

# Race, Racism, Xenophobia and Migration

by Bill Fletcher

We must begin by establishing, without any ambiguity, that “race” is not a biological or genetic category, but is a political construction. The origin of **all** of humanity is to be found in southern Africa, so in that sense, all of humanity is African.

Yet the notion of race, and the corresponding practice and theory of racism, is very real. Prior to both the so-called “Reconquista” in Spain with the Catholicization of Iberia and the purge of the Moors and the Jews in the 15th century, as well as the English occupation and colonization of Ireland in the 16th century, “race,” as we have come to know it, did not exist on planet Earth. While there were certainly religious, tribal, ethnic and imperial conflicts, this was transformed over the end of the 15th century and throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

Race came to be associated with so-called inferior and superior peoples, and fundamentally with the occupation of lands and the displacement of populations. Eventually, this came to be associated with skin color, but it is worth noting that, in the beginning, race did not depend on skin color, with Irish Catholics and Spanish Jews being a case in point. This overall process of racial construction was linked with the development of capitalism and in that context, the notion of race must be understood

In sum, the construction of race was linked, from the beginning, to the rise of capitalism and later imperialism. It was not an add-on or a device that was to be used and thrown away at a whim.

The second piece that is important to grasp about race and migration is that the current global wave of migration, which the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates to be more than 86 million, is fundamentally different from earlier waves during the history of capitalism, i.e., those from the 1500s through the early 1900s. In the waves of migration that began with the invasion of the Western Hemisphere and the colonization of other parts of what we refer to today as the global South, the migrating populations were part of the process of colonization and, as in the cases of the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa, to name just four locales, the establishment of formal settler states.

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as an ideological and institutional mechanism for both the suppression of specific populations in perpetuity, as well as the introduction of social control over the working masses as a whole, be they of the suppressed/oppressed population or of the suppressor/oppressor population.

In Latin America, the art form and classification code called the *castas*, along with the introduction in both North and South America of slavery for life for specific populations (Africans) and marginalization and genocide perpetrated on others (Indigenous) had nothing to do with science generally or genetics specifically. Rather, it became a means to divide up populations, turning them against one another through the associated system of racial privileges that tended to be meted out according to how close someone got to being supposedly pure white.

“White” was always the reference point for the dominant bloc, even though this did not in any way mean that everyone who was designated by the ruling classes to be “white” was automatically part of the ruling classes. It has also been the case that who is and is not considered white in a specific society is not always self-evident. A classic example from US history in the early 20th century was the debate over whether Armenians were to be considered “white” or not.

These migrating populations, irrespective of whether they were persecuted in their European countries of origin, served as part of a process in the construction of colonial and settler states. Even when they engaged in wars of independence with their European colonial sponsors, these were struggles that were not truly emancipatory, but were struggles to redefine the terms of a particular relationship. To put it another way, most of the inde-

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pendence struggles represented a break with a colonial power—and a renegotiation of the relationship—but not a break with the key social and economic institutions, e.g., slavery in the Western Hemisphere, the *Latifundia* in Latin America, that were hallmarks of the colonial period. As such, the native populations were never true allies with the insurgents, but were, at best, allies of convenience

(example: Native Americans used by both sides in the French and Indian Wars 1754–1763).

It should be noted that there were other migration patterns that did not originate in Europe. Migration from China and Japan to the Western Hemisphere in the mid to late 19th century, for instance, had a different character and, particularly in the case of the migration of these Asian populations to the USA, there was intense hostility that was visited upon Asian migrants, a hostility that has lasted for generations.

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This is worth noting since the European migrants, even when experiencing a hostile reception by prior European migrants, were generally absorbed into the “white bloc” after their “credentials” as white people were established. Asian migrants in the 19th and early through mid-20th centuries faced a very different challenge since they were not accepted into a white bloc. They were placed, depending on the country or territory to which they migrated, into a racial hierarchy but they were not considered white people.

The character of migrations began to change in the early 1900s when populations from colonies proceeded to relocate to the imperial centers. The migration patterns that we are witnessing today are a continuation and acceleration of this process. In the absence of self-determination and with the deformed economic and political structures imposed on colonial and semi-colonial territories, populations began to shift. Separately, there were population shifts between and among colonial and semi-colonial countries.

The migration of Haitians to the Dominican Republic that began in the 19th century, for instance, is just such an example of the latter, and one that reminds us of the manner in which xenophobia can take on genocidal proportions when a so-called native population is manipulated through fear. Specifically, race was constructed in such a way in the Dominican Republic that there was a generalized denial of the African roots of most of the population and a disdain for anyone described as being “black.” The dictator Rafael Trujillo took advantage of this situation to move an anti-Haitian pogrom in 1937 in which more than 20,000 Haitians were murdered, having been blamed by Trujillo as the source of the Dominican Republic’s many problems.

