

Race: A Factor of Social Reproduction

Recently I stumbled upon a text on the site libcom.org called “*Races and the working class in USA*”, also referred to as “*Letter #48*”, from a group I think is called Mouvement Communiste. Broadly speaking, the text consists of two parts. In the first part the authors take a look at race and class in the USA today through an array of statistics, and the second part takes a critical look at intersectionality, politics of identity, and other related themes. Reading the text, I found it lacking severely in almost every department. Seeing how a few groups I have decent respect for seem to have shared it approvingly, and that the themes are timely and important, I felt I needed to get some objections off my chest. I will not cover everything though, and mainly limit myself to the main assertion of the writers, and the data they use to back it up.

The text starts out by asserting that racism in USA has to be understood “*in the framework of the proletarian condition*” and “*must be fought with the means of class struggle against capitalism and its state*”. It is an unremarkable, if in my opinion somewhat reductive start, and I was eager to see where this analysis would go. Soon enough this became painfully apparent, as the authors of the text proclaimed that “*racial discrimination towards Blacks is not, in our view, a central element of the exercise of capitalist domination and even less one of the present foundations of civil society and the state in that country.*”

They go on to say that “*[i]t was, however, like that until the 1970s, before being swept away by the formidable civil rights movement of the 1960s, which succeeded in eliminating the racial segregation laws rooted in the slave regime of the previous century.*”

Realizing they are already in a conundrum, the writers quickly note that:

“*Certainly, communists know very well that it is not enough to withdraw laws to change things and that competition within the proletariat maintained by capitalism ceaselessly regenerates antagonisms – of which racial discrimination is a part – between the components it is made up of.*”

To sum up, the writers set out an argument that racism in the USA is blown out of proportions, and while still lingering, it is not in any way central to social reproduction, especially after formal racist segregation laws were swept aside in the 60s and 70s. It is also clear that the authors think that, in as much as racism is a thing in today’s USA, it is primarily a tool which capital might or might not use to divide the working class. Lastly, the writers admit that the change of the formal or legal situation does not mean that things on the ground have necessarily changed, but this is something the authors aim to show is the case throughout the text, which should lead to the following conclusion:

“*This text proposes that the discrimination which hits the Blacks does not target them because of their skin colour but because they are “over-represented” among the poorest.*”

Having lived in the USA for years, and been involved in both analysis and practical work surrounding racism and working class struggles in the country, historical as well as contemporary, I was pretty sure I knew how this would pan out. Still I wasn’t quite prepared for how dire things would be at places throughout the text. So let us strap in, and take a ride through the arguments and data presented throughout the text.

George Floyd Rebellion and BLM

The first thing the authors of the text turn to is an assessment of the wave of social upheaval that followed the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. They initially seem to complain that “*the media*” wanted to attribute the uprising to “*the nebulous BLM*”, seemingly implying that this is incorrect, and that it is unclear what BLM signifies. Nevertheless, much of the critique towards this “*badly structured*” movement focuses solely on the organization going by the name Black Lives Matters, and pretends it is the movement as a whole. In this way, the movement as a whole can be portrayed as having as its “*one shared ideology*” the “*refusal of the notion of class and, therefore, of class struggle*”, and that the organization and/or movement “*has served the campaign of the Democratic candidate for the US presidency very well, along with the Democratic Party in general, while provoking the mobilisation of Trump supporters around the defence of “law and order”*”. Radicals that participated in the uprising in one way or another, raise your hand if you recognize yourself in this description. Anyone? Ok, never mind then, let’s move on.

By flattening the entire spectrum of participants in the movement this way, the writers do exactly the thing which they accuse BLM of doing – they forge a narrative about a liberal movement focused on race, and obscure the real movement, which is much more dynamic and diverse, which – as any mass scale movements – finds supporters

among liberals, and even some reactionaries, as well as among radicals. There is a large part of the movement outside of the organization that is BLM, and even within the organization, significant voices have been raised and entire chapters have left while raising critiques that are far more profound and interesting than anything found in “Letter #48”^{2,3}.

Another initial thread of the letter has to do with some of the methods and slogans of the movement, especially in relation to how the uprising evolved in Seattle. The first remark is about the slogan “Defund the Police”, which the authors characterize as follows:

“It is a demand which explains in itself the political perimeter in which the movement is situated. Most of the activists chose to remain in the framework of the democratic dialectic of the state, without expressing political practices of autonomous organisation, capable of sketching the first lines of a social order other than that of capital.”

The authors continue by claiming that this slogan and its related practice actually endanger working class people, especially people of color and black folks:

“In addition, to demand the removal of the police from poor neighbourhoods, to demand the sacking of the most violent cops etc., is not a solution for the impoverished who live in such degraded zones. To make their existence more bearable, it would also be necessary to neutralise in turn the informal police (drug dealers, gangs of all sorts) who subject these neighbourhoods to periodic culling and who rival the militias of the state in anti-proletarian violence and barbarism. On the contrary, there is the real risk (as is already the case in a good number of “at-risk” neighbourhoods in the metropolises of capital around the world) that large sections of the poorest populations crowded into concentrated habitats will turn towards the “official” defenders of existing law and order, towards the police and their legal auxiliaries. Some recent examples (Seattle, Minneapolis and Portland) show that the retreat of the latter from “sensitive” areas ends up with the growth of assaults on the inhabitants. Being particularly affected, shopkeepers call for private security guards, thus reinforcing the militarisation of these territories.”

