

# White Supremacy: Exploring the Contours of Race and Power in America

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*It is widely believed that white supremacy is a racist ideology of hatred promoted by marginal extremist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or the Aryan Nations. Often overlooked and neglected in this view are the structural inequalities that ensure the continued supremacy of whites over non-whites in all facets of social life. Also conveniently disregarded are the more subtle, yet frequent and numerous, manifestations of white supremacy that are woven into the fabric of American culture. In this sense, white supremacy is just as much of a social reality as it is an ideology. Indeed the two often go hand in hand, although this isn't always the case.*

There are many white people who hold supreme positions in the social hierarchy, over and above the masses of non-white people, without consciously adhering to any white supremacist ideology. This essay will explore the complex reality of white supremacy in America, examining its existence in the social structure, analyzing its cultural expressions, considering some of its ideological forms, and finally investigating its causes.

There can be little doubt that white supremacy is built into the very social structure of America when one considers the fact that the politico-economic structure of the U.S. was designed by white people to serve the interests of white people. For example, the Constitutional Congress that created the American government consisted of 55 members and all of them were white, while 15 of them were African slave owners (Beard, pp.74-151).

There were absolutely zero Blacks, Latinos or Native Americans involved in forming the government of the U.S. To this day only one non-white has ever attained the presidency of the U.S. government, while Blacks make up only 7% of the U.S. Congress, with Latinos making up only 4% (Henschen and Sidlow, p. 110). Although subordinate races have now been assimilated into American society, the social structure still functions in such a way that maintains the supremacy of whites, excepting certain token reforms such as Affirmative Action. A simple look at the empirical data confirms this.

Aside from the political structure, virtually even, social indicator unequivocally confirms that whites are levels above non-whites in the most essential domains of social life.<sup>1</sup>The supremacy of whites on the economic terrain is indisputable and highly instructive. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, in 2005 the median family income for whites was \$62,300, compared to just \$36,075, \$38,558 and \$37,387 for Blacks, Natives and Latinos respectively (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB]. 2009. p. 38).

The CQ Researcher reported that in 2002 the median weekly income for white workers was

\$624, while Black workers earned \$498 and Latinos a mere \$423 (CQ Researcher [CQR], 2003, p. 601). In 2005, the poverty rate for white families was only 6.3%, while a staggering 23.4% of Black families, 21.1% of Native homes, and 21.4% of Latino households lived below the poverty line (LTSCB. pp. 38-39). And finally, the real unemployment rate for whites was 9.5%, compared to 37% of Blacks and 31% of Latinos (USCB, 374). All of these statistics illustrate the fact that whites in Amerika collectively enjoy economic privileges over and above their Black, Native and Latino counterparts.

There are also glaring discrepancies in the domains of education and healthcare.

In 2005 86.1% of whites graduated high school, compared to 80.7% of Blacks and only 59.3% of Latinos. In the realm of higher education 28.4% of whites had college degrees, compared to just 18.5% of Blacks and 12.4% of Latinos (USCB. 145). A good general measure of a people's quality of healthcare is found in the infant mortality rate. In 2004, the infant mortality rate for whites was 5.7 per 100,000, compared to 13.8 for Blacks (ibid., p. 81).

Equally revealing is the fact that in 2005 only 14% of whites were without health insurance, while 20% of Blacks and a whopping 32% of Latinos were uninsured (ibid., p. 107). Although numbers can't convey the human dimensions of emotion and suffering involved in these differences, they do make clear the objective disparities that exist between whites and non-whites in these crucial realms of social life. These disparities indicate that white supremacy is not merely a matter of personal prejudice, but rather a social reality rooted in the basic structure of American society.

