

Shinin' the Lite on White Privilege

by Sharon Martinas

Sharon Martinas, 1998.

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. Fifty-six percent of California's electorate voted "Yes" on Proposition 209, thus wiping 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 grassroots 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, 55% 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 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.

"White" is . . . "White" isn't

What does "white" mean to you, as it refers to people? Here are some questions to think about:

- 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 USA "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 (indigenous) 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 teenagers and kidnapped African people. By the second decade of colonization, working servants, both English and African, outnumbered "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 were 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 following analysis explores the first three ways in which white privilege is perpetuated in the U.S.:

The Political Economy of Internal Colonialism

As Elizabeth Martinez 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 exploitation 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 grandparents 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 master's 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 got 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, has led 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 sexual orientation, 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 freedom of the press.
- In 1920, white women got the vote after 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 that when oppressed whites protest 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 capitalist power which oppresses all of us today.

Some materials that have helped me understand white privilege:

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11. Alfredo Mirand?, *Gringo Justice*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.
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14. Mab Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor*. Boston: South End Press, 1994.
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