This section is highly interesting for several reasons. First, it includes a reference to an article supposedly backing up the claim that the retreat of police from “sensitive” areas results in the “growth of assaults on the inhabitants”. The reference is to an article in New York Times dated August 8 2020, with the title “Abolish the Police? Those Who Survived the Chaos in Seattle Aren’t So Sure”. Interestingly, “those” who “aren’t so sure” seem to be a group of small business owners located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, who suffered damages and lost profits due to the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone and the withdrawal of police from the area.

Granted, the CHAZ in itself had its problems, but nowhere in the article is there a mention of working class blacks or PoCs feeling threatened or suffering assaults as a result of the withdrawal of the police. On the contrary, the article shows all the hallmarks of a propaganda hit piece intended to garner sympathy for petit bourgeoisie in the midst of a nation wide and radical wave of protests and uprisings, while discrediting the protesters. Considering that the writers of “Letter #48” spend considerable time bemoaning the “cross-class alliances” that “nebulous” BLM-movements get involved in, their choice of allies here seems peculiar.

Their off hand dismissal of the “Defund the Police” slogan is equally damning. In doing so, the writers showcase a lack of understanding of social movements in general as well as of radical abolitionist theories, debates and practices in the USA. In reality, the slogan was largely popularized by abolitionist circles, which were quickly propelled from the margins to the mainstream as the rebellion grew, and resulted in liberals and established media scrambling to try to contain the increasingly radical and generalized demands on the streets. This led to at least 3 strains of interpretation of what the slogan meant – from simple reform, to serious defunding, to full on abolition⁴.

Still further, the authors’ attempt to correlate violence and insecurity with the withdrawal of the police comes across as highly dishonest, if one really delves into what the abolitionists want. Just as most people who would prefer a stateless society aren’t referring to a situation that might often arise in the power vacuum of a collapsing state in the absence of strong social movements, police abolitionists don’t put police withdrawal at the heart of their agenda, instead turning to self-organized community defense, rapid response networks, notions of restorative and transformative justice, and other theories and practices which have the purpose of replacing cops from within the movement, as for instance highlighted by the works of groups and individuals such as Critical Resistance⁵, Alex Vitale⁶, Project NIA⁷, or 8 to abolition⁸.

Lastly, instead of wanting to paint a bleak picture of police absence so badly so that they end up siding with petite bourgeoisie, the communists of “Letter #48” could investigate what black people themselves say about the presence or absence of police in their daily lives. In a YouGov poll from the early days of the George Floyd uprising – that means, exactly the time frame we are talking about – 60% of black folks reported that they felt “less secure” when they personally see a police officer, as compared to only 5% saying that they feel “more secure”⁹. Alas, if only these blacks read the communist “Letters” from overseas, which could dispel such false consciousness.

With this out of the way, let us now turn our attention to the statistics that the writers amassed, and the conclusions drawn from them. We will do this by replicating the headlines of the article, and in that manner go through the content section by section.

Legalized segregation

The authors get off to a strong start, declaring that legalized segregation is over in the USA, even though some institutional resistance has lingered, and that the *“application of the law by judges, cops etc. is another matter entirely.”* I’m sure most people noticed that Jim Crow laws have been ended, but to quote the authors of the letter, *“communists know very well that it is not enough to withdraw laws to change things”*, so one would expect an investigation of how *de jure* desegregation translates into *de facto* desegregation. While our friends will find some time later on to discuss this, they don’t say anything about it in general under this header.

This leaves us with the work of investigating what is trivially obvious to most people living in or familiar with US social conditions. The fact of the matter is that US authorities have targeted black people directly and indirectly, both before and after the abolition of segregation. This has happened by seizing land for public spaces, by local as well as federal policies subsidizing predominantly white neighborhoods, and probably most blatantly, by the process called redlining, which barred black people from the possibility of obtaining loans for buying houses:

“To carry out these missions, the newly minted Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created maps to assess the risk of mortgage refinancing and set new standards for federal underwriting. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) used these maps to determine the areas in which it would guarantee mortgages. But HOLC maps assessed risk in part based on a neighborhood’s racial composition, designating predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods as hazardous, and coloring these areas red.”

These practices were not abolished by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as shown by the fact that the Fair Housing Act followed in 1968, and the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977. Did these laws prevent explicitly racist discrimination? It doesn’t seem so:

“A recent CAP report, “Racial Disparities in Home Appreciation,” highlighted that although the Fair Housing Act banned discriminatory housing practices, many lenders continue to unfairly target people of color with limited federal, state, and local oversight or accountability.”¹⁰

And in a Pulitzer Prize winning series of articles, first covering Atlanta and then the national situation, investigative journalist Bill Dedman showed how banks pursued directly racist lending practices:

“[A]lthough they had made loans for years in even the poorest white neighborhoods of Atlanta, [they] did not lend in middle-class or more affluent black neighborhoods.”¹¹

These, and a myriad of other practices by federal, or local government, by capital or by collective or individual actors, have resulted in levels of segregation remaining very high, and home ownership among black people being dramatically lower than for whites even accounting for level of education:

“[C]ollege educated Black people are less likely to own their own homes than white people who never finished high school.”¹²

Even when black people own houses, racism does not stop affecting them:

“Racial bias not only undermines access to housing but can also affect property values. One study found that homes in Black neighborhoods were undervalued by an average of \$48,000 due to racial bias, resulting in \$156 billion in cumulative losses nationwide.”¹³

Furthermore, the segregation *“has contributed to persistent disparities in access to public goods—such as parks, hospitals, streetlights, and well-maintained roads—and has undermined wealth building in communities of color nationwide.”*

In short, the situation of black people in terms of segregation in the USA is a result of a mix of practices, some due to pre-existing class positions and lack of resources (which often can be traced all the way back to slavery), some clearly and directly racist in nature. These factors were present before the abolition of legal segregation, but have also persisted beyond, in ways that are too numerous to mention exhaustively. The question remains, though, why the authors of *“Letter #48”* chose not to mention this at all.

