

# CLASSISM

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## Introduction

“You are kept apart so that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings,” the famous Georgia populist leader Tom Watson told a crowd of Black and white laborers in 1892. Elite whites established and perpetuated segregation between the poor of all races, he argued, to their own economic benefit. “You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both,” Watson rightfully crowed.<sup>2</sup>

Classism is the belief in or support for a policy or idea that denies value, dignity, liberties, and opportunities to people based on their perceived membership in a socioeconomic group. The creation, implementation, and perpetuation of bigoted laws, policies, practices, and narratives serves to consolidate power in the hands of the ruling group.

Just like all bigotry categories, classism intersects with almost every other marginalization in America, particularly racism. According to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, a class racist is “[o]ne who is racializing the classes, supporting policies of racial capitalism against those races-classes, and justifying them by racist ideas about those race-classes.”<sup>3</sup>

From the eras of brutal colonialism and slavery to the struggles of working-class people today, many of the problems plaguing America are a direct result of classist racism. The oligarchs of this country have and have always had fortunes to protect, and white supremacy has always assured their place at the apex of society.

Whether pitting laborers of different races against each other, stoking xenophobic and racial fears through a sensationalistic and profit-driven media, or politically scapegoating entire ethnic groups, America’s white elite have successfully modernized age-old strategies of using racism to prevent the formation of a broad coalition of people along class lines—and across racial lines.

Falling incomes, rising poverty, harsh labor laws, inadequate social safety nets, and mass incarceration have brought the country to an unethically unequal state. By allowing and even perpetuating the spread of civic ignorance, by propagating historical lies and political untruths, and by engendering an insidious form of racism, upper-class whites continue to maintain their position atop society – amassing ungodly multi-generational fortunes at the expense of the rest of the country. No matter how well-educated, hard-working, or inspired, a child born into poverty in America today has very little chance of ever escaping it.

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas E. Watson, “The Negro Question in the South,” *The Arena* 6 (Oct. 1892): 540-550.

<sup>3</sup>Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 151.

## Manifestations

Classist bigotry manifests itself in many ways—in all places, across all times, in all events. The problem at the root of all other American problems is such disparate inequality in the richest nation in the history of the world. Classism is one of the key tools by which the elite maintain their vast wealth, power, and control.

One particularly insidious way those in power perpetuate classist racist misogyny is by invoking racist stereotypes of poor Black and Latinx people, usually women, as the face of poverty. The stereotypes used to describe Black and Latinx women are the same ones used to denigrate all impoverished people—they have too many children, they are too licentious and sensual, they are alcoholics or drug abusers, they are lazy and just want a handout. These stereotypes are not inherently racial, but rather are rooted in classism. They describe widely held beliefs about why poor people are undeserving of help.

The racialization of these stereotypes in the public discourse is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers an alternative explanation for why BIPOC families are significantly poorer than their white counterparts, one that conveniently erases the role of structural racism, forced labor, and ongoing racial extraction. In so doing, it shifts the responsibility for repairing the legacy of racism and white supremacy in this country from its perpetrators and beneficiaries to its victims, who are presumed to bear personal responsibility for their economic condition. If the disproportionate poverty of Black people is a personal and moral failure, then they need tough love, not reparations. The result is a set of harsh and punitive policies aimed at poor people. On the other hand, the racialization of these stereotypes harms poor white people as well because many of the anti-poor policies that are fueled by racist animus are race-blind.

By making poor Black and Latinx women stand-ins for all poor people, the oligarchs are able to stoke classism by invoking racism, cementing the link between race and class in public discourse. They then use this classist racism to defund popular public services that could help lift millions out of poverty. In his epic tome, DuBois argues that once Black Americans gained their freedom, they found themselves at the bottom of the “free labor” society, and elite whites used racism to prevent class alignment between Black people and poor whites.<sup>4</sup>

A major paradigm for classist policies is ACCESS, or more accurately, LACK of ACCESS to various services, jobs, and opportunities: a lack of access to what are supposedly human rights. At home, poor people often lack access to food security, affordable housing, and basic healthcare. Their children lack access to fully funded, quality public education, whether it is daycare and early childhood education, K-12 education, or higher education. Poor women in particular are harmed by a lack of access to birth control, safe abortions, and even maternal healthcare while pregnant and giving birth.

In the workplace, poor people in America lack access to the right to organize to improve their working conditions, equal pay for work regardless of race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability, and safety from harassment. In their communities, they often lack access to public transportation, clean air and water, and even the right to vote freely and easily. In old age—if they are lucky enough to outlive all the detrimental health hazards of being poor—they lack access to a secure retirement. In reality, many

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<sup>4</sup>W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (reprint, 1935; New York: Scribner, 1995).

poor people, especially poor Black people, have significantly lower life expectancies than the national mean. These are massive holes in our public services infrastructure that remain intentionally unfilled. The system is fundamentally broken and nothing short of a complete and total overhaul of every aspect of how the government deals with poverty will come close to fixing it.

