



Our culture's obsession with upward mobility is not sustainable. The old "movin' on up" mantra is social and ecological suicide. It paves the path for an elite few to walk all over the rest of us while they make their way to the top. It leaves the vast majority fighting for crumbs, trying to emulate their oppressors. It leaves an earth that nurtured human social development for hundreds of thousands of year in total devastation.

Rejecting the upwardly mobile society doesn't mean regressing into the past or accepting the misery and poverty that so many live with. It means looking down at the earth below our feet, and at the people around us, and learning how to go forward together...

For more info about these ideas or to get involved in local/global activities to build community and create social change, get in touch:

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Shinin' the Lite on White Privilege

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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 (Challenging White Supremacy) 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 **except** 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: