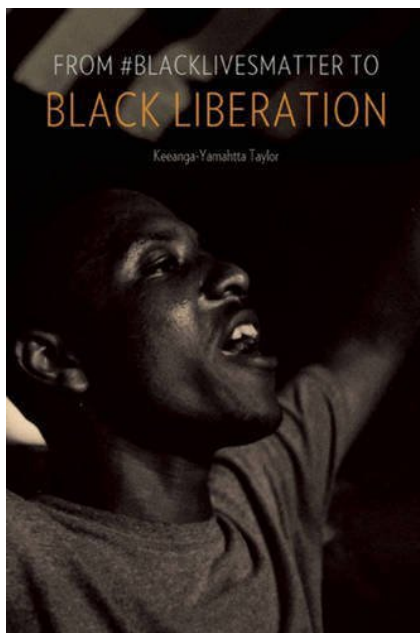


Review: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*

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Kieran Allen, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2016. \$ 17.95

Eight years ago millions of people all over the world watched as America elected its first African American president. The dominant theme of Barack Obama's campaign was Hope however vaguely defined. It was especially moving to see elderly African Americans cast their vote when only a few decades previously they had been viciously beaten up by racist police when they demonstrated for Civil Rights.

It can only be dispiriting then to observe the current US election that pits Donald Trump, a vulgar openly racist and sexist billionaire, against Hillary Clinton, an arch imperialist who would be at home in any European right wing party. This comes at a time when the US has the largest prison population in the world, 50 per cent of who are African American and when American police are killing more African Americans than were lynched during the brutal Jim Crow era. Eight years after the first Black president was elected African Americans are actually worse off and have seen their household wealth decline significantly as a result of the 2007 economic crash. The facts are simply staggering. Average household

wealth (as opposed to income) is only \$6446 for African Americans while it is \$91,405 for whites. Four million Black children live in poverty while 240,000 Black people lost their homes as a result of the mortgage crisis.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation by American socialist activist and academic Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is therefore a very timely and excellent analysis of how we got to this stage but also outlines a strategy on how the deep rooted and systemic nature of American racism can be challenged and ultimately overcome.

Taylor opens with a speech given by Martin Luther King only weeks before he died in which he declared that 'I'm not sad that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable' and insisted that 'America must change'. These words are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago.

Apologists for the status quo in the US insist that we're living in a post-racial supposedly colour-blind society and that any incidents of racism are merely aberrations from an essentially benign state of affairs. The image of the United States that we are expected to believe is of an inherently democratic entity since its beginnings with the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This argument is used to justify American imperialism and the notion of the US as the leader of the 'Free World' that generously grants these liberties to the rest of the world. Obama echoed this argument when he stated 'America our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. But as Americans we welcome our responsibility to lead. From Europe to Asia... we stand for freedom for justice for dignity. These are values that have guided our nation since its founding' (Taylor, P.25). More recently it has been used to reinforce the idea that if inequality still exists it's down to individual failings and a so-called 'culture of poverty'.

But as Taylor argues justice is not something that is a 'natural part of the life cycle

of the United States nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle' (Taylor, P.5). Like anywhere else the democratic rights that Americans enjoy, limited as they are, have had to be fought for and thousands have suffered and died in that struggle.

The Civil Rights marches and the more militant inner city uprisings of the 50s and 60s resulted in the defeat of Jim Crow in the South and a commitment to spend more on social welfare and Government programmes that improved the lives of both millions of African Americans and whites. Affirmative Action measures made some headway towards correcting racial inequality in employment and housing.

The Black movement was the catalyst for other movements especially the anti-war movement where African Americans constituted a disproportionate number of those conscripted. Millions of Americans were making the connection between being asked to fight for democracy abroad while being denied the same rights at home. This is one of the reasons why the movement of the 60s and the Black Lives Matter movement is so important then and today. It exposes the ideological self-image of the US as the land of the free and the American dream where supposedly anyone can make it.

The main beneficiary of the movement was an emerging Black middle-class. Affirmative Action removed previous barriers to promotion especially in the public sector. It also manifested itself in electoral politics so that by 1990 there were over 7000 elected officials.

As the movement receded in the 1970s electoral politics seemed a more attractive option as African Americans were in a position to run local governments in many of America's largest cities primarily through the mechanism of the Democratic Party. But there was a price to be paid for this compromise with the system. The turn came at a time in the early 1970s when the long Post War boom was ending and governments everywhere were adopting Neo-Liberal economics and cutting spending while employers laid off thousands of workers. These cutbacks affected African Americans dispropor-

tionately as spending on inner city projects to lift people out of poverty were severely cut.

Black politicians now found themselves having to manage reduced budgets and implement the very cutbacks that affected their voting base the most. Their only solution to create jobs was to rely on private sector investment and expensive Public Private Partnerships. The ruling class also realized that African American elected politicians could be quite effective in policing their communities. Carl Stokes, the first elected African American mayor of a major US city (Cleveland) was endorsed by President Johnson and received funding from the Ford Foundation.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 heralded an all-out onslaught on many of the gains of the 1960s. Welfare was slashed while Reagan used coded racist language with reference to mythical 'welfare queens' never mind that a majority of welfare claimants are whites. Black family income declined by 5% in Reagan's first year in office. Instead of challenging the neo-liberal consensus, African American politicians adapted to the right ward drifting mainstream. The most notorious example of this was former Martin Luther King adviser, Ralph David Abernathy, who endorsed Reagan in 1980. Reagan went further with his War on Drugs which was deliberately targeted at African American communities. Much stiffer sentences were imposed for use of crack cocaine than were for powder cocaine which tended to be mainly used by middle-class whites.