Classist racism is the foundation for getting poor white people to rationalize withholding these services from themselves, to the benefit of the oligarchs who would otherwise have to pay greater taxes to fund social welfare programs. Studies show that conservative white people approve of increasing taxes to fund a social safety net when they think it is primarily white people who will benefit, but support drops precipitously if they believe the benefit will accrue heavily to people of color.<sup>5</sup> It is not a coincidence that the conservative war on Big Government and white flight started after the Civil Rights Movement's hard-fought wins to recognize that Black people had the right to equal access to services like public education, public housing, and public hospitals.<sup>6</sup>

## Financialization

Corporations, particularly big banks and other financial institutions, have played a substantial role in driving racial and economic inequality. From racist redlining that prevented Black families from building wealth through homeownership to the predatory, discriminatory lending that resulted in the 2008 foreclosure crisis, banks and mortgage lenders been a driving force behind the racial wealth gap.

- *Race for Profit*, by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: This book shows how exploitative real estate practices in the late 1960s and 1970s continued to hurt Black Americans long after housing discrimination was banned by the federal government. Racist exclusion was thus never “eradicated,” argues Taylor, “but rather transmuted into a new phenomenon of predatory inclusion.”<sup>7</sup>
- *The Color of Money*, by Mehrsa Baradaran: At the time of freedom from slavery, Black Americans owned less than one percent of the US’s wealth, and as of 2019, that percentage has only barely changed (she cites less than 2 percent, half of William Darity’s findings of 4 percent). In addition to the well-documented ways Africans Americans have been plundered of their wealth and income by whites (unfree labor, carceral state, racial massacres, racist laws), Baradaran shows how the history of Black banking has added to the racial wealth gap as well.<sup>8</sup>

Just as racist redlining by banks prevented Black families from building intergenerational wealth by systematically denying them access to homeownership, racist reverse redlining during the subprime housing boom, in which lenders targeted Black and Latinx families with predatory mortgage loans that were designed to fail, caused families of color to lose the little wealth that eventually had been able to build. A 2015 study by the Social Science Research Council found that banks and mortgage lenders

<sup>5</sup>Rachel Wetts and Rob Willer, “Privilege on the Precipice: Perceived Racial Status Threats Lead White Americans to Oppose Welfare Programs,” *Social Forces* 97, no. 2 (Dec. 2018): 793-822, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy046>.

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan M. Metz, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

<sup>7</sup>Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banking and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 69-100.

targeted Black borrowers with higher-priced subprime loans that were more likely to result in default, even when they qualified for cheaper conventional mortgages.<sup>9</sup>

While banks disproportionately foreclosed on Black and Latinx families in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash as a result of these racist lending practices, it is important to note that nearly 70% of families who had their homes taken away were actually white. This is because even though Black and Latinx families were more heavily targeted by predatory subprime mortgages than white families, there are still a lot more poor, white people in the country than there are poor people of color. By racializing the foreclosure crisis as an issue of greedy and irresponsible Black and Latinx borrowers looking to live outside their means, conservatives were able to prevent broad public support for meaningful measures loan modifications with principal reduction that could have kept millions of people in their homes, most of whom would have been poor white families.

### **Erasure/Invisibility/Dispossession Criminalization: Access to Citizenship**

Michelle Alexander calls our criminal justice system “the New Jim Crow.”<sup>10</sup> The criminalization of poverty, with racially disparate enforcement and sentencing, plays a critical role in maintaining this system.

For classism, the entire criminal justice system maintains this bigotry at every level, making poor Black people more likely to be arrested and spend more time locked up after arrest, trapping them in a cycle of poverty after they are released.

First of all, we have a spate of laws that criminalize the poor for living their lives, like anti-vagrancy laws and anti-loitering laws that target people who are unhoused. Due to the racist nature of policing, Black men in particular are more likely to be arrested as a result of these laws. Once they are arrested, there are systems like cash bail, super-high costs for lawyers, extremely overburdened court-appointed lawyers, and the imposition of fines and fees as punishment that make poor people more likely to be locked up for extended periods of time even before they have been convicted of any crime.

Furthermore, the threat of harsh sentencing laws and facing racist judges and juries force many poor Black people to take plea deals or enter into diversion programs with predatory fees and excessive penalties even if they are innocent. Once poor Black people are released from jail, they face myriad obstacles that trap them in a cycle of poverty and can land them back in jail—for example, criminal background checks, credit score requirements, and drug tests for employment or housing. If they end up with a felony conviction on their record, they are often stripped of their right to vote in the future as well.

