Beyond black/white: the racisms of our time.

by Elizabeth Martinez

US race relations have traditionally focused on a black-white framework due to population, geographic and historical factors, but a racial view that promotes solidarity between all people of color is needed. Latino identity is a mixture of race, culture, generations and politics, and Latinos face racism based on culture and nationality as well as race. Racism has evolved from a support for imperialism to an isolationism based on heritage and nationalism.

LET ME BEGIN BY ADMITTING THAT I HAVE AN AXE TO GRIND. A BELL TO TOLL, A grito to shout, a banner to wave. The banner was fashioned during 10 years in the Black civil rights-human rights movement followed by 10 years in the Chicano movimiento. Those years taught that liberation has similar meanings in both histories: an end to racist oppression, the birth of collective self-respect, and a dream of social justice. Those years taught that alliances among progressive people of color can and must help realize the dream.

Such alliances require a knowledge and wisdom that we have yet to attain. For the present, it remains painful to see how divide-and-conquer strategies succeed among our peoples. It is painful to see how prejudice, resentment, petty competitiveness, and sheer ignorance fester. It is positively pitiful to see how often we echo Anglo stereotypes about one another.

All this suggests that we urgently need some fresh and fearless thinking about racism at this moment in history. Fresh thinking might begin with analyzing the strong tendency among Americans to frame racial issues in strictly Black-white terms. Do such terms make sense when changing demographics point to a U.S. population that will be 32% Latino, Asian/Pacific American, and Native American -- that is, neither Black nor white -- by the year 2050? Not to mention the increasing numbers of mixed people who incorporate two, three, or more "races" or nationalities? Don’t we need to imagine multiple forms of racism rather than a single, Black-white model?

Practical questions related to the fight against racism also arise. Doesn’t the exclusively Black-white framework discourage perception of common interests among people of color -- primarily in the working class -- and thus sustain White Supremacy? Doesn’t the view of institutionalized racism as a problem experienced only by Black people isolate them from potential allies? Doesn’t the Black-white definition encourage a tendency often found among people of color to spend too much energy understanding our lives in relation to Whiteness, obsessing about what the White will think? That tendency is inevitable in some ways: the locus of power over our lives has long been white (although big shifts have recently taken place in the color of capital) and the oppressed have always survived by becoming experts on the oppressor’s ways. But that can become a prison of sorts, a trap of compulsive vigilance. Let us liberate ourselves, then, from the tunnel vision of Whiteness and behold the colors around us!

To criticize the Black-white framework is not simply a resentful demand from other people of color for equal sympathy, equal funding, equal clout, equal patronage. It is not simply us-too resentment at being ignored or minimized. It is not just another round of mindless competition in the victimhood tournament. Too often we make the categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, physical condition, etc., contend for the title of "most oppressed." Within "race," various population groups then compete for that top spot. Instead, we need to understand that various forms and histories of oppression exist. We need to recognize that they include differences in extent and intensity. Yet pursuing some hierarchy of competing oppressions leads us down dead-end streets where we will never find the linkage between oppressions or how to overcome them.

The goal in reexamining the Black-white definition is to find an effective strategy for vanquishing an evil that has expanded rather than diminished in recent years. Three recent developments come to mind. First is the worldwide economic recession in which the increasingly grim struggle for sheer survival encourages the scapegoating of working-class people -- especially immigrants, especially those of color -- by other working-class people. This has become so widespread in the West that a Klan cross-burning in London’s Trafalgar Square or on Paris’ Champs Elysee doesn’t seem hard to imagine. The globalization of racism is mounting rapidly.

Second, and relatedly, the reorganization of the international division of labor continues, with changing demands for workers that are affecting demographics everywhere. History tells us of the close relationship between capital’s need for labor and racism. If that relationship changes, so may the nature of racism.

Finally, in the U.S., we have passed through a dozen years of powerful reaction against the civil-rights agenda set in the 1960s. This has combined with the recession’s effects and other socioeconomic developments to make
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people go into a defensive, hunkering-down mode, each community on its own, at a time when we need more rather than less solidarity. Acts of racist violence now occur in communities that never saw them before (although they always could have happened). An intensification of racism is upon us.

