

# What is White Privilege?

## I. Basic Analysis

### 1. DEFINITIONS

#### **Privilege:**

A privilege is a right, advantage, favor or immunity specially granted to one, especially a right *held by* a certain individual, group or class, and *withheld from* certain others or all others. (Webster's Dictionary. Italics added)

#### **White:**

"White," as referring to people, is a political, economic and legal concept established by colonial slave owners to separate poor Europeans and Africans, giving privileges to Europeans, while creating a system of chattel slavery for Africans.

#### **Race:**

Race is "a specious classification of human beings created by Europeans (whites) which assigns human worth and social status using 'white' as the model of humanity and the height of human achievement for the purpose of establishing and maintaining privilege and power."

(Definition by Ronald Chisom and Michael Washington of The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, in Undoing Racism: A Philosophy of International Social Change. People's Institute Press, 2nd edition. 1997. Page 30-31. (The People's Institute, 1444 North Johnson Street. New Orleans, Louisiana. 70116. Phone: 504-944-2354. E-mail: pisabnola@aol.com)

**\*Sharon Martinas, 'What is White Privilege?'**

## **White Privilege:**

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 and exemption from racial and national oppression is called "**white privilege.**"

In a white supremacy system, white privilege and racial/national 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 sexual orientation; and also on the basis of religion, culture, ethnicity, age, physical abilities and political expression.

At the same time, they are *all* privileged *in relation to* peoples of color.

## **Capitalism:**

Capitalism is a system of domination based on class in which the ruling class owns and controls the resources of the society.

Capitalism creates wealth and power for the ruling class through the exploitation of land, waged and unwaged labor, and the oppression of non-ruling class people.

## **Patriarchy:**

Patriarchy is an economic, political, cultural and social system of domination of women that privileges men. Patriarchy is based on binary definitions of gender -- male/female -- with strict gender roles.

Patriarchy also has rigidly enforced heterosexuality that places male/straight as superior and women/queer as inferior.

Patriarchy shapes and is shaped by white supremacy, capitalism and the state. Together, they form interlocking systems of oppression in the United States.

## **II. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE**

**White Privilege is *both* a class *and* a race term.**

**It is a class term because only non-ruling class white people (middle class, working class and poor whites) have white privilege.**

The ruling class does not need privilege. *It has class power.* In a capitalist system, the ruling class owns and/or controls the major economic and state resources; and it has the capacity to make and enforce decisions over the non-ruling class majority based on this ownership and control.

**As a racial term, 'white privilege' is the other side of the coin from racial/national oppression.**

In a white supremacy system, those who benefit from white privilege help to hold up forms of racial/national oppression by:

- °° Actively supporting that oppression, and/or
- °° Not fighting for racial justice, and/or
- °° Not challenging white privilege in the situation.

**Because non-ruling class people are *both oppressed and privileged*, their resistance to oppression is a bundle of contradictions.**

They usually challenge their oppression but not their privilege, so they rarely fight for racial justice. Instead, they often side with their oppressors against people of color.

So white privilege works to perpetuate *both the white supremacy and the capitalist system.*

**The colonial ruling class constructed the system of white privilege in order to divide the oppressed and prevent them from uniting against their oppressors.**

The strategy, which the CWS workshop calls, "*the strategy of the slave owners*," was so successful that it has worked throughout U.S. history to keep oppressed whites from building principled unity with peoples of color.

When oppressed whites protest against their own oppression, while refusing to challenge racial/national oppression and their own white privilege, *they can win short term victories*. But when they organize in this way, they sabotage the possibility of creating the coalitions and alliances that can bring real power to all oppressed people.

**White privilege has been institutionally perpetuated in the economics, laws, policies and programs of all U.S. institutions which are dominated by white people.**

This institutional domination has created a legacy of 350 years of affirmative action for white people.

The effects of generations of affirmative action for non-ruling class white people have made *real, material* differences in their daily lives based on their access to the privileges of being white.

These differences between oppressed white people and peoples of color often outweigh the experiences of similar oppression based on class, gender and sexual orientation.

**The preferential treatment accorded to non-ruling class white people in daily life, together with institutionalized affirmative action programs, historically and today, lay an *experiential* foundation for the culture of white supremacy.**

The culture of white supremacy is based on the worldview that asserts the superiority of all white people, and the inferiority of all people of color.

