



Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America

By Ian Lopez (2019)

Strong On Messaging But Weaker on Analysis

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

Lopez does surveys and focus groups to reveal much better ways for progressive politicians to talk about diversity, to counter Trump's dog whistle appeals to the worst in humanity. In fact, just insert the phrase "white, black, and brown", as in "We need to invest in education, create better paying jobs, and make health more affordable for 'white, black, and brown' people struggling to make ends meet". Support went up from 33% to 41%, with this insertion, compared to a pro-business message (p. 186), enough to make a big difference among the 60% of voters who are "persuadables" (not hard core Left or Right).

The idea is to show diverse workers that they have much to gain by embracing solidarity against the greedy rich instead falling prey to their divide and conquer tactics of racist and classist dog whistles (coded language like "law and order" or "welfare queen"). Trump's newest trick is to use more openly racist attacks (like the "birther" attacks on Obama) to provoke the Left, then claim that when the Left responds with charges of racism that they are accusing his supporters of being racist, thus alienating them. Hillary Clinton lent credibility to this claim by using the word "deplorables" to describe many Trump supporters.

My note: Many others on the Left have likewise fallen into the Trump trap, even creating new ideologies that accuse all whites of being racist or complicit in a white supremacy culture. Though some whites may be successfully guilt-tripped by such language into supposedly becoming "anti-racist", a vast swath of the electorate feels insulted and is further alienated. Many think this is a key reason that Trump's polling holds solid despite his often outrageous and incompetent behavior. However, Lopez avoids dealing with these pathologies of the Left, viewing himself as solidly on the Left.

But Lopez is too much into racial resentment as a cause, rather than as a symptom. For example, he claims that Robert Reich was wrong to suggest that "economic hardship is the real problem" (p. 139). Really? Suppose that the last 40 years of escalating inequality had never occurred – that everyone's incomes had almost doubled, with strong unions, manufacturing, and small businesses, general prosperity and no deaths of despair, etc. Trump's scapegoating would have gone nowhere.

Ironically, in other places Lopez endorses the "convergence theory" of Derrick Bell – that racial progress is made when common interests between blacks and white are recognized and acted upon. This is exactly what Reich recommends, along with Bernie Sanders. And, by-the-way, contrary to what Lopez claims, Bernie is hardly "colorblind" in his messaging. For example, "Medicare for All" can be interpreted as code for the inclusion of health care for blacks other minorities. In fact, you could call this a "dog whistle" for inclusion, rather than division. Likewise, the "Green New Deal" is coded to indicate good working class jobs and benefits, which, in this day and age, would include the minorities that were excluded by southern segregationists in the original New Deal. In addition, in every speech, Bernie explicitly names a variety of minorities that his programs will benefit, in addition to workers and the middle class, seeking to create solidarity against the "billionaires".