White supremacy is not only built into the social structure of America, it is also deeply embedded in American culture. Many day-to-day instances of white supremacy are so commonplace they go practically unnoticed by most people. These are virtually impossible to quantify since they only play out on a subjective level, although many of them do have very tangible consequences. In his 2006 book *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, author Michael Eric Dyson points out that "although one may not have racial intent, one's actions may nonetheless have racial consequence" (p. 20). Using Hurricane Katrina as an example, he shows how government negligence, although not the result of "active malice," was ultimately caused by a "passive indifference" to the plight of poor Blacks in New Orleans. In other words, the Bush administration's response, or lack thereof, to Hurricane Katrina was probably not motivated by a desire to see impoverished Blacks destroyed, but it didn't really care enough to save them from ruin either. No matter the case, poor Blacks ended up suffering more than whites. Indeed, as Dyson goes on to explain:

active malice and passive indifference are but flip sides of the same racial coin... if one conceives of racism as a cell phone, then active malice is the ring tone at its highest volume, while passive indifference is the ring tone on vibrate. In either case, whether loudly or silently, the consequence is the same: a call is transmitted, a racial meaning is communicated. (Dyson, pp. 20-21)

Today most expressions of white supremacy take this form of passive indifference, allowing many whites to sit back in relative comfort and privilege while non-whites suffer the effects of white supremacy.

As was pointed out earlier, one need not adhere to white supremacist ideology to benefit

from its effects. It has been empirically demonstrated that whites collectively enjoy a relative privilege over and above non-whites in the most important areas of social life- in the political structure, the economic structure, the educational structure, and even in the healthcare system. This is true whether or not individual whites are racist. The social reality of white supremacy is a fact beyond dispute, albeit still disputed. The ideology of white supremacy seeks to rationalize this social arrangement by attributing to white people an inherent superiority that makes their supremacy seem natural. Whereas most whites seek to ignore or deny their privilege, the white supremacist ideologue takes pride in it and seeks to justify, protect and expand it. Historically white supremacist ideology has taken on two main forms. The first is in the form of Christianity, from its very inception, America has always been a devoutly religious country, although today there is a noticeable trend towards secularism in urban cities and industrial areas. In his 2006 book *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, author Kevin Phillips notes that America is one of the most religious nations in the world, ranking alongside Israel, India and Iran (pp. 100-101). According to recent polls, 98% of Americans believe in the Christian God and 55% believe that the Bible is literally true, both percentages being much higher than in any other industrialized nation (ibid, p.98). What makes Israel and the U.S. unique in all of this, according to Phillips, is that each holds a widespread conviction that they share a sort of "covenant" with God and have a special relationship with Him as His "chosen people."

In the case of the U.S., this "covenant" pledged that the settlers would strictly adhere to "God's Word" with a heavy emphasis on Old Testament scripture, in exchange for God's paternal protection in the hostile "wilderness" of America (ibid, pp. 125-131). This notion that Americans have a covenant with God led to the imperial doctrine of "manifest destiny," which asserted that it was God's will for the white man to conquer and dominate all of North America. Obviously African slaves and Native Americans were not part of this covenant. In fact they were among the very threats that the settlers were expecting God to protect them from. Most settlers viewed Africans and Indians as heathens, which allowed them to justify their subjugation and exploitation of the "heathens" on religious grounds.

This form of white supremacist ideology finds its ultimate expression in the modern-day doctrine of the Christian Identity movement. This doctrine "holds that white people are the genuine descendants of the Biblical Hebrews... Jews and Blacks are the devil's spawn" (CQR, 2009, p. 433). Although this teaching is rejected by mainstream Christians, many settlers believed that Africans were the cursed descendants of Noah's son Ham, and that slavery was in fact God's punishment being inflicted on the wicked African heathens. Either way, Christianity was used to justify white supremacy, African slavery and indigenous genocide.

The second main form of white supremacy cloaks itself in secular language and masquerades as science. It is well known that Europeans have frequently devised bogus scientific constructs to justify their colonial conquests of non-European peoples. Scholar Samir Amin observed that genetics has been used to claim "that biological traits, sometimes called 'racial' characteristics, are the source of cultural diversity and create hierarchy within diversity" (Amin. 1989. p. 97). Now largely discredited in Europe, these pseudo-scientific theories took on a new impetus in America with the 1994 publication of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's controversial book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Drawing on a long tradition of imperial discourse, the authors argued that all races are genetically predisposed to a general level of cognitive ability or IQ. Whites are

shown to possess a much higher IQ than Blacks, Natives and Latinos, which accounts for their supremacy in social life (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, pp. 319-339).

