



# The Ethical Humanist

## Newsletter of the Boston Ethical Community

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### The Humanist Legacy of the African American Fight for Equality

*Leah Mickens*

*Editor' note: Leah Mickens is a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Division of Religion at Boston University. She will be speaking at BEC on March 13.*

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**T**he received wisdom in this country is that the Civil Rights Movement was essentially a religious movement, borne out of the particular charism of the entity known collectively as the "Black Church." Consequently, the Civil Rights Movement is often held up as an example of religion "doing good" or a sign that religion can be a force for social progress. However, if we look at the struggle for African-American political and social empowerment – all of it, not simply the most famous manifestation that occurred in the decades of the post-war era – it becomes clear that religious humanists (i.e.,

Unitarians and Ethical Culturalists) and other assorted freethinkers played a large role, much larger than their religious counterparts.

The most important civil rights organizations were all established by multi-racial coalitions of progressive humanists. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1908, during the tail end of what is often referred to as "the nadir of race relations," a period called such because of the dire political and economic situation of most African Americans. The previous year, a race riot had broken out in Springfield, Illinois, the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, which inspired Mary White Ovington, a white feminist and anti-racist activist from a Unitarian background, to convene a conference to discuss ways to improve the plight of the black community. The establishment of the NAACP was the result of the conference, and many of the most important American humanist leaders and thinkers

were present, including John Dewey, Jane Addams, Henry Moskowitz, Oswald Villard, Anna Garlin Spencer, and William Edward Burghardt "W.E.B." Dubois. The tactics of the NAACP, which consisted of directly challenging discriminatory laws, demanding an immediate end to segregation, and the restoration of the black male vote in the South were considered extremely controversial, not just among nervous white philanthropists, but among many black ministers, who preferred Booker T. Washington's "accommodationist" stance (i.e., focusing on industrial education and acquiring bourgeois habits, rather than demanding social or political rights).

The Urban League, another important civil rights organization, was heavily influenced by Ethical Culture ideals.

*Continued on page 4*



## The Way It Is (?)

*Marvin Miller*

### Imperialism

**T**he ethics of imperialism is similar to that of racism: one part of the human species is deemed to be superior to another part and to possess the right to dominate that other part, even, in some circumstances, to the extent of genocide.

Americans, collectively, have been ambivalent toward imperialism. Our country, as an independent country, was born in a revolution against the British empire, which made anti-imperialism an inherent part of American culture. But Americans have not been averse to American imperialism. The nickname of New York is the Empire State. The Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men are created equal", also contains a harsh insult against the entire Native American population. Such an attitude accompanied and justified the armed seizure of control over the lands inhabited by the Native Americans.

Lenin called imperialism the highest stage of capitalism. But imperialism is much older than capitalism. The ancient Chinese, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, etc. had empires.

Historically, empires were extended by marching an army into a country and

seizing control over it. This still happens, but since the two world wars it has become, to some extent, culturally disreputable. Other means have been used to effect similar results.

American imperialism beyond the borders of the U.S.A. goes back as far as the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which asserted that extension of European imperialism on the Americas was a danger to the United States, implicitly claiming the entire western hemisphere as the sphere of influence of the U.S. Since then the U.S. has intervened often in Latin America and the West Indies. We still hold a piece of Cuba and use it as a prison.

In the middle of the 19th century the U.S. took a big chunk of Mexico by armed force. At the end of the century it took Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spain.

Since the second world war the scope of American imperialism has been global. It intervened in Greece and South Korea to prevent Communist takeovers. Among government leaders removed by U.S. intervention were Allende in Chile, Lumumba in the Congo, Arbenz in Guatemala, Aristide in Haiti, Sukarno in Indonesia,

Mossadegh in Iran, and Diem in South Vietnam. Some of these removals involved assassination, the installation of tyrannical regimes, and large-scale civilian deaths.

Other countries also seek to exert power beyond their borders. The British maintained control over the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. The Russians tried to control Afghanistan. But in our era the cross-border power of other countries is tiny compared with that of the U.S.

In a humanistic view, we should side with the anti-imperialistic side of American culture. Populations should have the right to govern the places where they live and use their resources in their own interest, rather than being governed by the governments of other countries.

### Looking Ahead: Humanist of the Year 2016

The Boston Ethical Community is pleased to announce that **Juliet Schor**, Professor of Sociology at Boston College, has been named our 2016 Humanist of the Year.

Professor Schor will address the Community on April 3 at the Longy School.

## Election 2016 - History in the Making

*Andrea Perrault*

**R**obert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton, has been burning up the pages of the Huffington Post with his analyses of the current state of politics and the economy in the United States. I must say that his theories seem cogent and plausible.

In a column on January 20th "[Who Lost the White Working Class?](#)" Reich takes on Democrats for their role in the fact that white working class voters have abandoned them. While he lauds Democrats for significant victories that benefit these voters such as the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), the expanded Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Family and Medical Leave Act, he chides them for failing to change a system that has brought us to the current state of glaring income inequality. In fact, he identifies specific policies in Democrats' role in fostering this state of affairs. From free trade agreements to the diminishment of labor unions to the protection of Wall Street crooks and corporate pirates, to an inability to effect campaign finance reform, Democrats in the Clinton and Obama administrations have bolstered the power elites.

Ultimately, the Republican party has benefited from this lack of vision as the historic base of the Democratic party was splintered.

