

Lecture at San Diego State University

Should art be judged on the basis of race and gender?

By David Walsh
27 April 2017

Posted below is a slightly edited version of a talk given at San Diego State University on April 18, 2017.

We are living at a very dangerous, fraught moment in world history. The Trump administration, fully backed by the Democratic Party and the media, has launched a violent and illegal attack on Syria. It dropped a horrific bomb in Afghanistan, the largest bomb since the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. Ultimately, the target here is Russia in the case of the Middle East, where nuclear-armed powers face each other in the region. Meanwhile, Trump threatens to launch an attack on North Korea, which is aimed at China—and that too would find universal support in the American establishment. The ruling classes everywhere are hurtling toward disaster.

A great deal depends on the political development of the international working class, its political, social and cultural consciousness, as the only force that can stop the imperialist war drive, which threatens the future of humanity.

We are taking up tonight's subject in that context. What are the great questions of our time? In our view, social inequality, the threat of dictatorship, the drive to war. The unification of the working class across all ethnic and national lines, politically directed against this rotting system, is decisive.

However, if you were to go by the media and large portions of the academic world in the US, and not only the US, when they are not repeating lies about Syria or Russia or Iran or North Korea, every important question of social life revolves around—or reduces itself—to either race or gender. This is a deliberate and reactionary attempt to divert attention from the most burning questions and channel sections of the middle class in particular in the most selfish and self-pitying directions.

Moreover, there is a profound connection between the emergence and “flourishing” of upper middle class identity politics, race and gender politics, and the growth of a new constituency for imperialist war. These layers, newly or not so newly wealthy, turning to the right, to the defense of their wealth and the system, are especially susceptible to propaganda about—or, in some cases, the most aggressive advocates of—neo-colonial invasions and wars in the name of “human rights,” “women's rights,” “gay rights” and so forth. The exposure of this ideological and political trend is thus vital to the struggle against war and imperialist barbarism.

In regard to the dishonest and politically-driven fixation with race in particular, the *New York Times*, the newspaper of record, one of the most influential big business media outlets in this country, sets the tone in this regard on a daily basis.

Recent headlines include:

- * The Real Reason Black Kids Benefit From Black Teachers
- * A History of Race and Racism in America, in 24 Chapters
- * Race in America: Racial Progress or Racist Progress?

- * Girls Go Missing, and Washington's Racial Divide Yawns Wider
- * What Racial Terms Make You Cringe?
- * Fighting Racial Bias on Campus
- * How Should Parents Teach Their Children About Race and Racism
- * Racial Progress Is Real. But So Is Racist Progress
- * Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation
- * Are We Raising Racists?
- * No Racial Barrier Left to Break (Except All of Them)
- * NYT Employees Ponder What Racial Terms Are Offensive

This is a small sampling of recent articles. This is not innocent. This is not the honest concern of a democratically inclined publication with the fate of the African-American population. This is a publication that speaks for major sections of Wall Street and big business, that has been a leading, lying propagandist for neo-colonial war and violence in Iraq, Libya and Syria, resulting in the deaths of millions ... and the publication that now ferociously pushes the anti-Russian campaign that threatens the world with a nuclear war.

This is part of a larger process. To cite a couple of recent incidents of the racialization of American culture, two out of dozens:

First, the attack on *Free State of Jones*, a 2016 drama, directed by Gary Ross and featuring Matthew McConaughey, about a white man, a small farmer, in Mississippi who led a revolt against the Confederacy in the midst of the Civil War. It is an extraordinary story. In fact, Southern small farmer and artisan opposition to the Confederacy and slavery was far more extensive than we know.

This film provoked widespread anger in the identity politics crowd. The film was condemned as a “white savior” work. Charles Blow in the *New York Times* led the charge against the film, writing that it “emphasizes white heroism and centers on the ally instead of the enslaved. It tries desperately to cast the Civil War, and specifically dissent within the Confederacy, as more a populism-versus-elitism class struggle in which poor white men were forced to fight a rich white man's war and protect the cotton trade, rather than equally a conflict about the moral abhorrence of black slavery.

“Throughout, there is the white liberal insistence that race is merely a subordinate construction of class.”

We wrote a lengthy reply, in which we noted, “Blow ... is offended by *Free State of Jones* because it argues that great historical events cannot be explained in racial or ethnic terms. On the basis of the *Times* columnist's outlook, one simply cannot understand why hundreds of thousands of white people died to end slavery.”

Second, there is the attack on Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till.

