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Racism and the Rise of the Right

"The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people."

Mao Tse-tung August 8, 1963

Introduction

It has been a little over 25 years since Henry Luce proclaimed the "American Century." Yet today we are confronted by the reality of the decline of U.S. capitalist hegemony within the capitalist world-system. The fall from hegemony has meant the rapid demise of the "mature global liberalism" that has been the framework for bourgeois rule in the postwar United States. Into its place has moved a mean-spirited conservatism—vigorous, jingoistic and racist to the core.

This is no mere change from Democrats to Republicans; we have arrived at the end of a historical period, the period of New Deal liberalism. Coleman Young, black mayor of Detroit, bitterly observed: "Reagan is not just cutting the budget more drastically than ever before...he's making radical changes to reconstruct the system. It's a scorched earth policy to leave no program standing. And he's salting the earth so that nothing can grow again."1

It should not surprise us that the Right is coming to the fore at a time of world capitalist crisis, especially when the world crisis is accompanied by the decline of U.S. hegemony in the world capitalist system. The danger, however, is that the crude and virulent racism and sexism of the right wing may distract us from focusing on its major political-economic function, which is the reassertion of bourgeois hegemony over the working class in times of crisis. Thus, as a colleague recently remarked, the locus of racism is not under the white hood, it is in the pin-striped suit.²

Many socialists are disturbed because most elements of the right wing do not express their racism in the language of racial hatred. But this is not entirely inconsistent, for they speak very directly of their racist ideology. For example, neoconservative criminologist James Q. Wilson in his book, Thinking About Crime, denies being a racist in virtually equating "predatory street crime" with blacks. For him, "social class... is a much better predictor of behavior than race... much of what passes for 'racial prejudice' today may be little more than class prejudice." To Wilson, race is itself "a rough indicator of class, the urban lower class being disproportionately black..." (emphasis added).3

The rise of the Right and the virulent racism which it practices make it absolutely essential that we grapple anew with the politics of racism. This paper will examine the questions before us by looking at the plight of black people, the largest racial minority in the United States.

Recent History of the Black Movement

In the 1960's, a proud and militant black movement marched to center stage in American life. This movement was an inspiration for millions of exploited and oppressed people, not only in the United States, but around the world. Revolutionaries and progressive people everywhere took heart. At last the long silence wrought by years of McCarthyite repression was broken. At long last, serious oppositional currents were once again stirring in the heartland of world capitalism.

But by the summer of 1979, the Ku Klux Klan, sensing the signs of the times, was retracing Martin Luther King's historic route from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama-symbolically turning back the clock on the gains of the black movement. Within the next two years, Reagan and the conservative Congress had launched an all-out attack on school desegregation, affirmative action, the Voting Rights Act, the federal civil rights apparatus and public education. These direct attacks on black people have been augmented by deep cuts in public programs that especially benefit black people. Publicly assisted housing is scheduled to be cut by \$54 billion over the next four years; 350,000 jobs will be lost through cuts in the CETA program; 400,000 households will be removed from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC); one out of four black families now eligible for food stamps will be declared ineligible; and payments for extended unemployment are being cut by 15.4%.

Indeed the clock is being turned back, and the movement that originally forced these concessions from the system hit rock bottom long ago. As early as 1972, black poet Jo-Ann Kelly was writing nostalgically of the black movement: "Everybody talkin' bout what happened to the Revolution and the 'mean-bad-militant-children of the Sixties' (the sistas and the brothers).... Did I dream them times?... or maybe... we in retrograde."4

In the 1970's, the ruling class and its media propagated the myth of black progress. They presented slick, sleek images of the black middle class as the typical black family, while the living conditions of the black working class and underclass deteriorated. In the 1980's, the ruling class no longer feels compelled to propagate the myth of black progress. There is no longer any pretense that social and racial equality are desired goals. Quite the contrary, the white backlash has become official government policy.

This presents a challenge of no small proportions to the U.S. working class, to racial and national minority people, and to the organizations and forces that purport to represent them. It is a challenge before which the Left has often floundered. Many believe that a correct understanding of the politics of racism is the basis for being able to construct a social force capable of challenging the power of capital here in the heartland of world capitalism.

