

UTOPIAN ANTIRACISM IN THE UNITED STATES:
THE PSEUDO-PROGRESSIVISM OF WHITE PRIVILEGE DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

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Utopian Antiracism in the United States: The Pseudo-progressivism of White Privilege

Discourse discusses the history, principles, and consequences of “white privilege discourse.” I use this phrase to denote a diffuse body of work united by a common thesis: that white people must recognize and renounce their social, political, and economic privileges to further racial justice in the United States. Since the late 1960s, an increasing number of activists, pundits, and scholars have advanced this thesis. However, in *Utopian Antiracism*, I argue that white privilege discourse is a pseudo-progressive smokescreen that protects the laws, policies, and interests perpetuating racial inequality in the United States today. Whereas most other academic critics of white privilege discourse have addressed a small sample of white privilege scholarship or repudiated the discourse while broadly disparaging identity politics as illiberal, this dissertation offers a meta-analysis methodologically anchored in critical theory and pragmatism. Together, these traditions encourage interdisciplinary scholarship that exposes inegalitarian ideologies and power structures to facilitate effective egalitarian organizing. Employing these traditions, I show that rather than promoting the interests of nonwhites, white privilege discourse buttresses the racially inegalitarian status quo by encouraging moralizing over political organizing and reinforcing racial essentialism. Moreover, white privilege discourse decouples the fight for racial

justice from the fight for economic justice and thereby undermines demands for universal public goods and the cross-racial working-class coalitions needed to advance racial equality.

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INTRODUCTION

“Beloved, you must not only read about black life, but you must school your white brothers and sisters, your cousins and uncles, your loved ones and friends, and all who will listen to you, about the white elephant in the room—white privilege.”

-Michael Eric Dyson (2017, 203)

1981 Part One

How can egalitarians advance racial equality?

Five months into his presidency, Ronald Reagan offered his vision to a polite and chilly audience of 5,000 delegates at the 72nd Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Weisman 1981). A much warmer audience had received the President months before, on February 18, 1981, when he delivered his proposal for economic recovery before a joint session of Congress. There, the President asked the legislators to join him “in reducing direct federal spending by \$41.4 billion in fiscal year 1982” (Ronald Reagan 1981). His request was met first with applause and then (days before the NAACP’s mid-summer convention) with votes in a House comfortably controlled by his opposition. The Senate would approve \$35.2 billion in cuts to “food stamps, health care, welfare, school lunches, housing assistance and other programs” by summer’s end (Weisman 1981).

In 1981, as today, Black Americans were disproportionately poor and working-class. And then, like now, cuts to programs targeted at poor and working-class Americans disproportionately hurt Black Americans. Fittingly, the NAACP was opposed to the cuts. Still, Reagan tried to find common ground with members of the Association. He cleared a low bar for solidarity at the convention when he expressed sadness for, and committed further resources to solving, the serial killing of dozens of Black Americans known as the “Atlanta Child Murders.” He cleared another low bar by promising that his administration would “root out any case of government

discrimination against minorities and uphold and enforce the laws that protect them” (Reagan 1981). But the organization was unreceptive to Reagan’s attempt to link his disdain for a big federal government to Black Americans’ disappointment with federal governance. Reporting on the convention noted that the NAACP passed “a resolution accepting the invitation of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations to join in a demonstration in the nation’s capital on Sept. 19 against the Administration’s financial plans” (Rule 1981a).

Clouded by percentage and dollar amounts, the argument Reagan offered to the NAACP was simple and familiar. Shrink the federal government, deregulate the market, and all Americans—rich, poor, black, white—will have access to the American Dream. In conveying this message, the President used rhetoric emblematic of what “white privilege discourse”—the subject of this dissertation—would call “color-blind racism.” The President employed the defining feature of color-blind racism by suggesting that “racists are few and far between” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 17):

A few isolated groups in the backwater of American life still hold perverted notions of what America is all about...If I were speaking to them instead of to you, I would say to them, ‘You are the ones who are out of step with our society. You are the ones who willfully violate the meaning of the dream that is America. And this country, because of what it stands for, will not stand for your conduct.’ (Reagan 1981)

According to white privilege scholars, Reagan’s claim that only backward, backwater Americans are racist concealed that racial discrimination and bias are structurally embedded and psychologically pervasive. In the worldview of white privilege discourse, we must see that “white people who really aren’t doing anything other than being nice people are racist. We [whites] are complicit with that system. There is no neutral place” (DiAngelo quoted in A. Shapiro 2020). In failing to see this, Reagan’s colorblind racism allowed “whites to deny the

existence of racial discrimination, and it [legitimized] practices that maintain racial inequality” (Jardina 2019, 151).

Guided by the conviction that racism is marginal, the President also failed to offer what white privilege scholars would see as the proper corrective to racial inequality: race-specific interventions. Instead, Reagan stated that he “genuinely and deeply believe[s] the economic package we’ve put forth will move us toward black economic freedom, because it’s aimed at lifting an entire country and not just parts of it. There’s a truth to the words spoken by John F. Kennedy that a rising tide lifts all boats” (Reagan 1981).

Five years later, in a radio address celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day (a holiday he signed into law), Reagan declared, “We want a colorblind society, a society that, in the words of Dr. King, judges people ‘not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character’” (Reagan 1986). While Reagan echoed King’s desire for a color-blind future, here he did not claim that contemporary society was color-blind. Yet even this vision of a future, race-blind society is incompatible with the vision of some white privilege scholars. In her work, legal scholar Barbara Flagg explicitly states that she does not believe “that race consciousness should be embraced on a merely temporary basis, with colorblindness remaining the long-term goal ... Instead, the vision offered here is of a transformed” not eliminated “consciousness of race” (1993, 954).

The consciousness Flagg and other white privilege scholars wanted to transform—for temporary political purposes or for good—was the consciousness of white people (Flagg 1993, 954). The call was for white privilege discourse.

White Privilege Discourse

This dissertation examines the genesis, ideological principles, and political consequences of “white privilege discourse.” This phrase denotes a diffuse, interdisciplinary body of work united by a common thesis: that white people must recognize and renounce their privilege to advance racial justice in the United States. White privilege discourse began in the late 1960s among marginal New Left groups. Now, it is championed by talk shows like *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (see *The Late Late Show with James Corden* 2020) and *The Problem with Jon Stewart* (see *The Problem With Jon Stewart* 2022), best-selling books like Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* (2018) and Layla F. Saad’s *Me and White Supremacy* (2020), podcasts like *Code Switch* (see Demby and Marisol Meraji 2016) and *It’s Been a Minute* (see Sanders, West, and Hochman 2020), and workshops like those hosted by Peggy McIntosh’s National SEED Project and The White Privilege Conference.¹ In the United States today, white privilege discourse is central to mainstream, antiracist ideology.

The works I look at here are predominately by “white privilege scholars,” my term for academics who argue that all (or nearly all) white people enjoy advantages due to their whiteness that all (or nearly all) nonwhite people lack. While white supremacists also believe that whites enjoy advantages that nonwhites lack (namely biological and cultural advantages), here I

¹ Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* is particularly noteworthy as it is an archetype of white privilege discourse and one of its most impactful iterations. *White Fragility* has spent dozens of weeks on the *New York Times Best Seller* list, and as of summer 2020, it sold 1.6 million copies. The author has been invited to speak to “school faculties...government agencies...university administrators and companies like Microsoft...Google” and Levi Strauss & Co. She has appeared as a guest on late shows like Jimmy Fallon’s “The Tonight Show” and has been welcomed into the halls of power. In June of 2020, “DiAngelo addressed 184 Democratic members of Congress who had gathered, by conference call” for a “Democratic Caucus family discussion on race” (Bergner 2020). DiAngelo’s writing also routinely appears on academic syllabi.

examine those who wish to eradicate white advantage rather than protect and perpetuate it. The scholarship I discuss has been written by political scientists, historians, sociologists, philosophers, legal scholars, and a few social scientists and humanists from other disciplines. Some of the texts I assess have found audiences beyond the academy; nearly all frequently appear on whiteness studies and critical race theory syllabi. The specific works I consider have been selected for their popularity, acclaim, or because they were repeatedly recommended to me by advocates of white privilege discourse. Although taken from a larger body of work, these texts collectively articulate the various and most nuanced understandings of “white privilege” circulating today.²

Thesis

In analyzing this work, I demonstrate that instead of subverting racial inequality, white privilege discourse helps maintain it. White privilege discourse does so by providing a pseudo-progressive smokescreen that protects the laws, policies, and economic and political interests perpetuating racial disparity in the United States today. All else being equal—and this caveat is crucial—white Americans are advantaged compared to nonwhite Americans, Blacks and Hispanics in particular. But examining racism through the lens of “privilege” and demanding that white people surrender their privilege ultimately sustains racial inequality. Like reactionary racial politics, white privilege discourse reinscribes racial taxonomies used to dehumanize and exploit nonwhites. Moreover, the discourse reinforces an economic system that disproportionately harms most Americans of color. White privilege discourse does so by undermining cross-racial worker

² I omit (or only note in passing) some popular texts readers might expect to see here, e.g., those by Ibram X. Kendi, David Roediger, or Nikole Hannah-Jones. While such authors and white privilege scholars have a kindred worldview, Kendi, Roediger, and Hannah-Jones do not prioritize “white privilege” in their work.

solidarity and calls for universal public goods, thereby obstructing the formation of large, interracial coalitions capable of challenging the racially inequalitarian status quo.

The first Chapter sets up this argument by presenting the history of white privilege discourse, from its emergence among New Left Marxist-Leninist activists to its expansion into mainstream racial ideology. The Chapter shows that the discourse's genealogical progression was marked by an increased decoupling of the fight for racial justice from the fight for economic justice. In analyzing how white privilege scholars define "white people" and "whiteness," Chapter One also initiates my discussion of how white privilege discourse reinforces racial essentialism.

Chapter Two looks at works by white privilege scholars between the late 1980s and the present day, a period that has witnessed the discourse's proliferation across the social sciences and humanities and entrance into the political mainstream. As the phrase "white privilege" is rarely used univocally or consistently within or across works on the subject, here I analyze the term's various denotations. Ultimately, I suggest five definitions of "white privilege" and argue that, in all its forms, the phrase misdirects egalitarian efforts away from policies and coalitions that would advance racial justice.

Chapter Three assesses white privilege scholars' proposed solutions for addressing racial disparities and discrimination. There, I reproduce and evaluate the concrete actions and policy proposals white privilege scholars suggest along with their principal recommendation: white consciousness-raising. In evaluating white privilege scholars' solutions, I further detail the pernicious, racially inequalitarian ideological principles upon which the discourse is predicated. These include commitments to racial taxonomizing, the myth of American meritocracy, and underclass ideology. Moreover, given white privilege discourse's focus on white reeducation, I

argue that it encourages moralizing and confession, not organizing and action. The widespread belief in “white guilt” among white privilege scholars contributes to their view that confession is a prerequisite to white antiracist activism. The shorthand “white guilt” describes the idea that every white person born in the context of white supremacy is morally flawed. In theory, white privilege discourse does not require belief in white guilt, i.e., the claim that all white people born in the context of white supremacy are privileged does not imply that all such people are guilty. However, in practice, white guilt is habitually (albeit usually inadvertently) promoted by white privilege discourse. Accordingly, Chapter Three explores white privilege scholars’ understanding of white guilt to further illuminate their approach to advancing racial justice.

The final substantive chapter examines the material and psychological incentives behind white privilege discourse. In addition to genuine altruistic commitments to advancing racial justice, I argue that one incentive for white privilege scholarship is economic, as white privilege discourse can be monetized via the Diversity Equity Inclusion industry. In noting that the discourse can be profitable, I do not mean to argue that white privilege scholars act cynically, expressing a worldview they do not sincerely embrace. Knowing any individual white privilege discourse advocate’s true motives is impossible. However, to demystify and undermine white privilege discourse, it is valuable to identify likely psychological, social, and material incentives behind it, regardless of whether any given motive can be attributed to any given actor. By identifying such motivations, I aim to locate interests that sustain white privilege discourse. Moreover, in providing this analysis, I explore white privilege scholars’ commitment to upholding the idea that, but for racial discrimination, America operates meritocratically.

Throughout *Utopian Antiracism*, I suggest an alternative antiracist ideological ethic and an alternative, pragmatic approach to advancing racial justice. In the dissertation’s conclusion, I

summarize this prescription. Unlike the scholars I examine, I do not suggest that a revolution in white consciousness is what is needed. Instead, I argue for concrete action guided by the fundamental principles of successful egalitarian organizing. These include the primacy of coalition building and appealing to people's interests rather than their better angels. As a whole, my dissertation aims to persuade readers that white privilege discourse distracts from the fight for racial equality, as racial justice cannot be advanced by white people recognizing and renouncing their privilege.

The Political Theory Landscape

This dissertation is a comprehensive, progressive critique of white privilege discourse anchored in political theory and historical analysis. It is intended as a scholarly intervention with immediate pragmatic consequences. Accordingly, *Utopian Antiracism* follows in the tradition of critical theory, wherein scholars undermine reigning power structures by exposing their ideological and material foundations. As the dissertation's title indicates, it is also a text critical of the misuse of utopian thinking. I do not reject utopianism generally. Beyond aesthetic merit, visions of perfect worlds are useful moral tools and practical guides in imperfect circumstances. However, I reject when ideal theory is mistaken for nonideal theory, i.e., when people confuse the world they want for the world that is and allow such miscalculations to inform their advice. I will say more about the dissertation's title below.

In critiquing white privilege, I am also negatively assessing one manifestation of identity politics. In identity politics, an ascriptive quality—one's race, gender, religion, etc.—is viewed as the principal factor determining one's relevant political perspective and interests. Proponents of identity politics make political claims in identitarian terms (e.g., "legalize gay marriage") and base their political coalitions and/or coalitional hierarchies on identity (e.g., by excluding or

limiting the leadership role of cis heterosexuals in a queer organization). Broad critiques of identity politics are commonplace. Working in the liberal tradition, political scientists Francis Fukuyama and Mark Lilla offer two popular versions of these. Working in progressivist traditions, political theorists Wendy Brown and Asad Haider offer two others.

Fukuyama's *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and The Politics of Resentment* (2018) and Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal* (2017) were written with concern for the future of American liberal democracy in the wake of Donald Trump's election. Both argue that the prominence of identity politics in recent progressive discourse has made the American left too anemic to stem the tide of rightwing populism, a position I agree with. However, I disagree with Fukuyama's and Lilla's proposals for redress.

For Fukuyama, identity politics express the fundamental human need for social recognition of one's worth (2018, 10). He writes that "contemporary identity politics is driven by the quest for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalized by their societies" (22). "It is everywhere a struggle for the recognition of dignity," he writes (103-104). Yet, because he believes identity politics is a destructive expression of this fundamental need for dignity, Fukuyama argues that an alternative expression must be offered to people seeking recognition. For him, a strong "creedal"—as opposed to ethnic—national identity "built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy" must be cultivated (166). This will give people the dignity they need while making "democracy more functional" (Fukuyama 2018, 166).

In his work, Lilla voices frustration with liberals' inability to rouse enthusiastic support for a Democratic Party that has embraced identity politics. For him, "if liberals hope ever to recapture America's imagination and become a dominant force across the country," they must abandon acrimonious identity politics and embrace "a vision of our common destiny based on

one thing all Americans, of every background, actually share. And that is citizenship” (2017, 14-15). Like Fukuyama, Lilla calls for “unity.”

Attempting to inculcate Americans with a strong national or citizenry identity will not, in my view, appropriately address the fundamental problems Americans face, from outrageous economic inequality to racial disparities to violence to climate change. Instead, as I will suggest throughout this dissertation, a political movement that calls for resource redistribution is essential. Where Fukuyama advocates a politics of recognition, and Lilla believes “calls for economic justice” are too divisive, I advocate a politics of redistribution (2017, 126)

Fukuyama argues that organizing around the need for resources rather than the need for dignity is misguided, as the latter is a more fundamental human drive. “Much of what passes for economic motivation,” he writes, “is...actually rooted in the demand for recognition and therefore cannot simply be satisfied by economic means” (2018, xv).³ Elsewhere, he contends, “To be poor is to be invisible to your fellow human beings, and the indignity of invisibility is often worse than the lack of resources” (2018, 80). I am unpersuaded by this supposition. Instead, in this dissertation, I subscribe to what sociologist Adaner Usmani and political economist David Zachariah call “the Materialist Wager” (2021).

Debates regarding which people need more, recognition or resources, and which politics are more efficacious, the politics of recognition or redistribution, have received substantial scholarly attention. However, Usmani and Zacharia sum up my position on the matter succinctly

³ Fukuyama makes this point throughout *Identity* (2018, see pages 7, 11, 81). However, there are a few moments in which he suggests that the struggle for recognition is actually rooted in economic deprivation. On page 179, he writes, “Resentment over lost dignity or invisibility often has economic roots, but fights over identity often distract us from focusing on politics that could concretely remedy those issues” (2018, see also page 115).

and sufficiently for this dissertation's purposes. Their "Materialist Wager" claims "that a person's economic resources have an asymmetric effect on that person's political, cultural, and social influence. That is, a person's power in these noneconomic domains is fundamentally constrained by the economic resources they possess" (Usmani and Zachariah 2021, 55). In other words, for Usmani and Zacharia, material resources are usually necessary for the acquisition of tangible as well as intangible goods (such as dignity) and, therefore, fundamental. Accordingly, the desire for material resources often provides sufficient motivation for political action, dignity aside. Usmani and Zacharia refer to this position as a "wager" because it is based on assumption rather than proof. Common sense, however, endorses this assumption. A starving person is more likely to want food than the acknowledgment of their hunger and the unique contours of their personhood. Therefore, their desire for the former is more likely to inform their political behavior than their desire for the latter—at least until a certain level of material comfort is secured.

Beyond distinguishing my position from Fukuyama's, the Materialist Wager informs the forthcoming analysis as it has implications for how best to pursue racial equality. Here too, Usmani and Zacharia express the point concisely:

If the Materialist Wager is true, the most effective thing to do will be to fight the racial divide in economic life.

The Materialist Wager implies that the cultural, social, and political subjugation of the racially oppressed is in large part a consequence of the fact that they lack conventional economic resources. It implies that if the oppressed were to gain these resources, they would also gain much of the political leverage, cultural clout, and social status necessary to end racial inequality in the political, cultural, and social domains, respectively. (2021, 56)

There is an obvious counterpoint to Usmani and Zacharia's theory here. While an economic analysis is necessary for understanding events in 1930s Germany, Nazis targeted Jews not

because they were an under-resourced minority but in part because they were seen as disproportionately well-off. The consolidation of more economic resources by the German Jewish minority would have done little to prevent the holocaust. However, the Materialist Wager is a safe bet in the context of American white supremacy, a claim that will be substantiated in this dissertation.

Wendy Brown's critique of identity politics in her chapter "Wounded Attachments" from *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995) is nearer to my own than Fukuyama's and Lilla's. I, like Brown, believe that identity politics (often) depend on reaffirming human taxonomies designed to exclude, exploit, and subordinate people. I also agree that identity politics (often) "require a standard internal to existing society against which to pitch their claims, a standard that not only preserves capitalism from critique, but sustains the invisibility and inarticulateness of class—not accidentally but endemically" (Brown 1995, 61). In other words, I share Brown's fear that identity politics forecloses critiques of capitalism because identitarians seek inclusion within the current neoliberal order, not an overhaul of it.

Indeed, Brown's contentions that identity politics essentialize marginalized identities and implicitly suppress challenges to modern capitalism are my principal indictments against white privilege discourse. However, in addition to the narrower scope of my subject—white privilege discourse rather than identity politics—there are several ways my analysis departs from Brown's. For one, Brown's main target differs from mine. She disparages identity politics, first and foremost, as a manifestation of "late modern liberalism," the true object of her derision, whereas I neither defend nor deride liberalism and am happy for readers to interpret what follows as an endorsement, critique, or evasion of the subject. Furthermore, while Brown and I both take aim

at reigning ideologies, concrete actors—e.g., politicians, academics, activists, economic elites, etc.—play a larger role in my account than they do in Brown’s.

For Brown, the key players are “politicized identities.” Not fully explicated, “politicized identities” appear to be both the subject and object of identity politics, i.e., they are those who endorse identity politics as well as those whom identity politics supposedly liberate. In contrast, I propose that the proponents of identity politics and its purported beneficiaries form distinct (albeit often intersecting) groups. Because she collapses these categories, Brown must explain why politicized identities would adopt an ideology that undermines their interests. She turns to Nietzsche’s concept of “slave morality” to do so.

“Slave morality” inverts the natural order of power wherein the strong dominate the weak. According to this ethos, suffering makes one virtuous, while a lack thereof makes one villainous. Slave morality can psychologically satisfy its adherents and may provide a path toward political and material power. Yet, slave morality cannot free “slaves” from their wretchedness, Nietzsche proclaims, as their superiority is predicated on it. Slave morality is a form of false consciousness—to borrow a phrase from another tradition—incapable of truly liberating the faithful.

The subject of false consciousness requires an examination of the epistemological worldview that underlies much of contemporary identity politics, an examination not provided by this dissertation. Suffice it to say; I believe that imputing false consciousness to subjects creates more problems than it resolves, especially for political pragmatists. Accordingly, I find Brown’s supposition that contemporary identity politics is a manifestation of slave morality misguided.

Another distinction between Brown's analysis and my own pertains to "blame." Whereas Brown wishes to forgo "dispensing blame for an unlivable present," I seek to identify the interests responsible for sustaining the inegalitarian status quo (Brown 1995, 76). Lastly, while "Wounded Attachments" aims to advance a somewhat opaque "radically democratic political project," this dissertation specifically seeks to promote racial and economic equality in the United States (Brown 1995, 54). Despite these differences, the following analysis remains indebted to Brown's critique of contemporary identity politics.

This analysis is also indebted to Asad Haider's *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (2018). *Mistaken Identity* specifically focuses on race and directly discusses white privilege, and Haider's brief genealogy of white privilege discourse informed Chapter One's research agenda. Regarding identity politics broadly speaking, Haider—like Fukuyama, Lilla, Brown, and I—is troubled by its hegemonic status. In its current form, Haider argues, "identity politics paradoxically ends up reinforcing the very norms it sets out to criticize" (2018, 24). Like Brown, he notes that this is partly due to identity politics' lack of economic analysis. Ultimately, Haider concludes that identity politics is unable to help its supposed beneficiaries. My work, again, is distinguished from Haider's by its more circumscribed subject matter. So too, by the groups Haider and I take issue with. He primarily focuses on the antiegalitarian agenda of Black intellectuals, Black politicians, and Black economic elites, whereas I attend to the antiegalitarian agenda of white privilege scholars.

While it would be appropriate to view this dissertation as a contribution to anti-identitarianism, I do not reject all applications of identity politics. Successful organizers consider every available tool, and it is self-defeating to dismiss any single one unless history has proven it unethical or ineffective. I do not believe identity politics has met this standard. Furthermore,

while the interests and ideologies that maintain racism, sexism, transphobia, xenophobia, and so on overlap, they are not uniform. Accordingly, identity politics may redress some prejudices more than others.

In our time, we have witnessed identity politics' utility to the LGBTQ+ movement in general and the fight to legalize same-sex marriage in particular.⁴ In the case of same-sex marriage, gay and lesbian couples sought recognition of their fundamental equality within a political and cultural order that privileged married couples. The demand was not for a revolutionary overthrow of marriage as an institution but for access to that esteemed institution. While there have always been detractors of marriage, there has never been a viable movement against it in the United States. If the dissolution of marriage was at hand, progressives might have legitimately disparaged the same-sex marriage movement for its limited scope and particularized demands. However, no such movement existed or exists, and it would have been cruel for progressives to demand the continued subordination of the LGBTQ+ community in favor of a fantastical social and political revolution to the American family. The gay marriage movement was indeed a case of identity politics, one all Americans should have supported. It was also a remarkably successful movement. As Lilla notes, the past decades saw an

⁴ In *Identity*, Fukuyama rightly notes that the “gay marriage movement”:
does have an economic [i.e., non-identitarian] aspect, having to do with rights of survivorship, inheritance, and the like for gay and lesbian unions. However, many of those economic issues could have been and were in many cases resolved through new rules about property in civil unions. But a civil union would have a lower status than a marriage...this outcome was unacceptable to millions of people who wanted their political system to explicitly *recognize* the equal dignity of gays and lesbians; the ability to marry was just a marker of that equal dignity. (2018, 19)

“astonishingly rapid transformation of American attitudes toward homosexuality and even gay marriage” (2017, 128).

Witnessing how identity politics benefits one cause, some may have overgeneralized its value to others. Indeed, I suspect that identity politics’ role in legalizing same-sex marriage is partly responsible for the left’s continued enthusiasm for identity politics. But nuances of the gay marriage movement make such enthusiasm inappropriate. For one, marriage equality activists demanded inclusion in a particularly fixed and venerated institution. Moreover, the LGBTQ+ community has a demographic feature that makes its activism well-suited to identity politics: although many LGBTQ+ Americans self-segregate after leaving home, queer Americans come from every state, religion, ethnicity, political party, culture, and environment, rural, suburban, and urban. This allows queer activists to make effective emotional, identity-based appeals—as opposed to interest-based appeals—to family, friends, and community members with whom they have rapport. According to Lilla, attitudes around same-sex marriage “were changed during tearful conversations over dinner tables across America where children came out to their parents (and sometimes parents came out to their children)” (2017, 128). While such conversations did not, of course, constitute the full force of the same-sex marriage movement, they were a crucial component of it.

Identity politics was undoubtedly a useful tool in the fight for marriage equality. However, as Lilla concludes, “race is a wholly different matter” (2017, 128). The persistence of racial segregation in the United States, along with racism’s origin in, and relationship to, economic exploitation (among other features), makes identity politics of little use to the fight for racial justice in America. Given my specific focus on white privilege discourse, I do not fully

defend this position here. Nonetheless, others could surely apply aspects of my argument to a broader critique of racial identity politics in the United States.

Semantic Foundations

Throughout *Utopian Antiracism*, I discuss and challenge the concepts white privilege discourse employs to describe racial inequality in the United States. However, a few initial definitions set the semantic foundation for the forthcoming chapter. Here, I consider the meaning of “racial justice” and two sets of terms in juxtaposition: overt racism/covert racism and materialism/idealism. Below, I offer white privilege scholars’ understandings of these concepts as well as my own.

Overt Racism and Covert Racism

In calling for white people to renounce their privilege, white privilege scholars seek to redress covert rather than overt racism. Overt racism describes attitudes, actions, policies, and structures that knowingly discriminate against nonwhite people and groups. Once dominant, overtly racist organizations and individuals still contribute to racial violence and discrimination in the United States today. However, white privilege scholars recognize that overt racism is no longer a pervasive ideology and that nonwhites and whites have been formally equal before the law for fifty years. Sociologist Thomas Shapiro, for example, writes, “Overt bigotry, Jim Crow laws and policies, government mandated discrimination, and the belief in black inferiority have virtually disappeared” (2004, 101). Some white privilege scholars also highlight that even those who espouse flamboyantly racist views distance themselves from racism when questioned. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva cites Donald Trump as one such example, noting that the former president and friend to neo-Nazis asserted that he is “the least racist person” when reporters challenged his antiracism bona-fides (2018, 222).

However, white privilege scholars argue that the mainstream rejection of overt racism is not the rejection of racism, generally speaking. In *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* (2005), journalism scholar Robert Jensen writes:

If “racist” means the expression of overtly racist ideologies about the inherent inferiority of non-white people and support for practices that would reflect that belief, then it seems clear that most white people in the United States are not racist. The Ku Klux Klan and other overtly white-supremacist groups exist, but they are considered fringe by most people. Yet at the same time, virtually all white people have to face the fact that racism lurks in our hearts and minds as a result of being raised in a white-supremacist society. (2005, 25-26)

Although most white Americans explicitly endorse racial equality, white privilege scholars suggest that most (if not all) also express and perpetuate covert racism.

In the lexicon of white privilege discourse, covert racism describes attitudes, actions, policies, and structures that unknowingly (or seemingly unknowingly) discriminate against nonwhite people and groups on the basis of race (as opposed to some corollary factor). Covert racism may take on different forms. The extent to which each form constitutes modern-day racism and sustains racial inequality varies among the texts I examine. Yet what unites this body of work are the authors’ claims that white Americans’ refusal to recognize and renounce their privileges is one of, if not the, most destructive form of covert racism in the United States today. Here, I note other examples of covert racism cited in white privilege discourse:

Covert racism may manifest as the Reaganian colorblind racism discussed above. Bonilla-Silva regards “the ideology of color blindness as the current *dominant* racial ideology” (2018, 179). Another form of covert racism—or rather, a subgenre of colorblind racism—Bonilla-Silva identifies is “smiling discrimination.” He writes:

The scholarly community has documented the persistence of discrimination in the labor and housing markets and has uncovered the coexistence of old-fashioned as well as

subtle “smiling discrimination.” But racial discrimination is not just about jobs and housing: discrimination affects almost every aspect of the lives of people of color. It affects them in hospitals, restaurants, trying to buy cars or hail a cab, driving, flying, or doing almost anything in America. (2018, 205)

Implied in this description is the sentiment that “smiling discrimination” is varyingly the result of conscious but unsaid racial bias and implicit racial bias.

“Cultural racism” is another form of covert racism. It describes the belief that “racial minorities...have an inferior culture that accounts for their status in America” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 13). Bonilla-Silva elaborates that “the essence of the American version of this frame is ‘blaming the victim,’ arguing that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (2018, 67). Later, he argues that “most whites in the United States...believe blacks are culturally deficient, welfare-dependent, and lazy” (2018, 142). Shapiro similarly asserts that “most whites explain black disadvantage in cultural, moral, and character terms” (2004, 102). That “most” white Americans currently think this way is not convincingly substantiated by either Bonilla-Silva or Shapiro. But it is worth pausing on the concept of “cultural racism” as it helps explain the rise of white privilege discourse.

In the 1980s, culturally racist “underclass ideology” was the chief explanation for racial disparity. Underclass ideology locates the source of poverty in the behavior of the poor, or rather, an antisocial subset of the poor: the “underclass.” Underclass ideologues were not the first to blame the poor for their own lot. “Culture of poverty” theorists in the 1960s similarly attributed poverty to the dysfunction of the impoverished.⁵ But by the 1980s, culture of poverty theses were largely discredited by progressive academics. Yet underclass ideology continued to be used by

⁵ Not the first to blame the poor for their own lot either. See Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People* (2010).

liberals and conservatives who wished to continue the narrative while shedding the critical baggage.

While underclass ideology takes various forms, Adolph Reed Jr. distills the core tenets of the dogma. The underclass refers (at times implicitly but often explicitly) to “inner-city blacks and Hispanics” who engage in some set of the following: “crime, drug abuse, teenaged pregnancy, out of wedlock birth, female-headed households, and welfare dependency” (Reed 1999, 184). While only a subset of the Black and Hispanic urban poor participates in these practices, underclass ideologues see these deviants as products of the cultures from which they came.

As Historian Touré F. Reed notes, underclass ideology has consistently and bipartisanly been used to justify governmental neglect of the poor. The belief that “black and brown poor people’s cultural and moral deficiencies were significantly if not entirely to blame for poverty and its attendant social consequences—has served to justify the enactment of draconian drug laws, mass incarceration, cuts to public housing and social welfare programs... [and the] privatization of public schools” (T. F. Reed 2020, 99). Touré F. Reed traces the invocation of this ideology from Reagan to Obama. Reagan, he asserts, used it “to attack the welfare state ...means-tested programs and antidiscrimination policy” (2020, 16). The Bushes acted similarly, and Clinton notoriously used underclass ideology to incarcerate poor Black Americans. While Obama espoused a more nuanced analysis, he also traded in underclass dogma. At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama admonished poor Blacks for their meritocratic failings. According to Touré F. Reed:

Obama’s reflections on implicitly black “inner-city” residents stressed the need for African Americans to extricate themselves from dysfunction: “Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can’t teach kids to learn.”

Obama then continued, “They know parents have to parent, that children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.” (2020, 138-137).

Trump, of course, did little to rid the oval office of this discourse.

White privilege scholars refute the misguided, prejudicial, and callous argument that nonwhites—with their inferior values, culture, and practices—are to blame for their overrepresentation in ghettos and prisons and their underrepresentation in well-paid professions and positions of power. These scholars hope to redress whites’ perception that Black and Brown Americans are to blame for the disparities that marginalize them. Bonilla-Silva writes, “My work is a challenge to post-civil rights white common sense... that the problems afflicting people of color are fundamentally rooted in their pathological cultures” (2018, 13). However, whereas Adolph Reed Jr. and Touré F. Reed explain racial disparity by turning away from cultural and behavioral explanations, white privilege scholars maintain culturalist analyses, as I detail below. But, according to white privilege scholars, it is not the practices and values of nonwhites that must change to achieve racial equality: white people must change.

