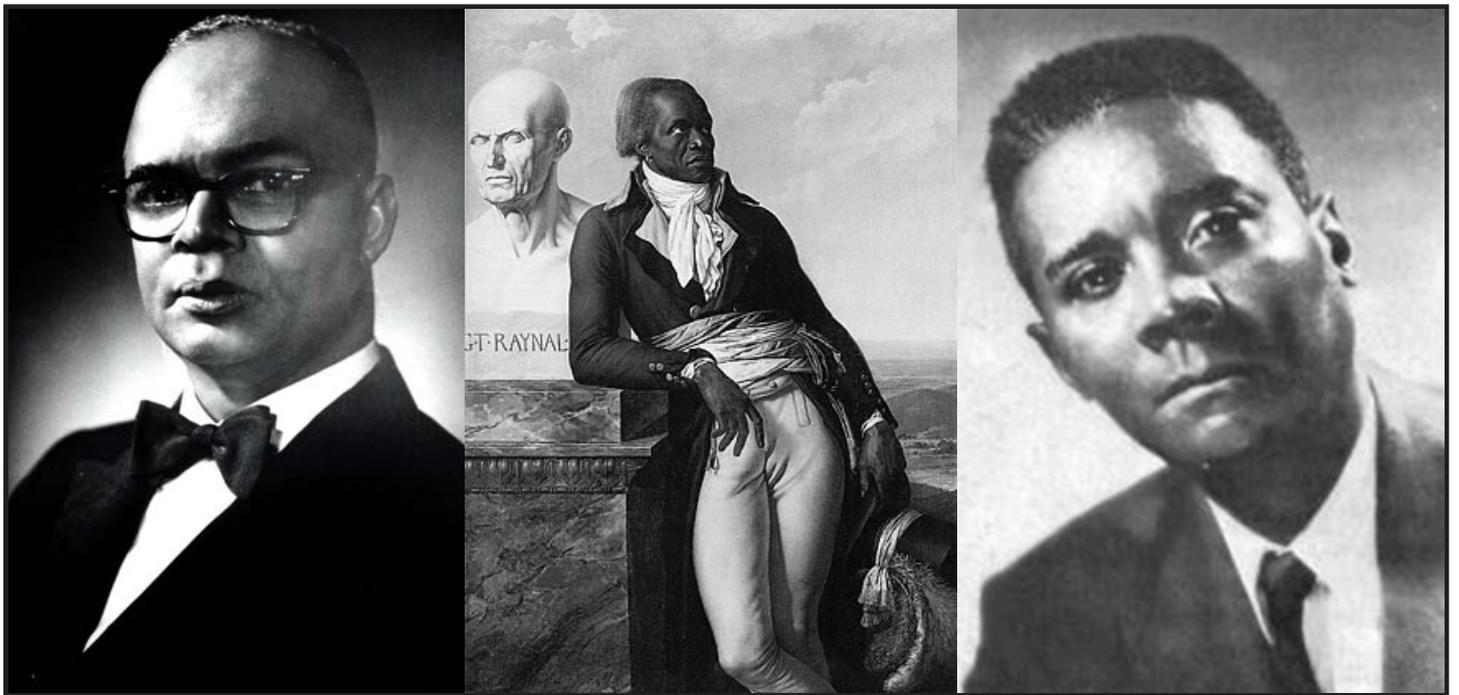


Class and Race

Marxism, racism & the class struggle

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Part I

Introduction

More than twenty years have passed since the end of white minority rule and the racist segregation system of apartheid that maintained it. But for the black majority, the more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same. To all intents and purposes white privilege never died. Society today is more unequal than it was under apartheid. Half of all black households struggle to survive on less than R2,500 per month; half of all white households live on more than R10,000 per month. Unemployment is nearly 40% for black people; it is less than 7% for whites.

But it is not just economic inequality that keeps racism in the foreground. Racist prejudices are never far from the news. In May a white university lecturer was dismissed from Stellenbosch University for sending an SMS to a black student calling him a "black bastard". In January it was reported that white parents had pressured a private school in Gauteng to racially segregate the pupils. In December 2014, the racist booking policy of a Cape Town restaurant was exposed when a black family was repeatedly refused a table reservation that a white friend then made with one telephone call. Earlier that year, there was outrage when pictures of white University of Pretoria students dressed as black domestic workers were circulated on social media, faces blackened and behinds padded.

The emergence of the black-student led Rhodes Must Fall Campaign at the University of Cape Town that demanded the removal of statues from the colonial and apartheid era showed that white privilege continues to fuel a feeling of national oppression. This is felt most strongly in the elite universities that remain bastions of white privilege.

The Rhodes campaign expressed itself in the language of Black Consciousness. Likewise, the Economic Freedom Fighters promotes the related ideas of Frantz Fanon. But how do these ideas account for the continuation of white privilege and racism twenty-one years into black majority rule? Frequently, supporters of these ideas fall back on nationalism. Under apartheid, the nationalism of the ANC was progressive in overcoming the tribal divisions encouraged by the apartheid regime and by colonialism before that. But today, on the basis of majority rule, nationalism and nationalist theories can play a reactionary role. Because they cannot account for the continuation of white privilege and racism they end up relying on racist prejudices themselves – whites are born racists and that is that. From this viewpoint, the problem with the 1994 negotiated settlement that ended apartheid can only have been that the whites were not 'driven into the sea'. The failure of nationalism to adequately explain the real basis of inequality and poverty in society today in turn allows space for tribalism, and even xenophobia, to grow.

But white privilege and racism are not the result of an 'inevitable' racial friction between white and black. They are maintained by the class structure of capitalist society. Indeed,

capitalism itself was responsible for the birth of racism. Before capitalism, discrimination against an entire people based on permanent prejudices of supposedly inferior ancestry, skin colour or other physical and mental characteristics did not exist. Historically, racism emerged to justify the Atlantic slave trade, an enormous source of profits for the fledgling capitalist class. Once arisen, racism was moulded and adapted to justify the shifting economic interests of the capitalist class in their colonial conquests and as part of capitalism's ideological armoury against the revolutionary working class. Charting the development of racism against the ebbs, flows, twists and turns of the class struggle is the only way to understand why racism exists. This requires a Marxist analysis.

The Marxist approach

For Marxists, all ideas, including racism, are ultimately a reflection of social conditions. This materialist approach means ideas must be examined as products of historical development. Trying to understand any idea without a materialist approach is like examining the shadow independently of the object that casts it. To truly understand racism it is necessary to examine the specific historical circumstances that created it and which have maintained and modified it up to the present day.