The authors claim that the reason nonwhites tend to be the most impoverished, the most dependent on welfare, the most susceptible to crime and the most unemployed is because they have relatively low IQ levels. According to this logic, non-whites are not the victims of white supremacy; they are simply condemned by nature to occupy the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. The authors intended their book to be an argument against Affirmative Action. This type of self-serving logic is nothing more than an attempt to rationalize white supremacy and scale back some of the token reforms that non-whites won during the Civil Rights struggle.

There is a trend of thought amongst some of those who have been most victimized by white supremacy to attribute it to some malicious evil inherent to white people. This view is somewhat understandable to anyone who is familiar with the historical record of colonialism, the Atlantic slave trade or modern imperialism, but it falls short of supplying us with a materialist understanding of history and at times borders on the absurd. The most extreme expression of this type of thinking is found in the religious doctrine of the Nation of Islam (N.O.I.), which has had a considerable influence on Blacks in America.

According to the N.O.I., white people have attained supremacy of the world through deceit, murder, slavery, rape, plunder, and all sorts of barbarity—which is true enough. But the N.O.I. claims that whites are wicked and immoral by nature. Elijah Muhammad, founder of the N.O.I., taught that about sixty-six hundred years ago, the earth was a paradise inhabited by a highly advanced Black civilization. As the story goes, these Blacks were the original humans and they were righteous practitioners of Islam. Greed, murder, rape and evil were unknown to them. But along came a rogue scientist named Yacub who became discontent and embittered towards God. Out of spite he decided to unleash havoc upon the earth, 'through genetic engineering he created a race of genetically recessive white "devils" that would destroy the Black man's civilization and rule the world for six thousand years. The whites used trickery and deceit to set the Blacks against each other and eventually conquered the planet through murder, pillage and savagery (Malcolm X, 1965, pp. 173-183). From a historical standpoint this is obviously a religious myth, no different from the Christian Identity narrative. However it does have a certain emotional appeal to many who have suffered the vicious effects of white supremacy.

To avoid falling into these metaphysical traps which inevitably lead to simplistic reductions that depict whites as inherently evil, it is necessary to place our analysis of white supremacy in the historical context of European capitalist development. In his groundbreaking 1989 study *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat*, author J. Sakai offers a historical materialist interpretation of America that provides us with a solid theoretical framework for understanding white supremacy. He suggests that "the key to understanding America is to see that it was a chain of European settler colonies that expanded into a settler empire" (Sakai, 1989, p. 5). Adding the concept of settler colonialism into our analysis allows us to see that capitalism was the driving force behind European immigration to North America, the genocide committed against the Native Americans and the African slave trade. It will be shown on the basis of Sakai's analysis that Europeans aren't wicked by nature, but rather they were compelled to expand to every corner of the world, conquering non-Europeans in the process, by the very logic of the capitalist system: accumulation.

As the capitalist order was consolidated upon the ruins of feudal Europe, vicious class struggles were unleashed all across England. Millions of peasants were driven off their lands into the urban towns where they became wage laborers (i.e. proletarians). Living conditions were unimaginably miserable so that "participating in the settler invasion of North America was a relatively easy way out of the desperate class struggle in England for those seeking a privileged life" (Sakai, p. 5). What compelled people to leave their homelands and travel across the Atlantic was "the chance to share in conquering Indian land" (ibid. p. 5). Thus it was the material conditions of capitalist development in England, combined with a desire for land, that drove so many Europeans to settle in colonial Amerika.

