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BIPOC? ;Basta!

Time to blow the final whistle on the oppression Olympics.

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It's everywhere! "BIPOC." You cannot seem to get away from it. We both remember when the preferred reference to those on the receiving end of racist and national oppression was "people of color." Then suddenly we became BIPOC—a change urged by many as a specific form of enlightenment.

BIPOC, of course, stands for "black, indigenous and people of color." The term's rise to favor can be traced back to several factors. One is the demographic transformation of the country following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which gave preference to relatives of US citizens and those with specific skills. As a result, larger numbers of migrants from the Global South have arrived on our shores and, in various ways, have transformed discussions regarding race and color. Two, the decline—until recently—of the Black Freedom Movement, beginning in the 1970s, led many leftists and progressives to downplay the continued significance of anti-Black racism, the oppression of African Americans, and the importance of the Black Freedom Movement in shaping US politics. Third is the political resurgence of the neo-fascist and racist social movement unleashed in full fury by Donald Trump. A principal aim of that movement is the full institutionalization of white minority rule—an American apartheid state—motivated by a deeply rooted fear of the "Great Replacement," that a "majority-minority" country will dismantle the systemic white privilege that pervades every political, economic, and social institution in the United States. This right-wing movement's campaigns against immigrants, Muslims, Black Lives Matter, critical race theory, etc.—ranging from the rhetorical attacks by Donald Trump to the murders in El Paso and Buffalo—have understandably motivated oppressed communities of color to consider how to designate commonality in their collective freedom struggle.

However, there is an additional factor—one that many people wish to deny or downplay. And it is an extremely sensitive issue. Under the rubric of diversity,

post-1965 Immigration Act, immigrants of color (and their descendants) started to be moved—by whites—into positions of leadership in various nonprofits, unions, and other progressive organizations, superseding nonimmigrants of color. These promotions were identified as representing “diversity,” even though those chosen had a very different—indeed qualitatively different—experience with white supremacist national oppression. Over time this process resulted in a slow but steady increase in resentment among nonimmigrant peoples of color.

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Originally “BIPOC” emerged as a means of asserting that the experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples could not and should not be erased or subordinated. We agree with the intention. Yet there remains a problem—or maybe a few problems. For starters, the label created a racial hierarchy akin to the old “Black people and other minorities.” It was basically saying that there was a ladder of oppression that must be recognized—and at the top of the ladder were the most oppressed peoples of color. Creating such hierarchies leads to an “oppression Olympics” in which various populations and movements compete. This is deeply problematic.

Second—and of equal if not greater importance—is the way that BIPOC *invisible-izes* entire populations, ignoring what should be understood as national oppression, a direct outgrowth of settler-colonialism.

The construction of US capitalism begins with the invasion of the Western Hemisphere and the wars against the Indigenous inhabitants. It is then supplemented and reshaped by the introduction of forced labor—especially and eventually the racial slavery for life for Africans captured and brought to the thirteen colonies. As a result, all populations brought to North America or who came voluntarily, were ultimately *racialized*, i.e., placed into specific racial categories (having nothing to do with science) but also enlisted—voluntarily or involuntarily—into the expansion of the growing settler-colonial state. Thus, what came to be understood as US capitalism cannot be understood apart from its history as a racialized settler-state, identified by theorists such as Lerone Bennett Jr, Theodore Allen, Rodolfo Acuna, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

While capitalism is always “racial,” there were particularities to US capitalism that were rooted in this interrelationship of indigenous genocide and dispossession, racial slavery and settler colonialism. This settler-state evolved into full-blown imperialism and colonialism as the USA captured and oppressed entire populations—and immediately *racialized* them. The conquest and annexation of northern Mexico is a major case in point, but would eventually include other populations such as Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and Micronesians. In each case, however, the racism that each population experienced—while sharing common features to that

experienced by other populations of “color”—was also unique.

What the Indigenous experienced was not the same as the Africans, which was different from the Mexicans, etc. Yet racist and national oppression displayed many common features and, in every case was a principal method of social control over all subaltern populations.

“BIPOC” ignores this history and relegates millions of people into the “us, too” column—not quite the “Other” but still an afterthought. Not only are these populations insulted; there is also a strategic myopia growing out of the failure to understand the nature of the US state. The US state was founded on racism *and* national oppression. This myopia also leads to the misapprehension that the remedies for the particular experiences of different racialized and nationally oppressed populations should all be the same.

An example may help. While the Indigenous and African Americans were both racialized by the white supremacist/settler colonial state, the demands of the Indigenous cannot be answered, even at the level of reforms, by equal rights and anti-discrimination. They are nations whose sovereignty was assaulted and undermined. Any satisfactory resolution to their experience with racism and settler colonialism must address treaties and sovereignty. African Americans have certainly fought struggles for equal rights, against discrimination and for various forms of national self-determination. But the African American struggle is not identical to that of the First Nations.

Another example: Chinese immigrants in the 19th century were often captured and brought to the US involuntarily, brutally oppressed and segregated by the white supremacist/settler colonial state. Yet their experience, and that of other Asian migrants, was not the same as the African American experience, including the impact of racial slavery on family structure, connection with countries of origin, etc.

“BIPOC” recognizes none of this history, simply throwing all these groups into a stew while allowing Black people (who are never defined) and the Indigenous to be floating on top.

Where does that leave us? There is no one satisfactory term for the victims of racist

and national oppression. At different points we were all called “colored peoples”; in the 1960s and 1970s we called ourselves “Third World people.” The first Rainbow Coalition, organized by Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, emphasized the strategic commonality of struggles of recipients of racist and national oppression (but also included poor whites as a necessary component of a strategic alliance!). Later, the Black-led electoral upsurge of the 1980s thrust forward the term “people of color,” again emphasizing a critical need for a strategic alliance. There is no ideal term. We can offer a new acronym, e.g., BICPAMIC (Black, Indigenous, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian, Micronesian, & immigrants of color). Or simply “the Global Majority,” which some have started to use. Or we can keep “people of color.” But what should guide our thinking is an effort that expresses the unity of the oppressed in our common freedom struggle—without sacrificing the specific character of each population.

It is time to blow the final whistle on the oppression Olympics. **N**

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