

Dog Whistle Racism, Race-Class Fusion Politics, and Our Future

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SPEAKER

IAN HANEY LÓPEZ is the originator of the race-class approach to beating dog-whistle politics. He has published four books and two anthologies and is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at the University of California, Berkeley.

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

ADRIAN COSTA is a Senior majoring in both Political Studies and Theatre & Performance at Bard College.

MODERATOR

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ABOUT THE EVENT HOST



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Dog Whistle Racism and Race-Class Fusion Politics

IAN HANEY LÓPEZ discussed the history of dog whistle politics in conversation with Roger Berkowitz and Adrian Costa. His research—discussed in his most recent book, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*—demonstrates that dog whistle politics can be defeated.

FRAMEWORK AND HISTORY

- The old framework suggests that racism is a conflict between whites and people of color. It assumes that racism must be addressed to help people of color but not whites, and that addressing racism will take something away from whites.
- It is imperative to talk about what has happened since 1964—the last time a Democratic candidate for president won the majority of white votes. Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to extend the New Deal and fight the war on poverty.
- Johnson's Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, disguised a class war of the rich against working Americans in a set of appeals to race. He campaigned on racial themes. He spoke on issues of states' rights and freedom of association, which was code for the right of Southerners to oppress African Americans and refuse to do business with them. Goldwater carried five Southern states and appealed to Democrats deeply committed to the New Deal.
- Richard Nixon thought that Goldwater was onto something and implemented the Southern Strategy. Racial dog whistles and coded phrases that did not explicitly mention race helped Nixon win the 1968 presidential election. He doubled down on this approach for his 1972 reelection campaign.
- This was a tectonic shift in American politics. White working class and union members, who were solid members of the New Deal coalition, started voting Republican.

RACE AND CLASS POLITICS TODAY

- In 2016, the majority of white union members voted for Donald Trump. Politicians are appealing to them on the basis of coded racial themes. However, they are voting for politicians whose actual allegiance is to corporate America and union busting.

- Racial division is the number one weapon in the class war that the rich are winning. The number one threat to white families in unions is racism against people of color. Therefore, we must build cross-racial, class-conscious solidarity.

THE LEFT IS BADLY DIVIDED

- The class left is dominated by white-led organizations which emphasize economic populism. They do not see how racism is a major threat to their economic agenda.
- The race left is focused on racial justice. They are organizing to oppose mass incarceration, deportation, and the neglect of communities of color.
- The race left needs to pivot away from a stance of seeing racism as a white problem. Foremost, racism is a weapon of the rich against all of us. White Americans have the same interests as people of color in building cross-racial solidarity.
- Since 2017, national studies led by Haney López have shown that a message of coming together across racial lines to build power in the face of intentional division is the single most powerful political message available right now.

HANEY LÓPEZ RESPONDS TO QUESTIONS FROM BERKOWITZ AND COSTA

- If racial division is a strategy of the powerful, and not necessarily a weapon of hate, are you against the idea of systemic racism?
 - The different forms of racism are not competitors, rather they are complimentary. Racism as strategy is making racism in the United States so destructive today. Racism as a strategy can be promoted by people with no racial hatred whatsoever.

