



BEYOND GUILT & PRIVILEGE:
ABOLISHING THE WHITE RACE

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Beyond Guilt and Privilege: Abolishing the White Race

VIEWPOINT MAGAZINE

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INTRODUCTION: ON BECOMING A DIFFERENT PEOPLE ENTIRELY

Now is not the time to focus on whiteness. And yet, if our movement hopes to abolish white domination, we must at least ask what whiteness means. We should be clear on its history and effects on our social existence. Neither endless introspection among white people, nor corporate handbooks on diversity, nor a purely moral recognition of white supremacy's evils can provide such clarity. We need to examine whiteness as a *political* problem.

The materials in this pamphlet aim to move the discussion from a fixation on individual experiences of whiteness toward the broad possibilities of collective struggle for abolition and human freedom.

Abolishing white domination certainly includes abolishing specific institutions, like prisons and police. The texts here, however, taken together, suggest something more: to abolish white domination means, in fact, to abolish whiteness itself. This is because whiteness is a historically constituted institution that, by design, divides oppressed and exploited people and creates a means for some to participate in their own subordination.

The struggle against whiteness is a struggle for Black liberation, but also for the liberation of those people who currently hold tight to their whiteness. It is a struggle to reject what Noel Ignatiev calls whiteness's "barbed offering"—ostensible benefits, conferred or even imposed by the state and capital, that lead people to eschew solidarity and become further trapped in a system that cannot serve their needs.

All of this means that whiteness conceived in individual terms, in relation to simple appearance, or through static solitary figures like the "white ally" or "white accomplice," is insufficient. It also raises questions about the tactical logic of "white people to the front," and its contradictory pairing, "white people to the back." There is nothing objectionable about street discipline based on varying levels of risk, or decisions to highlight the leadership of certain people in the struggle; the issue is whether these often conflictual conceptions of the "role" of white people inadvertently reify a category that itself must be abolished. Given the recent prevalence of the white "outside agitator" trope, we might also wonder whether they create opportunities to discipline and discredit movements. When political

discussions once again come to revolve around white people, it takes the focus away from participatory multiracial struggles for abolition.

As Asad Haider argues in “White Purity,” it is not enough to invent new, supposedly “good” conceptions of whiteness and its benevolent role in the struggle. The desire to formulate and protect these roles can become a narcissistic distraction. We don’t need better whites; we need to abolish the white race. If, nevertheless, it is necessary to reflect on whiteness in order to abolish it, it must be understood as a structural and historical phenomenon, with its destruction being a necessarily *collective* project. There is no “checking yourself” out of whiteness.

It would be easy to view whiteness as simply the neutral backdrop against which racialization has historically played out in the United States. Scholars in the field of white abolition, however, like Pem Davidson Buck in the first essay of this collection, show that this is not the case. That is, whiteness, as much as any other racial category, had to be invented and propagated. This invention consisted of creating marginally superior conditions for some workers and counterposing them to the worst forms of oppression and exploitation suffered by others.

The crowning achievement of whiteness was getting its conscripts to *defend their position* as if it were a true privilege, rather than seeing it for what it is: a meager compensation that can be given and taken at will while ensuring obedience to the relations of capitalist exploitation. Seeking something more than the wages of whiteness—which, as Thuy Linh Tu and Nikhil Pal Singh argue, are growing leaner by the year—would require them to stand together with the Black, Native, and other people who were not even offered the poison bait. In short, the invention of whiteness was the creation of a grand obstacle to mass liberation.

This obstacle has been responsible for many failures and fissures in the history of working peoples’ struggles against domination and exploitation. If Black rebellion is often the spark for mass struggle in the United States, white chauvinism is a wet blanket. As Noel Ignatiev argues in the essay included here, every time white working people pursue their supposed racial interests, they damage the possibilities for interracial solidarity, and in doing so they contribute to the erosion of their own conditions as well. On the other hand, when they refuse to take the bait and instead form new political relationships through multiracial acts of rebellion, new horizons can appear, even in the most unforgiving conditions. Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin offers the example of a prison uprising in Indiana that only became possible when, in solidarity with Black inmates, white and Latino prisoners pushed out reactionary groups like the Klan, becoming in the process “a

different people entirely.” When Black prisoners then led a revolt against the penitentiary’s tortuous conditions, the Warden could no longer count on white supremacists as his shock troops.

But, as many examples also attest, abolitionist solidarity does not emerge spontaneously from the conditions of white workers. W.E.B. Du Bois, in the excerpt from *Black Reconstruction* included here, notes that in the antebellum United States, there was a fateful missed encounter between the white labor movement, socialists included, and the movement for abolition. Thus, even with an achievement as monumental as the abolition of slavery, neither white domination nor the exploitation of labor were defeated. Their institutionalized relationship instead took on new forms that shaped the struggles of the twentieth century and continue to shape our struggle today.

It takes work to weave together a collective political subject from the atomized debris of a racist capitalist system. It requires new political practices to disrupt the patterns and institutions that separate us from one another and weigh us all down. We’ve seen these practices emerge in the streets following the killing of George Floyd. We see them, as Jay Caspian Kang writes, in the daily confrontations with police that have multiplied across the country. In this edited collection, we present an additional avenue for this type of collective political work: we hope that efforts to read and re-read these texts together across social boundaries and ascribed positions, to decipher them and make use of their insights, can be a small practical step on the road to the abolition of the white race. ■

CONSTRUCTING RACE, CREATING WHITE PRIVILEGE

Pem Davidson Buck · 2001

CONSTRUCTING RACE

Improbable as it now seems, since Americans live in a society where racial characterization and self-definition appear to be parts of nature, in the early days of colonization before slavery was solidified and clearly distinguished from other forms of forced labor, Europeans and Africans seem not to have seen their physical differences that way.¹ It took until the end of the 1700s for ideas about race to develop until they resembled those we live with today. Before Bacon's Rebellion, African and European indentured servants made love with each other, married each other, ran away with each other, lived as neighbors, liked or disliked each other according to individual personality. Sometimes they died or were punished together for resisting or revolting. And masters had to free both Europeans and Africans if they survived to the end of their indentures. Likewise, Europeans initially did not place all Native Americans in a single racial category. They saw cultural, not biological differences among Native Americans as distinguishing one tribe from another and from themselves.

Given the tendency of slaves, servants, and landless free Europeans and Africans to cooperate in rebellion, the Elite had to "teach Whites the value of whiteness" in order to divide and rule their labor force.² After Bacon's Rebellion they utilized their domination of colonial legislatures

1 My discussion of the construction of race and racial slavery is deeply indebted to Lerone Bennett, *The Shaping of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 [1975]), 1-109. See also Theodore Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, vol. II, *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-American* (New York: Verso, 1997), 75-109; Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 100-1, 109, 142-3, 198; Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107-244; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 15-51.

2 Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 74-5.

that made laws and of courts that administered them, gradually building a racial strategy based on the earlier tightening and lengthening of African indenture. Part of this process was tighter control of voting. Free property-owning blacks, mulattos, and Native Americans, all identified as *not* of European ancestry, were denied the vote in 1723.³

To keep the racial categories separate, a 1691 law increased the punishment of European women who married African or Indian men; toward the end of the 1600s a white woman could be whipped or enslaved for marrying a Black. Eventually enslavement for white women was abolished because it transgressed the definition of slavery as black. The problem of what to do with white women's "black" children was eventually partially solved by the control of white women's reproduction to prevent the existence of such children. The potentially "white" children of black women were defined out of existence; they were "black" and shifted from serving a thirty-year indenture to being slaves. To facilitate these reproductive distinctions and to discourage the intimacy that can lead to solidarity and revolts, laws were passed requiring separate quarters for black and white laborers. Kathleen Brown points out that the control of women's bodies thus became critical for the maintenance of whiteness and to the production of slaves.⁴ At the same time black men were denied the rights of colonial masculinity as property ownership, guns, and access to white women were forbidden. Children were made to inherit their mother's status, freeing European fathers from any vestiges of responsibility for their offspring born to indentured or enslaved African mothers. This legal shift has had a profound effect on the distribution of wealth in the United States ever since; slaveholding fathers were some of the richest men in the country, and their wealth, distributed among *all* their children, would have created a significant wealthy black segment of the population.

At the same time a changing panoply of specific laws molded European behavior into patterns that made slave revolt and cross-race unity more and more difficult.⁵ These laws limited, for instance, the European right to teach slaves to read. Europeans couldn't use slaves in skilled jobs, which

3 Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 241.

4 Brown, *Good Wives*, pays particular attention to control of women's bodies and status in producing slavery and race (see especially 181, 129-33, 116); see also Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 128-35, 146-7, 177-88; Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 75.

5 For this section see Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 72; Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton and CO., 1975), 311-3; Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 249-53.

were reserved for Europeans. Europeans had to administer prescribed punishment for slave “misbehavior” and were expected to participate in patrolling at night. They did not have the legal right to befriend Blacks. A white servant who ran away with a Black was subject to additional punishment beyond that for simply running away. European rights to free their slaves were also curtailed.

Built into all this, rarely mentioned but nevertheless basic to the elite’s ability to create and maintain whiteness, slavery, and exploitation, was the use of force against both Blacks and Whites. Fear kept many Whites from challenging, or even questioning, the system. It is worth quoting Lerone Bennett’s analysis of how the differentiation between black and white was accomplished:

The whole system of separation and subordination rested on official state terror. The exigencies of the situation required men to kill some white people to keep them white and to kill many blacks to keep them black. In the North and South, men and women were maimed, tortured, and murdered in a comprehensive campaign of mass conditioning. The severed heads of black and white rebels were impaled on poles along the road as warnings to black and white people, and opponents of the status quo were starved to death in chains and roasted slowly over open fires. Some rebels were branded; others were castrated. This exemplary cruelty. Which was carried out as a deliberate process of mass education, was an inherent part of the new system.⁶

CREATING WHITE PRIVILEGE

White privileges were established. The “daily exercise of white personal power over black individuals had become a cherished aspect of Southern culture,” a critically important part of getting Whites to “settle for being white.”⁷ Privilege encouraged Whites to identify with the big slaveholding planters as members of the same “race.” They were led to act on the belief that all Whites had an equal interest in the maintenance of whiteness and white privilege, and that it was the elite—those controlling the economic

6 Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 73-4.

7 The first quote is from Smedley, *Race in North America*, 224; the second is from David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

system, the political system, and the judicial system—who ultimately protected the benefits of being white.⁸

More pain could be inflicted on Blacks than on Whites.⁹ Whites alone could bear arms; Whites alone had the right of self-defense. White servants could own livestock; African couldn't. It became illegal to whip naked Whites. Whites but not Africans had to be given their freedom dues at the end of their indenture. Whites were given the right to beat any Blacks, even those they didn't own, for failing to show proper respect. Only Whites could be hired to force black labor as overseers. White servants and laborers were given the right to control “their” women without elite interference; Blacks as slaves were denied the right to family at all, since family would mean that slave husbands, not owners, controlled slave wives. In 1668, all free African women were defined as labor, for whom husbands or employers had to pay a tithe, while white women were defined as keepers of men's homes, not as labor; their husbands paid no tax on them. White women were indirectly given control of black slaves and the right to substitute slave labor for their own labor in the fields.

