MERGE LEFT

Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America

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THE NEW PRESS

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Preface

The question from the floor signals that the wheels are off the unity bus.

In my day job, I'm a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, but this Hilton meeting hall is no ivory tower seminar room. In 2014, I published *Dog Whistle Politics*. That book explained how the economic royalty and the politicians they fund have been twisting American politics for decades by manipulating racial resentment. After that, rather than continue conversing only with scholars and students, I resolved to do what I could to discuss this widely with people and groups dedicated to fighting back.

Now it's early 2016, and this hotel conference room is full of union officials who have come together for their annual retreat. The union's national leadership has brought me to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to lead a day-long workshop on racism and economic hardship for their state representatives. The unions I've worked with have been further along than most liberal institutions in seeing how race and class interact, so this is an audience that should be open to my analysis. Still, even before the unnerving question, the pressure of the looming day weighs on me.

Partly the weight comes from the significant risk that the union's top leadership is taking. They've ordered the fifty state leaders into stackable chairs in a windowless room. I look around. With a handful of exceptions, everyone is white. There are just a very few women. Really? This room full of big white guys who came up through labor is going to listen to a Latinx professor with soft

writer's hands pontificate on racism for eight hours? The national leadership has gone out on a limb, and then handed me the saw.

Even more, though, the weight pressing on me comes from the seeming absurdity of my goal. I think there's a way to move whites toward a pragmatic commitment to racial justice. I also believe doing so provides a fulcrum to build economic justice for all racial groups, whites included.

It sounds good in theory, my academic comfort zone. But this morning as I survey the faces looking at me, the audacity of it seems delusional. The practical reality of actually moving the solid bodies sitting around the large U-shaped conference table racks my nerves.

I start by asking if they think they have a racism problem in their union. Some volunteer spontaneously, oh yes, we have racism. But it's not a problem, others laughingly rejoin. They're half talking to themselves and half responding to me. There's some chuckling around the room. Then someone calls out to explain: sure, there's some racism among a few of our members, but it's not really a big deal.

That's when I get the question that really unsettles me. "Why can't I say the n-word?"

I struggle to understand where the question is coming from. Is it asked in good faith, in a space perceived as safe? Maybe, but this early in the conversation, I doubt it. Rather, it seems more confrontational, some sort of taunt.

Answering a question you're unsure about with a return question is a trick of the trade among professors. So I query the room regarding how they would respond to their union brother. No help there. Over the clink of water glasses there's an overlay of murmurs and low laughter, as people turn to their neighbors to joke. The only direct responses I get are more voices repeating the challenging question, and making clear what had only been implied before: *They get to say it, they call each other that all the time, it's everywhere in their rap music, so why can't I say the word?*

Maybe they're feeling like there's a double standard that only

criticizes whites for stuff everybody supposedly does—like prefer-ring the company of their own group or saying the n-word. Or maybe they're bristling at what they perceive as preaching from a brown person with lots of degrees after his name. Maybe it's some combination. I'm not sure.

But I do know that the longer the n-word conversation goes on, the more the faces looking at me start to harden, eyes narrowing and mouths pressing thin. Arms cross and men lean back in their chairs, their chests rising. The room seems to be letting me know they're not going to lie down for another mini-sermon on their racism.

I reach for another teaching trick: turn your answer in the di-rection you want to go. All people should be treated the same, I acknowledge. The statement is abstract enough that those in the room can fill it with their own meanings, perhaps finding in it confirmation that they are being treated unfairly. But then I add that when society puts groups in very different positions, some-times the same actions carry very different meanings. Chairs scuff over the industrial carpet patterned in muted blocks of contrast-ing colors. I can feel people pushing further away as I seem to jus-tify what they see as a double standard.

Let me explain, I quickly interject. Let's talk about what's hap-pened in society since the civil rights movement in the 1960s made uttering the n-word broadly unacceptable.

I have ulterior motives. First, I know from experience that dis-placing hard conversations about racism onto the past can smooth the discussion. Pointing at distant others slows people from deaf-ening their ears to defend themselves.

Second, I really do want to describe what's happened to the country since the 1960s, in a way that connects racism and surg-ing wealth inequality—including, most relevant in this context, labor union decline.

Addressing the incendiary question from the floor, I start:

The n-word is one of the most violent terms expressing white supremacy, and for generations in this nation it permeated public

life. But in the 1960s, the civil rights movement succeeded in driving this word out of polite conversation. In turn, that cultural change set the groundwork for laws prohibiting white supremacy from operating openly in voting, jobs, schools, housing, and union halls as well.