The problem was that North America was already inhabited by some 300 indigenous nations, encompassing over 10 million people (Sakai, p. 7). As the European influx continued and accelerated, it became necessary for the settlers to expand further westward, deeper into Indian territory. This brought the Natives and the settlers increasingly into conflict. Naturally the Indians were not eager to give up more of their lands, so the settlers simply "killed off millions of Native Americans to get the land and

profits they wanted" (ibid, p. 7). Between 1600 and 1900 the Indian population was reduced from 10 million to approximately 250,000 (ibid. p. 7). Sakai observes that "the point is that genocide was not an accident, not an excess, not the unintended side-effect of virile European growth. Genocide was the necessary- and deliberate act of the capitalists and their settler shock-troops. The 'Final Solution' to the 'Indian Problem...'" (ibid. p.7). Whites didn't kill the Natives simply because they were racist and hated them, but rather, they killed them for their land plain and simple, using racism to justify their conquests. Once all the land was taken, the genocide stopped—or at least became less explicit.

Another problem the settlers confronted was that there was a major labor shortage in the colonies. Since the majority of settlers owned their own farmlands, there were very few, if any, wage laborers. At the time of the War of Independence, 15% of the population were temporary workers who would soon move on to become small capitalist farmers, while only 5% were laborers (Sakai, p. 10. emphasis mine). To solve this problem the settlers simply imported millions of African slaves to do all the necessary work of building up the colonies. There were white indentured servants too, but they were generally freed after four years of service and then moved on to become small farmers or small capitalists of some sort (ibid, p. 11). Not all whites owned slaves, but all benefited from slavery in some way. For example, slavery allowed white laborers to earn wages at least double those of their European counterparts—sometimes even earning up to six times more (ibid. p. 11. emphasis mine). Sakai points out that what's important isn't "...the individual ownership of slaves, but rather the fact that world capitalism in general and Euro-American capitalism in specific had forged a slave-based economy in which all settlers gained and took part" (ibid. p. 8). All of these factors go to show that the material basis of Amerika, from the beginning, was the oppression and exploitation of non-whites. Genocide and slavery are the twin pillars that hold Amerika up.

Throughout American history, whites have always had power over and above Natives, Blacks and Latinos. There is literally no point in history where this hasn't been true. White supremacy is, and always has been, a basic reality of American life. The ideology of white supremacy, and racism more generally, is merely a cultural expression of this reality. As Noam Chomsky remarked,

"If you're sitting with your boot on somebody's neck, you're going to hate them,

because that's the only way you can justify what you're doing, so subjugation automatically yields racism" (Chomsky, 2004, p. 567). In this sense, it is not SO much racist thinking that is the problem, but rather the material conditions which give rise to such thoughts.

Eradicating white supremacy is not simply a matter of reeducating prejudiced whites to appreciate cultural diversity, but involves a much more concrete and systematic social approach. What is essential is that the relationship of power between whites and non-whites be changed. Justice dictates that white Americans right the wrongs of their ancestors since they all benefit, directly and indirectly, from the crimes of Amerika's past. Reparations should be paid in the form of land and capital to all descendants of African slaves in America as well as all Native American nations. The Amerikan territory stolen from Mexico in the nineteenth century should likewise be returned to Mexico with full compensation. These are concrete steps that Amerika can take to desettlerize and give up the luxuries of white supremacy.

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### **Notes**

1. This doesn't exactly hold for Asians Amcrikans. This seems to be due to the fact that Asians have

migrated to America voluntarily, many bringing a high degree of education and even wealth from their homelands. Blacks were brought to America involuntarily and have remained trapped ever since. Natives are de facto colonial subjects. And half of the continental U.S. formerly belonged to Mexico so many Latinos are akin to colonial laborers.

2. These numbers, along with the poverty rate statistics, were calculated on the basis of data contained in the U.S. Census Bureau. These figures were arrived at by taking the total number of impoverished/unemployed members of a particular racial group and dividing it by the total population of that race instead of the total U.S. population a slick White supremacist trick used to obscure the actual disparities.

3. Historical materialism refers to the analytical methodology employed by Karl Marx to study the history of human societies. From this perspective, all political, cultural, and ideological developments are seen as expressions of the economic mode of production and the relations of production in a particular society.

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