

No Plans to Abandon Our Freedom Dreams

RESPECT EXISTENCE OR

EXPECT RESISTANCE

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Photo: shesbeautifulwhenshesangry.com

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By Linda Burnham

The first 2 weeks of the Trump presidency ought to be engraved in our memories as if in granite. Politics is a blood sport and the far right takes no prisoners—except, apparently, those it intends to torture. The Republican Party has demonstrated for a very, very long time now that it has no use for a single one of the niceties of bi-partisanship. Yet most Democratic politicians dib and dab around as though living in a different political era altogether, though I'm not sure which one.

We are witness to 3 simultaneous crises: a crisis of the working class, which is fractured by race, by region, by citizenship status and, increasingly, by religious belief, and which lacks political cohesion or organizational representation; a crisis of the ruling class, which was bullied and backed into a corner by a megalomaniacal kleptocrat who stole their candy and who has no respect for the core institutions of class rule or for the stories his class brothers and sisters tell each other about the delights of the prevailing world order; and a crisis of the state, in which far-right ideologues, autocrats and theocrats, having captured the governing apparatus, are rapidly concentrating power in the executive while bureaucrats scramble toward either dissent and defiance or appeasement and accommodation.

Historians, economists and political scientists will delve deep to examine the currents that brought us to this three-pronged crisis. Strategists of every political and ideological stripe are under intense pressure to map a way forward. These notes, focused on what might appear to be a side issue, perhaps could be subtitled, "Not the Way Forward."

A highly consequential debate about the future direction of the Democratic Party rages among academics, pundits and politicians. This debate is most active among liberals, but it ranges both rightward and leftward as well. For 2 months now liberals have been ruminating on the role of "identity politics" in November's defeat of Hillary Clinton. Essentially, the debate turns on whether the Democratic Party and Clinton, in their embrace

of racial, religious and sexual minorities, forsook working class whites, who in turn responded to their abandonment by casting their votes for Trump. According to this point of view, the journey back from the devastation of 2016 requires that the party take an indefinite break from identity politics to concentrate on winning back economically squeezed white workers. There's a leftist version of this line – an economic fundamentalism that posits that pocket book issues trump all others. And a classic liberal version that, seemingly reasonably, demands the subordination of the part to the whole, the interests of particular groups to the national interest. Both boil down to the same thing: it's time to subordinate the rights' claims of various "interest groups" to an economic agenda that prioritizes the distress of white workers. Only this adjustment will create the conditions for Democrats to make gains in congressional and statewide races and retake the White House in 2020. (Or, in the leftist version, only this adjustment will set the foundation for building a successful workers' movement.)

Where the Democratic Party lands on this issue matters enormously. The degree of traction this post-election analysis gains will, at minimum, impact the direction of the flow of attention and resources of the party, liberal think tanks and liberal philanthropy, as well as the focus of progressive organizations. It will likely determine how the Democratic Party positions itself relative to 2018 and 2020, and whether that positioning has the intended effect of creating a sufficiently broad electoral coalition to roll back Trumpism. With the tenor and thrust of liberal and left politics hanging in the balance, it is worth taking a moment to examine what might be problematic about analyses that lay 2016's rout of the Democratic Party at the feet of "identity politics."

It's never a good idea to enter willingly into a frame your opponent has constructed to entrap you. The last I heard, "identity politics" was the terminology of the right, deployed to disparage and dismiss social justice movements that seek to expand the democratic rights of marginalized and excluded groups. Implicit

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in the term is the notion of placing the concerns of the part over the common good – of selfishly advancing narrow, particularistic agendas rather than the broader national interest.

The terminology of “identity politics” is part of a whole vocabulary including “thought police,” “politically correct,” and “liberal elites,” whose main intention is to undermine the legitimacy of liberal and left politics. In my experience, advocates and organizers for racial justice don’t think of themselves as purveyors of “identity politics”—nor, do immigrant rights organizers, advocates for LGBTQ rights or women’s rights activists. Rather, in fighting for the expansion of democracy for particular groups they rev the motor for the renewal and expansion of democracy

of the contrast between people who were brown, backward and incapable of self-governance versus white Americans who were enlightened and masterly nation builders.