The most fundamental social conditions that must be examined are the relationship between classes which themselves arise depending on how society organises production. Different ways of organising production give rise to different classes. History has known a number of different forms of class society. But the common feature is a minority ruling class who exploits the working majority by expropriating (i.e. stealing) the surplus wealth created by their labours. This is the fundamental division in society.

Different systems of belief (or ideologies) emerge to justify the position of the ruling class and to persuade the masses to accept their exploitation. Different forms of class society require different ideologies to justify them. However, the history of slave uprisings, peasant revolts, and the mass revolutionary struggles of the working class in our own time shows that the ruling class only ever partially succeeds in fooling the classes they exploit.

But it is not only the class struggle between the ruling class and the exploited majority that has significance. The struggles between competing factions of the same ruling class, or two different exploiting classes, also play an important role in determining the development of society and the ideologies that emerge. For example the competition between the different imperialist capitalist classes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or the struggle between the rising capitalist class and the declining feudal ruling class in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is the conflicting interests of different classes that are the real social basis upon which racial prejudices, discrimination and oppression form. In the struggles between classes, differences of race but also gender, age, sexuality and religion are frequently given an antagonistic form leading to corresponding ideologies of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and religious prejudice. Engels dealt extensively with the roots in class society of oppression against women and the sexist prejudices this gives rise to; later writers have shown how homophobic prejudices

emerged in the nineteenth century based on the form of the family in capitalist society.

However, Marxism's power as a method of analysis does not lie in a simplistic materialism that says economic interests are always reflected as ideas and ideologies in a crude and obvious way. Rather it lies in Marxism's dialectical materialism.

Dialectics means to examine the development of social conditions as processes and interactions. This means that Marxism recognises that ideas and ideologies can themselves interact with the economic forces that originally created them adding layers of complexity to social conditions. Engels explained the nuances that dialectics brings to Marxism as a method of analysis when he wrote:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results ... constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.

Letter to J. Bloch, 1890

Engels' comment is the key to understanding what can otherwise appear as contradictions in the historical development of racism. For once arisen an idea or ideology, even a prejudice, can take on a certain life of its own within limits. Under the weight of historical inertia ideas can persist long past their use-by date. So for example, whilst it is not possible to be born racist, it is possible to be *born into* a racist society and raised to accept prejudices that were created by the social conditions of a past period. Also, ideas and ideologies can be given a new content by changing social conditions even as the language they express themselves in remains unchanged. Ideas that were progressive in one period in history can become reactionary in another as they are adapted to serve different class interests. Different ideologies can intertwine. This has been the case with racism and nationalism, particularly in the social conditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is only Marxism that can cope with such contradictions by basing itself on the real thread of continuity in changing social conditions and not the ideological shadows they cast.

Marxism can accommodate and explain why sections of classes, under certain conditions, can support ideologies that do not correspond with their fundamental interests. Marx observed that, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas". This means that the ruling class's control of society gives them the means to partially impose ideologies that reflect their interests on to society in general. Under the right historical conditions, ruling class ideologies of racism and nationalism can succeed in creating divisions amongst the working class and poor and prevent them from uniting against their common exploiter, the capitalist class.

Lenin described how the imperialist phase of capitalism and its colonial expansion created the social conditions for the European capitalist class to "bribe" sections of the European working class by encouraging the formation of a privileged "labour aristocracy" that would opportunistically support racist colonial policies as the basis of its privilege. Today this idea is regularly distorted to write-off the entire working class of Europe. But even in the nineteenth century that Lenin was describing, at the height of colonial rule, he stressed that it was only ever a section of the working class that succumbed to this bribery. He further explained that the contradiction between supporting an ideology that did not in reality correspond to the working class's fundamental interests was "bound to increase the irreconcilability between opportunism and the general and vital interests of the working class movement".

The weakness of the bourgeois method

The ability of Marxism to illuminate the social conditions that create and nurture racism can be further demonstrated by comparing it to the weaknesses of bourgeois (i.e. capitalist) academics' attempts to explain racism. To describe them as bourgeois is not meant as an insult to the writers but a description of the weakness in their method of analysis.

This weakness can be summed-up as the failure to consistently place the examination of social conditions, especially class relations, at the centre of analysis. Whilst bourgeois academics plunge into the depths of history, they begin to treat racism itself as an ahistorical phenomenon. In other words, as something that has always existed, rather than something that was brought into being under certain social conditions at a definite point in history. This means they cannot account for the emergence of new ideas and prejudices or the circumstances that cause them to change their form. The bourgeois approach is ultimately descriptive rather than analytical, unable to find the real thread of continuity that links racism's evolving form in changing social conditions and the class struggle. Crucially therefore, they cannot point out the tasks necessary to end racism.

The same weakness is reflected by some Africanist thinkers. Those that assert that the only racism is the very real prejudices of white people, held by all white people regardless of time and place, likewise treat racism as an ahistorical phenomenon. Without a historical explanation of how white people came to hold racist prejudices it has to be assumed that they must have lain dormant in those periods of history where the mass of white and black people would never have encountered each other or even heard of each other's existence.

Part II

The rise of capitalism and the emergence of racism

Racism was created by the social conditions in Europe as capitalism began its long development. From the fifteenth century, the development of the Atlantic slave trade began a long process that would crystalize racist prejudices. But racism did not automatically spring into existence the moment the white proto-capitalist Portuguese merchants entered the West African market for black slaves in the 1440s. It took the capitalist class's growth to maturity over many centuries for racism to acquire its most developed white-supremacist form. At every stage over this centuries long process, the outline of racist ideas were sharpened and reinforced by the capitalist class's pursuit of their economic interests, principally their struggle to control labour, its supply and markets. The precise economic interests, the class strategies necessary to satisfy them, and the ideologies necessary to justify this shifted with the different phases of capitalist development. The master key to understanding racism is identifying these shifting economic interests and the ebbs and flows of the class struggle that arose from them.

But before looking at how the economic interests of the capitalist class created and maintained racism, it is necessary to briefly look at the character of prejudice and discrimination in the feudal society that capitalism developed out of.

Prejudice and discrimination before capitalism

The social conditions necessary to give rise to the ideas of 'race' and 'nation' were absent in the feudal societies that pre-dated capitalism in Europe. The idea that prejudices based on ancestry and skin colour could be the basis for permanent discrimination were incompatible with the interests of the feudal ruling class and contradicted the ideologies that legitimised their rule.

