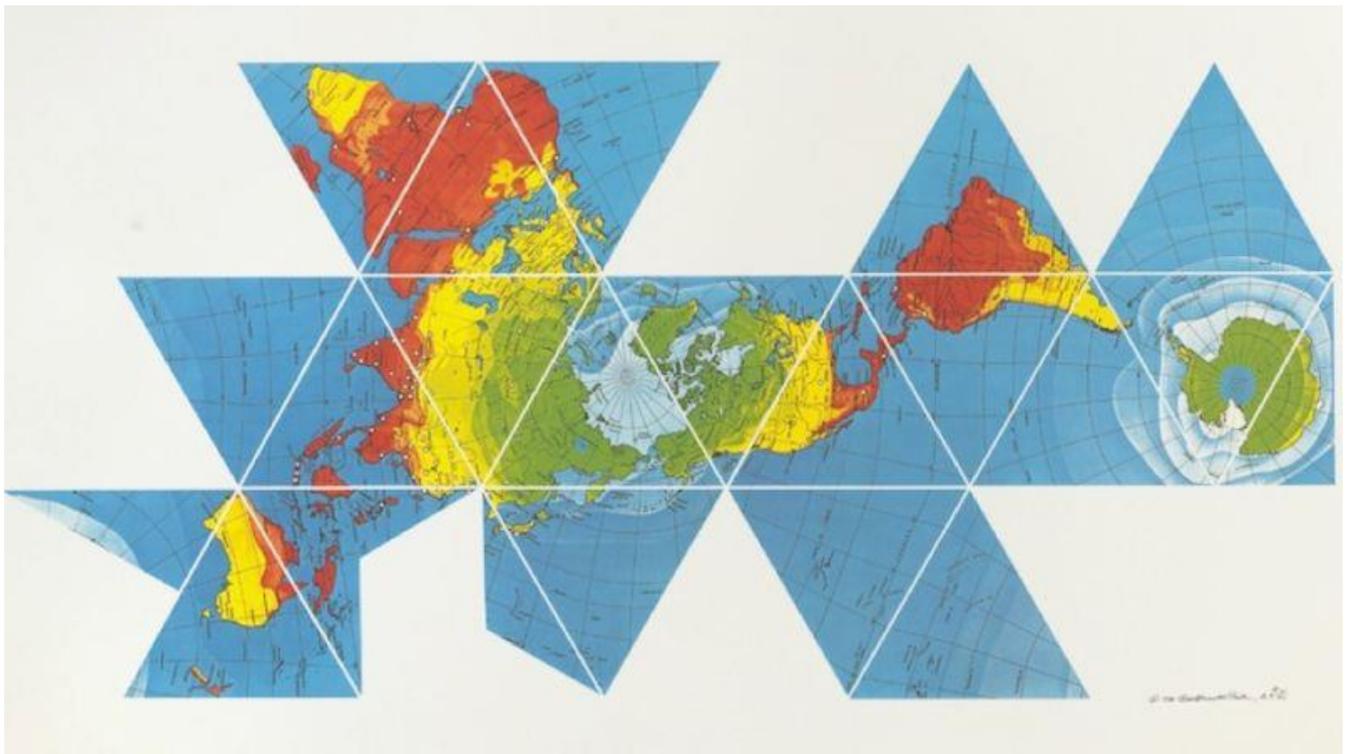


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Decolonizing the Classroom: Embracing Radical Internationalism

by Chris Steele



*DYMAXION AIR-OCEAN WORLD MAP, BY ERIC GABA, 1954*

What first enthralled me about historian Gerald Horne was reading his book *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920*, where he tells the story of the boxer Jack Johnson, who was denied food in Mexico City by a U.S. store owner thinking he could uphold Jim Crow laws. Jack left the store and returned later with three or four generals who revoked the store owner's license, made him apologize and told him that Mexico was no "white man's country."