One could go on, but who really wants to track back through the catastrophes and follies of U.S. national formation perpetrated, in substantial part, in the name of whiteness? This is not about projecting the racial sensibilities of today back onto social and political environments that operated on completely different sets of assumptions. It is about reckoning with the degree to which the nation-building project has been, at the same time, a white identity formation project. This fusion of white identity and American identity, the bedrock of white nationalism, has such a long his-



for the whole. And, they know from experience that purportedly universalistic solutions often work to make already embedded inequalities even more rigid.

Uncritically adopting the “identity politics” language of the right is the equivalent of dropping our guard and waltzing onto their terrain. Master’s tools, master’s house anyone? We need to recognize a toxic frame when we see one and refuse to be a party to its proliferation.

But let’s set aside the questions of language and framing for a moment. Because there is, in fact, an expression of identity politics core to the evolution of our nation and critical to how we understand the current juncture. White identity and nation building have been bound together as though co-terminus since way before the founding fathers and the drafting of our framing documents. The rest of us have had to fight our way into the body politic. Or, in the case of Indian nations, make the best of a spectacularly unequal and uneasy standoff. The conceptual contrast between white Christians and red savages underwrote relentless territorial expansion and genocide. Between white Christians and Black savages, the enslavement of Africans and the appropriation of their bodies, their labor, their progeny. Between brown savages and white Christians, the taking of the Southwest. Between the yellow peril and white patriotic Americans, various exclusions, internments, property appropriations and ghettoizations. And the colonial interventions in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines were rationalized by way

tory that it has been internalized and naturalized. Only since the Civil Rights movement has it began to be somewhat disrupted. Until we collectively “get” this, some will continue to deny or be confused by the white rights subtext of “Make America Great Again,” and surprised at how powerfully it resonated. The shaping of white identity, premised on exclusion, is a central thread in the national narrative, bound up with capitalist development in general and manifested, in one way or another, to one degree or another, in every political, social and cultural institution.

Which brings us to an essential difference between white identity and the identities of groups forged in the experience of exclusion and subjugation. There is a reason that “Black Power!” and “Brown Power!” reverberate on completely different frequencies than “White Power!” And that “White Lives Matter,” or “Blue Lives Matter,” or even “All Lives Matter” are misguided rejoinders to “Black Lives Matter.” An assertion of existential urgency by the marginalized and scorned cannot simply be inverted without carrying the connotation of both a rebuke to demands for justice and inclusion and a reassertion of the primacy of white lives.

Obama’s presidency was bracketed by two especially noxious racist tropes: the “birther” lies that first surfaced during the 2007-08 campaign and the vile “ape in heels” slur cast at the first lady in the waning days of Obama’s second term. Trump’s birther charge is a reinforcement of white identity by way of as-

Continued on Page 10

No Plans to Abandon Our Freedom Dreams

Continued from Page 7

serting that the Black president is not and never will be a “real American.” The “ape in heels” insult is, obviously, a resurrection of the never-far-from-the-surface characterization of Blacks as sub-human, primitive, uncivilized. These may seem like extremes of a coarse, atavistic racism – a good distance from current concerns about implicit bias and micro aggressions. And no morally grounded person with an interest in reinforcing our sense of shared humanity wants to spend much time contemplating such racist poison. But the point here is that the extremes of anti-Black racism still find a hearing among a substantial segment of white Americans, and that a master at reinforcing the exclusivity of the claim of whites to the national identity now prowls the Oval Office. He of multiple Eastern European wives knows full well that the son of a Slovenian will never be subject to challenges as to his national identity in the way the son of a Kenyan was.

This take on white identity is blunt and broad. It doesn’t take into account class, gender, regional variation or the infinite expressions of identity at the level of the individual. Nevertheless, Trump’s victory is virtually incomprehensible without a reading on the dynamics of white identity and national formation.

The liberal inquiry into the role of “identity politics” in Clinton’s loss is pointed in a direction diametrically opposite to where it might find some answers.