<sup>9</sup>Sarah Burd-Sharps and Rebecca Rasch, “Impact of the U.S. Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations,” *Social Science Research Council* (June 2015): 9,

[https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field\\_document/discrimlend\\_final.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/discrimlend_final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup>Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2011).

In the book that began the new abolitionist literature, Dr. Angela Y. Davis argues that the modern prison is a brutal continuation of unfree labor, where millions of men and women are exploitatively forced to work for private corporations and the government.<sup>11</sup> She explicitly calls for decarceration.

Scholars such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore have directly linked the labor market to the growth of mass incarceration, crediting the “surpluses of finance capital, labor, land, and state capacity” for its expansion.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the prison industrial complex then weakens worker powers and protections, silences civil rights leaders, and stands as a constant, omnipresent warning to anyone who dares fight for better working conditions—for better lives.<sup>13</sup>

## Mitigation and Liberation

To be able to address these problems going forward, we must truthfully explain why people have learned racist, classist, bigoted history for so many generations. In telling the historical truth, many of the stigmas surrounding these issues can start to be addressed, and the public will be able to better understand how certain inequities came to be: that they were made by policies, laws, and daily decisions by those in power, to preserve their power.

With the United States remaining the only wealthy nation in the world with such abysmal rates of poverty and inequality, with no real social safety net for citizens in need, and no promise of a minimum standard of living, a Third Reconstruction is perhaps our most promising hope.

Reconstruction is defined by several factors, but put simply: Reconstruction happens when the federal government intervenes in the states—whether through Constitutional amendments or federal legislation—to expand civil rights for all.

The first Reconstruction is the actual Reconstruction—the one that immediately followed the emancipation of over 3.5 million enslaved Black laborers. Coming on the heels of the bloody Civil War, it unfortunately fell far short of changing much of America’s racist economic structure. It did, however, revolutionize (at least theoretically) the political landscape of America. The “Reconstruction Amendments,” that is, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, ended chattel slavery, extended citizenship to all men born on American soil, and endowed them with suffrage rights. Although these rights would soon be tempered by violent and sinister forces, their grave importance is still demonstrable.

The Poor People’s Campaign and many historians call the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s the Second Reconstruction. The Second Reconstruction accomplished much politically, including, at the federal level, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

<sup>11</sup>Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup>Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crises, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 88.

<sup>13</sup>Dorothy E. Roberts, “Foreword: Abolition Constitutionalism,” *Harv. L. Rev.* 133, no. 1, (Nov. 8, 2019): 16-17, notes 69-72; Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Ruth Wilson Gilmore and James Kilgore, “Some Reflections on Prison Labor,” *Hard Crackers*, June 24, 2019, <https://hardcrackers.com/reflections-prison-labor/>.

We have surely witnessed the beginnings of our Third Reconstruction over the past few years, and there are several reasons for that. In addition to the vast racial wealth gap caused by white supremacy during the horrors of slavery, Jim Crow, and beyond, we must also keep in mind that the recession of 2007-2008 hit Americans hard—and it hit the poorest, of course, the hardest.

While white people have now recovered most of the wealth they lost in the crash, due to the ravages of history and racism, people of color have not fared as well. Half of all wealth owned by Black Americans was lost in the 2007-2008 market crash, and that number still hasn't caught back up to pre-recession levels. But perhaps even more frightening is the current inevitability of yet another crash soon – if politicians don't make major changes to the economy in the next few years.

## Key Recommendations

- **Reparations for Black and Indigenous people:** The United States was built on the backs of enslaved Black people and the stolen land of Indigenous people. Enslavement and genocide are at the heart of our current socioeconomic structure. In order to address economic inequality going forward, we must repair this past harm. We must pay reparations to Black and Indigenous people.
- **Massive expansion of the social safety net:** We need to have the free, universal provision of high-quality public services like education at every level—from early childhood to post-graduate housing, healthcare, childcare, eldercare, transit, utilities, and broadband internet access. These are all basic human needs that are critical to functioning in modern society. They should be available to everyone regardless of economic status.
- **Universal basic income (UBI):** In addition to a strong, comprehensive, and fully funded social safety net, every person also should be entitled to a universal basic income. This must be in addition to a strong social safety net, not in place of it, as some have suggested. Karl Widerquist, a Georgetown professor of political philosophy, estimated that at \$6,000 per child and \$12,000 per adult, the net cost of UBI would be \$539 billion per year.<sup>14</sup> This number may sound astronomical, but to put it into perspective, Widerquist writes, a UBI would cost “less than 25 percent of the cost of current US entitlement spending, less than 15 percent of overall federal spending, and about 2.95 percent of Gross Domestic Product.”<sup>15</sup> It would immediately lift more than 43 million people out of poverty, including 14.5 million children.<sup>16</sup> The cost of not eliminating poverty? It's over \$3 trillion a year.<sup>17</sup>
- **Federal jobs guarantee (FJG):** UBI would work best if paired with a federal jobs guarantee. The vast majority of Americans want to work; they derive a sense of pride and fulfillment and identity from their jobs. A FJG undoubtedly would transform the United States. Taking the best aspects of the New Deal (and learning lessons from the era about what not to do), a FJG would have the power to completely rebuild our nation's infrastructure, modernizing the country and

<sup>14</sup>Karl Widerquist, “The Cost of Basic Income: Back-of-the-Envelope Calculations,” *Basic Income Studies* 12, no. 2, (2017): 2, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bu.edu/10.1515/bis-2017-0016>.