We see it in the anti-immigrant emotions being whipped up and new divisions based on racism and nativism. We see escalating white fears of becoming the minority population, the minority power, after centuries of domination. As U.S. demographics change rapidly, as the “Latinization” of major regions and cities escalates, a cross fire of fears begins to crackle. In that climate the mass media breed both cynical hopelessness and fear. Look only at that October 1992 Atlantic magazine cover proclaiming “BLACKS VS. BROWNS: Immigration and the New American Dilemma” for one chilling symptom of an assumed, inevitable hostility.

Today the task of building solidarity among people of color promises to be more necessary and difficult than ever. An exclusively Black-white definition of racism makes our task all the harder. That’s the banner that will be raised here: an urgent need for 21 st--century thinking, which can move us beyond the Black/white framework without negating its central, historical role in the construction of U.S. racism. We do need much more understanding of how racism and its effects developed, not only similarly, but also differently for different peoples according to whether they were victimized by genocide, enslavement, or colonization in various forms.

Greater solidarity among peoples of color must be hammered out, painstakingly. With solidarity a prize could be won even bigger than demolishing racism. The prize could be a U.S. society whose national identity not only ceases to be white, but also advances beyond “equality” -- beyond a multiculturalism that gives people of color a respect equal to whites. Toni Morrison has written eloquently in Playing in the Dark of this goal from an Africanist perspective: “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.... In the scholarship on the formation of an American character [a]...major item to be added to the list must be an Africanist presence -- decidedly not American, decidedly other" (Morrison, 1992: 47).

We need to dream of replacing the white national identity with an identity grounded in cultures oriented to respect for all forms of life and balance rather than domination as their guiding star. Such cultures, whose roots rest in indigenous, precolonial societies of the Americas and Africa, can help define a new U.S. identity unshackled from the capitalist worldview. Still alive today, they color my banner bright.

Let us begin that dialogue about the exclusively Black-white model of racism and its effects with the question: does that definition prevail and, if so, why?

Alas, it does prevail. Major studies of “minorities” up to 1970 rarely contain more than a paragraph on our second largest “minority,” Mexican-Americans (Blalnuer, 1972: 165). In two dozen books of 1960s movement history, I found inadequate treatment of the Black Civil Rights Movement, but almost total silence about the Chicano, Native American, and Asian American movements of those years (Martinez, 1989). Today, not a week goes by without a major media discussion of race and race relations that totally ignores the presence in U.S. society of Native Americans, Latinos, Asian/Pacific Americans, and Arab-Americans.

East Coast--based media and publishers are the worst offenders. Even a progressive magazine like The Nation can somehow publish a special issue entitled “The Assault on Equality: Race, Rights, and the New Orthodoxy” (December 9, 1991) containing only two brief phrases relating to people of color other than African-Americans in 27 pages. Outbreaks of Latino unrest or social uprising, such as we saw in the Mt. Pleasant section of Washington, D.C., make little if any dent. New York, that center of ideological influence, somehow remains indifferent to the fact that in 1991, Latinos totaled 24.4% of its population while Asians formed 6.9%.

Even in California, this most multinational of the states, where Lations have always been the most numerous population of color, it is not rare for major reports on contemporary racial issues to stay strictly inside the Black-white framework. Journalists in San Francisco, a city almost half Latino or Asian/Pacific--American, can see no need to acknowledge “This article will be about African-Americans only" -- which would be quite acceptable -- in articles on racial issues. At best we may hear that after-thought construction, "Blacks and other minorities."