But how do we take up the challenge? How do we analyze the current conjuncture? What strategies will enable us to counter the ruling class and right-wing offensive? How do we deal with the reality of competition and inequality within the working class in an age of decline? How indeed do we take the offensive?

Many strategies are being put forward. The social democratic Left is moving into the Democratic Party to take advantage of the political defeat of the traditional liberals. Others are organizing to fight the right and to build anti-racist coalitions. Some are calling for a united front against war and racism. Many black leftists are working within national black organizations such as the National Black United Front, the National Black Independent Political Party and the Nation-

al Black Workers Organizing Committee.

There is also renewed theoretical and political line debate associated with strategies for black liberation. Within the Marxist-Leninist Left, many organizations have moved to embrace variants of the "Black Nation" thesis. Other organizations of the Marxist-Leninist Left, especially those within the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" trend, are now challenging not only the present existence of a "Black Nation," but also the very formulation of the "Black Nation" thesis itself. Within the anti-imperialist Left and the black Left, variants of the "dispersed nation" thesis seem to be developing.

I will not attempt to enter into these debates here. My implicit disagreements with some of these positions will become apparent in what follows. I think that it is of the utmost importance to understand our past and our current reality in order to change it, not to verify eternal truths, nor to construct grand models from the sanctity of our armchairs.

It seems to me that the current situation presents us with several tasks: 1) how do we understand the historical relationship between race and class as it has developed within the capitalist world-economy; 2) how do we understand the current conjuncture; 3) how do we build a movement to fight back against the ruling class and right-wing attack, while at the same time seizing the offensive to embark on the long march toward working class socialism.

The Real Significance of Racism in the Capitalist World-Economy

Racism developed as the ideology of a rising and expansionist European capitalism which incorporated non-European areas of the world as peripheral areas and external arenas of an emergent capitalist world-economy. The capitalist world-economy has always consisted of: 1) core areas which are the initiators of the capital accumulation process and toward which the surplus flows; and 2) peripheral areas which are mainly the providers of cheap labor, raw materials and agricultural products. This was as true in the sixteenth century as it is today. This is reflected in the popular conception that the world is divided into a handful of rich industrialized nations and a great many poor, "underdeveloped" nations, commonly called the "Third World."

An external arena, on the other hand, is an area outside the world-economy—although the external arena is practically negligible today, the entire globe having been subordinated to the capitalist mode of production. Africa, for example, was a part of the external arena of the capitalist world-economy through the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Africa was incorporated into the capitalist world-economy as a peripheral area because the then-hegemonic world power, area because the then-hegemonic world power, and wanted to deny slave producers to its European competitors.⁵

It is commonly argued that racism developed as an ideological justification for slavery, that slavery was an economic system in and of itself, separate from and incompatible with capitalism. Consequently, some observers posit that racism is a relic from slavery and not in any way endemic to capitalism. I shall argue that, to the contrary, racism is not merely endemic to capitalism, but is constitutive of it.6

Contrary to what is commonly held, slavery was not incompatible with capitalism; indeed, the slave South was itself a peripheral area of the early capitalist world-economy wherein the cheap labor of the African slaves was utilized to produce cotton for the world market. The chief beneficiaries of the system were not the slaveholders, but the British textile manufacturers. Slavery did not disappear because it was incompatible with capitalism, but because it was incompatible with a capitalist world-economy that no longer had Africa as an external arena to bear the bulk of the cost of slave-breeding.

I do not think that the exploitation of free waged labor is the defining characteristic of capitalism. Marlene Dixon and Susanne Jonas have explained this position:

We take as the defining characteristic of capitalism neither the exploitation of free waged labor by capital (though such exploitation is the highest form of capitalist relations of production) nor the predominance of exchange on a market. Rather, we understand capitalism as production solely for capital accumulation, based on the appropriation of surplus value from the direct producers, where the greater part of the surplus value is reinvested; the market under capitalism is

organized so as to maximize capital accumulation. Capitalism is the only mode of production in which capital accumulation is maximized for its own sake (irrespective of human use value), which creates a pressure for constant expansion. Capitalism is a world-system whose dynamic is: expand or die.8

