

Little White Lies: An Interview With AntiRacist Activist Tim Wise

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Tim, let's start with the basics - how would you describe the work you do?

I guess I would consider myself one-part social critic, one-part anti-racist organizer. My job, as it were, is to educate others—particularly other whites—about the damage done by racism, not only to persons of color, but to whites as well, spiritually, economically, and culturally. By accepting the bargain of white privilege, we've really cut ourselves off from any possibility of building a just society; so until institutionalized racial inequity is destroyed, justice in any real sense is impossible. My role, and the role of other whites, should be to interrupt the dominant discourse on race and racism by any means necessary: the spoken word, art, literature, political essays, media, protest, whatever.

I primarily operate through the mediums of oration and print. In the past three years, I've spoken on about 150 college campuses and to dozens of community groups—maybe 40,000 people in all—about issues ranging from affirmative action, to "welfare reform" and the assault on the poor, to the need to go beyond feel-good diversity trainings, and instead focus on the structural roots of racism. My job is to do everything in my power to resist collaborating with what I consider a truly evil system—nothing more, nothing less. It's really about using my white (and male) privilege—as a weapon against the very system that bestows the privileges to begin with.

You've written a book, *Little White Lies: The Truth About Affirmative Action and 'Reverse Discrimination'*. Let's start at the beginning: Why do you think we need to defend affirmative action?

If for no other reason than to reaffirm the premise which is inherent to the concept of affirmative action, we have to defend it. That premise is simple: in the absence of formal requirements to ensure greater representation for persons of color and women in the private and public sectors, and institutions of higher learning, those persons will continue to be overlooked, irrespective of qualifications, ambition, or whatever else. Why? Because of ongoing race and gender bias, which has been documented by more sources than I care to recount here, as well as the institutionalized racism and sexism which operates through the old-boys network: a network, or set of networks, which disproportionately excludes people of color and women from the best jobs, schools, and a fair shot at government contracts. By encouraging us to look at the way our history of exclusion has prevented true equal opportunity, affirmative action can serve as an honesty check: it can force us to face our past, and acknowledge the effects of that past on the present. So although any true radical—and I consider myself one—would have to acknowledge the rather limited success of affirmative action over the years, anyone who's intellectually honest

would also have to acknowledge the importance of reasserting the principle. Affirmative action as a symbol is critical, and I'm afraid that if we lose it, we'll have an increasingly difficult time defending any of the more thoroughgoing changes which need to take place to bring about true racial and gender justice.

Do you believe affirmative action can be improved?

Well, sure.

How?

First off, really enforcing it would be a start. Affirmative action requirements have become paper tigers in a sense over the past fifteen years or so; first, because of the Reagan-era assaults, and now because the agencies charged with overseeing civil rights compliance have too few resources to make the laws meaningful. The Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), for example, conducted a review in 1994-1995 which concluded that about 75% of the businesses they investigated were in "substantial violation"—not only of affirmative action mandates, but of the basic premises of the Civil Rights Act of 1964! The real kicker, though, is that the OFCCP only has enough money to conduct about 4000 reviews a year, meaning that they can check up on each workplace under their jurisdiction about once ever 38 years. In addition, only a handful of companies have ever been banned from receiving government contracts for failure to comply with the laws. Until we get serious and treat discrimination like the crime it is, affirmative action will remain somewhat hollow.