A recent controversy involved a painting at the Biennial, a major art event, at the Whitney Museum in New York City. The painting is based on a photograph of Till, the 14-year-old black youth savagely murdered in

Mississippi in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Till's mother insisted on an open casket, so the world could see what was done to her son. This was one of the episodes that outraged millions and spurred the development of the Civil Rights movement.

Protests began at the Whitney because the painting of Till was done by a white woman, Dana Schutz. An open letter was circulated by Hannah Black, a video artist living in Berlin, demanding the painting be removed and *destroyed*.

The letter contended that *Open Casket* "should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time."

We wrote: "Schutz is clearly responding to and seeking to direct the attention of the public toward an appalling crime. Her effort is an entirely legitimate and *admirable* protest against racist violence, with obvious political connotations in the present circumstances of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bigotry whipped up by the Trump administration. ...

"Hannah Black and her co-signatories see the world entirely through the prism of race. This blinds them to the decisive social realities. They echo those extreme Zionists and similar tendencies who use a history of racial or religious oppression to justify their own reactionary communalism."

This is typical of the racist commentary on the Whitney controversy: "In the latest case of habitual boundary overstepping and [cultural] appropriation, painter Dana Schutz's work *Open Casket* has sparked controversy and outrage at the Whitney Biennial in New York City. The medium-sized painting depicts the battered face of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955, as it appeared in photographs and news reports. The artist used smudges of paint and cuts in the canvas to reflect the brutality of Emmett's death mask, because obviously, what the commentary surrounding a 62-year-old brutal murder of a 14-year-old needs is the voice of a white woman from Brooklyn." (Michael Harriot, *The Root*)

What's astonishing—and telling—is that the writer is so saturated with racialism that nothing about this final sentence makes him pause. Why shouldn't "a white woman from Brooklyn" have something to say about the Emmett Till killing? "Stick to your own lane" is one of the most noxious possible slogans. If artists, or revolutionaries for that matter, had followed that advice, there would be no world culture or modern society.

And this: "Why do white artists think the only way you can discuss race is through the suffering of people of color?"

"Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* in the 2017 Whitney Biennial highlights this phenomenon: Schutz, a white woman, attempted to stir our collective empathy by painting the disfigured body of Emmett Till. But her identity—and, likely, her experience—is actually closer to that of Carolyn Bryant, the white woman whose lies led to Till's murder." (Ryan Wong, *Hyperallergic*)

The smugness and ignorance of such circles is almost beyond belief. If I were Schutz, I might consider suing for slander. These layers of the population are soaked through with racialism. And when we raised the comparison of this type of view, from its ideological and political point of view, to the Nazi racist outlook, we were not speaking lightly.

The Nazis banned "Un-German," "non-Aryan" music and art. They prohibited Jewish musicians from playing "German music." There is a sinister and inescapable logic to racial politics.

We made the point that the program of ethnic or racial particularism in art and culture, which insists that the various peoples and nationalities are incapable of communicating with and understanding one another, is thoroughly repugnant. It is part of the "anti-Enlightenment" tradition, which rejects rationality, democracy, egalitarianism and universality. I will go into that somewhat later.

All of this is circulating, in the art world, in the music business, in

Hollywood—hence the controversies about the lack or not of black and other minority nominees for the Academy Awards. Of course, in the academic world there is much talk about "white privilege" or "male privilege," "cultural appropriation."

Racism remains a serious issue in America, but the *New York Times* and the American ruling elite are not concerned with combating racial prejudice and backwardness of every sort, but with encouraging and exacerbating racial and ethnic tensions to divide the working class and weaken it. No one should be a bit surprised that the people in power, the people who monopolize the wealth, should want to see the working-class population fighting amongst itself. Nothing would please the rulers of this country more than the open eruption of ethnic or racial or religious conflicts.

Gender plays a somewhat different role for fairly obvious reasons. To argue for the complete separation of males and females presents certain economic, social, not to say, biological difficulties. Gender plays more of a divisive role in the academic world, in the professions, where a bitter conflict for advancement is under way. It also plays a role in the efforts of the Democratic Party to present itself as a "progressive" party—after all, it had a woman as its presidential candidate! That she was a warmonger in the pocket of Wall Street made no difference to certain elements.

Gender, like gay rights, plays a cynical role in American foreign policy. To justify its unending and bloody military interventions, the US ruling class attempts to cloak its ruthless, predatory policies. It proposes to change this or that regime, any regime that stands in its way, and often on the grounds of its "human rights record." That the new regimes are no better at democracy than the old ones never receives attention in the American media, or the fact that one of the central allies of the US in its conspiracies is the foul, medieval government of Saudi Arabia, one of the most oppressive on the face of the earth.