In feudal society the Christian Catholic religion was the dominant ideological prism reflecting social conditions. Catholic ideology justified the feudal 'domestic policy' of a fixed hierarchal social order by declaring that it was ordained by God. Everyone was born into their station in life from the king and the lords down to the peasants. Before capitalism in Europe there were no nation-states. Feudalism was composed of small-scale political entities united under a distant monarch or emperor. The mass of the peasant population, tied to a small area of land for life, without mobility, literacy, the existence of large-scale trade or a mass media, lacked the social conditions for a national consciousness to develop. Not only did the lack of a national consciousness rule out the feudal ruling class leaning on nationalism to justify their rule, it would have been impossible generally as the language and culture of the ruling class was often different to those that they ruled.

It took the development of capitalist social relations and the rise of the capitalist class to exert the pressure toward the formation of nation-states. The chief necessity was the need

for a sizeable national market that would allow the capitalist class to develop the scale of production in order to increase their wealth. Once this process was underway it stimulated nationalist ideologies to correspond with it.

In the course of capitalism's development racism and nationalism would increasingly intertwine. Conflicts over the character of the nation arose. Who was and was not to be included? What was the nation's language? What was the nation's religion? Even, what did the nation's people look like? Such considerations gave rise to nationalist and even racist prejudices to discriminate in answering these questions where there were not straightforward answers.

In feudal society the Catholic doctrine of 'universalism' justified the feudal 'foreign policy' of expansion by conquest. This doctrine held that all people, whatever their ancestry or skin colour, were potential Christian converts. It was the duty of Christian rulers to try and bring them into the fold. This doctrine justified the economic interests of the feudal ruling class who could only increase their power and wealth through the conquest on new lands and the peasants that were tied to them by birth. The form of exploitation in feudal society saw the two as inseparable. Therefore religious conversion of conquered populations was demanded to square the circle between the ideological justification for the conquest and the necessity to maintain the peasants on the land.

The social conditions of feudal society and the interests of the feudal ruling class gave pre-capitalist prejudice and discrimination their expression in religious terms. Having the 'wrong' religious beliefs, and their expression in different cultural practices, was the only basis for discrimination. But this could be escaped through religious conversion. Indeed, the interests of the feudal ruling class demanded such conversion. This form of temporary religious prejudice and discrimination was all that was required by the feudal ruling class to justify the pursuit of their interests. A person's ancestry or skin colour could not become the basis for permanent discrimination.

In their struggle to become the new rulers of society, the capitalist class would of necessity destroy the feudal ideologies that justified the old society. Capitalism's unleashing of new economic forces and new forms of exploitation would create the social conditions for new forms of prejudice and discrimination. Below is a brief outline of how some of the key phases in the development of capitalist society gave birth to racism and developed it through the centuries.

Discrimination based on descent

A crucial watershed for the development of racism was the undermining of the Catholic doctrine of universalism and the development of the idea that the 'wrong' religion could be passed on by descent. This watershed came in fifteenth century Spain. There, the Jewish and Muslim populations were faced with the 'choice' of expulsion from society or conversion to Christianity. However, in a new departure, those that converted continued to suffer discrimination because of their 'bad blood'.

This small shift in ideology, so fateful for world history, had its roots in the class conflicts that arose in Spain's transition to capitalism and its consolidation as a nation-state. The 'New Christian' converts were concentrated amongst the proto-

capitalist merchants who were growing in wealth and power. The declining feudal landowners, jealous of the new-money wealth of the merchants used their control of feudal political institutions against their class rivals. Laws were enacted excluding 'New Christians' from state office, church office and membership of professional bodies as well as trade and craft guilds. The intention of the landowners in this struggle was not to destroy the 'New Christians' but to bolster their own political power in order to take a share in the growing money-economy which the merchants dominated. The new laws existed more as a threat against uncooperative merchants and were only used selectively.

If the landowners were to successfully prosecute their class struggle against the merchants, it was necessary for them to maintain a basis for discrimination even when the merchants 'chose' religious conversion. They found the answer by building upon the pre-existing, but until then limited idea, of 'noble blood'. This period also saw the consolidation of the Spanish nation-state out of decaying Spanish feudalism, a crucial stage in the development of capitalism. The alignment of class forces dictated that this was to be a Spanish-speaking Christian nation reinforcing the discrimination against the 'New Christians'.

This early form of racist discrimination and proto-nationalism, both maintaining significant religious colours, began the long intertwining of these twin ideologies. The class struggles of fifteenth century Spain added important new ideological colours to the canvass of the class struggle. The impetus to this early racism was given by the economic forces created by capitalism. But it was not an ideological weapon of the rising capitalists but rather the declining feudal landowners. This only underlines the complex relationship between social conditions and ideas and ideologies. For, as they grew to maturity, the capitalist class would harness the ideological seeds sown in this period of feudal decay to advance their own class interests. It is an irony of history that these first victims of a form of racism, the 'New Christian' merchants, were, in Spain and Portugal, the pioneers of the Atlantic slave trade which would give rise to the anti-black racism of later centuries.

The capitalist's reinvent God

The Catholic doctrine of 'universalism' was no match for the rising economic interests of the proto-capitalist merchant class who pioneered the Atlantic slave trade from the mid-fifteenth century. Centuries of theological debate followed about the morality of enslaving potential black converts. However, in Northern Europe, especially Britain and the Netherlands, the rising capitalist merchants made a more decisive break with the Catholic Church. They reinvented Christianity to reflect their own class interests in the new creed of Protestantism.

The rising capitalist class was struggling to end the feudal restrictions in society that had become a fetter on their accumulation of wealth and aspiration to political power. Protestantism armed the rising capitalist class with an ideological weapon to attack the ideas that justified the feudal social hierarchy as ordained by God. In contrast to the tight social control exercised by the Catholic Church, Protestant ideology promoted the possibility of a personal relationship with God unmediated by the Catholic hierarchy. This 'democratisation' of Christianity meant that every aspect of Catholic ideology was now up for debate. New Protestant sects proliferated criticising

the supposed divinity of feudal society from new, and often competing, interpretations of the Bible.

The Calvinist Protestant sect reflected the rising capitalist class's economic interests in the most straightforward way. Engels described it as "fit for the boldest of the bourgeoisie of his day". The Calvinist ideas of 'predestination' and 'a calling from God' made the highest virtue of the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God's favour.

The Afrikaner Broederbond which set itself the task of consolidating an Afrikaner capitalist class in South Africa in the first part of the twentieth century was based on Calvinism. Several centuries later, a similar creed has emerged in Africa in various 'prosperity' churches. These churches reflect the economic aspirations of the new middle class and the hopes of the working class and poor. However they have taken Protestantism's 'democratisation' of Christianity to absurd extremes. They form around *individual* charismatic 'prophets' whose *personal* enrichment is a sign of the congregation's divine favour!