But the word still carries a terrible potency, I say. Sometimes groups contesting ugly beliefs about them seek to strip vile words of their power by claiming those words for themselves. Think about how some in the gay rights movement adopted and thereby transformed the term "queer." In the same way, those of us who are not Black should understand when some in the Black community seek to take ownership of the n-word to redefine it in ways that shift its meaning to them.

But the truth is, I state, it's still a word tied to a bloody history and a revolting set of views. When whites use this word today, it strikes many as suggesting at best an indifference to hard-won advances in racial equality, and possibly a persistent attachment to dehumanizing beliefs about racial supremacy. It furthers the kind of racial divisions that we are gathered here to discuss.

Then I pivot to take the group beyond abstract piety to focus on the consequences of racial division. This is not just a moral issue, I tell them. At stake is the future of their union. This is where I want to go. My goal is to transform the racism conversation by connecting it to their self-interest.

I walk them through a slide show I've prepared with photos, campaign videos, and maps of electoral results that tell a dismal tale. In the presentation, Richard Nixon strides into the conference room in images from 1968, pushing back against civil rights by calling for "law and order" and claiming to represent "the silent majority." These are dog whistles, I explain. A literal dog whistle sounds at such a high frequency that human ears cannot hear it but canines can. As a metaphor, it points to political language that operates at two levels, one silent about race, the other provoking sharp racial reactions.

Nixon wins in 1968, and then wins reelection in 1972 in a

landslide that colors the whole electoral map red. Ronald Reagan then appears, warning the union leaders about "welfare queens." These racial dog whistles, I say, are how the party of big business has been winning support from working families for decades. Democrats, I explain, eventually decided their best answer was imitation. The supposed hero of the white working class Bill Clinton pops up to ask for their votes by repeating Republican dog whistles, promising to "end welfare as a way of life" and to "crack down on crime."

A sharply rising graph shows wealth inequality surging higher decade by decade from the Reagan years onward. The government policies that leave working people choking on dust emerge as familiar bullet points:

- Tax cuts for the rich
- Slashed social spending
- Corporations writing the rules
- More police than jobs in poor communities of color
- Government hostility toward unions

Here's the biggest mystery, I say: Why in the midst of increasing economic hardship are so many white working families voting for this? Because they've been convinced to fear and resent people of color. Big money interests and the politicians and media outlets they bankroll have been selling the same basic lie for fifty years: *Distrust liberals and government for coddling rather than controlling people of color. Demand that government start punishing dangerous and undeserving people, by slashing social spending, launching a war on crime, and a war on immigrants, too. Punish government itself, by cutting taxes to starve it and gutting its regulations. Trust yourself to the marketplace. The party of big business and the working man are on the same team.* Basic numbers flash on the screen showing the GOP's 2012 presidential candidate drawing more than 90 percent of his support from white voters, while 98 percent of the GOP's elected officials are white.[1]

I close the morning by asking whether they see a future for

their own children in their union. Many admit with frustration that they do not. Among the immediate crises facing unions are hostile politicians and the judges they've appointed. The underlying problem is the racially charged elections that have put those politicians in power. Like a lawyer going for the jugular in a closing argument, as they prepare to file out for lunch I ask these mostly white union leaders a final question: *Isn't it true that racism against people of color is the biggest threat your own families face?*

They come back from the buffet trending toward the verdict I hoped they would reach. Using ideas and terms we've been discussing, they start asking questions that demonstrate an evolving mindset. What is unconscious bias and what is strategic racism? How can we effectively communicate to our members the critical importance of building strength across racial lines? What are the best practices for integrating a union? Not all of them, of course, are sold on this new perspective. But most seem to have made a major shift—from early questions about their prerogative to use a racial slur to earnest inquiries about how to build cross-racial solidarity.

I don't mean to oversell the moment. The about-face in the conference room was not my doing alone, not nearly. Union leaders have been pushing a related analysis for decades, making it easier for the people in the room to grasp arguments about racism as a divide-and-conquer tactic. And while I hope some of the leaders in that room put the lessons they learned into practice, I really don't know what, if anything, changed on the ground after our meeting.

For me, the day's conversation was hopeful but also discouraging. It confirmed as sound the basic strategy of connecting the fight against racism to economic self-interest. But it also underlined the difficult part: how to actually do that. Eight-hour lectures could not be scaled up.