Again, momentous events that speak to Latino experience of racist oppression fail to shake the prevailing view. Millions of Americans saw massive Latino participation in the April 1992 Los Angeles uprising on their TV screens. Studies show that, taken as a whole, the most heavily damaged areas of L.A. were 49% Latino, and the majority of people arrested were Latino (Pastor, 1993). Yet the mass media and most people have continued to view that event as "a Black riot."
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Predominantly Anglo left forces have not been much better than the mainstream and liberals. The most consistently myopic view could be heard from the Communist Party U.S.A., which has seen the African-American experience as the only model of racism. Left groups that adopted the Black Nation thesis rarely analyzed the validity of Chicano nationalism in the Southwest, or advocated giving lands back to the Native Americans, or questioned the "model minority" myth about Asian/Pacific Americans.

A semi-contemptuous indifference toward Latinos -- to focus on this one group -- has emanated from institutions in the dominant society for decades. Echoing this attitude are many individual Anglos. To cite a handful of personal experiences: Anglos will admit to having made a racist remark or gesture toward an African-American much more quickly than toward a Latino. Or if you bring up some Anglo's racist action toward a Latino, they will change the subject almost instantly to racism toward a Black person. Or they may respond to an account of police brutality toward Latinos with some remark of elusive relevance about Spanish crimes against indigenous people in the Americas.

A stunning ignorance also prevails. Race-relations scholar Robert (Bob) Blauner has rightly noted that:

Even informed Anglos know almost nothing about La Raza, its historical experience, its present situation.... And the average citizen doesn't have the foggiest notion that Chicanos have been lynched in the Southwest and continue to be abused by the police, that an entrie population has been exploited economically, dominated politically, and raped culturally

(Blauner, 1972: 166).

Above all, there seems to be little comprehension of what it means to suffer total disenfranchisement in the most literal sense. Millions of Latins, like many Asian/Pacific Americans, lack basic political rights. They are often extremely vulnerable to oppression and the most intense oppression occurs when people have problems of legal status. This means the borderlands, where vulnerability rests on having formal admission documents or not. Aside from South Africa's pass system, it is hard to imagine any mechanism in modern times so well designed to control, humiliate, and disempower vast numbers of workers than the border and its requirements.

Why the Black-white Framework?

Three of the reasons for the Black-white framework of racial issues seem obvious: numbers, geography, and history. African-Americans have long been the largest population of color in the U.S.; only recently has this begun to change. Also, African-Americans have long been found in sizable numbers in most of the United States, including major cities. On the other hand, Latinos -- to focus on this group -- are found primarily in the Southwest plus parts of the Northwest and Midwest and they have been (wrongly) perceived as a primarily rural people -- therefore of less note.

Historically, it has been only 150 years since the U.S. seized half of Mexico and incorporated those lands and their peoples into this nation. The Black/white relationship, on the other hand, has long been entrenched in the nation's collective memory. White enslavement of Black people together with white genocide against Native Americans provided the original models for racism as it developed here. Slavery and the struggle against it form a central theme in this country's only civil war -- a prolonged, momentous conflict -- and continuing Black rebellion. Enslaved Africans in the U.S. and African-Americans have created an unmatched history of massive, persistent, dramatic, and infinitely courageous resistance, with individual leaders of worldwide note. They cracked the structure of racism in this country during the first Reconstruction and again during the second, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, as no other people of color have done.

Interwoven with these historical factors are possible psychological explanations of the Black/white definition. In the eyes of Jefferson and other leaders, Native Americans did not arouse white sexual anxieties or seem a threat to racial purity, as did Blacks. In any case, White Supremacy's fear of Indian resistance had greatly diminished by the late 1800s as a result of relentless genocide accompanied by colonization. Black rebelliousness, on the other hand, remains an inescapable nightmare to the dominant white society. There is also the fact that contemporary Black rebellion has been urban: right in the Man's face, scary.

A relative indifference toward Mexican people developed in Occupied America in the late 1800s. Like the massacre of Indians and enslavement of Africans, the successful colonization of Mexicans in what became the Southwest was key to U.S. economic growth. One would expect to see racist institutions and ideology emerge, and so they did in certain areas. Yet even in places like the Texas borderlands, where vulnerability rests on having formal admission documents or not. Aside from South Africa's pass system, it is hard to imagine any mechanism in modern times so well designed to control, humiliate, and disempower vast numbers of workers than the border and its requirements.
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borderlands, where whites have historically reviled and abused Latinos, the Mexican presence didn’t arouse a high level of white sexual anxiety and other irrational fears. Today Latinos often say Anglo attitudes make them feel they are less hated than dismissed as inconsequential. “There’s no Mau-Mau factor,” observed a Black friend half-humorously about Latino invisibility.

