

Race and class in America

Former Indianapolis City-County Councilor José Evans just published a book, *Fear of a Black Republican: The Story of José Evans*. One of the issues he discusses is the origins of race and class conflict in the social invention of white people resulting from Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

As well, Evans uses ideas from Pres. Lyndon Johnson that help us understand why poor whites and poor blacks do not work together to solve their common problems. José also talks about his admiration for Robert Kennedy and his attempt to unite black, brown and blue-collar white citizens as he campaigned in Gary, Indiana in April of 1968. Kennedy was shot in June 5 in LA.

The influence of Robert F. Kennedy on me

Ever since I began studying the story of America, and especially our leaders, Robert Kennedy made a deep impression on me. My high regard for him centered on his 1968 campaign for president. He had a wide appeal across generations, colors, gender identities, social-economic classes, and the specter of urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Because I was raised in an urban working-class neighborhood, I was especially impressed with how he was able to get the lower classes of all colors engaged. Although historically these groups had a common experience and thus a common cause, they did not self-organize to solve their various common problems.

Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit, the recent book by MSNBC's *Hardball* host Chris Mathews (2017), covered RFK's success with the poor. Bobby's efforts made me try to understand how and when these marginalized communities developed antagonistic views of each other.

Bacon's Rebellion: How the powerful made sure white and Black do not work together

That the history of Bacon's Rebellion (1676, Jamestown, Colony of Virginia) is also part of the history of "race" in America is well documented. Both Libertarianism.org and Allen see Bacon's Rebellion as the defining moment regarding the possibilities of a coalition of the working classes organized to carry out America's hallmark characteristic: self-determination.

An uprising of Virginia colonists--which included common indentured European servants, farmers, and African slaves--concerned with their safety was led by prominent colonist Nathaniel Bacon against Royal Colonial Virginia Governor William Berkeley.

After the rebellion was put down and during the following years, those with governmental powers passed laws favoring European colonist (indentured or not) and Native American over America's kidnapped and enslaved Africans. The colony's dominant class used racialization to create a wedge of social difference and prejudice between the poorest whites and slaves.

As laws denied Blacks their freedom, whites, though poor were told they were still part of the superior "race" since they had privileges slaves or even freedmen did not. This strategy by the *status quo* worked to divide these two politically constructed races and discouraged them from subsequent united uprisings.

For example, to stifle any more rebellions, Virginia passed the Slave Act of 1705 normalizing the "invented" idea of race. Having a new social order based on differences of skin color made "race" a constant marker of social, political and economic status. The law also reinforced the "superiority" of European Americans and the "inferiority" of African Americans because now slaves had no protection under the law. They were property and their masters could treat them any way they wanted without fear of prosecution.

Beginning to dismantle the status quo

The "divide and conquer" scheme continued through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the modern Jim Crow era, but was challenged in the late 1960's.

A campaigning Lyndon Johnson, a white Southerner by birth and culture, understood how and why working classes were divided, although they shared a lower status and common concerns. LBJ broke it down like this,

“If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you.”

He knew, as we too must appreciate: As many European Americans suppose a racial superiority, within this group there is a pecking order. It is usually based on class, but can also be based on culture. In many cases, the white lower class is looked down on by the white middle and upper classes. Even elite whites may disdain the “not as successful” middle-class white person or family.

Culturally, for example, the language, music, diet, and lifestyle of European Americans living in the Appalachians and Ozarks, do not have the status in the white hierarchy of the white suburbanites or elites living in mansions in gated communities who may embrace the “high culture” of the Symphony. Remember, we Hoosiers instinctively know the difference between an evening at the Opera and one at the Grand ole Opry!

To have the working and service classes accept this lowest ranking, those with power appeal to the worst instincts of these often economically susceptible people whom they need to collect the garbage, labor in factories, or do the heavy lifting needed to build our magnificent country.

As well, through buying into the made up idea that certain persons/groups are simply inferior (genetically, socially, and culturally), gullible and vulnerable poor whites get both an excuse to discriminate and a salve for their conscience. Meanwhile though, they’re still poor.

This is racism pure and simple. By using the insinuations of Eugenics and the politics of the IQ concept (and its political bodyguard, Standardized Testing), distrust is sowed and provoked among members of the lower income classes.

Pushing the idea that we are not all socially equal (which we are) corrupts the social fabric that our democracy needs to make America possible. It’s a mess, but it is an American mess. It’s our mess, and we can untangle and straighten it out.

Discrediting the story of a natural inter-class conflict

Along with LBJ, Robert Kennedy made a special effort to unite working-class Blacks and whites during his 1968 presidential campaign. He wanted to show that working together was the solution to their common plight.

In fact, it was here in Indiana where he made history by riding through the white and Black parts of Gary in the backseat of an open convertible between Tony Zale, a Polish American steelworker and world champion boxer, and Gary Hatcher, the Black mayor of Gary. Throughout the campaign there, he told both races that jobs were better than welfare. Historians noted that the reaction was positive in both sections of the city.

As well, it was Kennedy’s two-day tour of eastern Kentucky to investigate the state of poverty in America which helped propel Appalachia, poverty, and Kennedy himself onto the national campaign stage.

- Like Robert Kennedy, I want to build relations between neighborhoods of Blacks, browns, and blue-collar whites.
- Like him, I want to be willing to tell each what’s important, not just what they want to hear.
- Like him, I want to connect with Marion County citizens from all walks of life.

Jose M. Evans

For a copy of *Fear of a Black Republican*, go to <https://ibjbp.com/product/fear-of-a-black-republican/>

The Southeast Working-Class Task Force Newsletter is composed by task force chair John Harris Loflin john.loflin@seindy.org. The SEW-CTF meets the 3rd Wed. of the month at 901 Shelby St.