There are other things we can do to improve, or supplement, affirmative action. For example, the 1991 Civil Rights Act, says that job qualification requirements—like a standardized test score or educational degree—which disproportionately exclude people of color, are only legitimate if they are absolute business necessities: in other words, having a certain score or credential has to be necessary to performing the job in question, or else the requirement is not allowed. This was originally asserted by the Supreme Court in 1971, but had been weakened in 1989 so that all companies had to do was show a "reasonable" relationship between qualification requirements and ability to perform the job. To the extent the Congress took us back to a more stringent standard, fine. But what about "qualification requirements" for admission to selective colleges and universities? Why shouldn't such institutions also have the burden of showing that things like the SAT bear a substantial relationship to one's ability to succeed in college? Of course, the evidence is that these tests are bullshit: the SAT, for example has a .32 correlation with freshman grades, meaning that only about 10% of the difference between two students can be traced to their differences on the SAT. Similar evidence exists for graduate level tests. So, to the extent that people of color generally do worse on the tests—thanks to having attended resource-poor schools, or having been tracked into classes that don't prepare you for these exams—and are therefore underrepresented in many colleges, we should apply the same standard that we apply for employment. Developing alternative admission criteria that wasn't so tilted in favor of those with greater resources would greatly improve affirmative action's effectiveness, and also help thousands of low-and-moderate income whites who, because of inadequate resources, also bomb these tests. For those wanting more information on a number of similar ideas, I would strongly recommend the article by Lani Guinier and Susan Sturm in the July, 1996 *California Law Review*.

Some people argue that fighting for governmental protections like affirmative action serves primarily to legitimize the government's authority and takes energy and focus away from fighting for fundamental social change. How would you respond to those arguments?

Well, I agree, if the persons fighting for such minimalist protections end their analysis there, without linking the fight for affirmative action to the fight for broader social change. To the extent many proponents of affirmative action fail to make those connections, they're not real allies. This is basically where the mainstream of the Democratic Party is: defending affirmative action as an isolated policy concept, without discussing the need to radically transform the society. However, to the extent we make the connections between the need for affirmative action, and full employment, and education as a right rather than a commodity, and workplace democracy, and ending poverty, then I think the fight for affirmative action can be empowering, and actually help demonstrate the overall sickness of the system. The bottom line is this: people don't join the revolution if they can't support their families. They don't have the time. By making it possible to survive, "reformist" policies, be they affirmative action, or income support, or whatever, provide an opportunity for greater participation in the movement, not less. But, —and this is a significant but—the only way this is true, is if the analysis being provided can guarantee the proper focus. Reform can operate as anesthesia or adrenaline, depending on who controls the terms of the debate.

Race has been called the "great American divide," and, referring to whiteness specifically, an influence that "permeates every issue in U.S. society, whether domestic or foreign." Do you think that's true?

Of course. From conquest, to slavery, to colonialism and Jim Crow, racism and the system of white supremacy has been and is implicated in every breath and heartbeat of the United States. At least since the late 1600's, when whiteness as a concept and mark of automatic advantage was developed by the elite so as to divide poor whites from the people of color (black and American Indian) with whom they had substantially more in common, the battle lines have been drawn in an explicitly racial way. And today, we're still held hostage to this system.

So when we talk about "the healthiest economy in a generation," whiteness is implicated, because the reference point is clearly a white one: for millions of blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and recent Asian/Pacific immigrants, the recession never ended. They're still facing double-digit employment, crushing poverty, and wage stagnation at far higher rates than their white counterparts. Trickle-down Lite—a la Clinton—is no more effective than trickle-down Heavy was. The booming stock market doesn't mean shit to those on the bottom: in fact, it often means bad news, since it typically reflects a higher share of profit-taking by owners and investors, rather than workers.

When we talk about education, crime, the deficit, really anything, race is never too far below the surface, and whiteness is most definitely implicated, because the perspectives on all these issues which are considered normative are white perspectives. This is not to say there is an inherent "white perspective," but simply that whites experience America far differently, and more positively, than persons of color, and this shades our perception. Of course, the fact that whiteness is usually invisible, precisely because it is the "normative" and dominant perspective, makes what I just said incomprehensible to many people. That's why it has to be made visible.

Let's talk about a specific example. Sometimes it's difficult to clearly understand how race and class relate to each other, particularly—for me, anyway—with issues like urban migration and displacement. Cabrini Green, a housing project close to downtown Chicago, is being torn down. The residents of Cabrini Green, most of whom are black, are being forced to move, although the city has made no real plans to find affordable housing for them. Developers have been building up all around Cabrini Green for years now, attracting middle- to upper-class, predominantly white residents. So there's an obvious economic and apparently racist push to kick these people out of their homes. How do you see race and class interacting in a place and situation like Cabrini Green?