Of course there may be an emergent Mau-Mau factor, called demographics. Anglo indifference to Latinos may be yielding to a new fear. The white response to anticipation of becoming a minority during one’s own lifetime is often panic as well as hatred and those “hordes” at the gate are of colors other than Black. But the new frenzy has yet to show the same fear-stricken face toward Latinos -- or Asian/Pacific Americans -- as toward African-Americans.

Robert Blauner, an Anglo and one of the few authors on racism to have examined the Black/white framework, looks at these psychological factors as revealed in literature:

"...We buy black writers, not only because they can write and have something to say, but because the white racial mind is obsessed with blackness.... Mexican-Americans, on the other hand, have been unseen as individuals and as a group.... James Baldwin has pointed to the deep mutual involvement of black and white in America. The profound ambivalence, the love-hate relationship, which Baldwin’s own work expresses and dissects, does not exist in the racism that comes down on La Raza.... Even the racial stereotypes that plague Mexican-Americans tend to lack those positive attributes that mark antiblack fantasies -- supersexuality, inborn athletic and musical power, natural rhythm.

Mexicans are dirty, lazy, treacherous, thieving bandits -- and revolutionaries (Blauner, 1972: 163--164). (Not that I would want to choose between having Rhythm or Roaches.)"

A final reason for the Black/white framework may be found in the general U.S. political culture, which is not only white-dominated, but also embraces an extremely stubborn form of national self-centeredness. This U.S.--centrism has meant that the political culture lacks any global vision other than relations of domination. In particular, the U.S. has consistently demonstrated contempt for Latin America, its people, their languages, and their issues. The U.S. refuses to see itself as one nation sitting on a continent with 20 others whose dominant languages are Spanish and Portuguese. That myopia has surely nurtured the Black/white framework for racism.

The Culture of Color

Color is crucial to understanding the Black/white framework of racial issues. Early in this nation’s history, Benjamin Franklin perceived a tri-racial society based on skin color -- "the lovely white," black, and "tawny," as Ron Takaki tells us in Iron Cages. Echoing this triad, we still have the saying "If you’re white, you’re all right; if you’re Black, get back; if you’re brown, stick around." As that old saying indicates, racism is experienced differently by Native Americans, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian/Pacific Americans. In the case of Latinos, we find them somewhat more likely to be invisible -- rendered "unseen" -- than problematized (with thanks to writer/activist Linda Burnham for that concept). Color explains much of this.

The relatively light skin and "Caucasian" features of many Latinos mean they are less threatening in the eyes of white racism and can even "pass" -- unnoticed, invisible -- much more often than African-Americans. Obviously this carries certain advantages in a racist society. Many Latinos would like to pass, work hard to assimilate, and succeed.

Until 1990 the U.S. Census categorized Latinos as "White," and even in that year it generated mass confusion on this issue; today the common term "Non--Hispanic Whites" certainly suggests a view of Latinos as white. At the same time, a 1992 poll of Latinos has shown an unexpectedly strong lack of self-identification as such. More than 90%, for example, said they did not belong to any ethnic organizations and less than 13% participated in any political activities organized around their national groups.

The term Hispanic (Her Panic, His Panic), whose emergence accompanied the rise of a Latino middle-class in the late 1970s to 1980s, encourages the wannabe...
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whites/don't wannabe Indians. Always the unspoken goal has been to sidestep racist treatment, and who can be criticized for that? But we must also recognize the difference between those whom racism's obsession with color allows to try, and those with no such choice. "Passing" is an option for very few African-Americans. If it is possible for some Latinos to assimilate, one cannot say that of most African-Americans; they can only accommodate.