For decades, the Right has been pushing a core narrative about undeserving people of color, government betrayal, and the saving power of the marketplace. It's now widely accepted as common sense. How could unions create a concise counterstory? How

could they fashion a narrative so compelling and so frequently repeated it became its own version of common sense? And what about nonunion audiences: How could a new progressive story be made into common sense outside of the strong institutional support some unions provide?

All of this was a tall enough order just by itself. But in practice another mountain also loomed. I was meeting rejection from racial justice activists.

I had assumed that the main stumbling block to urging cross-racial solidarity would be convincing a majority of whites. At least equally formidable, it turned out, was enlisting support from people directly focused on racial justice, overwhelmingly activists of color.

To some extent, I encountered this sort of skepticism within unions. But even more frequently, I met rejection from race-focused advocates in my lectures on university campuses. As I came to see cross-racial solidarity as the key to both racial justice and economic fairness, I began delivering the same lecture I gave to the unions at colleges across the country. In those progressive settings, much of the pushback came from the students most committed to racial justice. I felt I knew them well, even when I was meeting them for the first time. They were just like my Berkeley students.

As a general rule, racial justice student-activists are steeped in history. They've studied the country's founding decisions and subsequent patterns, allowing them to perceive contemporary injustices in a context that emphasizes these injustices' deep roots and also society's broad culpability. They also live in a present that has them battling every day. It's not just the scale of the challenges, nor the wrenching emotions of witnessing racism devastate particular lives and families, sometimes their own. They're also warring against indifference expressed as lukewarm support. Even within a progressive space like my famously left-leaning campus, the committed activists are relatively few in number. Most of them are women of color, fighting not only racism but patriarchy and often

class hierarchy and other inequalities as well. A few white students also fervently take up racial justice—in the law school context, they often plan to work in criminal law, immigration, or human rights.

When I urge racial justice advocates to link racism to economic issues in order to enlist more whites, these committed activists react in a range of ways. Some say straight up that they would rather demand that society face the crimes of white racism—even if it means not much really changes on the ground—than to reframe whites as victims of racism, too. These students challenge the very heart of my approach.

I argue back by focusing on the goal most important to them, helping communities of color.

Since the civil rights movement, I tell them, many politicians have won votes through racially coded scaremongering. Every time they triumph, they ramp up state violence against communities of color to prove their mettle—if you promise to keep whites safe from violent people of color, prove yourself by funding more police and building more prisons; if you say you'll clamp down on welfare cheats, especially defund the government programs that serve communities of color; if you claim that terrorists pose a looming threat, launch major surveillance programs and jail people for minor immigration violations; if you describe human beings as illegal aliens, rip families apart, jail hundreds of thousands, and deport millions more.

Behind all that storm and drama, I explain, these politicians do yet more favors for their big money patrons. The resulting economic inequality devastates everyone, including already vulnerable communities of color. But people of color especially suffer, I argue, as targets of the massive state violence designed to prove just how dangerous and unworthy we are. The key to immediate relief—to ending mass incarceration and mass deportation and systemic neglect—is to build a cross-racial coalition that defeats politicians who campaign using dog whistle scare tactics.

Often I invoke the work of pioneering race scholar Derrick

Bell. Bell was the first African American to become a tenured professor at Harvard Law School, and a founder of what has become known as critical race theory. Bell knew that racial progress stems from what he termed "interest convergence." "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites," he explained.[2] Bell certainly believed in moral suasion. But he also understood that most people move in the directions they think will benefit them.

Channeling Bell, I say to the racial justice students that while moral arguments are important and human beings often act altruistically, it is a losing battle to expect that most whites (or any group) will relinquish a key form of their power simply because it is the right thing to do. You cannot radically improve the lives of communities of color until you convince whites that your pain ultimately hurts them, too. I ask, is the point to fault society, or to seek a way forward?

This often sparks a different concern. Are they now, some activists wonder, supposed to stop talking about racism as a social dynamic of whites over nonwhites? These student-activists often believe that the key to racial justice is to broadly educate people about white-over-nonwhite racism. Some of them have done so full time before coming to law school, for instance as labor movement organizers or in their churches.