Despite these privileges, landless Whites, some of them living in “miserable huts,” might have rejected white privilege if they saw that in fact it made little *positive* difference in their lives, and instead merely protected them from the worst *negative* effects of elite punishment and interference, such as were inflicted on those of African descent.¹⁰ After all, the right to whip someone doesn't cure your own hunger or landlessness. By the end of the Revolutionary War unrest was in the air. Direct control by the elite was no longer politically or militarily feasible. Rebellions and attempted rebellions had been fairly frequent in the hundred years following Bacon's Rebellion.¹¹ They indicated the continuing depth of landless European discontent. Baptist ferment against belief in the inherent superiority of the upper classes simply underscored the danger.¹²

8 Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 152, 248-53, emphasizes that elites invented white supremacy to protect their own interest, although working-class Whites did much of the “dirty work” of oppression.

9 Morgan, *American Slavery*, 312-3. On white privileges see Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 67-8' Allen, *Invention* vol. II, 250-3; Brown, *Good Wives*, 180-3.

10 The quote is from Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 256, citing a contemporary traveler.

11 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995, 2nd ed.), 58.

12 Smedley, *Race in North America*, 174-5.

So landless Europeans had to be given some *material* reason to reject those aspects of their lives that made them similar to landless Africans and Native Americans, and to focus instead on their similarity to the landed Europeans—to accept whiteness as their defining characteristic. Landless Europeans’ only real similarity to the elite was their European ancestry itself, so that ancestry had to be given real significance: European ancestry was identified with upward mobility and the right to use the labor of the non-eligible in their upward climb. So, since land at that time was the source of upward mobility, land had to be made available, if only to a few.

Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson advocated the establishment of a solid white Anglo-Saxon yeoman class of small farmers, who, as property owners would acquire a vested interest in law and order and reject class conflict with the elite. These small farmers would, by upholding “law and order,” support and sometimes administer the legal mechanisms—jails, workhouses and poorhouses, and vagrancy laws—that would control other Whites who would remain a landless labor force. They would support the legal and illegal mechanisms controlling Native Americans, Africans, and poor Whites, becoming a buffer class between the elite and those they most exploited disguising the elite’s continuing grip on power and wealth...

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WAGE

The initial construction of whiteness had been based on a material benefit for Whites: land, or the apparently realistic hope of land. By the 1830s and 1840s, most families identified by their European descent had had several generations of believing their whiteness was real. But its material benefit had faded. Many Whites were poor, selling their labor either as farm renters or industrial workers, and they feared wage slavery, no longer certain they were much freer than slaves.¹³ But this time, to control unrest, the elite had no material benefits they were willing to part with. Nor were employers willing to raise wages. Instead, politicians and elites emphasized whiteness as a benefit in itself.

The work of particular white intellectuals, who underscored the already existing belief in white superiority and the worries about white slavery, was funded by elites and published in elite-owned printing houses.¹⁴ These intellectuals provided fodder for newspaper discussions, speeches, scientific analysis, novels, sermons, songs, and blackface minstrel shows in which white superiority was phrased as if whiteness in and of itself was naturally

¹³ Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 10, 44-5.

¹⁴ Allen, *Invention*, vol. I, 109.

a benefit, despite its lack of material advantage. This sense of superiority allowed struggling northern Whites to look down their noses at free Blacks and at recent immigrants, particularly the Irish. This version of whiteness was supposed to make up for their otherwise difficult situation, providing them with a “psychological wage” instead of cash—a bit like being employed of the month and given a special parking place instead of a raise.

Many Whites bought into the psychological wage, expressing their superiority over non-Whites and defining them, rather than capitalists, as the enemy. They focused, often with trade union help, on excluding Blacks and immigrants from skilled trades and better-paying jobs. Employers cooperated in confining Blacks and immigrants to manual labor and domestic work, making a clear definition of work suitable for white men.¹⁵ Native white men began shifting away from defining themselves by their landowning freedom and independence. Instead they accepted their dependence on capitalists and the control employers exercised over their lives, and began to define themselves by their class position as skilled “mechanics” working for better wages under better working conditions than other people. They became proud of their productivity, which grew with the growing efficiency of industrial technology, and began using it to define whiteness—and manhood. The ethic of individual hard work gained far wider currency. Successful competition in the labor marketplace gradually became a mark of manhood, and “white man’s work” became the defining characteristic of whiteness.¹⁶ Freedom was equated with the right to own and sell your own labor, as opposed to slavery, which allowed neither right. Independence was now defined not only by property ownership but also by possession of skill and tools that allowed wage-earning men to acquire status as a head of household controlling dependents.¹⁷

15 On runaways see Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 217; Smedley, *Race*, 103-5; Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 55.

16 On the tendency to make common cause, see Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 148-58; Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, 19-22, 74. On increasing anger and landlessness, see Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 208-9, 343 n. 33; Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 62.

17 Berkeley is quoted in Takaki, *Different Mirror*, 63.

This redefinition of whiteness was built as much on changing gender as on changing class relationships.¹⁸ Many native white men and women, including workers, journalists, scientists, and politicians, began discouraging married women from working for wages, claiming that true women served only their own families. Despite this claim—the cult of domesticity, or of true womanhood—many wives of working class men actually did work outside the home. They were less likely to do so in those cases where native men were able, through strikes and the exclusion of women, immigrants, and free Blacks, to create an artificial labor shortage. Such shortages gave native working class men the leverage to force employers to pay them to afford a non-earning wife. Women in the families of such men frequently did “stay home” and frequently helped to promote the idea that people who couldn’t do the same were genetically or racially or culturally inferior.

But native Whites whose wages actually weren’t sufficient struggled on in poverty. If a native woman worked for wages, particularly in a factory, the family lost status. Many female factory workers were now immigrants rather than native Whites. Many had no husband or had husbands whose wages, when they could get work, came nowhere near supporting a family.¹⁹ It is no wonder immigrant women weren’t particularly “domestic.” Such families didn’t meet the cultural requirements for white privilege—male “productivity” in “white man’s work” and dependent female “domesticity.” These supposed white virtues became a bludgeon with which to defend white privilege and to deny it to not-quite-Whites and not-Whites, helping to construct a new working class hierarchy. This new hierarchy reserved managerial and skilled jobs for “productive” native Whites. So for the price of reserving better jobs for some native Whites, the capitalist class gained native white consent to their own loss of independence and to keeping most of the working class on abysmally low wages.

In the South, where there was less industry, the psychological wage slowly developed an additional role. It was used not only to gain consent to oppressive industrial relations, but also to convince poor farming Whites to

18 On Bacon’s Rebellion see Takaki, *Different Mirror*, 63-5; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 254-70; Allen, *Invention*, vol. II, 163-5, 208-17, 239; Brown, *Good Wives*, 137-86. Although interpretations of the rebellion vary widely, it does seem clear that the frightening aspect of the rebellion for those who controlled the drainage system was its dramatic demonstration of the power of united opposition to those who monopolized land, labor, and trade with Native Americans.

19 Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 77, 104-17.

support Southern elites in their conflict with North elites. Du Bois points out that by the Civil War

... it became the fashion to pat the disenfranchised poor white man on the back and tell him after all he was white and that he and the planters had a common object in keeping the white man superior. This virus increased bitterness and relentless hatred, and after the war it became a chief ingredient in the division of the working class in the Southern States.²⁰



²⁰ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 271-9.

THE WHITE WORKER

W. E. B. Du Bois · 1935

The opportunity for real and new democracy in America was broad. Political power was at first as usual confined to property holders and an aristocracy of birth and learning. But it was never securely based on land. Land was free and both land and property were possible to nearly every thrifty worker. Schools began early to multiply and open their doors even to the poor laborer. Birth began to count for less and less and America became to the world a land of opportunity. So the world came to America, even before the Revolution, and afterward during the nineteenth century, nineteen million immigrants entered the United States.

The new labor that came to the United States, while it was poor, used to oppression and accustomed to a low standard of living, was not willing, after it reached America, to regard itself as a permanent laboring class and it is in the light of this fact that the labor movement among white Americans must be studied. The successful, well-paid American laboring class formed, because of its property and ideals, a petty bourgeoisie ready always to join capital in exploiting common labor, white and black, foreign and native. The more energetic and thrifty among the immigrants caught the prevalent American idea that here labor could become emancipated from the necessity of continuous toil and that an increasing proportion could join the class of exploiters, that is of those who made their income chiefly by profit derived through the hiring of labor.

Abraham Lincoln expressed this idea frankly at Hartford, in March, 1860. He said:

“I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat boat—just what might happen to any poor man’s son.” Then followed the characteristic philosophy of the time: “I want every man to have his chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him. That is the true system.”

He was enunciating the widespread American idea of the son rising to a higher economic level than the father; of the chance for the poor man to accumulate wealth and power, which made the European doctrine of a

working class fighting for the elevation of all workers seem not only less desirable but even less possible for average workers than they had formerly considered it.

These workers came to oppose slavery not so much from moral as from the economic fear of being reduced by competition to the level of slaves. They wanted a chance to become capitalists; and they found that chance threatened by the competition of a working class whose status at the bottom of the economic structure seemed permanent and inescapable. At first, black slavery jarred upon them, and as early as the seventeenth century German immigrants to Pennsylvania asked the Quakers innocently if slavery was in accord with the Golden Rule. Then, gradually, as succeeding immigrants were thrown in difficult and exasperating competition with black workers, their attitude changed. These were the very years when the white worker was beginning to understand the early American doctrine of wealth and property; to escape the liability of imprisonment for debt, and even to gain the right of universal suffrage. He found pouring into cities like New York and Philadelphia emancipated Negroes with low standards of living, competing for the jobs which the lower class of unskilled white laborers wanted.

For the immediate available jobs, the Irish particularly competed and the employers because of race antipathy and sympathy with the South did not wish to increase the number of Negro workers, so long as the foreigners worked just as cheaply. The foreigners in turn blamed blacks for the cheap price of labor. The result was race war; riots took place which were at first simply the flaming hostility of groups of laborers fighting for bread and butter; then they turned into race riots. For three days in Cincinnati in 1829, a mob of whites wounded and killed free Negroes and fugitive slaves and destroyed property. Most of the black population, numbering over two thousand, left the city and trekked to Canada. In Philadelphia, 1828–1840, a series of riots took place which thereafter extended until after the Civil War. The riot of 1834 took the dimensions of a pitched battle and lasted for three days. Thirty-one houses and two churches were destroyed. Other riots took place in 1835 and 1838 and a two days' riot in 1842 caused the calling out of the militia with artillery.

In the forties came quite a different class, the English and German workers, who had tried by organization to fight the machine and in the end had to some degree envisaged the Marxian reorganization of industry through trade unions and class struggle. The attitude of these people toward the Negro was varied and contradictory. At first they blurted out their disapprobation of slavery on principle. It was a phase of all wage slavery. Then

they began to see a way out for the worker in America through the free land of the West. Here was a solution such as was impossible in Europe: plenty of land, rich land, land coming daily nearer its own markets, to which the worker could retreat and restore the industrial balance ruined in Europe by the expropriation of the worker from the soil. Or in other words, the worker in America saw a chance to increase his wage and regulate his conditions of employment much greater than in Europe. The trade unions could have a material backing that they could not have in Germany, France or England. This thought, curiously enough, instead of increasing the sympathy for the slave turned it directly into rivalry and enmity.

The wisest of the leaders could not clearly envisage just how slave labor in conjunction and competition with free labor tended to reduce all labor toward slavery. For this reason, the union and labor leaders gravitated toward the political party which opposed tariff bounties and welcomed immigrants, quite forgetting that this same Democratic party had as its backbone the planter oligarchy of the South with its slave labor.