Even today, capitalism as a world-system contains within its economic arenas some firms based largely on contractual wage labor and some (even most) firms based on one or another variant of coerced or semi-coerced semi-wage labor. The U.S. Civil War, the conflict between the slave owners and the New England mill owners, was not an ideological conflict over the justness of the slave system, nor was it a conflict between two antagonistic economic systems. The issue in the Civil War was which sector of the ruling class would be able to utilize a state apparatus to promote and defend its interests.9

But my argument is not simply that racism is a product of capitalism, but rather that racism is constitutive of it. Let us try to approach this in another way. It is well known that Karl Marx long ago asserted that the fundamental conflict of the capitalist mode of production is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He further argued that over time the accumulation of capital leads to the concentration of immense wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people at one pole, and the production of misery and poverty for ever larger numbers of the working class at the other pole.

The capitalist world is not only divided into classes, although that is the fundamental division. It is also divided into states, locations of certain production processes, and peoples. The kind of polarization that exists between classes exists within these other groupings (although I would stress, but not elaborate here, that there are intermediate groups in each case, who ameliorate the political explosiveness of polarization). At any rate, it seems clear that over time the unequal distribution of reward as measured in materia goods, life chances, quality of life, and total work effort required for subsistence has increased

between those at the top and those at the bottom. It This polarization is reflected in the spatial division of the world into core areas and peripheral areas; this division in turn reflects the spatial

hierarchy of production processes and the concentration of capital in the world-economy. The polarization is also reflected within the inter-state system wherein strong core states (for example, the U.S., Germany, Japan) dominate weaker peripheral states (for example, El Salvador, Panama, Ghana). Finally, this polarization is reflected in the rank ordering of peoples in a hierarchy from "superior" to "inferior." The basic thread that runs through all of these systems of polarization is one of white vs. nonwhite (which are not so much colors as they are social locations). But, clearly, these operations are not only crucial to the functioning of the capitalist system, they are what allows it to work. That is why I agree with Immanuel Wallerstein's argument that racism is not merely endemic to capitalism, it is constitutive of it.11

In The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa, South African scholar Bernard Magubane sums up this position very well:

To study the development of capitalism is thus the best way to study race inequality, for to do so places socioeconomic relationships at the heart of the problem, and shows how underdevelopment and racial inequalities developed together. The economic, political, and ideological motives that have structured capitalist relations of production in the modern world cannot be separated. Capitalism required an expansionist policy of conquest and exploitation which set off a cumulative process that produced its own ideology: this ideology in turn became a force capable of orienting choices and determining decisions. The ideology of racism, called into life and fed by the expansionist and exploitative socioeconomic relations of capitalist imperialism, became a permanent stimulus for the ordering of unequal and exploitative relations of production along "racial" lines, and further demanded justification of these relations. The seemingly autonomous existence of racism today does not lessen the fact that it was initiated by the needs of capitalist development or that these needs remain the dominant factor in racist societies. 12

So can I conclude, as have some analysts,

that we are back to W.E.B. DuBois' dictum at the turn of the century, in *The Souls of Black Folks*, that the problem of the twentieth century is "the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."? Perhaps, but only if it is very clearly understood that the color line to which DuBois alluded was the dimensions of the world class struggle and not strictly skin color.¹³

So what is racism? DuBois' famous statement is given scientific rigor by Immanuel Wallerstein. In a review of Magubane's book, he explains that racism is the ideological legitimation of global unequal exchange, the structural antinomy of core and periphery, and is thus integral to the functioning of capitalism as a world-system. Consequently, the struggle for socialism must have the struggle against racism and national inequality as an inescapable centerpiece. 14

This is not a controversial conclusion. Most U.S. socialists would agree on the importance of the struggle against racism, at least in theory. But what of the corollary implied by the above analysis? If indeed racism is organic to capitalism and not simply a dispensable superstructural element, does this not also mean that the struggle against racism is in fact part and parcel of the struggle for socialism? Does this not mean that there can be no such thing as an anti-racist movement that simply fights for equality under capitalism? How, indeed, can we fight for equality under capitalism if in fact wage slavery is based on competition within the working class? So what does it mean, within the parameters of capitalism, to tell white workers to give up their "white skin privileges" as a prerequisite for building a multinational workers' movement? It seems to me that the failure to appreciate the struggle for racial equality as a struggle for socialism is the basis of the divisiveness of the strategies criticized above. I believe that working people from different races and nationalities can only build unity through fighting together.