In fact, the United States is a country deeply divided, above all, along *class and economic lines*. A handful of billionaires control the overwhelming majority of the wealth.

As we have noted on the WSWS:

A report published in December 2016 by University of California at Berkeley economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman revealed unprecedented levels of social inequality in the United States.

The report documented an immense redistribution of wealth over a period of several decades from the working class to the rich. The bottom 50 percent's pre-tax share of national income has fallen from 20 percent in 1980 to 12 percent in 2014, while the income share of the top 1 percent has almost doubled to 20 percent. The wealthiest 1 percent now owns over 37 percent of household wealth, while the bottom 50 percent—roughly 160 million people—owns almost nothing, a mere 0.1 percent.

Eight billionaires, six of them from the United States, own as much combined wealth as the bottom half of the world's population, some 3.6 billion people, according to the latest report on global inequality from the British-based advocacy group Oxfam.

The circumstances of every section of the working class are worsening. The conditions in the inner cities are disastrous and have only gotten worse since the early 1970s. Millions of people in American cities have simply dropped out of the statistics. Police killings, brutality are facts of everyday life.

At this point, the position of young and middle-aged white workers is deteriorating the most rapidly. Of course, they are falling from a somewhat higher level, on average. Job losses, the destruction of pensions and health care benefits, the horrifying drug overdose epidemic, the overall decline in life expectancy ... these are all features of America under Donald Trump, and the legacy of America under Barack Obama.

But, according to the media, race and gender are everything.

The socialist movement stands, and has always stood, for opposition to every kind of oppression and injustice. We exert ourselves on the *World Socialist Web Site* in publicizing and encouraging opposition to every instance of abuse and violence.

The socialist movement, throughout its history since the mid-19th century, has opposed slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racism. There is no political tendency on the face of the earth with a comparable history. Every major dispute in our movement has ultimately arisen between those who have surrendered to nationalist pressures, succumbing to their own ruling class, and those committed to internationalist and egalitarian principles.

This passage comes from the *Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, published in February 1848.

“The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality.

“The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. ... National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. ... In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.”

This was written in 1847!

In relation to the condition of women in society, the historical record is clear.

“One of the first great heralds of the socialist ideal, the Frenchman Charles Fourier, wrote these thought-provoking words a hundred years ago: ‘In every society the degree of female emancipation (freedom) is the natural measure of emancipation in general.’” (Rosa Luxemburg, “Women’s Suffrage and Class Struggle,” 1912)

We are currently marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

“The October revolution honestly fulfilled its obligations in relation to woman. The young government not only gave her all political and legal rights in equality with man, but, what is more important, did all that it could, and in any case incomparably more than any other government ever did, actually to secure her access to all forms of economic and cultural work.” (Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 1936)

The Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution in 1917 introduced the most advanced laws in world history on questions of marriage, divorce, abortion, joint responsibility for children and so forth. The first workers state also decriminalized homosexuality and permitted cohabitation. The emergence of Stalinism, a reactionary nationalist bureaucracy, put an end to those liberating efforts.

In the US, there is a long history of left-wing struggle, conducted by revolutionary elements within the trade unions, by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the early Socialist Party, later the Communist Party, and the Trotskyist movement itself, against racist violence, lynchings and frame-ups. From the case of the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 to the civil rights movement, the intellectual backbone of the struggle against Jim Crow racism was provided by left-wing thought and left-wing activists.

Racism, discrimination, bigotry, sexual violence and every form of abuse can only be fought through getting to their source in class society—the division of society into exploiter and exploited, the frictions and tensions, and toxins, produced by the crisis and decay of capitalism—and by unifying the working class against the entire system. Single-issue protest movements have a disastrous and disorienting history in the US, always leading masses of people back to the stranglehold of the

Democratic Party and bourgeois politics.

It can be confusing, of course, and confusion is very much the aim, but it would be wrong to mistake the current obsession with race and gender in the media and on college campuses for a genuinely democratic or progressive struggle.

Rather, in many cases, what we are seeing is the increasingly unbridled ambitions of various layers of the upper middle class, seeking to leverage past or present abuses, to advance their own selfish interests.

There is an objective, economic basis for this striving. While broad layers of the working class, black and white, male and female, have seen a steady worsening in their conditions of life ... at the same time, a narrow layer of African Americans and women, as part of the larger upper middle class, has done very well.