The new immigrants in their competition with this group reflected not simply the general attitude of America toward colored people, but particularly they felt a threat of slave competition which these Negroes foreshadowed. The Negroes worked cheaply, partly from custom, partly as their only defense against competition. The white laborers realized that Negroes were part of a group of millions of workers who were slaves by law, and whose competition kept white labor out of the work of the South and threatened its wages and stability in the North. When now the labor question moved West, and became a part of the land question, the competition of black men became of increased importance. Foreign laborers saw more clearly than most Americans the tremendous significance of free land in abundance, such as America possessed, in open contrast to the land monopoly of Europe. But here on this free land, they met not only a few free Negro workers, but the threat of a mass of slaves. The attitude of the West toward Negroes, therefore, became sterner than that of the East. Here was the possibility of direct competition with slaves, and the absorption of Western land into the slave system. This must be resisted at all costs, but beyond this, even free Negroes must be discouraged. On this the Southern poor white immigrants insisted.

In the meantime, the problem of the black worker had not ceased to trouble the conscience and the economic philosophy of America. That the worker should be a bond slave was fundamentally at variance with the American doctrine, and the demand for the abolition of slavery had been continuous since the Revolution. In the North, it had resulted in

freeing gradually all of the Negroes. But the comparatively small number of those thus freed was being augmented now by fugitive slaves from the South, and manifestly the ultimate plight of the black worker depended upon the course of Southern slavery. There arose, then, in the thirties, and among thinkers and workers, a demand that slavery in the United States be immediately abolished.

This demand became epitomized in the crusade of William Lloyd Garrison, himself a poor printer, but a man of education, thought and indomitable courage. This movement was not primarily a labor movement or a matter of profit and wage. It simply said that under any condition of life, the reduction of a human being to real estate was a crime against humanity of such enormity that its existence must be immediately ended. After emancipation there would come questions of labor, wage and political power. But now, first, must be demanded that ordinary human freedom and recognition of essential manhood which slavery blasphemously denied. This philosophy of freedom was a logical continuation of the freedom philosophy of the eighteenth century which insisted that Freedom was not an End but an indispensable means to the beginning of human progress and that democracy could function only after the dropping of feudal privileges, monopoly and chains.

The propaganda which made the abolition movement terribly real was the Fugitive Slave—the piece of intelligent humanity who could say: I have been owned like an ox. I stole my own body and now I am hunted by law and lash to be made an ox again. By no conception of justice could such logic be answered. Nevertheless, at the same time white labor, while it attempted no denial but even expressed faint sympathy, saw in this fugitive slave and in the millions of slaves behind him, willing and eager to work for less than current wage, competition for their own jobs. What they failed to comprehend was that the black man enslaved was an even more formidable and fatal competitor than the black man free.

Here, then, were two labor movements: the movement to give the black worker a minimum legal status which would enable him to sell his own labor, and another movement which proposed to increase the wage and better the condition of the working class in America, now largely composed of foreign immigrants, and dispute with the new American capitalism the basis upon which the new wealth was to be divided. Broad philanthropy and a wide knowledge of the elements of human progress would have led these two movements to unite and in their union to become irresistible. It was difficult, almost impossible, for this to be clear to the white labor leaders of the thirties. They had their particularistic grievances and one

of these was the competition of free Negro labor. Beyond this they could easily vision a new and tremendous competition of black workers after all the slaves became free. What they did not see nor understand was that this competition was present and would continue and would be emphasized if the Negro continued as a slave worker. On the other hand, the Abolitionists did not realize the plight of the white laborer, especially the semi-skilled and unskilled worker.

* * *

In all this consideration, we have so far ignored the white workers of the South and we have done this because the labor movement ignored them and the abolitionists ignored them; and above all, they were ignored by Northern capitalists and Southern planters. They were in many respects almost a forgotten mass of men. Cairnes describes the slave South, the period just before the war:

It resolves itself into three classes, broadly distinguished from each other, and connected by no common interest—the slaves on whom devolves all the regular industry, the slaveholders who reap all its fruits, and an idle and lawless rabble who live dispersed over vast plains in a condition little removed from absolute barbarism.

From all that has been written and said about the antebellum South, one almost loses sight of about 5,000,000 white people in 1860 who lived in the South and held no slaves. Even among the two million slave-holders, an oligarchy of 8,000 really ruled the South, while as an observer said: “For twenty years, I do not recollect ever to have seen or heard these non-slaveholding whites referred to by the Southern gentleman as constituting any part of what they called the South.” They were largely ignorant and degraded; only 25% could read and write.

The condition of the poor whites has been many times described:

A wretched log hut or two are the only habitations in sight. Here reside, or rather take shelter, the miserable cultivators of the ground, or a still more destitute class who make a precarious living by peddling ‘lightwood’ in the city ...

These cabins ... are dens of filth. The bed if there be a bed is a layer of something in the corner that defies scenting. If the bed is nasty, what of the floor? What of the whole enclosed space? What of the creatures themselves? Pough! Water in use as a purifier is unknown. Their faces are bedaubed with the muddy accumulation of weeks. They just give them

a wipe when they see a stranger to take off the blackest dirt. ... The poor wretches seem startled when you address them, and answer your questions cowering like culprits.

Olmsted said: "I saw as much close packing, filth and squalor, in certain blocks inhabited by laboring whites in Charleston, as I have witnessed in any Northern town of its size; and greater evidences of brutality and ruffianly character, than I have ever happened to see, among an equal population of this class, before."

Two classes of poor whites have been differentiated: the mountain whites and the poor whites of the lowlands.

Below a dirty and ill-favored house, down under the bank on the shingle near the river, sits a family of five people, all ill-clothed and unclean; a bleary-eyed old woman, a younger woman with a mass of tangled red hair hanging about her shoulders, indubitably suckling a baby; a little girl with the same auburn evidence of Scotch ancestry; a boy, and a younger child all gathered about a fire made among some bricks, surrounding a couple of iron saucepans, in which is a dirty mixture looking like mud, but probably warmed-up sorghum syrup, which with a few pieces of corn pone, makes their breakfast.

Most of them are illiterate and more than correspondingly ignorant. Some of them had Indian ancestors and a few bear evidences of Negro blood. The so-called 'mountain boomer,' says an observer, 'has little self-respect and no self-reliance ... so long as his corn pile lasts the 'cracker' lives in contentment, feasting on a sort of hoe cake made of grated corn meal mixed with salt and water and baked before the hot coals, with addition of what game the forest furnishes him when he can get up the energy to go out and shoot or trap it. ... The irregularities of their moral lives cause them no sense of shame. ... But, notwithstanding these low moral conceptions, they are of an intense religious excitability.

Above this lowest mass rose a middle class of poor whites in the making. There were some small farmers who had more than a mere sustenance and yet were not large planters. There were overseers. There was a growing class of merchants who traded with the slaves and free Negroes and became in many cases larger traders, dealing with the planters for the staple crops. Some poor whites rose to the professional class, so that the rift between the planters and the mass of the whites was partially bridged by this smaller intermediate class.

While revolt against the domination of the planters over the poor whites was voiced by men like Helper, who called for a class struggle to destroy the planters, this was nullified by deep-rooted antagonism to the Negro, whether slave or free. If black labor could be expelled from the United States or eventually exterminated, then the fight against the planter could take place. But the poor whites and their leaders could not for a moment contemplate a fight of united white and black labor against the exploiters. Indeed, the natural leaders of the poor whites, the small farmer, the merchant, the professional man, the white mechanic and slave overseer, were bound to the planters and repelled from the slaves and even from the mass of the white laborers in two ways: first, they constituted the police patrol who could ride with planters and now and then exercise unlimited force upon recalcitrant or runaway slaves; and then, too, there was always a chance that they themselves might also become planters by saving money, by investment, by the power of good luck; and the only heaven that attracted them was the life of the great Southern planter.

There were a few weak associations of white mechanics, such as printers and shipwrights and iron molders, in 1850–1860, but practically no labor movement in the South.

Charles Nordhoff states that he was told by a wealthy Alabaman, in 1860, that the planters in his region were determined to discontinue altogether the employment of free mechanics. “On my own place,” he said, “I have slave carpenters, slave blacksmiths, and slave wheel-wrights, and thus I am independent of free mechanics.” And a certain Alfred E. Mathews remarks: “I have seen free white mechanics obliged to stand aside while their families were suffering for the necessaries of life, when the slave mechanics, owned by rich and influential men, could get plenty of work; and I have heard these same white mechanics breathe the most bitter curses against the institution of slavery and the slave aristocracy.”

The resultant revolt of the poor whites, just as the revolt of the slaves, came through migration. And their migration, instead of being restricted, was freely encouraged. As a result, the poor whites left the South in large numbers. In 1860, 399,700 Virginians were living out of their native state. From Tennessee, 344,765 emigrated; from North Carolina, 272,606, and from South Carolina, 256,868. The majority of these had come to the Middle West and it is quite possible that the Southern states sent as many settlers to the West as the Northeastern states, and while the Northeast demanded free soil, the Southerners demanded not only free soil but the exclusion of Negroes from work and the franchise. They had a very vivid fear of the Negro as a competitor in labor, whether slave or free.

It was thus the presence of the poor white Southerner in the West that complicated the whole Free Soil movement in its relation to the labor movement. While the Western pioneer was an advocate of extreme democracy and equalitarianism in his political and economic philosophy, his vote and influence did not go to strengthen the abolition-democracy, before, during, or even after the war. On the contrary, it was stopped and inhibited by the doctrine of race, and the West, therefore, long stood against that democracy in industry which might have emancipated labor in the United States, because it did not admit to that democracy the American citizen of Negro descent.

Thus Northern workers were organizing and fighting industrial integration in order to gain higher wages and shorter hours, and more and more they saw economic salvation in the rich land of the West. A Western movement of white workers and pioneers began and was paralleled by a Western movement of planters and black workers in the South. Land and more land became the cry of the Southern political leader, with finally a growing demand for reopening of the African slave trade. Land, more land, became the cry of the peasant farmer in the North. The two forces met in Kansas, and in Kansas civil war began.

The South was fighting for the protection and expansion of its agrarian feudalism. For the sheer existence of slavery, there must be a continual supply of fertile land, cheaper slaves, and such political power as would give the slave status full legal recognition and protection, and annihilate the free Negro. The Louisiana Purchase had furnished slaves and land, but most of the land was in the Northwest. The foray into Mexico had opened an empire, but the availability of this land was partly spoiled by the loss of California to free labor. This suggested a proposed expansion of slavery toward Kansas, where it involved the South in competition with white labor: a competition which endangered the slave status, encouraged slave revolt, and increased the possibility of fugitive slaves.

It was a war to determine how far industry in the United States should be carried on under a system where the capitalist owns not only the nation's raw material, not only the land, but also the laborer himself; or whether the laborer was going to maintain his personal freedom, and enforce it by growing political and economic independence based on widespread ownership of land.

This brings us down to the period of the Civil War. Up to the time that the war actually broke out, American labor simply refused, in the main, to envisage black labor as a part of its problem. Right up to the edge of the war, it was talking about the emancipation of white labor and the organization

of stronger unions without saying a word, or apparently giving a thought, to four million black slaves. During the war, labor was resentful. Workers were forced to fight in a strife between capitalists in which they had no interest and they showed their resentment in the peculiarly human way of beating and murdering the innocent victims of it all, the black free Negroes of New York and other Northern cities; while in the South, five million non-slaveholding poor white farmers and laborers sent their manhood by the thousands to fight and die for a system that had degraded them equally with the black slave. Could one imagine anything more paradoxical than this whole situation?

