

More thoughts on why system of white privilege is wrong

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[This essay builds on the discussion of white privilege from Peggy McIntosh's essay "[White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies.](#)"]

by Robert Jensen

By writing about the politics of white privilege--and listening to the folks who responded to that writing--I have had to face one more way that privilege runs deep in my life, and it makes me uncomfortable.

The discomfort tells me I might be on the right track.

Last year I published an article about white privilege in the *Baltimore Sun* that then went out over a wire service to other newspapers. Electronic copies proliferated and were picked up on Internet discussion lists, and the article took on a life of its own (the essay is available online at <http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whiteprivilege.htm>)

As a result, every week over the past year I have received at least a dozen letters from people who want to talk about race. I learned not only more about my own privilege, but more about why many white folks can't come to terms with the truism I offered in that article: White people, whether overtly racist or not, benefit from living in a world mostly run by white people that has been built on the land and the backs of non-white people.

The reactions varied from racist rantings, to deeply felt expressions of pain and anger, to declarations of solidarity. But probably the most important response I got was from non-white folks, predominantly African-Americans, who said something like this: "Of course there is white privilege. I've been pointing it out to my white friends and co-workers for years. Isn't funny that almost no one listens to me, but everyone takes notice when a white guy says it."

Those comments forced me again to ponder the privilege I live with. Who really does know more about white privilege, me or the people on the other side of that privilege? Me, or a black inner-city teenager who is automatically labeled a gang member and feared by many white folks? Me, or an American Indian on the streets of a U.S. city who is invisible to many white folks? Whose voices should we be paying attention to?

My voice gets heard in large part because I am a white man with a Ph.D. who holds a professional job with status. In most settings, I speak with the assumption that people not only will listen, but will take me seriously. I speak with the assumption that my motives will not be challenged; I can rely on the perception of me as a neutral authority, someone whose observations can be trusted.

Every time I open my mouth, I draw on, and in some ways reinforce, my privilege, which is in large part tied to race.

Right now, I want to use that privilege to acknowledge the many non-white people who took the time to tell me about the enduring realities of racism in the United States. And, I want to talk to the white people who I think misread my essay and misunderstand what's at stake.

The responses of my white critics broke down into a few basic categories, around the following claims:

1. White privilege doesn't exist because affirmative action has made being white a disadvantage. The simple response: Extremely limited attempts to combat racism, such as affirmative action, do virtually nothing to erase the white privilege built over 500 years that pervades our society. As a friend of mine says, the only real disadvantage to being white is that it so often prevents people from understanding racial issues.
2. White privilege exists, but it can't be changed because it is natural for any group to favor its own, and besides, the worst manifestations of racism are over. Response: This approach makes human choices appear outside of human control, which is a dodge to avoid moral and political responsibility for the injustice we continue to live with.
3. White privilege exists, and that's generally been a good thing because white Europeans have civilized the world. Along the way some bad things may have happened, and we should take care to be nice to non-whites to make up for that. Response: These folks often argued the curiously contradictory position that (1) non-whites and their cultures are not inferior, but (2) white/European culture is superior. As for the civilizing effect of Europe, we might consider five centuries of inhuman, brutal colonialism and World Wars I and II, and then ask what "civilized" means.
4. White privilege exists because whites are inherently superior, and I am a weakling and a traitor for suggesting otherwise. Response: The Klan isn't dead.

There is much to say beyond those short responses, but for now I am more interested in one common assumption that all these correspondents made, that my comments on race and affirmative action were motivated by "white liberal guilt." The problem is, they got two out of the three terms wrong. I am white, but I'm not a liberal. In political terms, I'm a radical; I don't think liberalism offers real solutions because it doesn't attack the systems of power and structures of illegitimate authority that are the root cause of oppression, be it based on race, gender, sexuality, or class. These systems of oppression, which are enmeshed and interlocking, require radical solutions.

And I don't feel guilty. Guilt is appropriate when one has wronged another, when one has something to feel guilty about. In my life I have felt guilty for racist or sexist things I have said or done, even when they were done unconsciously. But that is guilt I felt because of specific acts, not for the color of my skin. Also, focusing on individual guilt feelings is counterproductive when it leads us to ponder the issue from a psychological point of view instead of a moral and political one.

So, I cannot, and indeed should not, feel either guilty or proud about being white, because it is a state of

being I have no control over. However, as a member of a society--and especially as a privileged member of society--I have an obligation not simply to enjoy that privilege that comes with being white but to study and understand it, and work toward a more just world in which such unearned privilege is eliminated.

Some of my critics said that such a goal is ridiculous; after all, people have unearned privileges of all kinds. Several people pointed out that, for example, tall people have unearned privilege in basketball, and we don't ask tall people to stop playing basketball nor do we eliminate their advantage.

The obvious difference is that racial categories are invented; they carry privilege or disadvantage only because people with power create and maintain the privilege for themselves at the expense of others. The privilege is rooted in violence and is maintained through that violence as well as more subtle means.

I can't change the world so that everyone is the same height, so that everyone has the same shot at being a pro basketball player. In fact, I wouldn't want to; it would be a drab and boring world if we could erase individual differences like that. But I can work with others to change the world to erase the effects of differences that have been created by one group to keep others down.

Not everyone who wrote to me understood this. In fact, the most creative piece of mail I received in response to the essay also was the most confused. In a padded envelope from Clement, Minn., came a brand-new can of Kiwi Shoe Polish, black. Because there was no note or letter, I have to guess at my correspondent's message, but I assume the person was suggesting that if I felt so bad about being white, I might want to make myself black.

But, of course, I don't feel bad about being white. The only motivation I might have to want to be black - - to be something I am not -- would be pathological guilt over my privilege. In these matters, guilt is a coward's way out, an attempt to avoid the moral and political questions. As I made clear in the original essay, there is no way to give up the privilege; the society we live in confers it upon us, no matter what we want.

So, I don't feel guilty about being white in a white supremacist society, but I feel an especially strong moral obligation to engage in collective political activity to try to change the society because I benefit from the injustice. I try to be reflective and accountable, though I am human and I make mistakes. I think a lot about how I may be expressing racism unconsciously, but I don't lay awake at night feeling guilty. Guilt is not a particularly productive emotion, and I don't wallow in it.

What matters is what we decide to do with the privilege. For me, that means speaking, knowing that I speak with a certain unearned privilege that gives me advantages I cannot justify. It also means learning to listen before I speak, and realizing that I am probably not as smart as I sometimes like to think I am.

It means listening when an elderly black man who sees the original article tacked up on the bulletin board outside my office while on a campus tour stops to chat. This man, who has lived with more kinds of racism than I can imagine through more decades than I have been alive, says to me, "White privilege, yes, good to keep an eye on that, son. Keep yourself honest. But don't forget to pay attention to the folks who live without the privilege."

It doesn't take black shoe polish to pay attention. It takes only a bit of empathy to listen, and a bit of courage to act.

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