Segregation in the administration

Next up, the text deals with segregation in the state administration, and it starts with the same good news as in the previous section: *“Blacks can access all types of jobs in state administration”*. The writers underscore this by mentioning Colin Powell as an example, and go on to say that *“[s]tatistics show that Blacks in the Army are more represented than in the population, including amongst officers.”* However, the very source they use goes on to say that:

“Racial diversity decreases at the upper echelons of the military. While the officer corps has similar levels of racial diversity as the general population, those with higher ranks—generals in the air force, army, and marine corps, and admirals in the coast guard and navy—are disproportionately white. There is an even greater ethnic disparity in the top ranks.”

This immediately reveals the writers’ namedropping of Colin Powell as disingenuous, but also shows that racial disparities once again manifest, even in the military, except for the bottom level – the cannon fodder that is sent to fight imperialist wars for rich people. To add insult to injury, what actually explains the over-representation of young black men in the military is the predatory practices of US Army recruiters towards poor people, tied to various incentives.^{14,15,16,17}

In other words, black people aren’t over-represented in the military because there is a lack of racial bias, but because they are on average in far more financially insecure positions, which, at least so far into our investigation, turns out to be based both on class positions and direct as well as indirect systemic racism. It is also worth mentioning that the problems with racism within the military are so serious, that some black folks in the military report being *“[grinded] down by overt racism”* and bear witness to a lack of judicial tools to fight this phenomenon¹⁸.

Furthermore, other types of administrative jobs aren’t exactly a walk in the park for black people. As an example from Alaska, an investigative book by United States Commission on Civil Rights, tells a sobering story:

*“African Americans have difficulty securing jobs, and when they do, often they are not given the opportunity for promotion to higher positions. This pattern can be seen in state, federal, military, and private sectors.”*¹⁹

A segmented labor market

The section on labor market gets off to the usual bright start with a clear statement that *“[s]tatistics indicate lower wages for Blacks in all employment categories [and that] [t]he differential also exists for Black women even though they are lower down the scale”*.

This is true, but it might also be worth quantifying this claim. While black men earn around 80 cent on the dollar compared with white men, black women earn as little as 63 cent per dollar. On aggregate, black households have a median yearly income of \$40k, while white households have a median income of 68k²⁰. In other words, the median black household income is roughly 59% of a median white household income. And if this seems like a large gap, then it is still nothing compared to wealth gaps. The median net worth of a white household, at \$163k, is roughly 1000% or ten times that of the median black household, which is at approximately \$16k²¹.

The authors of *“Letter #48”* instead choose to focus on what I guess should be considered the positives, writing that *“we must not forget that almost a quarter of blacks are paid at the same level as their White equivalents [and] a third of Black households do not live in poverty and destitution”*. This is admirable optimism, seeing the glass as half full, or maybe rather, seeing that one third of the glass is still something. Very encouraging. It is however a misleading line of reasoning. Firstly, it is unclear which data point the writers actually use to reach the conclusion that a quarter of black people are paid *at the same level* as their equivalents, because looking at median incomes cannot provide that information. A suspicion is that it is based on a breakdown of the median incomes into various income levels, but not even this data can lead to that conclusion. Just to make things abundantly clear – the fact that, for instance, 10.8% of blacks fall in the above average \$100-150k bracket, does not mean that they are being paid *“at the same level as their White equivalents”*. Indeed, research indicates the opposite – that black people get paid less for the same jobs and at the same educational levels²². Thus it seems once again that our friends, in their optimism, are obscuring real disparities which point, once again, towards explicit structural racism as a factor.

If the writers of the text actively fail to see explicit instances of systemic racism, they also do a good job of obscuring secondary instances of the same phenomenon, thus acting, in a way, like a Kafka-esque bureaucracy, shuffling a complaint between different departments, until they can be forgotten. They thus write:

“Numerous Silicon Valley firms (Apple, Google, etc.) have adopted recruitment programmes for “people of color”, but struggle to find people with the right qualifications and experience for their needs. The difference in employability between Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians etc., is in fact due more to the fact that education does not match the needs of the labour market. These are disparities in education directly attributable to the material conditions of existence of these various populations (high cost of education, environments unfavourable to studying

in poor neighbourhoods, unemployment, single-parent families etc.) rather than racism targeting a particular group.”

We will deal with the spurious claim that big tech companies are “*anti-racist*” later, while the very next section in the Letter gives us the opportunity to discuss the problem of education. As a quick spoiler, we’ll see that access to education in itself contains elements of explicit systemic racism. As for the labor market in general, it is also worth mentioning that at the point of hiring, as one example, racial discrimination persists, and does not show any signs of declining for at least the last 30 years²³.

