

SHININ'

THE LITE

ON

WHITE:

**AN
HISTORICAL
OVERVIEW
OF
WHITE
PRIVILEGE**

SHININ' THE LITE ON WHITE: WHITE PRIVILEGE

by Sharon Martinas

Introduction

The "Shinin' the Lite on White" series includes this essay on white privilege, several exercises on identifying and challenging white privilege behavior of social justice activists, and the essay, "The Culture of White Supremacy."

The purpose of this series is threefold:

- (1) To develop a definition of *white*, so that we can deal with the problem more effectively;
- (2) To strengthen our insights about *white privilege* in a white supremacy system;
- (3) To develop an effective analysis and strategy for challenging white privilege as well as racial oppression.

Defining the Problem: Why Can't We Just Get it Together?

In 1996, progressive activists in California waged a massive, multi-racial and militant struggle to save affirmative action. Though we raised the consciousness of millions of people, voters and non-voters, we lost at the ballot box. 56% of California's electorate voted "Yes" on Proposition 209. The voters wiped out affirmative action in the public sector: in education, employment and contracting.

What happened? There were many analyses among activists, all of which held important kernels of truth:

°° The electoral arena in California is a stacked deck when the Right uses racist initiatives. Though 47% of the population is people of color, 83% of the voters are white.

°° The left was out spent by the right, and the Clinton campaign failed to keep its commitment to provide millions of dollars to wage an effective media campaign against the initiative.

°° The wording of the initiative, billed as a "civil rights" policy, deliberately confused many well meaning voters who would be expected to support equality in government programs.

°° To wage a comprehensive grass roots organizing electoral campaign, in a state the size of California, activists should have started in 1995 and coordinated their efforts much more effectively.

These are important points. But something is missing. The organizers in communities of color reached their electoral objectives: hundreds of thousands of new voters went to the polls, and the NO on 209 votes looked like this:

Asian Americans 61%; African Americans 74% and Latinos 76%! But the groups organizing among white feminists did not reach their goals. To defeat 209, fifty-five percent of white women needed to vote NO. *Instead, 57% of white women voted YES!*

What happened? Most feminists know that white women have been the major beneficiaries of affirmative action in all its spheres. So why did we white women vote overwhelmingly *against our own self-interest as well as against social justice for people of color?*

To begin to analyze this problem, I believe we have to understand the history and role of white privilege in this country.

Brainstorm: "White" is not... "White" is....

"What does white mean to you, as it refers to people?" Here are some guiding questions to address in your response:

- *** Is *white* a skin color?
- *** What does your dictionary and thesaurus say about *white* as referring to people?
 - *** Are *white people* a race?"
 - *** Is *white* an ethnicity (like Norwegian, Irish, Jewish, Russian)?
 - *** Are white people who live in the U.S.A. *Americans*?
 - *** Is there such a thing as *the white community* in the U.S.?
- *** If you are a person of color, what do you call people whose ancestors came from Europe?
- *** If your ancestors came from Europe, what do you call yourself?

White is — White Privilege

Webster's New World (sic) Dictionary defines *privilege* as "a right, advantage, favor, or immunity specially granted to one; esp., a right held by a certain individual, group, or class, *and withheld from certain others or all others.*" (Emphasis added. Third College Edition of Webster's, 1988).

The CWS Workshop defines white privilege this way:

"U.S. institutions and culture give *preferential treatment* to people whose ancestors came from Europe over peoples whose ancestors are from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world; and *exempt* European Americans — white people — from the forms of racial and national oppression inflicted upon peoples from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world.

This *web of institutional and cultural preferential treatment* is called **white privilege**. In a white supremacy system, white privilege and racial oppression are two sides of the same coin."

Non-ruling class white people are both oppressed and privileged. They are **oppressed** most significantly on the basis of class, gender and sexuality, and also on the basis of religion, culture, ethnicity, age, physical abilities and politics. At the same time, they are **privileged** in relation to peoples of color.

Historical Origins of White Privilege

In the early 1600's, 50 wealthy Englishmen bought stock in the Virginia Company of London. Their stock options included large parcels of (Indian) land in the new colony of Virginia, as well as the right to govern the colony.

These English gentlemen did not intend to work their lands in Virginia. To get workers, they contracted with English merchants who delivered impoverished English teen-agers and kidnaped Africans. By the second decade of colonization, working servants, both English and African, outnumbered English gentlemen by perhaps 100 to 1.