America thus stepped forward in the first blossoming of the modern age and added to the Art of Beauty, gift of the Renaissance, and to Freedom of Belief, gift of Martin Luther and Leo X, a vision of democratic self-government: the domination of political life by the intelligent decision of free and self-sustaining men. What an idea and what an area for its realization—endless land of richest fertility, natural resources such as Earth seldom exhibited before, a population infinite in variety, of universal gift, burned in the fires of poverty and caste, yearning toward the Unknown God; and self-reliant pioneers, unafraid of man or devil. It was the Supreme Adventure, in the last Great Battle of the West, for that human freedom which would release the human spirit from lower lust for mere meat, and set it free to dream and sing.

And then some unjust God leaned, laughing, over the ramparts of heaven and dropped a black man in the midst.

It transformed the world. It turned democracy back to Roman Imperialism and Fascism; it restored caste and oligarchy; it replaced freedom with slavery and withdrew the name of humanity from the vast majority of human beings.

But not without struggle. Not without writhing and rending of spirit and pitiable wail of lost souls. They said: Slavery was wrong but not all wrong; slavery must perish and not simply move; God made black men; God made slavery; the will of God be done; slavery to the glory of God and black men as his servants and ours; slavery as a way to freedom—the freedom of blacks, the freedom of whites; white freedom as the goal of the world and black slavery as the path thereto. Up with the white world, down with the black!

Then came this battle called Civil War, beginning in Kansas in 1854, and ending in the presidential election of 1876—twenty awful years. The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. The whole weight of America was thrown to color caste.

The colored world went down before England, France, Germany, Russia, Italy and America. A new slavery arose. The upward moving of white labor was betrayed into wars for profit based on color caste. Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk. Indeed, the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded, and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863. The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world's laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression. And this book seeks to tell that story.

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY



MORBID CAPITALISM AND ITS RACIAL SYMPTOMS

Thuy Linh Tu & Nikhil Pal Singh · 2018

Leaning over her iron Sherry looks almost lost in the cavernous space of Mill Store, the discount T-shirt shop she manages in Florence, Alabama. While women browse the racks, Sherry shuttles between the front and back rooms, restocking the floor and finishing a custom order. Saturdays are busy, and the customized T-shirts she's working on have become very popular, but Sherry likes it that way. She loves this job and hopes business stays good. Before she sold shirts, Sherry sewed them. Thousands of people in Florence did. The shop is actually housed in the former Tee Jays factory, once the largest privately owned T-shirt manufacturer in the US. After a series of layoffs beginning in the 1990s, workers showed up one morning in 2005 to locked doors and a CLOSED sign. Women like Sherry scattered to a series of short-term jobs. She answered phones in a local shop, studied to become a hairdresser, started a pool-lining-recycling business, and even came back to sewing at a small manufacturer for a while. Then she lucked into Mill Store. "It's a good job," she says, looking around at her empire of cotton, all imported from Central America.

People like Sherry make up the "white working class" that has been at the center of fervid political discussion since Donald Trump's victory in 2016. She has lived in Lauderdale County her whole life, a county that is more than 80 percent white, and where Republicans now hold most local offices. A single mom without a college education, she has struggled to pay the bills. Sewing used to be the way people in Florence made ends meet: as a local saying used to have it, you go to high school graduation on Saturday and start at Tee Jays on Monday. By the time Tee Jays, the third-largest employer in the area, finally closed, up to two thousand workers had lost their jobs. In an area that used to hum with garment production, 25 percent of Florence's forty thousand residents now live at or below the poverty line.

Before NAFTA, Muscle Shoals supported more than 10 percent of the approximately fifty thousand apparel-industry jobs in the state. Promises to bring manufacturing back and to keep terrorists and immigrants out played well here. During the election, more than 70 percent of Lauderdale

County voters went for Trump. But if people like Sherry helped to hand Trump the presidency, as well as make longtime Alabama senator Jeff Sessions the attorney general, she is in no hurry to get back on the sewing machine. Her dream is to open a second Mill Store.

The white working class has become a visible and burdened figure in the current moment. Whites with no more than a high school education, sizable percentages of whom voted for Obama, have been widely cited as tipping the scales in favor of Trump, particularly in Midwest swing states. Researchers and commentators have tried to track the white worker's political intentions, economic potential, demographic fate, and ethnographic truth, which suggests how critical this figure has become to making sense of the current moment. And it isn't just the fortunes of the Trump Administration that are bound up with white workers. The health of the white working class has become a cipher for the well-being of American capitalism itself.

Concern about the health of America has not been purely metaphoric. In a widely circulated study in 2016, the economists Ann Case and Angus Deaton identified a dramatic and unprecedented rise in midlife mortality rates for non-Hispanic whites in the United States. This rate has been growing, despite a steady decline in mortality across the industrialized world and among other demographic groups in the US. Case and Deaton peg this sudden increase in white mortality to what they call "deaths of despair"—characterized by rising rates of suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol poisoning and linked to "morbidity increases," that is, self-reported health deterioration, including chronic pain and other everyday struggles.

Spanning 1999–2013, the period of Case and Deaton's study overlaps with the collapse of manufacturing in states like Alabama, and it follows the longer slope of American economic decline since the 1970s: the now-familiar story of low growth, stagnant wages, rising income inequality, declining union strength, disappearing industrial work, reduced public and social-welfare spending, and the coup de grâce of the 2008 financial crash, which eviscerated savings tied to home equity.

Though they acknowledge this coincidence, Case and Deaton argue that purely economic reasons aren't sufficient to explain white health outcomes. They speculate that the economy's long downturn may have led to "cumulative disadvantages over life" for whites with lower income and education, and "bred a sense of hopelessness" in this once-advantaged group. Embedded in Case and Deaton's "narrative of deterioration," then, is a narrative of racial declension. Poorer, non-college-educated black and Hispanics have suffered the same economic weakness without experiencing

rising mortality and morbidity. Instead, white mortality has risen, and has closed the “racial gap” in life expectancy. Health disparities used to tell the story of white privilege. The apparent narrowing of these inequalities now highlights “white vulnerability.”

The day after the election, the New York Times said Trump’s victory “electrified the country’s white majority and mustered its full strength against long-term demographic decay,” referring to their declining share of the electorate, even though whites still compose 70 percent of voters. If “black lives matter” became a slogan of the late Obama years, a peculiar feature of Trump’s rise is the targeted reassertion of white fragility and victimization. Liberal thinkers like Mark Lilla even draw direct equations between the two, accusing Black Lives Matter activists of “Mau-Mau” tactics. “As soon as you cast an issue exclusively in terms of identity you invite your adversary to do the same,” he claims.

Accounts such as these betray a racial anxiety never far from the surface of American political life. Both the modern Republican Party, and—until very recently—the politically centrist Democratic Party have solicited white-identified constituencies through dog-whistle invocations of black fecklessness or criminality, in order to advance welfare reform, intensified policing, mass incarceration, and the like. Obama’s ascendancy marked a rhetorical sea change, but even he took pains to present himself as a President for all, and he occasionally used his status to give standard speeches in which he dressed down blacks for derelict parenting and expensive sneaker and video-game purchases.

Obama’s vexed relationship to racial politics—symbolized, toward the end of his term, by the rise of militant black-led movements against prisons and police brutality—had a corollary in the surge of militant white-led movements emphasizing loss of status and country, exemplified by the rise of the Tea Party and Trump’s “birther” campaign. Political scientists John Sides and Michael Tesler argue that during the 2016 Republican primaries, survey respondents who affirmed the idea that whites tended to be “treated unfairly” were likely to vote for Trump over other candidates. A majority of white evangelicals (who voted overwhelmingly for Trump in the general election) had come to believe that Christians face “a lot” of discrimination in the United States. Among those who said their identity as whites was extremely important to them, 81 percent intended to vote for Trump in the 2016 primaries. Meanwhile, at the extremes pro-Trump “alt-right” groups parade behind slogans like “You will not replace us,” as well as the specter of “white genocide.”

Though it seemed to provide supporting evidence for the rise of white-supremacist politics, neo-Nazism, and Trump himself, Case and Deaton's paper has been subject to a number of fundamental challenges. In certain readings of the data, the statistics don't hold up: increases in mortality appear only among white women, and are mostly confined to the South and the Midwest. But the problem is also moral and political. Why, many have asked, does white mortality matter so much when black deaths (not to mention stubbornly high rates of black poverty, unemployment, and incarceration) continue unabated?

But to fixate on racial disparities—whether still open or rapidly closing—misses the point. Writing about white political dispositions in an earlier period, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that postbellum working-class and poorer white Americans received “a public and psychological wage,” withheld from African Americans and other stigmatized racial groups. He meant that whiteness secured certain expectations and assurances of material and social gains, including access to stable wages and a monopoly on public goods. What we are seeing in this moment is not a literal diminishment of white bodies, but the stagnation of these wages of whiteness.

White Americans remain political, economic, and psychic beneficiaries of these wages. (Look at most corporate boards, newsrooms, academic departments, and congressional delegations.) But for whites at the bottom, the decline in the standard of living—and even the conditions of livability—is hard to ignore. For them, not only jobs and affordable housing have disappeared; education and clean water can't be counted on, as they used to be. The sudden reversal in midlife white mortality is just another sign of how deeply the latest phase of capitalism reaches into the lives of the majority of Americans, eroding the pretense and protective covering that whiteness once promised some of them.

The wages of whiteness were generated through black enslavement, expropriation of indigenous land, migration of low-wage laborers from Asia and Latin America, and, following the abolition of slavery, segregated housing, segmented labor markets, and unequal education. Today, these legacies of black subordination produce diminishing returns. Law-and-order policies, and the mass incarceration of black bodies, paid dividends to municipal bondholders, public prosecutors, and prison-guard unions (often the only source of jobs in the towns where prisons dominate). But the same policies also locked up and disenfranchised millions of poor Americans, across the board. Predatory lenders who targeted black home-buyers fueled a housing bubble that, once popped, wiped out the

savings of millions of homeowners indiscriminately. More and more poor and working-class people across the color line are being overwhelmed.

In a time when white privilege is no longer clearly sustained or—perhaps more to the point—measured by black subjugation, when white workers, too, face the fallout from the declining price of labor globally, in what many have termed the “race to the bottom,” there is a kind of convergence happening. Yet the depiction and discussion of this shared material decline (including in studies like that of Case and Deaton) remains captive to racial comparisons and categories, as if these were discrete, neutral, and empirically valid descriptions, rather than categories morally and politically freighted with a history of inequality that shapes the meaning of the conclusions drawn from them. It’s becoming increasingly clear, though, that our racially comparative but still segregated ways of knowing and doing politics no longer serve us very well.

Trump has promised a return to American greatness through a reinflation of the wages of whiteness. Perhaps recognizing that antiblack themes no longer shock, his rhetoric accentuates the idea that foreign invaders—Mexicans, Muslims, and Chinese—are stealing Americans’ birthright. (Trump has even blamed Chinese and Mexicans for the opioid crisis.) In the wake of white racist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, which prompted the collapse of Trump’s advisory council on US manufacturing, we can see more clearly how damaging and counterproductive his efforts to renew white identity politics actually is. Terminal whiteness will not be restored to its past glories by reindustrialization, border walls, or the repeated invocation of racial enemies (old or new). That these ideas are now put forth as answers to economic distress merely reflects a deepening of morbid symptoms that have come to define America’s racial-capitalist order over the past several decades. Our collective survival urgently depends on finding another course.