Latinos themselves buy into the hierarchy of color. Too often we fail to recognize the ways in which we sustain racism ideologically. We do it when we express prejudice against those among us who look indio, mulatto, or just Black. We do it when we favor being lighter. Such prejudice dehumanizes fellow human beings, it divides our forces in the struggle for social justice, and must be confronted.

The Devils of Dualism

The issue of color, and the entire Black/white definition, feed on a dualism that shaped the U.S. value system as it developed from the time of this nation's birth. Dualism sees reality as consisting of two irreducible elements, usually oppositional, like: good and evil, mind and body, civilized and savage. A Western, Protestant version of dualism was used by the invaders, colonizers, and enslavers of today's United States to rationalize their actions by stratifying supposed opposites along race and gender lines (e.g., mind is European and male, body is Colored and female). The uses of dualism in relation to racism, along with the Enlightenment impulse to classify for the sake of social "order," have been studied by various scholars of racial theory. One simple example tells a great deal: the U.S. insistence on classifying as Black a child with a single Black ancestor, no matter how "white" that child might otherwise be. If the child is not white, it has to be Black. If not good, then evil. And so forth.

The dread of "race-mixing" as a threat to White Supremacy enshrined dualism. Today we see that "...a disdain for mixture haunts and inhibits U.S. culture. Because it does not recognize hybridism, this country's racial framework emphasizes separateness and offers no ground for mutual inclusion," as David Hayes-Bautista and Gregory Rodriguez put it (1993). I, for one, remember growing up haunted by that crushing word "half-breed," meaning me. It was years before mestizaje -- mixing -- began to suggest to me a cultural wealth rather than a polluted bloodline. U.S. society, the Dean of Denial, still has no use for that idea, still scorns the hybrid as mysteriously "un-American."

Such disdain helps explain why the nature of Latino identity seems to baffle and frustrate so many folk in this country. The dominant culture doesn't sit happy with complex ideas or people, or dialectics of any sort. And the Latino/a must be among the most complex creatures walking this earth, biologically as well as culturally. They originated as a 16th--century continentwide mix of at least three "racial" groupings, which led philosopher Jose Vasconcelos to apply the phrase la raza cosmica -- the cosmic people, La Raza.

In the 16th century they moved north, and a new mestizaje took place with Native Americans. The Raza took on still more dimensions with the 1846 U.S. occupation of Mexico and some intermarriage with Anglos. Then, in the early 20th century, newly arrived Mexicans began to join those descendants of Mexicans already here. The mix continues today, ever more complex, with notable differences between first, second, third, and 20th--generation people of Mexican descent.

All this means Latinos are not an immigrant population and yet they are. On the one hand, they are a colonized people displaced from their ancestral homeland, with roots here that go back centuries. On the other hand, many have come to the U.S. more recently as economic refugees seeking work or as political refugees fleeing war and repression. Politically, the reality is even more dialectical: today's Chicanos were born from a process of colonization in Mexico by whites, then became colonizers themselves in what is today's Southwest, only to be colonized again by other whites!

Such complexity is too much for most Anglos and, let's face it, for some Latinos, too. Noted writer Cherrie Moraga articulates the sense of paradox:

"Los Estados Unidos es mi pais, pero no es mi patria." (It is my land, but not my country.) I cannot flee the United States, my land resides beneath its borders.... Chicanos with memory banks like our Indian counterparts recognize that we are a nation within a nation (Moraga, 1993: 18).

We must also remember that the very word "Latino" is a monumental simplification. Chicanos/as, already multifaceted, are only one Latino people. In the U.S., we also have Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, Central Americans, Panamanians, South Americans, and so forth. We have a broad range in terms of class status and color (a light-skinned Argentine psychiatrist, for example, has
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little in common with a dark Mexican tomato picker or a Black Dominican taxi driver).