Living and working conditions for African and English laborers were horrendous. Workers were regularly whipped, nearly starved to death, denied days of rest, and refused permission to marry. English servants, who were supposedly protected under English poor laws, had limited times of servitude, but owners disregarded the laws. Those servants who were freed as required, usually died within a few years.

Under these conditions, African and English servants struggled to survive and resist their common oppression. They traded together; they made love together, and they made war together against their masters. Most servants were armed, since the wealthy used their servants to protect the frontiers against "hostile Indians."

Virginia records document ten servant revolts in the mid 1600's, culminating in the famous Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. African and English servants, free workers and farmers, demanded land and pay for their labor. They burned down Jamestown, the colony's capital. Colonial rulers had to call in the British army to subdue the rebellion.

Colonial land-owning legislators responded with a series of Slave Codes enacted from 1680 through 1705. These codes legalized chattel slavery (the child of an enslaved woman would be enslaved for a lifetime) and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. The codes equated the terms "slave" and "Negro," thus institutionalizing the world's first system of racialized slavery.

The codes also set out the "rights" of and restrictions for "servants." At first, "servants" referred ambiguously to both Africans and English. But as "slave" became synonymous with "Negro," (the Spanish word for "Black,") "servant" came to mean "white," the term which replaced "English," "Christian" or "wench" to refer to poor or indentured Europeans.

As the codes tightened the legal noose around enslaved Africans, they simultaneously loosened the legal bonds on English indentured servants. English or "white" servants were granted specific forms of *privilege* or *preferential treatment* which was specifically denied to slaves, or "Negroes."

For example, the codes stipulated that servants could challenge unjust behavior of their masters in court; servants, both men and women, were entitled to specific "freedom dues," paid in tobacco (the legal tender of the colony) when their term of servitude was over. Servants could get a small plot of land, provided they promised to guard the frontiers. Poor white males were offered the first paid jobs in the colony-- on the slave patrols. They got bounties for every slave they caught. (I think the slave patrol is the institutional ancestor of the police department.)

All these "privileges" were specified as being available only to "white" people. However, if any poor whites acted in solidarity with any Africans, they would be physically branded, and their privileges removed. Thus the term *white* became synonymous with *privilege* in colonial law.

In conclusion, a study of the historical origin of the term *white* suggests that:

*** *"White" is a political term.* It was specifically created by colonial rulers to prevent oppressed people from different continents from uniting to confront their common oppressors.

*** *"White privilege" is a relational term.* It is the other side of the coin of *racial oppression*. In the U.S. white supremacy system, they go together.

*** *White* was originally a class term. The privileges of whiteness were first granted by the colonial ruling class only to the poor and servant class of Europeans.

Colonial rulers did not need privilege. They had power.

*** In a few generations, the institutional privileges for the white poor would wipe out the material basis for unity with oppressed Africans, as their daily lives grew further apart. (Bacon's Rebellion was the last multi-racial revolt of the oppressed during the colonial era.)

*** Colonial rulers used the existence of these privileges to convince poor white people that the little they had was due to their racial superiority, rather than to preferential treatment combined with hard work. *The impact of white privilege on white people's daily lives reinforced the ideology of white arrogance and "legitimized" their dehumanization of people of color.*

*** In summary, the system of white privilege for non-ruling class whites reinforces the system of racial oppression against people of color. And the *complementary systems* of white privilege and racial oppression maintain the system of white *power* for ruling class whites.

How White Privilege has been Perpetuated in the U.S.

I believe that there are five major ways by which the system of white privilege has been perpetuated:

- (1) The political economy of internal colonialism which laid the basis for the U.S. capitalist system;
- (2) Three hundred years of affirmative action programs for white people, created by federal and state laws;
- (3) Political demands of most white progressive movements (I call this *The Strategy of the Slave Owners*);
- (4) Reproduction of white privilege in daily life: the treatment of white people because they are white, and the behavioral response of white people to this treatment.
- (5) The culture of white supremacy.

Although this analysis of white privilege may seem a bit complex, spotting manifestations of white privilege is relatively easy. Just look for an instance of racial oppression, and ask yourself "Who benefits from this oppression?" You'll probably see that a few white guys at the top get the lion's share -- because they have the *power*; -- and a whole lot of white men *and women* in the middle get a little piece of the action.

The Political Economy of Internal Colonialism

As Elizabeth Martínez discussed in her essay on What is White Supremacy? the United States as a nation-state was created out of stolen land, enslaved labor and war. The wealth created from the theft of indigenous land, the labor of African captives, and the war on Mexico made the European-American colonial owners a very wealthy class of people, and provided the capital that created capitalism in the U.S.