Attributing racial inequality to the behavior of white rather than nonwhite Americans, Jensen states:

In the opening of his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois wrote that the real question whites wanted to ask him, but were afraid to, was: ‘How does it feel to be a problem?...it is time for whites to self-consciously reverse the direction of that question...We have to ask ourselves: How does it feel to be the problem?’ (2005, 92)

If whites ask themselves this question, Jensen continues, then they will have to “come to terms” with the fact that their “burden is to do something that doesn’t seem to come naturally to people in positions of unearned power and privilege: Look in the mirror honestly and concede that we live in an unjust society and have no right to some of what we [white people] have” (2005, 93).

Indeed, white privilege scholars want white Americans to recognize covert racism because if they “do not see [themselves] as part of the problem, [they] cannot be part of the solution” (Saad 2020, 43). “If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I place myself on the ‘not racist’ side, what further action is required of me?” DiAngelo asks. “No action is required,” she answers “because I am not a racist. Therefore, racism is not my problem; it doesn’t concern me and there is nothing further I need to do. This worldview guarantees that I will not build my skills in thinking critically about racism or use my position to challenge racial inequality.” (DiAngelo 2018, 73)

White privilege scholars’ understanding of overt and covert racism and the ubiquity of the latter has liabilities for the fight for racial justice. In what is to come, I will focus on the liabilities of white privilege discourse. Here, I question the distinction between overt and covert racism. While there is no harm in discussing more and less subtle expressions of racial prejudice, when people, policies, and structures racially discriminate, racism is at hand, and identifying it as overt or covert is unhelpful.

My issue here is not merely taxonomic but with the intellectual and material practices that come from positing covert racism as a distinct category. Intellectually, doing so encourages circularity, wherein a thinker can suppose racism is at hand and then locate it in nearly any “covert” behavior. This can become quite absurd. Flagg, for example, suggests that the *rejection* of overt racism may be a sign of covert racism when she writes, “The components of modern racism include...[the] rejection of gross stereotypes and blatant discrimination” (1993, 988). Two of “racism’s adaptations” that DiAngelo lists are “acting overly nice” and “being careful not to use racial terms or labels” (2018, 49-50).

Materially, attending to covert racism prioritizes exposing bias over confronting policies

that sustain racial disparity, regardless of whether discrimination is present. Moreover, history gives little reason to accept the proposition that, unless white people acknowledge covert racism, they will fail to see themselves as part of the problem and, therefore, part of the solution. Thomas Paine, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Angelina Grimké, Joachim Prinz, Mathew Ahmann, and so on did not need to view themselves as racists to fight for racial justice. On the contrary. In Chapter Three, I discuss why encouraging people to see themselves as racist is counterproductive to racial justice organizing. For now, I will note that it is useful to use “racist” to distinguish avowed racists from the rest of the population to help maintain the political and social sanctioning of blatant and violent discrimination.

These pragmatic issues are exacerbated when white privilege scholars argue that covert racism is worse than overt racism. While covert racism is a lesser evil than overt racism for some white privilege scholars, for many, it is equally, if not more, pernicious. DiAngelo writes, “I am often asked if I think the younger generation is less racist. No, I don’t. In some ways, racism’s adaptations over time are more sinister than concrete rules such as Jim Crow” (2018, 50). Theresa L. Torres—professor of Religion, Anthropology, Latina/Latino Studies, and Sociology—writes, “The invisibility of covert racism... has a more harmful effect for people of color than overt racism” (Torres 2012, 74). Philosopher Shannon Sullivan explains that her intention “is not to minimize the atrocities committed by extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nation, but to suggest that rather than being a relatively benign form of white domination, white privilege is just as, if not more destructive, than [overt] white supremacy” (2006, 55). And, Bonilla-Silva asserts that “although ‘new racism’”—“the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse” since the end of Jim Crow—“seems to be racism lite, it is as effective as slavery and Jim Crow in maintaining the racial status quo” (2003, 272).

To suggest that behaving *overly nice* to a black person while *not* calling her the N-word is worse than Jim Crow—where black people were lynched and certainly called the N-word all the while—as DiAngelo does above—is, at the *very least*, strategically problematic. If you believe being stilted and awkward is more detrimental than being murderous, you are not prepared to marshal resources to undermine racial dehumanization and exploitation.

Racial Justice

But why is covert racism so destructive? Because, white privilege scholars assert, it produces unmerited racial disparities. Works on white privilege usually begin by enumerating these disparities. In *The Abolition of White Democracy*, political theorist Joel Olson discusses “disparity between whites and people of color in the realms of education, law enforcement, employment, housing, health care, and politics” (2004, xxii). In “Was Blind but Now I See,” Flagg writes that “Blacks...experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment and are more likely to live in environmentally undesirable locations...They have more frequent and more severe medical problems, higher mortality rates, and receive less comprehensive health care than whites” (1993, 955-956). In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva describes how “Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have” (2018, 2).⁶

White privilege scholars’ understanding of racism’s harms indicates their vision of racial justice. Though “racial justice” is ill-defined in the literature, white privilege scholars often

⁶ This is not true of all “dark-skinned racial minorities.” According to a 2018 analysis, Indian Americans had “a median household income of \$101,591,” whereas the national median income was \$53,657. (Chen 2018)

imply that it will be realized once strict racial parity is achieved; i.e., once nonwhites are proportionately represented in all sectors. Bonilla-Silva makes this implication explicit, asserting that a “new Civil Rights movement” must demand “what whites do not want to give us: *equality of results*... proportional representation in everything. If Blacks and Latinos represent 25 percent of the nation,” he states, “that should be their proportion among lawyers, doctors, and engineers as well as among people in the nation’s prisons” (2003, 283). Rather than reduce the number of incarcerated people, for example, Bonilla-Silva argues for the racial redistribution of resources and deprivations alike.

I do not share this vision of racial justice. As Adolph Reed Jr. writes, “the reality of a standard of justice based on eliminating group disparities is that a society could be just if 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources so long as the one percent featured blacks, Hispanics, women, lesbians and gays, etc. in rough proportion to their representation in the general society” (2019). Such a vision leaves most nonwhite people largely unaided by the fight for racial justice, with no greater access to healthcare, education, jobs, or finances.

Despite the apparent anemia of this form of justice, white privilege scholars insist that strict racial parity will help all nonwhites. They also often express an understanding of equality that goes beyond mere parity. This will become clearer in the following pages. What should be stated at the outset, however, is that regardless of whether racial justice is defined as strict racial equity or a condition wherein every nonwhite person has a realistic chance at a safe and comfortable life with “access to quality education, quality housing, well-paying jobs, and healthcare,” white privilege discourse is a barrier to racial justice (Reed 2021).

Materialism and Idealism

“Materialism” and “idealism” are the final foundational terms I will address. Contrasting these concepts helps distinguish my theoretical approach from that of white privilege scholars. Materialism and idealism offer two divergent understandings of historical development, most starkly differentiated in Marxist thought. Marxism embraces a materialist conception of history in which “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains...but in changes in the modes of production and exchange” (Engels 1880/1978, 701). For orthodox Marxists, the economic sphere—the forces and relations of production—conditions possibilities in all other spheres: political, social, cultural, etc. Idealists, Marx and Engels suggest, consider “concepts, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness...as the real chains of men,” or, put differently, as the real drivers of historical development (Marx and Engels 1932/1968, 3). For idealists, what people think conditions possibilities in all other spheres.

Here, I use a broader conception of materialism than the one Marxists traditionally employ. Under this conception, formal arrangements—laws and policies as well as economic structures—govern society, first and foremost. This broader view of materialism

does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice; and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into ‘self-consciousness’...but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history. (Marx and Engels 1932/1968, 9).

According to this worldview, successful organizers must appeal to how people already think—their values, principles, affections, self-interest, etc.—to build movements. It is both the movement building itself and the transformation of material structures that allow for new ways

of thinking to become possible. Whereas materialists prioritize challenging systems and institutions, idealists prioritize challenging consciousness. The idealism I challenge asserts that informal arrangements—namely human psychology and culture—govern society, first and foremost. This is the ontology of white privilege discourse.

The specific interventions white privilege scholars propose are rarely targeted at mutable political and economic arrangements. Instead, like other idealists, white privilege scholars believe that organizers must change how people think before transformative movements can occur. For example, ordained minister, scholar, and public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson writes, “The siege of hate will not end until white folk imagine themselves as black folk...Only when you see black folks as we are, and imagine yourselves as we have to live our lives, only then will the suffering stop, the hurt cease, the pain go away” (2017, 212). And best-selling author Layla F. Saad tells her audience, “Systems do not change unless the people who uphold them change...it is your responsibility within yourself, your communities, your educational institutions, your corporations, and your government institutions to do the work that you *can* do every day to create the change the world needs by creating change within yourself” (2020, 209).

There are exceptions to idealism in white privilege discourse. In *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (2004), for example, Shapiro proposes concrete policy changes (in Chapter Three, I discuss how these uphold underclass ideology). However, as will be evidenced throughout this dissertation, white privilege scholars more commonly suggest that fighting racism is tantamount to confronting: “the white mind” (DiAngelo 2018, 76), “white experience” (Lockard 2016, 18), and the “white unconscious” (Sullivan 2006, 100).

Although white privilege scholars seldom use the words “idealism” and “materialism,” most claim to be “structuralists.” Structuralism implies materialism. As the following quotes

make clear, white privilege scholars frequently acknowledge this. Yet, they consistently stray from the materialism they claim or imply that structuralism encompasses all *widespread* phenomena, political and economic as well as psychological and cultural. Speaking in materialist language, Jensen states, “The fundamental frame for pursuing analyses of issues around race...should be not cultural but political, not individual but structural;” yet a couple of pages later, he writes, “we all must change at the micro level, in our personal relationships, if the struggle for justice is to move forward” (2005, 78; 80).⁷ DiAngelo suggests a materialist framework when she says, “White supremacy...does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political economy, and social system of domination” (2018, 28). Yet moments later, she idealistically asserts, “White supremacy describes the culture we live in, a culture that positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal” (2018, 33). In *Racism without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva explicitly states that his model is “based on a materialist interpretation of racial matters” and that he does “not subscribe to individual-level analysis of racial affairs and am known in the field for my structuralist or society-wide stance on racism” (2018, 7; 239). And yet, Bonilla-Silva concludes that “Becoming an antiracist begins at home. You cannot change others if you have not changed yourself” (2018, 243-244).

⁷ Jensen continues this quote by, once again, discussing the importance of structural interventions: “But struggle in the personal arena is not enough; it is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for change. Lots of white people could make significant progress toward eliminating all vestiges of racism in our own psyches—which would be a good thing—without it having any effect on the systems and structures of power in which white supremacy is manifested” (2005, 80). If, according to Jensen, “Lots of white people could make significant progress toward eliminating all vestiges of racism in our own psyches...without it having any effect on the systems and structures of power in which white supremacy is manifested,” it is unclear why “we all must change at the micro level... if the struggle for justice is to move forward” (2005, 80).

In short, white privilege scholars subscribe to an idealist understanding of historical development, while I subscribe to a materialist one. White privilege scholars themselves do not differentiate between materialism and idealism, and their use of materialism's sister term, structuralism, is too malleable or vacuous to be meaningful. It equivocally denotes economic, political, mental, and cultural practices. Moreover, the idea that antiracism begins with white people *individually* transforming their consciousness is incompatible with any useful sense of the word "structural."

Utopian Antiracism

This dissertation takes inspiration from works that challenge utopian approaches to political organizing. These approaches are largely characterized by the idealism described above. Detailed markers of utopian idealism include: the tendency to attack anthropomorphized abstractions rather than tangible political arrangements; ahistoricism, wherein the present moment is deemed transglobal and transhistorical; the privileging of moralizing over political organizing; and, as a result of these other features, futility.

As political theorist Bertell Ollman writes, "utopian thinking leads to adopting ineffective political strategies for bringing about the desired changes. For the utopian thinker, the ideal society will come into being when enough people recognize that it is both good and possible" (2005, 21). But, as Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*, "people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. 'Liberation' is an historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions. (Marx and Engels 1932/1968, 10). White privilege discourse denies this, opting for a fantastical view of historical development.

1981 Part Two

The vision Reagan presented in his 1981 speech before the NAACP would not help Americans of color. This is not because, as white privilege discourse would suppose, it failed to acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism, egregious racial disparities, or the role of white privilege. The President's vision would not help nonwhite Americans because it promoted economic policies that countered the majority of their interests. The NAACP recognized this.

The spring before Reagan's speech, the Association put forth a 130-page alternative budget in response to the President's proposed spending cuts. The alternative budget called "for less military spending, restoring major cuts in programs that help the poor, and emphasis on higher taxes on industry instead of a personal tax cut" (Press 1981). While the organization sought some race-specific outcomes—e.g., it prodded "government and private industry to increase the level of business they do with minority contractors" (Rule 1981b)—its core agenda was a race-neutral economic policy that would help all poor and working-class Americans. The NAACP knew that such universal policies were in the interests of the vast majority of the Black Americans they avowed to advance. They also knew that highlighting the *universal nature*—rather than focusing on race-specific harms—was the best political strategy, albeit one still unable to undermine the neoliberal fervor of the times.

Benjamin L. Hooks, executive director of the NAACP from 1977 to 1992, had prepared an address for the 72nd annual convention that "he decided not to give ...because the meeting was running behind schedule" (Rule 1981a). Had he delivered the speech, the audience would have been told: "We will move from this place making plans together again on Sept. 19 in Washington, D.C., to march with our allies of every race, sex and creed in a gigantic

demonstration against the inhumanness of the preset budget proposals and civil rights rollback being contemplated” (Rule 1981a). On “solidarity day,” the NAACP did just that.

In calling for unity, the NAACP implicitly recognized that “Racism and class inequality in the United States have always been part of the same phenomenon” (Fields and Fields 2014, 266-267). Put differently, the NAACP understood the “double mission of white supremacy—to hold down black people and white people alike” (Fields and Fields 2014, 149). White privilege discourse obscures this fact and conceals the enduring, co-constitutive nature of racial and economic injustice. In this way, more than any other, white privilege discourse is utopian anti racism.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHITE PRIVILEGE DISCOURSE

“Capitalism is so bound up with racism. I avoid critiquing capitalism—I don’t need to give people reasons to dismiss me.”

-Robin DiAngelo (DiAngelo quoted in Bergner 2020)

Introduction

Exploitation facilitates economic accumulation, prejudice facilitates exploitation, and “race” facilitates prejudice. Race, racism, and economic exploitation are inseparable. This inextricability is most apparent when examining the origins of race and racism in colonial conquest and American slavery. Yet race and racism largely endure because racial differentiation and prejudice continue to serve the interests of economic elites in more and less obvious ways. Then and now, race divides exploited workers to hinder their recognition of shared interests and weaken their economic and political power. While a seemingly antiracist ideology, white privilege discourse is a modern manifestation of racist ideology: like its predecessors, the discourse (knowingly or unknowingly) employs race to divide, misdirect, and exploit nonwhite and white people alike. In the words of literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels, “the work that used to be done by racism—the work of obscuring class difference—is now done by antiracism” (2006, 79).

Barbara Fields explains that exploitation—in the form of slavery—preceded racism:

Race as a coherent ideology did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery, but took even more time than slavery did to become systematic. A commonplace that few stop to examine holds that people are more readily oppressed when they are already perceived as inferior by nature. The reverse is more to the point. People are more readily perceived as inferior by nature when they are already seen as oppressed. (1990, 106)

Indeed, for most of history, people have understood other's stations—and, often, their own—to be divinely or (what until recent history was the same) naturally ordained. But hierarchies are never determined in abstraction and then implemented. They are implemented and then justified by abstractions. So too with the western hierarchy that inspired racism. African slaves in America were first dehumanized, then viewed as an inferior race worthy of dehumanization.

Viewing African slaves as an inferior race, however, only benefited those at the top of the hierarchy: slavers. Slave owners were incentivized to develop racism to buttress their economic interests with ideological justification. Such justification was especially necessary after the introduction of enlightenment thinking as “egalitarian norms required special reasons for exclusion” (Fredrickson 2002, 68). “The doctrine that ‘all men are created equal’ and endowed with individual rights derived from nature or reason,” historian George M. Fredrickson writes, “was difficult to reconcile with lifetime servitude” (2002, 64). “Racial ideology,” Fields adds, “supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights” (1990, 114).⁸ In short, racial ideology rationalized slavery to the benefit of those who profited off the status quo in America. Along with almost all nonwhites, this excluded most whites.⁹

⁸ In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014), Barbara and Karen Fields contextualize why enslaving Africans and their decedents was more feasible than enslaving Europeans and their decedents (see page 125). Many other historians have established why indigenous people ultimately did not supply mass slave labor.

⁹ Charting slave ownership between 1830 and 1860, historian James Oakes writes:

Thirty-five percent of Southern families owned slaves in 1830, but that number fell to about 30 percent by 1850 and fell still more precipitously to 25 percent by 1860. The price of slaves skyrocketed to the point where a single “prime” field hand cost what, in today’s currency, would amount to tens of thousands of dollars...meanwhile the rates of landlessness became widespread in many parts of the South, and the number of poor whites increased dramatically. (2021, 38-39).

Once developed, race supplied “a ready-made propaganda weapon for use against the aspirations of the great majority of working Americans” (K. E. Fields and Fields 2014, 183). After Reconstruction and the “the Populist political insurgency in the late nineteenth century,” southern elites imposed Jim Crow, for example, a “segregationist regime...based on disfranchisement of the vast majority of blacks *and* a substantial percentage of whites” (Reed 2019, emphasis mine). As will be shown, for much of US history, race has divided poor and working-class Americans and subverted demands for universal public goods.

This chapter provides a history of white privilege discourse from its origins in marginal activist circles to its expansion into mainstream racial ideology. In what follows, I argue that the ideological progression of white privilege discourse is marked by an increased decoupling of the fight for racial justice from the fight for economic justice. At times, white privilege scholars acknowledge the co-constitutive nature of racial dehumanization and economic exploitation. Yet, while these are the most accurate moments in contemporary white privilege discourse, they are relegated to asides, incompatible with the broader narrative. White privilege discourse today ultimately denies “the double mission of white supremacy—to hold down black people and white people alike” (K. E. Fields and Fields 2014, 149).

The Origins of White Privilege Discourse

White privilege discourse emerged at the end of the civil rights movement. Its founders were New Left, Marxist-Leninist activists who saw the fight for racial and economic equality as co-constitutive. Yet soon after the discourse’s founding, its scholars would dissociate the two struggles, and by the time of its popularization in the late 1980s, white privilege discourse had largely abandoned its original commitment to economic equality. In this way, the development of white privilege discourse reenacted the broader cultural transition in racial ideology that had

occurred after World War II. During the postwar period, psychological and cultural explanations for racial injustice increasingly supplanted economic explanations in mainstream thought.

In the 1930s and 1940s, civil rights leaders across the ideological spectrum “generally presumed that racism was inextricably linked to class exploitation” (Reed 2020, 12).

Organizations with ties to the Communist Party, like the National Negro Congress, viewed “the problem of racial inequality [as] fundamentally economic” and believed that “the solution required addressing the impoverishment and exploitation of black and white workers alike” (Sugrue 2009, 34). More conservative organizations tied to the Black middle class, like the National Urban League, also “encouraged African Americans to join in common cause with white workers in labor unions” (T. F. Reed 2020, 32-34). Political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. notes that:

The 1944 volume, *What the Negro Wants*, a collection of analyses by prominent leftist, centrist, and conservative black public figures...indicated a consensus among black racial advocates across the ideological spectrum that a strong industrial union movement and expansion of social wage policies were essential for black American’s continuing success in pursuit of racial justice and equality. (2021, 30)

However, in 1947, with the onset of the Cold War, the introduction of McCarthyism, and the passage of the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act, the civil rights movement retreated from class politics. “By the 1950s,” historian Touré F. Reed writes, “liberal thinkers and Democratic policymakers began to coalesce around culturalist conceptions of inequality that would trace racial disparities to whites’ ingrained prejudices and poor blacks’ cultural deficiencies” (2020, 12). Although movement leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin continued to link African American liberation to interracial working-class emancipation, the postwar era saw the rise of racial liberalism, which explained racial inequality in social, rather than economic, terms.

Historian Leah N. Gordon defines “racial liberalism” as “the political agenda that put antidiscrimination legislation, integration, and anti-prejudice education at the center of the struggle for racial justice from World War II until the late 1960s” (Gordon 2010, 29). During this period, civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) embraced racial liberalism. For them, the victory in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) suggested that the fight for racial justice should center on antidiscrimination legislation and integration rather than the labor movement (Goluboff 2005). In postwar America, leaders of the Democratic Party also shifted their attention away from economic explanations for racial inequality. In his 1965 report, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the assistant secretary of labor under the Johnson administration, explained that racial equity was primarily hampered by two cultural factors: white racial prejudice and social pathologies inculcated among Black Americans by “unimaginable mistreatment” (T. F. Reed 2020, 82). Influenced, like many Americans, by Cold War–era anti-labor forces, scholars of race relations encountered additional incentives to embrace racial liberalism and omit class analyses. Among these were “expanded federal and philanthropic support for the behavioral sciences; the refining of attitude measurement and opinion polling techniques, [and] the growing appeal of scientism and quantification”—all of which focused scholars’ attention on attitudinal explanations for the persistence of racial inequities (Gordon 2010, 30).

White privilege discourse began taking shape after social/cultural explanations of racial inequality had largely supplanted political/economic ones in mainstream thinking. However, like most civil rights activists before World War II, white privilege discourse’s earliest articulators believed that racial injustice and economic exploitation were intrinsically linked.

According to critical race theorist Noel Ignatiev (formerly Ignatin), his collaborator Ted Allen coined the phrase “white-skin privilege” “in a 1965 speech commemorating John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry” (Staudenmeier 2007, 2). Like other New Left, Marxist-Leninist activists, Ignatiev and Allen were committed to advancing a proletarian revolution and tried to understand what prevented it. And like many white privilege scholars who came after, they turned to W. E. B. Du Bois for answers.¹⁰

The passage from Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* that would make it the bible of white privilege discourse reads as follows:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had a small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. (Du Bois 1935/1998, 700-701)

In this passage, Du Bois explains “the pervasiveness of white racism during the period after the Civil War” (Staudenmeier 2007, 1). This racism, he argues, was largely motivated by white workers’ attachment to short-term social advantages over nonwhites. It was not, Du Bois notes, motivated by their long-term economic interests.

Nearly all the white privilege scholars examined here cite Du Bois, and most reference the above passage explicitly. However, since the late 1980s, white privilege scholars have consistently ignored the historical specificity of Du Bois’s analysis and that white workers’ long-term economic interests are not included among the wages he lists. Yet, by citing Du Bois,

¹⁰ Haider (2018) informs the genealogy of “white privilege” presented below.

contemporary white privilege scholars appear to anchor their analysis in that of one of the most prominent Black American theorists.¹¹

While white privilege discourse often misrepresents Du Bois's understanding of white laborers' "public and psychological wage," it does echo positions Du Bois endorsed during certain periods of his ideological evolution. Take, for example, Du Bois's argument in "Marxism and the Negro Problem" (1933). Here, the theorist posits that while Black and white workers "have similar complaints against capitalists:"

the lowest and most fatal degree of [Black Labor's] suffering comes not from the capitalists but from fellow white laborers. It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions, expels him from decent houses and neighborhoods, and heaps upon him the public insults of open color discrimination.

It is no sufficient answer to say that capital encourages this oppression and uses it for its own ends...the bulk of American white labor is neither ignorant nor fanatical. It knows exactly what it is doing and it means to do it" (Du Bois 1933).¹²

Du Bois does not articulate the central claim of white privilege discourse here, i.e., that white people must recognize and renounce their advantages to promote racial justice. However, he does offer one foundational premise of the discourse: that all whites, not just white elites, are responsible for racial oppression. Yet, despite this more robust connection to Du Bois's work,

¹¹ Historian Eric Arnesen makes this argument in "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination" (2001, 9). There, he "critically examines historians' use of W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on the 'psychological wage'...and concludes that the 'psychological wage' of whiteness serves poorly as a new explanation for the old question of why white workers have refused to make common cause with African Americans" (2001, 3).

¹² Later in the essay, Du Bois softens his claim somewhat, suggesting that all classes of whites—both capitalists and laborers—are responsible for Black exploitation equally. The "exploitation comes not from a black capitalistic class," Du Bois writes, "but from the white capitalists and equally from the white proletariat" (1933).

^{12a} In *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004), political scientist and white privilege scholar Joel Olson directly quotes from this passage.

the “public and psychological wage” section remains the “canonical passage” white privilege scholars invariably invoke (Arnesen 2001, 9).¹³

Writing at the onset of the post–civil rights era, Ignatiev offers an understanding of white workers’ contemporary “public and psychological wage.” Ignatiev writes that white people in the 1960s still enjoyed:

a monopoly of the skilled jobs...[a] cushion...against the most severe shocks of the economic cycle...health and education facilities superior to those of the nonwhite population...freedom to spend your money and leisure time as you wish without social restrictions... [and the ability to] occasionally promote one of your number out of the ranks of the laboring class. (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 150).

Although most of the advantages Ignatiev lists here are indeed material, as with the “public and psychological” wages Du Bois notes, they ultimately discourage white workers from effectively advocating for their long-term economic interests in coalition with nonwhite workers. In truth, Ignatiev writes, these short-term advantages are “bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to [divide and] subjugate black and white workers” for their material gain (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 152).

¹³ As there is a tendency in white privilege discourse to represent Black Americans’ views of racial injustice as monological rather than dialogical, it is worth noting that neither Du Bois—nor any other Black thinker—spoke on behalf of a unified Black community. For example, in response to Du Bois’s “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” James W. Ford—the first Black American to run for Vice President of the United States (Solomon 1998, 217) and “the most prominent black Communist in the nation during the 1930s and early 1940s” (Salter 2018)—wrote:

To believe Dr. Du Bois, means to give up all hope of liberation. It cannot be denied that racial prejudice exists among large sections of the white workers...But...what is the cause of this prejudice?...Capitalism fosters prejudice in order to maintain the oppression of Negro masses and prevent the unity of the white workers with them. But we see now that [white] workers are uniting with Negroes in a struggle to obtain their needs. (Ford 1936, 90)

Congruent with earlier mainstream Marxist theorists, Ignatiev and Allen believe that white supremacy is an obstacle to working-class solidarity. Like Marx, they argue that “labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin when in the black it is branded” (Marx 1867/1887, 195). However, unlike their Marxist predecessors, Ignatiev and Allen see “the attack on white supremacy” as a prerequisite to cross-racial organizing and believe that by choosing to “obtain, maintain or expand their social and economic white-skin privileges,” white workers are themselves responsible for “the deterioration of the conditions of the workers, black and white” (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 183; Ignatin 1969, 7). Together, these two claims— (1) that white workers need to repudiate their white-skin privileges before cross-racial worker solidarity can be achieved, and (2) that “the white supremacist attitudes within the United States working class, [are] the No. 1 barrier to the development of a class conscious movement”—lay the foundation for contemporary white privilege discourse (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 171). While the succeeding generation of scholars would embrace these two claims, most would reject Ignatiev’s and Allen’s assertion that white workers should disavow their privileges out of self-interest and not just for the well-being of Black workers.

This shift away from the belief that white privilege hurts white workers was portended—but not fully developed—by the Weathermen (later the Weather Underground), an extremist faction of Students for a Democratic Society. Although the Weathermen were a small, short-lived group, their worldview—inspired by third-world struggles for self-determination and the Black nationalist liberation movement at home—reflected broader ideological trends. In their manifesto, the Weathermen note that they looked to “Mao, Chef [presumably “Che”], the Panthers, [and] the Third World” for guidance. Their rhetoric indicates that the Weathermen saw

themselves as “white mother country radicals” tasked with bringing anti-imperialist movements to a young, predominately white audience (Asbley et al. 1969).

Like Ignatiev and Allen, the Weathermen believed that the “long-range interests” of the white working class lay with “fighting for international socialism.” However, the Weathermen also held that imperialism gave white workers, unlike nonwhite workers, “very real” privileges “which constitute some material basis for being racist or pro-imperialist.” Accordingly, the Weathermen argued that the economic interests of white workers were somewhat at odds with those of nonwhite workers (Asbley et al. 1969).

Because white workers had a “basis for being...pro-imperialist,” the Weathermen used race and ethnicity, rather than class, to identify revolutionaries. As self-described “communists,” the Weathermen wanted a “classless world,” but they saw the triumph of the colonized over the colonizers (rather than the triumph of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie) as the way to get there. For the most part, then, nonwhites were to be the revolutionaries because they belonged to the colonized nations, and whites were to be the reactionaries because they belonged to the colonizer nations. Although African Americans were citizens of the most powerful empire, the Weathermen considered Black America a colonized nation within the United States (Asbley et al. 1969).

That said, the Weathermen did not entirely ignore class when identifying likely revolutionaries: they still viewed Black capitalists as reactionary “agents of white monopoly capital.” But the Weathermen believed that one’s racial identity could overcome one’s class status—up to a point—and transform a well-to-do Black person into an activist. Of the Black petite bourgeoisie—who are inclined by economic circumstances to support the status quo—the Weathermen wrote, “when the movement is winning, [they] can be won to support full (socialist)

self-determination” because they “are close enough to the black masses in . . . oppression . . . that they will support many kinds of self- determination issues.” Given the “unity, commitment, and initiative” inculcated among Blacks by their oppression, as well as Black Americans’ “centralness to the system, economically and geo-militarily,” the revolution, the Weathermen concluded, could be achieved without the help of white people altogether (Asbley et al. 1969).

In arguing that “black people could win self-determination, abolishing the whole imperialist system and seizing state power to do it, without...[a] white movement,” the Weathermen echo 1933 Du Bois and anticipate moments in contemporary white privilege discourse (Asbley et al. 1969). In “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” Du Bois claims, “In the hearts of black laborers alone...lie those ideals of democracy in politics and industry which may in time make the workers of the world effective dictators of civilization” (1933). On the other side of the Weathermen in the timeline, in 2004, political theorist Joel Olson wrote, “as the walls of racial oppression tumble, class rule is also shaken” (2004, 140). And in 2011, activist and author Tim Wise, in recounting his conversation with a Black woman, stated, “I’m not fighting racism to save you from it... It would be like saying black folks aren’t capable of liberating yourselves from white supremacy. I think you are, though it might be easier with some internal resistance from whites” (2011, 182). However, the spirit of contemporary white privilege discourse runs counter to this thinking. If nonwhites could achieve racial justice without whites, the demand for white people to recognize and renounce their privilege would be purposeless, of limited value, or strictly performative. That said, sometimes white privilege scholars suggest that these, astoundingly, are the ends of their discourse, as will be seen.

Whiteness Studies

The white privilege discourse works I discuss from here on belong to a wider academic category: whiteness studies (sometimes called critical whiteness studies). I mention this field to locate white privilege discourse and my critique thereof in a broader scholarly context.

According to political scientist Cedric Johnson, “whiteness studies as an academic field of inquiry was born in the waning years of the Regan-Bush era, and its creators’ motives were earnest and well intentioned” (2019). As with its subgenre, white privilege discourse, whiteness studies aimed to refute prominent “underclass narratives” that portrayed “urban blacks and Latinos...as an inferior caste, lacking a work ethic” (Johnson 2019, 4). And, like white privilege discourse, whiteness studies responded by turning to “white identity and culture and the covert mechanisms of white power” to explain the persistence of racial injustice (Bergner 2020).

Historian Eric Arnesen, an early observer of whiteness studies, writes:

The scope of subject matter susceptible to analysis by whiteness scholars appears vast. Topics range broadly from the more familiar explorations of race and racial identity in American history, fiction, and film, to the less well trod territory of downhill skiing in Colorado (as in ‘The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing’), the various television and movie incarnations of Star Trek (‘Race-ing toward a White Future’), the constructions of hysteria and Southern child labor, and tourism and travel literature. (2001, 4)

But, Arnesen argues, the pre-existing discipline that most enthusiastically integrated whiteness studies was labor history.

It is widely held that a work of labor history—David R. Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Roediger 1991/2007)—is the foundational whiteness studies text.¹⁴ As the title of Roediger’s book suggests, whiteness studies,

¹⁴ Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish became White* (1995) is often mentioned as the second most influential text in the field.

like white privilege discourse, locates its roots in W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*. Barbara and Karen Fields have accordingly called the phrase "psychological wage" "the beloved pet of so-called whiteness studies" (2014, 160). Moreover, whiteness theorists, like contemporary white privilege scholars, ultimately reject class politics in favor of "a politics built around identity and race" (Arnesen 2001, 5).