The eye-opening variety and ambiguity of Latino people and experience led poet Bernice Zamora to write:

You insult me
When you say I'm
Schizophrenic.
My divisions are
Infinite.
Yet dualism prefers a Black/white view in all matters, leaving no room for an in-between color like brown -- much less a wildly multicolored, multilingual presence called "Latino." And so, along with being invisibilized by the dominant society, Latinos are homogenized.

The Color of Culture

If there is a culture of color in these racist United States, is it possible we also have a color of culture?

In trying to understand the Black/white construct, one might distinguish between racial oppression (derived from physical appearance, especially skin color), and national minority oppression (derived from cultural differences or nationality). According to these criteria Latinos -- like Asian/Pacific Americans -- would be victims of national minority rather than racial oppression. Racism itself, then, would indeed be strictly white on Black.

Does the distinction hold? Do Latinos suffer for reasons of culture and nationality, but not for their "race"?

On one hand, cultural difference (especially language) and nationality are indeed used in oppressing a colonized people like Mexicans or those of Mexican descent in the U.S. The right to speak Spanish on the job or in a school playground has been historically denied. A Spanish accent (though not a British or French accent) is a liability in many professional situations. Children are ridiculed at school for bringing Mexican lunches, their names are Anglicized by white teachers, humiliation is daily fare. Later in life, they will be treated as foreigners; citizens will be denied citizen rights and noncitizens will be denied human rights.

Culturally, Lations are seen as exotica, outside the mainstream, alien. They speak a funny language, some say (the most beautiful in the world, others say), and nobody outside the barrio can understand their best jokes, their beloved play-on-words, or self-mocking style. This isolation largely results from tactics of selfdefense: culture has provided a longstanding survival mechanism for many people of Latino origin in a hostile world. It is a mechanism whose strength has continued to flow, given the proximity of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to the United States. Latino efforts to move from outside to inside have intensified in the last 25 years and will continue, but the sense of inhabiting a culturally distinct world remains, especially in newer generations.

Latinos are acknowledged -- if at all -- in a ghettoized cultural framework: as actors, film makers, musicians, and other kinds of artists; as a growing market with great promise if one caters to its cultural characteristics; perhaps as an "ethnic" electoral force -- or, on the negative side, as immigrants who speak a "foreign" language and "swarm" across the border; as urban gangbangers with a culture of their own, or ale Eddie Olmos! Even when these attitudes are not actively hostile, they are dehumanizing.

Does all this mean Latinos suffer for their culture and nationality, but not for their "race"? If we look at social conditions, at the actual experience of Latinos in the U.S., it makes more sense to conclude that the presence of national minority oppression doesn't signify the absence of racial oppression. It makes more sense to understand "racial" in terms of peoplehood and not only a supposed biology.

Social conditions affirm that combination of national, cultural, and racial oppression. The statistics for Latinos are grim: their national poverty rate (27%), high school drop-out rate (36%), and child poverty rate (42%) are even higher than for African-Americans, according to news reports on the 1990 Census. They are now reported to experience the most discrimination in housing markets of any U.S. population group (Lueck, 1991).

Life-endangering racism is not rare for Latinos in the Southwest, especially near the border, and especially for those who are poor and working class. For decades, Anglos in Texas, Arizona, and California have enslaved, tortured, and murdered Lations because their victims were nonwhite "foreigners." Hundreds of Mexicans were lynched between 1847 and 1935, if not later.

On a recent visit, San Diego County in California felt to me for Mexicans and Central Americans like Mississippi felt for Blacks in the 1960s. Five years ago, in that county a pair of middle-class white youths spied two young, documented Latinos standing by the roadside; one shot them dead and later explained to the judge that he did it because he "didn't like Mexicans." Such attitudes are even more common in that county today. In urban areas Lations
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number high among the victims of Los Angeles Police Department and Sheriff’s Department brutality. It’s far from chic to be a spic, as poet Gerardo Navarro rhymed it sardonically.