Nationalism and Class Struggle

Another conclusion that flows from this analysis is a new appreciation of the relationship between nationalism and the class struggle. The inequality between the "inferior" people and the "superior" people, translated into class position,

means that there is a very large and significant correspondence between the "inferior" people and the lower and deeper working class. What this means is that under certain conditions (perhaps most), the class consciousness of the "inferior" people will be expressed in the form of nationalist consciousness. But since there is not a perfect correspondence between lower ethnic status and class, some confusion will be created. In particular, the upper strata of the "inferior" people will attempt to orient the organizational expressions of this nationalist consciousness to serve their own class interests. At the same time, the focus on race or nationality may cause confusion within the ranks of the lower strata and cause them to lose sight of the class base of their exploitation, and thus their common cause with other exploited and oppressed people. So although the demands of the lower strata will inevitably express proletarian class interests, there is still the danger of competition with other oppressed people.

It is important to stress that I am talking about two types of nationalism. The nationalism of the black petty bourgeoisie is strategic. It is a movement against being restricted from the class privileges of the petty bourgeoisie, and for bolstering their position vis-à-vis mainly the white petty bourgeoisie, but also that of other races and

nationalities.

The black petty bourgeoisie, like all petty bourgeoisies, is a subaltern stratum of the ruling class. Their interests are tied to the interests of capital, and thus as members of this class they are agents of capital in the black movement. The more radical members of the black petty bourgeoisie will express their interests in anti-capitalist rhetoric. This fraction of the black petty bourgeoisie organizes as a class for-itself. It is opposed to big capital and seeks to take its place. Radical petty bourgeois even brandish the label of socialism, but it is petty bourgeois socialism and not proletarian socialism of which they speak. In both cases, the black petty bourgeoisie as a class seeks to harness the energy of the black working class to realize their own ambitions.

This kind of nationalism is called petty bourgeois nationalism. It is the ideology of the ambitious, self-seeking black petty bourgeoisie. It is opportunist and unprincipled. But this is not the whole picture. There is more to this stratum, as we will see when we talk more about

the current conjuncture.

In contrast to the nationalism of the petty bourgeoisie, the nationalism of the black working class is a movement against exploitation and oppression. It is a tactical nationalism that reflects the reality of living in a racist society where the working class is segmented along racial lines. It is not opposed to class unity in principle, but has real questions about the reliability of white workers in the struggle. The point here is that members of this section of the working class, even when they express their class interests in nationalist clothing, are not an "ally" to the working class, as some assert, but constitute a central and decisive part of our movement.

We cannot afford to repeat the errors of the past. In the sixties, when a vigorous and militant black nationalism gripped the urban black masses across the country, the major Marxist organizations stood passively on the sidelines, condemning nationalism and mechanically insisting on the priority of a class analysis. As this movement grew, they shunned the traditional workers' parties and organized themselves under the banner of revolutionary nationalism. As sections of this movement moved toward the inevitable embrace with Marxism, they became embroiled in the dogmatism and sectarianism of the new communist movement and, for the most part, lost their base.

The Crisis of World Capitalism and the Decline of U.S. Imperialism

The dominant feature of our time is the crisis of world capitalism and the decline of the U.S. ruling class from undisputed dominance within the capitalist world-system. To paraphrase Malcolm X, U.S. capitalism used to be like an eagle. It soared high above the stratosphere, its dominance unquestioned and unchallenged. It provided the "good life" in varying degrees to strategic sections of the domestic population. For the capitalist class, for the new petty bourgeoisie of professionals, managers and technocrats, and for the upper working class of skilled white men, the post-World War II era in the United States was undoubtedly a time of seemingly unlimited prosperity. This was the reason for the tremendous exuberance and confidence of the American ruling class during the 1950's. This is why a little over 25 years ago Henry Luce proclaimed the "American Century."