* * *

Since the 2016 election, there has been a continuous, perhaps unresolvable, debate about whether deepening economic distress or ingrained racism led many whites to back Trump. Seen from the former empire of cotton in the US South, where surplus was extracted from black bodies, and industrial progress and good wages were allocated to whites who had only their own labor to sell, the notion that there would only be two opposed readings is impossibly simple. [...]

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his recent essay “The First White President,” wrote, “Black workers suffer because it was and is our lot. But when white workers suffer, something in nature has gone awry.” It’s not nature, though, that has produced the racial differentiation in wealth or health. What places like Alabama, which comprise a disproportionate number of communities described by economists simply as “distressed,” show is that whiteness is not an all-powerful “amulet”—to use Coates’s evocative word—whose energies can be conserved effortlessly through time. The open secret that Trump’s politics conceal is that white privilege no longer provides much protection from economic insecurity.

If the economic struggles of white Americans like Sherry are now more visible, it doesn’t mean she is specially or inexplicably vulnerable. Her challenges do not make her unique; they make her more like everyone else. To be a working person in America today is increasingly to join the ranks of workers everywhere. Such a realization is perhaps the first step toward generating the forms of collective political will and solidarity to chart a different course. Sherry herself understands that there is little to exempt her from the crisis that has engulfed her town and region. She knows that the ground continues to shift beneath her. “I hope it works out,” she says about Mill Store. But hedging her bets, she adds, “I don’t rule it out that I would go back to sewing, if I had to.” ■

WHITE PURITY

Asad Haider · 2017

Among other things, whiteness is a kind of solipsism. From right to left, whites consistently and successfully reroute every political discussion to their identity. The content of this identity, unsurprisingly, is left unexamined and undefined. It is the false foundation of the prototypically American model of pseudo-politics.

The most insidious form of white pseudo-politics is white guilt. Whether it is as dangerous or as ethically reprehensible as the open racism of white supremacy is a misleading question. Both reinforce the delusion of whiteness.

In a speculative screed called “The center has fallen, and white nationalism is filling the vacuum,” white author Ned Resnikoff reports with alarm that “white members of the self-styled radical left are closer than they know to right-wing white populism.” Considering that right-wing white populists are proudly giving Nazi salutes in public and claim Trump as their hero, that certainly seems like a cause for concern.

But Resnikoff runs into a bit of trouble when he tries to go into detail about this dangerous “white left.” The problem, as it turns out, is that not all of them are white. *Jacobin Magazine*, held up as the exemplar of the white left, has as its founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara—I’ve seen him in person, and he’s darker than me. Resnikoff also points to an approving citation by white nationalist Chris Roberts of a *Jacobin* article written by Shuja Haider. I am fairly certain that this other Mr. Haider is not white, since I am in fact related to him.

These debates, flaring up constantly since Trump’s election, provide whites with a perfect opportunity to make the world revolve around them. On Twitter liberal whites accuse critics of identity politics of ignoring white privilege, while socialist whites respond by pointing out how many white people there are in America.

In the meantime, nobody knows what to do with the non-whites, like me, who attempt to intervene in the debate. So far the strategy of the liberal whites has amounted to a glorified form of sticking their fingers in their ears and shouting “I can’t hear you!” Whites on Twitter continue to resolutely accuse us of being white, while white acquaintances point out

that we are not. And so it turns back around, back to white people and their fantasies. We have tried, for some time, to ignore this and continue to discuss the substantive issues. But white people make our lives even more difficult when they claim to speak in our name. I can only conclude that the strange phenomenon called whiteness produces a very deep and tenacious psychopathology, and that it is time for us to attack it openly.

* * *

What Ned Resnikoff demonstrates is that white guilt has a dark side, which I propose labeling “white purity.” It is a kind of ideology of racial hygiene which embraces multiculturalism and diversity, but attempts to eliminate undesirable elements from the white identity itself.

From the perspective of white purity, there are good whites. They have college degrees, listen to NPR, and have many POC friends. But unfortunately there also are bad whites. They’re bad because they probably voted for Donald Trump. But it gets worse. They listen to country music and eat factory farmed meat. They are offensively overweight, and go to church instead of yoga on Sundays. Most disgusting of all, they work in dirty manual labor jobs and have a petty fixation on making more money, unaware that at Harvard an English major of color is being forced to endure the trauma of reading *Huckleberry Finn*.

The whole thing gets more complicated because there are a few other bad whites who shouldn’t be bad whites, like Mark Lilla or Todd Gitlin. Despite their good educations and their incomes, they fail to embrace white purity. Instead, they advocate returning to the white politics of the 1930s and 1940s, when a benevolent white president secured a welfare state for his fellow whites.

As it turns out, these lapsed whites are actually a godsend for the whole project of white purity, because they serve to discredit any possible ideological threat. All non-white critics of white purity can be dismissed by *loudly claiming that they are little more than lapsed whites in disguise*. Whether you are black, Arab, Puerto Rican, or Korean, you will need to be *re-identified* if you fail to play your role.

Indeed, to the consternation of good whites, not every non-white is on board with white purity. Many are, to be sure, because the secret reality which white purity hopes to obscure is that non-whites are just as capable of a diversity of opinions and perspectives as whites are. For white purity to succeed, non-whites have to be romanticized as noble victims. When they fail to fit into this category, white purity seems to lack a proper foundation.

Fredrik deBoer asks, “Does it matter to Resnikoff that the most acid critiques of identity politics I know of have come from writers of color?” It is a question that keeps many whites awake at night. But for the rest of us the reasons are obvious. Because we have experienced racism from well-behaved and well-educated liberals as often as from the rednecks they despise; because we have never benefited from the condescending and patronizing attitudes of white multiculturalists; because we recognize in the affluent liberal hatred of the white poor the same depraved social Darwinism that in less public moments is directed against us.

* * *

“Metaphor is never innocent,” Jacques Derrida remarked. “It orients research and fixes results.” The primordial metaphor for whiteness is the knapsack, introduced by white author Peggy McIntosh in her influential article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”

Of course, McIntosh was not the first to try to describe the consequences of whiteness. W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote of the legal and social advantages granted to whites in *Black Reconstruction*:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

However, McIntosh’s article operated at a very different register from Du Bois’s historical investigation of the class composition of the postbellum United States. It is likely that McIntosh wrote with the best of intentions, aiming to reduce barbaric behaviors among whites. Unfortunately, the effect of her article has been to provide whites with new and seemingly progressive ways of centering politics on the white identity.

This is because McIntosh refers throughout her article, interchangeably, to “my race,” “my racial group,” and “my skin color.” The first “white privilege” she names is: “I can if I wish to arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.” Another is that she can “go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented.”

We will set aside what appears to be a lack of familiarity with the history of American popular music. What is significant is the equation of skin color, the category of “race,” and discrete groupings of human beings.

With this equation, white guilt reproduces the founding fiction of race: that there is a biological foundation, expressed in physical phenotypes, for separate groups of human beings which have separate cultures and forms of life.

This idea of race is a delusion, one which nevertheless has a “real” material effect. The “white race” is a more specific formation—a political structure of recent invention.

But the metaphor of the knapsack serves to obscure the reality of whiteness. McIntosh writes: “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.”

The knapsack is carried by an individual navigating the open social field. It contains tools which enable the individual to navigate this field with greater effectiveness than those whose knapsacks are comparatively empty. The resources contained in the knapsack constitute whiteness as privilege, because the knapsack is carried by an individual who belongs to the white identity.

If the knapsack of privileges is carried by an individual *already* identifiable as white, then whiteness must necessarily be understood as a biological trait. The falseness of this notion is evident: the people who are currently described as white have a wide and complex range of genetic lineages, many of which were previously considered to be separate “races” of their own (the well-documented though frequently forgotten racialization of Slavs, Italians, the Irish, etc).

We might conclude that there has only been a minor error of description: in reality, whiteness *itself* is constituted by the contents of the knapsack. The constitution of whiteness as identity and its constitution as privilege are simultaneous: the knapsack’s provisions confer not only advantages but also identity upon its bearer.

But how do we know, then, that the content of the identity conferred has something to do with “whiteness”? Surely, in addition to the specific items conferring a privilege, one would find in any knapsack of identity

an infinity of arbitrary details: hair length, gait, dietary preference, computer skills, etc. That is, in order to describe an individual's identity, the knapsack would have to contain everything constituting the this-ness of that particular individual. It would offer us no insight as to the organizing principle which constitutes these traits as something which can be called "white." There would be no way to distinguish "white" characteristics from human ones, Pennsylvanian ones, or heavy metal ones.

This is the failure of liberal thought. A political formation such as whiteness cannot be explained by starting with an individual's identity—the reduction of politics to the psychology of the self. The starting point will have to be the social structure and its constitutive relations, within which individuals are composed. And it is too often forgotten that decades before McIntosh's knapsack, the term "white privilege" originated with such a theory.

* * *

The theory of "white-skin privilege" was advanced by members of an early anti-revisionist split-off from the Communist Party USA (the Provisional Organizing Committee), and would come to have an enormous influence on the New Left and the New Communist Movement. A series of essays by Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev, collected as the pamphlet *White Blindspot*, offered the initial formulation. Ignatiev and Allen's argument was that the legacy of slavery was the imposition of white supremacy by the ruling class, as an instrument of class division. But this was a political theory, not a cultural or moral one, and it held that "white chauvinism" was actually *detrimental* to the white working class, preventing unity with black workers. So fighting against white supremacy was in fact a central part of a political program that favored the self-organization of all workers. Ignatiev's initial entry is worth quoting at length:

The ending of white supremacy is not solely a demand of the Negro people, separate from the class demands of the entire working class. It cannot be left to the Negro people to fight it alone, while the white workers "sympathize with their fight," "support it," "reject racist slanders" etc. but actually fight for their "own" demands.

The ideology of white chauvinism is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the entire proletariat. Therefore, its elimination certainly qualifies as one of

the class demands of the entire working class. In fact, considering the role that this vile practice has historically played in holding back the struggle of the American working class, the fight against white supremacy becomes the central immediate task of the entire working class.

As this language was taken up by the New Left, however, it went through considerable ideological transformations. The manifesto “You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” circulated at the turbulent Students for a Democratic Society conference of 1969, proposed a politics centered on white guilt rather than proletarian unity. The Weather Underground used the language of “privilege” to reject the white working class as a force for revolutionary change, instead associating political struggle with vanguard groups like themselves, who attacked their own privilege by adopting a revolutionary lifestyle. What this amounted to was the self-flagellation (with explosives) of white radicals, who substituted themselves for the masses and narcissistically centered attention on themselves instead of the black and Third World movements they claimed to be supporting—reducing those movements to a romantic fantasy of violent insurrection. In other words, the project of black autonomy and self-liberation—which implied the overall self-liberation of the poor and the working class—was effectively disabled by the Weather Underground’s skin analysis.

Ignatiev ruthlessly attacked the Weatherman problematic in a paper called “Without a Science of Navigation We Cannot Sail in Stormy Seas,” which is today a jarring discovery:

White supremacy is the real secret of the rule of the bourgeoisie and the hidden cause behind the failure of the labor movement in this country. White-skin privileges serve only the bourgeoisie, and precisely for that reason they will not let us escape them, but instead pursue us with them through every hour of our life, no matter where we go. They are poison bait. To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish. To argue that repudiating these privileges is a “sacrifice” is to argue that the fish is making a sacrifice when it leaps from the water, flips its tail, shakes its head furiously in every direction and throws the barbed offering.