This is from a comment by Antonio Moore in the *Huffington Post*, May 2016. He notes that, according to Federal Reserve figures, the median net worth of the top 1 percent of white households is 74 times that of the average white household. “This is among the highest levels of income stratification between classes in the developed world. Yet, the wealth difference between the American black household in the top 1 percent and the average black household is several times worse. As reported by MSNBC the median net worth of the few black households in the top 1 percent was \$1.2 million dollars, while according to the Census median net worth for all black households was about \$6,000 in total.”

“A black family in the 1 percent is worth a staggering 200 times that of an average black family. If black America were a country we would be among the most wealth stratified in the world.”

And there is the issue of inequality among women. These are selections from 2013 articles by Alison Wolf, Professor of Public Sector Management at King’s College London:

“Inequality among women is growing very fast indeed. In both the UK and the US, the percentage of total female earnings that goes to the top female 1 per cent has doubled since the 1980s. In America, almost 200,000 women are earning a quarter of a million dollars a year, or more: and the average income, within that group, is a breathtaking \$475,000.

“Among younger men and women with equal education levels, who have also put in equal time in the same occupation, there are no gender pay gaps left. Inequality in average earnings isn’t caused by glass ceilings. It reflects, instead, two things. First, the lives of non-professional women, the vast majority, the ‘other’ 80 percent, whose lives are very different. And secondly, it reflects the dilemmas faced by women when they have children, and the choices they make.”

These newly affluent elements want more. They see as their rivals more entrenched white or male rivals in various fields and professions. A bitter internecine conflict is going on in the academic world, in various professions, in the media, in the arts and entertainment, a sort of “ethnic cleansing,” a conflict between upper middle class layers over whatever pieces of the capitalist pie they can grab hold of. We’ve written recently about the Black Lives Matter movement, to which the Ford Foundation has promised to channel \$100 million over the next six years and which has announced plans to issue what it calls a “black credit card.” This is the reactionary program of Black Capitalism.

We stand opposed, as a party of the working class, to all these sordid maneuvers. We are hostile to all sections of big business, whether white or black, male or female. We do not consider the election of black or female capitalist politicians a step forward. We are utterly indifferent to the percentage of males or females, black or whites or Latinos, on the boards of giant corporations, or whether there is a woman in the White House or an African American presiding over the bombing of defenseless people in Syria or Yemen.

Again, there are these striking figures on wealth and poverty:

In 1960, there were an estimated 25 black millionaires. That number has grown 1,400 times. Today there are 35,000 black millionaires in the U.S.

According to a Pew Research Study, 35 percent of black households have “negative” or “no net worth.” Another 15 percent have less than \$6,000 in total household worth. That is nearly 7 million of the total 14 million black households that have little or no wealth.

This was the compensation of top-paid female CEOs of S&P 500 companies in April 2015, according to *USA Today*:

Yahoo, Marissa Mayer: \$42.1 million
Oracle, Safra Ada Catz: \$37.7 million
Lockheed Martin, Marillyn Hewson: \$33.7 million
TJX, Carol Meyrowitz: \$28.7 million
PepsiCo, Indra Nooyi: \$22.5 million
Xerox, Ursula Burns: \$22.2 million
Mondelez, Irene Rosenfeld: \$21 million
Hewlett-Packard, Margaret Whitman: \$19.6 million
General Dynamics, Phebe Novakovic: \$19.3 million
IBM, Virginia Rometty: \$19.3 million
Sempra, Debra Reed: \$16.9 million
General Motors, Mary Barra: \$16.2 million

What is the significance of these trends and developments for art and culture?

One of the issues I’d like to discuss this evening is this: Is it possible, referring back to the issues I raised before, for one gender or ethnicity or nationality to successfully create artistic works about another? Is such a thing even permissible? In other words, to put it more bluntly or concretely, because this is the issue that more often comes up at this point, is it legitimate or even possible for men to write or make films about women (and vice versa, to a certain extent)? Is it possible, or legitimate, for whites to write about blacks (and vice versa, to whatever extent this comes up)? And what are the implications if these efforts are not possible or permissible? *Is there a racial or gender criterion in art?*

Moreover, what is the history of claims about ethnic or racial particularism—claims, in other words, that different peoples are incapable of communicating with one another, and that each national culture is separate and distinct?

Our answer is not a mystery, and I’ve already given some indication of it. The artist, in our view, has the responsibility to strive for the broadest, most universal truths. The genuine artist has the interests of humanity in mind, not this or that nationality or tribe, or gender, certainly not in the modern era. There is no “national” ideal that can bring forth art of the highest quality or importance in our day. We have long since passed the heyday of the “national epic,” even in countries oppressed by imperialism.

