

Is racism in our genes?

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A cheer went up among the largely black studio audience of The Real McCoy when comedian Felix Dexter held up a copy of The Isis Papers. The book, by Black American psychologist Dr Frances Cress Welsing, has become a talking point amongst black people looking for a coherent explanation of racism. Paul Morris reviews the arguments in The Isis Papers and asks, do they really hold the keys to the colours??

It is not often that a book goes on sale in left wing and black community bookshops which argues that one section of humanity is genetically inferior to another, doomed to extinction, and that the world faces centuries of race war. Nor is it common to find a book advertised on a radical, right-on? comedy show arguing that homosexuality is a disease and that women do not have the muscle mass to fight the system.

But Dr Frances Cress Welsing's book The Isis Papers contains all of this and more. In a collection of essays spanning more than twenty years Welsing spells out her theory of colour confrontation? and its implications for the struggle against racism in modern society. For Welsing it is white people who are genetically inferior; race war is predicated by genetics and there is a genetic root to all manifestations of racism?social, political, economic and psychological.

According to Welsing:

?... the quality of whiteness is a genetic inadequacy or a relative genetic deficiency state, based on the genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin (which is responsible for all skin color) . . . Color always annihilates (phenotypically and genetically speaking) the non-color, white. Black people possess the greatest color potential.?

On the basis of this genetic fact? Welsing develops the theory that the needs of genetic survival cause white people to develop an uncontrollable sense of hostility and aggression? against non-whites. Thus for Welsing:

?The genocide of non-whites must be understood as a necessary tactic of a people (white) that is a minority of the world's population . . . the global white minority must act genocidally against people of color for the purpose of white genetic survival.?

This, Welsing claims, is the key to understanding not only all social and psychological behaviour (black and white), but the whole of human history to date. The rest of the book is an attempt to apply her psycho-genetic? theory to diverse instances of racism and its effects on black people.

Welsing investigates the racist-phallic symbolism of the gun, ball sports and boxing in black culture, and investigates the role of drugs in inculcating passivity amongst black males in the USA. Indeed drugs, homosexuality and single mother families are criticised on the same level as racist lynchings and castration because they are seen as weapons to prevent black procreation.

Behind each of the individual aspects of Welsing's analysis stands the claim that she has developed a

Unified theory modelled on Einstein's physics. Other theories of racism, she claims, cannot explain the whole experience. They compartmentalise its social, psychological and cultural aspects and do not relate it to the history of society as a whole.

Most theories of racism, according to Welsing, also fail because they refuse to be determinist. They are the theoretical equivalents of the 'physics of chance', which refuse to look for unified or systematic causes of all aspects of the racist system.

At one level it is easy to ridicule Welsing's theories. Many of the essays have dated palpably. Her critique of 'feminised' black male culture, 'the braided and curled hair, the earrings and bracelets . . . the powered underwear, the high heeled shoes with platforms' could hardly apply to black street style today on either side of the Atlantic.

But Welsing's theories have found a resonance amongst militants looking for more than just a series of slogans or partial political demands, looking precisely for a theory. So what is wrong with Welsing's theory?

Let's assume that she is right in asserting that whites are genetically 'albino mutants' and that black skin colour is genetically predominant. This begs the question: why is 'race war' between whites and non-whites genetically programmed? Why not a war between the tall and short peoples of the world? Why did the left handed people of the world not feel threatened by the genetically predominant right handed? Why did one of many genetic differences within humanity become the cause of a system of oppression?

Welsing's explanation focuses on psychology. Being a 'small minority' whites felt beleaguered and were threatened with extinction if they didn't stop black/white relationships. So they constructed a system to undermine the genetic potency of the black male.

This theory just does not stand up to the test of facts. For a start it is unlikely that early human societies were aware of the relationship between sex and childbirth. Secondly there is ample evidence of spontaneous intermixing throughout history and especially throughout the history of earlier societies. Whilst there was prejudice, exclusionism and at times violent oppression against 'alien' peoples in pre-capitalist society, it did not take place simply or even predominantly between black and white.

One of the weakest points of Welsing's theory—but a vitally necessary element of it—is that racial oppression is impossible between non-white peoples: 'there is only one functioning racism in the known world—white supremacy'. Among 'non-white' peoples Welsing includes everybody from the Native Americans to the Japanese and the Spaniards. She challenges anyone 'to demonstrate the functioning supremacy of any of the world's non-white peoples over anyone'.

Well, the Spaniards massacred the indigenous peoples of South America. The Japanese held most of Asia under a reign of terror, systematically oppressing other nations—for example Korea and China—during the 1930s and 1940s. Idi Amin's Uganda practiced genocide and forced migration against its Asian population.