Access to education in retreat

The authors of “*Letter #48*” start off with some facts:

“According to the Civil Rights Project of Harvard University, run by Gary Oldfield, the real desegregation of state schools plateaued in 1988. Since then, schools have in fact become more segregated.”

After going into some detail, the section ends with the statement “[i]f, since 1964, more and more “white” universities have opened their doors to a growing number of Black students, this process has reversed since 1990”.

As we’ve seen before, the statistics themselves are correct, but what conclusions can be drawn from them, and do they support the main thesis of the authors? In this section, they are very silent, and the optimism from earlier segments seems gone. This is especially alarming since they’ve shuffled the problem of hiring, discussed in the earlier section, to education, in an attempt to show that there was no explicit racism involved. If we are to continue the Kafka analogy, we could see this as the end of the line, tumbleweeds masquerading as a dial tone with no one on the other side to answer, after being shuffled around by various bureaucrats. So there’s no escaping doing the work ourselves again.

Just to get us started, black eight graders are five times as likely as white to attend schools that are highly segregated by race or ethnicity, and more than twice as likely to attend high-poverty schools. In both instances, the percentage of black students in this situation is a whopping 70%. Needless to say, this has been shown to affect school performance²⁴.

The failure of school desegregation is closely linked to the housing segregation. After school segregation formally ended, neighborhoods were still largely segregated and continued to be so, due to reasons we’ve partially already covered, like redlining. This resulted in the struggles such as that over the busing system, which could take white and black students alike to schools that weren’t in their immediate vicinity, thus supporting desegregation efforts²⁵. While many whites did not dismiss the notion of mixed schools, explicit racist currents and deep rooted identification of black neighborhoods as dangerous caused problems that undermined these attempts. Republicans also tended to oppose busing when in power, and this proved to be a convenient cover for racist policies – they could now be made on economic grounds while still consciously appealing to racist sentiments, something we will come back to in greater detail later.

It is also notable that black people overwhelmingly report experiencing discrimination (76%), and that this level is higher among those with college education (81%) than those with high school education (69%), while “57% of blacks with at least some college experience believe being black has hurt their ability to get ahead”²⁶. This is an interesting observation, which also suggests that black people in environments socially assumed to be white, thus subverting race-based social expectation, face greater pushback in some regards. This is in line with the history of the Reconstruction, and the violent racist backlash to the gains blacks were making after the abolition of slavery.

In terms of class and race, it can be said that explicitly racist practices (harassment starting as early as pre-school, lower ratings despite similar scores, less recommendations for gifted and talented programs, etc)²⁷ and economically based inequalities (majority in high-poverty low resource schools, restricted access to college due to economic situation, etc) have both compounded the problem in education, and with the end of the formal racist segregation, few efforts have really succeeded to desegregate housing and schools, and in that way level out the incomes and opportunities for black people. Thus both before and after formal desegregation, economic as well as racist factors have affected the continued racist outcomes, while the system at large has continued to reproduce racial divisions and inequalities.

Life expectancy improves but health situation remains terrible

This sections starts out by highlighting the life expectancy of black men (72.2) and women (78.5) as well as white men (76.6) and women (81.3). Here, as in all other areas covered so far, we see a discrepancy disadvantaging black people.

The authors of “*Letter #48*” go on to list some of the most common causes of death observed in Washington DC (Heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS) and quote the same source to establish that

blacks “suffer and die from these killer diseases in vastly disproportionate numbers compared to white residents“. Disproportionately poor health not only affects black folks in the urban centers, but we learn that the same is largely true in rural areas. Lest we start to think that some racism might be at play, the authors are quick to point out that “Poverty and bad health walk hand in hand. Always, poor Whites are in the same boat as their Black peers. Poverty is thus the determining factor in bad health and not skin colour. To put it simply, the Blacks are over-represented in the most impoverished sections of the population.”

Avid readers might start noticing a trend, that is continued in this section. The authors list some statistics, and then draw conclusions that are not based in the least on the sources they have provided. We are again left to our own devices to make sure they have not “missed” something.

Let us quote at length from a comprehensive source:

*“Differences in health status reflect, to a large degree, inequities in preventive care and treatment. For instance, African-Americans are more likely to require health care services, but are less likely to receive them. Disparity in treatment has been well documented in a number of studies, including studies done on AIDS, cardiology, cardiac surgery, kidney disease, organ transplantation, internal medicine, obstetrics, prescription drugs, treatment for mental illness, pain treatment, and hospital care. Certainly, difference in treatment can be based on a number of different factors, including clinical characteristics, income, and medical or biological differences. **However, race plays an independent role.** There are marked differences in time spent, quality of care and quantity of doctor’s office visits between Whites and African-Americans. **Whites are more likely to receive more, and more thorough, diagnostic work and better treatment and care than people of color — even when controlling for income, education, and insurance. Differences also exist in the number of doctor’s office visits between Whites and African-Americans, even when controlling for income, education, and insurance.** Furthermore, researchers have concluded that doctors are less aggressive when treating minority patients. **Thus, the most favored patient is “White, male between the ages of 25 and 44.” In fact, at least one study indicated a combined effect of race and gender resulting in significantly different health care for African-American women.**”²⁸ (emphasis mine)*

Maternal and infant health studies cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention further confirm these findings:

“According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, black mothers and children die at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts, regardless of their income levels.”^{29,30}

A lot of research has also gone into uncovering the various racist myths concerning black people and their supposed higher pain threshold, which obviously leads to worse experiences when seeking medical help³¹.