Since white privilege is hidden to the privileged, while very visible to the racially oppressed, one significant aspect of white supremacist culture is the 'norm-alizing' and the 'universalizing' of white experience, including of the oppressed.

Since white privilege makes a material difference in oppressed people's lives, another significant aspect of white supremacist culture is the phenomenon of '*white bonding*:' the allegiance that non-ruling class whites give to the white ruling class *against* people of color, and the consequent blurring of class contradictions among white people.

White supremacist culture is perpetuated and legitimized in every white dominated institution, especially the family, education, media, advertising and political system.

This institutionally expressed white supremacist culture is internalized in white individuals' values, assumptions, world views and emotions. Internalized white supremacy is expressed in white privilege behavior which, in turn, recreates and reinforces the internalized white supremacy.

### **III. WHITE PRIVILEGE: THE 'BOOT' WITH WHICH EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS PULLED THEMSELVES UP BY THEIR BOOT STRAPS -- AND BECAME WHITE**

#### **Political Economy: The Boot's Sole and Toe:**

The U.S. government gave European immigrants access to land at prices they could afford so they could farm, feed their families, and pass the land on to their children. The land was stolen from Native Americans, Mexicans, and freed enslaved Africans who had been falsely promised '40 acres and a mule.'

Generations of European immigrants found work in industries or services whose wealth was created by the enslaved labor of Africans.

Many white workers, especially in New York and California, organized violence against workers of African and Chinese descent to keep the latter out of work places and unions. Their mob violence was rarely punished by the law.

In today's political economy, work within industries is stratified so that white (mostly male) workers have the jobs with higher pay and better working conditions and benefits.

In today's political economy, non-ruling class whites have more access to credit, loans, transportation, housing and insurance than do their class counterparts of color.

## **Affirmative Actions Programs: The Boot's Heel:**

Throughout U.S. history, non-ruling class whites have been granted specific civil, political and economic rights expressly denied to some group of people of color. Examples:

*// the right of European immigrants to become citizens was denied to all or some non-European immigrants from 1790 to 1952.*

*// State laws prohibited non-citizen immigrants from owning land so the only first generation immigrants who could own land were Europeans.*

*// Colonial law allowed all Europeans access to the courts, but Africans and indigenous people could only testify against their own people.*

*// All European immigrants were allowed the right to marry either before or after they came to the U.S. Most Chinese and Filipino immigrants were not allowed to bring families nor to marry in the U.S.*

*// European workers did not need passes to travel in search of work. African workers did, by law or practice.*

*// In the late 19th century, children of European immigrants were granted the right to an elementary school public education. Children of African, Asian, Chicano or indigenous parents did not share this right.*



*// White women won the right to vote in 1920 after 100 years of struggle. But in the South, Black women and men were not legally able to vote until the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed after mass pressure from the civil rights movement. But as the recent Presidential election demonstrated, hundreds of thousands of African American voters in the South are still effectively disenfranchised. So the right to vote is still, in practice, a form of white privilege.*

*// After World War II, the federal government set up the nation's largest affirmative action program for white people in its history: loans to veterans for homes and college education. Theoretically, the program was for all vets, but the feds never challenged the racism of university admissions programs, nor the racist laws of suburban housing developments. In practice, therefore, the loans were for white people only.*

In the late 1960's, as a result of mass pressure from the civil rights movement, the federal government began to establish affirmative action programs in education and industry for people of color. But the programs have been under attack since their inception. A few examples:

*// The media and politicians labeled affirmative action programs 'reverse racism,' and implied that people of color who got positions under the programs for unqualified for them.*

*// Courts accepted complaints from white men who asserted that they were subjected to 'reverse racism' if they*

*did not get a job, contract or education placement they had applied for, and to which they felt 'entitled.'*

*// Courts demanded that plaintiffs of color who were being treated unfairly prove that the racist institutions 'intended' to be racist, instead of simply accepting statistics which demonstrated the results of their racist practices.*

*// In 1996, California voters (83% of whom were white at the time) declared affirmative action illegal under Proposition 209. 57% of white women, who were the major beneficiaries of affirmative action, voted to end the programs. Thus, affirmative action for people of color, in existence for only 30 years following 350 years for white people, was ended.*

### **Relative exemption from state violence: The Boot's Heel**

*// In the colonial era, the very first paid jobs for poor white men were in the militia -- fighting and killing indigenous nations for the protection of the colonizers -- and on the slave patrol -- capturing runaway Africans for their owners.*