But this prosperity never included all Americans, although New Deal liberalism promulgated the myth that eventually everyone would prosper under its policies. But the premises of New Deal liberalism are being proved false by the history that we are all living through. The liberals assumed that the capitalist system could work for everyone, and that it was just a matter of time before Keynesian income transfer policies totally eliminated the poverty that has been endemic to capitalism throughout its 500-year history.

Now the liberal program is in disarray, and most of the liberals are practically indistinguishable from the Reaganites. We now know that the liberal program was a consequence and not the cause of the postwar prosperity. The real cause of the prosperity was the entry of the world-economy into a long-term growth cycle after the restructuring of the economy which took place during the long stagnation of 1914 to 1948 (including two World Wars). The liberals mistook the normal operation of the capitalist system in an expansion phase as being due to their own policies. Now we are in another long stagnation, and New Deal liberalism is dead.

What the Crisis Means for the Class Alliances of The Postwar Period

In order to function as the hegemonic world power, it was necessary for the U.S. ruling class to obtain relative social peace in its home base. In order to do this, it was necessary for the ruling class to suppress the U.S. Left (thus McCarthyism) and win the allegiance of organized labor. The organized labor movement was offered a share of the imperial pie by means of increased real wages. This did not cut into the profits of the ruling class but was shouldered by foreign clients and the nonorganized section of the working class, including blacks. 17

In the sixties, a new middle class of managers, professionals and technocrats had to be built up within the excluded minorities, particularly among blacks. The lower strata of the black population had become extremely rebellious; it was the spontaneous and organized black movement that was breaking the political silence of the fifties. The new middle class was built up to coopt and control the influence of the lower strata on the black movement.

Now the class alliances of the postwar era are

in shambles. The decline of heavy industry is eroding the power of the class collaborationist labor leaders, and they are no longer able to deliver labor peace. Current ruling class strategies designed to extricate them from the crisis—such as "reindustrialization"—will depend on non-union sectors, thus further eroding the power of the labor bureaucracy. The leadership vacuum here will open up new opportunities for the rank-and-file of the labor movement to break the bonds of class collaborationist unionism.

The black sector of the new middle class has been almost entirely a product of the New Deal policies of the Welfare State. Their fortunes will decline along with the decline of the Welfare State. Reagan is clearly abandoning them to ally with the so-called new black elite, such as Thomas Sowell (economic adviser) and Samuel Pierce (HUD Secretary), whose interests lie more in the private sector than in the state sector.

Although the black members of the new middle class as a class are agents of capital, politically their abandonment by the ruling class means that there will be an increasingly large pool of unemployed intellectuals who, having no other choice within the system, will be more open to radicalization.

The ruling class response to the world crisis of capital accumulation is to shift the burden of the crisis to the working class while restructuring the international division of labor in preparation for the next wave of expansion. In order to get the working class to accept the austerity program, the ruling class is utilizing a particularly racist strategy which makes it very clear that the brunt of austerity policies will fall on blacks and other racial and national minorities.

This is the traditional advocacy of protectionism within the domestic working class, except this time it is against the "Third World within," as well. 18 Clearly, the attack on black people is central to the implementation of the ruling class' austerity program.

But there is more to the resurgence of racism than protectionism. There are larger political reasons for the attempt of the ruling class to isolate the "Third World within" during this period.

The conditions of America's ghettos are already barely livable. These communities exist in a state of more or less permanent stagnation and economic depression, and conditions are getting worse. Residents must contend with racial

discrimination in housing, employment, education and the courts. Their family income is 57% of that of the average white family. One out of four adults is unemployed, and there is a growing underclass of permanently unemployed people. Residents are victimized by an endless cycle of slum landlords, unscrupulous merchants, insurance companies, petty thieves and drug peddlers.

Beyond this, the reality of black working class communities is captured in the agony of Atlanta. Bernard Headley of the Criminal Justice Institute in Atlanta stated it well:

The ultimate significance of the Atlanta killings lies in the reality that there exists within Atlanta (as in a number of major U.S. cities) a vast underclass and subproletariat who... have been permanently trapped into a lumpen ghetto existence, and unable to exercise any control over their own communities, become prey to terror, violence, and exploitation....