The borderlands remain the locus of the most intense oppression, for that is where Latinos are most vulnerable by virtue of nationality -- with or without documents. Agents of the Border Patrol, the largest police force in the U.S., murder Latinos with impunity. Killing Latinos as they try to run back to Mexico, running them down with official vehicles, forcing them into the river to drown -- all these seem to be favorite Border Patrol pastimes.

Women are among those most brutally abused at the border; their victimization has only recently attracted public attention. Officials rape and then sometimes murder Latinas trying to cross the border, at will. Latina women contracted in their home countries as housekeepers have been raped on the day of arrival here at a new job; worked 14 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week; never paid promised wages; and kept isolated from possible sources of assistance. What happens to young, “illegal” children has included separation from parents and being jailed.

Latino men, women, and children are victimized on the basis of nationality and culture, rendered vulnerable by their lack of documents and scant knowledge of English or of local institutions. More often than not, they are rendered additionally vulnerable by their skin color and other physical features. Nationality then combines with a nonwhite (though not Black) physical appearance to subject them to an oppression that is a form of racism. Even if a nonwhite appearance is lacking, however, nationality and culture create a separate peoplehood as the basis for oppression.

In a land where the national identity is white, nationality and race become interchangeable. We live today with a white definition of citizenship, which generates a racist dynamic. Think about our words, our codes, in the media and conversation. "Immigrants" today means only two things: Mexicans and Central Americans, or Asians. It doesn’t mean French or Irish or Serbian people who have come to relocate (a nicer word than "immigrate").

A rigid line cannot be drawn between racial and national oppression when all victims are people of color. Both are racism, and in combination they generate new varieties of racism. All this suggests why we need to understand more than the Black/white model today.

Racism Evolves

Racism evolves; as editor David Goldberg points out in his book Anatomy of Racism, it has no single, permanently fixed set of characteristics. New forms are being born today out of global events, in particular from the new international division of labor. He writes:

...all forms of racism may be linked in terms of their exclusionary or inclusionary undertakings. A major historical shift has been from past racist forms defining and fueling expansionist colonial aims and pursuits to contemporary expressions in nationalist terms. Insistence on racial inferiority in the past fed colonial appetities and imperialist self-defini-
tion. Racism is taken now to be expressed increasingly in terms of isolationist nationalist self-image, of cultural differentiation tied to custom, tradition, and heritage, and of exclusionary immigration poli-
cies, anti-immigrant practices and criminality (Goldberg, 1990: xiv).

The increasing equation of racism with nationalism is spotlighted by the title of Paul Gilroy’s provocative book, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack. We need to look at that equation more closely here in the U.S. The challenge is to understand such new developments and to draw strength from our understanding. The challenge is to abandon a dead-end dualism that comprises two White Supremacist inventions: Blackness and Whiteness. The challenge is to extend a dialectical reach.

Black/white are real poles -- but not the only poles. To organize against racism, as people in SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) used to say, Blackness is necessary but not sufficient. They were thinking of class, as I remember; today we can also think of other colors, other racisms. In doing so, we have to proceed with both boldness and infinite care. Talking race in these United States is an intellectual minefield; for every social observation, one can find three contradictions and four necessary qualifications. Crawling through the complexity, it helps to think: keep your eye on the prize, which is uniting against the monster.
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Sitting on the porch of a Puerto Rican friend’s beach cottage one warm evening about 20 years ago, my friend Jim Forman asked me the question. We had been working on his book, The Making of Black Revolutionaries, about the years of fighting for Black civil rights and human rights. As Executive Secretary of SNCC, Jim had faced almost every danger and hardship; somehow he kept on pushing.

With the surf crashing nearby under a million stars, Jim said: “We’re all Black, don’t you see? African people and Mexican people and Puerto Rican people, we are all Black in the eyes of racism. So we must come together as Black.”

I thought to myself: there’s sense in that. But Latinos also have their particularities. They don’t want to give that up, it has meant survival. So I said nothing because the truth seemed to be somewhere between my thought and his, in a hidden place we had yet to find. Today it seems clearer that Jim’s words were true at heart. He spoke not from a fortress looking down, but across borders that must be breached.

REFERENCES