There is also evidence suggesting disparities when it comes to classifying the need of black children to receive emergency care, and a greater reluctance to admit them to hospitals³².

Even when health care decisions are done by algorithms, studies show that they can transfer implicit and explicit racist bias as well as economic discrepancies in a way that leads to worse outcomes for black people³³.

We could go on, and on, and on, but I think the point has been made. The writers’ assertions about health care for black people are completely unfounded based on the statistics they present, and wrong when statistics on racist discrepancies are considered. This is not to say that class and economics do not play a role – clearly they do – but more to point out that these two factors compound and interact to create a truly dire situation for black people in particular.

The writers of “Letter #48” end the section by saying that

“Blacks have been proportionately hit three times harder than Whites by the Covid pandemic (along with Latinos and Native Americans). Living in unhealthy areas, cramped housing, lack of information, but also the high representation of Blacks among health workers are the causes of this.”

It is clear that a number of factors, including access to healthcare, insurance, occupation, education and housing compound to create a more serious situation in regards to covid for black people. But there is one factor missing, which plays a part directly, and indirectly through all other mentioned factors. I’ll leave it to the reader’s imagination to figure out which it can be. The imagination of the authors of “Letter #48”, it is increasingly clear, does not admit any such further factors.

The central question of housing

The authors dedicate this short section to discussing the limited access and ownership of housing which black people experience in the USA, and admit that desegregation is “*weak*” at best. They write that

“The Whites tend to flee these areas, and this is notably above all because mixing in schools which young Blacks go to is associated with the idea of delinquency.”

We have already touched on this problem in the section on schools, where we discussed the close connection of that issue to housing, and also mentioned redlining outright. While clearly we are dealing with partially economic causes, it should also be obvious that the “*idea of delinquency*”, as imagined by many whites, spans the entire spectrum of innocent misconception to open racism.

Nevertheless, the writers press on with a theme that should be familiar by now:

“Coming from poor neighbourhoods considered “sensitive” is often the cause of hiring discrimination against Blacks. But this problem does not only affect Blacks in the US. It concerns all countries. In France, for example, bosses are reluctant to employ residents of “mal famés” (disreputable) neighbourhoods such as Grande Borne in Grigny, in the Paris suburbs, and it doesn’t matter if they are called Adama, Mohammed or Francis.”

First, it is notable that once again, we are presented with no data, and a very unconvincing line of reasoning, as to how racial segregation is wholly explained by class and economic factors. Yet again, we have to venture into the wild to find some relevant information. And luckily, there is a lot of it out there. A recent and highly relevant study, for instance, asks precisely this question. The result of the experiment was the following:

“race, per se, shapes how whites and, to a lesser extent, blacks view residential space. Residential preferences are not simply a reaction to class-based features of a neighborhood; they are shaped by the race of who lives there.”³⁴

In other words, whites generally, consciously or not, tend to not only rate neighborhoods based on their socioeconomic appeal, but also based on racial composition.

In the case of hiring discrimination mentioned, we also only get anecdotes as the single justification for the remarkable opinion that employers discriminate on socioeconomic factors and based on neighborhood, *not* race. Yet again, these two correlating is just an unlucky coincidence, inherited from a dark past, banished by the passing of the Civil Rights Act, we must assume. The immediate instinct here is to repeat our feats from earlier sections and look for actual data that points to the contrary. We have actually already mentioned direct connections to racism in the section on the labor market. But let us raise the stakes. Can we try to not only disprove the general point that the writers of the letter are trying to make here, but *literally* discredit their assertion? It turns out we can.

In a study that looked into bias in hiring practices in the US, the researchers found that

“[r]esumes with white-sounding names received 50 percent more callbacks than those with black-sounding names.”³⁵

Whether the same would be true in France is a matter for further investigation. Personally I know I’ve seen this type of research confirming the same bias in Sweden, and I would be rather surprised if these findings weren’t indicative of a general trend. But no matter what, I wouldn’t lend a lot of credibility to the unsourced words of the writers of “*Letter #48*”.

The police and criminality

This section contains an unusual admission, so let us start by quoting the first few sentences:

“Blacks are more exposed to police violence than Whites, Latinos or any other fractions “of color” of the population. If there are more Blacks murdered by the forces of repression, that is partly due to racism but also to their higher level of participation in economic activities deemed criminal, as is shown by the law enforcement statistics.”

It seems that the authors’ heroic attempts not to see racism faced an obstacle too difficult to scale here, but they still immediately point out that there are socioeconomic factors involved. Let’s leave aside the fact that, as we’ve mentioned before, even these socioeconomic factors tend to harbor components of structural racism, and let us still call this a victory. If we squint, this part of the analysis is actually reasonable, if underplaying racism a bit. Unfortunately, as if on cue, things take a weird turn:

“Also, the violence that Blacks are subjected to is greater from other Blacks (perpetrated within the family or by gangs) than from Whites or the police. This is shown by the figures for inter-racial murders and for gun homicides, where the US holds first place in the world.”