The point of framing racism as a class weapon is not to permanently displace discussions about racial hierarchy, I say. Instead, it's to create added space for those exchanges as well as a greater inclination to participate. When more people see that cross-racial solidarity provides the best way forward for themselves and their families, they should be increasingly willing to engage in and sustain uncomfortable but necessary conversations. Educational work about racial hierarchy is hugely important to racial justice as well as to the project of building robust cross-racial solidarity. It's just that *starting* with conversations about white dominance feels unwelcoming and overwhelming to many. Ultimately, however, framing racism as a class weapon and as white-over-nonwhite

hierarchy are complementary rather than competing ways to promote racial justice.

Even if they come to agree that genuine cross-racial solidarity would be beneficial in theory, many remain skeptical about what it would look like on the ground. They particularly worry that an interest-convergence approach offers little more than another opportunity for white folks to put themselves at the center. Will "cross-racial solidarity" in practice mean a coalition that responds to anti-Black racism only to the extent doing so helps white people? The racial justice activists also want proof. If they're going to risk having the racism conversation hijacked, they want to see some evidence that large numbers of whites might really endorse and work for racial justice for communities of color.

These were the sorts of challenging conversations I was already having when Donald Trump launched his presidential run with broadsides against Mexican rapists.

It's important to understand that Trump did not invent the larger pattern of political racism harnessed to rule by the rich. It's even more important to recognize this dynamic will continue long after Trump departs the scene, until the country actively defeats it.

Nevertheless, Trump's campaign and then his election catalyzed a sense of acute urgency. Trump was stomping on the accelerator of a democracy already headed toward a cliff because of rising racial divisions and surging wealth inequality. The little time left to avert catastrophe was burning up in clouds of choking fumes and plumes of spinning hate.

I knew by then that new frames and story lines were needed to solidly and consistently connect racism and plutocracy in the public mind—ideally, messages that communicated this reality quickly and that could be repeatedly reinforced. At the same time, it was obvious that any new approach could only be promoted with hard evidence. People needed proof a big departure might actually work. But how to actually craft and test these messages? I'd spent my career researching, writing, and teaching about how

racism evolves, but when it came to effective political messaging, I was way out of my depth.

I needed someone like the Republican political consultant Frank Luntz. Luntz is perhaps the preeminent wordsmith for the party of corporate America. His mantra: "It's not what you say, it's what people hear." [3] By this he means that whether in politics or in branding toothpaste, it's not enough to announce attractive selling points. At least as important, you have to figure out what people actually hear, remember, and react to. Luntz extensively uses focus groups and public polling, and with their help has concocted terms like "death taxes" for the inheritance taxes many of the very rich seek to abolish.

Luntz also contributed to GOP race-baiting around immigration. In 2005, he wrote a then-confidential memo to Republicans titled "Words that Work"—work, that is, to build politically potent animus toward undocumented immigrants. He advised that Republicans should say over and over to voters, "This is about the overcrowding of YOUR schools. This is about emergency room chaos in YOUR hospitals. This is about the increase in YOUR taxes. This is about crime in YOUR communities." [4] These themes contradict the facts of immigration, but no matter. They work as dog whistles by triggering racial anxiety without directly naming race. Schools, hospitals, taxes, community—and especially the emphasized "your"—communicate a basic message of ownership, scarcity, and racial division. The tactic has played well for Republicans for years and become a routine rallying cry for Trump. "The Democrats don't care what their extremist immigration agenda will do to your neighborhoods or your hospitals or your schools," Trump said at a 2018 rally in Houston.[5]

Immediately after Trump's inauguration, a mutual friend put me in touch with Anat Shenker-Osorio as a potential partner. Shenker-Osorio is an expert on progressive messaging around the economy and immigration, with extensive experience helping unions domestically and abroad.[6] With the Right resorting to focus groups, polling, and careful message testing to hone their dog

whistles, we would do the same to neutralize their weaponry and seek a basis for cross-racial common ground.

Shenker-Osorio had good relationships with pollsters, and we eventually partnered with Celinda Lake and Cornell Belcher, preeminent researchers and Democratic strategists. I was close with Heather McGhee, a former standout student at Berkeley Law and someone also focused on the destructive power of dog whistling. As the president at the time of Demos and Demos Action, think tanks geared toward connecting racial and economic justice, McGhee also brought an initial institutional home for the project.

In addition, the Service Employees International Union, with almost two million members, was on the cusp of launching their own research on how to meld anti-racism and pro-labor organizing. Through contacts with several of us, SEIU joined our core working group.