It also benefited the European-American working and middle classes, both immigrant and U.S. born. To understand the economic relationship between the white working and middle classes of the U.S. and all the peoples of color whose oppression created the wealth of capitalism, it is helpful to look at African colonialism. There you have a system where all classes of European settlers make their money off the backs of the indigenous colonized. So even when a Black and white worker work in the same industry, their relationship within that industry is one of colonized and colonizer.

An example from my own family history might help make the point. My paternal grandparents migrated from Russia in the early 20th century. My grandfather worked in a New York sweat shop, a miserable job by any standards. *But the economic reason why he and millions of his peers were able to get these jobs was because of the semi-slave labor of people of African descent in Southern plantations after the defeat of Reconstruction.* Cotton was cheap because of the conditions under which African Americans labored, so there was a huge market for cotton goods, which created thousands of jobs for European immigrants, including my grandfather.

My mother's father worked in a shoe factory. He worked under unsafe conditions, and eventually suffocated from asthma caused by leather dust. But at the turn of the century, the Massachusetts shoe industry was booming. The leather came from the South West on railroads built by Chinese and Mexican laborers. The cows were herded by Mexicano vaqueros who had been robbed of their historical lands after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transformed half of Mexico into "Occupied America." And so my maternal grand parents became the direct beneficiaries of the U.S. colonial war against Mexico, and the national oppression of Chicano people.

White mob violence guaranteed the white privileges from the economy of internal colonialism. In the 1840's and 1850's, Irish working class immigrants pushed African Americans out of the skilled trades in New York City by burning down parts of the Black community while Irish police and fire fighters looked on. White homesteaders murdered indigenous warriors trying to protect their historical homelands, and slaughtered millions of their buffalo. Unemployed white workers burned down parts of San Francisco Chinatown in the 1880's to drive Chinese workers out of the cigar-making and shoe industries. White squatters lynched Chicanos fighting to keep their ancestral lands in Occupied America.

I inherited this legacy. I am a white middle class woman, with enough educational and material resources to put on a free anti-racist training workshop. I am in this position because I am the beneficiary of the system of white privilege embedded in internal colonialism backed up by violence. I can run from it, but I can't hide. It's my history, a tiny part of the history of affirmative action for white people.

300 Years of Affirmative Action for White People

Some examples:

- 1663: In Virginia, English female indentured servants are no longer allowed to work in the fields; they can only work in their masters' house. African women still work in the fields.
- 1680 – 1705: Virginia "servant" codes specify that white servants can testify in court, get "freedom dues," a plot of land, and the right to marry someone else who comes from Europe. (Racial intermarriage is banned.)
- 1790: The Naturalization Act, the first act of the first U.S. Congress, guarantees that white immigrants can become citizens, which leads the way for them to become owners of land. "Non-white" immigrants are denied the right to be citizens. (This provision was not changed until 1952.)

- 1830: The Indian Removal Act, initiated by President Andrew Jackson, removes the Choctaw, Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Seminole Indians from the most fertile land in the South. White slave owners take over the land, use enslaved Africans to grow the cotton that creates the wealth for both Southern and Northern ruling and middle class whites. Cotton becomes the major export of the new nation.
- 1848: In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico cedes half its national territory to the United States. Mexicans living north of the Rio Grande become U.S. citizens, but they no longer automatically own the land their families have tilled for centuries. Under U.S. law, the land goes to those with papers. Mexicans do not have papers. White lawyers "representing" Mexican land owners swindle millions of acres by taking land as their legal fees. Mexican-Americans become the first farm workers on lands their families once owned.
- 1862: During the height of the Civil War, U.S. soldiers are also waging war on indigenous nations in the West. Millions of acres of Native land are taken by bloodshed. This land is distributed to white people only. The Homestead Act makes 50 million acres available, at low cost, to white working class homesteaders. The Morrill Act creates land grant colleges to build a new white middle class. And 100 million acres of Indian land are given free to the railroads.
- 1880's -1914: Millions of Southern and Eastern European immigrants come to the U.S. They can bring their families, marry, travel to find work and eventually get citizenship. But during the same period, Chinese immigrants, except for merchants, are excluded from immigrating. Chinese workers are not allowed to bring their wives, nor to marry non-Chinese Americans, so they cannot create families.
- 1887: The Dawes Land Allotment Act forbids communal land ownership by indigenous people, and encourages Indians to sell their lands to whites. As a result, millions of acres go to white squatters.
- 1947 on: Under the G.I. Bill, the federal government authorizes the largest affirmative action program for white people in the nation's history. Millions of returning veterans get preferential treatment in jobs, suburban home loans, and college education. But these federal programs do not challenge institutional racism in employment, housing or education, so almost all the benefits go to white men and their families.
- 1954ff: One of the most significant effects of Brown v. Board of Education is the firing of thousands of Black teachers and principals in southern Black schools, after these schools are integrated with white ones. School Boards say that white parents will not let their kids be taught by Black teachers. So the major beneficiaries of Brown v. Board of Education are the thousands of white (mostly female) teachers and white (mostly male) principals who get the jobs in these newly integrated schools.
- 1994:: The passage of "Three Strikes You're Out" in California leads to imprisonment for thousands of Black and Brown men while providing a major source of well paid jobs for mostly white working class men -- as prison guards.