The youthful males within the underclass are merely part of a redundant labor

force, valuable to the system only as a reserve of cheap labor; consequently they are viewed as physically expendable.19

This is the reality for the black working class. The ruling class knows this, but they also know that it will not be tolerated. There will be explosive resistance within the black community, and this time it is likely to be much more militant and organized than before. This is the real reason for the mobilization of the right wing. It is not that the Right has achieved political power, but rather that it will provide a significant anti-black force that, when combined with the protectionist measures already being promoted, will seriously aggravate the polarization of the working class. The Right will also serve as an additional irritant to the mobilized blacks and to the organized Left; consequently, it is likely that this resistance would give the ruling class an excuse to establish police state conditions in the black communities as an alleged protection against the violence of the Left and the Right.20

But that is purely the negative side. Although



Job seekers in Harlem

there are certainly dangerous and hard times ahead, the future is not all darkness. The combination of the dislocations caused by the loss of hegemony, the large size of the "Third World within," and the historic roots of the civil rights movement provide the basis for the emergence of a revolutionary Left as a significant political force in the United States for the first time since the 1930's. The success of this movement will greatly depend on how skillfully the Left is able to incorporate the nationalist movements that will inevitably emerge, given that the ruling class will attempt to depict the emerging class war as a race war.

Conclusion

What then is the significance of racism in the modern world? It is that racial and national

minority people suffer most from the dislocations which are a part of the normal operation of the capitalist system-unemployment, underemployment, poverty, ghettoization, cultural imperialism, police brutality, war, etc. Racism, then, reveals the ugly, brutal, true face of capitalism. Capitalism creates a propertyless proletariat, those masses who, in Marx's sense, have nothing to lose but their chains. It is this time bomb that the ruling class fears, and this is the meaning of the mobilization of the right wing in the current period. It is just a matter of time before social conditions erupt, for this stratum (of socially defined minorities-which includes working class women) is now an important segment of the population. It is this promise that makes it so important to see the "national movement" as not just an ally of the proletariat, but as the centerpiece of a revolutionary proletarian movement.

NOTES

- 1. Quoted by Saul Friedman of the Knight News Service in the September 3, 1981, issue of the San Francisco Examiner, p. A13.
- 2. Statement made by Betita Martínez, California gubernatorial candidate in 1982 of the Democratic Workers Party.
- 3. Quoted in David Edgar, "Reagan's Hidden Agenda: Racism and the New American Right." Race and Class Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 1981), p. 230.
- 4. Quoted in Manning Marable, Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution (Dayton, Ohio, Black Praxis Press, 1981), p. 93.
- 5. Immanuel Wallerstein, The Capitalist World-Economy (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 215-16.
- 6. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Crisis as Transition," unpublished manuscript, p. 24.
- 7. Wallerstein, The Capitalist World-Economy, cited above, p. 221.
- 8. Marlene Dixon and Susanne Jonas, "Proletarianization and Class Alliances in the Americas." Studies in Latin American Revolution (Occasional Paper of the Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis, 1981), p. 8.
- 9. Wallerstein, Capitalist World-Economy, cited above,

- pp. 218-19.
- 10. Wallerstein, "Crisis as Transition," p. 20.
- 11. Ibid., p. 24.
- 12. Bernard Magubane, The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa (New York, Monthly Review, 1979), p. 3.
- 13. Marable, Blackwater, cited above, p. 69.
- 14. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Race Is Class." Monthly Review Vol. 32, No. 10 (March 1981), p. 51.
- 15. Marlene Dixon, "On the Situation in the USA Today." Our Socialism Vol. 2, No. 8 (Oct. 16-31, 1981).
- 16. Ibid.
- 17. Ibid.
- 18. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The U.S. in Today's World." Paper delivered at the seminar on "The U.S. Today," under the sponsorship of the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales of UNAM, Mexico City, July 26-August 1, 1981.
- 19. Bernard Headley, "Class and Race in Atlanta." Race and Class Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1981), pp. 82, 84.
- 20. Dixon, "On the Situation in the USA Today," cited above.