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## James Baldwin and the Meaning of Whiteness

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By Chris Hedges



*The work of James Baldwin, pictured here in 1969, is as relevant today as in his time. The essayist, novelist, poet and social critic died in 1987.*

Raoul Peck's "*I Am Not Your Negro*" is one of the finest documentaries I have ever seen—I would have stayed in the theater in New York to see the film again if the next showing had not been sold out. The newly released film powerfully illustrates, through James Baldwin's prophetic work, that the insanity now gripping the United States is an inevitable consequence of white Americans' steadfast failure to confront where they came from, who they are and the lies and myths they use to mask past and present crimes. Baldwin's only equal as a 20th century essayist is George Orwell. If you have not read Baldwin you probably do not fully understand America. Especially now.

History “is not the past,” the film quotes Baldwin as saying. “History is the present. We carry our history with us. To think otherwise is criminal.”

The script is taken from Baldwin’s notes, essays, interviews and letters, with some of the words delivered in Baldwin’s voice from audio recordings and televised footage, some of them in readings by actor Samuel L. Jackson. But it is not, finally, the poetry and lyricism of Baldwin that make the film so moving. It is Peck’s understanding of the core of Baldwin’s message to the white race, a message that is vital to grasp as we struggle with an overt racist as president, mass incarceration, poverty gripping half the country and militarized police murdering unarmed black men and women in the streets of our cities.

Whiteness is a dangerous concept. It is not about skin color. It is not even about race. It is about the willful blindness used to justify white supremacy. It is about using moral rhetoric to defend exploitation, racism, mass murder, reigns of terror and the crimes of empire.

“The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world’s most direct and virile, that American women are pure,” Baldwin wrote. “Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held in spite of what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. The tendency has really been, insofar as this was possible, to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”

America was founded on the genocidal slaughter of indigenous people and the holocaust of slavery. It was also founded on an imagined moral superiority and purity. The fact that dominance of others came, and still comes, from unrestrained acts of violence is washed out of the national narrative. The steadfast failure to face the truth, Baldwin warned, perpetuates a kind of collective psychosis. Unable to face the truth, white Americans stunt and destroy their capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism. They construct a world of dangerous, self-serving fantasy. Those who imbibe the myth of whiteness externalize evil—their own evil—onto their victims. Racism, Baldwin understood, is driven by moral bankruptcy, narcissism, an inner loneliness and latent guilt. Donald Trump and most of those around him exhibit all of these characteristics.

“If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have needed to invent and could never have become so dependent on what they still call ‘the Negro problem,’ ” Baldwin wrote. “This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks.”

“People pay for what they do, and, still more for what they allowed themselves to become,” Baldwin went on. “And they pay for it very simply by the lives they lead. The crucial thing, here, is that the sum of these individual abdications menaces life all over the world. For, in the generality, as social and moral and political and sexual entities, white Americans are probably the sickest and certainly the most dangerous people, of any color, to be found in the world today.”

Footage in the Peck documentary of past murder cases including the 1955 lynching of the 14-year-old Emmett Till is interspersed with the modern-day lynching of young black men such as Michael Brown and Freddie Gray. Images of white supremacist parades from the 1960s, with young men carrying signs proclaiming “Keep America White,” shift directly to footage of Ferguson, Mo. This juxtaposition is almost too much to bear. If it does not shake you to the core you have no heart and no understanding of who we are in America.

The film begins with Baldwin’s 1957 return from France, where he had been living for almost a decade. He comes back to join the nascent civil rights movement. He was deeply disturbed by a photograph of Dorothy Counts, 15, surrounded by a mob of whites spitting and screaming racial slurs as she walked into a newly desegregated high school in Charlotte, N.C.

“I could simply no longer sit around Paris discussing the Algerian and the black American problem,” he said. “Everybody was paying their dues, and it was time I went home and paid mine.”

In short, he returned to the United States so that black children like Dorothy Counts would not have to walk alone through a sea of racial hatred.

He spoke and participated in hundreds of events for the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, however, largely held him at arm’s length. Baldwin was too independent and outspoken about the truth. His words made King’s Northern white liberal supporters uncomfortable. Baldwin was supposed to speak at the 1963 March on Washington, but King and the other leaders of the march replaced him with the actor Burt Lancaster. Baldwin steadfastly refused to be anyone’s “negro.”