Below, I discuss the historical inaccuracies white privilege discourse is built upon. Specifically, I examine the discourse's misunderstanding of labor history. I argue that white privilege discourse falsely presumes that the fight for economic justice and universal programs are at odds with the fight for racial justice and that white workers are especially responsible for persistent racial inequity. The broader category of whiteness studies has been rightly criticized for distorting historical understandings of labor organizing in the United States. Here, I show the validity of the criticism as it applies to white privilege discourse, specifically. First, however, I note the basic worldview presented in contemporary white privilege discourse.

Contemporary White Privilege Discourse

Against Ignatiev and Allen, the Weathermen weakened the claim that white privilege hurts white workers and muted the call for cross-racial, working-class solidarity, advocating for ethno-racial identity-based organizing instead. On both counts, the generation of white privilege scholars that emerged in the 1980s would align with the Weathermen. But, against all their forerunners, this new generation would abandon their predecessors' commitment to a "classless world" and their belief that white and nonwhite workers' long-term interests largely aligned. And while the Weathermen believed that multiracial class solidarity might be auxiliary to the fight for racial justice, many contemporary white privilege scholars suggest that class-based organizing can undermine this fight, as detailed below. At the outset of the 1990s, white privilege discourse

was fully aligned with already-dominant racial liberalism. Racial oppression, the discourse asserted, would be vanquished by attacking attitudes, not capital.

This contemporary version of white privilege discourse was introduced by author and activist Peggy McIntosh in her article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989). Here, McIntosh examines the fact that, by dint of being white, she is an oppressor. She confronts this by counting “the ways in which [she] enjoy[s] unearned skin privilege”(1989). In this iteration of white privilege discourse, the central conflict—economically, socially, and politically—is neither between workers and capitalists nor between colonized people and colonizers; it is between whites and nonwhites.

Philosopher Charles W. Mills describes this conflict in *The Racial Contract* (1997). According to Mills, “the Racial Contract” signifies white people’s collective agreement to exploit the “bodies, land, and resources” of nonwhite people: “it is a contract between those categorized as white over the nonwhites” (1997, 11;12). The Contract, Mills explains, is both formal and informal. Formally, it has been established by written documents with identifiable white signatories, for example, “the expropriation contract, the slavery contract, the colonial contract” (Mills 1997, 24). Informally, the Racial Contract describes the many ways whites retain social, political, and economic privileges at the expense of nonwhites. To advance racial justice, Mills concludes, this Contract (i.e., the white alliance) must be abolished.

According to Mills, all white people benefit from the white alliance, and their reluctance to abandon these benefits maintains their union. White privilege scholars that came after Mills echo his assertions. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, “Racial structures remain in place” because “actors racialized as ‘white’ ...receive material benefits from the racial order...[and] struggle (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges”

(2018, 9). Political theorist Joel Olson asserts, “The white citizen resists any political vision in which his or her privileges are not respected” (2004, xxi). Political scientist Ashley Jardina also contends that:

White Americans benefit tremendously from their position at the top of the hierarchy. Their group, on average, receives greater material benefits, social esteem, and political accommodations... When these cherished privileges... are challenged, many whites react defensively, condemning and resisting changes to the racial status quo. (2019, 22)

And journalism scholar Robert Jensen writes, “The primary force that keeps white supremacy firmly in place is the material and psychological gains that come to white people” (2005, 45). Indeed, the contentions that all white people benefit from white supremacy and that these benefits sustain racial injustice—coupled with the demand that white people renounce their advantages—unify white privilege discourse.

In the next chapter, I will examine the specific privileges whites are told to renounce. Here, I note that the demand for such renunciation arises, in part, from white privilege scholars’ perception that whites and nonwhites compete for resources in a zero-sum game. McIntosh expresses this when she writes, “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (1989). This zero-sum understanding of resource allocation—both material and psychological—remains a constant in white privilege discourse. Examples are many. Sociologist Thomas Shapiro writes, “White neighborhoods and schools are better in part because black neighborhoods and schools are worse” (2004, 153). Philosopher Barbra Flagg contends, “[t]he solution [to overcoming resistance to racial equality], I think, is for white people to acknowledge that taking responsibility for race discrimination does and should cost something” (1993, 1016). Layla Saad argues, “There is no personal gain for

people with white privilege to do this [antiracist] work and a lot to lose in terms of privilege and power” (2020, 132). White people, she continues, “must be willing to let go of “privileges, advantages, and comforts”—including money, time, space, and relationships—“so that BIPOC can have more dignity in their lives” (2020, 195-196). And Jensen states:

White people’s fear of losing what we have...if at some point the economic, political, and social systems in which we live become more just and equitable...is not completely irrational; if white privilege...were to evaporate, the distribution of resources in the United States and in the world would change...We would have less. (2005, 53)

Such statements demonstrate how far removed contemporary white privilege is from Du Bois, Ignatiev, Allen, and the Weathermen’s shared view that, if realized, racial justice would benefit the majority of nonwhites and whites alike.

The Myth of the Racial Contract

My critique of contemporary white privilege discourse begins with Mills’ “Racial Contract.” Mills himself acknowledges potential challenges to his analysis. He notes, for example, that conflicts among white people—“disagreements, battles, even world wars—might appear to undermine his insistence on a transnational white alliance (1997, 30). Yet he dismisses this objection, stating “though there is also internal conflict...the dominant movers and shapers will be Europeans at home and abroad, with non-Europeans lining up to fight under their respective banners, and the system of white domination itself rarely being challenged” (1997, 30-31).¹⁵ In so saying, Mills implies that Germany, Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom, etc., were willing to lose to each other because of their common Europeanness/ whiteness but would not have been willing to lose to nonwhite powers. It is unclear how the Ottoman empire fits into

¹⁵ I say more about Mills’ interchangeable use of “European” and “white” in the next chapter.

this analysis. As for Japan, Mills writes, “the world is essentially dominated by white capital,” but for “the notable exception” of Japan, “whose history confirms rather than challenges the rule” (1997, 36). Yet Mills does not defend why Japan is an exception that proves the rule rather than one that disproves it.

Ultimately, the “Racial Contract” cannot make sense of history, past or present. It cannot explain: wars between “white nations”; conflicts within or between “nonwhite” nations; how China became a superpower; how two of the three countries with the highest GDP are in Asia; how, in recent years, the country with the highest GDP per capita is often Qatar; how who is considered “white” changes over time; how the development of racial ideology also involved taxonomizing Europeans and “whites” into racial groups, e.g., Celts, Kalmucks, Alpines, Lapps, Teutons, etc.;¹⁶ the practice of negative eugenics (i.e., forced sterilization) upon “degenerate families” who were given “a poor and female southern face” (Painter 2010, 259, 256, 274); and so on. Barbara Fields puts it best: “From Peterloo to Santiago, Chile, to Kwangju, South Korea, to Tiananmen Square, and the *barrios* of San Salvador, humanity has learned again and again that shared colour and nationality set no automatic limit to oppression” (1990, 103).

Aware of history’s complexities, Mills undermines his narrative in the final pages of the *Racial Contract*. “Whiteness is not really a color at all but a set of power relations,” he argues (1997, 127, emphasis original). “All peoples can fall into Whiteness under the appropriate

¹⁶ In *The History of White People* (2010), Nell Irvin Painter discusses this history. She details, for example, the influence of William Z. Ripley’s *Races of Europe* (1899). Here, Painter notes that “The *New York Times* devoted two full pages to a glowing review” of this taxonomy of European peoples, the author of which received job offers from “Cornell, Yale, and Harvard” following the work’s publication (2010, 223, 226). In the review, the *Time*’s author “raves about Ripley’s ‘great work,’” writing, “best of all, Ripley demolished the ‘schoolroom fallacy that there is such a thing as a single European or white race’”(Painter 2010, 224).

circumstances,” he continues, “as shown by the (‘White’) black Hutus’ 1994 massacre of half a million to a million inferior black Tutsis...in Rwanda” (1997, 128-129). But if “whiteness” is a “set of power relations” (and what, exactly, are the components of this set?), why use a color (white) as a substitute for power? Why call the Hutus ‘white’ when they are often identified by their darker skin (“Assessment for Tutsis in Rwanda” 2003)? And why not describe the specific material and ideological forces that confer power—or that confer power at a given moment in a given location—rather than employ an abstraction used to exploit and dehumanize nonwhites?

Against Class Based Organizing

Unlike Mills, most of the other white privilege scholars I discuss examine the United States’ “white alliance” specifically. Contemporary analyses of white privilege in the United States sometimes begin, like their forerunners, by noting that European elites developed race and racism to facilitate the exploitation of nonwhite labor. Occasionally, these narratives also acknowledge that racism facilitated—and may continue to facilitate—the exploitation of white labor. Wise, for example, writes:

In the labor market, we [white people] benefit from racial discrimination in the relative sense, but in absolute terms this discrimination holds down most of our wages and living standards by keeping working people divided and creating a surplus labor pool of ‘others’ to whom employers can turn when the labor market gets tight or workers demand too much in wages or benefits. (2005, 120)

Yet, regardless of whether contemporary white privilege scholars believe white and nonwhite workers share a common class interest, they reject class-based organizing. Today’s white privilege scholars do not want whites who secede from the “white alliance” to ally with nonwhite workers—as was true for Allen, Ignatiev, and the Weathermen. Instead, they want white Americans to become “race traitors” and ally with nonwhites of all classes.

In Chapter Four, I discuss white privilege scholars' material and psychological incentives for rejecting class-based organizing. Here, however, I analyze their historical case against class-based coalitions and class-based demands. This case begins with white privilege scholars' distrust of white workers. Contemporary white privilege discourse suggests that class-based organizing cannot advance racial justice partly because white workers will always—or nearly always—abandon nonwhite workers to preserve their privileges. Accordingly, Bonilla-Silva warns that we must prevent “the older class-based agenda” from taking over “race struggles” (2018, 251).

Olson further details this position in *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004). Agreeing with his predecessors, Olson argues that the bourgeoisie—or more specifically, “the Virginia upper class”—established race, racism, and white privilege to “craft a docile [nonwhite and white] productive labor force. But, as the benefits of whiteness became apparent to English laborers,” Olson continues, “they came to embrace the system by which privileges were conferred in exchange for policing slaves” (2004, 38). “In allying themselves with the large planters,” Olson concludes, “poor whites traded class solidarity for whiteness and its accompanying privilege”: “slavery,” he argues, “was enforced primarily by [white] working-class members” (2004, 39; 7). Here, Olson's oversimplified—or, rather, inaccurate—portrayal of a white monolith is already apparent. For example, at the onset of the Civil War, nonslaveholders in the South “resisted and voted against secession,” and soon thereafter, “450,000 Southerners joined the Union Army” (Oakes 2021, 39). Yet, Olson maintains that white workers have unceasingly opted for racial solidarity over class solidarity.

Throughout US history, Olson asserts, white workers have abandoned Black workers to preserve their racial privileges. In addition to enforcing slavery, white workers recurrently

refused Black workers “entrance in the House of Labor” (2004, 13). Like other white privilege theorists, Olson uses works by whiteness historians to support his claims. These works conclude that “white workers had a voice in the Democratic Party, the unions, and the local political machines, and all too often they opted for whiteness rather than class solidarity” (2004, xxix).

While he believes that wealthy Americans constructed race, Olson ultimately does not hold them responsible for continued race-based exploitation: “Although this system has historically worked to the benefit of capitalists,” he writes, “the tragic fact is that it is ultimately perpetuated by the white working class” (2004, 30). Compared to Ignatiev, Allen, and the Weathermen, Olson more pointedly blames white workers for white supremacy.¹⁷ Beyond cursory statements, however, *The Abolition of White Democracy* does not examine race in US labor history. However, Olson’s belief that white Americans cannot be trusted to fight for

¹⁷ Olson does, however, marshal a statement from Du Bois in his favor, quoting, “The bulk of American white labor...knows exactly what it is doing and it means to do it” (2004, 14 quoting Du Bois, 1933).

^{17a} It appears that Bonilla-Silva initially agrees that white workers are especially responsible for white supremacy, but he adds a crucial caveat. “The wages of whiteness are not equally distributed,” he writes:

Poor and working-class whites receive a better deal than their minority brethren, but their material share of the benefits of whiteness is low, as they remain too close to the economic abyss. Hence, white workers have a powerful reason to exhibit more solidarity toward minorities than whites in other classes. (2018, 156)

However, Bonilla-Silva observes that white workers have failed to make common cause with black workers and wonders, “why have most workers in the United States been historically antiblack, antiminority and anti-immigrant?” (2018, 156). He speculates that “the answer has to do with the interaction between race and gender:”

It has been white *male* workers who have historically supported the racial order. Why? Because whether in periods of economic security or insecurity, white masculinity has provided white men with economic and noneconomic benefits...The white male bond thus has prevented working-class white men from joining progressive racial movements en masse. (2018, 156)

In short, Bonilla-Silva is skeptical of white males’ commitment to class-based organizing. However, Female white workers, he suggests, stand to gain from cross-racial worker solidarity.

economic justice without perpetuating racial inequality is corroborated by many instances of white workers organizing against nonwhites.

The history of American railroad unions provides one such example. According to historian Eric Arnesen:

[T]he largest white railroad brotherhoods...were organized in the 1860s and 1870s [and] from their inception, race was written into the very definition of their union membership. The engineers' brotherhood officially restricted its membership to white men, as did the Locomotive Firemen and numerous other railway unions. Any applicant for membership had to be "white born, of good moral character, sober and industrious, sound in body and limb, and not less than eighteen years of age, and able to read and write the English language. (2001, 1609)

Beyond officially barring nonwhites from their unions, white railroad brotherhoods also:

devised a number of mechanisms to restrict or eliminate black competition...[including] the restriction of blacks through separate seniority lists and the maintenance of racial quotas on specific divisions of the railroad. At other times, white brotherhood men advocated the complete elimination of their black counterparts, relying on tactics that included strikes, selective violence, legislative lobbying, and contract negotiations. (Arnesen 2001, 1602)

Such exclusion of nonwhites was motivated by a mixture of white workers' self-interest and racial prejudice.¹⁸ Illustrating the depth of racial hostilities, Arnesen cites a Clarendon, Texas fireman, who said: "[W]e would rather be absolute slaves of capital...than to take the negro into our lodges as a equal and brother" (2001, 1629).

¹⁸ African Americans were not the only minority group excluded from railway unions. According to Arnesen:

African Americans were neither the only objects of white railroad workers' disdain nor the only group targeted for exclusion from the brotherhoods and the railroad labor force. From the 1880s through the 1920s, brotherhood members, like their skilled craft union counterparts in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), scorned new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, from Mexico, and above all, from China and Japan. (2001, 1612)

However, Arnesen notes that the exclusion of these groups was far less impactful than the exclusion of African Americans since the latter were whites' primary competitors for railroad jobs.

Railroad brotherhoods were not the only unions to enforce racial hierarchies. In a 1913 *Atlantic* article, Booker T. Washington notes that the Washington Bricklayers' Union struck when a Black man was employed at the Government Printing Office (1913). Labor historians Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein write that in the 1940s, white rank-and-file members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) "walked off the job to stop the integration of black workers into formally all-white departments" (1988, 789). Historian Kevin M. Schultz argues that labor leaders who were "at the front of the civil rights cause throughout the early 1960s" "hedged their support" "when the integration of labor unions became a part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act" (2008, 73). But white workers' relationship with Black workers was not uniform:

The white working class...exhibited no monolithic approach toward African Americans. Some white southern coal miners, timber workers, and longshoremen, for example, developed racial practices very different from those of railroad workers, skilled shipbuilders, metal workers, and building tradesmen. (Arnesen 1994, 1606)

Like every institution in the United States, labor often reflected and buttressed the racial hierarchy of society at large. However, labor also served as a venue for promoting racial equality.

In his *Atlantic* article, Washington cites "many instances... in which labor unions used their influence [on] behalf of Negroes" (1913). He notes, for example, that a Key West Florida's Carpenters' Union refused to work until "two Negro workmen" who "had been unfairly discharged" were "reinstated" (1913). Korstad and Lichtenstein offer additional examples. They note that UAW vice president Walter Reuther "made it clear that 'the UAW-CIO would tell any worker that refused to work with a colored worker that he could leave the plant because he did not belong there'" (1988, 799). Korstad and Lichtenstein also discuss how, outside the workplace, unions like the UAW and CIO registered Black voters, mobilized their turnout, and advocated for "social services for the black community, minority representation on the police and

fire departments, and low-cost public housing” (1988, 793). The labor historians also mention that “In the aftermath of the great Detroit race riot of 1943, in which the police and roving bands of whites killed twenty-five blacks, the UAW stood out as the only predominately white institution to defend the black community and denounce police brutality” (1988, 799). Another representative of workers’ interests, the Communist Party, implemented especially progressive policies. In the 1940s, the party worked to develop Black leaders, adopting “what today would be called an affirmative action policy that recognized the special disabilities under which black workers functioned, in the party as well as in the larger community” (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988, 792).

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, from the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, Black leaders with divergent ideologies saw labor activism as essential to advancing civil rights. Washington wrote: “[S]o far as the labor unions are concerned, I am convinced that these organizations can and will become an important means of doing away with the prejudice that now exists in many parts of the country against the Negro laborer” (1913). Thirty-one years later, civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph asserted, “The Labor Movement, with all of its limitations and prejudices, that incidentally are common to all human institutions, offers to the Negro and all minorities the greatest hope and promise of freedom and democracy” (Randolph quoted in Schultz 2008, 73). Too often, white privilege discourse fails to incorporate into their historical analyses Randolph’s aside—that prejudice (namely racial prejudice) was “common to all human institutions.”

When theorists like Olson imply that organized labor was exceptionally racist, they forget what elsewhere they attend to at length: that white supremacy pervaded all American institutions. The conclusion that we should be skeptical of white workers is an indefensible leap from the

premise that unions often buttressed and propagated racial oppression. Analogies support this. The church has been racist; should we not have listened to civil rights preachers? Schools have been racist; should we not educate our children about the history of white supremacy? The law has been racist; should we not seek legal protections for minority groups? Like the church, schools, the law, and nearly every other American institution, labor unions were at times racist and at times fought racism. And there is evidence that unions advanced racial justice more than other institutions. Although unions—like the church, schools, and the law—can promote either enlightened or nefarious practices and policies, unions—unlike the church, schools, and the law—exist to empower exploited members of society, even if they do not always operate toward that end. Why, then, do white privilege theorists advocate for things like re-education and legal protections for minorities but denigrate unions? What ideology might this serve? Or more to the point, what class interest? It serves those who own American businesses—the majority of whom are white—not those who work in them.

Touré F. Reed succinctly states the harms inflicted on nonwhite Americans by “antiracist” disavowals of class-based organizing:

The bottom line is that the fate of poor and working-class African Americans...is linked to that of other poor and working-class Americans. Our road to a more just society for African Americans and everyone else is obstructed, in part, by a discourse...that derides unions as racist (despite blacks’ overrepresentation among unionists) ...and that, ultimately, insists upon divorcing race from class. (2020, 172)

Although white privilege scholars may acknowledge the initial bond between race and class, they insist that it has largely eroded. In Bonilla-Silva’s words:

The placement of groups of people in racial categories stemmed initially from the interests of powerful actors in the social system (e.g., the capitalist class, the planter class, colonizers). After racial categories were used to organize social relations in a society, however, race became an independent element ... [and different races developed] different interests. (1997, 473-475)

For Bonilla-Silva and other white privilege scholars, economic exploitation is Frankenstein, and its monster is racism. But racism is not a monster: it has no volition. Racism is an ideology, one that inherently serves to divide workers. In truth, interracial class-based organizing *is* racial justice organizing.

Against White Workers

Ignoring instances of racial solidarity, white privilege scholars frequently conclude that white workers cannot be trusted to fight for the well-being of all workers, nonwhite as well as white, as they will resist efforts to erode their “privileged standing” (Olson 2004, 86). The upshot of such thinking is that nonwhites should avoid organizing with whites, as whites will only organize with them out of self-interest. However, three erroneous assumptions underlie this conclusion. The first is that appealing to self-interest is a problematic organizing tool when it is likely the most effective motivator. The second is that nonwhite workers care more about white workers’ goodwill than about their actions. The third is that it is possible to have coalitions immune to the destructive power of self-interest. By emphasizing purity of thought over progressive (yet sometimes messy) action, white privilege scholars discourage working-class alliances that could promote the interests of low-income, disproportionately nonwhite Americans at the expense of America’s economic elite.

Washington’s analysis in “The Negro and the Labor Unions” (1913) was informed by answers he received from “various labor organizations in the United States” to queries he sent regarding the articles’ subject. The labor leaders’ responses reveal the centrality of self-interest appeals in fostering interracial solidarity and, correspondingly, racial justice. While many statements included in Washington’s article discuss how unions benefit Blacks directly, others

focus on how integrated unions help white workers, specifically. Quoting a report from the English Industrial Commission, Washington writes:

It is not owing to the existence of any sympathetic feeling between the white men and the Negroes that the latter are allowed to join the union; it is simply because white men feel their interest demands that colored men should be organized, as far as possible, so as to prevent them from cutting down the rate of wages...The white men make it quite clear that their connection with the colored men is purely a matter of business. (1913)

An article Washington cites by a “Mr. Nick Smith” makes the point again: “Treat the Negro square; allow him to work in our shops when he presents his union card, and we will take away from the foundryman his most effective tool, the Negro strikebreaker” (Washington 1913).

Again, the point is made by “Mr. M. J. Keough, of Cincinnati, acting president of the International Moulders’ Union.” “If a Negro moulder of Chattanooga is not brought up to the level of the white man,” he writes, “he, the Negro, will eventually drag the white man down to his condition” (Washington 1913).

Although most of the solicited letters discuss how interracial solidarity benefits all laborers, as these quotes illustrate, several focus on the benefit to white workers first and foremost. These authors are partly responding to the fact that “employers who wished to undermine the ability of their white workers to organize and bargain from strength frequently used African Americans as strikebreakers” (Fredrickson 2002, 86). Historian George M.

Fredrickson suspects that this cultivated:

a distinctive white working-class racism [that] took shape on the assumption that only white men were loyal to their fellow workers. Blacks and Chinese immigrants (and at times even swarthy newcomers from southern and eastern Europe who did seem quite white) were deemed genetically incapable of class solidarity and were therefore potential tools of exploitative employers. (2002, 86)

Unlike most early Black civil rights leaders, white privilege scholars would have argued that racist workers must confront, unpack, and verbally disavow their prejudice before they could be

viable members of an interracial coalition (I discuss this feature of white privilege discourse in detail in Chapter Three). But the best way to challenge one's prejudice is to engage in common cause with the object of it.

In critiquing white privilege, political scientist Cedric Johnson writes:

We are told individuals must correct their flaws before they can participate with others, a view that runs counter to what should be conventional wisdom about human behavior and social movement dynamics. The assumption that the therapeutic work needs to happen first is simply wrong, and there are plenty of examples throughout history and in our own times where we can find imperfect people working to realize and advance their common concerns. (2019)

It is through acts of solidarity that prejudices are challenged and made unsustainable. Moreover, when white workers do participate in interracial solidarity, they enact the very thing white privilege scholars call for most: they renounce their privilege—or, more accurately, they renounce short-term economic benefits.

All told, suggesting nonwhite workers would be foolish to organize with white workers pursuing their own interest betrays an upper-class bias. By supposing that people's motivations are more important than their actions, this suggestion promotes purity of thought over commitment to egalitarian activism. Motivations, like all thoughts, are, of course, neither unimportant nor disconnected from actions. Beliefs inform behavior and visa-versa. However, when critiquing thoughts is privileged over activism, wealthier, disproportionately white Americans benefit—as the status quo goes undisturbed—and disproportionately nonwhite Americans suffer. Furthermore, it is absurd to suggest that nonwhites should not pursue their self-interest by uniting with whites because whites will only unite with them out of theirs.

Against Universal Public Goods

White privilege discourse's misguided denigration of appealing to white people's self-interest is especially apparent when its scholars discuss universal, public goods—goods every American (or ideally, everyone in US territory) would have access to regardless of background, identity, or class. Bonilla-Silva disparages universal demands when he writes, “The record amply shows that if one begins with universalism, the universal will reflect the dominant interests of the groups leading the social movement” (2018, 252).¹⁹ Journalist and founder of the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah-Jones questions organizing around common cause when she says, “Race-neutral policies simply will not address the depth of disadvantage faced by people this country once believed were chattel” (2020, 55). Moreover, the zero-sum thinking that pervades white privilege discourse implicitly rejects universal public goods, as they would not provide resources to Americans of color by taking them away from white Americans. They would provide resources by redistributing them away from economic elites.

Olson rejects such zero-sum thinking, and yet he dismisses universal public goods as insufficiently antiracist, nonetheless. He writes:

inclusive' or class-based programs...downplay whites' historical privileges. In so doing, they appease white expectations rather than challenge them. This is not to say that class-based programs would not help African Americans and other people of color. They likely would, and they may even distribute benefits to people of color disproportionately compared to whites...Nevertheless, the success of such programs still depends on how well they comport with what Derrick Bell calls the 'white self-interest principle': whites will support social and political programs aimed at African Americans (directly or indirectly) only if whites stand to benefit from them as well. This leaves such programs politically vulnerable should their support wane. (2004, 86–87)

¹⁹ Bonilla-Silva—and certainly some other white privilege scholars—may support universal programs in practice despite their theoretical misgivings. For example, in assessing President Obama's healthcare policy, Bonilla-Silva writes, “Obama's proposed reform was far off from what the country needed: a universal single-payer health care plan” (2018, 216).

Here, Olson admits that he is against universal programs *not* because they hurt nonwhites—he admits they may help—but because they fail to hurt whites. Instead of a politics of racial equity, Olson offers a politics of resentment. Despite his understanding that “replacing white unity with class unity...would go a long way toward challenging inequalities of wealth that...[are] a significant obstacle to a far more democratic society,” Olson maintains that achieving class unity without first punishing whites simply won’t do (2004, 80).

Nor apparently will promoting popular programs that are vulnerable to some future, hypothetical withdrawal of white support (under the supposition that if white workers unite with nonwhite workers out of self-interest today, they will betray them out of self-interest tomorrow). But, of course, invulnerable programs—like invulnerable coalitions—do not exist, and, fittingly, Olson offers none. However, the more people a policy serves, the more who will fight for it, and the less vulnerable it becomes. Olson and other white privilege theorists see the key tactical benefit of pursuing universal policies— that doing so could attract broad enough support to foster coalitions large enough to effect political change—as a shortcoming.

That universal public goods will disproportionately benefit white people, however, is a warranted fear, and egalitarians must not “struggle for a larger portion of the pie to be parceled out unequally among workers” (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 155). As Ignatiev contends, “raising the demand for a larger slice of the pie for the working class does not in itself alter the apportionment of the slice within the working class” (Ignatin and Allen 1967/2011, 155). Therefore, when egalitarians demand universal healthcare, childcare, and eldercare, for example, they must also demand that hospitals, daycare centers, and nursing homes be built in predominately white and nonwhite neighborhoods alike. However, fighting for racially just

universal programs can only occur—and must occur—in conjunction with the fight for the programs themselves. But if poor, low-income, working-class Americans never obtain a larger portion of the pie, there will be no slices to parcel out in the first place.

All White People are Responsible

Above, I have focused, in part, on white privilege scholars' condemnation of working-class whites as insufficiently antiracist. I have specifically examined *The Abolition of White Democracy* (2004), as Olson explicitly warns nonwhites against organizing with white workers. Olson is certainly not the only scholar to make his distrust of white workers overt. For example, Bonilla-Silva asks, "why have most workers in the United States been historically antiblack, antiminority and anti-immigrant?" (2018, 156).²⁰ And, when discussing economically vulnerable white Americans, Michael Eric Dyson writes that they express, "fury of whiteness unleashed, or whiteness unbounded, of whiteness made, not less white, but even whiter by its class rage" (2017, 220). But, by and large, white privilege scholars do not explicitly focus on white workers. Instead, their claim is that *all* white people must recognize and renounce their privilege to advance racial justice.

Yet this "all" still implicitly turns readers' attention away from upper-class white Americans toward under-resourced and working-class whites. Above, I established that, before

²⁰ As footnote 19 attests, Bonilla-Silva answers this question, in part, by asserting that only white male workers have been consistently racist. Earlier, he cites studies that show "young, working-class women are the most likely candidates to be racial progressives. This finding," he continues, "contradicts the [claim that]... 'racists' are poorer working-class whites" (presumably because poor and working-class women have proven to be an exception to this) (2018, 143). In "On Being White: Thinking Toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy," philosopher and feminist theorist Marilyn Frye also argues that white men are primarily responsible for racism. Accordingly, she recommends that white women make disloyalty to white men "an explicit part of our politics and embrace it, publicly" (1993, 11).

racial liberalism, the fight for racial justice was intertwined with the fight for economic reform. Accordingly, economic elites—people who would have simply been called “privileged”—were often the targets of racial justice movements. So, while the white privilege lens may not move well-to-do whites entirely off-screen, their role is minimized as the field of vision expands to fit a much larger group of poor and working-class white people. Attention is further drawn away from wealthy Americans as white privilege discourse hardly ever discusses their role directly.²¹ Indeed, white privilege scholars often see efforts to discuss the relationship between economic inequality and racial inequality as racist. One manifestation of “covert racism” DiAngelo mentions is: “Attributing inequality between whites and people of color to causes other than racism” (2018, 44). For DiAngelo, attending to class distracts from race. The truth, however, is that race and class in America are co-constitutive. Ignoring this obscures “the political-economic roots of racial disparities, resulting in policy prescriptions that could have only limited value to poor and working-class blacks” while protecting rich, disproportionately white Americans’ economic interests (T. F. Reed 2020, 12). Consequently, though (in some marginal capacity) well-to-do whites, given their whiteness, remain targets of white privilege discourse, their economic interests go untargeted.

I should note that white privilege discourse gives political elites slightly more attention than economic elites. When discussing racial disparity, white privilege theorists highlight the dearth of nonwhite politicians. In recent works, they also discuss what Obama’s and Trump’s

²¹ When looking at any individual white privilege work, there are, of course, nuances. For example, Thomas Shapiro focuses on middle-class white Americans’ role in perpetuating racial injustice. Nevertheless, Shapiro still frequently obscures the co-constitutive relationship of race and class, as I discuss in Chapter Three and Four.

presidencies tell us about racial animus in the United States. White privilege scholars ask: what do politicians' demographics and positions *expose* about Americans' racial attitudes? Largely unaddressed in the discourse is how politicians *shape* Americans' racial attitudes.

Jardina's analysis of political elites in *White Identity Politics* (2019) illustrates the above. She writes, "politicians can make racial appeals that not only take advantage of the hostilities whites feel toward racial and ethnic minorities, but also ones that appeal to whites' desire to protect and preserve their groups' power" (2019, 255). Later, Jardina reiterates, "Appealing to whites' desire to preserve the nation's racial hierarchy is a powerful tool that politicians have at their disposal" (2019, 279). For Jardina, white people's racial hostilities and commitment to white supremacy exist prior to politicians' interventions. Latent white in-group favoritism and out-group animus are exploited and directed by political elites, not fostered by them.

In short, while they *may* play a role in white privilege accounts of the origins of race and racism, economic and political elites become peripheral actors in white privilege narratives. To understand modern forms of race and racism, contemporary white privilege scholars argue, we must attend to the racial identities and attitudes of the white masses.

Conclusion

But the white masses, like nearly all nonwhite Americans, are disadvantaged by racial injustice. Acknowledging this does not imply that whites have it worse than nonwhites. Nor does it suggest that all poor and working-class whites are antiracist or that egalitarians should accept any racism they may express. Racist attitudes and actions should always be condemned, no matter who propagates them. But to alleviate racial inequality, egalitarians ought to communicate that racial injustice hurts, rather than privileges, most whites. Of course, white privilege

discourse does the opposite. For the discourse's scholars, white workers are always perpetrators of white supremacy first and never—or almost never—its victims.

In a country where the “three richest individuals... collectively hold more wealth than the bottom 50% of the domestic population” (Kirsch 2017)—the bottom 50% of the country need not compete with each other for resources: they need to take on those at the top. This is not to say that building large, predominantly working-class coalitions is easy—quite the opposite. But, as sociologist Adaner Usmani and political economist David Zachariah write, “it is the only (egalitarian) game in town” (2021, 85). In the next chapter, I discuss what “white privilege” means according to its scholars. In so doing, I demonstrate in further detail how white privilege discourse harms nonwhite Americans economically as well as socially, politically, and legally.

CHAPTER TWO

WHITE PRIVILEGE DISCOURSE

“[W]hiteness leads to no conclusions that it does not begin with as assumptions. Whiteness is a racial identity; therefore, white people have a racial identity. Whiteness equals white supremacy; therefore, European immigrants become white by adopting white supremacy. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore, the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness.”

