

# LOOKING UNDER THE HOOD OF THE IDENTITY POLITICS DEBATE

BY DANIEL RASHID

**METRO'S  
EEO POLICIES  
DON'T WORK.**

Laborers' District Council  
of Washington, D.C.  
and SCLC

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"JIM CROW"  
ON METRO**

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## FURTHER READING:

- Touré F. Reed on Jessica Krug/“Jess La Bombalera”:  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/jess-la-bombalera-and-the-pathologies-of-racial-authenticity>
- Jessica Krug as “La Bombalera”, testifying to the New York City council,  
complete with surreal accent:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n40wEIFtImU>
- Krug’s Medium post admitting to her deception:  
<https://medium.com/@jessakrug/the-truth-and-the-anti-black-violence-of-my-lies-9a9621401f85>
- Noel Ignatiev on police killings, race and class:  
<https://hardcrackers.com/survey-police-killings-race-class/>
- Talk by David Ranney on his book:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ9-hgWmTgw>



It should go without saying that socialists are deeply interested in race, gender, sexuality and all the other innumerate social categories that exist in the capitalist system, beyond the fundamental class structure of proletariat and bourgeoisie. Virtually all socialists agree that they are of concern; the disagreements come elsewhere, and predominantly centre around the nebulous concept of “identity politics”.

This is one of the more frustrating topics to discuss; most can’t even agree on what exactly it is. It’s rare to find people that affirmatively call themselves supporters of identity politics, for much the same reason that it’s rare to find people that call themselves “opportunists”. The term is primarily a pejorative. This mess of accusations is made worse by the low-grade swamp that is left-wing internet culture, the place where all these debates play out – if you don’t know why the word “y’all” is so controversial, I envy you.

All this perhaps explains why Candace Cohn’s “Marxist critique of the theory of ‘white privilege’”, republished last year by Socialist Alternative in their publication *Red Flag*, clings strangely onto a theory that “privilege theory” – the latent politics most would recognise by catchphrases like “check your privilege” and “use your privilege for good” – was developed disastrously by American Maoists in the 1960s, and then festered in the New Communist Movement until the 1990s or so, at which point it was adopted by “neoliberal” academia as their pet theory to harangue people with.

The picture does bear some resemblance to reality. “White-skin privilege” as an explanation for why the American working class movement was so paralysed did indeed come from Stalinists, nostalgic about Third Period Stalinist support for black separatism. Basic rights and liberties are treated by many leftists and liberals as “privileges”, implying the

problem is with whites who possess things like the ability not to get profiled by customs officers, instead of the system that particularly disadvantages non-whites. Soft-left academics do tend to prefer thinking about race in terms of individual privileges and identities as opposed to its function in capitalism. The discussion focuses on individual consciousness instead of broad social problems. Resentment towards individuals instead of capitalism as a whole naturally follows.

However, Cohn's picture is quite clearly oversimplified; the article itself has the implicit function of defending Cliff-Trotskyist approaches to race from its critics. The approach of the Stalinists and Maoists is worlds apart from the modern, liberal manifestations we see. One of the intellectuals Cohn criticises, Noel Ignatiev, was quite clear about this; he was an opponent of multiculturalism, and one of his last published articles made the point that once you control for class, white and black people seem to be killed by police at similar rates. Cohn's article also offers little in terms of strategy.

Perhaps part of the reason "privilege theory" and "identity politics" survive so strongly is in the fact that they are so rarely positively formulated. The common critiques that these concepts are full of holes makes sense in this light. However, Cohn's article gives us an opportunity to deal concretely with these concepts, and how they fared in reality, because the "white-skin privilege" theory she criticises was indeed formulated clearly and put into practice by political groups.

"White-skin privilege" arose from the work of Theodore W. Allen and Noel Ignatiev. Both quite credibly argued that the social category of race and its associated hierarchies were introduced into America by the ruling classes as a way to defuse potential solidarity between the (often indentured) colonial European underclass and the mass of African slaves. Bacon's Rebellion of 1676 – an event involving an alliance of Europeans and Africans – lit a fire under the colonial authorities, who realised that this had the potential to undercut their entire enterprise.