Fear and loathing of other peoples did not assume the form of systematic racial oppression until the onset of a certain kind of society. It certainly has an effect on culture and psychology in that society, but the system of racial oppression and white supremacy is fundamentally determined socially, not genetically.

It was a specific human society which chose the genetic features of skin colour as a dividing line between oppressed and oppressor. It was the capitalist system.

As European capital expanded around the globe, it was obliged to create an ideological underpinning for

the enslavement of Africans and the conquest of India and the Far East.

Yet Welsing's theory abstracts completely from all forms of society and class. Welsing cannot see that her own ideas are determined by the very class society she refuses to consider. Welsing's theory takes black/white conflict as a natural, genetically programmed "fact" when it is socially determined.

Onto this fundamentally "awed" foundation she heaps piles of "evidence". Everything from the white phallic Washington monument, to the Holocaust to "homosexuality, rape, "ags, men's ties" can be understood within the "united" "eld" of Welsing's theory.

But such a method has nothing in common with Einstein or any materialist, determinist scientific method. Real science, physical and social, seeks fundamental laws of motion in an analysis of concrete events themselves.

Take Welsing's views on suntanning. Suntanning and cosmetics, which both add colour to the skin, represents for Welsing white people's psychological desire to be black.

Maybe they do. But how then do we explain white people's desire, for most of the 18th and 19th centuries, to have white skins, to avoid the sun, to apply white cosmetics to their hair and faces? Both cultural practices were socially determined. White makeup in former centuries was a way of distinguishing the rarified and work-shy aristocracy from peasants whose grimy, outdoor lives often deeply coloured their skins.

Welsing's theory cannot take account of such facts so it ignores them. Instead of a coherent, united theory of racism we have a non-theory, "lled with all the reactionary prejudices of a middle class American shrink.

So what are the strengths of Welsing's book? At a political level the theory contains much that will be attractive to militants influenced by black nationalism. Its concentration on changing black people's "submissive" attitude to racial oppression echoes a common theme throughout much of modern US black resistance writing:

"Black women must learn to rear sons who will learn from the cradle that their major function as men is not to get a good job and a "ne car but to defend, protect and support their people (in that order) even should death be the consequence . . . There will be good jobs and self respect (if not "ne cars) once the people are liberated. There will be no true self respect until that task is completed?"

Welsing's study of the Holocaust also attempts to combat the idea that racial "assimilation" or the integration of a few middle class blacks into white society can solve the threat of racist genocide. The experience of the Jews in twentieth century Europe proves, for Welsing, that:

"No matter how much you may mix with and intermarry with people who classify themselves as white . . . no matter how many doctors, lawyers, judges, professors, scholars you produce, no matter how much money, diamonds and gold you obtain; if you are classified as non-white under conditions of white supremacy domination when the hammer of white supremacy falls, you will be under that hammer.?"

With the ideas of struggle, not submission, and the impossibility of a solution short of destroying the racist system, revolutionary socialists can agree. But Welsing's book does not give a coherent guide for the struggle to smash that system. On solutions to the race war, she muses:

"Perhaps some psychiatrist will develop a method of mass psychotherapy . . . to help whites become

comfortable with their color and their numbers.?

But since she rightly cannot see this happening, she concludes that a continuation of the war is inevitable. Since she rejects rioting as counterproductive, and the picket line as posturing, we are left with only the individual struggle against male ?feminisation?, against drugs, homosexuality and the single parent family within the black community itself. There is no strategy for collective resistance, and there cannot be one. The entire argument has nothing but reactionary conclusions.

Marxists do have a ?uni?ed? theory of racism. We understand that it is rooted in capitalist society, in the decaying imperialist system which condemns humanity to national wars, racial oppression and periodic racial genocide.

Our theory can link that to individual cultural manifestations and its effects on the oppressed themselves, without recourse to reactionary anti-gay ideas, the depiction of women as physically weak child rearers, or the appropriation and inversion of 19th century white racist ideas. It can do so precisely because it understands the different laws of motion of different levels of human activity?genetic, social, political, psychological?and does not attempt to ?t the facts of all these activities into one, crackpot, genetic theory.

Also, Marxism, unlike The Isis Papers, contains a solution. It is not to hope fondly that assimilation will mollify the oppressor. Nor is it the pursuit of wealth by a black middle class. It is the revolutionary integration of black and white working class people?into the workers? movement and the struggle to destroy capitalism. The Isis Papers do not contain ?the keys to the colors?. Those who want a coherent theory of racism, a systematic refusal to compromise with the racist system and a struggle for its total destruction will have to look to revolutionary socialism.

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