
Black, White, and Blue: Working Class Self-Defeat in Somerville

01/08/2016



According to the Associated Press, roughly 50 police officers and their supporters rallied to protest a Black Lives Matter (BLM) banner that has been hanging outside City Hall in the predominantly white and historically working class Boston suburb of Somerville for a year. The primarily Caucasian haters of the banner chanted “All lives matter!,” “Take it down!,” and “Cops lives matter!” It was part of the “Blue Lives Matter” movement.

According to the president of the Somerville Police Employees Association, the banner sends an “exclusionary message” and “implies that Somerville police officers are somehow responsible for racially motivated decision-making against minorities.”

A local white firefighter claimed that BLM had become “almost synonymous with killing cops.” He’s talking the line taken by the decrepit white supremacist Rudolph Giuliani (a close Donald Trump ally and adviser) on FOX News.

But BLM is “almost synonymous with killing cops” only in the minds of people who can’t differentiate between a civil rights movement and lone gunmen. Yes, two mentally unhinged Black military veterans – one in Dallas and one in Baton Rouge – got pushed over the edge by recent videos of Black men being senselessly killed by white police officers. And yes, the ongoing epidemic of such shootings is what drove the rise of BLM. But, no, BLM activists have never advocated “killing cops.” They have gone to great lengths to distance themselves from such actions.

Who says that white and-or Asian and/Latino and/or Arab and/or Native American and/or indeed that all lives don’t matter when one says that Black lives do matter? Nobody.

When Black men in Memphis and other Southern cities in the 1960s marched as part of the Civil Rights Movement with signs saying “I am a Man,” did they thereby proclaim that white men weren’t men? Of course they didn’t.

When you raise your female child to understand that she is a worthy and valuable person, does that mean you

teach her to believe that a male child isn't? Of course it doesn't.

When you argue for the rights of children and say, perhaps, that children matter, maybe even that children, do you thereby argue or even remotely suggest that adults don't matter? No, of course you don't.

If you are religious and patriotic and say "God Bless America," does that mean that also and at the same time "God Damn all other nations?"

Of course "all lives matter." Only a moral idiot would say otherwise. The problem is that, with perhaps the exception of the nation's small remaining population of Native Americans, the lives of no racial or ethnic group seem to matter less to America's soulless capitalist and imperial system than do those of Black Americans. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" emerged in response to the endemic police shooting of young Black adults, young Black men especially, who are gunned down by mostly white law enforcement officers with shocking regularity in the U.S. – once every 28 hours on average.

The statistics of racial disparity in poverty, disease, mortality, wealth, joblessness, incarceration, felony marking, education, execution, and more are stark. Nobody is more savagely concentrated in highly segregated high-poverty, no-job ghettos, in under-funded and inferior schools, and in mass jails and prisons than are Black Americans. It's not even close

Do lower and working class whites ever get shot down by the police? Do they ever get incarcerated and criminally marked? Of course they do, but the likelihood of Americans in other groups – especially whites – getting shot, imprisoned, executed, frisked, traffic-stopped, home-invaded, ripped off, beaten and harassed by police, and felony branded is much, much slighter than it is when it comes to Black people.

The main problem with the dominant white mindset isn't denial of the disparities themselves (though there's plenty of white ignorance and denial on that score) but denial of the ubiquitous societal racism that causes them. "They brought it on themselves" is the standard viewpoint of majority white Americans who tell me "Racism? What racism, dude? Hey, man, the President of the United States is Black!"

The problem is that, leaving aside the epic bigotry that even Obama's race-downplaying and "color-blind" presidency has elicited, it's not really about the skin tone of the president or for that matter about the color of the U.S. Attorney General or the color of a corporate CEO or a television news anchor or football coach. It's about the relentlessly racialized day-to-day functioning of core social structures and institutions including the labor market, the workplace, the financial system, the real estate market, the educational system, the social welfare system, the electoral system, and the criminal justice system. And across these and other key societal spaces, study after study documents the persistence of an ongoing and often stark anti-Black racial bias, discrimination, and neglect. It all grinds on, Obama notwithstanding, atop a cold white refusal to acknowledge, much less pay reparations for the incalculable compound price to Black America of centuries of Black chattel Slavery and nearly a century of formal Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement in the South – this along with the de facto segregation in the 20th and 21st century urban North and racial-ethnic cleansing across the rural and small town North in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Google up the term "sundown towns").

But so what if the current corporate-imperial president is half-Black? The next U.S. president – Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Jill Stein, and Gary Johnson – is going to be fully Caucasian. And the half-white Obama has had incredibly little to say about and against racism during his time in the "bully pulpit." His "Black but not like Jesse" and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" candidacy was predicated on calculated, post-racial distancing from any serious confrontation with American racism, deeply understood. He has in the White House continued his early and ugly habit of giving poor and working class Blacks ("cousin Pookie") nasty neoliberal lectures on their own supposed personal and cultural responsibility for their presence at the bottom of the nation's steep socioeconomic pyramids. He also lectures Blacks on their obligation to respect "law and order" in a nation that repeatedly exonerates police officers who murder young Black people with impunity. Truth be told, Obama has been a calamity for the struggle for Black equality on numerous levels, including the cloaking power his presence in the White House has provided for persistent societal racism.