These are histories of resistance seldom heard to which Horne gives a voice. While there should be no illusions about the Obama presidency, the age of Trump is a caravan of injustices. Horne's analysis of the legacy of white supremacy and the refusal of mainstream U.S. history and education to acknowledge colonialism shows us how the age of Trump came about.

While teaching political science in the community college circuit in Colorado, I was faced with preassigned textbooks that presented history from a Eurocentric male perspective, devoid of a critique of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.

On my first day of teaching comparative government, a student in the course asked why the textbook didn't cover any of the genocides in Africa, such as Belgian King Leopold II's genocide of an estimated 10 million in the Congo for rubber, or Germany's genocide of the Herero and Nama in 1904. I reflected on my white colonial mind and college education and realized I was never assigned readings that had to do with genocides in Africa.

I decided to rework the course readings with student input to change this pattern of reproducing global white supremacy in the classroom, as well as the cultural, intergenerational and historical trauma that students of color often endure throughout education by not receiving the whole picture of history.

Historian Gerald Horne offers a sober perspective that was indispensable in this endeavor: He seeks to stab through hagiography and dismount from historical mythology, allowing his readers to see the connection to capitalism, slavery, the genocide of Indigenous peoples, Pan-Africanism and liberation struggles with a worldview that is often absent in the classroom and mainstream discussions. Horne holds the John J. and Rebecca Moores Chair of History and African American Studies at the University of Houston.

Known for his stunning use of historical archives, Horne has authored more than 30 books on topics ranging from biographical works on W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois to white supremacy's legacy in Fiji, Hawaii and Australia. His newest book, titled, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean*, is set to be released in January 2018.

In this interview, Horne discusses radical internationalism and the importance of educators teaching

history in a way that honors how Black and Indigenous resistance have shaped history.

### **Chris Steele: What is one's role in the classroom as an educator and framer of history?**

**Gerald Horne:** With regards to the United States of America—since the United States of America is a nation that was built on slave labor, particularly of Africans—it's mandatory to have that story embedded in the basic narrative and it's mandatory for the teacher to frame the narrative of the construction of the United States of America through the lens of the African slave trade and the enslavement of Africans.

### **Can you speak about how teachers can avoid the pitfall of just describing atrocities of colonialism instead of also addressing the perseverance, resistance and complexities of people of color throughout history, such as the 1712 revolt in Manhattan and other slave revolts?**

Well, I think even today in 2017, you have historians who even consider themselves to be progressive who tend to downplay the question of resistance, which I think does a disservice to history and certainly it does a disservice to Black people. In some ways, it reminds me of the reaction to Trump in liberal and left circles; there's a lot of denunciation of Trump, which is fine, I can resonate with a denunciation of Trump. But what we really need is an explanation of how this happened and likewise, if you don't have a story of resistance along with the story of enslavement, you really can't provide an explanation of how we got to this point, and therefore you are doing a disservice to history and you're doing a disservice to those who are trying to resist today.

### **Can you speak about representation and resistance in the classroom, tying in Indigenous history—which is U.S. history—or other issues, such as patriarchy throughout U.S. history?**

Well, certainly if you look at the revolt of 1776 that led to the creation of the United States, in my book [*The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*], I stress the question of slavery and only mention the Royal Proclamation of 1763 in passing. The Royal Proclamation, of course, was London's attempt to avoid expending more blood and treasure fighting Native Americans for their land, but the settlers . . . resisted this Royal Proclamation and [it] led directly to kicking London out of what is now the United States.

Certainly, in the state of Colorado where you're sitting, Native American resistance has shaped the history of that state. For example, unfortunately in terms of writing about the U.S. Civil War, many historians do not engage the question of how that led directly to more expropriation of Native American land—I'm thinking of the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado, for example. Certainly, we need an integrated history of the United States that braids and threads the question of African suffering and African resistance, Native American suffering and Native American

resistance, the question of patriarchy, the question of ethnic cleansing—all of that needs to be incorporated into a grander narrative history of North America.