I don’t mean of course that the artist should avoid treating the most concrete, particular, details of life, that is essential to his or her work, but the fleeting and immediate have to point beyond themselves toward the more general human condition. Significant art work has always endured for that reason, because it transcends the immediate circumstances, grasps and rises above them, and speaks to the generalized conditions—social, psychological, moral—that exist within class society. This is why we still read Homer or Shakespeare, or whatever other examples you want to provide.

It would be impossible to write a novel or play today, for example, that would genuinely enlighten or move masses of people if it were steeped in American patriotism or nationalism, if such a work argued that Americans from every social class and background should unite against the common enemy, let’s say, the Chinese or the Russians or the Iranians, or perhaps the Germans. Such a work would not be effective because it would be so obviously untrue, so counter to the real interests of the population, it would not be convincing—and, in any case, no seriously talented person would undertake such a work.

Of course, we have militaristic, jingoistic, pro-CIA films:

The Hurt Locker (2008)

Act of Valor (2012)

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

Lone Survivor (2013)

American Sniper (2014)

The Interview (2014)

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit (2014)

13 Hours (2016)

These works, by and large, do not have an impact, or, if they do, they have an impact only on susceptible, less conscious social layers and appeal to their worst instincts. But none of the militaristic works about Iraq and Afghanistan, like *American Sniper*, or a pro-CIA film like *Zero Dark Thirty*, will survive.

There are two related questions: Can one culture or gender understand another? Does it have *the right* to make artistic representations of another?

I need to digress to make one point. We need to distinguish, first of all, between absolute and relative truth, between understanding someone relatively well, even very well, and understanding him or her absolutely. There is never a complete identity between our thinking and the object we are thinking or making art about. Our thinking or imaging is always an approximation. The task is to make the approximation as accurate and profound and evocative as possible.

Not every human experience, of course, can be grasped by every other human being. A friend of ours recently had a child and spent 18 or 20 hours in labor. That is one experience I and at least half the population will never know. But even then, the general idea presumably is available to me.

Significant cultural, national, linguistic, even regional distinctions obviously exist and will continue to exist. To a certain extent, these distinctions make life interesting. We all search out people and experiences different from those familiar to us. But they are *relative* differences, differences within a species we recognize as our own. In fact, we could not register the differences if there were not an underlying sameness, a profound point of connection. They wouldn’t be intriguing or enjoyable or accessible in any way. Truly, nothing human is alien to any of us.

We are all made of the same basic substance, have many of the same physiological and material, and psychic needs. Especially at this moment in history. Economic processes have leveled the differences enormously.

Each of us is *unique* in the specific manner in which the different physical, cultural and social elements are arranged.

This is the significance of Trotsky’s brilliant comment in *Literature and Revolution* (1924):

“Even if individuality is unique, it does not mean that it cannot be analyzed. Individuality is a welding together of tribal, national, class, temporary and institutional elements and, in fact, it is in the uniqueness of this welding together, in the proportions of this psychochemical mixture, that individuality is expressed. ...

“So it can be seen that what serves as a bridge from soul to soul is not the unique, but the common. Only through the common is the unique known; the common is determined in man by the deepest and most persistent conditions which make up his ‘soul’, by the social conditions of education, of existence, of work, and of associations. The social conditions in historic human society are, first of all, the conditions of class affiliation. That is why a class standard is so fruitful in all fields of ideology, including art, and especially in art, because the latter often expresses the deepest and most hidden social aspirations.”

In any event, are there such things, for example, as entirely distinct Black and White cultures in America? I would dispute that. Of course, there are distinct sources and interests, histories and features, but blacks and whites have been painfully, tragically intertwined since the very earliest days in America.

There is hardly a significant political document, either of a progressive or reactionary character, in the first century of the country's existence that did not, directly or indirectly, take up the African American presence. From the Declaration of Independence, with its earthshaking claim about the equality of men—which was only a promissory note, given the existence of slavery, and inevitably had to be fought out over the next 85 years—through all the debates and conflicts of the first part of the 19th century, to the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech.

If you turn to American literature, the democratic, almost orgiastic fluidity of peoples is one of the major themes of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, with the slavery question certainly in the background, as it was in the entire American Renaissance of the 1850s, in Emily Dickinson and in Thoreau and Emerson, and later—very much in the foreground—in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

There is the vast intellectual and cultural impact of the Civil War on figures like Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, etc. They were produced by an intellectual and cultural universe in which the Civil War and the subsequent rise of modern industrial American capitalism were the central and pivotal features.