Clearly, the new capitalist Protestant ideology did not in and of itself lead to racism. Racism was being called into existence by forces elsewhere in society. But Protestantism cleared away the Catholic 'universalism' which acted as a certain ideological break on the development of permanent non-religious forms of prejudice and discrimination. It is for that reason that it is worth describing the changing form of Christianity in this account of the historical development of racism. In a proliferation of different Protestant sects based on a 'direct relationship' with God it was far easier for the individuals responsible for 'interpreting' scripture or receiving 'revelation' to reflect the prejudices of the times and the class interests of their congregations.

This explains the otherwise contradictory phenomenon of different Protestant sect's historical support for black-slavery and other forms of racist discrimination at certain points in history, and their opposition to them at others. The debates in the Protestant Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa under apartheid are an example of the significance of this shift in the ideological superstructure of society for racism. Initial universal support for apartheid eventually broke down into a muddle of support, opposition, and everything in between under the twists and turns of the class struggle.

The Atlantic slave trade & the creation of anti-black racism

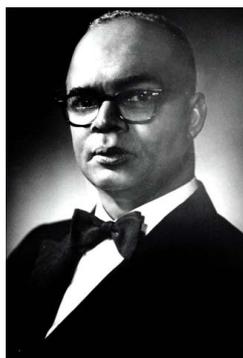
The major capitalist economic interest that would create the social conditions for anti-black racism was the Atlantic slave trade. But the history of slavery in general is not the history of racism. The slavery of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome was not based on skin colour. In these societies people of all shades could be enslaved. It was not possible for racism to arise on this multi-racial basis.

In the early capitalist period, slavery maintained its multi-racial character. When the first merchant slave ships arrived in Africa in the 1440s and began a small-scale barter trade with West African rulers for black slaves, their trade existed alongside the West African practice of taking slaves in war, the long established trans-Saharan slave trade under the control of North African Muslims and the continued enslavement of white people in parts of Europe.

The difference between the Portuguese merchants and their early competitors was that the former represented the rising capitalist class and the latter the remnants of old social forms that capitalism would soon sweep away. This proto-capitalist class of merchants would reinvent slavery. In putting it to use in the newly conquered Americas they transformed it into a vast capitalist enterprise. It was only upon the basis of capitalist slavery that the social conditions were created for the emergence of anti-black racism by making slavery, for the first time, exclusively black.

But this would take many years. The first Atlantic slave ship to carry black slaves sailed from Africa in 1510. Fifty black slaves were taken to the Spanish controlled island of Hispaniola (the modern day Haiti and Dominican Republic). This 'innovation' took place because the indigenous Indian populations that were the first to be enslaved and put to work in the new silver and gold mines and on the new tobacco and sugar plantations died too readily from the diseases carried by the Europeans. Up to the seventeenth century the Atlantic slave trade remained intermittent and on a small scale compared to what was to come. The social conditions for a general and pervasive anti-black racism had not yet been sufficiently prepared.

The key to understanding the scale of the Atlantic slave trade is the demand for labour in the new American colonies which in turn depended on the development of capitalism in Europe and its creation of new markets. The turning point came in the seventeenth century when sugar became the main cash crop throughout the Caribbean and South America. This rapidly accelerated the need for labour which was most easily satisfied by the importation of black slave labour from Africa.



Eric Williams

Over the next two centuries over twelve million black people were enslaved and sent to the Americas. They came to constitute a vast slave population. Their status as slaves, the bottom rung of the social ladder, became inseparable from their skin colour. It was this that created the social conditions for anti-black racism. As Marxist historian Eric Williams described it in his book, *British Capitalism and British Slavery*, "the features of the man, his hair, colour and dentifrice, his "subhuman" characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labour and resorted to Negro labour because it was cheapest and best."

Anti-black racism had been called into existence and would not now disappear. It existed in the colonies and in the metropolises that benefited from its existence. When slavery was ended throughout the nineteenth century, Williams noted that this did not eradicate the racist prejudices it had created. He said, "the ideas [racism] built on these interests [slavery] continue long after the interests have been destroyed and work their old mischief, which is all the more mischievous because the interests to which they corresponded no longer exist." But this was not just historical inertia. Despite the ending of the Atlantic slave trade capitalism would require racism to justify new economic interests.

The North American road to racism

Under different social conditions, the development of slavery and anti-black racism took a different path in the North American colonies. After similar failed attempts to enslave the indigenous Indian population, the North American landowners next turned to white indentured labour to solve their labour shortage. To be indentured meant to work as virtual slaves for a period of up to seven years before being set free. In the 150 years up to the end of the eighteenth century up to 250,000 English, Irish, German and other impoverished white people were sent to the North American colonies to be indentured. But the death rate due to over-work and mistreatment, not to mention the ease and frequency of extending the period of indenture meant many died in bondage.

Throughout this period there was also a steady arrival of black people purchased from slave traders. However there was no system of outright slavery in North America. Upon arrival these black slaves were converted into indentured servants and integrated into the existing labour system. Being black did not yet automatically brand them a slave. Some even lived to achieve freedom and became masters of indentured servants themselves.

In the fields of the plantations black and white indentured servants worked together. Shared misery and a sense of class solidarity prevented the emergence of racism between the exploited. Amongst the ruling class, prejudices developed to justify their brutal treatment of indentured servants, both black and white. All were de-humanized and equally regarded as "filth and scum". An explicitly anti-black racism served no purpose in these social conditions and accordingly did not arise. But this was to come in the course of the class struggle.

The turning point in the development of anti-black racism in North America came with the 1676 Bacon Rebellion in Virginia. In this uprising against the aristocratic landowners, black and white indentured servants, runaways, landless free labourers and small farmers united. The Rebellion was brutally crushed. The final group of rebels killed, who chose to stand together in class solidarity and fight to the bitter end, comprised "Eighty Negroes and Twenty English", according to an account of the time. And it was this that terrified the ruling class.

After the suppression of the Bacon Rebellion, the ruling class, anticipating the apartheid regime by several centuries, set about creating a privileged middle layer to act as a social buffer for their rule. The potential dividing line was apparent in seventeenth century Virginia as it was in South Africa on the eve of apartheid - white should be consciously divided from black. The legal position of white indentured servants was improved. Whipping was forbidden. When the period of indenture finished, whites were to be provided with "corn, money, a gun, clothing and fifty acres of land" to give them a stake in the existing order of society.