<sup>15</sup>Widerquist, “Cost of Basic Income,” 2.

<sup>16</sup>Widerquist, “Cost of Basic Income,” 2.

<sup>17</sup>Widerquist, “Cost of Basic Income,” 2.

making it accessible to most non-car owners. It would radicalize our choices in aging and end-of-life care, as more Americans could stay at home with loved ones and have medical professionals and caretakers come to them. Additionally, we might finally have enough qualified professionals to engage in mental health care, helping to alleviate some of the nation's rampant drug and alcohol abuse. A FJG would unquestionably help narrow the achievement gap in schools, as high-quality universal childcare could be offered from infancy. For many women with children, this fact alone would allow them to continue their own careers without worrying about earning less than what their childcare costs. Further, with at least one-third of workers in the private sector not getting paid sick leave, and a full quarter of Americans never enjoying paid vacation or holiday time, a federal jobs guarantee would offer ample paid time off, including family leave and short-term disability, to every worker. Notably, FJG is also a key way to narrow the gender pay gap by paying women for “women’s work”—taking care of the elderly, disabled, and young.

- **Right to retire with dignity:** We need to dramatically expand Social Security and Medicare to allow all seniors to retire with dignity. As part of this, we also need to address the fact that many Black people never live to 65 so never benefit from these programs. That could mean lowering age thresholds for retirement programs through a reparative framework. Social Security should be guaranteed to all regardless of immigration status or how much or how long they were in the workforce and it should pay all recipients the equivalent of a living wage.
- **Deeply progressive taxation:** One may naturally wonder who we would pay for all of this. We could do that through deeply progressive taxes on megacorporations, millionaires, and billionaires at every level of government. We need to tax billionaires out of existence. We can crack down on corporations that ship profits to offshore tax havens by taxing their untaxed or undertaxed income overseas.<sup>18</sup> Looking at the role the finance and tech sectors in particular have played in driving economic inequality and undermining democracy in the United States and abroad, we need to tax those two sectors in particular through a financial transactions tax and digital ad tax.
- **Right to organize and collectively bargain:** We need to reform labor laws to guarantee all workers the right to organize a union and collectively bargain to improve their working conditions.
- **Abolition of police and prisons:** As Alyx Goodwin from the Action Center on Race and the Economy says, “Police are the muscle of racialized capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> Their job is to maintain the socioeconomic status quo, the unequal and extractive system we live in. They help keep those in power at the top, and communities of color and poor people terrorized and terrified. There is no way to reform the policing and mass incarceration system in the United States because its primary purpose is to uphold the system that creates the racial and economic inequality that plagues our society. We need to defund and abolish the police, shut down our prisons, and decarcerate the two million people who are currently living in cages.

<sup>18</sup>Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, “How to Tax Our Way Back to Justice,” *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/opinion/sunday/wealth-income-tax-rate.html>; see also Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (New York: Haymarket, 2021).

<sup>19</sup>Tracey Corder and Solana Rice, “Living in Abundance,” *The Forge*, May 20, 2021, <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/living-abundance>.

- **Comprehensive immigration reform:** We need to legalize all immigrants in the United States, guarantee them full worker protections and access to the social safety net, and give them a pathway to citizenship. We need to decarcerate everyone currently caged in immigrant detention centers.
- **Democratic reform:** It is fair to ask how we can accomplish such a bold, progressive agenda when Democrats cannot even pass broadly popular legislation even when they have unified control over the federal government. As long as our elected officials are more beholden to corporate interests than they are to their constituents, we cannot address racial or economic inequality. As long as they believe they can effectively pick their constituents through gerrymandering their districts or by disenfranchising voters of color, we will not see change. We need to ban all money from politics and move to publicly financed elections. We need to pass voting rights legislation, get rid of the Electoral College, abolish the Senate and replace it with a parliamentary system, and make elections accessible to everyone. This means holding elections for weeks on multiple days and hours to make them accessible for all workers and moving elections for all politicians, including local ones, to once every four years to make every election really matter.

These measures are only a start. They are necessary but not sufficient to rooting out classist bigotry in the United States and creating a society in which poor people of all races can thrive and have the opportunity to lead joyful and meaningful lives with dignity.