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## White Skin Privilege

By Richard Moser  
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White privilege is a thing. It's just not the same thing the corporate Democrats use to boss us around with. The concept of white privilege was not invented by some liberal university professors. In fact, the concept of white privilege was created by a white man: a radical activist and historian who barely attended college.

Writing for the John Brown Commemoration Committee in 1965, Theodore Allen innovated the discourse on white skin privilege. In 1967 he co-authored “White Blindspot” and in 1969 published “Can White Workers Radicals Be Radicalized?”

According to Jeffrey B. Perry:

Allen’s work influenced the Students for a Democratic Society and sectors of the “new left” and it paved the way for the “white privilege” “race as social construct” and “whiteness studies” academic fields.[1]

In our deep past, white privileges were granted by a “presumption of liberty” to white people that was simultaneously denied Blacks.

We can track that presumption of liberty straight to today’s “presumption of innocence” that we are all supposed to enjoy but are all too often denied Natives, Blacks, other people of color, poor people and those that do not conform to gender or sexual social norms. The vast militarized penal system all too often deprives people of color the “presumption of liberty:” the right to be innocent until proven guilty and to enjoy the equal protection of the law as demanded by the Constitution. As the presumption of guilt becomes normalized it effects everyone including the white working class.

Unlike liberal interpretations of white privilege used to attack dissent, Allen’s understanding was that white privileges are *contrary* to the long-term political and material interest of white people. The benefits, bribes, and appeals to white people do have a real value, which is one reason they work, but that value is far less than the value that would be produced by class solidarity and cross-racial action to raise wages, win political power and establish justice.

In 1969 Allen wrote:

The white-skin privileges of the masses of the white workers do not permit them nor their children to escape into the ranks of the propertied classes. *In the South, where the white-skin privilege has always been most emphasized and formal, the white workers have fared worse than white workers in the rest of the country. The white-skin privilege for the mass is the trustee’s privilege, not release from jail, merely freedom of movement within it and a diet more nearly adequate. It is not that the ordinary white worker gets more than he must have to support himself and his family, but that the black worker gets less than the white worker. The result is that by thus inducing, reinforcing and perpetuating racist attitudes on the part of the white workers, the present-day power-masters get the political support of the rank-and-file of the white workers in critical situations, and without having to share with them their super profits in the slightest measure...*[2] [emphasis added]

To this day, “The white-skin privilege for the mass is the *trustee’s* privilege not release from jail...” Some of the prisoners can control other prisoners but never challenge the warden.

Look at mass incarceration today. According to a Pew Research Center study 2010 US incarceration rates for white men are 678 per hundred thousand and 91 per hundred thousand for

white women. The incarceration rate for black men is a staggering six times greater than white men, and almost three times higher for black women. (4,347 for Black men and 260 for Black women). Yet, white men and women are incarcerated at rates much higher than those of comparable countries.

The US rate for white male incarceration alone is far greater than every other European incarceration rate for total prisoners of all classes, races and genders. And, the Russian incarceration rate skews the statistic as it towers above every other European country at 439 per hundred thousand. The average rate for European Union members was 135 in 2006. US white women for example, are incarcerated at higher rates than the total of all classes, races and genders for an astounding 20 European countries.

The penal system captures the effect of white privilege in a nutshell. “You got more than the blacks don’t complain.” But so much less than justice, freedom or democracy would demand. Yet our relative privilege allowed us to consent to the war on drugs and the “get tough on crime” politicians that aimed at Blacks first but who ultimately created an authoritarian police state that now aims to make even the exercise of constitutional rights a criminal act. We all lose, including losing our rights to a trial by jury that the Bill of Rights claims to protect. The new penal system also got tough on working class whites as it garrisoned the entire country with a militarized force dedicated to protecting the established order.

### **The Psychic Wage**

The wage harder to put a price on, and one of the most serious remaining obstacles to overcoming racism, is what W.E.B. Dubois, the great American thinker, called the psychological wage. “[3] The psychological or psychic wage is that highly coveted sense of personal, spiritual, and moral superiority we are taught to derive from our skin color.

This psychic wage is collected, in part, by an imaginary connection with whites of high status. White privilege creates vertical solidarity that connects working class whites to the power and glory of the rich, strong, and celebrated white elites, even though our overall political and economic interests are shared by working class people of color. White workers are exploited by the boss and sent to die in their wars daily. Our privilege gives us the delusion that we are *not* who we truly *are*.

