

“The White People Problem” in America

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Global Research, December 04, 2014

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#)

White Americans have essentially never internalized the Kenner Report. Assembled by Lyndon Johnson to address what was laughably referred to as the Negro Problem, the panel very quickly saw that this was a joke. There is no Negro Problem in the US, but rather a white people problem. FIFTY years ago (let that sink in), it opined, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black and one white—separate and unequal...Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.” The report explained that the race riots were rooted in segregation, inadequate housing, poor access to quality education, systematic police violence, and labor market exclusion. For these factors, the report concluded, “White racism is essentially responsible.”

TWO GENERATIONS later (another pause for sinking in) and white Americans are still, in large part, hard pressed to see it, scratching their heads to see just what black people are so darn angry about. The pursuit of White Supremacy, both domestically and globally, is the singular unifying engine driving the west’s ongoing hegemony around the world. Reduced to the old canard of ‘race relations’—whatever that is supposed to mean, it can be encapsulated in Rodney King’s much maligned plaint, ‘Can’t we all just get along?’ The answer, firmly, is no. Certainly not amid the flood of feigned perplexion, mock incredulity and the toxic ‘both sides’ rhetoric that still spews forth from the mouths of whites (and not a small number of non-whites) at every level of society, media, and social interaction. Not unless and until white people change, and begin to see the structural and institutional evil that white supremacy injects into every facet of American life. Basically, that is, until whites are collectively ready to go at least as far as the Kenner report did FIFTY YEARS ago (time’s up folks. It should have sunk in long ago).

This is not a demand or an expectation I take lightly; nor do I assert it without burdening myself with the same task. I have had to change—and massively so—from what I always thought was a forward-thinking, anti-racist, commie thinker in my early formative years. It’s just not enough. Granted, I have the best tutor I could ever hope for. And I chose to take the full immersion course. And I’m sure I have a lot of changing yet to do, and it will never quite be the same as seeing the world as if I was born black. But my ongoing education is as humbling as it is obvious to millions (billions, actually). You just see things differently when your own children are targeted by police, by other white people, by institutions. Wissen geht durch den Magen, as a famous German once said. When you bail family out of jail for something they didn’t do, for example. Wisdom comes through the gut.

When you lie awake at night worrying whether the kids have internalized the hatred you try to protect them from every day, you are halfway there. When you walk into a store together with your wife, and she is followed by a store detective while some old white lady comes up to you and asks if she can put such and such on layaway, you learn that maybe your eyes aren’t as open as they should be (and a bit more open than you wish they had to be). When

you are pulled out of a car and treated like a criminal because racist cops assume that your wife of ten years is a whore and you her drunken john... you wake up with the quickness. When cops investigating a fire separate you from your wife, trying to force her to admit that she smokes when she doesn't-come on, you smoke. You can tell us. Fuck you. And as you wake up, you start to see things. You see that you go to the same grocery store and pay with the same blue school check at least once a week-often twice a week-for ten years. No problem. But the one time you bring your seven-year old Haitian godson because he's having a bad day, the clerk takes the check and leans over the counter, asking "Is that WIC?" No, hon... that's WACK. And on and on, through literally thousands of examples, situations, interactions that become so commonplace that you become almost immune-but that are also part of your awakening. And ultimately you realize-you fear, you feel, you *know*-that Tamir and Trayvon and Aiyana and hundreds (yes, hundreds) of others-could just as easily be Johnny or Marcus or Hector or Herby or Funmi or Sammy-the family and circle who are my everything, and without whom I am lost on this earth.

In the weeks since the unrest in Ferguson it has been painful to endure a barrage of idiocy from white people, some despite good intentions, some ignorant, and some just downright racist, most of whom probably wouldn't know that my family is black. It is as if nothing has changed-except for the worse. Racism is so deeply entrenched-and ossified, it seems-that there is no longer even a veneer of understanding, and white people who would have prided themselves in 1968 to side with the oppressed, now feel themselves not only empowered but almost *compelled* to judge, moralize and hold forth about an experience from which they are completely divorced. It is as if the whole country has been transformed into the old Dave Chappelle sketch, and they "just know black people."

As one who has made and is making that journey, I see it as the duty of white people-at the very least-to avoid these pitfalls. Listen. Open your eyes. Learn and know supremacy for what it is, and understand it and expose it. The black girl who made fun of you in middle school may have been racist; but she probably doesn't have the power to take your job, or your home...or to kill your child with impunity. The difference is what defines supremacy. And when our eyes are open, we can see the nuances that make the system what it is. We can and should speak out as long and as loudly and forcefully to other white people in whatever forum and from whatever platform we can access until the very second the mic is wrenched from our hands against a supremacist system from which we benefit unequally... after all, we are mistakenly seen as the store manager, and not the thief.

And when you know, you can't un-know. You can't be assuaged by half measures that support the system rather than change it fundamentally. More body cameras for cops? Are they serious? What a crock of shit. Tamir was shot on video. Eric Garner was choked to death in front of a dozen witnesses. Rodney was beaten half to death on camera, and a white jury still couldn't see it. And on and on and on. Just another bullshit chapter in the hopeless neoliberal delusion that technological advancement-tweaking the numbers-can solve problems that require systemic change. Cowardly, righteous, and deliberately obtuse-and giving *more* resources to police who are already militarized and armed to the teeth.

Don't be drawn into the tired and corrosive Good Negro/Bad Negro paradigm that supremacist logic has used derail attempts to expose white supremacy for what it is. Dr. King was wise and calm, Malcom X was crazy and violent, conveniently ignoring and distorting the radical legacy that both men left us. After all it was Martin, not Malcolm, who

said “riots are the language of the unheard. And it was Martin, not Malcolm, who was quick to expose the hypocrisy of condemning his own people as violent savages amid the slaughter of nonwhite people in Vietnam: “I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.” Martin today would understand the rioters—not shame them.

Sadly, the Groundhog Day time bounce that governs these things replays the loop without the slightest hint of irony: white people tut-tutting about looting and violence while undoubtedly saluting the flag and sporting support our troops paraphernalia. The King of Drones blathers on about how ‘violence is unacceptable’ while raining death on nonwhite children and wedding collaterals the world around. Par for the course for the Supremacist-in-chief. The office really is colorblind, as it turns out, and this portfolio must be filled at all costs. This is what accounts for the radical difference between the Obomber’s rhetoric and that of say, another Black elected official, Deval Patrick.

Especially at the national level, there is no escape from The American Nether, that perverse intersection of race and class. I would, however, caution those who try beyond reason to make it first about class in a misguided attempt to promote a false ‘unity’ or to blunt their own complicity. In our own example, Julia is just as likely to be followed by the store cop whether she is in a do-rag or prepped up. We are both educated professionals, and play the part quite well. It didn’t save us—my wife was knitting (KNITTING!!) in the front seat when I was pulled from the car and mistaken for her john.

Is it all about race? Maybe not. Is it only about race? Hardly. But it is, was, and shall be **always** about race. Falling isn’t only or all about gravity either, but only the very stupid would discount it—and at their own peril. It is the not-so-well disguised secret that defines This American Life, the reality that has defined our experience since the arrival of Europeans, and the fuel that fires the twin engines that guide the separate systems about which Kenner and company warned when I was three years old. This is America. It is 2014. Wake up.

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