Bill Clinton went further with his Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. This act included increased use of the death penalty, life sentences for non-violent offences, 100,000 more police on the streets and the elimination of federal spending on prison education. The act also set aside 10 billion dollars for building prisons while at the same time Clinton cut 80 billion dollars in welfare spending.

Shamefully, the Congressional Black Caucus supported all these retrograde measures that specifically targeted African Americans. They even repeated some of

the racist stereotypes about a 'culture of poverty' and instead insisted that African American men needed to take personal responsibility. This tendency continues today and both Michelle and Barack Obama frequently lecture African Americans, specifically young Black males that they can't make excuses, thereby letting the system off the hook. Taylor quotes Obama 'We have to promote stronger role models than the gang-banger on the corner' (Taylor P.26).

Michelle Alexander quotes Obama in her book *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press, New York, 2010) in a speech he gave on Father's Day in a Chicagoan Church: 'Too many fathers are AWOL. They have abandoned their responsibilities. They're acting like boys instead of men.' (Alexander, P.178) This sanctimony comes at a time when African American men are overwhelmingly represented in the prison population. African Americans are urged to finish their education while the Democratic Mayor of Chicago and former chief of staff in Obama's first Administration, Rahm Emanuel, closed dozens of schools in the inner city where the student population is majority African American. These actions shouldn't surprise us and as Taylor argues, it is not just a matter of Black politicians exhibiting 'whiteness' and selling out, it is because they now have a stake in the system and are expressing their class loyalties.

Taylor concludes her book with an assessment of the Black Lives Matter movement and where it might lead. She argues quite forcefully that any movement for change in America has to grasp the systemic nature of American racism and put it at the forefront. Racism has always been central to the dynamic of American capitalism so therefore any struggle against either racism or economic injustice raises wider questions: 'The struggle for Black liberation then is not an abstract idea molded in isolation from the wider phenomenon of economic exploitation and inequality that pervades all of American society; it is intimately bound up with them'. (Taylor, P 194).

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged only a couple of years after the Occupy Wall Street protests that mobilised

hundreds of thousands of Americans on the streets against the greed of the 1%. The protests had given people the confidence to protest and also to make connections and look at the bigger picture. Small but increasing numbers of whites have begun to join in solidarity with African Americans on Black Lives Matter protests. For several days and nights the city of Ferguson Missouri was in revolt against the racist police murder of Michael Brown as protesters stood their ground and gained confidence that they could resist the violent racism of the police. One of the more heartening events of 2016, was when thousands of Chicagoans put manners on Donald Trump and stopped him speaking at his own election rally. It was noticeable how mixed the protesters were as they joyously chanted 'We stopped Trump'. More recently, large numbers of Americans from all backgrounds have protested in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, the African American footballer who refused to stand for the national anthem before a football match as a protest against racism.

Like in the sixties when the inner city uprisings connected with the anti-war movement the Black Lives Matter protests have the potential to gel into wider struggles against the system as more people begin to question racial and economic inequality in American society. Taylor cites the example of the successful 1970s mass postal workers strike where activists were able to bring the confidence they'd acquired from the inner city uprisings into the work place and unite Black and white workers on the picket line. Surveys since the Ferguson, Baltimore and other urban protests against police brutality have shown an increased number of white Americans acknowledge that African Americans are unfairly treated by the police.

The other point too is that while white workers harbour racist ideas they do not benefit from racism. While African Americans have been disproportionately affected by the economic downturn and are at the bottom in almost every indicator of wealth and income the real income of the American working class as a whole has remained stagnant since 1970. At the same time,

the wealth of the 1 per cent has grown exponentially as they have benefitted from neo-liberal economic policies under successive Republican and Democratic administrations. Wealth has not trickled down as Reagan famously and dishonestly promised. There are now over 540 billionaires in the US according to Forbes. The wealthiest 400 owned as much wealth as the bottom 60% in 2010 and the gap continues to widen. Ninety nine percent of all new wealth is now going to the top 1 per cent.

In the current vacuum in American politics a racist populist like Donald Trump is able to appeal with some success to white working class Americans (though this should not be exaggerated as studies show middle income Americans are more likely to vote for him than poor Americans) and manipulate people's anger to direct it against oppressed minorities. While this is by no means natural or inevitable it is also mistaken to suggest, as Bernie Sanders once did, that people will automatically unite in economic struggles and racism can be ignored until a later time. Any anti-capitalist movement will need principled socialist and anti-racist politics if it is to move forward.

Taylor reinforces this point when she argues that it's not just simply a matter of moral compunction but rather it is one of

necessity that obliges white workers to oppose racism if struggles against economic inequality are to be successful. A similar analogy can be drawn with Northern Ireland and the issue of sectarianism. Protestant and Catholic workers have united on several occasions on bread and butter issues most notably in 1932 during the Belfast Outdoor Relief Strike. However, socialist activists who played a key role in the strike avoided wider political issues such as the border and sectarianism, thereby allowing the Unionist employers to whip up anti Catholic bigotry and crush the fragile and temporary unity. Similar lessons apply to the US and activists cannot avoid the central issue of racism that continues to divide the American working class.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation is highly recommended for anyone who wants to further explore the workings of American racism and how it plays a central role in American society. Taylor expertly takes on several arguments as I've outlined above. But it's not just an academic study and indeed is highly readable and accessible unlike some books on the subject. It is also a valuable guide to strategy and action that anti-racist socialists can employ in the struggle for a better world where racism and inequality are just a distant memory.