

Racism Exposed, Radical Action Needed: From Paris to New Orleans

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IT TURNS OUT that the city of lights and city of jazz have a lot in common. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and militant explosions in the suburbs of Paris expose the underbelly of racism and class divisions.

Contents

- [France's Explosion and America](#)
- [Civil Rights Victory](#)
- [Ghetto Rebellions Revisited](#)
- [The Challenge](#)

The August 29 hurricane showed the world that the Bush administration's so-called war on terrorism is a failure. A comedy of errors and mismanagement, the response reflected institutional racism toward the African-American majority in New Orleans. At least 1,000 died, most for bureaucratic failure and policy decisions dating back decades. (Why hadn't the federal and state government reinforced the levees?)

This occurred as the head of the federal emergency agency (FEMA) was more concerned about his makeup and clothing attire than helping the people in need. Months after the devastation, the city's wealthy plot new plans of "gentrification." The aim: Let's get rid of the poor who happen to be mostly African American. The elites want to go back to "the good old days" when the city looked more like them.

France's Explosion and America

What's the connection to the social explosions in France? Race and class are driving elements to the social crisis. Moreover, the ruling elites here and there blame the victims for the governments' own reactionary responses and policy failures.

France is reeling from rebellions because the African-French population is tired of being treated as inferior "citizens." They have had enough of the empty proclamation of "liberty, equality, fraternity." The hard nose Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy blames Islamic extremists and foreigners for the violence. His police invoke violence. Legal residents are deported under false charges.

Yet the root cause of the rebellion is home-made racism. As much as 20% of the population is descended from immigrants from Africa. These second and third generation Black and Brown skin French men and women are still called "immigrants" by the "native French." The irony is this is done in the name of building a "color blind society."

That lie is even accepted by many liberals and leftists who like to declare, "We are not like the Americans." In truth, the United States and France are not that different when it comes to racism

and class exploitation.

The similarities between these countries are rooted in the two greatest revolutions of the 18th century. Both stood on great ideas — “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and “liberty, equality, fraternity.” Neither country, however, has lived up to those noble principles.

The American Revolution (1776) was popular but incomplete. The new Constitution defined limited citizenship. Only white men with land could vote. Slaves were property. The seeds of deep division and racism originated then and were not altered by the Bill of Rights.

Two Americas based on race and class dominated by whites was explicit. Whether freed or not, African Americans were seen as inferior. While the Civil War (1860-65) ended slavery, it could not change that perception of racial superiority by whites. Not surprisingly, Radical Reconstruction lasted for only a decade, and legal segregation was re-imposed by the end of the century (codified in the infamous 1896 Plessey v. Ferguson Supreme Court case).

Racism became institutionalized—in attitudes, behaviors and under the law.

Civil Rights Victory

The rulers adjusted to a new world reality with the onset of victorious colonial revolutions after World War II and mass protests that eventually overthrew the laws of apartheid. The demise of Jim Crow legal segregation — officially through laws in the 1960s — began to erode racist attitudes among whites even as Southern lawmakers led the counteroffensive to reverse those changes. Institutional racism nonetheless persists.

New Orleans reflects the stubbornness of racial, as well as class, divisions. The white economic powers are trying to reassert their political influence while most Blacks are residing outside the city as homeless “evacuees.” Of the 100,000 returnees that have returned to the city as of December, most were better off whites who lived on the “higher ground.” No one expects the city to repopulate to its pre-Katrina levels. Do the math on the new ethnic mix of tomorrow.

The Black Mayor, C. Ray Nagin, initially worked closely with these primarily white business elites. But after criticism by other Black leaders he felt the need to declare, “If we want to talk about getting back to the New Orleans of 1812, I’m not interested.” Rhetoric aside, the police chief, mayor and all the top officers of New Orleans who are African Americans continue to work with the business elites to transform the “new” New Orleans to keep the “underclass” from returning home.

Interestingly, the deep anger that led to “riots” in France is not happening after Katrina. The explanations lie with the Black political leaders being in positions of political power, as was not the case in the 1960s (or today in France). These “leaders” have been able to keep things under control.

This reality shows the contradiction of leadership and power in a Black population that is still heavily working class, and poorer than the white population. While the Black middle class lives well and is further removed from the vast majority of working class African Americans, they remain influential. The community is angry, as meetings across the country show, but there is as yet no alternative leadership.

Ghetto Rebellions Revisited

France today is experiencing the American upsurge of the 1960s in the 21st century. The government blames Islamists (terrorists) and outsiders (reminiscent of what American politicians said about “rioters” in Watts, Detroit and Newark) and refuses to see the source of the problem as institutionalized discrimination.

Ironically, French illusions about race are rooted in their own Revolution (1789), where citizenship was defined by rights and not ethnic background (diversity — what’s that?). When citizens were all “white” this wasn’t a big deal. This Enlightenment view of “citizenship,” however, clashes with a diverse France.

Today some 20% of the population is of African and Arab origin. The “color blind” society, based on presumed equality for all, is now a farce. (The government even bans girls wearing headscarves to school in the name of “equality.”)

The myth of a “colorblind” society — a worthy objective but not possible in a market-based system — has been blown apart by the rebellions. It is not surprising that a majority of “native France” support the government’s brutal police crackdown as their own delusions crumble.

Facts are facts, however. There are few Black and Arab French men and women serving in high government, media and corporate positions. The government refuses, in principle, to keep official data on the racial, ethnic and religious makeup of the country. They reject the policy (and construct) of affirmative action as an American idea.

The Challenge

Racism is racism no matter how you spin or justify it. Simple declarations of “colorblind” objectives are excuses to allow racism to thrive. Radical solutions are required. Moreover, significant change is possible even without a transformation of the economic system. Genuine fundamental change begins by granting some real political power to the Black and Brown “citizens” of France. Affirmative action (positive discrimination) programs would mark recognition of denied rights.

Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans shows that poverty and lack of opportunities for working-class African Americans still exist. But we also recognize that the end of legal segregation, and the official recognition of de facto discrimination, made it possible to win some real changes.

In that sense, the creation of a Black middle class is an advance for all African Americans. It clarifies the social and class divisions among Blacks. It helps to expose the institutionalized racist attitudes that exist among a significant layer of whites.

The solution, and the challenge facing progressives, here but also in France, is more complex than simply pointing fingers at capitalism. Those suffering are seeking immediate relief.

Reforms can be won through political action and mass protests. The absence of a new civil rights movement, and the decline of the organized labor movement, make that challenge an all the more difficult one — but it can be met, as history proves.

P.S.

* From Against The Current.