Well, this is consistent with the whole history of urbanization and the development of the U.S. housing market. Originally, the reason places like Cabrini Green were created the way they were—isolated, concentrated, high-rise complexes—was because city planners and the feds capitulated to the demands of whites who didn't want low-income persons of color living amongst them. So "the projects" were stuck in the heart of the city, while whites took FHA loans that were pretty much off limits to non-whites and hustled it out to the suburbs, all subsidized of course by the taxpayers.

Now that many of these well-off white folks recognize that the suburbs can be pretty stale and lifeless, devoid of any real culture in many cases—unless one considers Wal-Mart and strip-malls to be significant cultural icons—they want to come back to the cities. Only they still don't want to be around the folks they forced to stay in the cities in the first place—namely the poor and people of color—so they push them out through gentrification and a new round of "urban renewal," or whatever. Of course, the developers behind this, or the white folks moving back, or the politicians encouraging and even helping to finance this process, would deny to their death that such developments were racist. They would no doubt claim that unless a "better class of people" come to live in the cities, the urban areas will continue to crumble, and they would claim that they would welcome anyone in that "better class," irrespective of color.

But two points need to be made: first, given the historic and contemporary overlap between racial caste and class status, those who will be moving in to these new luxury apartments will be pretty melanin-challenged; and second, that such a "better class of people" is needed to save the cities is only true to the extent that the politicians have refused to provide the resources needed to lift up those living there now. Had the cities not been de-funded consistently since the late '70's, or had powerful folks cut loose with even a fraction of the money they'll now spend to attract business, commerce, and middle-class yuppies, much of the crisis could have been averted.

Ultimately, there's nothing wrong with tearing down Cabrini Green, or Robert Taylor, or any other "project" in any other city. They should be torn down. They should never have existed in the first place. But unless we're ready to do as much to subsidize housing for the poor as we do for the middle-class and wealthy through the mortgage interest-deduction, for example, then tearing these places down, and leaving people with no place to go, isn't just cruel, it's barbaric. It is the moral equivalent of "forced removal" in apartheid South Africa, or Israel taking Palestinian land and homes, in 1948, 1967, and still today, to make room for new settlements and pushing the victims of these policies further and further out of sight.

One of the bios I read of yours, in the Speak Out! Speakers Bureau literature, said that you've "squared off against white supremacists, religious fundamentalists and noted conservatives..." What are some of your more memorable discussions or debates?

I guess the most memorable would be a 1992 confrontation on national TV against a Klan leader from Wisconsin. I was on stage, along with a former Klan family—Jan and Gary Ralston—who had left the Klan and now speak out against hatred and bigotry. And the Klan leader and his wife were beamed in by satellite. The show itself wasn't particularly memorable, but a few months after it aired, the Klansman hung up his robes, so to speak, and I later found out that a few dozen skinheads had quit the movement as well, at least in part because of the way the Ralstons and I had dismantled their arguments on that show. We didn't call these folks names, or yell at them; we simply discussed the way that whites have been tricked into buying into this mindset, and how it really makes most all whites worse off. This experience really made an impression on me: first off, that pretty much anyone is redeemable if you can try and reconnect them with their humanity; and secondly, that it was particularly important for me as a white person to do this work, since obviously racists aren't going to listen to the same arguments from a person of color.

Of course, there are times when I haven't the patience or the desire to try and help someone reconnect to their humanity, and so I just let 'em have it. Like recently, I was on the radio in Colorado Springs—which is pretty much the nerve center for the far right it seems—and this Nazi shit wanted to debate the Holocaust, or the Jewish Conspiracy, or whatever. And he obviously wasn't going to listen to anything constructive, so I just figured, screw it. And so I used the one weapon which can at least defuse an asshole like that and discredit him to other listeners; and that weapon is ridicule. He had started off by saying that he wasn't "some uneducated hick," because he was actually a successful accountant, so naturally, I asked him why, if he was such a good accountant, not to mention a hardworking member of the master race, did he seem to have so much time to spend sitting on the telephone, spewing nonsense over the radio? The show was in mid-March, and it seemed to me that with less than a month to go before tax day, he should be busy. Where was his work ethic? I also asked him if he could give me the local number for the Colorado Springs branch office of the Jewish Conspiracy, since I hadn't gotten my weekly royalty check for all the good work I do on their behalf.