The American racial system developed and achieved its goal of dividing Europeans and Africans by solidifying them into the categories of white and black, granting minor privileges to the former group and institutionalising disadvantages to keep down the latter. Socialists agitating

help localise our understanding of identity, shedding certain analyses that are primarily imported from America – for instance, the prioritisation of race over ethnicity and language as the primary social dividing lines. It may also work against the generic "anti-identity politics" tendency, which posits a simplistic class-based identity as an alternative to equally simplistic race or gender-based identities; the solutions offered are usually equally superficial, and tend to cluster around support for people like Bernie Sanders and Corbyn.

A practical, living, breathing analysis of ethnicity, gender and other social divisions can only come from the places where those divisions are created: in the logistics centres, in the brothels, in the family, in the construction sites, and in all the areas of our society that, in one way or another, serve capital – the areas that could one day usher in the changes needed for society to, instead, serve humanity.

It's worth quoting Touré F. Reed at length on the Krug case:

*While much ink has been spilled on explorations of black angst about the frequently acknowledged fact that some white liberals and even conservatives like “their blacks” to share the same class sensibilities, we rarely consider the equally true fact that some white liberals, and even conservatives, like “their blacks” to fulfill their fantasies about the forever unknowable, forever exotic black other. That’s what “so and so isn’t really black” is partly illustrative of. This is what’s driving the demand for essays and memoirs on “black rage.” And this was also, very clearly, a critical component of Jessica Krug’s academic market niche.*

*However offensive Krug’s act is — and it is very offensive because it was a front — the demand for her performance is even more offensive. Indeed, the demand for the product Krug was selling merits far more attention than she does. Why? Well, Krug may have done damage to some people herself. But some of the people who bought her performance of blackness will continue to do damage to black and brown people, precisely because Krug tailored her racist performance to mesh with her intended professional audience’s racist presumptions about “black authenticity” — whatever that might be.*

One can compare this atmosphere with Ranney’s world of segregated lunch areas, shit pay, shit conditions, and the threat of immigration police invading your workplace and deporting you. What advantages would a white cleaner in a factory gain from claiming themselves to be non-white? All it would get them is a demotion, a sacking, or a visit from “La Migra” to make sure their papers are in order. In such an atmosphere where the possibility of *individual* advancement is so limited, *collective* advancement becomes much more pertinent.

The debate about identity politics will rage on. Too many journalists, academics and petit-politicians on both sides of the debate have too much invested to give it up so soon. My only hope is that intensified efforts on the part of socialists to operate in working-class communities will give these debates a more productive character. Such an engagement will also

against capitalism had to either compromise with the race-system in order to appeal to whites, who wanted to cling to their petty privileges, or reject it entirely, risking marginalisation. This system became the basic defence mechanism of American capitalism as it developed through the ages, through the Civil War all the way through to the present day, progressively modifying itself to fit new crises and new rebellions against it.

Putting aside the historical debates, it’s productive to look at how this approach fared in practice, when implemented by socialists. As the Students for a Democratic Society disintegrated, a number of new leftists influenced by the white-skin privilege ideas formed the Sojourner Truth Organisation, including Noel Ignatiev himself. The STO was committed to an idiosyncratic sort of Leninism, influenced as much by mavericks like C.L.R. James as the standard theorists, and mainly carried out an industrialising strategy. This strategy involved militants abandoning their previous career paths and getting jobs in the factories of the Midwestern industrial belt. There are hardly any groups pursuing such a strategy now, but in the fairly heated days of the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, it was relatively common, and most leftist groups had some level of coordinated presence in factories.