For anyone familiar with the political climate and discussion in the US, this is a familiar form of whataboutism, aimed at shifting focus from structurally racist violence, towards the victims. There is a word for it, when used in more extreme fashion on the right – “*black on black crime*”. Other than being a myth, because this highlighting of black crime is largely explained by the social and geographical racial segregation^{36,37}, it is a racist tactic to turn the discussion on its head. Trump has used it, and right wing extremists as well as more established republicans use it frequently in various forms. I’m not sure how the writers of “*Letter #48*” got the brilliant idea to recycle such far right talking points, but let us just call it an unlucky accident and move on.

To be brief, it should be mentioned that police and policing in the USA has its roots in slave patrols, repression of indigenous populations, and subduing unruly workers in the fledgling urban industries. As such, policing has a clearly delineated historical heritage of racism and a distinct class character built into it. These characteristics have never gone away, and there is a massive amount of data to support this.

First, the police force is an organization or community with a well established identity and ideology. They have an overblown danger imperative, a siege mentality, and explicitly anti-black biases³⁸.

We also have data showing that the more black people live in a neighborhood, the more likely are *white* cops to use a gun during an emergency call response – much more so than black cops. Thus it seems to matter, who is holding the gun³⁹. This is not to suggest, as some liberals do, that hiring black officers solves the problem. The police is also beholden to systemic institutional pressures, and the institution changes the individuals rather than the other way around. But it does show that white police seem to have a stronger anti-black bias which translates into greater use of force.

There is also an overwhelming amount of research⁴⁰ that shows the explicitly racist biases and outcomes of policing in the USA, from traffic stops, Stop and Frisk incidents, to abuse, violence torture and of course, murder. It is interesting that this section, in the original text of the “*Letter #48*”, is among the shortest. Perhaps it was just the least fertile for the writers’ argument, because no amount of statistical acrobatics⁴¹ can hide the fact that policing in the US is deeply racist.

Not to mention the overt racist incidents within the force and overlap of the police and outright racist organizations⁴², or the comical “*discovery*” of “*racist infiltration*” into the US police force in a recent report, which found that

*“[w]hite supremacist groups have infiltrated US law enforcement agencies in every region of the country over the last two decades”*⁴³

As if overt racism has been anything but the normal way of operating for US police since its inception.

In summary, even though they do their best to avoid the topic, at least the writers of “*Letter #48*” admit that racism plays a role here, and as a result there’s no need to list statistics exhaustively to disprove them, especially as much of that data overlaps with the next section.

Criminal justice and discrimination

The section on “*criminal justice*” is surprisingly lacking, considering that prisons have been one of the greatest areas of contention and resistance in class based anti-racist movements in the US, with a long history of critique⁴⁴ and a modern abolitionist movement including such classics as Angela Davis’ *Are Prisons Obsolete?* The writers do mention that

“The majority of prisoners is made up of “people of color” with an over-representation of Blacks and Latinos [and] Almost 70% of people incarcerated are inside for crimes linked to drug dealing.”

But don’t follow that up with any closer look, even though the latter statistic hints at the cause of the former. The War On Drugs, a vicious government policy deployed in the 1970s, might have just as well been called the war on black people, and it is a phenomenon with roots going as deep as the history of slavery. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Once again, we’re dealing with a section where the authors drop a few facts, and then largely stay silent, presumably because it’s hard to make a point that supports their general argument. The argument in question of course falls apart immediately, would it be made. It is well known that drug criminalization in the US happened not only in a way that explicitly prioritized working class neighborhoods, based on which drugs were popular there

compared to middle- or upper class neighborhoods, but was also designed to directly target black people. Even as many of the architects of the war on drugs claim that they have changed their minds, we still live with the effects of it, with a prison population that has exploded in recent decades:

*“There are 2 million people in the nation’s prisons and jails—a 500% increase over the last 40 years.”*⁴⁵

Many of the practices surrounding this process, also didn’t and still don’t simply target blacks because of their socioeconomic condition. As a recent summary of studies⁴⁶ showed:

“More than one in four people arrested for drug law violations in 2015 was black, although drug use rates do not differ substantially by race and ethnicity and drug users generally purchase drugs from people of the same race or ethnicity. For example, the ACLU found that blacks were 3.7 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than whites in 2010, even though their rate of marijuana usage was comparable.”

Or in relation to Stop and Frisk, where it was found that

“[t]he highest officials in New York City had “turned a blind eye to the evidence that officers are conducting stops in a racially discriminatory manner,”

Or in relation to stopping vehicles:

“A closer look at the causes of traffic stops reveals that police are more likely to stop black and Hispanic drivers for discretionary reasons—for “investigatory stops” (proactive stops used to investigate drivers deemed suspicious) rather than “traffic-safety stops” (reactive stops used to enforce traffic laws or vehicle codes). Once pulled over, black and Hispanic drivers were three times as likely as whites to be searched (6% and 7% versus 2%) and blacks were twice as likely as whites to be arrested. These patterns hold even though police officers generally have a lower “contraband hit rate” when they search black versus white drivers.”

Blacks were also found to be put in pre-trial detention at rates of 3.5 that of whites (which has been shown to affect sentencing), are more likely to be denied bail, have higher money bond set, are twice as likely to be charged with offenses that carry a mandatory minimum sentence than similarly situated whites, are more likely to be charged under habitual offender laws, some research suggest that parole boards are influenced by race, and there’s research suggesting that racial bias among correctional officers also shapes parole outcomes despite comparable in-prison conduct.