Now you might think, O.K., that's funny, but what good did it do? Well, I'll tell you: caller after caller responded to say, thank God someone finally decided to take that guy on without playing his game. Apparently he calls in all the time, and baits people to respond to him intellectually, as if he had anything legitimate to say. For people of color who listen to his racist diatribes, and even whites of conscience, this puts them on the defensive and is quite disempowering. But by reversing the terms of the debate, and taking control of the discourse, we can use constructive ridicule to further the cause of social justice. Alinsky realized this fifty years ago and it's still true.

You live and work in the South. Do you think there are any differences in race relations in the South versus the North?

Well, there are differences. But the differences are more those of type, than degree. In other words, I have no reason to believe racism is any bigger a problem in one region of the country than in another. However, the type or style of racism does vary greatly. I think most people of

color—particularly blacks—will tell you that in the South, for the most part, racism is more openly articulated. If people don't like you, they say so, and folks don't usually act like racism isn't a problem. In the South, we know it's an issue. It's part of our history and culture. At the same time, many folks say—and I tend to agree—that the South has made more progress in many ways than other regions. Forming cross-racial class alliances for example is much more common, as with environmental justice organizing. We've always been around each other down here, and so we know a little more about how to negotiate the tensions. This isn't to say we've conquered the past—and the sheer number of folks still waving confederate flags is evidence of that—but simply, that we have a head start in addressing racism, and ultimately, any movement to address racial inequity will, I truly believe, grow from this soil.

In other regions, racism is just as salient, but more covert. I go out West, or to the East Coast, and people act like: "Racism, what racism?" You get these liberal, progressive white folks in Seattle, San Francisco, or Portland, and they all think they don't have a problem. But ask people of color in those places, who have lived elsewhere, and they'll tell you those are some of the most racist places they've ever been. Why? Because the denial is its own form of racism: the racism of people who don't hate, perhaps, but who, with the simple act of denial, obliterate and negate the reality of people of color. In many ways that's worse than hate. To hate someone, you at least have to see them, acknowledge them. But to deny that person's reality altogether is to make them forever invisible. It denies them their humanity in a way that hatred never can.

The "Invisible Man" condition Ralph Ellison wrote about. I'd like to switch gears a bit and talk about history. I've recently learned about the "Black codes" in the post-Civil War South. Can you describe what those were?

Sure, the Black Codes were a set of rigid laws designed to primarily restrict the labor mobility of the newly freed slaves. The idea was to guarantee a supply of cheap labor to the white planters, and essentially maintain the dominant-subordinate relationship that had existed under slavery.

So, for example, the Codes—which varied from state to state—allowed for the arrest of any freedman without "lawful employment." If he was unable to pay the fine, he would be hired out to an employer. Basically, any freedman who wouldn't accept work at whatever wage white planters were offering, would be arrested and leased out. This essentially recreated the master-slave relationship. Blacks were also barred from certain types of employment—basically anything other than agricultural labor or domestic work—similar to South Africa's infamous "influx control" and other labor provisions of apartheid.

At first, the codes were weakly enforced, due to labor shortages in the years immediately preceding the War. And of course, the beginning of Reconstruction ended them outright. But within a decade, as Reconstruction was toppled, thanks to the capitulation of President Johnson and then the 1877 Hayes-Tilden Compromise, (which promised the end of Federal occupation and a return to power by the Southern planter class), the Codes were reinstated in a number of different forms, and became the backbone of the emergent Jim Crow system.

I saw a debate you had with Dinesh D'Souza in Washington State about a year-and-a-half ago that ended with D'Souza calling you the "Uncle Tom of Whites," which I thought was hilarious. Why did you want to debate D'Souza, and how would you describe D'Souza's work and history?