Today’s privilege politics cannot possibly permit a position of this kind. We are instead left with endless variations on the Weatherman position,

though without the appeals to armed struggle, bank robberies, and Lenin's theory of imperialism.

* * *

White liberals are suggesting that a new wave of “pro-white” socialists have arisen to defend the “white working class.” This is nonsense. Black revolutionaries throughout American history have argued that the project of emancipation requires overcoming the divisive logic of identity. Although he characterized the material advantages of whiteness as a “psychological wage,” W.E.B. Du Bois did not reduce whiteness to an effect of individual psychology. In fact, immediately preceding the passage on the psychological wage, Du Bois wrote:

The theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

If today liberal whites refuse to recognize this common interest, and eschew the socialist program that Du Bois vigorously endorsed, we will remain locked within the original sin of whiteness: the alliance of poor whites, abandoned by Northern elites, with the regressive and reactionary power of white capital.

“Capitalism cannot reform itself,” Du Bois wrote. “It is doomed to self-destruction. No universal selfishness can bring social good to all.” Unlike today's multiculturalist liberals, DuBois did not merely seek a more diverse ruling class. He recognized that inequality would persist as long as capitalism persevered. There has only ever been one alternative to whiteness and its barbed offerings: the multiracial alliance of the working class against white supremacy and private property. ■

WITHOUT A SCIENCE OF NAVIGATION WE CANNOT SAIL IN STORMY SEAS

Noel Ignatiev · 1969

WHOSE INTERESTS ARE SERVED BY WHITE-SKIN PRIVILEGES?

Are the real interests of the masses of white workers the same as, or in conflict with those of Black workers and other oppressed peoples? Should white workers side with the boss, or with the Black workers? Is the fight against white supremacy and the repudiation of the white-skin privilege in the real interests of white workers? The answers to the above questions are decisive in determining the whole direction of strategy for white revolutionaries. We were not the last to take note of the existence of white-skin privileges. In a paper, the White Blindspot, which we wrote two years ago together with Ted Allen, we pointed out:

The U.S. ruling class has made a deal with the mis-leaders of American labor, and through them with the masses of white workers. The terms of the deal, worked out over the three hundred year history of the development of capitalism in our country, are these: you white workers help us conquer the world and enslave the non-white majority of the earth's laboring force, and we will repay you with a monopoly of the skilled jobs, we will cushion you against the most severe shocks of the economic cycle, provide you with health and education facilities superior to those of the non-white population, grant you the freedom to spend your money and leisure time as you wish without social restrictions, enable you on occasion to promote one of your number out of the ranks of the laboring class, and in general confer on you the material and spiritual privileges befitting your white skin.

The cutting edge of that pamphlet was directed at PL [Progressive Labor Party], which denied and still denies the existence of any privileges accruing to whites in the U.S. However, even in that context we were careful to state, and to buttress by examples, that: "The ending of white supremacy does not pose the slightest peril to the real interests of the white workers; it

definitely poses a peril to their fancied interests, their counterfeit interests, their white-skin privileges.”

Let us look at the matter a little more closely, starting with three industries. In the auto industry, where white-skin privileges have been relatively less than perhaps any other, the workers for a fairly long period enjoyed the best conditions of any laborers in the U.S. However, after years of acceptance by the white workers of their own monopoly in the skilled trades, the workers face speed-up, falling real wages, plant relocations and layoffs.

In the mining industry, where white-skin privileges took on a more hardened form—sole access to the mechanized jobs which were least susceptible to automation—the total number of workers has been cut to one-fourth of what it was, vast areas of West Virginia and Kentucky have been laid waste, medical facilities (once the pride of organized labor) are primitive, and “hillbilly heavens” have sprung up across northern cities.

In the southern textile industry, where the white-skin privilege was more highly developed to mean total exclusion of Blacks from the mills, the workers live under conditions so degraded that in some areas they can only be described as barbaric.

Three industries, three degrees of white-skin privilege. The greater and more firmly established the privilege, the greater the misery. The pattern is not coincidence; in every case cited, the deterioration of the conditions of the workers, black and white, can be shown to be the result of the more or less conscious decision of the white workers to obtain, maintain or expand their social and economic white-skin privileges, which required the renunciation of proletarian class solidarity.

And these examples are taken as separate industries, limited to “the (economic) relation of capital and wage labor.” To take up the whole question of the political weakness of the U.S. proletariat, the lack of a labor party, etc., would strengthen our argument! In what sense, then, can white supremacy be said to be in the interests, either short or long range, of the white workers? If the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in their interests, what would the white workers have to do to run counter to their interests?!

White supremacy is the real secret of the rule of the bourgeoisie and the hidden cause behind the failure of the labor movement in this country. White-skin privileges serve only the bourgeoisie, and precisely for that reason they will not let us escape them, but instead pursue us with them through every hour of our life, no matter where we go. They are poison bait. To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish. To argue that repudiating

these privileges is a “sacrifice” is to argue that the fish is making a sacrifice when it leaps from the water, flips its tail, shakes its head furiously in every direction and throws the barbed offering.

Of course the class struggle involves sacrifices. Jose Marti said, “revolution is sacrifice and valor.” And remember Marx’s admiration for the heroic sacrifices of the Communards, who “stormed the heavens.” The first group of white workers who take action against the white-skin privilege can expect to be visited by all the furies of a bourgeoisie being attacked at its most sensitive spot. These workers will be a Legion of John Browns, honored forever for the sacrifices they will surely have to make. But one thing they will not be sacrificing is their class interests, either short or long range. To argue otherwise is to make a mockery of proletarian morality, which is always consistent with the class interests of the proletariat. One of two things—EITHER the struggle against white supremacy is in both the short and long-range class interests of white workers, in which case they can be won to it: OR it is not in their short-range interests but is in their interests later on, in which case we will never get to “later on.”

* * *

The line of denying the identity of interests of white and Black workers is anti-working class. In being anti-working class, it is, of necessity, anti-Black! To claim that the basis for winning masses of whites to an internationalist policy lies in the decline of privilege rather than in the relation of labor to capital (and that is what they are saying when they say, for example, “The potential for revolutionary consciousness does not always correspond to the ultimate class interests, particularly when imperialism is relatively prosperous and the movement is in an early stage.”) is to undercut the mass base among whites for a policy of proletarian internationalism. The consequences of treating white workers as an adjunct of the class struggle instead of an integral part of it are expressed in the slogan which has occasionally been raised by various Weatherman—create two, three, many John Browns.

Such a slogan sees the role of white revolutionaries quite apart from the immediate class interests of white workers, and thereby substitutes the heroic actions of a few whites for the heroic actions of the masses of white workers. The real slogan that must be put forward is—create two, three, many million John Browns, for that is the slogan which corresponds to both the immediate and long-range class interests of white workers.

Abandonment of the responsibility to organize white workers as part of a class is not support for national liberation [movements around the world] but betrayal of it. This betrayal finds its crudest and most chauvinistic expression in the slogan—create two, three, many Vietnams. In an oppressed nation, that slogan may have a certain justification as meaning the opening of new fronts against U.S. imperialism. We do not here propose to take up the question of whether it is the best summary of the strategy and tactics required to carry out such a perspective. But in an imperialist country, in the oppressor nation, the slogan is entirely out of place. Are the Weathermen asking US imperialism to send troops to Santo Domingo, or to Charleston, South Carolina?! Regardless of good intentions, that is the effect.

In the U.S. among white workers, the basic slogan of proletarian internationalism must be—Transform the imperialist war into a civil war.

* * *

There are a number of vital questions of theory and the application of theory to U.S. conditions which are yet unanswered, or to which only the most elementary answers have been given. Considering the overall weakness of the proletarian movement in the US, it is likely that our weakest aspect is our ignorance—ignorance of U.S. history, of the actual conditions in our country, of the inter-relation between various social forces, and of the road along which we must move in order to achieve our goal. Questions of the specific relation of the national liberation struggles within the U.S. to the class struggle, an examination of the ways white supremacy has functioned to retard the growth of class consciousness, the revolutionary potential of the fight for women's liberation, the place of the youth movement in the class struggle, the role of labor unions, the operation of state-monopoly capitalism, the economic cycle—these and a hundred other questions will have to be scientifically posed and answered in the course of carrying out struggle. This process has barely begun. [...]

The solution lies in [...] starting our investigation by recognizing the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, which was expressed in clear tones at the beginning of the century by the Wobblies: "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common." ■

BACK FROM HELL: BLACK POWER AND TREASON TO WHITENESS INSIDE PRISON WALLS

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin · 1994

The federal penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana had the reputation of being the most racist and brutal prison in the federal prison system. The city of Terre Haute itself had been known in the 1920s as one of the strongest base areas of the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest. As I was to discover later, many prison guards were Klan members or sympathizers. There were no black guards at the time I entered it, in the summer of 1970.

The most famous inmate to do time at the prison was the 1950s rock and roll singer, Chuck Berry, during the early 1960s, and reportedly he spoke disparagingly about the state of Indiana for years afterward and said he would never have a concert in the city of Terre Haute. I do not know if this was true.

Usually racism is the best tool of the prison officials to control volatile prison populations. The warden and his guards intentionally keep up racial hostilities through rumors and provocation, and give a free hand within the prison to groups like the KKK and the Aryan Brotherhood to maim or kill black prisoners. They use the racist white prisoners to confine both themselves and others, in return for special privileges and the fleeting feeling that they are “helping” the “white race” maintain control. This is how the system imprisons whites and uses them in their own oppression. The officials can usually count on recruiting a steady supply of racist murderers and henchmen from the white prison population. But an important part of the plan is to beat down or silence anti-racist whites, in order to make sure all whites toe the fascist line. In fact, without this conformity the whole plan would not work.

For years many black inmates had been beaten or killed at Terre Haute by both white prison inmates and guards. I knew from the stories I had been told by black prisoners in Atlanta that this was true. In fact, the black prisoners at Terre Haute had lived in total fear of the whites. I say “had” because by the time I got there things had started to change.

A group of young militant black prisoners had formed an organization called the Afro-American Cultural Studies Program (AACSP), which met each week and discussed black history and culture, as well as world current events. The prison officials hated the group but had to grant their charter because of a lawsuit filed against the Warden and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. But the Warden, John Tucker, said that if they started “acting militant,” he would grant a Klan charter for the racist white inmates—as if they secretly already didn’t have one! Warden Tucker had a well-earned reputation for brutality against black inmates. The older blacks told us “young bloods” all kinds of horror stories about Tucker, and about the blacks killed or mutilated over the years by white guards and inmates. Black men were hanged, stabbed, thrown into a threshing machine, beaten with pipes, burned alive in their cells, and murdered in every other way imaginable. Tucker even had a group of white inmates who acted as his “hit men” against whites who refused to conform to the racist line. But the “young bloods,” and especially the black inmates from AACSP, would not be intimidated and vowed that they would fight back to the death. Shortly after I arrived in the prison, I threw in my lot with them.

At one of their meetings held each Thursday, I asked what I had to do to join. The gentleman who had been acting as the moderator, a short, dark, bald-headed brother from Detroit, whose name was Nondu, told me all that was necessary was to actively take a part. I was introduced to all the brothers there—fifty in all—but especially to Karenga, a huge, but affable, brother from Cincinnati, along with his prison rap partner, a relatively smallish brother named Desumba, and then Hassan and Nondu from Detroit, all of whom were the principal AACSP officers.