1996: The passage of Proposition 209 ends a brief interlude of 30 years of affirmative action for people of color. And California, which will be the first state in the nation to have a majority population of people of color, leads the way in returning to a 300 year tradition of affirmative action for white people.

The Strategy of the Slave Owners

The construction of institutional white privilege, which I call "The Strategy of the Slave Owners," was a brilliant piece of politics. Created over 300 years ago, it still works beautifully today. It divides the oppressed, whether the oppression is based on class, gender or sexuality, so we can't get it together. Virtually all politically progressive movements led by white activists after 1676 have recreated, consciously or unconsciously, the structures of white privilege.

In social movements led by people of color, white allies have historically supported demands of people of color for a short while, then gone back to their own issues. When whites break the coalitional power of the people, the *only* guarantor that racial reforms will be implemented and maintained, all progressive movements end up suffering the backlash. Here are a few examples:

*** From 1789 to 1791, non-ruling class whites organized to include the Bill of Rights as the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution. But these amendments did nothing to protect the rights of African or indigenous peoples in the new nation-state. Nor has the Bill of Rights protected white activists who defy the state or corporate power. And only the rich have *effective* freedom of the press.

*** In 1920, white women got the vote after a 100 years of struggle. But they got it by promising Southern segregationists that they would use the vote to support white supremacy. Today, a divided women's movement still lacks the power to enact mandatory maternity leave for all working parents, despite the fact that women are more than 50% of all voters.

*** In 1935, militant workers won the legal right to be represented by unions. But, in order to get the National Labor Relations Act passed by Congress, they agreed to a compromise. The Act would exclude agricultural and domestic workers from its protections. Since these workers were mostly African American, Chicano, and Chinese, the new labor law essentially legalized unions for white male workers only. Today, an historically divided work force has not even been able to obtain a minimum wage above the poverty level.

*** In 1973, abortion finally became legal in the U.S. But white middle class women, the main beneficiaries of *Roe v. Wade*, did not wield their organizing power to oppose the Hyde Amendment (which restricted abortions for women on welfare) or the sterilization of Puerto Rican and other poor women of color. So when the Right rolled back abortion rights in the 1980's, there was no powerful multi-racial feminist movement to stop it. Today, 80% of U.S. counties are without abortion services.

*** White environmentalists seldom challenge environmental pollution of communities of color or Indian reservations, even though most toxic dumping is done in these communities. Since toxics and cancer go hand in glove, is it any wonder that cancer is still a leading killer -- of white people as well as people of color?

The legacy of "The Strategy of the Slave Owners" demonstrates what *when oppressed whites protest militantly against their own oppression, while refusing to simultaneously challenge racial oppression and white privilege, they can win short term victories (a union, legislative reform, a constitutional amendment, etc.) But when they organize in this way, they themselves become oppressors of people of color. Their silence is consent to racial oppression and white privilege. And they sacrifice the possibilities for building coalitions with activists of color which could challenge the power of the descendants of the slave owners -- the power which oppresses all of us today.*

Some materials that have helped me understand white privilege

1. Robert Allen,
 - a. Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1983.
 - b. Black Awakening in Capitalist America. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1989.
2. Theodore Allen,
 - a. "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race," Radical America. May-June, 1975, Vol. 9, Number 3.
 - b. The Invention of the White Race. Vol. 1 (1994) and Vol. 2. (1997).
New York: Verso Press.
3. Tomás Almaguer, Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
4. Derrick Bell, Race, Racism and American Law. Second Edition. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1980.
5. Robert Blauner, Racial Oppression in America. NY: Harper & Row, 1972.
6. Ward Churchill, Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide and Expropriation In Contemporary North America. Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993.
7. European Dissent, The Journey of European Dissent, the newsletter of European Dissent, a white anti-racist organization affiliated with The People's Institute.
8. Paula Giddings, When and Where I enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America. NY: Random House, 1984.
9. A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. In the Matter of Color: Race & The American Legal Process: The Colonial Period. NY: Oxford University Press, 1980.
10. Elizabeth Martínez, 500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures. Albuquerque: South West Organizing Project, 1991.
11. Alfredo Mirandé, Gringo Justice. Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1987.
12. Victor G. & Brett de Bary Nee, Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