This holds true for every aspect of cultural life, literature, music, drama.

And there is the obvious, unavoidable impact of European culture on African American culture.

“Black literature must necessarily be a mixed mode, growing out of European language and European literary models. The example of the spirituals, which derived largely from European hymns, should indicate to us that authentic black models can develop from European models. Similarly, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, [Charlie] Parker, and [John] Coltrane took the instrument patented by the Frenchman Antoine-Joseph Sax in 1846 [i.e., the saxophone] and made it into an instrument that is now inseparably associated with jazz. Black musical expression is not limited to forms or instruments created in Africa, and this need not be the case for black literature either.” (David L. Smith, “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” 1991)

It need not be, and cannot be, frankly, even if it wanted to be.

I would like to speak briefly about the history of ethnic or racial particularism, the notion that there are absolute differences between peoples, and that they are incomprehensible to one another.

The current racist trends, those who argue that whites cannot understand blacks, and that Jews should not make films about Italians, and that men and women can never produce successful artistic works about one another, have a very bad pedigree. In fact, they are taking up ideas that were associated with reactionary thinkers of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, thinkers associated with the “Anti-Enlightenment” or “Counter-Enlightenment.” The only difference today is that this type of reactionary racist and ethnic communalist politics is presented as something “left-wing” and “progressive.” We want to demonstrate that it is no such thing.

An important starting-point is the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the great intellectual movement that reflected the rise of the bourgeoisie within the old feudal society, based on great economic upheavals, major scientific developments, and the exploration by Europeans of the Americas and other parts of the globe. Frederick Engels, the co-founder of the modern socialist movement, commented, “In its theoretical form, modern Socialism originally appears ... as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the 18th century. ...

“The great men, who in France prepared men's minds for the coming revolution [of 1789], were themselves extreme revolutionists. They recognized no external authority of any kind whatever. ... Reason became the sole measure of everything.” (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880)

Of course, the great thinkers of the 17th and 18th century could not, any more than anyone else, “go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch.” The “kingdom of reason” they helped bring about was nothing more than the idealized kingdom of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois property and bourgeois equality before the law were the inevitable result. However, this is not to diminish their accomplishments or the implications of their thinking. On the question of the equality of human beings and equality among cultures, here are a few examples:

From Baruch Spinoza, the Dutch-Jewish philosopher, one of the great rationalists of the 17th century: “But all men have one and the same nature: it is power and culture that mislead us.” (*Theological-Political Treatise*, 1670)

Another figure of the early Enlightenment, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, argues in “Digression on the Ancients and the Moderns” (1688) that men have been the same in all times and places, that “the materials nature has in her hands are always the same; she forms and re-forms them into a thousand shapes ... The centuries have caused no natural difference to arise among men ... Here we are, then, perfectly equal, the ancients and the moderns, Greeks, Romans, and French.”

The great 19th century Russian revolutionary democrat, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, makes this comment about the Enlightenment:

“Are we entitled then to say that all races of people are identical not only in their physical structure, but also in their mental and moral qualities? In the eighteenth century the opinion was widespread among progressive people ... They spoke of the unity of human nature in very broad and strong terms.” (“An Essay on the Scientific Conception of Certain Problems in World History,” 1887-88)

This is from a recent work on the subject: “If the people of the Enlightenment had an awareness of the pluralism of cultures, they retained a sense of the unity of the human race. People should be seen in their historical context, but humanity was one, people were rational individuals, and their weaknesses were a product of their environment and not of their nature.” (Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, 2009)

One of the greatest figures of the Enlightenment, Denis Diderot, renowned as the co-founder, chief editor and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, had this to say: “Therefore, everything goes to prove that humankind is not comprised of essentially different species. The difference between whites and browns arises from food, morals, customs, climate; that between browns and blacks has the same cause. Therefore, originally, there was only one race of humans.” (*Human Species*, 1765)

This is a comment by Frederick Douglass, the former slave and abolitionist, a man steeped in Enlightenment thought: “I adopt the theory that in time the varieties of races will be blended into one. Let us look back when the black and the white people were distinct in this country. In two hundred and fifty years there has grown up a million of intermediate. And this will continue. You may say that Frederick Douglass considers himself a member of the one race which exists.” (Remark to a journalist, 1884)

Enlightenment thought was generally animated by universalism, secularism, egalitarianism, belief in rationality and science, hostility to superstition, confidence in progress and the ability of human beings to eventually bring their lives under their conscious control. Men and women were not wicked, the social conditions in which they lived represented the principal obstacle to human happiness.