-Barbara J. Fields (2001, 53)

Introduction

The term “white privilege” is rarely used univocally within or across works by white privilege scholars, that is, academics who argue that white people must renounce their privilege to advance racial justice in the United States today. This ambiguity helps sustain white privilege discourse; the slipperiness of the phrase allows it to appeal to people’s preconceptions and avoid scrutiny. To facilitate analyses of “white privilege,” I identify what the term denotes in the discourse.

Below, I argue that “white privilege” takes one—or some combination—of five different meanings. “White privilege” may mean that (1) white people have greater access to material resources than do nonwhites; (2) white people enjoy rights nonwhites cannot; (3) white culture, perspectives, and practices are viewed as normal; (4) white people psychologically benefit from a sense of racial superiority; and (5) white people are not discriminated against for being white. At times, white privilege scholars explicitly state one of these definitions. More often, they imply them. While some of the authors I examine use just one definition, most employ “white privilege” to communicate multiple meanings at once or alternate between them as they shift contexts. Although I intend for this list to be comprehensive, there will surely be outlying instances where an author uses “white privilege” eccentrically.

In defining “white privilege,” I evaluate whether its scholars accurately assess the mechanisms perpetuating, and the remedies for addressing, racial inequality in the United States today. Ultimately, I find that the first four definitions distort reality and buttress racial inequality, the final definition does little more than assert that racial discrimination exists, and all five definitions divert the fight for racial equality from practical and ethical interventions.

Preliminary Definition: White

To specify the privileges white people must abandon to dissolve their alliance and relinquish their supremacy, it is useful to understand who, according to white privilege scholars, has such privileges: that is, who is white.

Nearly all white privilege scholars *explicitly* reject the idea that race is biologically determined or that phenotype alone decides who is white. Most also note that “race” and “whiteness” were invented by (some) Europeans to justify the exploitation of non-Europeans²² and that the category of white expanded as new groups of “European immigrants came to the [United States] and were . . . welcomed into the emerging club of whiteness” (Wise 2011, 16).

For some white privilege scholars, this history alone offers sufficient information to identify “white people.” Philosopher Charles W. Mills, for example, equates “white people” with “Europeans and their descendants” (1997, 40). Legal scholar Barbara Flagg does so as well when she states, “I define white person loosely, as an individual of European descent who, following

²² Author Robin DiAngelo articulates this when she writes, “belief in racial inferiority was not what triggered unequal treatment...first we exploited people for their resources, not according to how they looked. Exploitation came first, and then the ideology of unequal races to justify this exploitation followed. (2018, 16). Elsewhere, however, DiAngelo employs a brazenly circular understanding of the development of “race.” “Race,” she writes, “was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage” (2018, 17). Here, DiAngelo offers the absurdity that racial categories were invented to protect racial categories.

the prevailing system of racial classification, has no known trace of African or other non-European ancestry” (1993, 953). Yet Mills’ and Flagg’s understanding of “white” is both logically and ethically unsound.

Logically, although those who identify as white usually have European ancestry, “white” and “having European ancestry” are not synonymous. The latter is a statement of fact: one either does or does not have European ancestry (and those ancestors may or may not have been called “white”). Having “no known trace of African or other non-European ancestry” is similarly empirical. Being “white,” however, is fictitious, and the ideas that race is socially constructed and heritable are incompatible.

Ethically, the belief that one’s lineage dictates one’s race—and that race is therefore objectively discernible—has been the cornerstone of racist ideology since its origins in the seventeenth century.²³ When Flagg writes that a white person is “an individual of European descent who . . . has no known trace of African or other non-European ancestry,” she articulates the segregationist rule that one drop (or some measurable quantity) of “African blood” disqualifies one from being white (Harris 1993, 1738). Political scientist Ashley Jardina uses racist rhetoric more explicitly (albeit presumably unknowingly) when she writes, “regardless of whether whites identify with their racial group, their *objective* categorization into the group imbues them with considerable status and privilege” (2019, 35; emphasis mine).

Enforcing this “first principle of racism”—that race is an objective category—is especially pernicious as millions of Americans have not been dispelled of this notion (Fields and Fields 2014, 109). A 2018 study by Northwestern University’s Center for the Study of Diversity

²³ For more on the history of racial ideology, see Liggio (1976), Fields (1990), and Painter (2010).

and Democracy “found 33.8 percent of Americans think biology totally determines racial identity; 18.8 percent think it somewhat determines race; 30.2 percent believe the two are related but not causal, [and] 17.2 percent see no relation” (Rockett 2018). Reinforcing the link between race and biology is not just factually inaccurate: it fortifies a racist misconception that is alive and well.

However, most white privilege scholars acknowledge that genetics alone do not confer whiteness. Instead, white people are those who are perceived as white because of some combination of racialized traits (physical characteristics, social practices, familial ties, community affiliations, etc.). Nevertheless, nearly all white privilege scholars conclude that although whiteness, like race, has no biological reality, it has become a “social fact” (Olson 2004, 9). “Racial categories are historically, socially, economically, and psychologically constructed,” philosopher Shannon Sullivan writes, “and are nonetheless real for being so” (2006, 128).²⁴

My own understanding of “white” overlaps with this second account but diverges in two significant ways. I agree that people are identified as white based on some combination of factors—skin color, other physical traits, ancestry, dress, speech, class, community, religion, etc.—that have come to signify “white.” However, when I use “white,” I intend to connote a

²⁴ Aptly critiquing “scholars who intone ‘social construction’ as a spell for the purification of race,” Barbara and Karen Fields write:

Race as culture is only biological race in polite language: No one can seriously postulate cultural homogeneity among those whose racial homogeneity scholars nonetheless take for granted. The only veil hiding the conjuror’s apparatus from full view of the spectators in the quicksilver propensity of *culture* to change meaning from one clause to the next—now denoting something essential, now something acquired; now something bounded, now something without boundaries; now something experienced, now something ascribed. (2014, 156)

social fiction rather than a social fact.²⁵ This is not to say that racial oppression is fictitious: racism is a social fact. Indeed, it is a fact that depends on the fallacy—scientific, social, or otherwise—that races are real. But race and races do not exist.²⁶ And when white privilege scholars claim that race, and not racism, has become a fact, they naturalize and thereby reinforce a construct designed to dehumanize and exploit people.

Second, when I use “white” in my own right, I mean “those who identify as white”—or, more precisely, those who identify as members of the factitious white race—rather than “those who are perceived as white.” This point may seem trivial, as one’s identifying as white is ordinarily determined by others’ perceptions of them as white. However, history suggests that when social or political groups police how individuals identify, rather than allowing individuals to self-identify, the repression of an identity group is at hand.

Defining “White Privilege”

At the most expansive level, “white privilege” denotes white people’s “unearned advantages” over people of color. “White privilege,” Robin DiAngelo writes, is a “concept referring to advantages”—economic, legal, political, and social—“that are taken for granted by

²⁵ For compelling accounts of why we ought to call “race” a social fiction rather than a social fact, see Michaels (1997, 2006) and Brubaker and Cooper (2000).

²⁶ White privilege scholars’ contention that race is a social fact allows them to attribute causality to it. For example, DiAngelo writes:

While there is no biological race as we understand it...race as a social construct has profound significance and shapes every aspect of our lives. Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and how long we can expect to live. (2018, 5)

But “having no material existence, [race] cannot have material causation” (Fields and Fields 2014, 22). Supposing race is causal impedes scholars’ ability to discern the true causes of racial injustice.

whites and that cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color in the same context ” (2018, 24). Yet it is difficult to distill what privileges *precisely* white privilege scholars believe white people share. Below, I aim to do so.

In detailing “white privilege’s” various connotations, I show that they collectively ideologically buttress racial prejudice, racial inequality, and nonwhite resource deprivation. These pernicious effects are, once again, largely an outcome of white privilege discourse disassociating the fight for racial justice from the fight for economic justice. In attending to the co-constitutive nature of racial and economic justice here and elsewhere, I neither question the harmful effects of racial discrimination nor the importance of its eradication. Instead, I argue that white privilege discourse is ill-equipped to challenge racism in the United States. *All else equal*—and this caveat is crucial—white people are advantaged compared to nonwhite Americans—Blacks and Hispanics in particular. But examining racism through the lens of “privilege” and demanding that white people renounce their privilege only sustains racial injustice.

Definition One: White people have greater access to material resources than do nonwhites

White privilege is often used to refer to the fact that white people, on average, are wealthier and have greater access to economic opportunities than do nonwhites. Mills claims that white people’s economic advantages are the key feature of white privilege:

The economic dimension of the Racial Contract is the most salient, foreground rather than background, since the Racial Contract is calculatedly aimed at economic exploitation. The whole point of establishing a moral hierarchy and juridically portioning the polity according to race is to secure and legitimate the privileging of those individuals designated as white/ persons and the exploitation of those individuals designated as nonwhite/ subpersons. There are other benefits accruing from the Racial Contract . . . but the bottom line is material advantage. (1997, 32–33)

In his work, political theorist Joel Olson details these advantages: “higher wages, two-tiered wage scales, exclusive access to certain jobs and informal unemployment insurance (first hired, last fired)” (2004, 13). Journalist Cory Collins writes, “the ability to accumulate wealth has long been a white privilege” (2018), and sociologist Thomas Shapiro specifically examines the contribution of head-start assets to the racial wealth gap. Shapiro argues that disparate access to intergenerational wealth results in unequal access to economic opportunities for white people and Black people of commensurate ability, merit, and drive. When white parents use their wealth to help their children pay for college and homes, Shapiro argues, they perpetuate racial disparity.²⁷

However, using “white privilege” as a proxy for “economic privilege” is descriptively, instrumentally, and ethically unsound.²⁸ Descriptively, it is misleading given that 17 million non-Hispanic whites—5% of the US population—are white people living in poverty (O’Rourke 2019). Usually, white privilege scholars acknowledge that there are many economically insecure white people. As legal scholar Cheryl I. Harris writes, “[white] advantage does not mean that no

²⁷ Professor of Education Zeus Leonardo equates white privilege with material advantage in his article “The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of ‘White Privilege’” (2004) this way: During the summative comments about racial privilege at a 1998 American Educational Research Association panel, James Scheurich described being white as akin to walking down the street with money being put into your pocket without your knowledge. At the end of the day, we can imagine that whites have a generous purse without having worked for it. Scheurich’s description is helpful because it captures an accurate portrayal of the unearned advantages that whites, by virtue of their race, have over people of color...However, there is the cost here of downplaying the active role of whites who take resources from people of color all over the world, appropriate their labor, and construct policies that deny minorities’ full participation in society...The experience of people of color is akin to walking down the street having your money taken from your pocket. Historically, if “money” represents material, and even cultural, possessions of people of color then the agent of such taking is the white race, real and imagined. (2004, 138)

²⁸ In “The Trouble with Disparity” (2020), Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr. discuss why race is often used as a proxy for class. One reason they offer is that researchers often focus on race and gender rather than class when gathering demographic data.

whites will be poor, but that the poor will be disproportionately Black” (or nonwhite) (1993, 1760). Nonetheless, by using “white privilege” to denote “economic advantage,” white privilege scholars confusingly imply that millions of white people lack “white privilege.” Moreover, that white people are, on average, less economically disadvantaged than nonwhite people does not make most white people economically advantaged. Descriptively, then, the demand that all white people renounce their material privilege is misguided, as millions of white people have no such privilege to renounce.²⁹

Still, white privilege scholars usually suggest one of three ways white people can confront their economic privilege. One is by advocating for race-specific economic interventions like paying reparations. Another is by supporting race-neutral policies that would allow asset-poor families to accumulate wealth without “disputing or discouraging the ability or right of innovative, hardworking, successful people to reap great wealth rewards from their own endeavors” (Shapiro 2004, 196). The third is by fighting discriminatory hiring and employment practices, which I discuss when addressing definition five.

Advocates for reparations argue that African American descendants of slavery are owed reparations because, unlike white Americans, their ancestors could not accumulate and pass on wealth. Such advocates accurately assess that reparations would directly and immediately lessen the racial wealth gap between white Americans and African Americans (although it would leave

²⁹ Shapiro makes this demand when he calls on white people to stop “[hoarding] opportunities and capacities [that] maintain their advantaged positions” (2004, 104). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva does so when he asks whites to start rejecting the “manifold wages of whiteness” (2018, 9). And Olson does so when he tells white readers to stop resisting “pro-grams that erode [their] privileged standing” (2004, 86).

the gap between white Americans and Hispanic and Native Americans intact).³⁰ However, no matter one's belief as to whether reparations are just, passing such legislation is not politically viable.³¹

Reparations promoters themselves note the improbability of the government implementing reparations. For example, 1619 Project founder Nikole Hannah-Jones writes that “Congress has refused for three decades to pass H.R. 40, a bill to simply study the issue of reparations.” Her only hope now is that the “collective suffering” caused by COVID-19 will have

³⁰ Unlike Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans, Asian Americans have a higher household income than white Americans (on average) (“Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being” 2016) and a comparable amount of wealth— “the difference between savings . . . and debt”—to whites (Weller and Thompson 2016).

³¹ The movement for reparations in the United States has had some minor successes. For example:

In 2021, officials in Evanston, Ill., a Chicago suburb, approved \$10 million in reparations in the form of housing grants. Three months later, officials in Asheville, N.C., committed \$2.1 million to reparations. And over the summer, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a plan to transfer ownership of Bruce’s Beach — a parcel in Manhattan Beach that was seized with scant compensation from a Black couple in 1924 — to the couple’s great-grandsons and great-great-grandsons. (Lee 2022)

Yet, as sociologist Adaner Usmani and political economist David Zachariah explain, the argument that reparations are not viable in the United States remains undisturbed: “The demographic context is . . . different in certain cities and even states in the United States. This means that race-based coalitions are viable at these subnational levels. But because cities and states have no real power to transform the income distribution, [the argument against reparations] is unaffected” (2021, 79).

^{31a} Philosopher Shannon Sullivan offers a perverse argument for pursuing reparations. The goal of reparations, she argues:

is to use economic demands to modify the psyches of black folk by transforming them into beings who see themselves as justified in claiming their due. This would be for black people to see themselves as full persons rather than as the subpersons they often have been told and believed they are . . . what it will do is reclaim black personhood for African Americans, and it can accomplish that goal whether or not reparations are ever actually made. (2006, 137)

Why Sullivan believes many black people see themselves as “subpersons” and why economic demands—let alone unrealized economic demands—would “reclaim” their “personhood” is unclear. Saying “black folk” are “beings” that need to be transformed is, however, clearly offensive.

instilled enough empathy in white Americans to “tilt the scales” (2020). Mills is no more optimistic: given the “backlash against affirmative action, what would the response be to the demand for the interest on the unpaid forty acres and a mule?” (1997, 39).

In “The Class Path to Racial Liberation” (2021), Adaner Usmani and David Zachariah explain why reparations are impracticable in the United States. Because paying reparations would only benefit a minority of Americans, it is unlikely to garner the support needed to pressure politicians to pass it: over 87% of Americans have nothing to gain.³² Although ethical arguments may compel a few altruistic members of that 87% to support reparations, self-interest, not altruism, drives politics. An online survey by the University of Massachusetts Amherst underscores this point: While “86 percent of African Americans support compensating the descendants of slaves,” only “28 percent of white people do” (Lee 2022). To win political concessions, Usmani and Zacharia explain, organizers must form large, durable coalitions that “speak to people’s self-interest”: “Historically, it has not been sufficient to appeal to altruism or compassion to ask many ordinary people to bear the significant costs of collective action. If a given group of people is to make common cause, that common cause must address the interests of the individuals that comprise it” (2021, 67). However, even if race-specific economic interventions could close the racial wealth gap, white privilege scholars do not address how racial equity would be maintained if racial discrimination persists.

The race-neutral policies Shapiro proposes do not attack white privilege; they attack economic privilege (I detail Shapiro’s proposals in Chapter Three). By conflating the two,

³² Of course, strategically placed, well-resourced minorities can often get their preferred policies enacted in the United States. However, African American descendants of slavery do not have the overabundance of political power needed to do so.

Shapiro repeats the “age-old social yearning to characterize the poor as permanently other and inherently inferior” by racializing them, in the words of historian Nell Irvin Painter (2010, 396). When Shapiro suggests that asset-poverty interventions could help restore “the American Dream,” he also overestimates the degree of upward mobility in the United States, which has been flat or declining for decades (Shapiro 2004, 183; Krause and Reeves 2018). Moreover, as millions of white Americans—for example, special education teachers (85.1% white), home health aides (56.3% white), and line cooks (71.6% white)—are poorly compensated despite their hard work, closing the racial wealth gap alone would not make the United States a meritocracy (“Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey” 2021).

In short, using “white privilege” to denote “economic privilege” is instrumentally unsound. Those concerned with the well-being of all nonwhite Americans will also find it ethically inadequate, as closing the racial wealth gap between whites and nonwhites would leave millions of nonwhite people, like millions of white people, underemployed, underinsured, and undercompensated. When disaggregated, “the racial wealth gap is almost entirely about the upper classes in each racial group,” as the Pew Research Center and the People’s Policy Project both note (Bruenig 2020; Kochhar and Cilluffo 2017). “The overall racial wealth disparity is being driven almost entirely by the disparity between the wealthiest 10 percent of white people and the wealthiest 10 percent of black people,” and “97 percent of the overall racial wealth gap is driven by households above the median of each racial group” (Bruenig 2020): “If the racial wealth gap were somehow eliminated up and down the distribution, 90 percent of black people would still have only 25 percent of total wealth, and the top 10 percent of blacks would still hold 75 percent” (Michaels and Reed 2020). By focusing on the racial wealth gap, white privilege

scholars promote the betterment of wealthier nonwhites, leaving the situation of poorer nonwhites unchanged.³³

If one's priority is to improve the standard of living and life chances for all nonwhites, then universal economic interventions—like raising the minimum wage and providing universal public goods like health care, childcare, and eldercare—are the most viable solutions.³⁴ Unlike those proposed by white privilege scholars, these remedies provide resources to nonwhites directly and do not depend on a functioning meritocracy or altruism.

The tactical benefit of fighting for racial equality by pursuing universal public goods is that doing so could appeal to most Americans' self-interest and thereby foster coalitions large enough to effect political change. However, as the previous chapter shows, many white privilege scholars see this strategic advantage as a shortcoming. By claiming that “white privilege” is responsible for racial resource inequity, white privilege scholars direct our attention away from the root of nonwhite poverty: economic privilege itself. In the end, using “white privilege” as a proxy for “economic privilege” promotes the material interests of wealthy Americans, not Americans of color.

Definition Two: White people enjoy rights nonwhites cannot

In his work, Olson states that white privilege includes “the enjoyment of all the rights accorded citizens” (2004, xx). In so saying, he implies the second definition of white privilege, that the rights of nonwhite Americans are largely disrespected while those of white Americans

³³ See Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr.'s article “The Trouble with Disparity” (2020) for how “the lack of progress in overcoming the white/black wealth gap has been a function of the increase in the rich/poor wealth gap.”

³⁴ See Ellora Derenoncourt and Claire Montialoux's article “To Reduce the Racial Inequality, Raise the Minimum Wage” (2020) for an analysis of how raising the minimum wage would help close the racial wealth gap.

are upheld. The specific rights I examine here are those discussed by white privilege scholars themselves—namely, the right to be treated fairly before the law and the right to vote. My concluding critique of white privilege as “economic advantage” also applies to white privilege as “full legal protection.” By implying that white people’s rights are consistently respected and calling on whites to renounce this privilege, white privilege scholars distract from economic (and political) elites who maintain mass incarceration and voter suppression (both of which disproportionately harm nonwhites). White privilege scholars also regressively suggest that we ought to consider many of US citizens’ rights as “privileges.”

Before the 1964 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts, this second form of white privilege was legally codified in the United States. Jim Crow, the Black Codes during Reconstruction, and slavery before that all legally demarcated nonwhites— or, more specifically, African Americans—as second-class citizens. For the past half-century, however, nonwhites and whites have been formally equal before the law, as white privilege scholars themselves note (Harris 1993, 1753). Yet, they argue, formal, “color-blind” equality conceals persistent, systemic racism.

To substantiate this claim, white privilege scholars point to alarming racial disparities at every level of the US criminal justice system: traffic stops, arrests, police killings, sentencing, and incarceration. Remarks from politicians and police officers show that the targeting of Black and Brown people is often intentional. Unfortunately, examples are easy to find. Recently, three officers in North Carolina were fired for racist rhetoric. One officer was recorded saying, “We are just gonna go out and start slaughtering them fucking n*****s” (“Wilmington Police Department Professional Standards: Internal Investigation” 2020).

Citing racial disparities in voter suppression, white privilege scholars also argue that “suffrage” is one of “the privileges of white citizenship” (Olson 2004, xx). The penal system

plays a central role here too. While only 13% of today’s population, “black people comprise 38 percent of all Americans who have been stripped of their voting rights due to [felony] conviction histories” (Schroeder 2018). Moreover, since 2012, many states have implemented voter ID laws and early voting restrictions—both of which inordinately disenfranchise nonwhites—and some have eliminated voter registration drives, which African Americans and Hispanics are twice as likely as whites to use (D. Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro 2019; “The Facts about Voter Suppression” 2020). These disparities have inspired sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva to liken such measures to “poll taxes and literacy requirements under Jim Crow” (2018, 30).

Grotesque as these racial disparities are, there are, of course, white victims of the criminal justice system and voter suppression. By the end of 2017, there were 436,500 white inmates in federal and state prisons (thousands of whom were disenfranchised), and as of 2019, white people made up “58.4% of federal inmates, and 39% of all inmates in jails and prisons nationally” (Johnson 2019, 33). Between 2009 and 2012, law enforcement officers killed 424 white people (DeGue, Fowler, and Calkins 2016; Gramlich 2019). White privilege scholars would not deny these facts. But considering them, how might they sustain the claim that “the enjoyment of all the rights accorded citizens” is a white privilege?

Following Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, white privilege scholars suggest that white people are “collateral damage” rather than targets of the penal system (2010, 205).³⁵ According to Alexander, the criminal justice system in the post–civil rights era was

³⁵ It is worth noting that half a million incarcerated white people is a lot of collateral damage.

^{35a} Although many white privilege scholars draw on Alexander’s work, I do not view her as a white privilege scholar. Unlike the other authors I examine, Alexander believes that whites and nonwhites must renounce their privileges (referring to affirmative action when discussing the latter). Moreover, her discussion of white privilege is brief (Alexander 2010, 255–58).

designed to target Black and Brown Americans and strip them of their rights in order to maintain the racial hierarchy established under Jim Crow. Alexander uses data from the war on drugs to substantiate this. While “African Americans are not significantly more likely to use or sell prohibited drugs than whites,” she writes, “they are made criminals at drastically higher rates for precisely the same conduct” (197). Once they have been made criminals, Alexander explains:

the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended the racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it. (2010, 2).

Given that the purpose of the modern criminal justice system is to protect white supremacy, white victims, then, are only there to maintain white people’s “self-image as fair and unbiased people,” according to Alexander’s account (205).

It is undeniable that nonwhites are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and that poor, urban nonwhites are the main targets of the war on drugs. That racial biases often inform the behavior of law enforcement is similarly indisputable. Police are more likely to use force in encounters with nonwhites than whites, “prosecutors are more likely to charge people of color with crimes that carry heavier sentences than whites,” and “judges are more likely to sentence people of color than whites . . . and to give them longer sentences, even after accounting for differences in crime severity and criminal history” (Ghandnoosh 2015). However, that gross racial disparities, overt racism, and implicit racial biases persist does not mean that the criminal justice system’s *raison d’être* is to maintain a racial caste system and preserve “white privilege.”

Alexander’s account omits key information about mass incarceration in the United States. The majority of incarceration inequity is due to higher rates of violent crime and property crime

among African Americans, not drug convictions. Recent studies “conclude that between 61% and 80% of black overrepresentation in prison is explained by higher rates of arrest (as a proxy for involvement in crime)” (Ghandnoosh 2015). While “higher rates of arrest” is a poor proxy for “the least serious offenses,” “victimization surveys and self-reports of criminal offending suggest that, especially for certain violent crimes and to a lesser extent for property crimes, the race of those arrested resembles those of the people who have committed these crimes” (Ghandnoosh 2015). Therefore, in such cases, arrest rates are appropriate proxies for crime rates. As political scientist Marie Gottschalk notes, “even if we could release all drug offenders today, without other major changes in US laws and penal practices . . . a stint in prison or jail would continue to be a rite of passage for many African Americans” (2015, 5).

That African Americans disproportionately commit violent crime and property crime is not, of course, because they are especially deviant. It is because African Americans, as a group, are especially poor, and poor people may depend on extralegal activities in lieu of legitimate job opportunities to get the resources they need. It is therefore unsurprising that economic disparities can account for much of the racial disparities in incarceration rates (Clegg and Usmani 2019). By failing to account for class, the theory that the criminal justice system is a racial caste system in disguise cannot explain why African Americans disproportionately commit violent crimes or why poor people of all races are disproportionately incarcerated.

Alexander’s theory also fails to account for how white people, as a group, benefit from mass incarceration. Mass incarceration does not economically or psychologically benefit half a million white inmates or their white loved ones. Nor does it profit white civilian workers whose

wages are undercut in “a huge range of jobs” by a captive labor force (Gottschalk 2015, 61).³⁶ In light of this, it is difficult to maintain that today’s criminal justice system privileges all (or most) white people. Moreover, making this claim is unnecessary, as there is a more obvious answer to the question of who benefits from the US criminal justice system: those who profit from it.

Mass incarceration provides a captive labor force for companies like “WalMart, Victoria’s Secret, Boeing, and Starbucks” (Gottschalk 2015, 61).³⁷ It enriches private companies—like “bail bond companies, which collect \$1.4 billion in nonrefundable fees from defendants and their families; phone companies that charge families up to \$24.95 for a 15-minute phone call; and commissary vendors that bring in \$1.6 billion a year”—that make their fortunes servicing captive prison populations (“Mass Incarceration Costs \$182 Billion Every Year” 2017). So, too, the American penal system helps the rich avoid paying higher taxes to fund public services,³⁸ houses

³⁶ Political scientist Rebecca U. Thorpe notes that mass incarceration can benefit the majority-white rural communities where most prisons have been built since the 1980s. Nonwhite people convicted of crimes in urban areas are often sent to such institutions. And although they are usually denied the right to vote, incarcerated people “are officially counted as residents of the communities where they are confined” (Derenoncourt and Montialoux 2020). “Consequently, rural communities with large institutionalized populations” can increase their representation and “their share of state and federal funding” while silencing those who generated these increases (623). That rural communities are politically privileged is undeniable: the electoral college ensures this. (Rural economies, however, are not advantaged by prisons, as Gottschalk and Thorpe both note). But “rural privilege” and “white privilege” are not the same: “contrary to dominant narratives that use ‘rural’ as a synonym for ‘white,’ 24% of rural Americans were people of color in 2020” (Rowlands and Love 2021). Moreover, white Americans are far more likely to live in urban areas than rural areas.

³⁷ Although “only about 5,000 people in prison — less than 1% — are employed by private companies”—and are therefore too small a population to “alter the general market in any economic sector”—this population has “an enormous impact in certain localities” (Sawyer and Wagner 2023; Gottschalk 2015, 61).

³⁸ Gottschalk writes that “for the federal government, it is cheaper to keep inmates occupied by investing in prison factories rather than by investing in counseling, drug treatment, and educational programs” (2015, 60).

a surplus unemployed population,³⁹ and disenfranchises voters whose interests do not align with those of their exploiters.

The criminal justice system also advantages wealthy Americans (who face criminal charges) at nearly every stage of proceedings. Unlike low-income defendants, the rich can often post bond and avoid pretrial detention, which, in turn, decreases their odds of being convicted, given long sentences, or pressured into unfavorable plea deals.⁴⁰ Wealthy Americans can also pay for lawyers (or teams of lawyers) who are not overwhelmed with excessively high caseloads, access expensive treatment programs that allow them to evade confinement, and more easily avoid recidivism since they have the means to endure new economic hurdles (like the denial of public services and benefits, limited employment opportunities, restricted mobility, etc.) that accompany criminal charges in the United States (Ghandnoosh 2015). By omitting class from their analyses, white privilege scholars obscure—and thereby protect—those who sustain and profit from the American criminal justice system.

As to voter suppression, the main group that benefits here—or rather, hopes to benefit—is neither white people nor wealthy people (although many members of this group are both); it is Republican politicians. The United States has never been free from laws or efforts to suppress nonwhite votes, and for at least the past 20 years this legacy has been primarily carried on by GOP strategists. In 2013, North Carolina’s Republican-controlled legislature passed a law that “was so blatant an attempt to restrict voting access for Black Americans that a federal court

³⁹ As of 2002, 29% of people in jail were “unemployed, and 59% reported earning less than \$1000/month” (Ghandnoosh 2015).

⁴⁰ “The median felony bail bond amount (\$10,000) is the equivalent of 8 months’ income for the typical detained defendant” (Sawyer and Wagner 2023).

overturned the law in 2016, writing that the law targeted Black voters in the state ‘with almost surgical precision’” (Skelley 2021). But as GOP operatives have made clear, such laws aren’t about “discriminating against African Americans. They just ended up in the middle of it because they vote Democrat” (Lopez 2017). Indeed, Republican politicians have repeatedly shared their belief that voter ID laws would help their party win elections (Wines 2016). Some have also stated that they are “opposed to restoring voting rights” to those with felony convictions because “felons don’t tend to vote Republican” (Sarat 2020).

In 2021, “nearly 90 percent of [restrictive] voting laws proposed or enacted . . . were sponsored primarily or entirely by Republican legislators” (Skelley 2021). However, it is unclear whether Republican politicians are rewarded for their efforts. For instance, analysts debate whether voter ID laws effectively suppress Democratic turnout (see Lopez 2017; Skelley 2021). They also debate whether disenfranchising people with felony convictions hurts Democrats. For example, political scientist Traci Burch (2012) found that denying ex-felons suffrage in Florida hurt George W. Bush more than Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election.

However, some Republican efforts to disenfranchise disproportionately nonwhite voters have been undeniably effective: e.g., felony disenfranchisement and gerrymandering. The partisan battle in Florida over the enactment of Amendment 4, a 2018 ballot measure intended to “restore voting rights for up to 1.5 million people with felony convictions,” is illustrative of Republican efforts to disenfranchise carceral subjects (Mazzei 2019). Amendment 4 passed in the purple state with 65% of the vote, receiving “more votes than any single candidate in November” (Mazzei 2019). Yet, in response to the measure’s passage, the Republican-led legislature in Florida voted to curtail Amendment 4’s impact by requiring “thousands of people with serious criminal histories...to fully pay back fines and fees to the courts”—amounting to tens of

thousands of dollars for some— “before they could vote...effectively pricing some people out of the ballot box” and violating the will of Floridians (Mazzei 2019). The vote in the House was along party lines, 67 to 42 (Mazzei 2019). The sabotage of Amendment 4 exemplifies widespread Republican efforts to choose their own electorate rather than visa-versa.

While gerrymandering is a bipartisan practice, in recent history, it has also mutilated American democracy on behalf of Republican politicians. In 2010, Republicans held an enormous advantage in a congressional redistricting process that gave state legislatures “primary control” in 37 states (Daley 2017, 2). As David Daley illuminates in *Rat F**ked* (2017), Republicans’ advantage was not happenstance but rather the result of a targeted effort by Republican strategists—aided by sophisticated mapping technology—to win local elections, control the redistricting process, and retake the House. Republicans’ efforts gave them full control in 18 state legislatures and split control in another 18. Democrats were left with control in just six (Levitt 2020).⁴¹ As a result, since 2010, Republicans have often lost the popular vote in their states but won more seats in the House, the only federal body designed to represent the majority. In 2012, for example, “Democratic candidates received 2,793,538 votes [in Pennsylvania], and Republicans 2,710,070 [83,468 less], yet Republicans took 13 of the seats and Democrats 5” (Daley 2017, xxiv). Despite such outrageous outcomes, in 2019, the Supreme

⁴¹ Five of the remaining states have one congressional district, making redistricting moot, and Nebraska has a nonpartisan legislature (Levitt 2020).

Court ruled that “federal courts are powerless to hear challenges to extreme partisan gerrymandering” (Liptak 2019).⁴²

Regardless of the outcome, GOP attempts to disenfranchise voters do not privilege most white people even if they disproportionately target nonwhite people. When GOP tactics give the Republican Party an electoral advantage, all Democratic Party voters are hurt, 59% of whom were white as of 2020 (Gramlich 2020). When GOP tactics do not give Republicans an advantage but still erode Americans’ confidence in free and fair elections, then the interests of all “small d” democrats are harmed. By suggesting that white people disenfranchise nonwhite voters to preserve their privilege, white privilege discourse obscures—and thereby protects—Republican efforts to undermine American democracy at the expense of the majority of Americans (by definition).