Baldwin was, like Orwell, an astute critic of modern culture and how it justifies the crimes of racism and imperialism. In his book “The Devil Finds Work” he pits Hollywood’s vision of race against the reality. The Peck documentary shows clips from films Baldwin critiqued in the book including “The Birth of a Nation” (a 1915 movie Baldwin called “an elaborate justification of mass murder”), “Dance, Fools, Dance” (1931), “The Monster Walks” (1932), “King Kong” (1933), “Imitation of Life” (1934), “They Won’t Forget” (1937), “Stagecoach” (1939), “The Defiant Ones” (1958), “Lover Come Back” (1961), “A Raisin in the Sun” (1961) and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” (1967). In film after film Baldwin pointed to the ingrained racial stereotypes of African-Americans in popular culture that sustain the lie of whiteness.

Blacks were, and often still are, portrayed by mass culture as lazy and childlike, therefore needing white parental supervision and domination, or as menacing and

violent sexual predators who needed to be eliminated. These Hollywood stereotypes, Baldwin knew, existed as foils for an imagined white purity, decency and innocence. They buttressed the myth of a nation devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty and democracy. The oppressed, because of their supposed character defects, were the architects of their own oppression. Oppression was for their own good. Racism was a form of benevolence. Baldwin warned that not facing these lies would see America consume itself.

In “The Devil Finds Work” Baldwin also wrote about the film “A Tale of Two Cities” (1935). He had read the novel by Charles Dickens “obsessively” as a boy to understand “the question of what it meant to be a nigger.” This novel and other novels he consumed, such as “Crime and Punishment,” spoke of the oppressed. He knew that the oppression of the characters in these stories had “something to do with my own.” The books “had something to tell me.” He wrote:

I was haunted, for example, by Alexandre Manette’s document, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, describing the murder of a peasant boy—who, dying, speaks: “I say, we were so robbed, and hunted, and were made so poor, that our father told us it was a dreadful thing to bring a child into this world, and that what we should most pray for was that our women might be barren and our miserable race die out!” (“I had never before,” observes Dr. Manette, “seen the sense of being oppressed, bursting forth like a fire.”)

Dickens has not seen it all. The wretched of the earth do not decide to become extinct, they resolve, on the contrary, to multiply: life is their only weapon against life, life is all that they have. This is why the dispossessed and starving will never be convinced (though some may be coerced) by the population-control programs of the civilized. I have watched the dispossessed and starving laboring in the fields which others own with their transistor radios at their ear, all day long: so they learn, for example, along with equally weighty matters, that the Pope, one of the heads of the civilized world, forbids to the civilized that abortion which is being, literally, forced on them, the wretched. The civilized have created the wretched quite coldly, and deliberately, and do not intend to change the *status quo*; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their “vital interests” are menaced, and think nothing of torturing a man to death; these people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the “sanctity” of human life, or the “conscience” of the civilized world. There is a “sanctity” involved with bringing a child into this world: it is better than bombing one out of it. Dreadful indeed it is to see a starving child, but the answer to that is not to prevent the child’s arrival but to restructure the world so that the child can live in it: so that the “vital interest” of the world becomes nothing less than the life of the child.

Nearly all African-Americans carry within them white blood, usually the result of white rape. White slaveholders routinely sold mixed-race children—their own children—into slavery. Baldwin knew the failure to acknowledge the melding of the black and white races that can be seen in nearly every African-American face, a melding that makes African-Americans literally the brothers and sisters of whites. African-Americans, Baldwin wrote, are the “bastard” children of white America. They constitute a peculiarly and uniquely American race.

“The truth is this country does not know what to do with its black population,” he said. “Americans can’t face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh.”

White supremacy is not defined, he wrote, by intelligence or virtue. The white race continues to dominate other races because it has always controlled the most efficient killing mechanisms on the planet. It used, and uses, its industrial weapons to carry out mass murder, genocide, subjugation and exploitation, whether on slave plantations, on the Trail of Tears, at Wounded Knee, in the Philippines and Vietnam, in cities such as Baltimore and Ferguson or in our endless wars across the Middle East.

The true credo of the white race is *we have everything, and if you try to take any of it from us we will kill you*. This is the essential meaning of whiteness. As the white race turns on itself in an age of diminishing resources it is in the vital interest of the white underclass to understand what its elites and its empire are actually about. These lies, Baldwin warned, will ultimately have fatal consequences for America.

“There are days, this is one of them, when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it,” Baldwin said. “How precisely you’re going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here. I’m terrified at the moral apathy—the death of the heart—which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that *they really don’t think I’m human*.”