Current waves of migration, then, have as their source both a continuation of these factors, plus additional factors, including but not limited to wars, neoliberal globalization, imperial foreign policies and climate change. Time does not permit me to examine each of these. In this situation, the “racialization” of migrants has taken on a particular significance.

At the global scale such racialization is found in the broad characterization of European/white vs. non-European/non-white. What this means, particularly in the post-World War II context, is that the “problem” of migration has usually been associated not with the general question of migrants and refugees, but the specific question of the shifting of non-white populations away from their homes of origin to the imperial metropole (usually meaning to the country that was the historical imperial/colonial dominating force over their particular oppressed nation/territory/people). The non-white migrant has been presented as the “evil” or the problem by the so-called “nativist” forces in the global North on a racial basis. As the theorist Etienne Balibar has pointed out, however, this racial construction is a bit different from traditional racial notions since it does not overtly presume superiority/inferiority (certainly on an alleged genetic basis) but rather articulates an “other-ness” based on cultural incompatibility.

To explain this point for a moment, let us take an example from the United States. The issue of illegal or undocumented migration has been a major watchword for the political Right since at least the 1970s. In the USA, the face of the undocumented migrant is, in the popular imagination, not color neutral but is brown and black. It is largely—though not exclusively—the face of the Latino despite the fact

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that undocumented migration has never been restricted to this group.

In the 1980s and early 1990s there was significant Irish migration to the USA, an important percentage of which was undocumented. Yet Irish migration to the USA during that period was never defined by right-wing or mainstream sources as being problematic. For all intents and purposes, it was ignored. Documented **and** undocumented migration from Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Mexico during that same period, however, was defined as being a problem because the unspoken message was that the Irish can be absorbed into the dominant white bloc in the USA, whereas the Haitians, Dominicans and Mexicans represent an “other” population that is culturally incompatible.

The racialization of migrants, however, is not something that is limited to conflicts in and with the global North. The xenophobic response to migrants in parts of the global South, be it the genocide against Haitians in the 1930s under the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic or the more recent attacks on migrants in South Africa by mobs, points to forces largely driven by limited and often declining resources that results in toxic competition between populations. This competition becomes racialized where the migrants are portrayed as the force that is incompatible with the needs and exist-

tence of the dominant population. They become the "Alien," so to speak, both literally—that is, in terms of the law; and figuratively—that is, in terms of the popular imagination.

This competition for resources is not something that exists in the abstract but is a phenomenon related to the rise of neoliberal globalization and the dramatic polarization of wealth and resources we have witnessed on a world scale. When we have a situation, for instance, where 225 individuals have the accumulated wealth of the bottom 47% of the world's population, it becomes clear that those at the bottom will be struggling to make do with what is left to them by those who have accumulated so much.

With regard the question of migration and the dialectic between the global North and the global South, we must understand that the political Right plays upon what a US Hip Hop/Rap group called Public Enemy described once as a fear of a Black planet. When I use the term "Black" here I mean it more in the manner that many of us used it in the 1960s and 1970s, that is a term referencing not just people of more recent African origin but people from the former colonies and semi-colonies. Changing global demographics along with changing economics and politics have become a source of fear and insecurity for much of the global North, specifically for the so-called white populations.

The fundamental source of this insecurity actually is rooted in both the weakening of traditional imperialist relationships along with the rise of neoliberal globalization and its transformation of both domestic and international conditions for working people. To put it another way, as the living standard for the working population in the global North declines due to the neo-liberal transformation—including the transference of wealth to the rich—the "spatial" violations that are the result of migration come to represent more of a perceived threat to that same population. That "threat" may be in terms of competition for employment in certain sectors, but more often than not it is a psychological threat in which the working populations of the global North come to recognize that imperialism's impact can no longer be perceived as being solely an external matter but is also manifested internally—that is, the security that once existed is now long-gone.

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What are some of the implications of this analysis? Let me suggest the following.

1. A progressive response to migration cannot be grounded on abstract moral principles but must be grounded in an understanding of the historic relationship between the migrating population and the target of migration: The absence of an analysis that provides a context inevitably leads to failure. If one

cannot explain the historical roots as to why a migration pattern is unfolding and the relationship of the policies of the migration target to the migrating population, then the migration may not make any sense or can be perceived as the equivalent of an invasion.

2. The destruction of lands, nations and peoples by imperialism, and its current incarnation as neoliberal globalization is resulting in unprecedented population shifts: The impact of imperialism on land use, climate change, ethnic rivalries, etc., is leading to increasing competition for resources as well as population shifts. In this environment, right-wing ideologies, grounded in a racialization of other populations, has advanced in both the global North and global South with the objective of excluding or marginalizing migrant populations, and in some cases, exterminating them altogether.