There is another current worth considering. “Anti-Enlightenment” thought, which arose in response to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and in defense of the old order, tended to be national-minded, ethnic-based, traditional, religious, irrationalist, it defended prejudice, focused on what divided humanity and was hostile toward and fearful of the people, anti-democratic. At first, this current defended the old feudal order, later it became integrated into the apology for capitalism and, in the

1920s and 1930s, some of these conceptions became part of the fascist ideological arsenal.

In the counter-Enlightenment we find a celebration of tradition, fear, submission, obedience. Initially at least, this trend is rooted in religious conceptions: We are Fallen Creatures, due to Original Sin, and efforts to remedy social ills will fail because human nature is essentially rotten.

We can begin with Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821). Born in the Duchy of Savoy, in present-day France, de Maistre was a violent enemy of the French Revolution of 1789, an equally violent proponent of the monarchy, the Pope and the state repressive apparatus.

He is notorious for his infatuation with the executioner. "All greatness, all power, the hierarchy as a whole rest upon the hangman: he is the terror and the mainstay of human society. Remove this misconstrued factor from the world and instantly order will yield to chaos, thrones will shake, and society perish. God, who created authority, also created punishment." (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, 1821)

In regard to the specific question we are discussing tonight, de Maistre made this famous pronouncement: "The 1795 [French] constitution, like its predecessors, was made for *man*. But there is no such thing as *man* in the world. During my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on; thanks to Montesquieu, I even know that one can be *Persian*; but I must say, as for *man*, I have never come across him anywhere; if he exists, he is completely unknown to me." (*Considerations on France*, 1795)

It is not for nothing that one commentator makes the case that de Maistre was one of the first "multi-culturalists."

Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) is considered "The Father of Racist Ideology." He was the author of *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, a four-volume work published in 1853-55. The work was in part a fierce response to the 1848 revolution, which saw one of the first serious efforts by the working class to rise up against bourgeois society. Revolted by the rootless, urban masses, Gobineau only felt, as he said, "horror and disgust at equality and democracy."

In his "Essay," he wrote: "Passing from one induction to another, I was gradually penetrated by the conviction that the racial question overshadows all other problems of history, that it holds the key to them all, and that the inequality of the races from whose fusion a people is formed is enough to explain the whole course of its destiny."

He attributed the decline of various civilizations to the dilution of blood. A race degenerates "because it has no longer the same blood in its vein," because of race mixing, miscegenation. He established a crackpot hierarchy of races—white, yellow, black. He argued, "The human race in all its branches has a secret repulsion from the crossing of blood."

Gobineau developed a theory of natural inequality, which he devised to justify his aristocratic stand against the encroachment of egalitarian ideas, which were not only racially but also socially unnatural. Needless to say, he was an enemy of socialism.

Gobineau had a strong influence on later, reactionary thinkers, including Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Oswald Spengler, and through them, on Hitler and the Nazis, although he was not a raving anti-Semite.

Various apologies for racism emerged in the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on the grounds that whites and blacks were utterly distinct and no rapprochement was possible. In his ground-breaking work, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), C. Vann Woodward noted that the influence of such works "was to encourage the notion that there was something inevitable and rigidly inflexible about the existing patterns of segregation and race relations in the South; that these patterns had not been and could not be altered by conscious effort."

This is from *Folkways* (1906), by Yale University social scientist William Graham Sumner (1840-1910): "In this way folkways arise. The young learn them by tradition, imitation, and authority. The folkways, at a time, provide for all the needs of life then and there. They are uniform,

universal in the group, imperative, and invariable. As time goes on, the folkways become more and more arbitrary, positive, and imperative. ...

"In our southern states, before the civil war, whites and blacks had formed habits of action and feeling towards each other. They lived in peace and concord, and each one grew up in the ways which were traditional and customary. The civil war abolished legal rights and left the two races to learn how to live together under other relations than before." This kind of academic rubbish justified the racist political set-up in the South.

The conceptions of French novelist and politician Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) are especially instructive on this score. A fanatical French chauvinist, anti-Semite and anti-Dreyfusard ("That Dreyfus is guilty, I deduce not from the facts themselves, but from his race") and a strong influence on the subsequent development of French fascism, Barrès said he was unable to understand the Parthenon or Plato because he had no Greek blood in his veins. As far as he was concerned, the Greek genius was impenetrable to a Frenchman. All that remained of truth was a multiplicity of national truths: Barrès spoke of a French truth and a German truth, a French justice and a German justice.