**Two of the principles you routinely talk about are organization and what civil rights leader and Black intellectual Paul Robeson called "radical internationalism." Can you talk about how these can be applied to education?**

With regard to radical internationalism, I would say that given the unsavory origins of the United States, which led to the empowerment of powerful white supremacists and right-wing forces . . . in order to overcome that tendency, the victims of capitalism and white supremacy have had to reach across the oceans and reach across the borders. In order to reach across the oceans and reach across the borders for solidarity and assistance, you need organization. I mean, otherwise it doesn't work very well and certainly that's a central lesson that needs to be imparted in the classroom.

**Have you researched how this colonizer form of history in the classroom can reproduce cultural or intergenerational trauma?**

Oh sure. I haven't researched it, but I have an opinion, which is that if those who are the victims of white supremacy and ethnic cleansing are not told in the classroom about the history that has led us up to the present moment, then there might be a tendency to feel that their present unfortunate circumstance is a personal individual issue as opposed to the result of the tides of history. Obviously, that can lead to a kind of individual trauma, which I would say could be avoided if there was more engagement with an accurate portrayal of history in the classroom.

**You are working on a new book about anarchists, communists and Black nationalists and how they have confronted the seat of national power. What is your perception of anarchism and U.S. history?**

It's complicated. I haven't begun to research deeply into this project, but I wrote a book a couple years ago on William Patterson, who was a Black communist . . . inducted into the communist movement through his engagement with anarchists, particularly with the Sacco and Vanzetti case of the 1920s in Massachusetts. From my past reading, I also know that in Mexico and in Spain in particular, there's been a strong anarchist movement. Now, of course there have been tensions between and amongst these three forces that I've mentioned— anarchists, Black nationalism and communism— but one of the purposes of my project when I finally get lift off and take off is to try to deal with those differences, because I think if we're going to build a more stable and more productive and more progressive environment, we're going to have to grapple honestly with these differences so that we can build that more productive environment.

**With the rise of the right wing, can you speak**

**about the KKK in Cuba and Fiji?**

It's interesting, I guess you're familiar with my book, *The White Pacific*, where I deal with the KKK in Fiji, which of course, was in the context of the attempt to revive Black slavery— this time focusing on Melanesians as opposed to Africans, with the site of the exploitation being Queensland, Australia and Fiji. I'm doing a book on Southern Africa now and, of course, there are many ties between the masters of apartheid in South Africa and the KKK and white supremacist organizations here in the United States. I mean, there's been this sort of "white right international" . . . and it certainly needs more attention, particularly nowadays, because as you know, in the United States, there has been a resurgence of what's euphemistically called the "alt-right" and what could be more accurately called white supremacist, white nationalist organizations. I think now more than ever we need close scrutiny of these organizations and their history so we can better defeat them.

**Throughout your research have you studied the so-called Doctrine of Discovery and the implications it had on the Indigenous population?**

Yes, it is sort of ridiculous. It's like if I come to where you are staying in Colorado and bust into your apartment and say, "I think I discovered your laptop and under the 'right of discovery' I'm going to claim it." I mean, the arrogance of the ridiculous nature— but obviously it was deadly serious, obviously the Christian church, particularly the Roman Catholic church, has a lot of explaining to do . . . a lot of apologies to craft since we know that that rise of that doctrine has been congruent with the expansion of Catholicism and in particular in the Americas, but of course, this takes place in the context of religious conflict.

I have a book coming out early next year on the 17th century, and of course, the 17th century—that is to say the 1600s— marks the rise of the expropriation of the Indigenous population and enslavement of the Africans, and this is taking place against the backdrop of religious conflict, particularly between Christians and Protestants and the reconciliation ultimately between Christians and Protestants (or an attempted reconciliation, I should say) reaches its zenith in North America, in the trade union movement in the United States.

This used to be called pork chop unity. That is to say, folks would bury their contradictions and intentions in order to get those pork chops— with the pork chops being in this case the land of the Native Americans and the bodies of the Africans and certainly that whole Doctrine of Discovery. The more I think about it, [it] is obviously so utterly ridiculous.

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