There was early thought given to expanding beyond race and class. The searing experience of an extraordinarily competent woman losing to a man who boasted on tape of sexually assaulting women made anti-sexism seem especially promising for progressive mobilizing. The millions who marched in the women's protests the day after Trump's inauguration—perhaps the largest day of protests in US history—added to this sense that fighting patriarchy could be as powerful an organizing tool as anti-racism.[7] But the culture wars around gender bisect race in complex ways. Many white women support patriarchy and do so in a manner that closely connects to support for continued white dominance, the sort of mindset that contributed to more white women voting for Donald Trump than Hillary Clinton.[8] Recognizing that our project was just a first step, it seemed best to focus on the already daunting task of shifting how progressives talk about race and class.

Together and with the help of many others, in 2017 and 2018 we ran a large research project interviewing activists, drafting potential messages, trying out early versions with multiple focus groups involving different racial communities all across the country, and

testing the resulting messages in national as well as state surveys. We called the endeavor the race-class narrative project.

The result of all of this new research? We found encouraging evidence suggesting that racial dog whistling can be effectively defanged.

- Against the dominant consensus, most whites hold progressive views on race—though they also swing back and forth to reactionary ideas. This is good news. It suggests the Left does not need to tear down a mountain of white racism. Instead the task is to help the majority of whites connect their self-interest to the anti-racist values most already hold.

- Also contra the conventional wisdom, majorities of African American and Latinx voters find large parts of the Right's story convincing. This means that neutralizing the Right's narratives of racial fear and resentment is also key to turning out communities of color.

- A message urging joining together across racial groups to demand that government promote racial and economic justice consistently proved more convincing—to whites as well as to people of color—than the Right's racial fear story. The race-class message also proved stronger than the main progressive alternatives, either staying silent about race to focus on class, or leading with racial justice.

Bottom line: the race-class research suggests that merging race and class builds energy and excitement between core constituencies indispensable to a resurgent Left but typically seen as mutually hostile—the white working class and Barack Obama's coalition of nonwhite voters.*

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* Copies of the race-class narrative project's public reports are hosted on the author's website, https://www.ianhaneylopez.com.

The book in your hands places the evidence, insights, and lessons of the race-class narrative project in a larger political and racial context. This includes:

- Detailing how dog whistle politics evolved in response to a Black president
- Exploring why liberals for five decades and still today distance themselves from racial justice
- Examining the limited power of colorblind economic populism to actually achieve economic populism, let alone racial justice
- Parsing why leading with racial justice for communities of color actually loses support from many in those very communities, not to mention from most whites
- Probing the ominous relationship between Trumpism and dangerous new trends in white identity

Ultimately, this book asks where we are in the long arc of a country struggling to overcome white supremacy. An enormous question, it nevertheless has immediate implications. Human societies take care of only those they see as worth caring for. This was America's founding insight—"with liberty and justice for *all*." It has also been its enduring limitation. Decade by decade, though, with peaks and reversals, people fought to expand who truly belongs, who fully deserves dignified treatment. When the civil rights movement insisted that people of color should be included in the broad "we," many Americans agreed. But enough balked that their resentment could be harnessed by politicians beholden to economic elites. Through the purposeful encouragement of racial resentment and fear, the new plutocrats battered social solidarity and built popular support for their rule.

Today, every bold progressive vision depends on building cross-racial solidarity first. This is obviously important to assembling broad support for racial justice initiatives like abolishing mass incarceration and creating a humane immigration system. But it is

also pivotal to enacting progressive legislation seemingly distant from racial issues, for instance publicly funded child and elder care, affordable and excellent healthcare, and a Green New Deal. Only a sense of linked fate across color lines seems likely to foster the supermajorities necessary to sweep away the politicians dog whistling on behalf of rule by and for the rich. The best response to divide-and-conquer is unite-and-build.

Our fates have always been bound together. For centuries, our greatest heroes—radicals like W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and César Chávez—have insisted that American salvation requires cross-racial alliances. Repeatedly, this insight has been suppressed, forgotten, and abandoned. Today, some of the wealthiest, most powerful forces in this country bend their will and money toward driving us apart so they can tighten their grip on government and the economy. Yet the very wreckage they have created—and the president they helped elect—open up another opportunity to build a broad cross-racial movement with the will and the political power to promote racial reform and shared economic prosperity.

This book explains the good evidence that cross-racial solidarity for racial and economic justice is possible, today.