They, along with the general members, all welcomed me into the group and treated me like family. Karenga, the President of the group, actually became my best friend, and saved my life on more than one occasion. These brothers all wore shaved heads, and were influenced by the 1960s cultural nationalist figure, Ron Karenga, along with the Cleveland, Ohio black nationalist Ahmed Evans (who, with his second in command, Nondu Lathan, was serving life in Ohio state prison for killing several policemen in 1968), but their greatest influence was Malcolm X. I was not greatly enamored of Ron Karenga, who headed a Los Angeles-based group called “US” (United Slaves), which was implicated in the murder of two Black Panther Party members in 1969, and purportedly engaged in other internecine violence against the BPP. The Panthers believed that Karenga was a police agent, or knowingly allowed the crimes to take place because of some political sectarian reason. But my initial doubts did not stop me from

taking part in the AACSP. It became my all-consuming passion while at the prison, and I would fight and die to defend it. In fact, I almost did make the supreme sacrifice. We had to fight both the racist authorities and the white inmates on behalf of the black prison population, many of whom were intimidated into silence. We were bold and audacious, and carried on a virtual guerrilla war to strike back at the killers of black men, whether they were guards or inmates. The whites hated and feared us because we were ruthless in defending ourselves and punishing racists. There was no mercy. Our retaliation was always swift and bloody. Our kind of revolutionary blacks had never been seen before at Terre Haute, and it changed the status quo when we fought back. Many of the prisoners were white radicals who were in prison for anti-war cases, and they in turn began to educate other whites. This anti-racist organizing by white radicals was important because it ensured that white prisoners would no longer be indoctrinated or intimidated by the Klan as they had been for the previous thirty-five years at that prison. This re-education was something black revolutionaries could not effectively do alone, and it created a new sense of unity among the prisoners as a class. The white prisoners began to check out books from the Black Culture library, to attend joint political study groups, and to try to understand in theoretical terms how racism was a way of enslaving us all—blacks and other non-whites as inferiors, whites as oppressors. They understood now how the Klan had been doing the bidding of the prison officials for years, just like the white workers in society do the bidding of the capitalists. Fascist politics became not only unpopular but unsafe.

Guards used to the old regime decided to suddenly “retire,” and racist inmates begged to be transferred. The Warden and his staff were greatly alarmed, but powerless to take any action lest they precipitate a full-fledged race riot, which would also get guards and staff killed in large numbers. The prison officials realized they were losing control, and began to panic. All prison officials know that if racism is surmounted, revolt is inevitable.

Then in September of 1971 the Attica prison revolt erupted in upstate New York, and riveted the attention of the entire world on the U.S. prison system. Revolutionary prisoners—black, Latin, and white—had taken guards hostage at Attica and were running the prison. This terrified prison officials all over the United States. It also pushed forward the prison struggle and made it a red-hot issue.

Even after the repression of Attica, sympathy rebellions broke out all over the country, including at Terre Haute, where for the first time black, white, and Hispanic prisoners rose up to fight the prison officials. Buildings were torched or bombed, people tried to escape, strikes and industrial

sabotage went on, and desperate hand-to-hand combat between guards and prisoners in the high-security L-unit was taking place, along with other acts of resistance which seemed to break out daily.

Warden Tucker and his staff panicked, and rushed to start building a new wing of high-security cells in L-unit to hold the “malcontents” in his prison. He then tried to provoke a confrontation, a “race riot” among inmates, but this didn’t work because we had chased away most of the racists, and had made alliances with progressive white and Latino prisoners. These prisoners, many of whom were schooled in revolutionary politics, wouldn’t fall for the old tricks.

The Warden could not convince the white prisoners, who had now struggled and suffered next to us, to accept the old racist “hate bait.” They knew they were prisoners, and would not accept white skin privileges or resurrect the Klan to help the Warden run the prison. These white prisoners were standing up against their masters, and *they were a different people entirely*. They no longer saw anything in common with the Warden, not even “whiteness.” The black prison population had overcome its fear and insecurity to become the vanguard and the backbone of a serious threat to the organized racial violence and repression which had ruled unchallenged for years.

Frustrated, Tucker then just told his officers to begin rounding up the AACSP leaders and throw them into the new security unit. But we had prepared for this eventuality, and had decided not to go down without a fight. So the first time they came for our leaders, it precipitated a twelve-hour standoff when we took over one of the prison units where most of them were, booby-trapped the doors with explosives and other traps, and held the unit guards hostage. The prisoners armed themselves with spears, knives, home-made dynamite, and other weapons.

Realizing how serious the situation had become, a truce was negotiated by Tucker for protection of our so-called constitutional rights to have disciplinary hearings for the leadership instead of just summarily throwing them into solitary, and for no reprisals over the protest. But this agreement for amnesty and standard disciplinary hearings with outside legal representation was swiftly broken as soon as the authorities re-took control of the institution. All of the known leaders of the AACSP, and their white and Latin allies, were snatched up and rammed into high-security cells.

The officials were thus satisfied that they had removed the threat, and that the absence of the first level of leadership would cause the group to collapse. But on the contrary, the organization never missed a beat. We had set up AACSP as an organization which had several levels of leadership;

there was no primary leader. So as soon as the original founding leaders were removed, the secondary leadership took over. I took over as President, and the other slots were quickly filled by a new wave of leaders. We kept up the struggle, continued our weekly meetings, and began sending out a monthly newsletter to tell our outside supporters and the press what was going on.

We had always had a number of programs to help prisoners: a library of radical and black books, political education classes, literacy classes and job training, and we kept these going. We even demanded that officials allow us to take books and materials to those leaders in the solitary confinement units. The officials had to agree, since they saw they had failed to destroy us in the previous incident. Finally, after several months of this standoff, officials created another provocation by attacking one of the leaders in solitary, Brother Hassan. He was badly beaten when he objected to a guard spitting and blowing his nose into the prisoners' food. We knew this was a set-up, so we did not violently respond. We demanded that the harassment cease, circulated a petition, and filed a lawsuit in the local court system. Even though we did not attack the guards like they wanted, they began to round us up anyway, claiming that we were "planning" to create a disturbance. The truth was the officials concocted this "conspiracy" to try to destroy the organization and justify these harsh security measures.

We were all thrown into the special security cells in L-unit and were only let out for showers and the law library. For twenty-three hours a day we were locked down in these cells, which were about the size of your bathroom. The guards taunted us by calling us racist and offensive names, and spitting and blowing their noses in our food. They would do this right in front of you hoping you would object so they would have an excuse to call you a "smartass nigger" and beat up on you. They would gang up and beat prisoners bloody, especially those they did not like.

After a discussion among the comrades in the unit, we decided to rebel against these conditions before things got worse and somebody got killed. As it was, Hassan was so badly beaten he required stitches and a back brace.

One day when they opened the doors to take me to the law library, I knocked the handcuffs away, leaped out of the cell, hit one of the guards in the face with my fist and stabbed the other one in the hip with a knife. I tried to force them to open the security door to let all the prisoners out, but the guard who had the keys ran and threw them out the window into a hallway. So I was trapped along with them, and decided, in frustration, to kill our keepers who had been tormenting us for weeks. I jumped on the guard I had punched, and stabbed him several times until the knife broke

in his side. He screamed, “Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me ! I’ve got a wife and three kids.” I hit him again and again until he fell to the ground. Then I picked up a mop wringer to crush his skull, but the other guard attacked me from behind. I turned to hit him in the chest, and then we started to wrestle. Meanwhile the pig on the floor jumped up and sprayed my face with chemical MACE. I also had cut my forehead on the mop wringer, and blood flowed into my eyes, blinding me. I fought on in a blind rage!

By this time the other guards in the hallway had been alerted and ran into the unit with riot equipment. They started to beat me, but the other prisoners in the unit broke their cell windows out and started throwing coffee mugs, glass jars, and other things at the riot squad as they dragged me out of the unit, feet first, like I was some lifeless animal. But they were more afraid than I was, to see this stuff flying in the air at them, so they refrained from hitting me any more in front of the inmates.

I was dragged down the hallway by about six guards to the hospital, where I was thrown into a “mental observation” cell on the second floor. They were treating me as if I had gone “crazy.” They ripped all of my clothes off of me, and then threw me naked into the cell.

There was no bed, linen, toilet, or even a sink to wash my face—just a door, a window, a hole in the wall to “do your business,” and padding all over the floor and walls to either cushion these “crazy” inmates from injuring themselves when they run their heads into the walls, or to cushion the sound of blows by guards when they beat prisoners.

For the week I remained there, they would neither feed nor clothe me, and except for when they would open the doors to spray me with a high-pressure water hose, and then open the windows to freeze my ass off with a blast of wintry air, I was left alone night and day. I caught pneumonia as a result and almost died. When they saw I was real sick and that my death would cause the other prisoners to revolt, they decided to see that I got some kind of medical attention. They made arrangements to send me to the prison hospital in Springfield, Missouri.

But even though I was being transferred by prison officials, who hoped to end the uprising, this did not happen. Although the prison officials ultimately took back administrative control from the “rioters,” the prison was never the same place. Because of the united prisoner population at Terre Haute, the prison had strikes and violent protests for years afterward. The unity of the prisoners made many things possible : the creation of the Indiana prisoners’ labor union, which fought for better working and living conditions, an end to the racially motivated killing and organizing by groups like the Klan, and of course better overall treatment. Some of

the most brutal guards were fired or prosecuted after they had beaten or tortured prisoners, something which had never happened before.

Although I was to go through many years of torture at Springfield, Marion (Illinois), and other prisons, I lived through it all. I remember many things about those fifteen years in prison, but the struggle at Terre Haute, and how even whites who had been following the Klan line for many years rose up with the blacks against the prison officials was one thing I will never forget. ■

BLACK PROTESTER, WHITE PROTESTER

Jay Caspian Kang · 2020

During my time as what I'll just charitably call a "protest reporter," I saw a whole lot of white kids breaking shit in cities around the country. I also saw a whole lot of black, Latino and Asian kids doing the same. At a particularly tense stand-off in one city, I saw a white kid dressed in all black dragging a wooden pallet and a can of gasoline towards the line of police. He looked, for all intents and purposes, like a cartoon version of the "outside agitator." The cops were firing markers and tear gas at the time and so nobody really made much of it, nor did they make some theatrical effort to stop him. When I asked the organizer about it afterwards, she explained that person, who she didn't know, should be seen as part of the protest community. There was no reason to reject him or question his motives because he was on "our side." Last night, at a planned Curfew Break in Oakland, where thousands of people sat in Oscar Grant Park, after one of the speakers said "We don't want you anarchists in our movement," the leader of the action came out, apologized, and said, "some of my best friends are anarchists." Later, a different speaker cautioned against the "Good Protester/Bad Protester" division and said that a good protester was a protester who shows up.

But that's just two cities, both with long-standing protest communities. The videos that have been shared of black protesters ejecting white looters, or, in some instances, handing them over to the police, are real, but they do not reflect some totemic belief in "non violence" or "peacefulness," nor should there be some hierarchy of concerns and opinions that starts with "organizers" and trickles down from there. The messy, obvious truth is that in some cities, anti-racism organizers have long-standing partnerships with "anarchists," while others might believe in a more top-down approach. Some organizers believe in tactics like the "wall of white allies," where white people go to the front and face-down the police, while others believe they divide what should be a unified front. In some places, bored, white suburban teens are smashing up stores, while in others, those kids

might belong to some anti-capitalism organization that fights the cops every May Day.