The professor of urban planning turned factory worker (later turned professor of urban planning again) David Ranney was one of these STO militants who entered the factories out of their own volition, interested in the latent power possessed by these workers. In his brief memoir, *Living and Dying on the Factory Floor*, he describes the sort of racial environment of the factories:

*I soon discover that the black workers all take lunch and breaks in the locker room. The Mexicans, most of whom work on the fill line, have fashioned some benches and sit near the line. The two groups don’t mix. I try taking some breaks in both spots. The pipe fitters ask me why I do this. I tell them so I can get to know people. They shake their heads in disbelief. I suspect the new white maintenance guy is a disappointment to them.*

*The Mexicans speak mostly in Spanish. Mine isn’t so good, but I understand enough to learn that they think the blacks are lazy*

*drunkards and would steal the shirt off your back. The black workers have a similar low opinion of the Mexicans, or "Spanish" as they call them. They believe they are all "illegals", steal and "they can't even speak American".*

The pipe fitters mentioned in the first paragraph were some of the only whites in the factory; they were also in some of the more comfortable positions. They ate their lunch in a whites-only locker-room, where they complained about how the "n\_\_\_\_s do this and the n\_\_\_\_s do that", making fun of the "stupid shit they do", and so on.

The approach of the STO was to deal with racial divisions on the shop-floor by attacking the dividing lines themselves, and organising around demands that would tackle them head-on – like having more black workers recruited into skilled positions. This contrasted with the approach of much of the rest of the left, which centred around common demands that would unite all workers, like an across-the-board increase in pay. The process of common struggle would then, according to its proponents, bring workers of different races together, shattering racist illusions due to the necessity of uniting all workers if the struggle was to succeed.

STO took issue with this approach, because they believed it papered over material segregation that existed in the workplaces. The unity was shaky, because bosses could easily pick it apart, leaning on the white-skin privileges of the white workers. After the struggle was over, they simply reverted to their old patterns.

In the case of some of Ranney's workplaces, the existing union was corrupt and formed a sort of pact between the bosses and the mostly white workers it represented. In one instance, Ranney's organising against a mediocre union-negotiated contract led to him being assaulted by a union agent, who said things like "what I want to know is what the fuck you think you're doing stirring up all the n\_\_\_\_s around here". The wildcat strike proceeded anyway, but primarily with black and Latino workers.

In such instances, can we really afford to be cynical about the white privilege concept? Its validity can be disputed or accepted, but it must be taken seriously; it is a product of the sincere attempt to further the class struggle by breaking down internal class segregation.

Perhaps the reason "privilege theory" takes the odious form it does is because it largely comes out of the rare fields where one's status as a non-white can be leveraged for individual advancement – academia and activism.

I had personal experience with this at university. Being of mixed-ethnicity is a mundane fact in and of itself, but it was possible for me to leverage it in the right way to make certain points or write essays in a manner others couldn't. There's a certain kind of (usually white) academic that expects every opinion from a non-white (or non-male, non-straight, non-cisgender, etc.) student to begin with "as a \_\_\_ person...", and they will grade you accordingly.

These bizarre expectations take even stranger forms in certain activist circles, where the "as a \_\_\_ person..." prefaces become ritualistic. Being indigenous, say, allows you to take a more prominent role in activism surrounding indigenous issues, and you will accordingly become the focus of attention of left groups seeking to recruit, who know your identity makes you more valuable to them than others.

One can call this line of thinking overly cynical, but some real-life examples prove the point. In September of 2020, it was revealed that the professor Jessica A. Krug, a white woman from Kansas of Ashkenazi descent, had been posturing for nearly her entire professional life as "Jessica La Bombalera", an Afro-Latina Puerto Rican from Harlem. It was on this basis that she wrote her academic literature, and became a tenured professor at George Washington University.

Krug mentioned in her mea culpa Medium post that her decision to adopt the guise of a fair-skinned Afro-Latin woman was driven by depersonalisation, stemming from severe childhood trauma. Yet, this doesn't seem to be the whole picture; Krug's post seems to have been written under emotional distress and panic so severe that it becomes incoherent: *"I should absolutely be cancelled. No. I don't write in passive voice, ever, because I believe we must name power. So. You should absolutely cancel me, and I absolutely cancel myself"*. It, naturally, cannot give us the whole story.