Suburbanites and urban culture elites prospered under the new economy, but the low-income and working classes fared much worse with expanded and crushing unemployment, mortgage loan crises, and the erosion of educational opportunities. While such inequities crippled many desecrating their



American dreams, the Democratic beneficiaries of the "new" order turned a blind eye to this reality. The belief that the economy was rebounding became a common chant. These voters were certainly not standing up for their former allies in the party, until the system started crashing around them as well and began to destroy their futures too.

Now Bernie Sanders is gaining support as their children join the many dispossessed for a fairer vision and a future that will support rather than bankrupt them.

While support for Bernie Sanders is Robert Reich's call

to the public, and I appreciate his sincere and accurate assessment of today's economic reality in the U.S., I cannot cast my vote for Bernie Sanders. As a woman, I feel that the United States has failed in its ability to ensure equity for women across the board, and with an opportunity to elect the first woman for U.S. President, I must stand with Hillary Clinton. In order for women to achieve greater representation in employment and in political and corporate leadership, young girls need to see that they can have a place in this society where real power exists. I want to see greater opportunity for all in this country, current income inequality be obliterated, and corporate power significantly diminished.

I believe that Hillary Clinton will deliver on these issues. I believe that she now knows that this will be her mandate. I believe that a vote for Bernie Sanders will take us back to when George McGovern and Ralph Nader worked for progressive government. I expect that such a vote would in effect be a vote for Donald Trump, and I cannot go there.

As the primary season ends and the final election season commences, I hope we all will elect a new administration that values a shifting of the economic climate to assure economic prosperity for all. We all need a break from the current system..

**Leah Mickens, continued  
from page 1**

It was established by George Edmund Haynes, a black sociologist who studied under Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler at Columbia University, and Ruth Standish Baldwin, a wealthy white Unitarian social activist, to help blacks from the rural South acclimate to life in urban industrial centers in the North, while the first president of the group was New York Ethical Culture Society leader, E. R. A. Seligman. The Urban League was also promoted interracial cooperation to solve social problems, a conception that was a widely held belief among Ethical Culturists, but was a radical notion in a

country where “separate but equal” governed most social relations between different ethnic groups.

From the end of Reconstruction until the mid-1960s, the notion of granting civil rights to blacks was considered ill-conceived at best and communist at worst. For most “orthodox” white religionists, the problem was not that Jim Crow was a soul-sucking system of oppression and degradation that made a mockery of American ideals, but that black people had the temerity to complain about being treated as second-class citizens (see Mississippi Praying: Southern White

Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975 by Carolyn Renée Dupont for more information on how Christianity was used to support racial apartheid in the South). While some black churches played crucial roles in the Civil Rights Movement, most black churches, being poor, rural, and politically impotent, remained uninvolved. Humanists need to relearn and claim their historic support for African American civil rights, rather than continue to let religionists co-opt a cause of which they remain largely indifferent.

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## Sunday Programs in March 2016

March 6

Colloquy. Check the [website](#) for details.

March 13

Leah Mickens, Boston University

*Creative Minority Report: How Humanists Changed America*



Leah Mickens is a first-year doctoral student in the Graduate Division of Religious Studies' Religion and Society track. Her research interests include the Roman Catholic Church's

evolving views on liberalism, liberal democracy and modernity, Catholic social teachings, and the rise of atheism as a popular movement.

This talk will provide an overview of the humanist movement in the twentieth century, especially as it pertains to three crucial social justice movements: the abortion law repeal/decriminalization movement, the voluntary euthanasia movement, and the early movement for African American civil rights. Although the numbers of self-proclaimed humanists has always been relatively small, this talk will show how they were able to change American society in profound ways.

## Musicians for March

**March 6** Peter Zay, cello; Anastasia Zay, violin

**March 13** Jada Y. Willard, sitar

**March 20** Suzy Giroux, voice and guitar

**March 27** Anastasia Seifetdinova, piano

March 20

Brian King, Boston Ethical Community

*Book Discussion: "[The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History](#)" by Elizabeth Kolbert*

The Earth has witnessed five mass extinctions in the past, the last one 66 million years ago. We are now in the middle of a human caused extinction event that threatens to get only worse as global climate change continues. What does this mean for life on the planet including human life?



The book is widely available in stores and libraries. Brian King will present a summary and lead the discussion. Please read the book ahead of time if you can, but it is not required for this meeting.

March 27

Charles Derber, Boston College

*The 2016 Election: Fascism, Socialism and the Working Class Voter*



Charles Derber, professor of sociology at Boston College, is a leading social critic, who has written eight widely acclaimed books.

In this talk, Professor Derber will look at the structural, cultural and ideological cross-currents shaping the election, including the shift of the GOP toward neo-Fascism, the spectacular rise of a socialist Democratic candidate, and the ways in which right and left populism are resonating to voters, especially white working class folks.

~ Program Schedule for March 2016 ~	
<b>March 6</b>	Colloquy. Please check <a href="http://www.bostonethical.org">www.bostonethical.org</a> for details.
<b>March 13</b>	Leah Mickens, Ph.D.candidate, Boston University <i>Creative Minority Report: How Humanists Changed America</i>
<b>March 20</b>	Brian King, President, Boston Ethical Community <i>"The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History" by Elizabeth Kolbert</i>
<b>March 27</b>	Charles Derber, Professor of Sociology, Boston College <i>The 2016 Election: Fascism, Socialism and the Working Class Voter</i>
<b>Sunday Meetings are held at 10:30 AM at 33 Garden St in Cambridge</b>	

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