All those disparate groups are out in the streets of American cities right now and generating such a massive glut of video evidence that any narrative can take hold. It's impossible to really delineate what's happening and what's not outside of this: Nearly every single one of those groups is getting tear gassed, beaten, and brutalized by the police. Many of those people are white and almost none of them are the "white looters" that [Seattle] Mayor Durkan warned against. Buying into the "white looter" not only trades on racist, condescending visions of black protesters as helpless, angelic victims who sing "We Shall Overcome" as they are beaten down, but it also divides the protest and convinces all the Riot Santas²¹ to stay home, lest they become part of the problem. In liberal cities like Seattle where such sentimentalizing runs rampant, it delegitimizes the action and takes away its moral righteousness. Which, of course, then justifies a swift shut down.

We should reject the "white looter, black protester" trope, but what *do* you do with all these white protesters? Should they become the infantry of the movement, dutifully heed the orders of black activists, and use their privilege in the fight for justice? Should organizers, as the mantra commands, ensure that any actions taken by "white allies" are done in the name of George Floyd and the patchy umbrella of Black Lives Matter? [...]

These protests, which have almost reached their second week, are much more chaotic than what we saw in 2014 or 2016. Millions of people have lost their jobs and face an uncertain future due to a pandemic that exposed every type of disparity, not only in this country, but around the world. The massive solidarity protests that have sprung up in Japan, Paris, London, Amsterdam, and dozens of other cities on other continents, reflect a more universal anger, not only because of the murder of George Floyd, but over inequality and miscarriages of justice whose outcomes always feel foregone. As such, I imagine there will be no leaders who emerge out of these national protests, nor will there be any concrete demands. These

²¹ *Ed.*: Here, "Riot Santa" refers to liberals who sort protesters into "good" and "bad" lists based on how their actions relate to their own racial and moral preconceptions. The author writes: "For the purposes of this post, picture a good liberal seated at their kitchen table. While doomscrolling through Twitter on a Macbook Pro, they take in scene after scene of protests around the country. Every few moments, they squint, pick up a fountain pen they received as a wedding gift (once belonged to Tom Wolfe or whoever the fuck) and jot down notes in a ledger that has been divided into two columns: Good Protester; Bad Protester. Think of them as a kind of Riot Santa Claus."

protests will not look like the fetishized and thoroughly edited videos of the Civil Rights Movement.

Over the past ten days, tens of thousands of white Americans have been tear-gassed by cops; tens of thousands more have been arrested in largely peaceful protests. They have all seen the violence of the police state for themselves and while they might rightfully acknowledge that black people bear the brunt of this oppression—and not only during times of national protest—many will start to see their own struggle and subjugation under capitalism. Just over the past twenty-four hours, we’ve all seen the video footage of a 75 year old man being pushed to the ground in Buffalo. As he lays bleeding out his ears, the police, who seem completely unbothered, step over his rigid body. We’ve heard of Sarah Grossman, a 22-year-old in Columbus, Ohio, who died after being tear gassed by the local police. And we’ve seen dozens of videos and read accounts on social media of white, peaceful protesters getting beaten, maced and detained. We can point out they would’ve gotten it worse if they had been black, but I wonder if that sort of comparative reflex, while absolutely true (and certainly not voiced by everyone), makes the most sense when trying to build and sustain a movement.

It might be tempting, then, to argue for a renunciation of “identity politics” and try to turn the fight for Black Lives into a direct and forceful confrontation with capitalism, not only here in the United States, but around the world.

This is not a new question. It’s one that Noel Ignatiev, my old professor who passed away last November, considered throughout his entire career. Please forgive the long excerpt, but in a 1972 piece titled “Black Worker, White Worker” Ignatiev thought through the need for the centrality of “the race question” in revolutionary labor organizing.

At a large electrical appliance manufacturing plant in Chicago, one of the radical groups, the Revolutionary Union, sent a few people in. The radicals began putting out a plant newsletter which raised the issues of speedup, safety, low wages—all the various grievances of the workers—and also carried on a fairly aggressive campaign against racial discrimination, against the exclusion of Black workers from the better departments, etc.

The group managed to build up considerable support, most of it among Black workers, which wasn’t surprising since Black workers made up almost half the work force and were most victimized by the oppressive conditions the group was agitating against.

After some time had passed, the strategists in the group who, it is safe to surmise, were the white radicals who had initiated it along with one or two newly radicalized workers from the plant, decided that, as a tactic, they ought to try and throw out the present union, the International Association of Machinists, which is one of the worst unions in the Chicago area, and bring in the United Electrical Workers union. That is the UE, the old left-led union expelled in 1949 from the CIO and still under what is called progressive leadership.

Anyhow, they took a group of workers down to the UE hall and met with the organizers there. The staff people were delighted that they were interested in bringing in the UE, but they observed that there weren't enough white workers in the committee. If they ever hoped to win the plant for the UE, they would have to involve more white workers in the organizing effort.

That was certainly a logical effort. And so, what did the group do? They went back into the plant and began campaigning for the UE, using the newsletter as their chief vehicle. But now there was a change. The main aim became to reach the white workers, and so the line of the newsletter now became: all workers unite, the boss makes no distinction between Black and white, do not let race feeling divide us, bringing in the UE will benefit us all, our interests are all the same, etc. As for the exposures of racial discrimination and the campaign to abolish it in the plant, which had occupied so much of the group's attention prior to the decision to bring in the UE, that was laid aside in the interests of appealing to the broadest number of workers who could be won to the immediate goal, getting a better union.

What is there to say about a story like this? What is there to do besides shake your head? Doesn't this represent, in capsule form, the whole history of labor movement in this country—the radicalization of the workers followed by the capitulation, on the part of the leadership, to the backward prejudices of the white workers? How many times does this experience have to be repeated? Apparently an infinite number until we learn the lesson.

By the way, the upshot of the organizing campaign was that the group didn't succeed in fooling any white workers; they still considered it a Black power group and kept it at arm's length. But it did succeed in cooling the enthusiasm of the Black workers who were its initial base.

Was there an alternative course that could have been followed in the particular situation? I think there was.

Nothing Less than Total Change

The alternative would have been to encourage the group along its original lines, determined to fight consistently against white Supremacy regardless of what came up or came down—to develop the group as the core of a fighting movement in the plant that carried out struggles on the shop floor around all issues of concern to its members, including the issue of racial discrimination.

It's probably true that such a group could not have been a majority movement at the beginning, or perhaps even for a considerable length of time. Most likely, as the group pushed firmly against racial discrimination it would alienate some white workers who could have been won to it otherwise. That's a choice that has to be made. The group in the plant made the wrong choice.

I think that a group such as I describe, made up perhaps in the beginning almost entirely of Black workers, could have developed as a center of struggle in the plant, and a center of opposition to the company and the rotten union. As time went on, it could have attracted to itself white workers who were so fed up with their situation that they were looking for radical solutions—and would even identify with a “Black radical” outfit, so long as it seemed to offer a way out of the mess they were in. The very things which would make such a group repulsive to some workers would make it attractive to that increasing number of workers, Black as well as white, who are coming to sense that nothing less than a total change is worth fighting for.

The course I advocate offers great difficulties—no doubt about it. It is likely that the repression directed against a radical group that relentlessly fought racial discrimination would be greater than against a more moderate group. It is possible that a group such as I describe could never have gained admittance into the UE. I freely concede all the difficulties. But then, who ever said that making a revolution was easy?

As for the alternative, the course that was actually followed, we know all too well where that leads.²²

The parallels here are fairly obvious and it should be pointed out that a street movement that specifically started out of a call for racial justice is not the same as a labor union. But the threat of co-optation remains more or less the same. Would discarding “white protester, black protester,” and refocusing the fight away from George Floyd and onto, say, capitalism, crowd out black voices? Would it be a form of “All Lives Matter?”

²² *Ed.*: The full article “Black Worker, White Worker,” by Noel Ignatiev is available at: <http://www.sojournerttruth.net/bwww.html>.

There are some decent arguments for why a broader focused movement that did not separate out white and black protesters might yield a better result than, say, fifty years ago, when the anti-War movement on college campuses became so dominated by the concerns of white men that minority groups and women had to go out and start their own organizations. White people in today's protest spaces seem much more deferential than they might have in the past—some combination of true belief and fear of shaming compels most of them to listen to the Black voices. The leaderless nature of these movements means that nobody really has to come to the forefront anyway, which means there's less risk of what Mayor Durkan called “co-option” because one charismatic voice can't lead everyone to compromise.

But there's a better argument to be made that what Ignatiev described might actually be happening right now in the streets of America. We can argue, I believe, that certain relics like “white ally,” discussions of “privilege,” and the sort of “seat at the rich table” identity politics that plagues the media, in particular, should be set aside, as should the self-flagellating cringe of upwardly mobile “people of color” who examine their own space in the movement. (Small parting shot: No group seems to be more concerned about the ‘white looter/black protester’ question than “seat at the rich table” professional Asian-Americans.)

I'm not sure of any of these concerns really matter within the context of the larger movement. Last week, while standing around waiting for a march to start at a high school in Oakland, I asked a friend what he thought about all the “black protester/white protester” discussions. We were surrounded by thousands of teenagers, many of whom were white. After some back and forth, my friend said that these kids had done everything we had asked them to do. At a moment when the police had murdered a black man, they had shown up to the march. They were trying their best to defeat white supremacy and anti-blackness. If they did not fully grasp what those terms meant or their complicity, they might have very well been woken up when the Oakland Police Department shut down the march that night by arresting dozens of protesters. If you believe, as Ignatiev, inspired by CLR James did, in the spontaneous, self-organized revolution that can take place when white people cast off their whiteness, then you don't need to constantly remind white protesters that they are white, but you should also trust that these kids, who have now seen their friends tear-gassed in peaceful protests, might not exactly care what column they fill in the heavy, dull ledgers of the Riot Santos. ■

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ABOLISHING THE WHITE RACE DOES NOT DEPEND ON WINNING OVER A MAJORITY OF WHITES. WHAT IS NEEDED IS A BAND OF PEOPLE, INCLUDING SOME NOMINALLY CLASSIFIED AS WHITE, WHO ARE DETERMINED TO **CHALLENGE, DISRUPT** AND EVENTUALLY **BREAK UP THE INSTITUTIONS THAT REPRODUCE WHITENESS: THE SCHOOL SYSTEM...**, THE **LABOR MARKET**, THE **CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM** (INCLUDING THE **PBA**), THE **WELFARE AND HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS**, ETC. THE AIM IS NOT TO WIN OVER INDIVIDUALS TO SECEDE FROM THE WHITE CLUB (ALTHOUGH THAT IS GREAT WHEN IT HAPPENS) BUT TO MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANYONE TO BE WHITE. THERE ARE ALREADY ENOUGH ‘ANTIRACISTS’ TO DO THE JOB. THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT GAVE RISE TO MOVEMENTS FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND AGAINST THE MEXICAN WAR. THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT STIMULATED NEW MOVEMENTS OF WOMEN AND YOUTH, AND A MOVEMENT AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR. NOTHING OFFERS SO GREAT A POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMING THE POLITICAL CLIMATE OF THIS COUNTRY AS AN ANTIWHITE MOVEMENT.



– Noel Ignatiev, *“Needed: An Antiwhite Movement”*



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