As before, we could keep going for a very long time, but the point is probably clear enough. There is a clear structural racism in the US prison system.

And this should come as no surprise, as many people have pointed out time after time, especially in relation to the prison system’s role as a substitute for slavery. The saying that the plantation never disappeared, but just shifted form and moved out into society at large, has a lot of truth to it. And so, even going back to the 13th amendment, which technically abolished slavery, we notice that this amendment did not cover the case of prisoners. That’s why we now have mostly-black prisoners working jobs in prison without getting paid, doing everything from assembling commodities to working as firefighters, under abysmal conditions of health, and in systematically poorly maintained facilities.

None of this seems to be of interest to our communist friends.

Civil society still scarred by racism

In this weirdly but unsurprisingly named section, the authors establish that *“[US] civil society remains polarised and identification by race remains strong”*, which, yes, we have not failed to notice throughout this investigation. They, however, seem somewhat confused by this:

“This is the paradox of the United States, where the population in general and proletarians in particular define themselves first of all in terms of race, despite the generalisation of wage labour and the fall of legal barriers to equality before the law.”

Here, in one sentence, the authors both reap the fruits of their own analysis, and fail to adhere to their own caveats. They have spent numerous sections failing to notice explicit racial discrimination, and must thus call the observed racial divisions and identifications a “paradox”. Secondly, they seem to have forgotten their own proclamation, to the effect that *“communists know very well that it is not enough to withdraw laws to change things”*. Their position this

far, can thus be summarized as, “When communists face a reality that does not reflect their analysis, something must be wrong with the reality”.

Advanced “antiracist” capital

Having done so well at the beginning of many sections, it is disappointing to see the opening statement of the present one:

“Capitalism in the US (as elsewhere) is neither racist, nor antiracist. It is quite simply capable of exploiting in turn all the various divisions and fractures existing within the dominated class to assure the valorisation of capital.”

I’m not sure what reality the authors of “Letter #48” exist in, but it is surely not the one as the rest of us. Capitalism has historically always been racist. There has been no point at which racism didn’t play an important part. In fact, the writers will soon be quoting Marx to that very effect, in relation to the role of slavery in the rise of North American capitalism. Since those days there has not been a minute where capitalism has not been in a close relation to both explicit and implicit racism. The agnostic capitalism of the writers is thus not a historical phenomenon, but an abstract ideal construction – and one at that which there is no certainty could ever exist as such in practice.

Next, our attention turns to the main topic of the section, which is meant to expound on this doubtful foundation:

“Today, for the advanced sectors of capital, those with a high technical composition and active globally, racial discrimination is no longer useful. It is even judged counter-productive. The support of the giants of high-tech, particularly all those of GAFAM (Google Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), for BLM is something which must not be forgotten.”

This claim is backed up by the fact that Apple pledged \$100 million to “challenge systemic barriers that limit opportunity for communities of color in the critical areas of education, economic equality and criminal justice.” Let us first look at the numbers. Just Apple’s annual R&D budget stands at roughly \$18.75 billion, while the annual gross profit tends to hover around \$100 billion, and the annual revenue sits around 270 billion⁴⁷. Quickly translated onto my own earnings, it would mean a donation of \$1 for the cause of the abolition of structural racism. On a personal level, few people would be impressed, and considering the amount of money corporations use for various types of PR campaigns, it is probably a pretty good deal – it sure managed to impress the communists behind “Letter #48”. Let us instead be honest for a moment. If this announcement was about investments in LGBTQ issues, every socialist worth their salt would simply call that rainbow capitalism, and proclamations that corporations – even if we just limit ourselves to big tech – now are in any way pro-LGBTQ, would be met with ridicule. Not to speak of cops kneeling and marching in Pride parades, or other similar stunts.

A more precise statement regarding all this, grounded in historical developments and power dynamics, would conclude that capitalism is still firmly racist and patriarchal, but that it will dress up in any color or costume in order to cynically exploit small or big trends, developments or contradictions, for its own benefit.

In reality, the thin veneer of inclusivity barely covers the obvious inequality hiding behind it, and the tech firms hailed as “anti-racist” generally fail to live up even to their own promises and proclamations⁴⁸. Companies like Apple thrive on racist practices of forced labor⁴⁹, have racist ads ran for them⁵⁰ and even lobby China to soften prison labor laws⁵¹. Being able to tap into the free black US prison labor force would likely be a dream come true for the likes of Apple, only potentially offset by the perceived PR losses resulting from such endeavors.

Next, we are reminded that “The Democrat Joe Biden, then the Presidential candidate, in his turn expressed himself in favour of the protests while condemning violence committed by the protesters” and much is made of the fact that some Black Lives Matter member has reluctantly stated that Biden is to prefer over Trump. We’ve already dealt with the imprecise way the authors of the letter try to approach last years uprising and the myriad of tendencies and organizations within the broader movement, so we’ll put that to the side. And as far as Biden goes in general, this is not much different from when Obama was in office, and in fact presided over the presidency while the repression of black people was so harsh and blatant that the Black Lives Matter movement was born in the first place. In short, it isn’t exactly convincing if it is meant to signal some significant shift in the political and/or economic ruling class.