I had actually debated him twice before the event you describe at Evergreen (and will actually be doing so again in late April in Virginia), and a lot of people have asked me why I would want to do that, since it gives him the chance to spread some extremely obnoxious propaganda for the far-right. To which I respond very simply this: Dinesh is going to be invited to speak on campuses with or without me, or someone else to debate him. He is an extremely well-paid "policy analyst," at the American Enterprise Institute, in Washington DC, and a best-selling author, and he gives 40-50 lectures a year, according to what he told me back in 1996. So it seems to me, it makes more sense to encourage debates with him, where at least his message has to be held up to scrutiny, than to give him *carte blanche*, in the interests of remaining "pure and untainted," as some leftists seem to think we'll do by ignoring him.

As for who he is, I've just told you his professional affiliation. His views are among the most retrograde on race of any I've heard in recent years. His recent book, *The End of Racism* says, among other things, that whatever problems blacks and Latinos have today in America, is due, not to discrimination, or economic dislocation, but rather to a "civilizational deficit," between them and white folks. (And Asians, of course—of which Dinesh is one). He argues that whatever discrimination does exist today is "rational," and understandable, and even acceptable, since it stems from realistic assessments of black and Latino ability.

In other words, it's OK to treat all people of color like the worst elements in their respective communities, because the risks of treating them equally, without prejudice, only to find out that the black guy in the suit, with the college degree, really is a crack-dealer are just too great. He also says slavery wasn't racist, and Jim Crow laws were passed by enlightened, caring whites who only sought to protect black people by keeping them away from the few really crazy whites who wanted to kill them. As a policy proposal, Dinesh calls, not only for the end of affirmative action, but also the repeal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The book is filled with historical distortions, statistical fraud, and lapses of logic so dramatic as to boggle the mind, but I would recommend reading it just to realize how sick this country has become, that crap like this and the *Bell Curve* can sell hundreds of thousand of copies and their authors can be taken seriously.

In terms of fighting for racial equity, what specific things do you think whites can do?

First, recognize that racism is a white problem, and a problem that all whites must address. So long as the institutions of society provide us with racial privilege—however mediated it may be through class and gender divisions among other things—we have to take it seriously, and not treat it like just another "topic," which is something white leftists do all the time: "Oh gee, today, I'll save the rainforests, and tomorrow I'll go to a demo against bombing Iraq, and next week I'll write a letter to the editor about vivisection." Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying those things are unimportant, it's just that until we make racism something we deal with every day—the way people of color have to whether they like it or not—very little is going to change. We shouldn't have the luxury of choosing to deal with it only if we want to. By treating racism like just another issue, while we continue to reap the benefits of a racist system makes us complicit in evil.

Second, don't worry so much about interracial alliances and organizing. First, organize around racism in the white community; with friends, colleagues, family members, neighbors. I know we all want to work together, and build alliances with people of color, but unless we spend just as

much time working on cleaning up our own shit, intraracially, then no long-term alliances are going to last. There are models out there for doing this kind of work: European Dissent, for example, in New Orleans. They're affiliated with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and can help white antiracist activists connect with others, and get them started on this road.

Third, we have to be accountable to people of color and their communities. People of color are the ones oppressed by racism, meaning that we can't just go out there and say, "alright, I'm going to organize against racism," unless we know what the concerns are in the communities most impacted by racism. So we have to learn to listen. We have to read the materials published in communities of color, like black owned papers, or the newsletters of community-based groups. We have to pay attention to what they're saying, and always be willing to accept their leadership and direction, even when you're principally organizing other whites.

Finally, to refuse to collaborate means refusing to give our votes to candidates who don't reflect an anti-racist agenda, or who give short shrift to these issues. To vote for a candidate who doesn't address racism or racial inequity because "we like his position on the environment," or "he/she is a supporter of women's rights," is to make the false assumption that any of these issues can be decoupled. No real champion of women's rights or the environment ignores racism or racial inequity. And to think otherwise; to believe in this "lesser of two evils" crap is a delusion, because once you start down that road, you never stop moving the line. It never ends, and pretty soon, we've chased the right all the way to social fascism. The more we compromise on basic principles, the more the other side can push the envelope that much further.