A white "all lives matter" e-mailer asked me last spring if I had seen then recent news reports and data about rising white middle-aged working class mortality in the U.S. (increasing at a significantly higher rate than that of any other group in the nation.) Yes, I told him, I had seen and been quite astounded by the reports and findings. I told my e-mail correspondent that the disturbing research was indicative of how millions upon millions of white blue- and grey-

collar men have been turned into “surplus Americans” – people shorn of “productive [employable] engagement with society” – by global capitalism (the same system that brought us chattel slavery).

But it's important to keep some comparative perspective, I added. Middle-aged blacks still have a much higher mortality rate than whites: 581 per 100,000, compared to 415 for whites.

When the research paper documenting the rising mortality of working class whites came out last year, Ronald Lee, a leading University of California demography researcher, spoke to the New York Times. “Seldom have I felt as affected by a paper,” Lee said. “It seems so sad.” The “it” that caused the academic's melancholy was the increase in white death due largely to substance abuse and suicide, not the persistently higher Black mortality. White lives matter more in U.S. culture.

When the startling data on declining white working class life expectancy hit the headlines, there were no lectures from Obama or anyone else on white working and lower class folks' personal and cultural responsibility for their increasingly deadly dire straits – this despite the fact that alcohol abuse and illegal drug use were shown to have played major roles in the rising white mortality.

It's at this point that many whites I've interacted with on the race issue in the last two years like to play what they think is their ace in the hole. “If Blacks want to say that ‘Black Lives Matter,’ then why don't they stop killing each other so much?” These whites talk about Black-on-Black crime and how more young Blacks get killed and shot by other young Blacks than by police officers.

But endemic intra-Black violence in the U.S. takes places within a white-imposed context of racially concentrated poverty, joblessness and hyper-segregation that White America simply refuses (with too few oddball exceptions like this writer) to acknowledge. Does anyone seriously think that droves of gun- and drug-mad and militarism-backing white Americans wouldn't be gunning each other down on an epic scale if they were the minority group piled up on top of itself in jobless, opportunity-free ghettos, reservations, prisons, and jails, branded by the color of their skins and the ubiquitous lifelong stigma of criminal records? The resulting white-on-white slaughter that would occur on a regular basis in the great Caucasian ghettos and reservations would make current Black-on-Black (and Native American-on-Native American and Latino-on-Latino) violence look mild by comparison. For what it's worth, Europeans whites have been known to shoot and carve each other up on a pretty grand scale in history. If you don't believe me just Google up “Thirty Years War,” “Seven Years War,” “Napoleonic Wars,” “World War One” and “World War Two.”

Do police officers have a public relations problem – a widespread sense among Americans that their lives and tribulations don't matter? Hardly. Gallup regularly reports that police departments and police rank at the top – along with the military – of the list of American institutions and professions that U.S. citizens hold in high respect. Along with soldiers and small businessmen, cops are held in extremely high public regard, unlike, say, lawyers, Congresspersons, “community organizers,” and “civil rights activists.”

And just how dangerous is police work? In the wake of the retaliatory revenge shootings of police in Dallas and Baton Rouge, major politicians both Blue and Red can't seem to say enough about how the heroically hazardous nature of police work. But cops don't even make it on to the federal government's list of the ten most fatality-plagued occupations in the nation. Those top ten are, in order of death risk: loggers, fishers, airline pilots, roofers, structural iron and steel workers, garbage and recycling workers, electric power installers and repairers, truck drivers, farmers/ranchers, and construction laborers. In 2014, the AFL-CIO reports, 4821 workers were killed on the job in the United States and an estimated 50,000 died from occupational diseases. Police did not make up an especially significant part of this terrible toll. Do Logger Lives Matter?

Maybe we need a Workers Lives Matter Movement. Oh wait, we do, sort of, My bad. It's called the labor movement and it has expanded most and reached its greatest power when it has recognized the legitimacy of the struggles for Black and other minority civil rights like those being fought today by Black Lives Matter. That's something for the rank and file in the Somerville Police Employees Association to think about as the “wages of whiteness” they've embraced with a Blue tint continue to fade before the skyrocketing wealth of the privileged financial Few. The predominantly white corporate and financial elite loves to see the multicultural working class majority mired in racial and other forms of internal division. This is something the Somerville cops' U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) tried to tell people about at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) last week:

“‘Divide and Conquer’ is an old story in America. Dr. Martin Luther King knew it. After his march from Selma to

Montgomery, he spoke of how segregation was created to keep people divided. Instead of higher wages for workers, Dr. King described how poor whites in the South were fed Jim Crow, which told a poor white worker that, 'No matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than the black man.' Racial hatred was part of keeping the powerful on top....When we turn on each other, bankers can run our economy for Wall Street, oil companies can fight off clean energy, and giant corporations can ship the last good jobs overseas...When we turn on each other, rich guys like Trump can push through more tax breaks for themselves and then we'll never have enough money to support our schools, or rebuild our highways, or invest in our kids' future...When we turn on each other, we can't unite to fight back against a rigged system."

It's a good point, even if Warren is a leader in a Wall Street-captive party that will never seriously advance the organization of workers across racial lines to fight the rich. Building such organization is the job of rank and file working people, including even some police officers. White people falling prey to the authoritarian, divisive, and racism-denying sentiments at the dark heart of the "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter" slogans is part of why the working class is so weak and battered in New Gilded Age America, where – as Bernie Sanders noted yet again at the DNC – the top tenth of the U.S. One Percent owns nearly as much wealth as the nation's bottom ninety percent.

In Somerville, a banner hangs over the police department honoring the slain officers of Dallas and Baton Rouge.