Not to mention factors overlapping government policies and labor market, like the militarized southern border of the US. Scholar Aaron Bobrow-Strain commented, during an interview on *Against the Grain*⁵², that the border regime of the US should not be viewed as a failed attempt at keeping people out, but as a successful precarization machine. It provides jobs for people in the border-industrial complex and opportunities for tech industry to provide the tools, while at the same time serving up cheap precarious labor through the practices of racist violence upon those fleeing dire circumstances in Central- and South America. In the context of “Letter #48” we’re of course focusing on racism against black people, but it is worth mentioning that other racist policies, hitting people in different circumstances,

are deeply ingrained in the US imperial machinery, and that corporations of all stripes make great profits off of such policies.

Turning the tables

Before wrapping up and trying to provide some sort of concluding remarks, we'll briefly mention something that doesn't fit into any of the categories above. To reiterate, the main thesis of the writers seems to be the argument that most of what we perceive as racism in US society in particular, is actually the result of the economic class position of black people. The fact is, that the opposite has often been the case in the US, especially since the time of the civil rights movement. The smoking gun is the famous 1981 Lee Atwater interview. For those unfamiliar with it and with him, Atwater was a White House staffer under Ronald Reagan, and was widely lauded on the right as "*South Carolinas most effective Republican operative.*"

In the interview, Atwater does something rare – he speaks clearly about the tactics Republicans had pursued for decades in order to win over racist votes while not alienating other sections of the population completely:

"You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger." ⁵³

This was a realignment of what had been referred to as the Southern Strategy – a catchphrase for a Republican political analysis and practice, which identified the racial tensions following the civil rights movement's victories, and aimed at playing off those tensions with racist rhetoric to win white southern voters. As Atwater points out, this was no longer viable in the same way a few decades later, and thus racist rhetoric was veiled in "*fiscal conservatism*" – a prime example of a sort of dog whistle.

In conclusion, the authors of "*Letter #48*" have argued that racism does no longer play a major role in the social reproduction of the system in the USA. They admit that this was the case in the past, but draw the line roughly at the victories of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From then on, they argue, any vestiges of racism are marginal, and generalized wage labor has made capitalism agnostic, or even "*anti-racist*" in some respects, because it is a hindrance to capital accumulation.

Throughout their text, they've provided numerous links, mostly showing how racial inequalities are still a material fact in the lives of the people in the USA, and in several categories these inequalities are growing. However, none of these sources actually support their thesis, which takes the form of short sentences here and there, either undermining the statistical findings to make their case, or pulling proclamations out of thin air to the effect that this nevertheless is all a matter of class. In contrast, this text has provided ample evidence on pretty much every matter touched upon by the original text, which shows that racial dynamics affect every aspect of the lives of black people, and that these various dynamics and categories interact and overlap – poor housing, poor education, job opportunities, incarceration, violence, and so on. This has been done mostly without even referencing or bringing up the de facto extreme right and racist movement in the USA, which stretches well into the republican party and is a real risk for black people all over the country, and instead focused on more seemingly innocent but nevertheless pernicious and wide-ranging dynamics of everyday life.

So where the authors of "*Letter # 48*" set out to prove that racism in fact was only veiled class antagonism – something we have seen no evidence for – we've now been able to show that racism in the US not only persists as a factor of social reproduction, but also has a long tradition of being veiled in conservative economic terms. In doing so, we have been able to show that the authors' thesis is standing on its head, and have now hopefully managed to put it right side up again.

In the section concluding the situation of black people, the writers say that

"[a]dvanced capital in the US could certainly change its position rapidly if Black proletarians found their place in the class struggle again or if the antiracist fight fused with that for the political autonomy of the working class"

in regards to the notion that "*advanced capital*" is now "*antiracist*". Are we to understand that this "*identitarian*" black anti-racist movement they have painted at the beginning of their text, has caused the black population to leave their place in the class struggle? Turning for the last time to statistics, black people are actually more likely to be unionized⁵⁴, and view socialism more favorably than white people⁵⁵. They play integral parts in political organizations, in mutual aid efforts, in labor organizing, as well as during uprisings in the streets. To be sure, we're not essentializing or claiming that all black people are, do or think the same things. But many black folks have reacted to the material conditions put in front of them in a way that have put them right in the middle of the class struggle.

The statement, in the context of the entire text, sheds some light on why blacks might find it difficult to exist in predominantly white working class spaces: Because material issues which explicitly concern them and which complicate every aspect of their daily existence are waved away, or at best instrumentalized, and the call for unity instead goes along a narrow line – only what will directly benefit the white part of the working class. Now we're slowly sliding into the territory of the last part of the text, and as for these concluding sections on intersectionality, politics of identity, and the writers' explicit adherence to a "*determinist Marxism*", I am very much in disagreement with them, but that is a topic for another time.

Finally, in a political climate where the far right is rising to prominence everywhere and explicit racist ideologies, practices and policies are gaining traction, it is easy to succumb to opportunism and tone down notions of anti-racism, receding into a reductionist economism that not only leads to bad analysis, but also risks to actively hurt black people, people of color, and other marginalized folks and ethnicities, sometimes going as far as straight out red-brown alliances. As a secondary concern, such analysis and practice based on it, will undermine rather than support building strong working class movements. As such, I think it is important to react and counteract such tendencies, and I hope to have done so here. I'll leave it as an exercise for the reader to determine where exactly on the scale from harmfully ignorant to blatantly racist the text we've been scrutinizing belongs, and with that said, withdraw back into the shadows.

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