⁴² It is worth noting that Olson supports race-based gerrymandering. He writes, “gerrymandering to create majority-Black or -Latino districts is sometimes necessary to ensure Black and Latino political representation” (2004, 91). While Olson is correct that gerrymandering often leads to more representatives of color, it does so at the expense of most black and brown people. Daley explains why:

[I]n the early 1990s...the new Republican National Committee legal counsel was responsible for fixing the Republicans’ redistricting problem. The solution hit upon...was to use the Voting Rights Act’s provisions governing majority-minority districts to create African American seats in Southern states. Work closely with minority groups to encourage candidates to run. Then pack as many Democratic voters as possible inside the lines, bleaching the surrounding districts whiter and more Republican, thus desegregating congressional representation while increasing the number of African Americans in Congress. The strategy became known as the unholy alliance, because it benefited black leaders and Republicans at the expense of the Democratic Party... (2017, xvi)
...and, therefore, at the expense of most Americans of color.

Unlike most economic and Republican elites, most white Americans do not benefit from police brutality, mass incarceration, disenfranchisement, or any of the racial disparities therein.⁴³ That the majority of wealthy Americans and Republican politicians are white does not make their discrete advantages the advantages of the “white race.” All told, the claim that white people enjoy rights nonwhites cannot—like the claim that white people enjoy economic privilege—is misleading, and when it misleads racial justice advocates, this distortion helps preserve the inegalitarian status quo. Whether one’s goal is broader criminal justice reform or electoral reform, attending to white privilege conceals the causes of injustice and provides no remedies.

Finally, naming “rights” as “privileges” and demanding that white people renounce their “privilege” is regressive. Progressive movements in the United States have always worked to secure more rights for more people, not demanded the renunciation of the same. Regardless of white privilege scholars’ intentions, the language and logic of their discourse imply that white people should forfeit, rather than fight for, their rights.

Definition Three: White culture, perspectives, and practices are viewed as normal

Among the 50 white privileges she lists in her article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” McIntosh includes the following:

6. I can turn on the television and open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented...
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair...

⁴³ With regard to police brutality, while race and class are factors, mental illness is especially predictive of lethal outcomes. Between 25% and 50% of those murdered by police have a mental illness—an unsettling reminder of how the poverty of our social services correlates with the brutality of our enforcement apparatuses (Ghandnoosh 2015).

46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin. (1989)⁴⁴

These privileges suggest a third definition of “white privilege”: that white people enjoy the advantage of having their whiteness and its attending culture, perspectives, and practices depicted in the mainstream and, therefore, considered normal. Mills implies this definition when he writes that the “world is structured around” the “racially privileged” (1997, 76). Flagg does so when she states that to be white is not to “think about whiteness, or about norms, behaviors, experiences, or perspectives that are white-specific” (1993, 969). And DiAngelo does so when she writes, the white race “is held up as the norm for humanity. Whites are ‘just people’—our race is rarely if ever named” (2018, 56). McIntosh, Mills, Flagg, and DiAngelo all conclude that the normality of whiteness insidiously oppresses nonwhite Americans. “In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious,” McIntosh writes, “other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated” (1989).

While nonwhites are indeed underrepresented in many social, political, and economic spaces, here I argue that, once again, the white privilege framework does not help combat this injustice. Instead, by claiming that white culture, perspectives, and practices are viewed as normal—and thereby suggesting that “white culture,” “white perspectives,” and “white

⁴⁴ DiAngelo similarly speaks to this third definition when she writes: “Virtually any representation of *human* is based on white people’s norms and images—‘flesh-colored’ makeup, standard emoji, depictions of Adam and Eve, Jesus and Mary, educational models of the human body with white skin and blue eyes” (2018, 57).

practices” are meaningful concepts—white privilege scholars buttress racial essentialism and police racial boundaries and, in so doing, reinforce racist ideology.⁴⁵

The negative impact white privilege scholars believe this third form of white privilege has on nonwhites is not immediately apparent. Being “normal” is not unequivocally positive: we laud geniuses and admire those who aspire to excellence; for many, counterculture is the arbiter of what is worthy of emulation; and it has become mainstream for institutions to boast of their diversity. Yet “abnormality” has its drawbacks. As McIntosh’s list suggests, those who deviate from the norm may experience diminished freedom of choice. For example, nonwhite people may have more trouble than white people finding products (like makeup) tailored to their bodies. Nonwhite people may also have more trouble finding products tailored to their tastes. It is difficult to expand on this point without employing stereotypes. But if we assume that people prefer “their own,” then nonwhites will have more difficulty than whites finding Hollywood movies they enjoy (Venkatraman 2021). The literature on recognition, however, provides a more compelling account of how the supposed normalization of whiteness may harm nonwhites.

Recognition theorists detail the harmful effects of misrecognition and non-recognition. When an individual or group is misrecognized, they are confronted with inaccurate or insulting portrayals of themselves. When an individual or group is not recognized, they lack representation, good or bad. The misrecognition of nonwhites has been well documented. Demeaning depictions of African, Hispanic, Native, and Asian Americans abound. However, the

⁴⁵ In *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006), Walter Benn Michaels argues that the belief that racial groups are culturally distinct is incoherent (see pages 43-47). “You can’t keep race alive by translating it into culture,” he writes. “Either race is a physical fact, dividing human beings into biologically significant differences, or there is no such thing as race, whatever it’s called” (2006, 47).

third definition of white privilege speaks to the nonrecognition of nonwhites, that is, their lack of representation rather than their misrecognition.

Recognition theorists like Charles Taylor argue that without seeing positive reflections of themselves in the mainstream, individuals and groups may develop inauthentic personalities, low self-esteem, and self-hatred (1994, 25-26). In addition to these psychological ills, nonrecognition has material consequences. When nonwhites do not see politicians or professionals of color, they may internalize the misconception that they are incapable of fulfilling these roles. This may lead nonwhites—or their employers—to think that people of color are only suited to menial, poorly compensated positions. However, while white privilege scholars note the harm of nonrecognition, they do not alleviate it. Instead, to substantiate their claim that white culture, perspectives, and practices (i.e., “white norms”) are viewed as normal, white privilege scholars employ infantilizing and homogenizing stereotypes (i.e., misrecognitions) of nonwhites. Analyzing what white privilege scholars mean by “white norms” reveals why the third definition of white privilege misrecognizes Americans of color.

White privilege scholars rarely provide concrete examples of “white norms,” and it is unclear whether they signify (1) the culture, perspectives, and practices actual white people have or (2) the culture, perspectives, and practices associated with whiteness. The first understanding is only meaningful if we can identify who white people are. As I have argued, white privilege scholars fail to either coherently or unproblematically do so. Employing my own definition—that white people are those who identify as white—does not solve the problem since no attribute (language, music, food, literature, philosophy, value, practice, profession, personality, etc.) is universal or exclusive to white identifiers.

However, perhaps it is possible to identify the norms associated with whiteness without identifying who exactly is white. In the same way that Jewish traditions are separable from Jewish people—a Christian can put up a mezuzah or speak Yiddish—perhaps white norms are separable from white people. However, whereas Jewish norms can be discussed without insulting gentiles, white norms cannot be discussed without demeaning nonwhites. This is because the concept of “white norms” depends on dehumanizing, class-laden portrayals of people of color. Flagg’s discussion of white norms attests to this. The only concrete ones she offers are the “white educational norm” of smart people going to college (which is a class norm) and the white norm of speaking unaccented English (which is absurd) (Flagg 1993, 976, 998).⁴⁶

This second understanding of white norms also reinforces racial stereotypes by suggesting that there are more and less authentic nonwhite people: authentic nonwhites who resist white ways and inauthentic nonwhites who exhibit them. For Bonilla-Silva, Obama is an example of the latter. Obama, he writes, “quickly became for whites an Oprah- or Tiger Woods-like figure, that is, a black person who had ‘transcended’ his blackness and become a symbol” (2018, 212). While Bonilla-Silva claims that white people (not he) see Obama this way, there is no evidence that whites are blind to Obama’s—or Oprah’s or Woods’s—racial identity. Another “inauthentic” Black representative Bonilla-Silva discusses is Edward, an “unemployed forty-one-year-old man.” Asked by a researcher if he supports reparations, Edward replies, “Oh bullshit, no, no! I think that America needs to think about its people now and that American people are all kind of folks.” In response, Bonilla-Silva asserts that Edward “exhibits the same emotions as many whites . . . and thinks, like most whites, that the issue is helping all Americans now rather

⁴⁶ In 2016, only 35% of white people 25 and older had completed a bachelor’s degree (“Indicator 27: Educational Attainment” 2019).

than dwelling on the past” (178). Rather than consider that his values and experiences as a Black, unemployed man may inform Edward’s position, Bonilla-Silva dismisses it as a white way of thinking.

Flagg classifies the opinions of nonwhite members of a nominating committee as “white ways of thinking” when she discusses the committee’s evaluation of a Black woman interviewing for a position on a “majority white Board of Directors” (1993, 974). According to the committee, the candidate became hostile when asked about her educational background. The committee then warned the board—when forwarding the candidate’s name—that “she might be a disruptive presence” (975). Having analyzed the incident, Flagg concludes that prejudicial white norms informed the committee’s evaluation. In a footnote, she elaborates:

I have been asked what the nonwhite members of the Nominating Committee had to say about these events...My response is that it does not matter, because the organization and the Nominating Committee were pursuing white-defined goals and applying white-formulated norms...Assimilation to whites’ standards and expectations is a powerful and attractive strategy for survival and success for many nonwhites. Whether or not one regards such choices as “free” given the conditions of white supremacy in which they are made, they are choices made under the shadow of white domination. Whites, therefore, should never assume that the participation or acquiescence of nonwhites in a decisionmaking process “neutralizes” the whiteness of the norms being applied. (975)

Inevitably repressed by white norms, the committee members of color cannot authentically represent nonwhite views. The only person who can, in Flagg’s account, is the Black candidate who does not have a college degree, is reluctant to answer questions, and appears to be hostile. Such racist conclusions are the product of presuming this third definition of white privilege.

Lastly, by claiming that white norms dominate US culture, white privilege scholars obscure nonwhite influences on mainstream Americana. When McIntosh lists her twelfth privilege— “I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a

hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair"—she ignores American music stores replete with the works of nonwhite musicians, supermarkets that sell nonwhite ethnic foods, and hair salons that cater to nonwhite clientele. America has many flaws, but a lack of diversity contributing to its culture is not one. While rightfully noting that nonwhites have not received due credit for their contributions, white privilege scholars paradoxically perpetuate the myth that white people alone created American customs, tastes, and values.

In short, “white culture,” “white perspectives,” and “white practices” are, in and of themselves, meaningless terms: there are no such things as “white culture,” “white perspectives,” or “white practices.” Giving these terms meaning only buttresses white supremacy by essentializing race, policing racial boundaries, and advancing racial stereotypes.

Definition Four: White people psychologically benefit from a sense of racial superiority

The fourth understanding of white privilege—that white people psychologically benefit from a feeling of racial superiority—is implied by white privilege scholars when they discuss the cross-class white alliance (Mills 1997). White workers' solidarity with white elites, white privilege scholars argue, is not only (or consistently) motivated by economic payoffs but also motivated by the psychological “wages of whiteness,” which “ensure that no matter how poor, mean, or low a white citizen may be . . . he or she still has, in many ways, a social status higher than the most intelligent, well-off Black person” (Olson 2004, 14).

But what does it mean (and why is it desirable) to have a higher social status if it does not protect you from being “poor, mean, or low”? Building on the work of historian David Roediger, Harris suggests an answer: “because Blacks are held to be inferior . . . it allows whites—all whites—to ‘include themselves in the dominant circle. [Although most whites] hold no real power, [all can claim] their privileged racial identity’” (1993, 1759–60; see also Roediger

1991/2007). In other words, whites' higher social status gives them the psychological enjoyment of feeling racially superior.

There are, presumably, white people who feel superior to nonwhite people and derive satisfaction from this feeling.⁴⁷ However, my rejection of the fourth definition of white privilege is on pragmatic and ethical, not psychological, grounds. A progressive racial justice movement does not benefit from dubbing “feeling racially superior” a “privilege.” Doing so suggests that whites will lose something meaningful and worth preserving if they renounce this feeling. Instead, progressive racial justice movements must frame “feeling racially superior” as an unethical attitude. Moreover, as a matter of opinion, I believe that a life in which you embrace the humanity of others is more gratifying than one in which you deny it, all else being equal. “Feeling racially superior,” then, is an ailment, not a privilege.

Definition Five: White people are not discriminated against for being white⁴⁸

The last definition of white privilege—that white people are not discriminated against for being white—underlies all white privilege discourse. Many of McIntosh's 50 white privileges imply this definition (1989). Privilege 25—“If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race”—identifies white

⁴⁷ Although, historian Barbara Fields cautions us against such presumptions: “Whether the denial of goods to Afro-Americans psychologically compensated white people for their own failure to obtain them is a question best left to those enamored of speculation that evidence can neither prove nor disprove” (2001, 53).

⁴⁸ An additional “white privilege” I do not discuss is “white privilege” as access to adequate healthcare. However, I have not included this as a separate definition because it is largely accounted for by definitions one, two, and three. Moreover, the literature I examine does not address healthcare disparities in detail. That said, conversations around white privilege and healthcare have proliferated since the pandemic. This is especially unfortunate as focusing on racial disparities in healthcare often has the perverse outcome of reinforcing biological racial essentialism.

people’s freedom from racial profiling. Privilege 33— “I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race”—indicates white people’s freedom from being viewed as representatives of their race. However, white privilege scholars seldom use “white privilege” to explicitly denote this fifth meaning because they want to do more than rename “racial discrimination” “white privilege”: they want to describe how discrimination privileges white people and how white privilege perpetuates discrimination. Still, I include this fifth definition because it is the most defensible. Nonetheless, I maintain that even in its most tenable form, white privilege discourse is at best ineffective and at worst detrimental to the fight for racial justice.

Lacking an explicit statement of this final definition from academic discourse, the one provided by Olivia Harewood—a show writer for *The Late Late Show with James Corden*—offers a helpful substitute. On the show’s June 4, 2020, episode, Harewood explains that “one of the biggest misconceptions about privilege is that saying you have it is saying you have an easy life . . . it doesn’t mean that. What [white] privilege does mean . . . is that your skin color didn’t make your life more challenging” (“James Corden Gets a Lesson on White Privilege” 2020).⁴⁹ Here, Harewood suggests that a white person may be ignored, treated poorly by her boss, falsely

⁴⁹ Here, I take “skin color” to mean “traits socially interpreted as racialized.”

^{49a} Journalist Cory Collins offers a similar understanding of white privilege when he writes: White privilege is *not* the suggestion that white people have never struggled. Many white people do not enjoy the privileges that come with relative affluence, such as food security. Many do not experience the privileges that come with access, such as nearby hospitals.

And White privilege is *not* the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned. . . . Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one’s level of income or effort. (2018)

accused by the police, made to feel ugly, told she is stupid, and so on. But a white person need not wonder if these encounters are due to—or will happen again because of—racial discrimination. A white person also need not fear that her actions will be attributed to, or seen as a reflection of, white people as a group. “A key [white] privilege,” Robin DiAngelo writes, is “the ability to see oneself only as an individual” rather than as a representative of a race (2018, 89). Collins similarly states, “White people...are more likely to be treated as individuals, rather than as representatives of (or exceptions to) a stereotyped racial identity” (2018). In other words, though a white person may fear that her actions will bolster negative perceptions of her family, religion, ethnic group, and so on, she need not worry that they will bolster negative perceptions of her race. Moreover, white people are seldom the victims of racially motivated violence and rarely trapped in situations where they must endure racial prejudice, at least in the United States. Of course, a white person in a majority nonwhite setting may encounter racial stereotyping, race-based exclusion, or unwelcome race-based attention. Yet white skin making one’s day more difficult—let alone one’s life more difficult—is the exception to the rule.

Despite being legally decodified in the 1960s, racial discrimination persists today. Although it is difficult to disassociate the variable of “racial discrimination” from other types of discrimination (economic in particular), studies and personal narratives show that nonwhite Americans still experience racial discrimination in employment, law enforcement, housing, education, health care, and interpersonal interactions. All else being equal, then, nonwhites remain more vulnerable than whites to the many injustices in American society. But what is the upshot of calling invulnerability to racial discrimination “white privilege”?

One possible upshot is that “white privilege” may succinctly communicate a specific effect of racial discrimination: in particular circumstances, it might allow white people to break

the law more than they could in a hypothetical racially just society. If law enforcement is inordinately surveilling the behavior of nonwhite people, it may be easier for white people to commit crimes unnoticed. For example, a white person with drugs in the car may be pulled over, searched, and arrested less (depending on the location) because officers are discriminatorily and disproportionately targeting nonwhites.⁵⁰

Getting away with illicit activity is a privilege in the true sense of the word because it exempts one from obligations to which others are subject. Furthermore, white people should relinquish the “privilege” of breaking just laws. If employed in this limited context, “white privilege” is an appropriate term. But it is still not a particularly useful one. Calling an increased ability to get away with illegal actions “white privilege” is more likely to encourage white people to evade the law than to fight for racial justice. For example, Wise (2011) provides a litany of activities he did in high school—underage drinking, drug use, making fake IDs—that he would have been less inclined to do for fear of punishment were he not white.

White privilege scholars also note that white Americans’ freedom from racial discrimination gives them a competitive market advantage. For example, Shapiro explains that “studies using matching white and black couples with identical job, income, and credit information consistently reveal discrimination by real estate agents and banks” (2004, 109). Field experiments also show that racial discrimination against Black and Hispanic Americans remains

⁵⁰ In *Locking Up Our Own* (2017), legal scholar James Forman Jr. describes the “pre-text regime” Eric Holder implemented in 1993 when serving as US Attorney for the District of Columbia. This regime helped make the above example—wherein Black drivers are pulled over, searched, and arrested more often than white drivers for crimes they are no more likely to commit—a common occurrence in the capital (Forman 2017).

common in the labor market (Pager, Bonikowski, and Western 2009; Quillian, Lee, and Oliver 2020).

A white person who buys a house or gets a job an equally qualified nonwhite person was refused because of discrimination undeniably benefited from racial prejudice. However, the white privilege framework—which suggests that white people must renounce their privilege to advance racial justice—does not offer practicable means to mitigate the effects of racial discrimination in the market. Individually, white people cannot refuse marketplace advantages. They cannot stop acquiring goods altogether, and they are not told when a good was unfairly denied to an equally worthy or worthier nonwhite person. Instead, when white people benefit from racial discrimination, it is the discriminator who must change her behavior; further, it is senseless and perverse to suggest that discriminating against nonwhite people is a privilege. Collectively, white Americans have already renounced their marketplace advantages in the only venue where they can nationally and formally do so: the law. And while this has mitigated racial discrimination, it has not eliminated it.

While we must continue to deny legal and social sanction to racist behavior, we presumably cannot eradicate it. Racists will likely remain so long as some people feel insecure, unappreciated, and threatened. But we can disempower discriminators by diminishing their ability to withhold goods people want and need. Racist landlords have undue power to control shelter largely because millions of people lack reliable housing, tax subsidies benefit homeowners over tenants, policies privilege gentrifying developments over public housing, and so on. Racist employers have undue power to control the job market largely because the United States does not recognize a right to employment, union power has been hollowed out, employers can often legally terminate their employees at will, and so on. The best way to help most

nonwhite people in the housing market, labor market, and all markets is to fight the laws, policies, and interests that give individuals discretionary power to allocate resources in lieu of universal public goods.

Although defining “white privilege” as “exemption from racial discrimination” has some descriptive merit, it offers no practical advice for racial justice advocates. Instead, white privilege discourse provides a pseudo-progressive smokescreen that conceals and buttresses the laws, policies, and economic and political interests perpetuating racial inequality in the United States today. Luckily, we do not need “white privilege” to understand or confront racial prejudice. Abolitionists called slavery an injustice without calling freedom a “privilege.” Civil rights leaders called voter suppression an injustice without calling voting a “privilege.” And we can call racial discrimination an injustice without calling a lack thereof a “privilege.”

Conclusion

On June 27, 1848, John C. Calhoun, one of the most powerful defenders of slavery in American history, explained to the United States Senate what he believed made the South greater than the North: “With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals, if honest and industrious; and hence have a position and pride of character of which neither poverty nor misfortune can deprive them” (Calhoun 1848). In so saying, Calhoun, a landed slaveowner, employs racist rhetoric that has served wealthy Americans since before the American Revolution. Being white, Calhoun asserts, is what allows a Southerner to “belong to the upper class,” “[be] respected,” and “have a position and pride of character.” Wealth has nothing to do with it. Poor whites, therefore, need not identify with Black slaves,

Native Americans, and nonwhite immigrants since the former are privileged and, unlike the latter groups, have nothing to gain from opposing the power of wealthy, white Americans.

Despite Calhoun's and white privilege scholars' divergent values, their rhetoric is akin. Like Calhoun, white privilege scholars assert that white people, rich and poor, are all privileged. And like Calhoun, they believe that white privilege maintains white supremacy. Of course, unlike Calhoun, white privilege scholars seek to dismantle white supremacy. Therefore, they call on white people to renounce their privilege, not cherish it.

But Calhoun and white privilege scholars are wrong. The "upper class" in America—those with privilege—is the upper class in America. And while white Americans today are free from the additional and significant injustice of racial discrimination, most have no economic, legal, or cultural privileges to renounce. Wealthy Americans, however, do. In claiming that racial disparity persists because white people—of all classes—refuse to renounce the advantages such inequity bestows, white privilege scholars, like Calhoun, conceal racism's *raison d'être*: to protect wealthy elites from the threat of a unified working class pursuing their collective interest.

Some might critique this argument as "class-reductionist," that is, as concerned only with economic inequities and not racial inequities. But my position is not that addressing economic disparity is more important than addressing racial disparity; it is that we must address economic disparity if we are going to effectively address racial disparity—material, penal, or otherwise. Addressing these co-constitutive injustices is an uphill climb. White privilege discourse is making it steeper.

CHAPTER THREE

WHITE REEDUCATION

“Raising or changing consciousness is conceived of as a prelude to possible future collective action. Perhaps if enough minds are changed, then social or political progress will be a natural...consequence. The difficult questions—of collective organization, of how the individual gets subsumed into a collective project, and of course the exercise of power—all fade tastefully into the background. The time is always soon, but never now.”

-Hari Kunzru (2020)

Introduction

According to the worldview of white privilege discourse, Americans live in a country steeped in racial prejudice. Some of this prejudice is consciously held and explicitly articulated. Most is unconsciously held and inadvertently expressed. Yet we know widespread racial prejudice exists—despite its largely unconscious manifestation—because widespread racial disparities exist—and how else could it be explained?⁵¹ It is our moral duty, white privilege scholars assert (and I agree), to rectify racial inequities. One key step toward this end, they argue, is to awaken the white majority to the fact of racial injustice (nonwhite Americans need not be enlightened: prejudice is apparent to them). Another is to awaken white Americans to the fact that their investment in white privilege is what preserves such injustice. If the United States is to become more racially egalitarian, white people must be inspired to recognize and renounce their privileges.

But, just like racial prejudice, white privilege is invisible to the unawaken white masses. Peggy McIntosh tells her readers that white privilege is “like an *invisible* weightless knapsack” (1989). Philosopher Shannon Sullivan opens *Revealing Whiteness* with the line, “This book

⁵¹ See the previous chapter for alternative explanations.

examines how white privilege operates as unseen, invisible, and seemingly nonexistent” (2006, 1). In a metaphor wherein he likens systemic racism to a “whiteness water cycle,” journalist Cory Collins writes, “The evaporation is white privilege—an invisible phenomenon that is both a result of the rain [i.e., racism] and the reason it keeps going” (2018). And Robin DiAngelo claims, “the dimensions of racism benefiting white people are usually invisible to whites” (2018, 28). White privilege scholars’ beliefs that white people cannot see white privileges and that white people cling to their privileges are in tension: how do white people cling to that which they cannot see? Such are the contradictions of white privilege discourse. Nevertheless, exposing white privilege is the cornerstone of white privilege scholars’ antiracist platform. In answer to the question, *what is to be done about racial injustice?* white privilege discourse responds: awaken white people to their unearned privilege.

Chapter One of this dissertation examined the genealogy of white privilege discourse. Chapter Two discussed the connotations of “white privilege.” In passing, Chapter Two also noted some of white privilege scholars’ answers to the problem of racial inequity, e.g., paying reparations. Here, I assess white privilege scholars’ proposed solutions in detail. I begin the chapter by reproducing and evaluating concrete actions and policy proposals white privilege scholars recommend. Then, I turn to white privilege discourse’s principal recommendation: white reeducation. This reeducation, I argue, has a religious tenor. The chief concerns of white privilege discourse are moralizing and confession, not organizing and action. Linguist John McWhorter has most famously classified modern antiracism, including white privilege discourse, as a religion. While I draw on McWhorter below, I also discuss how our analyses fundamentally diverge.

In evaluating the solutions white privilege discourse proposes to the problem of racial inequality, I also discuss how the discourse buttresses the racially inequalitarian status quo by denigrating poor and uneducated white people. I close the chapter by noting that white privilege scholars themselves often admit to the utopian nature of their strategy.

Concrete Solutions

Aside from calls for reparations (and endorsing the continuation and enforcement of affirmative action and antidiscrimination laws),⁵² policy proposals and concrete guidance for activists are few and far between in white privilege discourse. I present them nonetheless as they expose nuances and contradictions in the literature. Of the recommendations offered, some would surely mitigate racial inequality. However, following from white privilege scholars' flawed analyses, most would buttress such injustice. In this section, I'll begin with the more promising concrete proposals before turning to more troubling ones.

Promising Recommendations

In *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (2004), sociologist Thomas Shapiro notes several interventions that would generate a more racially equitable distribution of resources. For example, he recommends raising inheritance and estate taxes (2004, 194; 196). Depending on

⁵² Legal scholar Cheryl Harris' answer to the problem of white privilege is affirmative action. "Affirmative action," she writes, "is required on both moral and legal grounds to de-legitimize the property interests in whiteness—to dismantle the actual and expected privilege that has attended 'white' skin since the founding of the country" (1993, 1779). And yet, she notes that affirmative action does not help most Black Americans:

Affirmative action programs did not, however, stem the tide of growing structural unemployment and underemployment among Black workers, nor did it prevent the decline in material conditions for Blacks as a whole. Such programs did not change the subordinated status of Blacks, in part because of structural changes in the economy, and in part because the programs were not designed to do so. (1993, 1787-1788)

how this revenue was spent, this measure would likely benefit poorer, disproportionately nonwhite Americans.⁵³ As would Shapiro’s proposal to fund public schools at the state and federal levels rather than locally (2004, 200-201). By benefitting schools in low-income, disproportionately nonwhite neighborhoods, this restructuring would help alleviate racial inequity in education. As mentioned, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva promotes a more racially equitable healthcare system when advocating for “a universal, single-payer” plan that would also benefit most nonwhite Americans by benefiting poorer Americans (2018, 216).

Such pragmatic suggestions, however, are at odds with white privilege discourse’s overarching argument: None of the above disadvantages white people as a group. Instead, these policy proposals satisfy the economic interests of most white Americans. Moreover, if one wished to see these recommendations implemented, it would be ill-advised to frame them as race rather than class programs. In a pre-print paper, political scientists Micah English and Joshua Kalla note that “Decades of political science research would suggest linking progressive policies with race would decrease support for those policies, particularly among white Americans” (2021, 2). They find that this is still the case “despite leftward shifts in public attitudes toward issues of racial equality” (2021, 13). Based on the results of a large survey experiment, English and Kalla conclude that “linking public policies to race”—as opposed to class— “is detrimental for support of those policies. Importantly,” they continue, “our results showed that Black Americans were just as swayed by the class frame [i.e., proposals framed in class terms] as they were the race

⁵³ Shapiro advises against a wealth tax, however, because it “does not distinguish between earned and inherited wealth” (2004, 196). Like the higher inheritance and estate taxes Shapiro promotes, the wealth tax would disproportionately benefit nonwhites. But Shapiro rejects this tax because of his wrongheaded belief that economic inequality largely reflects disparate ability, talent, and drive. In the next chapter, I detail white privilege scholars’ misguided faith in American meritocracy.

frame [i.e., proposals framed in race terms” (2021, 13). As for white Americans, the reason for their increased support for the class frame is clear. “[A]mong white respondents,” English and Kalla explain, “we find that the class frame significantly increases their belief that ‘People like me will benefit from this policy’” (2021, 12). As previously discussed, politicians and activists must appeal to people’s self-interest to organize effectively.

Legal scholar Barbara Flagg (1993) also offers concrete guidance when she suggests how the judicial system might confront racial discrimination to greater effect. Flagg argues that racially disparate outcomes should be admissible evidence in discrimination cases. The reasons for this are succinctly articulated by the Equal Justice Society (EJS) in their explanation of the “Intent Standard.” EJS notes that since the *Washington v. Davis* (1976) Supreme Court decision, plaintiffs have had to “prove a perpetrator’s discriminatory ‘intent’ in order to prove an anti-discrimination claim.” “However,” EJS reasons that:

[B]ecause contemporary discrimination is frequently structural in nature, unconscious, and/or hidden behind pretexts (despite the fact that a tangible harm has resulted from their actions), the showing of “intent” becomes a near impossible burden for plaintiffs. We believe that the courts should strike down the intent standard and replace it with the disparate impact standard, which instead asks for a plaintiff to prove whether a policy or action causes disproportionate harm to their protected class, often through statistical evidence. (“Intent Standard” 2009)

Writing seven years before EJS’s founding, Flagg offers the same rationale. She also proposes that the government collaborate with plaintiffs to develop remedies for racial inequity since structural discrimination has no single perpetrator (Flagg 1993, 996).

Whether or not Flagg’s proposal would meaningfully attack discrimination depends on the government and the plaintiffs’ suggested remedies. Yet, given that racial inequities indicate underlying injustices of some sort, it is appropriate to explore the judiciary’s role in rectifying

this. Flagg's recommendation that the courts substitute proof of racial disparity for the intent standard encourages such an exploration.

At the end of *Racism without Racists* (2018), Bonilla-Silva points readers toward concrete actions they might take, including joining extant antiracist organizations. Although, as I show below, Bonilla-Silva believes racial justice starts with white reeducation, he finds that "The historical record shows that *fundamental* change on race, class, and gender matters always requires social movement activity" (2018, 245). To his white readers, Bonilla-Silva recommends an eclectic list of racial justice organizations and efforts, including Black Lives Matter, the fight to end gerrymandering, and the NAACP (2018, 246-247). To his nonwhite readers, Bonilla-Silva insists:

It is the responsibility of *every* person of color to engage, organize, agitate, and participate. If you are a college student, you have to join race-based groups and... transform your college from an HWCU (historically white college and university) into a truly multicultural institution. If you are not in college, you must join any movement seriously dealing with the racial issues of the day: police brutality, the resegregation of American schools and neighborhoods, the disenfranchisement of blacks, the criminalization of immigration or 'crimmigration,' struggle against Islamophobia, etc. (2018, 248)

Although Bonilla-Silva varyingly recommends issue based-organizing, coalition politics, and identity politics, he favors the latter, warning that without "exclusively race-, gender-, and sexual orientation-based groups... racial minorities, women, or gays and lesbians... are not likely to [have] their concerns [included] in the agenda" (2018, 252).

Unlike fellow white privilege scholars, Bonilla-Silva goes beyond the nod to social movements and provides concrete guidance on how readers can become involved. However, while he names different organizations, he does not offer tools to judge which are most effective. Furthermore, while identity-based organizations are useful in certain circumstances, their reach

and impact are usually limited, especially when it comes to racial justice issues (as I discussed in the Introduction).

Finally, in addition to these (somewhat) more precise policy and antiracist action suggestions, white privilege scholars often call on their readers to “speak up” and participate “in protests, rallies, local community meetings, and the like” (Dyson 2017, 207; 204).

Troubling Recommendations

In addition to the egalitarian reforms above, Shapiro also proposes policies that take for granted and advance underclass ideology. Underclass ideology, as the Introduction details, locates the source of poverty in the behavior of the poor, or rather, an antisocial subset of the poor: the “underclass.” In the United States, underclass ideologues tend to equate the underclass explicitly or implicitly with the Black and Hispanic urban poor. Shapiro’s “asset-based public policies” are representative of underclass ideology, as they paternalistically grant rich (disproportionately white) people greater control over poor (disproportionately nonwhite) people. Shapiro’s proposed “Children’s Savings Accounts initiative” is illustrative here: “The Children’s Saving Accounts initiative is the kind of idea that might work,” Shapiro writes:

There are many models for Children’s Saving Accounts, such as initial government or private contributions at birth, matches of family contributions for low-income families throughout the child’s formative years, and limited use of account balance at age 18 and older. Imagine, for example, that every child born in the United States had an initial deposit of \$1,000 in such an account. Additional yearly deposits would be encouraged and possibly tied to achievements such as school graduation, summer employment, and community service. Acquiring financial literacy throughout the school years would be a strong program component, providing relevant and stimulating educational context. Government funds would match contributions from low-income parents. Contributions to the account also could come from private, employer, or charitable sources. After high school, account holders could use funds for higher education or training. At age 25 or older uses of the funds might also include small-business capitalization and first-time home purchases. If accounts are still active by retirement age, people could use them to cover retirement expenses or pass them on to the next generation. With a \$1,000 contribution at birth and \$500 contributed annually by the family with half of that annual

amount matched for poor families, a young adult by age 18 could have about \$40,000 to start a productive life. (2004, 185)

As the title indicates, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (2004) is explicitly about racial inequity in the United States. Yet, it is apparent that economic inequality is the real subject matter of the work. Throughout this dissertation, I've argued that the fight for racial and economic justice are co-constitutive, and without acknowledging this, we cannot pragmatically advance racial justice. However, recognizing the interconnectedness of racial and economic disparities is different from confusing the two. As I noted in the last chapter, by conflating race and class, Shapiro repeats the "age-old social yearning to characterize the poor as permanently other and inherently inferior" by racializing them (Painter 2010, 396).