Meanwhile, black indentured servants lost all of their rights. Indentured labour became lifetime slavery. On the big plantations, white and black living quarters were segregated and the whites given superior clothing and easier work to distinguish them. Whites were forced to learn that they were 'superior' as racist prejudices were consciously encouraged. In another intertwining of racism and nationalism, for the first time, Englishness was explicitly defined as meaning white skinned.

With the establishment of black slavery and later the cultivation of cotton in the South, the stage was set for the development of the slave system of the Southern United States. The racist ideology that developed upon this foundation would survive long after the ending of Southern slavery in 1865. Again anticipating the apartheid regime, 1876 saw the introduction of the racist segregation laws of Jim Crow in the South that would survive into the 1960s.

Early modern science invents 'race'

As we have said, religion was the only ideological prism to reflect the social conditions of feudal society. Whilst capitalism modified religion to reflect its own interests, it also stimulated new ways of viewing and understanding the world that would compete with religion. The development of the modern scientific method of observation and experimentation in the sixteenth century 'Scientific Revolution' allowed human understanding of the world to take enormous strides forward. But the class struggle would inevitably find reflection in the new sciences.

In early modern science the capitalist class found a new framework to establish prejudices and justify racial discrimination through the new idea of 'race'. The construction of this idea reflected the existing social inequalities of the time rather than any 'natural' inequality. Attempts by scientists such as Carl Linnaeus in the early eighteenth century to classify nature in a hierarchy, with humans at the summit, in turn led to attempts to place differences between humans in a hierarchy. In the Spanish American colonies the racial categories of apartheid were anticipated in the 'castas' system. Over one hundred different and elaborate human 'hierarchies' were constructed containing as many as sixteen different classifications based on skin colour and descent. However, the social conditions prevented the castas becoming a rigorous basis for segregation.

Racial, but also class inequalities, could now be justified as 'natural'. If they were 'natural' they were justified to continue. The ideological ground was prepared for later pseudo-scientific theories of race that would underpin the monstrous forms of white-supremacist racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The deceit of Liberalism

Another new ideological development in capitalist society which would reinforce racism was, ironically, the Enlightenment ideas of individual reason and individual rights that were fought for in the French revolution. These developed as another vantage point from which the capitalist class could justify its class struggle against feudalism. In reality though, it was not the 'rights of man' that were being advocated but the rights of the capitalist class. No right was more important than the right to private property. But in order to rally all classes to the capitalist's banner in their struggle against feudalism these rights had to be posed in revolutionary terms applied equally to all.

But in its victory against feudalism, the capitalist class had no intention of being consistent with its revolutionary ideology. They had no desire to share their new political power with the working class, let alone to sacrifice the immense source of profits that depended upon the Atlantic slave trade and black slavery in the Americas. The capitalist class would continue to exclude the working class and the slaves of the colonies from political rights to maximise their exploitation. Ideologies to set

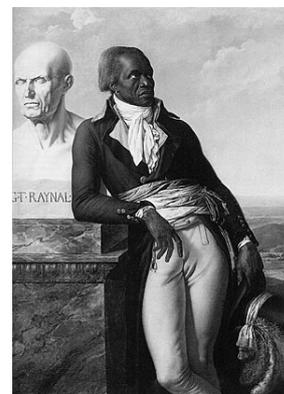
limits on the extension of what had previously been 'universal' rights would be required. The racism already developed on the back of the Atlantic slave trade would be reinforced and further developed to justify the exclusion of black people from the new capitalist 'liberty'.

But this could only partially succeed. The working class and slaves had taken the capitalist class at their word. The black-slaves of Saint-Domingue rebelled in support of the French Revolution which in its early stages found its most energetic support amongst the working masses. The French masses instinctive opposition to slavery was described by the Marxist historian C.L.R. James:

In these few months of [the masses] nearest approach to power they did not forget the blacks. They felt towards them as brothers, and the old slave-owners, whom they knew to be supporters of the counter-revolution, they hated as if Frenchmen themselves had suffered under the whip. It was not Paris alone but all revolutionary France. 'Servants, peasants, workers, the labourers by the day in the fields' all over France were filled with a virulent hatred against the 'aristocracy of the skin'. There were many so moved by the sufferings of the slaves that they had long ceased to drink coffee, thinking of it as drenched with the blood and sweat of men turned into brutes ... Noble and generous working people of France ... These are the people whom the sons of Africa and the lovers of humanity will remember with gratitude and affection, not the perorating Liberals in France...

The Black Jacobins, 1938

The capitalist class's early opportunistic opposition to slavery to win the support of the working class for their revolution was reversed at the first opportunity. The former-slaves of Saint-Domingue were forced to continue their struggle, now against the forces of the new capitalist government of France. They were victorious and succeeded in establishing the first black republic in history with the creation of Haiti in 1804.



*Toussaint L'Ouverture,
leader of Haitian revolution*

Colonialism & monopoly capitalism

Just as Africans were not enslaved because they were black, neither was Africa colonised in the nineteenth century because its people were black. The racist justifications for colonialism were the ideological reflection of a more fundamental economic process. Anti-black racism had been firmly established by the eighteenth century. But on the eve of the 'Scramble for Africa' in the 1870s, 90% of Africa was not colonised by Europe.

Lenin, writing in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, pointed out that in Great Britain, the dominant power of the age, "between 1840 and 1860, the leading British bourgeois politicians were opposed to colonial policy and were of the opinion that the liberation of the colonies, their complete separation from Britain, was inevitable and desirable." This was because the doctrine of 'free trade' and 'free competition' corresponded with the economic interests of the capitalist class at this stage; colonialism did not.

But the further development of capitalism across Europe led to the rise of monopoly capitalism. 'Free' competition was outgrown. Industrial and bank capital became concentrated and merged in what Lenin described as "finance capital". The export of this finance capital into new markets became vital to the interests of the capitalist class. Competition amongst the capitalist powers to secure markets for *their own* finance capital as well as to secure control of raw materials intensified. Reflecting this, the already hypocritical Liberalism would give way to nationalism and colonialism. Lenin explained that, "it is beyond doubt...that capitalism's transition to the stage of monopoly capitalism, to finance capital, is connected with the intensification of the struggle for the partitioning of the world." The class struggle between competing European national capitalist classes was the motive force for colonialism.

