

United States: “Where Are the People of Color?” - Guilt won’t help us build a more diverse left.

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Guilt is a sad, passive emotion — and it won’t help us build a more diverse left.

It could be any meeting — an ad hoc general assembly, an emergency gathering for immigrant defense, a planning session for an upcoming strike. The speaker is usually white, but not always — and depending on this, their tone is guilty or accusatory.

On the rare occasion that this query is accompanied by a positive proposal, it is abstract, likely no more than a call for reflection. When the speaker is white, it often functions to absolve them of the need to actually do something about it.

Sometimes, on its face, the question is reasonable. Any political collectivity in the age of Trump which consists only of white people is an example of an abject failure — a failure of outreach, at the simplest level, but also a political failure, a failure to challenge the white supremacy which is threaded through American history.

But sometimes the question reveals nothing more than sanctimonious ignorance. It would be hard for me to count how many times I have sat in a meeting, often right next to several other people of color, and watched as someone righteously declared, “Everyone here is white.”

In the moment, it makes my blood boil. As a Muslim American, I have been detained at airports and verbally abused in public places. When I heard the news of Trump’s Muslim ban, I wondered whether I would be able to see my parents again. And I am one of the lucky ones.

Given the opportunity to cool down, I have to reflect on the strange psychology of these statements. Could it be simply the racist assumption that anyone who attends a political meeting and can speak English well must necessarily be white? It is hard for me to read it otherwise, and it is disturbing to imagine the potential consequences of this white practice of speaking for others. We should hope that this does not become a self-fulfilling prophesy, alienating and driving away people of color whose presence is erased by guilty whites.

The question is itself exclusionary, in its reliance on the empty abstraction of “people of color.” In your city, wherever it is, there is likely a young white male who is addicted to Vicodin, struggles to support his children on fast-food wages, and is on the verge of eviction. Where is he during this political meeting?

Middle-class activists are adept at deluding themselves with complicated explanations. But it is not a difficult question to answer. Like many people of color and many other whites, he is doing what he can to make it to the next day.

As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes [1], “the privileges of white skin run very thin in a country where nineteen million white people languish in poverty.” Every day in a capitalist society is a struggle for the poor. Attending a meeting called by some unknown organization — and we all know how excruciating these meetings can be — will not put food on the table for your children. It will not help you recover from long hours of monotonous, draining work. It will not compel your landlord to fix your broken toilet. It will not stop the collection agency from calling.

This is not an appeal to holding up some mythical “white working class” as the abandoned core of the American masses. It is a simple recognition of lived reality of the working class, which contains white people and people of color, people of all genders and sexualities, the employed and the unemployed — a multitude of people irreducible to any single description.

Many socialists argue that across these differences, all of these people have a common interest — a point easily skewered by the identitarian liberal who asks how the young woman seeking an abortion and the evangelical protester, the undocumented immigrant and the salaried worker, can possibly have the same interest.

But this challenge is afflicted by the same condition it claims to diagnose. It mistakes the casual description of a shared trait with a claim about identity. We all have numerous interests, which are related to our identities but also where we work and where we live. To say that these different spheres of life interact and intersect is a banal truism which neither explains how our society is structured and reproduced, nor how we might formulate a strategy to change this structure.

A meaningful common interest does not somehow exist by default. We cannot reduce *any* group of people and the multitudes they contain to a single common interest, as though we were reducing a fraction. A common interest is *constituted* by the composition of these multitudes into a group. And this is a process of political practice.

White supremacy is the phenomenon whereby the plurality of interests of a group of people is reorganized into the fiction of a white race, whose very existence is predicated on the violent and genocidal history of the oppression of people of color. The self-organized struggles of oppressed people against white supremacy managed to significantly undermine, though not eliminate, this kind of organization. The likes of Trump, Steve Bannon, Richard Spencer, and Milo Yiannopoulos now attempt to restore its earlier strength.

Those of us who seek to change the world will have to fight against this effort, and this will require us to put forward an organization of resistance — one which collectively constitutes a common interest.

This common interest is beginning to take shape as the opposition to Trump. But it must be built further than that, to an opposition to the whole capitalist system. Because it is the structure of the capitalist system which prevents *all* people who are dispossessed of the means of production, regardless of their identities, from having control over their own lives, and thus from pursuing whatever interests they may have in all their particularity. Monsters like Trump only bring this ongoing tyranny of capital to the surface.

To merely criticize the composition of a political meeting is a defeatist practice. Yes, any anti-capitalist organization must reach out to the most disenfranchised and marginalized of our population. Yes, it is unacceptable if they are unable to speak for themselves.

But what is most important of all is that *you* are there, whoever you are. What is important is that in a society which steals our free time, leeches our energy, and crushes any hope for an alternative,

you have decided to commit yourself to the revolutionary possibility of that alternative.

Guilt is a sad, passive emotion. Its foundation is the wish that the past was different, and the failure to recognize the possibility of acting to change the future.

It is crucial for all socialist organizations, which today find themselves experiencing rapid growth, to formulate means of incorporating the excluded, in all their forms. The current composition of many of our organizations is a result of our lack of a social base — it's a problem that we must overcome through organizing. But this will mean going beyond guilt and constructing ways to meet the needs unfulfilled in capitalist society, and the means of asserting popular power.

You showed up. You are at a meeting. Your presence is an indication that it is possible to initiate the process of change. Do not allow yourself to be intimidated by guilt. Instead, sharpen your analysis and enhance your organization, until your ranks grow so large as to include everyone.

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P.S.

*Jacobin. 02.27.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/left-diversity-people-color-white-identitarian-solidarity-difference/>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 40969), [Trump's United States: No Time for Despair - Build democratic, multiracial, militant organizations.](#)