The back and forth among pundits over whether Trump voters should be tagged as racist has been especially frustrating. Allegedly, some voters claim that they chose Trump despite his racism and misogyny, not because of it. Or there’s the view that all these voters couldn’t possibly be racist, because, back in 2008 and 2012, Obama won many of the same overwhelmingly white counties that Hillary lost in 2016. Individuals certainly contain within them contradictory impulses and sentiments (door knockers and phone bankers for Obama had plenty of stories about white voters who proclaimed, “I think I’m voting for the nigger,”) and we may never be able to divine the impulses, prejudices and rationalizations that lie deep in the heart of hearts of Trump voters. But a majority of white voters cast their ballots for a man who is furiously and floridly racist, and they are apparently thrilled that he won. Black Americans standing on the planet today are here due to the vigilance of forebears, close in and long gone, who were keenly attuned to the lethal consequences of white fury. While there’s surely room for debate about the misuse or overuse of the language of “privilege,” it does seem a signal marker of white privilege to doubt or minimize the racial animosity of Trump’s base.

The conflation of white identity and national identity ripples out into the further conflation of white interests with national interests. In the current debate about “identity politics,” this takes the form of maligning Black politics, feminist politics, LGBTQ politics, etc., as fragmentary and divisive while, evidently, a politics built on the economic woes of white workers would be unitary and representative of national interests. There are so many things wrong with this view that it is hard to know where to begin – not least the howling hypocrisy of the sudden attention to the plight of white workers whose precarious economic status has been decades in the making. But to note just two issues, we have here a problematic conception of U.S. national interests and a problematic conception of the U.S. working class.

Apart from soaring campaign rhetoric and outright propaganda, there is no idealized national interest. Every expression of U.S. national interest is actually the expression of the more or

less stable, more or less contradictory, more or less politically coherent interests of different classes, economic sectors, geographies, demographic groups, etc., as projected onto domestic and international politics. The two political parties do their best to contain and manage these divergent interests and to present, each of them, a version of the “national interest” most effective at keeping their amalgamated electoral coalitions aligned. In other words,

the content of what’s understood by the term “national interest” is not abstract, unitary and ideal but rather highly politicized and reflective of the relative strength of contending political actors. All interests are particularistic and fragmentary. There is no reason to countenance the view that any one of the constituent elements is more representative of a unitary national interest than any other. That is to be fought out in the arena of politics, and is determined not only by demographic weight, but by the capacity to craft a vision and political agenda capable of unifying and stabilizing a coalition that is sufficiently powerful to project its worldview and political priorities as the “national interest.”

As to the conception of the U.S. working class, the belated focus on the abandoned white worker traffics in a worn out motif that posits a white guy in a hard hat on a construction site or a factory floor as a stand-in for the working class while declining to recognize that Black, Latino, Asian, female and LGBTQ workers have been battered by the same economic and social trends, that white male workers started at a higher baseline, and that there’s a racial and gender differential in the forms of and responses to the economic assault and battery. (Unfortunately, the long history of actively segregationist all-male unions is part of the backdrop to the conflation of “worker” with “white male worker.” The building trades unions’ recent warm embrace of Trump is not helping us out in this regard.)

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Art: Shepard Fairey

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Alarm bells have been rung, repeatedly, about rampant opioid abuse, rising suicide rates and detachment from the labor market in white working class communities. It is beyond question that political responses to these crises, by either party, have been inadequate, verging on criminally negligent, and that these communities deserve the compassion, social and medical services, and jobs programs that could begin to turn these trends around. And yet.... I remember the 1980s, the cruel terminology—“crack babies” and crack whores”—that accompanied that epidemic, and the unyielding resistance to naming the extended episode of drug dependency and addiction that tore through families and poor communities as a problem of the class. No, it was the “culture of poverty” and failures of character—meaning poor Black people were simply inclined to do dope. So, too, the current wave of Chicago shootings is not read as revelatory of bottomless layers of desperation on the part of young working class men who are stripped, practically from birth, of access to living lives that nurture their human potential—is not seen as a problem of class formation in the U.S., but is rather interpreted as inexplicable Black pathology (maybe it’s something in their genes....?) and wielded politically to reinforce both class and race division. So yes, empathy and understanding for stricken white working class communities, along with a better understanding of how the extension of empathy and understanding, like everything else in our society, is deeply racialized.