*// After the colonies became the United States, the slave patrols became the models for urban police departments, and the militia for the military. But their purposes remained the same: to protect white property and the white nation from the 'threats' of nations and peoples of color.*

*// From the colonial period to the present, the legal, institutionalized violence of the state -- police, courts,*

*prisons, INS, Border Patrol, FBI, CIA and the military -- has specifically targeted peoples of color.*

*// The only times white people have been targeted by state violence is when they organize to win their economic rights from corporations, or when they organize to protest U.S. wars against people of color, either within or 'outside' U.S. borders. But, even in these situations, protesters of color are treated more harshly, suffering police brutality, imprisonment or even death.*

*// In daily life, most white people rarely experience the violence of the state as people of color do. There is no such thing as racial profiling of white motorists. The Border Patrol does not chase down Canadian or Irish immigrants looking for 'illegal aliens.' The FBI's 'Cointelpro' focused on revolutionary organizations of color, and now organizes in mass to keep Leonard Peltier imprisoned. Most U.S. wars of invasion have decimated nations of color.*

*// Until very recently, the majority of workers in these systems of violence have been white. Thus, white workers have been given an economic stake in the repression of people of color.*

*// The result of this disparate treatment is that the majority of white people do not experience the violence of the state, and do not believe the state is systematically violent. Therefore, they do not believe that people of color are targeted by state violence. They think the state is just.*

**Relative Access to State and 'Mainstream' Institutions:  
The Sides of the Boot**

Non-ruling class whites experience much more access to information and services from both state and mainstream institutions, as compared to people of color. However, this white access varies widely depending on class, gender, sexual orientation, age, subculture and politics of the white people.

Some examples:

*// According to a NYC survey, working class white parents were given much more information about K-12 school opportunities for their children than were parents of color.*

*// Public transportation services are more available in white communities than in communities of color.*

*// Social workers do not give as full and complete information on services available to immigrants of color as to poor white recipients.*

*// Corporate media routinely misrepresent stories about communities of color as compared to most white communities.*

*// Non-ruling class white people have more access to civil and criminal courts than do people of color.*

*// Predominantly white liberal organizations have more access to politicians than do organizations of color.*

**White-Dominated Cultural Institutions Normalize,  
Legitimize and Universalize the Experience of White Privilege:  
The Boot's Glue**

The main institutions which perpetuate white privilege are the media, the education system, churches, families and the political institutions.

Collectively, these institutions frame the manifestations of white privilege as demonstrating the superiority of white people. For example, they would say that:

*// White people work harder than people of color, so they 'deserve' better jobs; or*

*// White people are not targeted by police because they are 'law abiding citizens;' or,*

*// White people who do drugs are ill, while people of color are 'addicts;' or*

*// White youth talking on a corner are youth, but youth of color on a corner are a 'gang.'*

*// White real estate speculators are 'entrepreneurs,' while drug dealers are 'criminals.'*

## **Legacies of Demands of White Progressive Movements, Past and Present: The Boot's Trim**

(Note: Since Challenging White Privilege in Progressive Movements is the entire subject of The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, this part will be brief.)

Some forms of white privilege are specifically the legacy of political demands won by movements dominated by white activists. For example:

*// The struggle for the Bill of Rights was waged by white workers, farmers and the urban middle class. They won the first ten amendments to the Constitution, but none of these rights protected people of African or indigenous descent.*

*// When mostly white unions won the right to organize and be recognized by employers in the 1930's, the law specifically excluded farm and domestic workers who were mostly people of color.*

*// When the mostly white women's movement won the right to legal abortions in the 1970's, they ignored the plight of women of color who were being sterilized, and they did not fight the Hyde Amendment which denied use of Medicaid for abortions for poor women, disproportionately women of color.*

*// Large, mostly white environmental organizations focus more energy on preserving a spotted owl than they do on the millions of people of color getting cancer and asthma because they live near toxic waste dumps.*

**White Privilege is Reproduced in Daily Life:  
If the Boot fits, Wear it...**

Individual white folks receive preferential treatment from both individuals and institutions, but they will rarely know it is 'preferential' unless they can witness treatment to a person of color in the same situation and make a comparison. Otherwise, the white privilege is hidden to the privileged. Examples:

*// A white person drives on a street at the legal limit and doesn't think twice when the cop car drives right by him.*

*// A white shopper is not followed around in a store and expects that she is being treated appropriately.*

*// A white parent inquires about her child's progress at school, and gets a convenient appointment with the child's teacher.*

Individual white folks often behave in a manner which demonstrates white privilege: that is, their sense of entitlement to speak their mind and be heard. Examples:

*// Talking first and too long in a group.*

*// Trying to squeeze into the beginning of a long line, and becoming impatient at having to wait in line.*

*// Interrupting another person, especially one of color.*  
(For a deeper analysis, see "Detour Spotting" by Jona Olsson in CWS Manual.)

