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The Oppression of Whites

Julius Lester

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The potential for revolution in this country will remain unrealized until whites understand that they are an oppressed people. Oppression is generally thought of as a condition endured only by blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and the poor whites of the South. Oppression is associated with the poverty of Appalachia and the tenements of Harlem, but a run-down mountain shack and a rat-infested tenement are only an aspect of oppression — material deprivation.

Oppression is a condition common to all of us who are without the power to make the decisions that govern the political, economic, and social life of this country. We are oppressed because our lives are predetermined by an economic machine functioning, and eventually to die, having lived our lives “earning a living.” We are oppressed because to “earn a living” (work), we are told, is good; to refuse to “earn a living,” voluntarily or involuntarily, is bad. Two weeks of every fifty-two are allotted to us to live. The other fifty are spent being “good,” i.e., keeping the economic machine functioning. Our reward for being “good” is a salary, a pacifier with which we feed, clothe, and house ourselves and our families and dull

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the pain by going into debt to buy the luxury items which give us the illusion of life.

It is necessary for the white radical to analyze the nature of his oppression and realize that any person who earns wages is a member of the working class. The taxi driver and the college professor are equal members of the working class. The professor's salary and social status give him certain attitudes whereby he can believe himself to be different. He is middle-class, bourgeois, but he is still a part of the working class. The middleclass and the working class are not opposed to each other. The middle class must be defined anew.

Whites are oppressed, but their realization of this is as yet, for the most part, unconscious. The hippie phenomenon, the widespread use of drugs, the teen-age runaways and the anti-war movement are all reactions to oppression. But the nature and substance of that oppression is only faintly articulated. Until a people understand what is being done to them, they will react only to what is hostile to their well-being. They will not fight back against it.

Perhaps the basic inability of black radicals and whites to communicate lies in the fact that the former know acutely the nature of oppression, while whites still think they're free. They still find it difficult not to believe the fairy tales about this country taught in school. Blacks know what has been done to them and they are angry. Whites do not and thus can only romantically identify with the anger of blacks.

Yet we are all victims of the ideology of inhumanity on which this country thrives. It is an ideology which says that if the amount of money in a man's pocket does not correspond to some numbers on a tag, that man can starve, be kicked out of his home, and go naked. It is an ideology of death, whose most blatant manifestation is napalm. But napalm is the logical extension of an ideology which requires money in exchange for the basic necessities of life.

There is much talk and confusion as to how to organize whites. Few feel adequate to the task and rationalize by saying that it is easier to organize in the black community. Yet, all around us there are white who are trying to get out of the system the best way they can. For most it is no more than sitting in front of the television set with a can of beer night after night and being anesthetized. Whites use a myriad of drugs to dull the pain. They do not want their perception of reality heightened. It is heightened too much already, and if they can't dull the pain, they eventually go quietly berserk one day. How many times a week do we read of some quiet model citizen eliminating his wife, kids, and himself and leaving no explanation behind for the neighbors? The neighbors don't need it explained, however. They know.

The inhumanity of America is etched into the lines of every white face. Yet the white radical tends to look upon whites with contempt. But talk to a cab driver, a waitress, one of those chic young secretaries, an airline stewardess, and the pain and misery they live is immediately apparent. Just as the absence of physical comfort reflects the oppression of the Kentucky miner, the absence of any semblance of a whole man reflects the oppression of those who have physical comfort.

The phrase that is being used to characterize the anti-war movement now is "from protest to resistance." That's true on one level, but the real battle has not yet been joined. That is the struggle against oppression. All that is evident now are the reactions to oppression. It is the responsibility of the white radical to move from reaction to oppression to action against it.