- Bill Clinton understood that besides not voting at all, African Americans had no alternative to the Democratic Party. He made modest gestures to treat African Americans with respect.
- Clinton's principal strategy for reclaiming some of the white working class that voted for Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush was to imitate the Republican anti-black racial appeals. He thought he had no choice but to bring back white voters by pandering to racist stereotypes. The New Democrats promoted ending welfare as a way of life and a crackdown on crime.
- We have to focus on racism as a strategy of the powerful to really understand where we are 50 years after the civil rights movement. Both the Democratic and Republican parties are engaging in scaring white voters as a strategy.
- **If dog whistling is the strategy, not all coded words are bad things. How do we identify dog whistling and fight it?**
 - People are complicated and typically hold contradictory ideas. About 60 percent of voters are simultaneously susceptible to racist fears and are also committed to racially egalitarian values.
 - Only 2–6 percent of whites self-identify with white supremacy. About 18–20 percent of whites are so steeped in the Fox News world that they have organized their lives around racial fear. Twenty to 22 percent of whites feel warmly towards people of color—the progressive base.
 - Dog whistling is an intentional strategy to trigger fears rooted in racism, but in a way that comes across as common sense. It is a massive intentional gaslighting of American voters.
 - Through critical analysis, we see that stories about illegal immigrants and Muslim terrorists are rooted in racist stereotypes. Additionally, these dog whistles are much more effective when people do not personally know an immigrant, or a Muslim, or an African American.
- Dog whistling is about triggering fears rooted in racism, but in a way that allows the audience to believe it is not racist.
- Some think there is nothing Trump can say that would impact his voters' support. That is not true. He cannot start spewing racial epithets. He needs to maintain a balance between appealing to fear as well as people's sense of racial egalitarianism.
- How do we fight dog whistling? We lose when we call Trump and his supporters racists. His supporters do not understand themselves to be racist. Consequently, the class left learned not to talk about race at all because they lose too many voters. The race left is fine with alienating these voters.
- Donald Trump is not racist in the sense of being a bigot. He is racist in the sense of being a wealthy and greedy plutocrat who is strategically dividing us.
- A race-class approach unites us, and it addresses the racism Trump is using in a way in which white people are not the problem.
- **Can you comment on the role of whiteness?**
 - There is a set of worldviews and presumptions connected to whiteness.
 - Whiteness is a set of beliefs that elevate those who are lighter over those who are darker. Notions of whiteness are also prevalent within communities of color.
 - Populations are marginalized when racism is seen as natural and obvious, and not a product of our society. As a product of our society, however, we have to take responsibility. Man can undo what man has done, as Martin Luther King, Jr. was trying to do.

Question and Answer Takeaways

ATTENDEES HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to ask Haney López questions following his presentation and discussion with Berkowitz and Costa.

Are there examples of dog whistling being used for good?

- Dog whistling is political speech that operates on two levels. Almost all political speech has multiple meanings. It's ambiguous, but what is the intent?
- There are all sorts of racial hatreds being stoked by Republicans. What makes dog whistling destructive is not that it is *in code*, but that it is *a code* that is trying to hide destructive social hatreds.

How does Bernie Sanders and his movement fit in with your strategies?

- Late in the 2020 Democratic primaries, Sanders moved toward a race-class approach. Economic populism is itself racial justice. But the class left does not want to be divided or distracted by talking about racial justice issues.
- Single issue groups do not work, whether they be the class left, the race left, or the environmental left. All of these issues are bound together and intertwined.

Does immigration complicate attempts to create a race-class alliance?

- If we talk about immigration and criminal justice reforms as primarily responses to address white racism and to help communities of color, we cannot build a big enough political coalition with enough power to make change.
- We have to pitch these reforms as responses to divide and conquer the class war. A better message for African Americans, Latinos, and whites alike is that these reforms are good for all communities.

Why is now a time to try for this coalition again? It has failed in the past.

- The idea of a multi-racial class-conscious movement is not new. But, what are the material and psychological benefits of organizing social, economic, and political worlds around the idea that white is better than non-white?

- Now is the best chance to convince a majority of Americans that organizing their lives in terms of cross-racial solidarity is the best way forward for their own families. Doing the opposite—organizing their lives, especially their political life, in terms of racial fear—is a recipe for continued rule by the rich, which right now is simultaneously threatening our democracy and accelerating climate collapse.

What would it take for white people to understand that racism against people of color is the biggest threat in their lives?

- Haney López's website, www.race-class-academy.com, has a video about the wages of whiteness and whether race-class solidarity is possible.
- Racism and capitalism rose together in colonialism. Today, the 1 percent promote a sense of division so that they can accumulate and concentrate power in themselves.
- In turn, this can lead to a more hopeful orientation towards race in the future. All of us have a pragmatic interest in fighting racism and building bridges. This is the best way to provide a survivable world for our children.
- Social solidarity must be purposefully built to respond to concentrated power. *Everyone* must commit to fostering a sense of social connection across every line of division being weaponized against us, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. This promises a society rooted in our highest ideals of society. That is a joyful vision of the future.