James Baldwin, the black writer and visionary, put it this way:

[A]s long as white Americans take refuge in their whiteness —for so long as they are unable to walk out of this most monstrous of traps —they will allow millions of people to be slaughtered in their name, and will be manipulated into and surrender themselves to what they will think of —and justify — as a racial war. They will never, so long as *their whiteness puts so sinister a distance between themselves and their own experience and the experience of others*, feel themselves sufficiently human, sufficiently worthwhile, to become responsible for themselves, their leaders, their country, their children, or their fate. They will perish...in their delusions. And this is happening, needless to say, already, all around us...*But the American delusion is not only that their brothers all are white but that the whites are all their brothers.* [4][emphasis added]

Whiteness and privilege distances us from our “*own experience and the experience of others.*” You may feel connected to a Trump or a Clinton for an Obama, or aspire to become a general or a billionaire, but to them we are but chumps and pawns.

### **Solidarity — Horizontal or Vertical?**

Yes, it is the privileges whites have that disrupt horizontal solidarity, but when those bribes are eroded, even partially, by debt, poverty, the long term decline of wages, poor health, drug addiction, and hopelessness, their hypnotic power weakens. Young whites in particular have come to see the transparent truth that the system is rigged against them, and perhaps above all, that the scientific forecast of life on our planet is so poisoned and precarious that no amount of privilege will save them.

These changes in consciousness are signs that we might again cross into revolutionary territory. The unending recession of 2008 has forced whites to choose. Cling ever harder to the psychological wage, hate, and white supremacy, or join the movements toward social reform, revolution, resistance, and love.

In a broader sense, it is the corporate power that is creating the crisis in privilege as a form of social control. If the corporate state can no longer allow any meaningful improvements in the lives of everyday people — and impose only austerity and growing poverty — we can expect that both the Democrats and Republicans will increasingly turn to the psychological wage as the remaining form of compensation, bribe and appeal. In different ways perhaps, Trump, Clinton and Obama have nonetheless resorted to the vertical solidarity of nationalism and/or corporate forms of political identity to block the political space that should be occupied by struggles over economic democracy, equality, ecology and peace.

The vertical solidarity of white privilege should make us very wary of other forms of vertical solidarity that have been a typical tool of the elites. Tokenism and machine politics establish a political and spiritual connection when people identify with the managers of war and empire because they share the same gender, sexuality, color, class or national origins. The degree to which there was uncritical feminist support of Clinton — and many feminists did oppose Clinton — is the measure of how psychic wages can operate to protect the existing order. The unfounded belief by some liberals that Obama is a civil rights leader — and many in the new civil rights movement do criticize Obama — shows the degree to which the vertical solidarity that has so damaged white people and the social movements, will have a similar effect if offered to others, even those historically exploited and oppressed by the established order.[5]

Privilege, vertical solidarity and the psychic wage remain potent means of maintaining social control at home and empire abroad. In the same way white privilege blinds white people to their own invented identity and the depth of racism, imperial privilege blinds all of us to the ongoing imperial project with its constant bloodletting and profit making that has become our way of life.

Our best move is to take on the most deeply entrenched form of privilege: white privilege. For that we need to organize the white working class.

## **It's Not Academic.**

Debates continue over Allen's assertion that the white race and white privilege was invented as a conscious and deliberate act of the oligarchs. Was it that, or the general outcome of the historical conditions of the time? The key argument for activists, however, is that white racism is not itself innate and therefore can be changed. History is made by human action. Sometime human acts are conscious, even conspiratorial. Other times we contribute to change through a multitude of human decisions; local and global, visionary and parochial.

But the political world is not an academic debate. It is up to us to prove that white racism is not innate in white people and that racism can be changed by activism.

## **Notes.**

1/ The Developing Conjuncture and Some Insights from Hubert Harrison and Theodore W Allen on the Centrality of the Fight against White Supremacy p 8-9

2/ Ted Allen, Can White ~~Workers~~ Radicals be Radicalized p. 175

3/ W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction [New York, 1935], pp. 700-701.

4/ James Baldwin, An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis

For more see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation, Chapter 3.