Then there was Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), the author of *The Decline of the West*, an anti-Communist and proponent of "national socialism," a German nationalist. Spengler was generally supportive of Hitler and the Nazis, although he was not a biological racist. He had criticisms of the regime, but it tolerated him, and he tolerated it.

Spengler wrote: "Each culture possesses its own standards, the validity of which begins and ends with it. There is no general morality of mankind. ... Truths are truths only in relation to a particular human group."

Spengler thought that "any attempt at understanding between nations" or any possibility of such an understanding was a sign of decline. For men who come to a different culture, its customs and morals are "a deep secret and a source of continual and pregnant error."

In recent decades, postmodernism, which employs its own extreme relativism, has had a major influence on bourgeois thought and the academic world. Postmodernism emphasizes "micro-politics," and "difference"—each individual or people has its own, equally valid "narrative." Rooted in particular in German subjectivist and reactionary philosophy, the postmodernists have launched their well-known assault on objective truth, on the study of history, on Marxism and the revolutionary role of the working class.

As two authors explain: "In the past two decades, the foundational claims of modern politics have been challenged by postmodern perspectives. ... The Marxian project of revolution, worldwide and global in scope, has been replaced in some quarters by more localized struggles and more modest and reformist goals. ...

"Within the mode of theory, the democratic [I would question that term—DW] turn involves a shift toward more multiperspectival theorizing that respects a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives rather than, as in modern theory, seeking the one perspective of objective truth or absolute knowledge. In opposition to discourses of the unity of absolute truth, postmodern micropolitics stresses difference, plurality, conflict, and respect for the other." (Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Dawns, Twilights, and Transitions: Postmodern Theories, Politics, and Challenges*, 2011)

There is an evident connection between this outlook, and the growth of ethnic, racial and identity politics. These tendencies in the upper middle class reject the ability to make sense of the world objectively and base one's views and politics on that objective assessment.

To conclude:

This history, and the recent history of postmodernism in particular, through which many of these reactionary tendencies flow, helps account for the very poor current state of arts and culture. There are many

interrelated factors, but the emphasis on self, personal identity, ethnicity, gender—and the hostility to universality, rationality and historical and social generalization—has had a significant and damaging impact.

The artist who begins from the conception that large areas of life are forbidden him or her, and that he or she is restricted to “staying in your own lane,” is virtually done for from the outset. Art is inevitably and correctly drawn toward the broadest questions that concern human beings, toward the universal features of life. Imagine telling an astrophysicist or a mathematician that such and such aspect of the field was off-limits. Art too, in its own particular manner, is involved in objectively knowing the world.

There has not been a single work in recent decades that one could point to, and say, “This sums up the period, or life in the US, or any country. This is a picture of life that will endure for decades. This provides the whole, or important parts of the whole.” Not one. The postmodernists and identity politicians have had several decades to show what they can do. And there is very little artistically to come out of it. This has been worst period in the modern epoch, in my view, from the artistic point of view.

I just came from the San Francisco film festival. There were numerous honest, sincere efforts, but for the most part these are self-consciously small and largely passive. The artists, more than at any other time in modern history, are unprepared for, uncomfortable with anything but immediate, or subjective conditions. Where is the rich social or historical drama? We live in a period of extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented, global drama and tension and upheaval. Where is that represented by artists?

Believe it or not, artists once stuck their necks out. Leo Tolstoy wrote a novel ambitiously entitled *War and Peace*, 1,400 pages long, a work intended to sum up European and Russian history over a considerable period of time. He wrote and re-wrote it seven times. Today, by and large, artistic presumptuousness and ambitiousness find expression in technological invention or bombast.

One of the problems today, along with a terribly low level of social and historical knowledge, is the degree of skepticism and pessimism that prevails in artistic circles. We are entirely confident, and insight into historical experience is vital here, that the conditions that have accumulated will provoke a mass social explosion. Every social class hesitates before making a great advance. However, shock and dismay, and the temporary paralysis produced by the rottenness of the trade unions and all the existing leaderships and organizations, will give way to anger and action. The ruling elite understands that, that’s why it’s arming itself to the teeth and trying to direct that social anger outward at other countries and peoples.

Self-pity and pettiness and selfishness have always been poor starting points for art, or anything else. The lives and thoughts of most artists at present, one has to be honest, are not that intriguing. We would say: put yourselves in your back pockets for a moment, and look at life more broadly, and more deeply.

This is the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution in 1917. We are marking it and studying it from the point of view of the revolutionary explosions to come. We make our appeal to the artists and those present in this room on that basis.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>