Group behavior of whites. Some examples:

*// Monopolizing conversation in a larger group.*

*// Refusing to let different agendas be discussed.*

*// Generous use of the pronoun "we" meaning "we whites" when in a racially mixed group.*

Internalized white supremacist attitudes, values and assumptions which, generally speaking, are expressed and reinforced through many of the above mentioned behaviors.

(For a deeper analysis, see essay on White Supremacy Culture by Tema Okun of Change Works in the CWS Creating An Anti-Racist Agenda Reader and The Culture of White Supremacy in the CWS Manual.)



#### **IV. INTERSECTIONS: WHITE PRIVILEGE AND SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION**

**Non-ruling class white people are *both oppressed and privileged*. They are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and sexual orientation; and also on the basis of religion, culture, ethnicity, age, physical abilities and politics.**

**At the same time, they are all privileged in relation to peoples of color. Because of this contradictory situation, when oppressed whites organize to resist their oppression, they rarely also organize for racial justice, or to challenge their white privilege. Careful analysis of the contradictions is necessary in order to develop effective strategies to help overcome them. Here are a few beginning ones:**

##### **Intersections of white privilege and class oppression:**

1. How did past programs of affirmative action for non-ruling class white people help move poor European immigrants up the ladder to working or middle class positions?
2. In what ways did (and do) organizations that fought (and fight) class exploitation (like unions) also protect and promote their members' white privilege? What are the legacies of history from which current activists can learn?
3. In what ways do white-dominated progressive organizations that challenge economic oppression and work for economic justice today also protect white privilege?
4. What mostly white organizations -- historically and today -- have effectively worked to challenge *both racial and economic oppression*? What strategies have they used?
5. In what ways have the language of past and present movements for economic justice among working class white activists minimized racial oppression and *normalized and prioritized* oppression of white experience (For example: Exploited white workers in the early 19th century called themselves 'wage slaves.')

6. As global capitalism lays off millions of U.S. workers and provides only temporary jobs with no benefits for millions more, what will be the impact on the white privilege of young white workers? Will this be the first generation in the history of the United States in which white parents cannot expect to give their children 'a better life' than they experienced?

7. Some Bay Area organizers who work with homeless people have asserted that the daily conditions of all homeless people are so difficult that one cannot speak of any relative material white privilege benefits for white homeless people. What do you think?

8. The concept of 'white privilege' has been popularized among college educated white activists who are primarily of middle class background. How can the term 'white privilege' be framed so that it *neither* ignores the extreme capitalist class exploitation of working class and poor white folks; *nor* marginalizes internal class contradictions among non-ruling class white activists?

### **Intersections of white privilege with oppression based on gender and sexual orientation**

1. What are the legacies of white women's movements in relation to challenging racial oppression and white privilege? What lessons can be learned for current work?

2. What are the legacies of mostly white queer activist groups in relation to challenging racial oppression and white privilege? What lessons can be learned?

3. Research the herstories and histories of white anti-racist activists, especially since the 1960's, who were women and/or queers. What lessons can be learned?

4. Examine the dynamics of oppressed groups who then become oppressors of peoples of color. What factors may be operating?

5. Study the political cultural expressions that both white women and white queer movements have used which prioritize their own oppression over that of peoples of color, or that norm-alize oppressed white experience. (Example: white women in the early 1970's compared their oppression by white movement men to that of the treatment of African Americans in the apartheid South) How can this culture of white privilege be challenged effectively?

6. How can movements for gender and queer justice incorporate both racial and economic justice into all aspects of their analyses and strategies?

7. Effective organizing is usually based on the culture and experiences of specific constituencies. What anti-racist organizing strategies are *specific* to different constituencies within both women and queer activists groups? For example: queer youth, women survivors of domestic violence, etc.