The fact that anti-black racism had already been created simply saved the capitalist class the time of inventing it. But as ever, these new economic interests required adaptations to racism. White-supremacist ideas and the pseudo-scientific theories of race came to the fore to justify the colonial conquest not just of black people in Africa but the people of Asia too. If the white European capitalist classes were to dominate the entire world and its people it was easier to assert the 'superiority' of their own race rather than the specific 'inferiorities' of every other race. Such ideas were not entirely new but the need to justify colonialism developed and promoted them to new heights. Huge areas of the world would be ruled, and their people exploited, upon the basis of these ideas. Consequently, the twentieth century struggles for national liberation in the colonial world acquired a character as anti-racist struggles too especially in their ideological expressions in Africanist ideas and other black nationalist ideas which were consistent with the interests of the aspiring black elite.

The rise of the working class and the reaction of nationalism

As described above, nationalist ideologies emerged in Europe out of the economic interests of the capitalist class. Nationalism was an essentially progressive ideological weapon in the hands of the capitalist class in its struggle against the feudal ruling class. However, as soon as the capitalist class achieved political power throughout most of Europe, they immediately had to square-off against their new working class enemy. Even in the French Revolution of 1789 and after, and the 1848 Revolutions across Europe, the demands of the working masses were increasingly at odds with the interests of the capitalist class with whom they were generally still in alliance against feudal society. In the 1840s Chartist movement in Britain, the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, the first ever workers state in the short lived Paris Commune of 1870 and the rise of trade unionism, the working class demonstrated the truth of Marx's point that capitalism creates its own grave-diggers.

Reactionary nationalism became crucial to the capitalist class's justification of class inequality and class exploitation in Europe. It was the counterpoint to the racism that justified exploitation in the colonies. Increasingly the two would intertwine. In the face of the revolutionary working class's call for class solidarity, class struggle and internationalism, the capitalist class counterpoised national and racial solidarity,

the struggles of nations and nationalism. The roots of both racism and nationalism within capitalist social conditions were laid bare by the emergence of the revolutionary working class movement who were compelled to overcome both ideologies in their struggle for a society that would be organised in their own class interests – a socialist society. Marxism is the ideology most consistent with the working class's real interests and therefore most consistent in its opposition to racism.

The capitalist class's refashioning of its ideological weapon of nationalism to fight its new working class opponent brought all the potential within nationalism for racial and ethnic prejudice to life. The racist ideas developed over centuries and the white-supremacist ideologies of colonialism were able to fuse with nationalism and give a new coating to the reactionary ideological armour of capitalism.

The most extreme form of capitalist reaction against the revolutionary struggle of the working class came in the twentieth century in the form of fascism. In the immediate aftermath of the victory of the working class in the 1917 Russian Revolution and the revolutionary movements for socialism that swept across Europe, combined with the capitalist crisis of the 1930s Great Depression, fascism became the last role of the dice for a desperate capitalist class on the threshold of losing power. Fascism's principle task was the smashing of the organised power of the working class. The ideological dressing for this capitalist reaction fused an extreme racist white-supremacy with imperialist expansionist nationalism and a virulent anti-socialism.

A history of struggle

Throughout the history of capitalism and its development of racism, the exploited masses, the slaves and the working class overcome racist divisions in their struggle against capitalist class divisions and the class exploitation that racism rested upon. The first black slave revolt occurred just twelve years after the first black slaves arrived in Hispaniola. Another ten years later and the black and indigenous Indian slaves united in revolt on the same island. The entire history of slavery in the Americas was a continuous history of slave revolts.

We have already mentioned the unity of black and white in the Bacon Rebellion and the successful Haitian revolution supported by the white working class of France. The working class of Europe also played an important role in the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and in the Civil War in the United States that ended the Southern slave system. The colonial revolutions in Africa and Asia in the twentieth century and the civil rights movement in the US continued those determined struggles for self-determination and genuine equality. Wherever the working class has been organised upon the basis of Marxist and socialist ideas that correspond to its real interests it has supported these struggles. When it has not, it has been the result of conscious divide and rule policies by the capitalist class. This was nowhere more the case than in South Africa.

Part III

Racism in South Africa

Nowhere in the world did the issues of race, class and nation become as intertwined as they did in South Africa with the creation of the racist apartheid segregation system from 1948. But nevertheless, the class relations remained the key to explaining race relations. In 1982, in *South Africa's Impending Socialist Revolution*, written by the Marxist Workers Tendency, the forerunners of the Workers and Socialist Party, we described the class foundations of white-minority rule and apartheid in the following way:

The Union of South Africa, which [the SA bourgeois] inherited in 1910, was a state largely fashioned by British imperialism, and resting on imperialist support. Despite all the beatings of the drums of 'national independence' by sections of the SA bourgeoisie, their state remains today dependent in critical respects on reinforcement by world capitalism.

Even today, the claims of the ruling class to 'independent' arms production or to the 'independent' development of nuclear power fail to conceal its continuing military and technical reliance on the major Western powers. And equally apparent is the continuing political support which imperialist governments provide for the South African capitalist state.

But, in contrast with those colonies where there was very little economic development, support from beyond the borders of South Africa has been an insufficient basis for the ruling class to construct and stabilise its dictatorship over the rising working class. Capitalism has been compelled to seek a social footrest within the population of South Africa itself.

Over the generations, the bourgeoisie has cultivated the support of the white middle class and the white labour aristocracy against the black workers, setting the whites apart and granting them privileges and an elevated status over the black people. **In this way the capitalist dictatorship in South Africa became consolidated as the system of apartheid – of national oppression and white privilege.**

The raw material for the system of national oppression lay in the old colonial situation itself – in the conquest of the indigenous people; in the existence of a white settler community on the land and in the towns; in differences of culture and language; in the importation of skilled whites earning wages many times the wages of the unskilled blacks.

But this raw material of prejudice and privilege was systematically moulded and developed by the capitalist class and its successive governments. The divisions within society were deliberately hardened and deepened so as to bring into being the modern apartheid system with all its savage refinements. In the process the emerging black middle class also was subjected to many of the burdens and humiliations that are the lot of the

black working class.

Both the strength and the weakness of the capitalist class in South Africa is revealed in the character of its social base.

On the one hand, the support of the white middle class and the white aristocracy of labour has given the SA capitalist class generations of political stability – and even a certain room to manoeuvre within the domination of imperialism. Out of these white layers the army, the police force and the state bureaucracy have chiefly been filled, and factory foremen and supervisors drawn. Stampeded behind barriers of racial privilege they have formed a bastion of reaction, millions strong, against the mass of the working class.

At the same time, the racist character of capitalist rule – directed of necessity against the entire black population – reflects the weak position of the South African bourgeoisie.

