Black Politics and State Violence

Event description:
The recent, widely publicized killings of unarmed black men – most notably Michael Brown and Eric Garner – and the resulting movement with its slogan “Black Lives Matter”, puts back on the agenda of a beleaguered American Left an old, yet seemingly perennial question, one that evokes a long history of struggle, longing, and disappointment; with a black president in the White House having survived or co-opted the #Occupy Movement, the return of the Black Question to the forefront of the Left’s concerns seems to justify the suspicion that America is fundamentally, perhaps irredeemably, racist. At the same time, given the undeniable changes in American society since the Civil Rights Movement and the dismantling of Jim Crow, it seems necessary to resist simplistic answers to the difficult questions. Over-reliance on the positions and perspectives of the past threaten to obscure the precise nature of the present, above all the question of how the Left got to where it is today. This skepticism appears doubly warranted in light of the fact that the Democrats, even as presently constituted, seem decidedly out in front of this movement, likely soon to have the necessary police officials and the black vote, perhaps even the police unions, duly lined up on their side. Given these circumstances and the dangers of yet another historical round of disappointment, another course in diminishing expectations, now would seem an opportune moment to reflect on how the Black Lives Matter movement might be made to herald a genuine revival of the Left here in the United States, where it is so badly needed.

Questions:
1) Whether we’re talking about chattel slavery or Jim Crow, and perhaps, too, the current regime of public austerity and mass incarceration, the American state has perpetrated, upheld, and overseen both overtly and effectively racist policies and practices throughout its history. At the same time, this same American state – however reluctantly, or with whatever motivation – abolished slavery and enacted the progressive reforms of Radical Reconstruction with support of radical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass in 19th century, and, in the 20th, legislated out of existence the system of Jim Crow. With this history and these past struggles in mind, how do we characterize the role of the state in mediating race in America? What role does it play today?

2) While it might be tempting to say that the protest movement against the Brown and Garner killings represents an awakening to the limitations to the impact of electing of a black president or, indeed, to American electoral politics more generally, these seem to exist many circumstances that would caution against such optimism. Already the involvement of the likes of Al Sharpton and the support of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio suggest that the enthusiasm this recent movement has generated might well be channeled into the Left’s further capitulation to the clockwork of mainstream politics and, in light of the threat of Republican victory in 2016, subservience to the Democratic Party. Needless to say, the Democratic Party has a long history of political incorporation of ethnic minorities dating back to the New Deal, and it is not unlikely that the scaling back of mass incarceration, greater oversight for racial profiling, and reforms to end or soften discrimination against felons figure among the promises the Democrats will make in 2016. What can the Left do to prevent the channeling of the protest’s energy into contained efforts to pressure the Democratic Party? Can the protests be something more than that? If so, how?

3) How is class or, more simply, the economy relevant to discussions of race today? Is race a class issue? Has it always been? If so, how are either or both race and class different in the present? If not, how are do race and class relate to each other in the past and in the present? Relatedly, in what ways has the disintegration of the labor movement conditioned the form in which the black question in America is currently posed? How might the Left want to couple the current movement to the movement with which, arguably, they have been most closely linked going back at least to the “free labor ideology” of the mid-19th century Republican Party, the radical Republican project inherited by American socialists, the CPUSA, New Deal labor leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell and Bayard Rustin, and the New Communist Movement of the 1970s?