In addition to racializing low-income Americans, Shapiro infantilizes them. The description above implies that a lack of financial literacy, entrepreneurial spirit, and dedication to education are key contributors to poverty. To cultivate such commitments, poor Americans must be financially supervised by rich Americans. This paternalist view pervades Shapiro's work (2004). Later, for example, he suggests that if low-income Americans are unable or unwilling to use program money for its intended purpose, their matched earnings should be withdrawn (2004, 189).⁵⁴

In short, Shapiro repeats the racist trope that a poor, largely nonwhite, lazy, and dependent underclass must be encouraged to make good decisions. Moreover, he also sees dedication to one's community as the purview of those with money. Shapiro writes:

⁵⁴ Discussing a tax credit designed to encourage homeownership, Shapiro writes, "A family could withdraw its own money and use it for any purpose at any time, but the matching tax credit would be lost for any use other than buying a home" (2004, 189).

I am confident as families become more invested in their communities, as homeowners, stakeholders, and citizens, they will begin pressuring for improved civic services such as better schools, libraries, playgrounds, open spaces, police and fire protection, and other public services... [Unlike asset-based programs], traditional welfare policies have failed to launch families out of poverty just as they have failed to promote independence and self-reliance. (2004, 192)

For Shapiro, only those with a financial stake in their homes care about their neighborhoods.

Moreover, poor people must paradoxically be chaperoned to become independent and self-reliant. In his favor, Shapiro frequently acknowledges the limitations of his reforms and claims they will only work “in conjunction with living wages and adequate social assistance” (2004, 17). Nevertheless, he promotes a culturally racist ethos white privilege scholars claim to detest.

Minister, scholar, and public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson, activist and author Tim Wise, and Bonilla-Silva offer other concrete actions that infantilize or tokenize people of color. Having acknowledged that widescale reparations are politically unviable, Dyson adds, “There are all sorts of ways to make reparations work at the local and individual level” (2017, 197). Dyson then offers a suite of suggestions wherein whites establish paternalistic authority over nonwhites:

You can hire black folk at your office and pay them slightly better than you would ordinarily pay them. You can pay the black person who cuts your grass double what you might ordinarily pay. Or you can give a deserving black student in your neighborhood, or one you run across in the course of your walk to work, scholarship help. In fact, your religious or civic institution can commit a tenth of its resources to educating black youth. (2017, 197)

Later, Dyson adds to the list that his white reader “should identify a school that you, or your office, or your company, or your peers, might adopt” (2017, 197). Rather than work with Americans of color, Dyson tells his readers to save them.

For his part, author and activist Tim Wise makes several utopian recommendations. He tells white homeowners they'll have to stop moving from neighborhoods when 'too many' people of color move in" (2005, 121). He also tells white parents to:

[speak] out in a school board meeting against racial tracking in class assignments: a process through which kids of color are much more likely to be placed in basic classes, while whites are elevated to honors and advanced placement, irrespective of ability. Protesting this kind of privilege—especially when it might be working to the advantage of one's own children—is the sort of thing we'll need to do if we hope to alter the system we swear we're against. (2011, 121)

As I discussed when examining the fifth definition of "white privilege" in Chapter Two, expecting people to work against their perceived interests is unrealistic. That is the case with housing and, more than anything, with respect to the well-being of one's children.

Lastly, Bonilla-Silva and Dyson both tell white people to make "*new* black friends" (Dyson 2017). In Dyson's words, "It is distressing that so few of you have more than a token black friend, maybe two. Every open-minded white person should set out immediately to find and make friends with black folks who share their interests" (2017, 206-207). Yet white people scouting for Black friends is archetypical tokenizing. Such actions treat Black people like commodities to be acquired for one's own ethical growth (or, more likely, for social cachet).

Having discussed white privilege scholars' policy recommendations and action-oriented solutions, the remainder of the chapter examines the thrust of their program for confronting racial injustice: white reeducation. To set up my analysis, I begin by examining two related features of white privilege discourse: white guilt and religious sentiment.

White Guilt Discourse

White guilt describes both a belief and a feeling. As a belief, "white guilt" connotes that any white person born in the context of white supremacy is morally flawed. The feeling of

“white guilt” is the affective manifestation of this belief in those who identify as white. By and large, white privilege discourse endorses white guilt as a belief—Americans should view whiteness as an ethical impairment—but condemns white guilt as an unhelpful, self-indulgent feeling. Despite the ubiquity of white guilt (the belief) in white privilege discourse, white guilt discourse and white privilege discourse are not co-extensive (at least in theory). For example, Peggy McIntosh argues that:

The people in any group did not create the systems they were born into...It is not appropriate to blame people who are just coming to awareness of power for having created the power differentials that exist. I feel that my colleagues and I...have learned how to teach about privilege systems in a way that diminishes blame, shame, guilt or anger. (2012a, 202)⁵⁵

Despite white guilt and white privilege discourses separability, there is an important connection as white guilt helps explain white privilege scholars’ reasoning for and approach to white reeducation.

White privilege scholars frequently claim that inculcating white guilt among their readers is divorced from or antithetical to their aims. Robin DiAngelo writes, “I don’t see my efforts to uncover how race shapes my life as a matter of guilt” (2018, 149). Sullivan asserts that “white people should not wallow in guilt about their whiteness. Such wallowing tends to be self-indulgent and counterproductive to antiracist projects” (2006, 184). Flagg argues that “blaming is not an effective, empirically well-founded, or prudent way of addressing the complete range of contemporary manifestations of race discrimination” (1993, 988). And education scholar Zeus Leonardo writes:

white guilt can be a paralyzing sentiment that helps neither whites nor people of color. White guilt blocks critical reflection because whites end up feeling individually

⁵⁵ However, below, I note that McIntosh does advance white guilt discourse despite her claim otherwise.

blameworthy for racism...they become overconcerned with whether or not they “look racist” and forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism. (2004, 140)

Yet, despite such claims to the contrary, white privilege scholars frequently suggest that a white person born in the context of white supremacy is morally flawed.

In contradiction to her statement above, DiAngelo writes, “To put it bluntly, I believe that the white collective fundamentally hates blackness for what it reminds us of: that we are capable and guilty of perpetrating immeasurable harm” (2018, 95). Elsewhere she says, “White people who really aren’t doing anything other than being nice people are racist. We are complicit with that system. There is no neutral place” (DiAngelo quoted in A. Shapiro 2020). Sullivan is similarly inconsistent. She states that “it is probably not possible for a white person to be wholly good” and admits that her “account of white privilege” is motivated by “the desire to see myself as good and to eradicate any guilt that I feel as a racially privileged person” (2006, 196; 184). While McIntosh frequently asserts that her work is *not* about “creating a sense of guilt or blame,” she also reveals that white privilege “deeply shook up [her] sense of being a moral and nice person” and finds that her whiteness makes her fundamentally untrustworthy because of the “racism deep in” her (1998, 1, 7; 2012a, 93). And Zeus Leonardo writes, “As long as whites ultimately feel a sense of comfort with racial analysis, they will not sympathize with the pain and discomfort they have unleashed on racial minorities for centuries” (2004, 141). That white privilege theorists say their work does not promote white guilt does not make it so.

However, some white privilege scholars prefer the language of “responsibility” to “guilt.” Flagg compares white guilt and white responsibility framings when assessing whether unconsciously racist white people are as blameworthy for racial discrimination as consciously

racist white people.⁵⁶ She provides a schema to evaluate this question: conscious discrimination is blameworthy but unconscious discrimination is not, both conscious and unconscious discrimination are blameworthy, or neither are blameworthy. Flagg finds fault with each option above as “none of these approaches is likely effectively to address contemporary American forms of racial discrimination” (1993, 988).

According to Flagg, if we only blame conscious discrimination and not unconscious discrimination, we encourage people to repress their racism to avoid reproach. This may be counterproductive since unconscious discrimination is more “intractable” than conscious racism (Flagg 1993, 989). However, Flagg also rejects faulting unconscious discrimination because “condemning the individual for matters not within his conscious control seems inconsistent with the very concept of blameworthiness” (1993, 989). Flagg is likewise concerned that reproaching people for their unconscious attitudes may cause them to become inert with guilt. Finally, she disavows exempting conscious discrimination from blame because “in a framework in which concepts of blame and innocence remain operative,” surely we must condemn intentional racism” (1993, 990). Ultimately, Flagg recommends a “discourse of responsibility” rather than blame: “in this model, one takes responsibility for correcting undesirable states of affairs without thereby accepting either blame for, or even a causal connection with, the circumstance that requires correction” (1993, 990-991) Moreover, by turning away from blame, white Americans are better able to see “the structural components of contemporary racism” (Flagg 1993, 990).

⁵⁶ While Flagg is specifically discussing how the courts should approach discrimination, she justifies her theory by appealing to ethics, not precedent. Therefore, I take her argument as a commentary on racial justice, broadly speaking.

Flagg's desire to have the judicial system take responsibility for correcting racial disparities even when a specific culprit cannot be identified motivates her analysis. Yet white privilege scholars outside the field of law echo Flagg's preference for a responsibility frame. For example, Wise (who is white) writes, "It is surely not my fault that I was born...into a social status over which I had little control. But this is hardly the point, and regardless of our direct culpability for the system, or lack thereof, the simple and incontestable fact is that we all have to deal with the residue of past actions" (2011, 24): "Those who reap the benefits of past actions—and the privileges that have come from whiteness are certainly among those—have an obligation to take responsibility for our use of those benefits" (Wise 2011, 25). Diversity and white privilege consultant Frances E. Kendall similarly writes, "It's not our fault we were born White or at any particular time in history. Our responsibility comes when we make the choice of how to deal with the race and time we were born into" (2012, 23). Journalism scholar Robert Jensen similarly asserts:

[W]e all have a responsibility to make society a better place. That responsibility certainly varies depending on one's power and privilege; those of us with the resources—time, money, education, experience, opportunities—to contribute to progressive social change bear a share of the burden consistent with our resources. And those of us who benefit, by choice or not, from the inequalities in the system carry an extra responsibility. (2005, 50)

In the same work, however, Jensen embraces the language of guilt, writing, "We [white people] should hate whiteness and be accountable for our own complicity with whiteness" (2005, xvii). Indeed, while responsibility is perhaps a more palatable framing than guilt for white people born into a white supremacist society, the two frames lead to a similar conclusion. According to both, whites who abstain from antiracist work are guilty by default.

This discussion of white guilt previews two flaws in white privilege discourse's racial justice strategy. One is that pursuing racial justice involves cultivating the right emotional state. The other is that doing so entails seeing nonwhites as uncomplicated innocents.

Like Flagg, Jensen believes that white people who wish to dismantle racism must correctly conceive of their innocence/guilt/responsibility in relation to it. He writes:

[I]f I let myself sink too far into guilt, I will reduce my political effectiveness. It's tempting to repress that sense of guilt completely or wallow in it; both reactions are born out of a frustration with the complexity of the world and a desire to simplify the moral equation. But our task is to live on the edge of guilt, to use it to challenge ourselves and each other to do better. The balance in all this is tricky. (2005, 51)

“When we are mired in guilt, we are narcissistic and ineffective,” DiAngelo writes: “[G]uilt functions as an excuse for inaction” (2018, 135). Yet, the same can be said for those auditing their moral state. By calling on white people to carefully balance their psychological attitudes, white privilege scholars encourage rumination over racial justice activism.

White guilt discourse also contributes to dehumanizing portrayals of nonwhites. In highlighting the culpability of white people, white privilege discourse extolls nonwhite innocence and infallibility. Discussing how to be a good white antiracist ally, one white affinity group asserts that white people must “follow the lead of people of color” (Michael and Conger 2009). Without identifying *which* leaders of color, the allies perpetuate the myths that nonwhite activists are a monolith and nonwhite leaders are omniscient. Another example comes from an address to incoming MSW students at Smith College, a social work program with an explicit commitment to antiracism. Here, the speaker tells “students of color:” “We hope that when you feel you have to challenge us, you will do so directly and with compassion as part of your actions in upholding the School’s commitment”(Newdom 2015). This statement similarly betrays implicit assumptions that white people are guilty and nonwhites are incorruptible: “The story

makes white people seem like flawed, complicated characters; by comparison, people of color seem good, wise, and perhaps simple” (Sanneh 2019).

Extolling the innocence of nonwhites may not be a particularly cruel form of dehumanizing “the Other.” However, recognizing another’s humanity entails more than acknowledging their perspective, experience, and emotions: it involves acknowledging their complexity. The image of the noble savage is racist not because it portrays its subject in a negative light; it is racist because it denies its subject depth. Moreover, a logic that equates whiteness with guilt and color with innocence absurdly suggests that an antiracist should turn to Clarence Thomas rather than Thaddeus Stevens for guidance. In this way, unexamined deference not only infantilizes nonwhites, it also signals irresponsible activism.

White Reeducation

Many individual white privilege discourse works—and certainly the discourse as a whole—barrage their target audience (white readers) with calls to educate themselves. While many texts include vague calls to “take a stand,” as noted above, the more detailed antiracist instructions ask white readers to “think” “read,” “watch,” “listen,” “notice,” and “understand.”⁵⁷ Speaking to his imagined white reader, Dyson writes, “Beloved, you must also *educate* yourselves about black life and culture” (2017, 199). DiAngelo tells her audience to “start with some very deep reflection on what it means to be white” and to “start reading what [BIPOC] are writing, listening to their videos, attending their talks and educating yourself” (DiAngelo quoted in A. Shapiro 2020). Layla Saad advises her readers to “return to the reflective journal prompts

⁵⁷ For example, see Paula S. Rothenberg’s *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the other Side of Racism* (2005), pages 146-147 and Cory Collins’ “White Is White Privilege Really?” (2018).

[in her book] again and again, as needed. Go deeper each time. Dig out more so that you can do less harm” (2020, 208).

As these statements suggest, white privilege scholars’ central aim is to reeducate white people into antiracist allies. Yet this is not simply their personal aim: for white privilege scholars, white reeducation, is the most pressing antiracist issue today. Components of white reeducation include: learning about the history of racism; becoming aware of contemporary racial discrimination; uncovering one’s own racist habits (e.g., expressing colorblind ideology or microaggressions); becoming conscious of one’s own whiteness; and recognizing that one’s whiteness confers privileges. But for reeducation to begin, white people must first admit that they need it.

In what follows I examine how white privilege scholars’ focus on white reeducation encourages confession over action and denigrates poor and uneducated white people, to the detriment of under-resourced whites and nonwhites alike.

Confession over Action

White privilege discourse discourages political activism, especially when presented in tandem with white guilt discourse. It does so by making reflecting on, and confessing to, one’s unconscious racism and privilege prerequisites for action. White privilege discourse also deters activism by claiming that even antiracist white people will inadvertently reinforce white supremacy. Accordingly, some white privilege scholars conclude that reeducation is not about encouraging activism at all; instead, it is about white people’s own liberation.

In the forward to Layla Saad’s best-seller, *Me and My White Supremacy* (2020), DiAngelo stresses that:

Building the racial stamina required to challenge the racist status quo is...a critical part of our work as white people. Rushing ahead to solutions—especially when we have barely begun to think critically about the problem—bypasses the necessary personal work and reflection and distances us from understanding our own complicity. (DiAngelo quoted in Saad 2020, xi-xii)

Saad herself also warns against “Jumping into activism without doing any real self-reflection work on your personal racism” (2020, 158). This work, readers are told, will be both emotionally taxing and difficult to do as “unconscious habits of white privilege will continue to thwart attempts to expose and change them” (Sullivan 2006, 197).

For nearly all white privilege scholars, reflection must entail becoming aware of one’s whiteness, i.e., that one is a member of the white race. According to Philosopher Marilyn Frye, “It is an important breakthrough for a member of a dominant group to come to know s/he is a member of *a group*, to know that what s/he is only *a part* of humanity” (1993, 6). However, white privilege scholars disagree about whether white Americans should develop positive white identities or try to (somehow) “stop being white” (Frye 1993, 12).

Trumpeting the former, Flagg suggests that white people do “the hard work of developing a positive white racial identity” that is “neither founded on the implicit acceptance of white racial domination nor productive of distributive effects that systematically advantage whites” (1993, 957). Bonilla-Silva similarly tells his white readers to transform but retain their white identities: to “never forget that you belong to the white group” (2018, 243). As mentioned, Bonilla-Silva argues that change requires social movements. Yet he insists that “becoming an anti-racist begins at home,” “when people see things differently and attain ‘cognitive’ and ‘emotional liberation’ from the, often wrong, common sense” (2018, 243; 242). Only then will white people be “prepared to participate in social movements” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 245). White people can begin such preparation by asking themselves, “Who are your friends and why? Where do you live?

What are the racial views of people in your closest circle? Why do you seem to only find attractive people who are like you?” “You must ask yourself these hard questions,” Bonilla-Silva continues, “and admit (or at least be willing to explore) very troubling racial feelings you might still have” (2018, 243-244). Ultimately, Bonilla-Silva implores white readers to “[dewhiten] your networks, orientations, and even emotions” and “liberate your soul from the prison of racialization” (2018, 243).

Against Flagg and Bonilla-Silva, Olson and Frye want to abolish white identity. However, because their suggestion is for white people to develop a “radical imagination,” it is unclear how this will occur (Frye 1993, 12).⁵⁸

The call for white people to develop *positive* racial identities is especially troubling. Pride in one’s whiteness has never been a boon for racial justice. White pride and white supremacy are inseparable. And history aside, how could having a positive white identity advance racial justice? Evidently, those who advocate for white people to develop and retain their racial identities assume that whiteness is immutable. In other words, they adopt and perpetuate racism’s originating myth: that race is real. In Chapter One, I discussed white privilege discourse’s commitment to racial essentialism in greater detail. The key issue here is that the call to white self-reflection overshadows the call to action in white privilege discourse.

In tandem with reflecting on one’s whiteness, white privilege, and repressed racism, a reeducated white person must outwardly testify to their shortcomings. This is all but a universal demand of white privilege discourse. Jensen writes:

If we white people can fashion a personal confession in which we ask ourselves how it feels to be a problem, then perhaps we can face the accusations that will come our way in

⁵⁸ Frye notes that white people can develop this imagination by educating themselves, which merely passes the buck to others (1993, 7).

the personal confessions of non-white people. For white people, that is our task, our burden. Our ‘White People’s Burden.’ (2005, 96).

Dyson similarly proclaims that “The most radical action a white person can take is to acknowledge... denied privilege, to say, ‘Yes, you’re right. In our institutional structures, and in deep psychological structures, our underlying assumption is that our lives are worth more than yours” (2017, 104). Layla Saad declares, “If you go deep, if you tell the real, raw, ugly truths so you can get to the rotten core of your internalized white supremacy, what you get out of this work and put out into the world will be beyond transformational” (2020, 17-18).

Supposedly, this self-work paves the way for action. “Anti-Blackness,” Saad writes, “needs to be excavated, confronted, and owned in order for you to practice antiracism” (2020, 91). But, as linguist John McWhorter aptly notes, white privilege scholars are “rather diagonally concerned with activism” (2021, 71): “[T]his acknowledgment of white privilege is framed as a prelude to activism, but in practice, the acknowledgment itself is the main meal. Despite formal claims otherwise, in real life the Elect testify—yes, testify—to their white privilege as a self-standing, totemic act” (McWhorter 2021, 32).⁵⁹

Drawing on her experience with the National SEED Project—an educational organization founded by Peggy McIntosh in 1987—Jessica Dockter Tierney corroborates McWhorter’s claim. According to McIntosh, the “main mode of interaction” at SEED:

is a process I have named Serial Testimony. A facilitator states a theme or opens with a simple question. Each participant speaks in turn around a circle, uninterrupted, without response from other group members. Participants speak only from their own experience and without reference to what anyone else in the group has said. The facilitator times the speakers and stops them when their time is up.

⁵⁹ “The Elect” is McWhorter’s term for people who preach and practice a strain of modern antiracism. “The Elect” is a broad group, and white privilege scholars are undoubtedly members.

Having participated in “Serial Testimony,” Tierney concludes, “White privilege pedagogy does not point toward action that can lead to structural change. In the end, ritual confession *is* the action against racism that is imagined and demanded within white privilege pedagogy” (Lensmire et al. 2013, 422). McIntosh affirms this herself, writing, “Serial Testimony does not aim to solve problems or create dialogue among participants” (2012, 98).

Despite white privilege scholars’ implication that the call for reflection and confession will purify and prepare white people for activism, McWhorter, Tierney, and even McIntosh attest that purification itself is the goal. Indeed, it must be the goal, as even purified whites are unreliable racial justice advocates; their internalized white supremacy inherently corrupts them.

McIntosh speaks to this when she recounts her exchange with a Native American woman. “No, don’t trust me, Brenda,” she says, “I will betray you” because of the “racism deep in me, handed down through the generations” (2012, 93). Sullivan similarly warns that “To use one’s privilege as a white person, even in the service of antiracist projects, may appear to only strengthen, rather than dismantle, that privilege. And, indeed, this is a danger that can never be completely eliminated” (2006, 161). DiAngelo also argues that actions performed by white people are always suspect. When listing phrases white people use to rebuff accusations of racism, DiAngelo rhetorically questions the motives of those who say, “I marched in the sixties:”

Someone who tells me that they marched in the 1960s... assumes that absolutely no racism—even unconsciously—was perpetrated toward blacks by well-meaning whites during the civil rights movement. Yet the testimony of black civil rights activists tells us otherwise. How many white people who marched in the 1960s had authentic cross-racial relationships with African-Americans?... Perhaps many of those white Northerners who came down South to save black people had some patronizing or condescending attitudes? Might many have dominated discussions, not listened to others, and assumed to know what was best? Did they say many racially problematic things that Southern blacks were forced to endure? (2018, 82)

Articulating her opinions as questions, DiAngelo undermines actions taken by white people to fight for racial equality.

Perhaps DiAngelo is right about white people who “marched in the 1960s.” White activists Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were certainly aware that their fellow activist James Chaney was Black. They may have even patronized him; I do not know. I do know that Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were all in Mississippi in the summer of 1964, that they were all trying to register Black Americans to vote, and that they were all murdered by a lynch mob.

At the end of *White Fragility* DiAngelo tells us, “Ultimately, I strive for a less white identity for my own liberation and sense of justice, not to save people of color” (2018, 150). Some of her colleagues say the same. In *The Heart of Whiteness*’ introduction, Jensen states plainly, “I want to be able to dream of being a human being instead of a white person. That’s where this book starts, with an acknowledgment that this writing is born of selfishness. I want to find a way out of whiteness so that I can claim my own humanity” (2005, xviii-xix). And on the last pages of *White Like Me* (2011), Wise similarly admits “that maybe the point is not victory... Maybe [white people’s] redemption comes from the struggle itself. Maybe it is in the effort, the striving for equality and freedom, that we become human” (2011, 269). For DiAngelo, Jensen, and Wise, antiracism is about purifying one’s soul. Yet perfection is for those who seek salvation in abstraction. The presumably imperfect actions of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney are how we diminish oppression on Earth. As political scientist Cedric Johnson concludes, white privilege discourse has ultimately “produced a form of anti-racist politics focus[ed] on public therapy rather than public policy, a politics that actually detracts from building social bonds and solidarity in the context of actual organizing campaigns, everyday life, and purposive political action” (2019, 36).

Religious Sentiment

White privilege scholars' fixation on confession—and the admission by some that such unburdening is in service to one's own liberation—exposes the centrality of white guilt discourse to white privilege discourse. Confession is only necessary if there is something to confess: unburdening only if one is burdened. Moreover, these elements also reveal the religious nature of white privilege discourse. In McWhorter's words, "third-wave antiracism"—of which white privilege discourse is a part— "is a profoundly religious movement in everything but terminology. The idea that whites are permanently stained by their white privilege, gaining moral absolution only by eternally attesting to it, is the third wave's version of original sin" (2021).

McWhorter also concludes that this religion prioritizes confession over action at the expense of nonwhite Americans who seek the actual—rather than mystical/psychological—overcoming of racial injustice. He writes:

[W]e must ask whether the Elect approach actually shows signs of making any difference in the lives of black people, other than making educated white people infantilize them. While purportedly 'dismantling racist structures,' the Elect religion is actually harming the people living in those structures. (2021, 97)

On this point, McWhorter and I agree.⁶⁰ However, our visions of how to realize a more

⁶⁰ Along with white privilege discourse's message, the tone of the message is similarly religious. Take, for example, Saad's passage:

White supremacy is an evil. It is a system of oppression that has been designed to give you benefits at the expense of the lives of BIPOC, and it is living inside you as unconscious thoughts and beliefs. The process of examining and dismantling it will necessarily be painful. It will feel like waking up to a virus that has been living inside you all these years that you never knew was there. And when you begin to interrogate it, it will fight back to protect itself and maintain its position. (2020, 19)

It seems that for Saad, dismantling white supremacy is tantamount to performing an exorcism.

Washington Post journalist and host of MSNBC's Saturday/Sunday Show, Jonathan Capehart, offers another example when discussing his conversation with Robin DiAngelo: "I'm going to look at you, Jonathan, in the eyes and say, on behalf of my people, I apologize," DiAngelo said. Tears slowly welled in my eyes as she said those words. In that moment, it was like I was in one of those movie scenes where one's life flashes

racially just world diverge. McWhorter expresses underclass ideology: he is concerned, at least in part, that Black “culture” limits Black progress in the United States (2021, 122-123).

Furthermore, while McWhorter’s concrete suggestions are reasonable enough— “There should be no war on drugs; society should get behind teaching everybody to read the right way; and we should make solid vocational training as easy to obtain as a college degree” (2021,140)—none of them fundamentally confront the underlying economic causes of widespread racial inequity. And lastly, whereas McWhorter believes that white privilege scholars are not after “money or power, but sheer purpose, in the basic sense of feeling like you matter and that your life has a meaningful agenda,” in the next chapter, I argue that money and power do indeed motivate white privilege discourse (2021, 40).

Minimizing the Suffering of Poor White Americans

In Chapter One, I examined how white privilege scholars’ claim that white workers cannot be trusted in the fight for racial justice undermines interracial working-class coalitions capable of advancing racial equality. Here, I discuss how the emphasis on white reeducation in white privilege discourse does the same. White consciousness raising inherently condemns less-educated white Americans to the ranks of unredeemed, untrustworthy racists. (As I discuss in the next chapter, the cost of white privilege trainings similarly dooms white people who cannot afford them). Moreover, the dismissal of white people’s—especially poor white people’s—suffering only deters aggrieved white people who associate white privilege discourse with racial justice advocacy from engaging in the latter.

before their eyes, except for me, it was a montage of sleights and cruelty that litter my memory. (2020)

In this account, DiAngelo appears as a prophet, taking on the sins of all whites to give Capehart a religious experience.

The fundamental educative aim of white privilege discourse is to have white people recognize their privilege. But, as Cory Collins, an advocate of white privilege discourse, acknowledges, “The word *privilege*, especially for poor and rural white people, sounds like a word that doesn’t belong to them—like a word that suggests they have never struggled” (2018). Although Collins clarifies that “White privilege is *not* the suggestion that white people have never struggled,” for those who wish to materially advance racial equality, how people hear “white privilege” is far more relevant than how Collins thinks they should (2018). Unsurprisingly, Gina Crosley-Corcoran—another journalist and white privilege discourse advocate—finds that “broke white folks get pissed when the word privilege is thrown around” (2017).

White privilege discourse’s emphasis on redefining terms likely exacerbates some white Americans’ alienation from mainstream racial justice discourse. In common parlance, to be racist is to believe that members of one race are inherently inferior to members of another. As discussed in the Introduction, white privilege scholars redefine racism as both overt prejudice (uncommon) and implicit racial bias (ubiquitous). However, as DiAngelo herself notes, “If your definition of a racist is someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race”—a definition she calls the “dominant paradigm of racism”—“then...it is offensive for me to suggest that you are racist when I don’t know you” (2018, 13; 76). Yet this is exactly what DiAngelo does. Accordingly, white people who are unexposed to, or reject, white privilege scholars’ redefinition of racism are likely to be offended by DiAngelo and her colleagues.

Such defensiveness is not unreasonable. When white privilege scholars transform “racism” from an accessible phrase into academic jargon—and suggest that understanding their definition of racism is crucial to antiracist work—untutored white people are deemed inherently

more racist and less trustworthy. Philosopher Claire A. Lockard takes such elitism a step further when she suggests that “white people armed with a Foucauldian understanding of the racist confession have a better shot at recognizing and undermining their” tendencies to reify white privilege than white people who haven’t read Foucault (2016, 19). By and large, those who have read Foucault—let alone those who have “a Foucauldian understanding of the racist confession”—possess more education, leisure time, and resources than the average American. The classist implications of Lockard’s statement are unavoidable. While Lockard’s elitism here is somewhat extreme, nearly all white privilege scholars express their own by requiring white people to follow an esoteric code of conduct when discussing race and racial justice. Perhaps the most frequently cited rule is the counterintuitive instruction that white people must not ask nonwhites to educate them about racism.

In short, when white privilege advocates prioritize white reeducation, unexposed white people are intrinsically marked as more racist. This, in turn, is liable to alienate white people from racial justice advocacy. That white privilege discourse teachings consistently ignore the existence or minimize the suffering of poor whites is likely to do the same. In her work, legal theorist Cheryl Harris disregards the history of impoverished whites in the 1930s. When telling the story of her white-passing grandmother, Harris writes, “Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival” (1993, 1713). Yet anyone with a basic knowledge of events in 1930s America—e.g., the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl—knows this statement is untrue.

Whereas Harris ignores the existence of poor whites in US history, the following white privilege scholars minimize their suffering. Dyson dismisses all white people’s tribulations when

he tells them to “repent of your whiteness, which means repenting of your catastrophic investment in false grievances and artificial claims of injury” (2017, 94). Bonilla-Silva dismisses the hardships of white males specifically, declaring that “The minute you were born in this country white male you have so many more privileges than the rest of the people, it’s unbelievable” (2018, 147). Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones insinuates that poor whites are responsible for their lot when she writes, “Wealth begets wealth, and white Americans have had centuries of government assistance to accumulate wealth” (2020). And, when Shapiro writes that “About 4 in 10 of all children grow up in asset-poor families. More distressing, over half of African American children grow up asset poor,” he implicitly suggests that because nonwhites’ asset poverty is disproportionately high, their suffering is qualitatively worse (2004, 184).

When discussing the “arrest of two black men in a Starbucks in Philadelphia,” journalist Michael A. Cohen highlights the willful ignorance of white suffering required by white privilege discourse. Regarding the arrest, Cohen writes, “This is something that would never happen to two white people. The only situation I can imagine where two white men quietly hanging out in a Starbucks would merit a call to the police is if they were homeless. Even then, I’m not so sure” (2019). While “African Americans and American Indians are dramatically overrepresented” in the homeless population, white Americans account for “49% of those experiencing homelessness” (“State of Homelessness,” 2018).⁶¹ That Cohen is unsure whether a white homeless person has ever been kicked out of a private coffee shop—let alone public spaces like

⁶¹ This data is from a HUD Annual Point-in-Time Count taken in 2018.

sidewalks and parks—is difficult to fathom given the pervasive criminalization of homelessness in the US.⁶²

No one downplays white people’s hardships more than DiAngelo, the most prolific white privilege discourse advocate. “In her talks,” *New York Times Magazine* contributor Daniel Bergner writes, “DiAngelo emphasizes that she ‘knew class shame at an early age,’ but that no one should equate the hardships of class with the injuries inflicted and obstacles imposed by racism” (2020). DiAngelo’s writing, like her talks, ignore and dismiss white Americans’ pain. She tells her readers, “The past was great for white people (and white men in particular) because their positions went largely unchallenged” (2018, 59). In so saying, DiAngelo diminishes indentured servitude, the world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, sweatshops, child labor, McCarthyism, etc., to blips in an otherwise rosy history for white Americans. Moreover, when DiAngelo writes, “to be white is to...be seen as an insider and to be granted the benefits of belonging,” she implies that access to healthy food, potable water, shelter, life-saving medicines, a decent education, and a living wage—all which thousands of white Americans are denied—are not key “benefits of belonging” in a democratic community (2018, 27).