8. What approaches might motivate women and queer activists to convince them that the *benefits of doing anti-racist work outweigh the costs*?

9. Activists challenging violence against women and queers often use the legal system to prosecute offenders. Evaluate the strengths and problems with this approach.

## **V. THE IMPACT OF WHITE PRIVILEGE** **ON GRASSROOTS SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS**

(The focus of CWS Workshops is on developing anti-racist organizing strategies -- working for racial justice and challenging white privilege -- for predominantly white grassroots social justice activists. A draft summary of these strategies is contained in the pieces, "Creating an Anti-Racist Agenda" and "Creating Anti-Racist Organizing Strategies." The purpose of this section is to create some of the questions that grassroots activists might want to ask about how white privilege works in their own movements, so that they can create the most principled and effective strategies to challenge it.)

### **The Impact of White Privilege on Individual Activists:**

// What are the class backgrounds of the activists in your group? How have these class backgrounds been impacted by past white privilege in activists' families?

// Give examples of how 'the world' treats white activists in their daily lives that may differ from treatment accorded to activists of color.

// In what ways do white activists have access to sources of personal and institutional legitimacy and privilege?

// How does the behavior of individual white activists perpetuate white privilege in daily life and in political work?

// What attitudes, values and world views of internalized white supremacy are expressed through particular forms of white privilege behavior of grassroots activists?

// How have the demands of past white social justice activists impacted on the lives of present activists: e.g., rights to organize and protest, women's rights, economic rights, housing and education, etc.?

**The Impact of White Privilege on the Political Practice  
of Grassroots Social Justice Activists:**

// In what ways does your group's ability to 'choose' its issues manifest its white privilege? Ex: 'issue-hopping.'

// In what ways do the issues your group chooses to work on, and *chooses not to prioritize*, perpetuate white privilege? For example: prioritizing symbolic actions over actions protesting daily institutionally-based oppression.

// In what ways does the 'frame' your group puts on the issues you choose perpetuate white privilege and minimize the struggle for racial justice?

// In what ways does your group's choice of political allies or coalition partners manifest and perpetuate white privilege?

// In what ways might your group's preference for focusing on *tactics* rather than *strategies*, or short term projects over long term campaigns, perpetuate white privilege?

**The Impact of the Culture of White Privilege on your  
Group's Behavior, Dynamics and Values:**

// In what ways does your group's individual and collective behavior manifest and perpetuate white privilege?

// In what ways does your group's political language and dialogue perpetuate white privilege culture?

// In what ways does your group's values perpetuate a denial of the history of white privilege? For example, how does your group talk about the actual historical practice of 'democracy,' 'freedom' and 'equality' in the U.S.?

// How does your group's literature and demands normalize and universalize the experience of oppressed whites, or make false analogies with the oppression of peoples of color?

// In what ways does your group analyze situations and make judgments based on 'either/or' thinking?

// Make an assessment of all the ways in which your group's values, assumptions, norms and language express and perpetuate the culture of white privilege.

// Why do you think that so many white activists believe that recruiting people of color into *their* work or *their* group is the *first* step to take in 'anti-racist activism?'

**The Impact of White Privilege on Grassroots  
Social Justice Organizations:**

// What access does your group have to institutional 'legitimacy' or 'resources' that are not available to grassroots groups of color with similar radical politics?

// In what ways do your group's relationships with activists and organizations of color perpetuate white privilege?

// What are the internal organizational dynamics in your group that might perpetuate white privilege -- for example, its process of recruitment, decision-making and leadership development?

// In what ways does your group play the role of 'movement gatekeeper' in terms of definition of issues, relationships to mainstream institutions, relationships to organizations of color and to other predominantly white groups?

### **The Impact of White Privilege on Progressive and Radical Grassroots Movements**

// Analyze the shared politics and practice in your movement for manifestations of white privilege.

// Analyze the shared values, assumptions and norms of your movement for expressions of white privilege.

// In what ways might the focus on large demonstrations in your movement perpetuate white privilege while challenging other forms of systemic oppression?

// In what ways might the focus on 'global' activism and the marginalization of 'local' activism perpetuate white privilege while challenging other forms of systemic oppression?

// How might white activists' definition of 'the movement' express and perpetuate white privilege?



Graphic by Seth Newton  
cws workshop participant  
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