13. People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Undoing Racism Workshop and especially the work of white core trainers Diana Dunn and David Billings. (The People's Institute is located at 1444 North Johnson Street, New Orleans, LA. 70116. Phone is 504-944-2354.)

14. Mab Segrest, Memoir of a Race Traitor. Boston: South End Press, 1994.

15. Herbert Shapiro, White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the "Brainstorm: 'White' is not... 'White' is" section of the essay, Sharon asks you to brainstorm, "*What does 'white' mean to you, as it refers to people?*"

If you are white, please begin your statements with "I." This pronoun is a simple way for those of us of European origin to take personal responsibility, at least verbally, for the system of privilege that benefits us.

2. Please give examples of how you have personally experienced (if you are white) or observed (if you are a person of color) instances of individual, cultural and institutional preferential treatment, or white privilege. What did you do?

3. To clarify how white privilege actually operates, think of a particular example of individual, cultural and institutional racial oppression and ask yourself, "Who benefits from this oppression?" Then try asking a white friend this question. Share her/his responses with the workshop.

4. How would you *distinguish* preferential treatment based on "race," -- being white-- from preferential treatment based on class, gender or sexuality? Please give specific examples from your own experience (if you are white), or your own observations (if you are a person of color).

5. Have you heard a white person say any of the following:

"How can you say I'm privileged" because...

...As a woman, I'm oppressed by sexism...

...I'm poor. I can't even pay my rent...

...I'm a victim of homophobia and hate crimes against queers...

...I'm a target of anti-semitism..."

What do you say in response? Please share examples from your experiences.

6. From your experience, in what ways, if any, can the use of an institutional and historical analysis of white privilege help white people get over their common emotional responses to dealing with their racism?

Some examples are: 'color-blindness,' guilt, denial of personal and familial responsibility, distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' white folks, focus on 'me me' -- individualism? Please share stories.

7. In what ways, in general, have you used or can you use an institutional and historical analysis of white privilege to strengthen your anti-racist work in your community? Please give examples both of success stories and barriers you have encountered.

8. At the conclusion of the section on 'Historical Origins of White Privilege,' Sharon makes a (potentially) controversial theoretical statement:

"In summary, the system of white privilege for non-ruling class whites reinforces the system of racial oppression against people of color. And the *complementary* systems of white privilege and racial oppression maintain the system of white power for ruling class whites."

What is your perspective on this statement? What are the implications of this analysis for your social justice work?

9. Begin to research your own family her/history. How have your ancestors been oppressed and/or privileged by the political economy of internal colonialism?

Note what happens when you ask this question of family members.

10. From your research into the history of the U.S. white supremacy system, please share more examples with the workshop of "300 years of affirmative action for white people."

Try a bit of field research: ask someone you know who objects to affirmative action, if she/he also objects to affirmative action for white people, and give some examples. Observe her/his response and share it with the workshop.

11. Have you been involved in organizing experiences in which potential coalitions between activists of color and white activists have been undermined or destroyed because of the white privilege politics of the white activists? What did you do? Please share your experiences and the lessons you learned with the workshop.

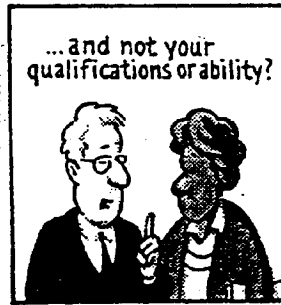
12. The Political Perspectives of the CWS Workshop asserts that racism is the *major barrier* to creating the mass-based, multi-racial social movements, led by progressive people of color, that could bring fundamental change in the United States.

What is your perspective on this statement? In what ways, if any, has this essay on white privilege affected your perspective? What would this mean for your present and future social justice work in your community?

Written for The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop*

CWS Workshop
2440 16th Street, #275 pmB
San Francisco, Ca. 94103
e-mail: cws@igc.org
phone: 415-647-0921

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