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3. Racialization, as a process, is not only a matter of the perception of the migrating population by the "native" population but also the manner through which the migrating population perceives dynamics within the target nation: The migrating population does not migrate with a blank consciousness, particularly on matters of race. It travels to the target nation with a racial consciousness that is shaped by the ideologies, histories and experiences from the home country. It is also shaped by the perceptions of the racial hierarchy in the target country. Thus, Latinos migrating to the USA from the Dominican Republic are shaped by the historical antipathy between the Dominican Republic and Haiti—the bizarre racial denial and oppression that was perpetrated by the Trujillo regime—as well as understanding of how white supremacy operates in the USA, including but not limited to which populations have what standing in the US imperial/racial hierarchy.

4. A radical, anti-racist practice must be introduced in order to build solidarity and respond to anti-immigrant and xenophobic ideologies and practices: The racialization of current migration has several objectives. One is the creation of a permanent, marginal, powerless and subordinate working stratum. This is summarized in the notion that migrant workers will do work that "native" workers avoid. The other aspect of the racialization is exactly the opposite, that is, the use of the "Other" as a way of creating a renewal of the dominant white bloc and the uniting behind a right-wing populist agenda. Right-wing populism can sometimes be confused for progressive, popular-democratic politics, if one avoids race. Right-wing populism often seizes on language from the Left in order to strengthen its base among working people from the "native" population. To break this alignment, the racist nature of right-wing

populism must be unpacked and exposed and a politics advanced that focuses on the development of an alternative, progressive bloc.

The struggle for justice for migrant workers is directly connected to the struggle against neoliberal globalization. The destruction of Earth's resources and the massive accumulation of wealth by a minority of the planet to the disadvantage of the majority means that billions find themselves in a struggle for survival. One option has become migration, but rather than migration being accepted as the reality of a modern economy, it has brought with it demonization of those who migrate, covert exploitation of the migrant, and the use of the migrant in fundamentally

racist ways to serve as scapegoat for the economic injustice being felt by so many.

The struggle for justice for the migrant worker is inextricably connected to the fight for racial justice, and, indeed, the fight for broader social justice. This struggle must be integrated into our various battles and not placed to one side as one additional issue on a long list of issues.

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## Socialism or Barbarism

by R. Burke

***Why Marx Was Right*, by Terry Eagleton, Yale University Press, 2011, ISBN 978-0-300-16943-0, 258 pages, \$25.00.**

Along with Slavoj Zizek and Antonio Negri, Terry Eagleton is one of the better known figures of the Marxist left. In some ways this is ironic, considering that his 2008 book *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* is a devastating critique of the "new atheists" Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. His latest work, *Why Marx Was Right*, is an insightful, humorous, and informative defense of Marxism. Eagleton has produced what may be the best argument for socialism to be offered in recent years.

Eagleton, a Distinguished Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster and Notre Dame, has undertaken to clear the record regarding the continued relevance of Marx's work. Considering the recent financial crisis, as well as the fact that we see an increasing reversion to the style of capitalism practiced in his day, there is indeed a strong case for Marx.

The book is divided into 10 chapters, each of which takes on a popular misconception of Marx's work. Eagleton does not defend Marx in a fundamentalist sense. "No Freudian imagines Freud never blundered, just as no fan of Alfred Hitchcock defends the master's every shot and line of screenplay. I am out to present Marx's ideas not as perfect but as plausible."

Beginning with the question of why Marxism is considered to be outdated, Eagleton demonstrates that this cannot be because capitalism has improved or advanced in some revolutionary way. The answer, he concludes, has something to do with the recognition of just how hard it is, and how long it will take, to abolish capitalism and replace it with socialism. In some ways the problem is connected with a collective disappointment in the wake of the heady utopian hopes roused in the 60s. The irony is that Marx is "accused of being outdated by the champions of a capitalism rapidly reverting to Victorian levels of inequality."

Eagleton is masterful in his critique of claims that Marxism is inherently tyrannical and murder-

ous. He reminds us that "[m]odern capitalist nations are the fruit of a history of slavery, genocide, violence, and exploitation every bit as abhorrent as Mao's China or Stalin's Soviet Union. Capitalism too, was forged in blood and tears; it is just that it has survived long enough to forget about much of this horror."

Capitalism was responsible for "the tens of millions of Indians, Africans, Chinese, Brazilians, Koreans, Russians and others who died as a result of entirely preventable famine, drought and disease in the late nineteenth century." These horrors remain with us today.

While Marx was a fierce critic of capitalism, he was not one-dimensional, and admired the legacy of

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democracy, liberty, and civil rights which capitalist societies engendered. Socialism in his conception was about expanding this heritage into an economic democracy as well.