In the older capitalist countries of Europe, where capitalism arose out of petty production over a long period of time, broad layers of the middle class provided the initial buffer for the bourgeoisie against the emerging proletariat. Only with the transition to imperialism did the capitalist class begin to extend the base of its support among the upper layers of the working class. We have explained already the conditions in Europe which made this process necessary, and possible.

In South Africa, on the other hand, the late but meteoric development of capitalism rapidly polarised society between the monopoly capitalists on the one hand, and the mass of the working people on the other. From the start, the middle layers of society were relatively insignificant. No room existed for a middle class to develop a substantial role in production. This was especially true of the black middle class which, from the beginning, was stunted in its development.

The social weakness of the middle class ruled out the possibility for the bourgeoisie to rest its rule simply on this layer. The bourgeoisie turned increasingly towards the development of its dictatorship on the basis of divisions of race, with the cultivation of a white aristocracy of labour to supplement the white petty bourgeoisie.

Wherever it exists, capitalism engenders lines of competition and division among workers which cannot be overcome by purely spontaneous struggles. It is precisely the development of class-conscious leadership within the ranks of the workers' movement which is needed in the struggle to bring about the unity of the working class. The weakness of the forces of Marxism in South Africa and internationally left scope for the bourgeoisie to carry out its policies of divide-and-rule with deadly effect upon the working class.

Yet the creation of a privileged section of the working class – the whites – did not take place without conflict. At every stage the bourgeoisie was obliged to balance its need for a stable basis of support among the whites

against the imperatives of profit.

Racial protection of jobs, access to collective bargaining mechanisms, increased material welfare, have only been extended to the white workers with reluctance. This has only been done – as is clearly shown by events from the 1890s to 1922 and from the 1930s to the 1950s – **to ward off greater dangers from the mass of the workers (the blacks), only in conditions of economic advance for capitalism, and only on the terms laid down by the ruling class itself.**

The privileges granted to the white workers were preceded by the **repression** of their sectional class action (most decisively the crushing of the 1922 Rand Revolt). Conversely, those layers of the white working class who were denied special treatment by the ruling class – such as the women garment workers during the 1930s – remained open to a programme of struggle on the basis of working-class unity.

A crucial role in this system of rule has been played by the reactionary leadership of the white workers' organisations...these leaders have consistently collaborated with the capitalist class in maintaining the divisions of colour and privilege within the working class and in supporting the regulation of trade unions by the state.

That is the elaborate structure of class collaboration that forms the foundation of what appears as 'white minority rule'.

To explain the continuation of racism in South Africa twenty-one years after the end of white-minority rule, and thirty-three years after the above was written, it is only necessary to develop the MWT's analysis and examine the modifications to the class relations created by the 1994 negotiated settlement that formally at least, ended the national oppression of the black majority.

From the late 1980s, the key institutions and laws of apartheid that maintained white privilege began to be dismantled in the face of the mass movement of the black population, crucially the black working class. The 1994 negotiated settlement created a bourgeois constitution and bourgeois parliament formally recognising the equality of all races in a democratic state. Political power (in the narrow capitalist sense) transferred to the black majority. In class terms the 1994 settlement represented a compromise between the white capitalist class and the black middle class in the ANC leadership who aspired to become a black capitalist class. The white capitalists would permit a *section* of the black middle class to develop in this direction and share with them the real *economic* power in society based on private ownership of the economy. The capitalist economic foundations that apartheid had rested upon would be left intact.

With the nod of approval from the ANC, many provisions were made to guarantee the continuation of certain aspects of white privilege in the twilight years of the apartheid regime. The 1994 settlement therefore, also left the foundations of white privilege in capitalist private property intact. Relative to the majority of black people, white people today continue to enjoy superior

housing, superior education, training and access to jobs, access to superior private healthcare and other social services; the white middle class continues to dominate the professions and ownership of small businesses. Class inequalities continue to have a racial appearance. The working class is overwhelmingly black. The capitalist class is overwhelmingly white and so are the middle layers in society. These are the modern social conditions for the continuation of white privilege and the corresponding feelings of racial 'superiority' and the explicit racism of a section of the white population reinforced by the enormous weight of historical inertia from the racism of the apartheid era and before.

In this situation *elements* of a national question continue to exist. The continuation of white privilege continues to fuel a feeling of national oppression amongst sections of the black population. The emergence of the black student-led Rhodes Must Fall Campaign at the University of Cape Town mentioned earlier, was an expression of this. It is no accident that the Rhodes Campaign emerged in the universities which remain bastions of white privilege - the so-called 'historically white universities'. Racism and national oppression are posed all the more sharply in the minds of the black students in the social conditions of the universities. That the Rhodes Campaign expressed itself in black consciousness ideas was not a surprising response.

Race and class prejudice intertwined

The modified post-1994 class relations and their contradictions continue to express themselves in versions of racism. Middle class fear of the working class frequently appears as white fear of black people. Under the pressure of the crisis ridden character of twenty-first century South African capitalism, the social position of sections of the white middle class is increasingly precarious, reflected in increasing indebtedness. The small Afrikaner farmer has all but disappeared as a significant social layer, swallowed up by big agri-business. The disastrous rule of the ANC further reinforces racist ideas amongst the white middle class as a 'black government' is seen to preside over economic crisis, deteriorating social infrastructure and a society riddled with corruption and cronyism all of which exerts a growing financial burden on the middle class. However, the rule of the ANC is disastrous not because it is a *black* government but because it is a *capitalist* government.

For now however, the majority of the white middle class have accepted the new non-racial form of capitalist rule because it gives some protection to their material privileges, rooted as they are in class inequalities and the continuation of capitalism. In that sense the white population, particularly the white middle class, remains an important middle buffer for capitalist rule. However it is far less resolute in its support for its new ANC political guarantors who it blames for its weakening social position.

However, this white middle class is no longer a sufficient middle buffer for South African capitalism under ANC rule. Indeed, it would have been politically impossible for the ANC to inherit unmodified apartheid capitalism's middle buffer given its character as a vehicle of the interests of the black middle class which leaned on the black working class to achieve them. So, just as the apartheid regime moulded the white population as a privileged middle layer, the ANC has of necessity pursued a policy to develop its 'own' middle layer. This is the purpose of

the Black Economic Empowerment policy. Whilst on the one hand it has created a small black capitalist class, on the other hand, through 'affirmative action', racial quotas, the opening up of the civil service etc. the ANC is consciously creating a property owning black middle class it hopes can act as a social base for capitalism in general and the ANC in particular.