Ultimately, the content of white reeducation can only dissuade poor and working-class whites and nonwhites from recognizing their shared interests. Why would white workers who have come to associate white privilege discourse with racial justice advocacy join a movement that dismisses their needs? And why would nonwhite workers unite with whites if they are

⁶² For an extensive report on the criminalization of homelessness, see “No Safe Place: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities,” National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, accessed October 20, 2019, https://homelesslaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/No_Safe_Place.pdf

intrinsically racist? By ignoring and minimizing white people's suffering, white reeducation discourages the formation of mass coalitions capable of effecting racially egalitarian change.

White Privilege Scholars Admit White Privilege Discourse Won't Help

According to white privilege scholars, white Americans are a powerful, unified majority, and unless they forfeit their privileges, racial injustices will remain. So, to motivate white people to do so, these scholars inform them of their privilege. They explain that whites and nonwhites compete for resources in a zero-sum game wherein whites are unfairly advantaged. But the scholars worry that once white Americans realize racial inequality benefits them, they will (continue to) resist dismantling it. Since they cannot appeal to white people's self-interest, white privilege scholars appeal to their conscience.

But *by white privilege scholars' own admission*, this will not work. In fact, Jardina explicitly rejects telling white people they are privileged:

[M]any whites who identify with their racial group do recognize their privileged status, and yet they express no interest in relinquishing it. Instead, a more viable approach may be to work to frame equality in less zero-sum terms. Growing diversity and the political, economic, and social success of racial and ethnic minorities need not be framed as occurring at the expense of whites. (2019, 281)

While Jardina is the only scholar I examine who explicitly warns against informing white people of their privilege, all white privilege scholars argue that white people cling to their advantages.⁶³

⁶³ Despite Jardina's conclusion that white privilege discourse messaging is antithetical to the fight for racial justice, I consider her a white privilege scholar as she (against her own advice) promotes such messaging. Jardina does so when she states:

White Americans benefit tremendously from their position at the top of the hierarchy. Their group, on average, receives greater material benefits, social esteem, and political accommodations. The dominant status also means that whites have come to accept this arrangement as "normal"; they view themselves as the "default category." When these cherished privileges—ones that whites regard as almost natural—are challenged, many whites react defensively, condemning and resisting changes to the racial status quo. (2019, 22)

As noted in Chapter One, Olson asserts that “the white citizen resists any political vision in which his or her privileges are not respected” (2004, xxi), and Bonilla-Silva contends that “racial structures remain in place” because “actors racialized as ‘white’...receive material benefits from the racial order” and therefore “struggle (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges” (2018, 9).

For her part, Sullivan suggests that even when white people try to give up their privileges, they are likely to exasperate racial injustice. “A devastating feature of many of the efforts to improve the world by eliminating racism is that those efforts can only make it worse. The disadvantages and dangers presented by unconscious habits of white privilege are very powerful and real. Yet struggle against them must continue” (Sullivan 2006, 185). But why would an antiracist follow guidance equally likely to reproduce racial inequity as alleviate it?

Finally, DiAngelo’s description of the upshot of her lifework testifies to its inane. In the forward to Saad’s *Me and My White Supremacy*, DiAngelo states plainly, “It has been my consistent experience leading antiracist education over the last twenty-five years that most white people don’t really *want* to know what to do about racism if it will require anything of them that is inconvenient or uncomfortable” (DiAngelo quoted in Saad 2020, xi). And, in her own book, DiAngelo admits that:

[I]f and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cogitative dissonance...So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger but still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content. (2018, 101).

And yet, DiAngelo and fellow white privilege scholars persist.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In the next chapter, I further detail the failings of the Diversity Equity Inclusion industry to which white privilege consultants belong.

As McWhorter finds:

The real job to these people is supposed to be tarring others for heretical thoughts, talking only vaguely about how that is necessary in order to “dismantle structures.” Whites must be held at metaphorical gunpoint and demanded to do “the work” of becoming “antiracist” in their every waking moment and to despise themselves for lapses in doing so, despite that it is a work they are condemned never to finish. This is performance art. (2021, 148)

However hyperbolic McWhorter’s words may seem, there is little reason to deny them.

Poetic Justification

A final defense of white privilege discourse’s racial justice platform—albeit one not offered by white privilege scholars themselves—is that there are certainly white people who suffer; but many people, especially nonwhite people, are denied basic human necessities, rights, and dignities, and if more white people understood this, maybe they would help rectify it. White privilege discourse, the argument would conclude, promotes this understanding.

According to this defense, white privilege discourse is a tool that stirs people’s consciousness and, in so doing, opens a gateway to political action. Admittedly, white privilege discourse may do this. Testimonials from white people suggest that learning about their privilege alerted them to racial injustice (or at least, to the extent of it) and inspired them to become antiracist activists. However, if white privilege discourse encourages people, it is not because it is a useful political tool so much as an artistic tool. Like a poem or a painting that reflects injustice and moves a listener or passerby to think and act in new ways, white privilege discourse may offer inspiration. But if an individual follows the wisdom of white privilege discourse beyond the initial moment of inspiration, they will not only fail to fight for transformative racial justice but will become a barrier to the same.

Conclusion

White privilege scholars stand in the way of those interested in advancing a racially just political agenda. Disguised as an egalitarian ideology, white privilege discourse—especially when coupled with white guilt discourse—distorts its audience’s understanding of what constitutes a progressive agenda. Progress, white privilege discourse contends, is founded on self-doubt, self-examination, confession, and moralizing. In Sullivan’s words, “Rather than rest assured that she is effectively fighting white privilege, when engaging in resistance a person needs to continually be questioning the effects of her activism on both self and world”(2006, 197). But this is not the case. Political, economic, and social progress is founded on confidence, solidarity, action, and open-mindedness. White privilege discourse clouds the way forward for those inclined and interested in contesting racial inequality and crowds out space for more progressive political platforms.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INCENTIVES BEHIND WHITE PRIVILEGE DISCOURSE

“Evil may result as well from good as from ill intentions. That is the fallibility and tragedy of human history—or, to use a different vocabulary, its dialectic.”

– Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields (2012, 147)

Introduction

On the December 15, 2022 episode of Dr. Phil, “Race 2 Dinner” co-founders Regina Jackson and Saira Rao confront Ambrosia, a woman accused of being a “Karen” after a video of her refusing to wear a mask at UPS went viral. A “Karen,” according to the episode’s description, is “a pejorative slang term for an alleged obnoxious, angry, entitled, and perceived racist white woman who uses inherent privilege to get their way or police other people’s behaviors” (“Deconstructing ‘Karen’” 2022). Explaining how Ambrosia is a Karen who doesn’t understand her white privilege is Jackson and Rao’s role in the episode.

This role aligns with their vocation: guiding white women to uncover and admit their internalized white supremacy. For a combined \$2,500, eight women can join Jackson and Rao for a two-hour dinner involving “very direct, exceedingly difficult conversations” about “white supremacy, racism and xenophobia.” The price tag also includes “pre-dinner support and post-dinner consulting with our Resident White Woman.” Along with the \$2,500 flagship product, Jackson and Rao provide a few additional services. One is “Race2Community,” a year-long online “anti-whiteness” course for white women. It costs “a minimum of \$1200,” although financial aid may be offered to “those who have a financial barrier to participating.” The other is “Race2Self-Actualization,” a 5-week, \$250 program for BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] “struggling to find their authentic selves in a world where we are largely invisible.”

Jackson and Rao offer a number of other ad-hoc one-on-one and group consulting services (“Race To Dinner” n.d.).

Race 2 Dinner was founded in 2019 and is part of the exploding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) consulting industry. According to the World Economic Forum, “Companies across the world spent an estimated \$7.5 billion on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)-related efforts in 2020, and this figure is projected to more than double to \$15.4 billion by 2026” (“DEI Lighthouse: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in 2023” 2023). Currently, the “United States represents the largest regional market for Diversity and Inclusion...estimated at US\$3.4 Billion in 2020” (“Global Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Industry” 2022).

In the previous four chapters, I demonstrated white privilege discourse’s racially inegalitarian premises and consequences. The harmful impact of the discourse invites the question: why would someone promote it in the first place? Therefore, in this chapter, I examine the motivations behind white privilege discourse. As the above description of Race 2 Dinner suggests, one incentive is economic: white privilege discourse can be monetized via the DEI industry. In noting that the discourse can be profitable, I do not mean to argue that white privilege scholars act cynically, expressing a worldview they do not sincerely embrace. It is impossible—and unnecessary—to know any individual white privilege discourse advocate’s true motives. However, to demystify and undermine an ideology, it is strategically valuable to identify likely psychological, social, and material incentives behind it, regardless of whether any given motive can be attributed to any given actor. By identifying incentives, strategists locate

interests that uphold worldviews and their corresponding practices.⁶⁵ For white privilege discourse, one such interest is economic.

However, before discussing how the DEI industry economically incentivizes white privilege discourse, I begin by noting noneconomic incentives for it. These include: a desire to promote racial justice; a misguided belief that for people to stop blaming nonwhites for their over-representation among the unemployed, poor, working-class, and incarcerated, we must start blaming whites; the appeal of idealist thinking; and a desire to purify American meritocracy.

As this list suggests, white privilege discourse—like most discourses—is undergirded by altruistic motivations (e.g., promoting racial equality) and self-interested motivations (e.g., a desire for profit). In assessing both types of incentives, I note when the power of the incentive, as such, depends on an instrumentally or normatively misguided analysis. I do so especially when discussing white privilege scholars' desire to purify American meritocracy.

The Chapter's Scope

In sketching the motives that uphold white privilege discourse as a pseudo-progressive smokescreen—namely, the economic motives—I assess some ways white privilege discourse has become institutionalized. While incentives and institutions dialectically shape each other, from a strategic standpoint, identifying institutional power is almost always more important than identifying incentives. For example, while a pro-choice organizer will be better equipped to

⁶⁵ To illustrate the benefit of identifying incentives, imagine a judge has a close personal friendship with a lawyer who frequently argues before them and that the judge's decisions usually favor their friend. An observer cannot know if the judge is motivated by judicial wisdom or personal bias. Yet, by identifying bias as a potential motive, a concerned observer can propose interventions that would mitigate the ability of judges to be influenced by personal biases in the future—whether or not this specific judge was.

devise effective strategies if they understand anti-abortion activists' motivations, understanding their institutional power is essential. Knowing the religious commitments, nonviolent commitments, patriarchal reasons, familial ties, political goals, etc., that might cause someone to be pro-life helps a pro-choice organizer separate who is reachable from who is not, arguments that can persuade from those that cannot. However, identifying the religious organizations, lobby groups, legal groups, etc., that anti-abortion activists use to wield power informs every aspect of pro-choice organizing, from identifying coalition partners, to crafting policy, to determining what is politically feasible.

However, broadly mapping the institutionalization of white privilege discourse is beyond the purview of this dissertation. This is partly because the discourse is rarely institutionalized in isolation, i.e., few organizations exclusively employ the lens of "white privilege." Instead, white privilege discourse is typically embedded in broader ideologies associated with labels like "antiracism" and "diversity, equity, and inclusion." Moreover, fully mapping the institutionalization of white privilege discourse would entail analyses of local, state, and federal institutions—like the Department of Education, National Public Radio, and political campaigns—non-governmental institutions—like colleges and universities, charitable institutions, and activist organizations—and for-profit businesses—like consulting firms, the corporations that hire them, and various entertainment organizations. Such a map would be a dissertation unto itself. Therefore, my discussion of white privilege discourse's institutionalization is limited, with the explorations of white privilege scholars' incentives being the primary focus of this chapter.

Genuine Concern

For those concerned with racial equality in the United States, it is apparent that we are greatly in need of interventions. Without a doubt, white privilege scholars are among these, and their work is at least partly motivated by the desire to address the massive racial disparities that pervade US society; persistent racial discrimination; and underclass ideology that blames nonwhites for their lot. However misguided the emphasis on white privilege, white privilege scholars' excoriation of "normalized white advantages in housing, education, employment, asset accumulation, health, criminal justice, and politics" is certainly inspired by their belief that "such preferences are morally wrong" (Olson 2004, 142).

Flagg articulates white privilege scholars' alarm at continued racial discrimination when she writes:

Numerous studies indicate that whites receive more favorable treatment than blacks in virtually every area of social interaction. The weight of the evidence supports the conclusion that race affects whites' discretionary decisionmaking in areas as diverse as hiring and performance evaluations in employment settings; mortgage lending, insurance redlining, and retail bargaining; psychiatric diagnoses; responses to patient violence in mental institutions; and virtually every stage in the criminal law process: arrest, the decision to charge, imprisonment, and capital sentencing. (1993, 983-984)

Eliminating such discrimination—or, at least, the effects of it—incentivizes much of white privilege discourse. As does undermining underclass narratives. Bonilla-Silva expresses this when he states, "my work is a challenge to post-civil rights white common sense; to the view that race no longer matters; and to anyone who believes that the problems afflicting people of color are fundamentally rooted in their pathological cultures" (2018, 13).

Shifting the Onus onto Whites

As an outgrowth of their understanding that it is factually and ethically wrong to blame nonwhite culture for racial inequality, white privilege scholars shift the onus for racial injustice

elsewhere. Employing fallacious logic, white privilege scholars conclude that if nonwhite culture is not to blame, then white culture must be. As I noted in the Introduction, Jensen employs this logic plainly when he states, “DuBois wrote that the real question whites wanted to ask him, but were afraid to, was: ‘How does it feel to be a problem?...it is time for whites to self-consciously reverse the direction of that question...We have to ask ourselves: How does it feel to be the problem?’” (2005, 92).

For many white privilege scholars, a positive upshot of shifting the blame onto white people is that, as a privileged class, they have the power to change things. Paula Rothenberg, editor of *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, argues that “the first step toward dismantling the system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it, and the second is for those of us who can to use our privileges to speak out against the system of privilege as a whole” (2005, 5). And DiAngelo writes:

Naming white supremacy...makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs. It also points us in the direction of the lifelong work that is uniquely ours, challenging our complicity with and investment in racism. This does not mean that people of color do not play a part but that the full weight of responsibility rests with those who control the institutions [i.e., white people]. (2018, 33).

In other words, DiAngelo believes that white people can use their position atop the social, political, and economic hierarchy to effectively and efficiently promote racial justice.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that white people, as such, are not, in fact, atop the social, political, and economic hierarchy. Moreover, whites’ position atop the racial hierarchy does not benefit them as a group: it benefits wealthy white Americans at the expense of most white (and, of course, nearly all nonwhite) Americans. Yet, if white people were collectively privileged by racial injustice, shifting the activist onus onto them would not work. Except for heroic individuals—who are heroic, as sociologist Adaner Usmani and political economist David

Zachariah note, precisely because their behavior is uncommon—those who benefit from a system are not the ones who change it (Usmani and Zachariah 2021, 72). Or, as Bonilla-Silva himself contends when quoting Frederick Douglass, “Power concedes nothing without a demand” (2018, 238).

Appealing to Hearts and Minds

In this dissertation’s introduction and the previous chapter, I examined how white privilege discourse employs an idealist (as opposed to materialist) understanding of historical development. According to this worldview, activists must first change how people think and feel before they can change how they act. Such idealism is seductive, partly because it can sometimes work, especially in more intimate interpersonal exchanges. Plenty of vegetarian and vegan partners have turned their significant others into the same. While a self-interested desire for a smooth relationship may play a role here, surely some of these significant others have been sincerely persuaded by environmental or animal rights-based appeals.

Idealism is also seductive because people often want to believe that others will do what is right once they understand it. Olson suggests that this is, in fact, how politics frequently operates, pointing to how abolitionists inspired change by “awakening consciousness” (2004, 136). Yet moral persuasion’s powers are limited. While ethical arguments alone should have ended slavery—a glaringly unethical institution—emancipation entailed a very material Civil War. That white privilege scholars want racial justice to occur by awakening white people’s understanding, compassion, or guilt is understandable. But it is also politically naive.

Such naivety is encouraged by reigning neoliberal ideology, which obscures material realities, including the economic dynamics largely responsible for racial disparity. In mainstream American culture, talking about money is taboo, politicians and the media perpetuate a mythical

American Dream, economics is shrouded in alienating jargon, and so on. Therefore, it might be difficult to see the economic dimensions of racial injustice that affect nonwhite and white people alike, especially for those who are materially well-resourced.

Meritocracy

An explicitly articulated motivation for many white privilege scholars is the desire to purify the American Dream. The core tenet of white privilege discourse is that whiteness gives its bearers unearned advantages. “Whiteness,” McIntosh writes, “gives me an undeserved edge in the competitions of the academy as in the society as a whole” (2012, 91). Of the privilege she “inherited as a White woman,” professor of architecture and planning, Martha Sonntag Bradley states, “I didn’t earn it, I didn’t deserve it” (Ryujin and Bradley 2012, 140). And talking to his white readers, Michael Eric Dyson writes, “The institutions of national life favor your success, whether that means you get better schools and more jobs, or less punishment and less jail. Not because you’re necessarily smarter, or better behaved, but because being white offers you benefits, understanding, and forgiveness when needed” (2017, 79). The reason white people have unearned privilege, according to white privilege scholars, is that they do not have to compete with nonwhites on equal footing.

When confronting that they may not have fully earned their deserts, some white, white privilege scholars express discomfort. Speaking of her and her co-author’s accomplishments, communications professor Lisa A. Flores writes:

We grounded our academic and professional success in what we knew were problematic arguments of merit and hard work. But wasn’t that partly true, too. We *did* work hard, we *were* smart, we *deserved* the success we got...Ok, I know, *I know*. Notions of meritocracy—just another manifestation of whiteness...Perhaps my stake in whiteness is my need to believe that I *am* smart(er). (Ashcraft and Flores 2012, 164)

Here, Flores suggests that—were it not for her whiteness—she could be fully confident that her accolades were deserved (given her intellect and work ethic). Journalism scholar Robert Jensen similarly shares his fear (and imputes this fear to all “white people in a white-supremacist society”) that “some of what we white people have is unearned” (2005, 53). Indeed, Jensen calls this “The first, and perhaps most crucial” fear white people have (2005, 53).⁶⁶

As Flores’ and Jensen’s statements indicate, for some white privilege scholars, the call for white people to recognize and renounce their privilege is partly motivated by their desire to know that they deserve what they have, or rather, to know that if they have more than others, they deserve to have more. In his work, sociologist Thomas Shapiro makes his desire to purify, rather than overhaul, American meritocracy explicit. Shapiro notes that he does not dispute or discourage “the ability or right of innovative, hardworking, successful people to reap great wealth rewards from their own endeavors” (2004, 196). Therefore, he does not support a wealth tax as it “does not distinguish between earned and inherited wealth” (2004, 196). Indeed, in *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (2004), the need to cleanse and preserve the American Dream is Shapiro’s take-home message. He closes the book with the following:

I believe that we want to be defined as a society whose values, structures, incentives, customs, policies, and laws encourage equality of opportunity, achievement, and reward...Without attending to how equal opportunity or even equal achievement does not lead to equal results—especially concerning wealth—we will continue to repeat the deep

⁶⁶ The full passage from which the above is excerpted reads:

It seems slightly self-indulgent to talk about the fears of white people in a white-supremacist society. After all, what do white people really have to be afraid of in a world structured on white privilege? It may be self-indulgent, but it’s critical to understand because these fears are part of what keeps many white people from confronting ourselves and the system.

The first, and perhaps most crucial, fear is the fear of facing the fact that some of what we white people have is unearned. (Jensen 2005, 52-53)

and disturbing patterns of racial inequality and conflict that plague our republic. A just society would not wish racial legacies and inheritances to block opportunities and make a mockery of merit, and just individuals will rejoice to give merit and democracy a fairer chance to triumph. (2004, 204)

However, Shapiro and fellow white privilege scholars are wrong to reduce American meritocratic dysfunction to an issue of racial disparity and discrimination. The etymology of the term “meritocracy” indicates just how idealistic the aspiration for a truly meritocratic society is. The term was coined in 1958 by British sociologist Michael Young to mock and warn against a society wherein social status is based on “effort,” “test scores,” and other “formal educational qualifications.” Such a society, Young imagines, would “create a new form of discrimination” by “excluding from leadership anyone who couldn’t jump through the educational hoops” (“Meritocracy | Etymology, Origin and Meaning” 2020).

As I noted in Chapter Two, the American Dream is a myth. It promises that every American willing to work hard can, at the very least, attain a comfortable middle-class life—with all basic necessities, plenty of leisure, and some luxuries too. Yet, to reiterate, upward mobility in the United States has been flat or declining for decades (Shapiro 2004, 183; Krause and Reeves 2018), and millions of white Americans, like nonwhite Americans, are poorly compensated despite their hard work. Closing the racial wealth gap alone would not make the United States meritocratic. To legitimize the American Dream, the US would need to abolish inheritance and provide equal access to—and equal quality of—education, extracurricular experiences, healthcare, childcare, eldercare, travel, etc.

By assuming that, were it not for racial bias, Americans would get the lives they deserve, white privilege scholars fail to acknowledge that the American Dream is inaccessible to nearly

all Americans, whites as well as nonwhites.⁶⁷ They thereby reinforce a lie that conditions people to accept the status quo and vainly seek their betterment individually rather than collectively (and, thus, effectively). In this way, the American Dream has the same narcotic effect Marx attributes to religion. Religion, Marx explains, allows people to endure the drudgery of their material lives by promising salvation in the afterlife. It thereby helps maintain oppressive systems. By falsely promising “*illusory* happiness,” religion discourages people from collectively demanding “true happiness” on earth (Marx 1844, 131). Likewise, the American Dream promises salvation it cannot deliver to the same effect. If you can escape your unhappy position by yourself, why unite with others? With the false promise that drudgery can be transcended individually, the American Dream, like religion, encourages collective tolerance of the status quo. Literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels argues that the American Dream is an even more effective opium of the masses than religion. “Marx used to describe religion as the opium of the people because it promised them in heaven what they couldn’t get on earth,” he writes. “The American dream is more effective; it assures us that we don’t have to wait for the afterlife” (2006, 197).

In their discussions of meritocracy, white privilege scholars also ignore that there is a finite quantity of in-demand jobs in the United States, and those in such positions depend on the labor of those in less desirable ones. For professionals, celebrities, and executives to enjoy their

⁶⁷ Citing a study by two Princeton Sociologists, Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat notes that in terms of access to opportunities in higher education, the most disadvantaged group as of 2010 were “downscale,” “rural,” and “working-class” white Americans (2010). But, as Michaels notes, we should not focus on white people’s disadvantages in accessing higher education alone. “The fact (and it is a fact) that it doesn’t help to be white to get into Harvard [should not overshadow] the much more fundamental fact that it does help to be rich and that it’s virtually essential not to be poor” (2006, 86).

work, they need others to feed, clothe, and transport them. While certain social contributions should be incentivized, the belief that people must earn decent jobs is not a progressive one. Every society depends on diversified labor and should work to make every job as pleasant as possible by providing fair compensation, reasonable schedules, adequate holidays and sick days, parental leave, workplace security, freedom from harassment, and so on. But white privilege discourse does not call for these universal rights. Instead, it implies that the white recipients of such comforts have unearned white privilege. The contention that such rights are privileges reinforces the meritocratic deception that dignity and comfort must be acquired.

Relatedly, by assuming that, were it not for racial bias, Americans would get the lives they deserve, white privilege scholars imply that poor and working-class white Americans are an underclass, as the only remaining excuses for their lack of success are a dearth of skills, talent, or drive. In 2014, *The Onion*, mocked white privilege discourse thinking succinctly with the headline, “White Male Privilege Squandered on Job at Best Buy” (2014).

Wanting to eradicate racial discrimination and nonwhite disadvantage in market competition is a laudable motivation for white privilege discourse. But white privilege scholars falsely presume that, among whites, competition is fair. By failing to recognize that the American Dream is a myth for all Americans, white privilege scholars are unable to offer remedies that would properly compensate most nonwhite Americans (as well as most white Americans) for their efforts. All told, white privilege scholars’ call for rescuing the American Dream from racial discrimination serves white elites’ egos—allowing them to believe that they’ve earned their status—more than nonwhites’ well-being.

Class Interest

In this dissertation, I have emphasized that the contention that white and nonwhite poor and working-class people's interests are in conflict has historically benefited economic elites and many political elites at the expense of most nonwhite and white Americans. In Chapter One, I discussed how racism and race were created to facilitate widespread economic exploitation. Throughout slavery, industrialization, Jim Crow, and the dawn of neoliberalism, the premise that the welfare of whites and nonwhites were antithetical discouraged—to varying degrees of success—the formation of a mass working-class alliance capable of effecting political change. In Chapter Two, I examined how the various definitions of “white privilege” disassociate the fight for racial justice from the fight for economic justice and thereby buttress the racially inequalitarian status quo. Moreover, in both chapters One and Three, I showed how white privilege discourse instructs nonwhite workers to see their white counterparts as untrustworthy racial justice advocates while encouraging white workers to view racial justice advocacy as against their own interests. And above, I noted how white privilege discourse sustains a meritocratic mythology that stultifies collective demands for economic reform. Finally, in this dissertation's conclusion, I illustrate how white privilege discourse upholds racial inequality and protects the interests of contemporary elites by helping maintain the party alignment imposed by the Southern Strategy.

Whether white privilege discourse materially benefits any one of its scholars—and thereby incentivizes their work—depends on whether current circumstances benefit them economically. Put differently, whether white privilege discourse benefits any one of its scholars depends on their material interest in having a unified, interracial working class promote a more redistributive economic agenda. No doubt, some white privilege advocates reap material rewards

from the status quo and their contribution to securing it. Political scientist Cedric Johnson promotes this conclusion when he argues:

[W]hiteness deprogramming provides a ready means of egress, a way to demonstrate sympathy without making more difficult, sustained political commitments that might entail contesting institutionalized power. Neither does it require shedding or sharing the actual trappings of middle class privilege, i.e. better salaries, savings and assets, high performing schools, the capacity to travel, social networks, etc., which are codified in popular speech as white privilege, even though these same goods may be shared by other middle class and wealthy ethnics. Whiteness training encourages sharing one's origin story, failings and sense of torment, but beyond charitable giving, it does not necessitate sharing resources at the level of redistributive public policy, i.e. through expansion of the universal social wage, commuter taxes, consolidation of urban- suburban school districts, revenue sharing across metropolitan divides, federally-managed public works projects etc. (2019)

Here, Johnson aptly identifies the absence of redistributive economic policy proposals in white privilege discourse. However, this absence might work to the detriment of some economically precarious white privilege discourse adherents who would materially benefit from a more egalitarian distribution of resources.

That said, I focus below on one way material gains directly incentivize white privilege discourse: many white privilege scholars profit off the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion industry—both inside and outside the academy—that employs white privilege discourse ideology.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Economist Christian Parenti's "The First Privilege Walk" (2021) relates tangentially to the subject matter here. The article connects the practice of confession, discussed in the previous chapter, to the development of the DEI industry. Specifically, Parenti examines how Erica "Ricky" Sherover-Marcuse encouraged the incorporation of Re-evaluation Counseling practices, "or RC, as it is often called"—including the central "act of confession and self-abnegation in front of a group"—into unlearning racism workshops (2021).

White Reeducation Industry

As Johnson notes, “a cottage industry of professional trainings, national conferences, study guides, manuals, and curricula targeting white audiences and intended to spark dialogue, personal reevaluation and behavioral modification” has flourished in the past few decades (2019, 5-6). Several of the authors mentioned in this dissertation have contributed to this industry. In 1987, McIntosh founded the National SEED Project, “a **peer-led professional development program** that creates conversational communities **to drive personal, organizational, and societal change** toward greater equity and diversity” (“Apply Now: 2019 SEED New Leaders Week” 2018). According to its website, “SEED has trained more than 4000 leaders from 1200 partner sites - including preK-12 and university educators, parents, community leaders, and other public employees from 45 U.S. states and 15 countries” and “engaged over 30,000 teachers to date, who in turn have influenced more than three million students and helped them experience greater equity and diversity in their communities, institutions, and schools” (“What Is SEED?” 2023; “History” 2023).

SEED’s main service is its New Leader Training. As of 2023, accepted applicants can attend “either 12- week virtual or 7-day in-person sessions.” “For private schools and private site partners,” either option costs \$6000 per person. “For all public schools and public site partners,” the cost comes down to \$4000 per person, and \$2000 of scholarship funding is available for organizations with “demonstrated need.” However, “schools and sponsoring sites are asked to provide an additional \$250 - \$500 per seminar for books, handouts, materials, and food, to be provided directly to the seminar leader(s) (not to SEED) and handled locally” (“New Leaders Training Application Process” 2023). All told, at the lowest end (\$2,000 per person), SEED’s New Leaders Training costs about \$700 more than the median weekly household income in the

United States as of 2020. At the highest end (\$6,000 per person), the training costs about \$350 more than the median monthly household income (Shrider et al. 2021).

Like McIntosh's, DiAngelo's services are costly. As of May 2023, DiAngelo's website discloses almost no information about the cost for her offerings. However, according to the *New York Times*, "during the year preceding Covid-19" DiAngelo "gave eight to 10 presentations a month, sometimes pro bono but mostly at up to \$15,000 per event" (Bergner 2020). That same year, 2019, DiAngelo charged between \$130 and \$165 per adult for a "Half Day Anti Racist Workshops" and between \$550 and \$875 for her "Anti Racist 3-Day Intensive for White People" ("Events: Education for Racial Equity" 2019). DiAngelo is now offering a "White Affinity Group Facilitator's Course," entailing "eight two-hour Zoom sessions" for between \$500-\$1,200 per individual (a sliding scale) and \$1,800 per attendee affiliated with an organization ("White Affinity Group Facilitator's Course" 2023). DiAngelo provides her services to a wide variety of public and private clientele, including "many colleges and universities as well as Amazon, W.L. Gore & Associates, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Hollywood Writer's Guild, the YMCA, The Innocence Project, Seattle Public Schools, City of Oakland, Metropolitan Council of Minneapolis, University of Sydney, University of Washington Medical School, and Unilever" ("Services" 2023).

The Privilege Institute (TPI) is another venue where white privilege scholars can promote their worldview. TPI was founded in 2014 by longtime DEI consultant Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. The organization was developed, in part, to carry on the legacy of the White Privilege Conference, an event held annually since 1999 ("About" 2023; "About Us" n.d.). According to TPI's website, the conference brings "together high school and college students, teachers, university faculty and higher education professionals, nonprofit staff, activists, social workers and counselors,

healthcare workers, and members of the spiritual community and corporate arena” to challenge “concepts of privilege and oppression and offers solutions and team building strategies to work towards a more equitable world” (“Events: Education for Racial Equity” 2019). Once again, the cost of TPI events is difficult to surmise. Links to “fees” and “cost” provide no such information. However, the old White Privilege Conference website noted that the 2020 registration fee for the three-day conference was \$215 for high school students and up to \$500 for adults (“Registration/Conference Fees & Discounts” n.d.). TPI offers a number of other services, including study abroad programs, keynote speaking and consulting trainings—including a “new training and consulting initiative that will focus on developing substance use and mental health recovery opportunities”—regional symposiums, a Youth Summer Leadership Institute, and more (“Events/Conferences” 2023; “Programs/Services” 2023).

Pollyanna Inc. offers a final example of white privilege discourse’s profitability. The New York-based non-profit consultancy was founded in 2015 by former marketer Casper Caldarola. Pollyanna provides several services aimed at helping “academic and other institutions...achieve their diversity, equity and inclusion goals.” Currently, it works with over 100 private, charter, and public schools across the country (“FAQ” 2021; “Who We Are” 2021). Pollyanna’s offerings include DEI assessments, conferences, workshops, and a free Racial Literacy Curriculum. This curriculum “begins in kindergarten with 5- and 6-year-olds using Pantone Color Charts to match their skin tone so that they might start to see themselves and one another by skin color” as “Recognizing and categorizing color is a foundational skill for early grades, and will be used as a platform for upcoming lessons that discuss skin color” (Cooper 2021).

By eighth grade, the curriculum’s goal is to create “social justice” action plans that address how “systemic racism provided social, economic, political, and legal advantages to White Americans.” Students devise plans and launch campaigns that seek to overturn

white privilege in the “community or city of the student body, or may reach broader, such as to the national level and beyond.” (Cooper 2021)

The Curriculum continues up until twelfth grade.