These notes should in no way be read as an argument against addressing the concerns and economic anxieties of white workers. It is an argument for: (1) addressing those concerns as a component part of a larger story about the declining fortunes of the class as a whole; (2) refusing to make concessions to racism, xenophobia, Christian supremacy, misogyny or heterosexism while addressing those concerns; (3) being clear that the displacement of white economic anxiety onto Black people and immigrants is neither warranted nor wise; (4) being clear that the post-war deal of expanding economic fortunes for a wide swath of white workers is completely off the table; what is on the table is the search for new forms of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-gendered worker organizing that applies itself to the riddle of how to effectively extract significant concessions from 21st century capital; (5) understanding that the work of addressing the economic and social concerns of white workers, and winning them away from thoroughly reactionary politics, is not principally an issue of crafting the best messages and communications strategies to produce results in the next election cycle, but a long-term, no-short-cuts proposition to which a battalion of people and organizations will need to devote their lives.

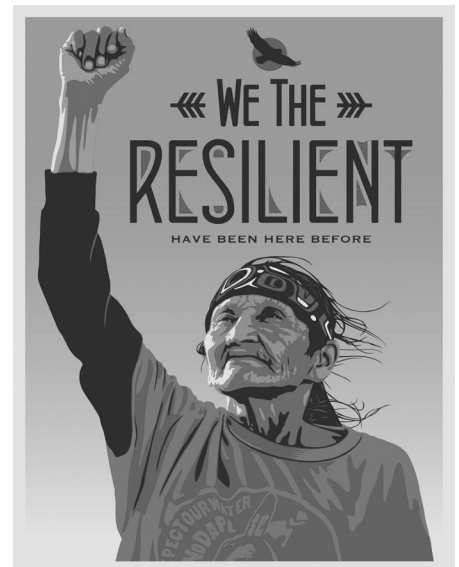
Fortunately there are organizations doing the hard, granular, on-the-ground work in counties and states that are overwhelmingly white and/or red. They know the importance of place and how history and culture shape their neighbors’ thinking. They know how many conversations it takes to get a first-time or infrequent voter to the polls. They know that race and gender bigotry, while tough to eradicate, are far from immutable. They have mastered the art of building complex coalitions in which no constituency

feels abandoned and all can move forward together to win progressive policies. We all need to learn from these organizations and make sure their lessons are widely shared, their efforts re-sourced and replicated, rather than throwing buckets of money to Democratic Party consultants and operatives whose transactional, short-term, short-sighted approach to polling and messaging has much to do with the crisis we’re in today.

A hailstorm of executive orders and a blizzard of bad news blanket the nation. A man who thrives on stoking chaos and fear has enmeshed all of us in his need for daily doses of high drama. It is tough to modulate between stunned passivity and frantic reactivity. In this roiling environment, it may seem that a debate over “identity politics” is of relatively little consequence. But it is, in fact, central to how the Democratic Party and progressives approach 2018 and 2020, and to whether and how the party regroup to become an effective shield against the far-right onslaught. It is of enormous importance to a left that must focus its influence on shaping the political frameworks and strategies most capable of defeating Trump and Trumpism.

The liberal imagination has become perversely fixated on the alleged excesses of “identity politics,” forgetting that social movements of the marginalized are the spark and spur of democracy. The abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights Movement extended democratic rights to the formerly enslaved and perpetually reviled, removing a deep moral stain from the nation. The women’s movement unleashed the potential and talent of half the country’s population. While the small-minded argue about bathrooms and pronouns—transgender activists, at great risk to themselves, have gifted us with a far more capacious understanding of the evolving spectrum of gender identity and expression. None of these movements is “done.” Each has advanced not just the interests of a singular identity group, but also the ambit of freedom for all. Most assuredly, the generation that stepped forward in the wake of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown will not stand down just because some liberals are having a panic attack.

We are all navigating treacherous terrain, seeking a way forward. At least some of us know that not a single development over the past period indicates that the way forward requires that we abandon our freedom dreams. To the contrary.



Art: Ernesto Yerena