On the surface then, the middle class is increasingly multi-racial. Black and white can find common ground in shared class prejudices and contempt for the black working class, reflected in the belief that the middle class 'deserves' their wealth and privileges, that they were acquired through their own 'hard work', that the working class is 'lazy' and if only they showed the same energy as the middle class they could pull themselves up by their boot straps and out of poverty. From the white middle class, this class contempt cannot but express itself in a racist form, from a crude racism to a patronising paternalism seeking to 'help' poor blacks. These same class prejudices amongst the new black middle class partially explains the Africanist-inspired insult against 'coconuts' and 'Oreos' – black on the outside white on the inside. The Africanist view of society primarily in terms of race and not class means that to them these class prejudices appear to be a form of hatred for black people rather than the black working class. This is the real class basis for the Africanist idea of 'self-hating' blacks and 'internalised racism'. Just as 'slave' came to equal 'black' in the Americas, so in South Africa, 'black' has come to equal 'poor', 'working class', and 'inferior' as race and class intertwine. Escaping black skin can come to be seen as the means of escaping the social conditions of ones class.

But despite shared class prejudices, this is not a middle class with a feeling of shared confidence in its social position. Quite the opposite. The middle class is riven with contradictions. There is the 'old money' white middle class suspicion for the 'new money' black middle class. And as always the middle class is a diverse layer whose wealth depends on varied forms, including ownership of small business, landlordism, salaried professions and of course the new, largely black, 'tenderpreneur' layer. But for the black middle class, the ANC's 1994 compromise with the white capitalist class, the crisis of South African capitalism and its neo-liberal policies, has set limits to their growth as a class compared to the state-led consolidation of the white middle class under apartheid. Much of the black middle class exists in a state of precariousness reliant on the grace and favour of the ANC. The white middle class tries to maintain its historical privileges; the black middle class finds itself incapable of fully entrenching its privileges.

It was only a matter of time before the frustrations of the black middle class that did not make it to the capitalist dinner table or were unhappy with the size of their portions if they did, found a political expression. On the one hand this has been expressed in the estimated one million urban black voters who switched their allegiance in the 2014 elections to the pro-capitalist white dominated Democratic Alliance in hope of a better managed capitalism. But these frustrations have also proved susceptible to expression as a racial antagonism between black and white, not least of all because the white middle class continues to dominate business and the professions. So on the other hand, the rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters, with its mixture of populism and anti-white Africanism reflects the continued racial appearance of class inequalities in South African society

and the black middle classes' frustration with their social position. The EFF is demanding the capitalist state be used to consolidate a larger black capitalist class and black middle class than the ANC has been able to do upon the basis of neo-liberal policies. In the meantime, the EFF leadership is content with the privileges of parliamentary office as compensation.

The working class post-1994

For the black working class, the overthrow of white minority rule and apartheid was a major victory and the winning of democratic rights a historic conquest. But it did not result in a major transformation of living standards because of the continuation of capitalism. In general the white working class still forms an aristocracy of labour relative to the black working class. But time will erode this position and the tendency will be, at least in their living standards, towards the racial desegregation of the working class. A process of class differentiation amongst the white population had been under way in the period between the Anglo-Boer War and the creation of apartheid. A non-racial class consciousness became increasingly evident in the towns and cities as black and white workers mingled. Apartheid was designed to arrest this process and reinforce the development of Afrikaner nationalism to bolster the social base of the Afrikaner elite.

Post-1994, amongst the white working class, sliding backwards from their position as a labour aristocracy, racism has its material foundations in the perceived threat of the black working class to their lingering privileges and the new found competition for jobs and resources. This process is a mirror-image of the social conditions that give rise to xenophobia in the black townships. In the absence of collective struggle, workers and poor will grab hold of any basis by which to advance themselves to the front of the queue in conditions of scarcity. Without a class conscious leadership of both black and white workers able to win over sections of the middle class, the tendency will not automatically be one of non-racial class unity. The danger of both white and black falling back on racism and nationalism to bolster their position relative to the other is lodged in the situation.

The crisis ridden character of capitalism in South Africa, the modified class relations post-1994 and the racist legacies of apartheid can provide the social conditions for many dangerous and reactionary racist and nationalist movements and ideologies. The only way to cut across this potential is for the working class to stamp its independent mark on society. It is only the working class that has the power to take society forward from the impasse it has been led into by the ANC's 1994 compromise. The working class must wage a battle for socialism and take control of the economy into their own hands through the nationalisation of the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, the big factories and big business under democratic working class control. Only the struggle for socialism can change the real class foundations upon which racism and national oppression exist. First and foremost this is the task of the black working class. The direction the working class is heading in towards the establishment of its class independence in the formation of a mass workers party therefore requires the support of all those serious about ending the racism of South African society.

Part IV

Race or class?

After the disasters of the two world wars in the twentieth century which expressed themselves in the racist and nationalist ideologies described in Part II, the 'official' policy of the imperialist capitalist classes whose predecessors created racism is a hypocritical anti-racism. But racism and racial inequality in the twenty-first century, the world over, have their material roots in capitalism's very nature as a system of class inequality; racial inequality is one of its forms of appearance. As long as society remains divided into classes the social conditions for racism will remain.

The intensity of racism and its use as a means of discrimination will continue to ebb and flow with the crises of capitalism and the class struggle. The capitalist class will continue to rely on it as part of their reactionary ideological armour to divide and rule the working class limited only by the level of organisation and the fighting capacity of the working class. Cruel and bizarre combinations of reactionary ideas and prejudices belonging to Engels' "endless host of accidents" will continue to be thrown up. The recent xenophobic violence in South Africa falls into this category. In the complete absence of working class leadership, the most reactionary racist and nationalist prejudices of capitalist society were picked-up and wielded by a section of the downtrodden masses angry at poverty, unemployment and inequality.

Which has primacy? Race or class?

This question is frequently posed in political debates and discussions in South Africa. Relying on their ahistorical understanding of racism, Africanists will usually assert that it is race. But Marxists should start by challenging the assumptions of the question. Yes, for Marxists class has primacy. But this does not exclude race from being of huge significance and importance in class relations and the class struggle. For it is in the dialectical *interaction* of class and race that racism arose and it is in the dialectical *interaction* of class and race that racism acquires all of its modern forms. C.L.R. James made the point that for Marxists, "the race question is subsidiary to the class question... But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental."



CLR James

Anyone wishing to understand the history of racism must examine whether Marxism is able to uncover and explain its real historical development. We believe that it does. But Marxism does not attempt to explain racism simply as a mental exercise but rather as a guide to action in the struggle for a socialist future. If Marxism is able to expose the real class foundations of racism then it is necessary to draw the full conclusions and join the working class struggle for socialism as the only means of eradicating the real capitalist basis for racism.