While the Racial Literacy Curriculum may be “free,” Pollyanna Inc. does not want for income. Although costs are “tailored to meet our client’s unique needs and available resources” (and are therefore unpublished on Pollyanna’s website), “pricing documents obtained by Tablet [Magazine]” found that:

Pollyanna was charging upwards of \$1,750 per hour to schools that contractually committed to “incorporate racial literacy content in the classroom,” \$6,000 for a half-day presentation on how to bring administrators up to speed on the basics of anti-racism, and \$21,000 plus travel expenses for a three-day Internal Curriculum Review and Development for schools exploring the possibility of implementing a full-scale DEI overhaul of their entire administrative and classroom playbooks. (Cooper 2021)

According to its tax filings, Pollyanna Inc.’s total revenue in 2020 was \$1,003,763, more than double its 2019 revenue, which was nearly double its 2018 revenue (“Who We Are” 2021; Cooper 2021).

The above are money-making enterprises for the white privilege discourse advocates who run them and the authors whose books they promote. But what outcomes do such organizations produce?

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that white privilege discourse buttresses the racially inequalitarian status quo. Accordingly, in as much as the above efforts advance white privilege discourse, they help solidify racial inequality. Yet evidence suggests that even by DEI companies own metrics—e.g., “reducing bias, improving morale, increasing opportunity for minority groups,” minority retention, fostering “better intergroup relations,” closing “recruitment gaps,” and “boosting productivity and workplace satisfaction”—their trainings fail (Cooper 2021; Singal 2023). This is especially so for “the specific type of diversity training that is

currently in vogue — mandatory training that blames dominant groups for D.E.I. problems” (Singal 2023). By and large, there is a dearth of material from which researchers can draw conclusions about DEI trainings efficacy, and some scholars have called for more investigation into the matter. However, the available (well-designed) studies suggest that, at best, DEI trainings marginally and temporarily lessen prejudice in the workplace. At worst, they create less diverse workplaces and more hostile environments for minorities.

In 2021, the *Annual Review of Psychology* published a comprehensive meta-analysis of “418 experiments reported in 309 manuscripts from 2007 to 2019” to assess the most effective methods for reducing prejudice (Paluck et al. 2021). The researchers specifically reviewed “studies of the basic science of prejudice reduction and evaluations of fully developed prejudice reduction intervention programs,” such as “cognitive emotional training, contact, [and] social categorization” (534).⁶⁹ The report’s authors found a pervasive publication bias in the literature in favor of “smaller studies reporting significantly stronger effects” than merited (535). They conclude that while “the interventions often achieve some of their goals of reducing prejudice, their effects are often limited in size, scope, and duration” (553). However, regarding diversity trainings specifically, the researchers “did not find a broad evidence base on which to draw conclusions about [their] efficacy” (543).

In 2017, a team of researchers conducted a large ($n=3,016$) field experiment in which they measured the effects of “a short online diversity training” on “attitudes and workplace behaviors.” The experiment’s subjects were members of an international organization, and their

⁶⁹ See pages 535-536 and 540 for a more detailed description of the types of experiments analyzed. Page 540 also lists the various group targets of prejudice encompassed by the studies. Experiments on race and ethnicity were the largest category.

participation was voluntary. The study’s primary aim was to evaluate whether the training promoted “inclusive attitudes and behaviors toward women, whereas a secondary focus was to promote the inclusion of other under-represented groups (e.g., racial minorities).” Ultimately, the researchers found that the training significantly increased inclusive *attitudes* toward women, but only among the international (non-US) subject population—a group more likely to begin with less inclusive attitudes toward women than the Americans. The researchers also found that the training significantly increased inclusive *behaviors* (e.g., willingness to mentor) toward women and minority groups only among women and minorities, respectively.⁷⁰ This suggests that diversity trainings have little effect on “the subgroups policymakers typically hope to influence most with such interventions.” In sum, the authors find “that the one-off diversity trainings that are commonplace in organizations are unlikely to be stand-alone solutions for promoting equality in the workplace, particularly given their limited efficacy among those groups whose behaviors policymakers are most eager to influence” (Chang et al. 2019).

A meta-analysis conducted by sociologists Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev offers a more damning assessment of DEI trainings’—namely mandatory trainings’—efficacy (2016). Having analyzed “three decades’ worth of data from more than 800 U.S. firms and interviewing hundreds of line managers and executives at length,” the authors determine that:

The usual tools—diversity training, hiring tests, performance ratings, grievance systems—tend to make things worse, not better. The authors’ analysis of data from 829 firms over three decades shows that these tools actually *decrease* the proportion of women and minorities in management. They’re designed to preempt lawsuits by policing

⁷⁰ The authors note their paradoxical findings stating, “the behavior change we observed was concentrated among those groups (e.g., women in the United States) who had the most supportive attitudes toward women in the absence of intervention. This is an interesting contrast to our findings regarding attitude change: Attitude change was concentrated among relatively less supportive groups” (Chang et al. 2019).

managers' decisions and actions. But as lab studies show, this kind of force-feeding can activate bias and encourage rebellion. (Dobbin and Kalev 2016)

Where Dobbin and Kalev did see “positive effects” from diversity trainings, they found that these “rarely last beyond a day or two.” Yet, their aggregated findings indicate no positive effect and instead identify that mandatory DEI trainings “can activate bias or spark a backlash.” Indeed, DEI trainers told the researchers that “people often respond to compulsory courses with anger and resistance—and many participants actually report more animosity toward other groups afterward.”⁷¹ And yet, Dobbin and Kalev write, “nearly half of midsize companies use [such trainings], as do nearly all the *Fortune* 500.” According to *The New Republic*, “nearly two-thirds of colleges and universities use diversity trainings,” as well, “and about 30 percent require their faculty to attend them” (Pan 2020). “The numbers sum it up,” Dobbin and Kalev conclude. “Your organization will become less diverse, not more, if you require managers to go to diversity training, try to regulate their hiring and promotion decisions, and put in a legalistic grievance system” (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

The lack of proven efficacy may seem to bode poorly for DEI consultancies. However, as noted at the opening of this chapter, there is no evidence of the industry's waning: quite the opposite. Perhaps, then, the lack of efficacy may paradoxically benefit DEI trainers and their patrons. For one, it may help DEI trainers if their services are seen as annual necessities, like checkups, rather than cures, as the former brings in more business than the latter (Taibbi 2020). Moreover, as author Hari Kunzru notes, a corporation will not hire a consultant who argues for

⁷¹ Dobbin and Kalev find that voluntary trainings, however, evoke the “opposite response,” “leading to...increases of 9% to 13% in black men, Hispanic men, and Asian- American men and women in management five years out (with no decline in white or black women)” (2016).

“the redistribution of power and resources”—i.e., more effective means of promoting equity—as such proposals counter corporate interests. “Of necessity,” Kunzru writes, “in a corporate forum, solutions need to be presented in ways that do not threaten the host organization, and that inevitably leads to their being framed as matters of personal, individual behavior” (2020). Therefore, a DEI consultant is more likely to be hired if they provide less-impactful interventions that do not dramatically affect a business’s bottom line. And companies can receive positive PR by providing trainings—as Sephora and Starbucks did “after instances of racial profiling at their stores”—regardless of their long-term impact (Pan 2020). Similarly, DEI interventions may provide legal cover for the companies that employ them, irrespective of their long-term efficacy as well.

Indeed, Dobbin and Kalev corroborate that mandated DEI trainings are largely motivated by legal concerns with historical and testimonial evidence. They write that “businesses started caring a lot more about diversity” “after Wall Street firms repeatedly had to shell out millions to settle discrimination lawsuits” “in the late 1990s and early 2000s” (2016). One diversity manager told Dobbin and Kalev that “If there are a number of complaints...or, God forbid, some type of harassment case... Everyone in the business unit will go through [another training].” While trainings may be costly, “requiring employees to take an hour-long online anti-bias course or even hiring trainers to conduct in-person seminars still costs significantly less time and money than a discrimination lawsuit, like the one that cost Texaco \$176 million in 1996 or the one that cost Coca-Cola \$192.5 million in 2000” (Pan 2020).

In short, the DEI industry provides economic opportunities for white privilege advocates. Accordingly, there is a material incentive for the continued production of white privilege discourse. However, whether one wants greater racial equality across social sectors, more diverse

professional representation, or simply more friendly workplaces, diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings—especially mandated ones—are not the answer. Instead, such trainings—wherein “issues like wages, benefits, commodification, workplace decision making, public spending priorities, and collective action are entirely evacuated”—protect corporate interests at the expense of those who would benefit from a more egalitarian redistribution of resources, including the majority of nonwhite Americans (Parenti 2021).

Conclusion

Whether motivated by disdain for racial injustice, ego, or money, white privilege scholars do not offer their adherents realistic means of advancing broader racial justice. Indeed, white privilege advocates’ tactics are more likely to entrench racial prejudice than alleviate it. But we do not want for realistic means of mitigating racial prejudice and advancing racial equality.

In analyzing the failures of the modern DEI industry, Dobbins and Kalev also discuss more effective means of confronting discrimination. They highlight one study that provided compelling evidence that people can shed much of their racial bias. During World War II, they write:

The U.S. army was still segregated, and only whites served in combat roles. High casualties left General Dwight Eisenhower understaffed, and he asked for black volunteers for combat duty. When Harvard sociologist Samuel Stouffer, on leave at the War Department, surveyed troops on their racial attitudes, he found that whites whose companies had been joined by black platoons showed dramatically lower racial animus and greater willingness to work alongside blacks than those whose companies remained segregated. Stouffer concluded that whites fighting alongside blacks came to see them as soldiers like themselves first and foremost. The key, for Stouffer, was that whites and blacks had to be working toward a common goal *as equals*. (2016)

In other words, it was not reeducation that transformed the white soldiers’ views; it was changing their material experience. In the dissertation’s Conclusion, I provide further evidence that racial justice has consistently been advanced through such material change.

CONCLUSION

“The long journey ahead requires that we emphasize the needs of all America’s poor, for there is no way merely to find work, or adequate housing, or quality-integrated schools for Negroes alone. We shall eliminate slums for Negroes when we destroy ghettos and build new cities for all. We shall eliminate unemployment for Negroes when we demand full and fair employment for all. We shall produce an educated and skilled Negro mass when we achieve a twentieth century education system for all.”

-Martin Luther King (October 26, 1966)

Introduction

In this dissertation, I have argued that white privilege discourse operates as a pseudo-progressive smokescreen that ultimately protects and promotes racial essentialism and reigning racial inequality. I define white privilege discourse as a body of literature united by the claim that white Americans must recognize and renounce their privilege to effectively advance racial justice in the United States. I conclude this dissertation by addressing the main challenge white privilege discourse proponents would likely level against my thesis: that it is “class-reductionist” and thereby fails to recognize that racism is a distinct harm from class exploitation that specifically requires race-based interventions.

To address this charge, I return to the argument I made at the end of Chapter Two: when people employ race as an organizing principle *divorced* from class, they buttress racial inequality, even if their intentions are antiracist. I then conclude the dissertation by advocating a solidaristic and pragmatic approach to furthering racial justice. To illustrate my position here, I discuss the practical political organizing American Unionists employed to provoke the most dramatic shift toward racial justice in American history, the emancipation of Black slaves.

Anticipated Challenges

As previously noted, white privilege scholars are motivated—at least in part—by their desire to combat misguided understandings of racial inequality in the United States. One objection they have is to underclass ideology, which blames people of color’s culture for the disproportionate representation of nonwhites among the unemployed, poor, working-class, and incarcerated. Another critique is of colorblind ideology, which seeks to eliminate racial discrimination by ignoring race altogether, socially, legally, and politically. A third approach white privilege scholars oppose is now pejoratively referred to as “class reductionism.” This view prioritizes class-based interventions as remedies for racial injustice. Articulating the position of white privilege discourse scholars, political theorist Joel Olson writes, “my argument refutes growing arguments to replace so-called ‘divisive’ race-based policies such as affirmative action with ‘universal’ or ‘class-based’ policies and insists on defending and strengthening those programs that directly undermine the wages of whiteness” (2004, xxii).

Again, my overall rejection of white privilege discourse is not an endorsement of underclass or colorblind ideologies; but as discussed in Chapter Two’s conclusion, I oppose white privilege scholars’ negative characterization of employing class-based tactics to promote racial justice. Throughout the dissertation, I have disavowed underclass ideology. I have also argued that white privilege discourse often inadvertently supports this ideology while claiming to rebuff it. Still, white privilege scholars and I agree that underclass ideology must be demystified.

Although I argue that emphasizing the commonalities shared by poor and working-class nonwhite and white people (and not their differences) is essential to furthering racial equality, I also agree with white privilege scholars that colorblind ideology is harmful. The public should be taught about the history and persistence of racial injustice, the government should continue to

enforce anti-discrimination, and when there is disproportionate racial representation in a sector, interested parties should work to understand why and address the root causes.

I do, however, reject the potential charge of class reductionism, as it depends on obscuring the connections and dependencies between racial oppression and economic exploitation. My position here is not that economic injustice is worse than racial injustice or that confronting economic inequality must be prioritized over confronting racial disparities. Instead, I argue that the material, social, and political well-being of most nonwhite Americans—and not just a token few—depends on class-based initiatives. Put differently, even those who prioritize racial justice over economic injustice should employ a class-based approach.

In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that white privilege discourse fails to offer meaningful, concrete interventions that would advance racial equity. But there are myriad class-based interventions with mass support that could. If a racial justice advocate is concerned with economic disparities, for example, then “the most promising strategies are not specifically about race” (Porter 2021, paraphrasing the economist Kerwin Kofi Charles). Instead, “[s]trengthening unions, whose main job is to push for higher wages...[and] raising the minimum wage” are surefire ways to reduce economic, racial disparities (Porter 2021). Furthermore, both interventions have broad appeal. As of 2022, 71% of Americans approved of labor unions, and as of 2021, 62% supported raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour (McCarthy 2022b; Dunn 2021). If a racial justice advocate is principally concerned with nonwhites’ access to resources like higher education, healthcare, and childcare, then universalizing these as public goods would give every interested nonwhite American access to them, rather than a select few that “earn” such rights. Once again, the support is there. “Among all U.S. adults, 63% favor making tuition at public colleges free,” the same percent “say the government has the

responsibility to provide health care coverage for all,” and “Free pre-kindergarten for all three and four year olds receives 61% support nationwide” (Hartig 2021; Jones 2020; “Report: Americans Support Universal Pre-K and Free Community College” 2021).

For those who wish to reduce the overrepresentation of people of color under the American penal system’s supervision, there are additional race-neutral interventions that have widespread support. For example, a 2016 study by Pew found that “80 percent [of Americans] favor ending mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses and...more than three-quarters support eliminating federal mandatory minimums in all cases” (“Voters Want Big Changes in Federal Sentencing, Prison System” 2016). Furthermore, 74 percent of Americans support ending stop-and-frisk (McCarthy 2022a). Another Pew study found overwhelming support for reducing jail time for juveniles and increasing their access to treatment, counseling, social services, and supervision (“Public Opinion on Juvenile Justice in America” 2014). There are many other race-neutral initiatives that would reduce racial inequity in criminal justice practices, including: restoring felons’ voting rights, ending cash bail, training police officers in de-escalation tactics, expanding accessible mental health resources, properly implementing the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth amendments (all of which have to do with the rights of the accused and indicted), democratizing access to quality legal representation, reducing the role of plea bargaining, and so on. Moreover, given the scholarly consensus that poverty and crime are linked phenomena, the abovementioned economic agenda would also reduce incarceration among under-resourced, disproportionately nonwhite Americans.

A racial justice advocate focused on ending racial discrimination might contend that these universal proposals cannot address their key concern, as even well-off people of color suffer discrimination. Scholar and public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson suggests this response when

he writes, “well-to-do blacks don’t get an exemption from racism. Of course our status mostly protects us from the worst you can do to most of us, but it doesn’t stop us as a class of folks from being denied opportunities that our smarts and our success should have guaranteed us” (2017, 90). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva similarly notes that even “middle-class Blacks” confront a “dense network of discriminatory practices...in everyday life” (2018, 28). I do not dispute these statements: middle-class and rich nonwhite Americans certainly face racial discrimination. However, it would be inappropriate to therefore conclude that universal economic programs cannot mitigate such prejudice. Instead, given the specific stereotypes associated with nonwhite (or, more specifically, Black and Hispanic) Americans and the inherent link between economic exploitation and racial categorization, it is reasonable to assume that class-based initiatives could meaningfully reduce racial discrimination. Articulating this argument requires briefly reproducing harmful group stereotypes.

Poor people in the United States are frequently stereotyped as lazy, violent, lawless, simple-minded, loud, unfaithful, out-of-control, and irresponsible. Although there is some deviation, this list is similar to the list of negative stereotypes imputed to Black and Hispanic Americans. Speaking to this point, Bonilla-Silva notes that one of the ways middle-class Black people are discriminated against is by “being confused constantly with menial workers” (2018, 28). While stereotypes of groups other than Black and Hispanic Americans may also overlap with those attributed to poor people—such as obese people or drug users—many groups are degraded by quite different associations. Historically, gay men in America have been portrayed as perverted, weak, frivolous, and cowardly. Jews as greedy, dishonest, treacherous, and vulgar. Women as irrational, complaining, unsatisfiable, and hysterical. Irish as alcoholic, prudish, uptight, and overly talkative. While these stereotypes have economic dimensions, unlike the

negative stereotypes of Black and Hispanic people, they do not dramatically overlap with those of poor people.

In theory, then, increased economic equality and, correspondingly, increased racial equality would undermine the association between nonwhites and poverty and prejudice against poor people and nonwhite people. This is not to suggest that universal class-based programs would quickly or fully eradicate racist perceptions of nonwhite Americans. Yet, unlike the reeducation tactics white privilege scholars endorse, these economic interventions could meaningfully reduce racial discrimination. Having said that, egalitarians should also reject the position that being “confused” with “menial workers” is degrading, as the dignity we afford people should be dissociated from whether they perform skilled labor. Providing all Americans with access to jobs, living wages, reasonable work schedules, healthcare, childcare, eldercare, affordable higher education, and so on, would reaffirm nonwhite dignity—and all human dignity—by establishing that humane treatment does not depend on the arbitrary circumstances of one’s birth and the role of luck in one’s life.

We need not speculate much, however, about one class-based intervention’s ability to lessen discrimination. In the United States today, uniting workers in interracial unions has been shown to effectively reduce racial resentment among white workers. In 2020, political scientists Paul Frymer and Jacob M. Grumbach published a study that investigated “the relationship between union membership and the racial politics of white Americans” (2020, 1). The study drew on data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey—which “contains biannual samples of 30,000 respondents” as well as 2010, 2012, and 2014 panel data—and the Voter Study Group—which provides panel data for “approximately 8,000 respondents who were

surveyed during the 2012 election cycle and then contacted again during the 2016 election cycle”

(6). This analysis found that:

White union members are less racially resentful than nonwhite union members by between 4.7 and 6.3% of the racial resentment scale. The magnitude of this relationship is substantial—rivaling or surpassing other demographic variables that strongly structure mass politics in the United States. The coefficient for union member is as large as that for female, and quite nearly as large as that for education. (9)

The study also found that becoming a union member reduces “racial resentment between 4.1 and 4.8% on the index” and that there is “a strong relationship between union membership and support for affirmative action for African Americans...The magnitude of [which]... is greater than that of education, and nearly the size of gender” (10; 11).

That “white union members have lower racial resentment” is unsurprising (Frymer and Grumbach 2020, 1). The aim of unions is to unite workers in common cause and protect their shared interests against those of management. Therefore, workers are incentivized to commiserate with one another, and they have time to do so as work is “where individuals spend most of their time outside of home life” (Frymer and Grumbach 2020, 3). Given that the labor movement “is undoubtedly more diverse than ever,” unions today are especially well-positioned to promote interracial understanding and solidarity (Frymer and Grumbach 2020, 3). Accordingly, if a racial justice advocate is concerned with reducing racial prejudice, their time is better spent helping revitalize American unions—the density of which has “declined from almost 30% to 10% of workers since 1970”—than promoting white consciousness-raising (Frymer and Grumbach 2020, 13). In addition, union membership has the added benefit of providing higher wages and more benefits than similar non-union work. As historian Touré Reed notes:

Unionization has paid significant dividends to African Americans. Indeed, when compared with nonunionized black workers, black union members earn 16.4 percent higher wages, they are 17.4 percent more likely to have health insurance, and they are

18.3 percent more likely to have some form of pensions. Moreover, because union contracts standardize wages, unionization virtually eliminates the black-white wage gap. (2020, 118)

All told, unionization and universal, class-based programs do not minimize racial inequality: they confront it directly via concrete interventions capable of attracting mass support. Moreover, as Frymer and Grumbach's work suggests, Olson's supposition above is unfounded: promoting class-based initiatives is compatible with supporting anti-discrimination measures and affirmative action.

Of course, there are tremendous barriers to revitalizing anemic working-class politics in the United States—not the least of which is the influence of monied interests in American politics. However, an interracial coalition invested in pursuing universal public goods is the most viable means of promoting meaningful and sustained racial equality: materially, politically, and socially. Demystifying and discouraging anti-solidaristic ideologies that crowd out space for more progressive politics is one tine of the multi-pronged approach needed to bolster truly egalitarian racial justice organizing in the United States.

The Political Function of Race without Class

Racism as an ideology has flourished in the United States largely because it obscures white and nonwhite poor and working-class people's shared interests and thereby protects the interests of economic elites. When one deploys race as a political device divorced from class, they advance an ideology designed to undermine the well-being of the majority of non-elite, disproportionately nonwhite Americans—no matter how good their intentions. In other words, race divorced from class reinforces the reigning ideology of the Antebellum South, Jim Crow, and the Southern Strategy, which was developed and deployed by civil rights era Republicans to form a majority voting block by appealing to the racial prejudices of white, southern workers

who had historically voted Democrat. By splitting the working-class vote, the strategy enabled decades of anti-poor, anti-worker governance. The Southern Strategy succeeded, and its effects endure, partly because Democrats failed and fail to provide an appealing alternative for voters interested in advancing economic policies like those noted above.

In her article “Beware the Race Reductionists,” political consultant and commentator Briahna Gray shows that Democratic politicians, like Republican politicians, frequently use race to distract from implementing progressive economic proposals. Gray notes that in 2016, for example, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton asked, ““If we broke up the big banks tomorrow...would that end racism? Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the LGBT community?” Her answer was no (Clinton quoted in Gray 2018). In the same year, Congressman James Clyburn questioned Bernie Sanders’ free college tuition plan by claiming that it would hurt HBCUs: “If you say that you’re going to have...free...two-year college among public institutions, why would a student go to an HBCU...most of which are private institutions...What will happen is these HBCUs will all close down all across America” (Young 2016). By downplaying the need for economic interventions, Democratic politicians leave space for Republicans like Donald Trump to steer emergent economic populism toward nationalist and white supremacist outlets.

Trump’s unabashed use of racial resentment has been well covered, but economist Christian Parenti notes that his appeal to economic populism has been somewhat understudied. “Contrary to how he was portrayed in the mainstream media,” Parenti writes:

Trump did not talk only of walls, immigration bans, and deportations...Don’t get me wrong, Trump is a racist, misogynist, and confessed sexual predator who has legitimized dangerous street-level hate...But the heart of his message was something different, an ersatz economic populism, which has been noted far and wide, but also a strong, usually overlooked, anti-war message. Both spoke to legitimate working class concerns. (2016)

Parenti describes how Trump’s campaign speeches “would tee-up with reference to ‘the wall’ but then quickly pivot to economic questions: trade, jobs, descriptions of economic suffering, critiques of deindustrialization” (2016). Accordingly, statements like the following litter Trump’s speeches: “We’re gonna bring businesses back. We’re gonna have businesses that used to be in New Hampshire, that are now in Mexico, come back to New Hampshire. And...you can tell them, to go fuck themselves! Because they let you down, and they left!” (Trump quoted in Parenti 2016). Of course, Trump’s claim that he would advance working-class Americans’ interests was entirely disingenuous, and the Republican party remains dedicated to corporate America’s political agenda. But the Democratic Party today does not offer a robust alternative program for the economically distressed.

White privilege discourse reinforces the racial messaging that the major American political parties use today (and have used for much of history): portray race as essentially separate from class and thereby deter poor and working white and nonwhite Americans from recognizing their shared interest. Historically, political operatives who use this strategy adorn it with white supremacy. White supremacists divorce race from class, degrade people of color, and cultivate white identity and the myth of white privilege. While white privilege scholars vehemently oppose white supremacy, they deploy the white supremacist playbook—except for intentionally degrading people of color (which only occurs as an accidental outgrowth of their philosophy)—to the same effect. However, whereas white supremacists implicitly communicate

to white people, “At least you’re not Black,” white privilege scholars do so explicitly.⁷² The upshot remains largely the same: more racial resentment and less solidarity among under-resourced nonwhite and white people, to the detriment of most Americans of color (and most white Americans, too).

An Anti-Utopian Approach to Racial Justice

The politics that can bring greater racial equality to the United States are solidaristic and pragmatic. By solidaristic, I mean a politics that appeals to the largest group of people who can be united in common cause (a strategy that is also practical).⁷³ By pragmatic, I mean a politics that takes people as they are—i.e., self-interested actors—rather than as the altruistic beings they could or should be. As the Martin Luther King epigraph suggests, this is the approach used by some of the most impactful racial justice organizers in US history. It is the approach Fredrick Douglass adopted. “In a visit to Ireland in the famine year of 1845, Douglass likened the circumstances of Ireland’s poor to those of enslaved black people...[stating], The Irish needed only ‘black skin and wooly hair, to complete their likeness to the plantation Negro’ (Painter 2010, 143). Rather than calling on Irish people to recognize their privilege compared to enslaved Black Americans, Douglass and fellow Garrisonians “made Irish Catholic emancipation an integral part of their campaign for universal reform” (Painter 2010, 143). For readers

⁷² In just a few lines, for example, Robin DiAngelo condemns and fosters racial animosity among workers: “The poor and working classes, if united across race, could be a powerful force. But racial divisions have served to keep them from organizing...Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren’t also experiencing racism” (2018, 19).

⁷³ Occasionally, white privilege scholars discuss moments of interracial solidarity. However, when they do so, white privilege scholars portray white activists as allies compassionately supporting a cause that goes against their own interests rather than as actors committed to a shared, cross-racial purpose. For example, see pages 244-245 of Tim Wise’s *White Like Me* (2011).

unpersuaded that solidaristic and pragmatic strategies are foundational to the pursuit of racial justice, the emancipation of Black slaves in the United States provides a useful case study. While contemporary activists must be aware of the current sociopolitical landscape and the nuances therein, understanding how power has been successfully contested in the past is also necessary for developing an accurate political analysis and effective organizing strategy.

The Emancipation of Black slaves in the United States, coupled with the Reconstruction Amendments, were the most significant racial justice reforms in American history. Achieving them required widespread solidarity and millions of Americans willing to sacrifice their lives. Of course, part of the coalition that emancipated slaves were hundreds of thousands of enslaved Black people who fought for their freedom. “By late 1861,” Republicans commonly referred to these enslaved people as the most reliably loyal Unionists in the South” (Oakes 2019). But Emancipation required more people power than current and former slaves alone could provide. This power included “300,000 Southern whites” who fought for the Union, Western Virginians who “petitioned for admission to the Union as a separate state” (which they were granted by agreeing to “formally abolish slavery first”), “small farmers [in the North, who] formed the bedrock of the Republican Party,” War Democrats who sought to preserve the Union, and, of course, skilled generals (Oakes 2019; Karp 2019). To create such a coalition, Republicans had to speak to the interests of each of these factions.

Historian Matthew Karp notes that:

In many ways, the newfound power of the antislavery appeal benefitted from the activist labors of American abolitionists, from William Lloyd Garrison to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had spent over two decades creatively decrying the sin and crime of human bondage. ... Yet it would be a mistake to regard the mass politics of antislavery, as they emerged after 1854, as primarily an exercise in consciousness-raising. While Republicans... often adopted the moral intensity of Garrisonian abolitionists, they also appealed to the very material self-interest of Northern voters. Above all, Republicans depicted the battle

against slavery as a species of class struggle — a social war not simply between slaves and masters, but between the overwhelming majority of Americans and a tiny aristocracy of slave lords who controlled the federal government. (2019)

In other words, the Emancipation of enslaved Black Americans largely depended on linking the slaves' struggle against slaveholders to free agricultural workers' struggle against the same.⁷⁴ Or, put differently, to form a coalition capable of “destroying the largest, wealthiest slave society on earth,” Republicans strategically equated the Civil War to class war: free labor vs. slaveholders (Oakes 2019).

Karp and fellow historian James Oakes provide many examples of Republicans using the language of class warfare to rally support for the Union. The New York Senator William Henry Seward did so frequently. “A privileged class has existed in this country from an early period of its settlement,” [he] declared in 1855. ‘The slaveholders constitute that class.’ The irrepressible conflict over slavery was best understood as a ‘conflict between the privileged and the

⁷⁴ Karp further details the limitations of moralizing as a political tactic when addressing those who deride Northern Union soldiers for being insufficiently outraged by the horrors of slavery. I quote Karp at length because white privilege discourse can similarly be faulted for overestimating the value of moralizing as an instrumental political tool:

For some abolitionists — and many later historians — the Republican embrace of class-conscious free labor rhetoric, and the party's support for tariffs and homesteads, represented the dilution of a purer struggle against slavery's injustice. The Garrisonian abolitionist Henry Wright offered a critique of the Republican Party that has resonated with many later scholars: “the party, as a party, has nothing to do with the enslavement of the African; that the only question at issue is — Shall the North be enslaved?” For these critics the Republicans' broader appeal to Northern voters precluded a truly moral campaign against slavery's injustice. But this perspective reflects the limits of a liberal humanitarian view of politics: it categorically rules out self-interest as a motive for radical action, conflating egalitarian struggle with charitable sympathy. Even more perversely, it brands the very boldness of the Republican agenda — building a mass movement to overthrow a ruling-class oligarchy — as moderate or even conservative politics. The Republican achievement in the 1850s was not to isolate moral, cultural, or economic arguments against slavery, but to combine them into a compelling and victorious whole. (2019)

unprivileged classes of this republic” (Oakes 2019). The following year, Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas accused Seward and other Republicans of “attempting to turn the slavery debate into ‘a question between capital and labor,’ so they could ‘take the side of the numbers against the few’” (Karp 2019). Affirming Douglas’ point, that same year “Republican organizer Francis Blair declared of the party’s strategy during the election of 1856: ‘the contest ought not to be considered a sectional one but rather the war of a class — the slaveholders — against the laboring people of all classes’” (Karp 2019). And in 1858, Black Ohio abolitionist John Mercer Langston argued:

[T]he enslavement and degradation of one portion of the population fastens galling fettering chains upon the limbs of the other ... This identification of the interests of the white and colored people of the country — this peculiarly national feature of the anti-slavery movement — is one of its most cheering, hope-inspiring, and hope-supporting characteristics ... White Americans cannot stand as idle spectators to the struggle, but must unite with us in battling the fell enemy if they themselves would save their own freedom. (Langston quoted in Karp 2019)

Fredrick Douglass understood the matter of emancipation similarly, stating in 1861, “all know that the masses at the North (the power behind the throne) had determined to take and keep this Government out of the hands of the slave-holding oligarchy, and to administer it hereafter to the advantage of free labor against slave labor” (Douglass quoted in Karp 2019).

These speakers did not invoke racial privilege. Instead, they challenged the privilege of those who directly profited from slave labor and a divided working class. In this way, Civil War-era abolitionists and Republicans cultivated mass solidarity. “By naming a common enemy—the privileged class of slaveholders,” Oakes writes, “the Republican Party was able to build and then steer a coalition of whites and blacks, racists and anti-racists, toward the systematic destruction of slavery” (2019). Unlike white privilege scholars who see white consciousness-raising and moral purity as a prerequisite to activism, Unionists required a commitment to concretely

furthering the cause of Emancipation. Hardly any American did more for this cause than Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, and he “had no sympathy at all for emancipation” (Oakes 2013, 319-320). But Sherman was “a professional [and exceptionally skilled] soldier who...believed that civilians made policy and that the army merely implemented it” (Oakes 2013, 320). By the end of the military campaign known as “Sherman’s March to the Sea,” the General’s army had freed between 17,000 and 25,000 enslaved Black people” (Hudson 2023). An idealist, in the moral sense, could not have entrusted Sherman, a white supremacist, with the liberation of enslaved Black Americans. A pragmatist, however, did, and in so doing, profoundly advance racial justice in the United States.

Conclusion

To continue the fight for racial justice today—when racial disparities persist across nearly all social sectors, racial discrimination remains pervasive, and far too many nonwhite people lack basic necessities, let alone middle-class comforts—egalitarians ought to reject the utopian antiracism of white privilege discourse and embrace the messier, more just, and more effective politics of pragmatic, antiutopian coalition building. Such coalition building must start by recognizing the fundamental truth that most white Americans, like nearly all Americans of color, suffer at the hand of racial injustice. White privilege discourse is predicated on denying this truth.

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