

To Advance the Class Struggle, Abolish the White Race

Noel Ignatiev

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Contents

How to Abolish the White Race	3
Against Fascism, Against Capital, Against the State	4
[Note from the Production Group]	5
Letter: Ignatiev responds to the L&R Production Group	5

Race is a biological fiction, but it is a social fact. The white race consists of those who enjoy the privileges of the white skin—freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, the inside track for jobs and careers, not having to fear for their lives every time they leave the home, expecting, if they are female, that the state will protect them from strangers. Its most downtrodden members enjoy a social status above any person defined as “non-white.”

From the standpoint of the working class, the white race is an attempt by some workers to cut a separate deal with capital, at the expense of the class of which they are a part. From the standpoint of capital, it is a cheap way of buying some people’s loyalty to a social system that exploits them.

The cops provide an example of how the white race is held together: the natural attitude of the police toward the exploited is hostility. All over the world cops beat up poor people, and it has nothing to do with color. What is unusual and has to be accounted for is not why they beat up black people but why they don’t normally beat up propertyless whites. The cops look at a person and decide on the basis of color whether that person is loyal to, or an enemy of, the system they are sworn to serve and protect. They don’t stop to think if the black person whose head they are whipping is an enemy; they just assume it. It does not matter if the victim goes to work every day, pays his taxes and crosses only on the green.

On the other hand, the cops don’t know for sure if the white person to whom they give a break is loyal to them. They assume it. The non-beating of whites is time off for good behavior and an assurance of future cooperation. White workers’ color exempts them to some degree from the criminal class—which is how the entire working class was defined before the invention of race, and is still treated in those parts of the world where race does not exist as a social category.

How to Abolish the White Race

But what if the police couldn’t tell a loyal person just by color? What if there were enough people around who looked white but were really enemies of the state so that the cops couldn’t tell whom to beat and whom to let off? What would they do then? They would begin to “enforce the law impartially,” as the liberals say. But, as Anatole France noted, “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids both rich and poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.” The standard that governs police behavior all over the world (except where race exists) is wealth and its external manifestations: dress, speech, etc. At the present time, the class bias of the law is partially repressed by racial considerations; the removal of those considerations would give it free rein. White poor would find themselves on the receiving end of police justice as black people now do. The effect on their consciousness and behavior is predictable.

The abolitionists consider it a useless project to try to win the majority of whites, or even the majority of working class whites, to “anti-racism.” They seek instead to compel capital to turn millions of “whites” against it, by rendering the white skin useless as a predictor of attitudes. How many would it take to rob the white skin of its predictive value? No one can say. How much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to destroy the value of the official stuff? The answer is, nowhere near a majority: in the past, five to ten percent fake has proven enough to undermine public faith in the other. Whiteness is the currency of this society; to destroy it would take only enough counterfeit whites (race traitors) to undermine the confidence of the police, etc. in their ability to differentiate between friends and enemies by color.

The abolitionist strategy depends on the coming together of a minority determined to break up the white race. What would the determined minority have to do to plant doubt about the reliability of the white skin? They would have to break the laws of whiteness so flagrantly as to make it impossible to maintain the myth of white unanimity. Such actions would jeopardize their own ability to draw upon the privileges of whiteness. That is what would define them as race traitors.

Just as the capitalist system is not a capitalist plot, race is not the work of racists. On the contrary, it is reproduced by the principal institutions of society. Therefore, the main target of those who seek to eradicate it should be the institutions and behaviors that maintain it: the schools (which define “excellence”), the unions and employers (which define “employment”), the justice system (which defines “crime”), the welfare system (which defines “poverty”), and the family (which defines “kinship”).

Against Fascism, Against Capital, Against the State

The collapse of the white race does not mean that all people now classified as white would suddenly become revolutionary. Some, whose class interests rest on exploitation, would remain faithful to the capitalist system. However, once color ceased to serve as a handy guide for deciding who gets a beating and who gets off, many victims of exploitation who previously considered themselves “white” would join with the rest of the working class in waging struggle against capital.

Others would take a different path, seeking to restore the privileges of the white race. Alongside class struggle, it is to be expected that militant white-supremacist movements with anti-capitalist slogans would grow among the poorest and most alienated sectors of white society.

The fascists are the vanguard of the white race; however, the big problem right now is not the white vanguard, but the white mainstream. Any anti-fascist struggle that does not confront the state reinforces the institutions that provide the seedbed for fascism. Moreover, every time the fascists are able to depict their opponents as defenders of the existing system, or mere reformers, they gain support among those whites who believe that nothing less than a total change is worth fighting for. An anti-fascist counter-rally where people gather to hear speeches, chant slogans, and shake their fists in rage is a display of impotence, and the more people who attend, the more they reveal their futility.

Fascism and white supremacy will only be defeated by a movement aimed at building a new world. It is not enough to declare this commitment abstractly, by waving the red or black flag; it must be expressed in the content and forms of the struggle itself. How to do that is no easy question. But it is the question of the hour.

Noel Ignatiev is one of the editors of *Race Traitor: journal of the new abolitionism*. Subscriptions are \$20 for four issues, single copies \$6 postpaid. Write [contact info removed from web archive version].

[Note from the Production Group]

[The women of the PG strongly disagree with Noel's statement at the outset of this article that "not having to fear for their lives every time they leave the home, expecting...that the state will protect them from strangers" is a "social fact" for white women. As white women, we have all been harassed by police and fear that we will fall victim to the common practice of police rape and a legal system that still makes it nearly impossible for a woman to 'prove' she has been raped. Some of us have also been physically abused in the presence of police that have turned the other way.

Given that this is the only reference Noel makes to women in his article on class struggle and white privilege, we gave him the opportunity to delete this sentence. He refused, arguing that it is his viewpoint and that it should be left in to "provoke debate." We find the claim offensive, and we want to point out that we believe it runs contrary to the newspaper's commitment to recognizing the way in which state power is used to uphold patriarchy.]

Letter: Ignatiev responds to the L&R Production Group

To the Editors:

In an article in the November/December 1994 issue of Love and Rage, I wrote that white people are those who enjoy the privileges of the white skin, among which are "expecting, if they are female, that the state will protect them from strangers." In a note appended to my article, the editorial board wrote that the women on it "strongly disagree" with my statement, which "runs contrary to the newspaper's commitment to recognizing the way in which state power is used to uphold patriarchy."

It is true that the state upholds the patriarchy, but like every other form of domination, the patriarchy is decisively shaped by white supremacy. In this society, the black woman is public property, the white woman is private property. The state protects the white woman from strangers (not from her husband, father, uncles and brothers), not because it cares for her as a person but because she is the property of a white man, and the job of the state is to protect private property. The state does not protect the black woman from strangers because it does not respect the property rights of the black man. Of course it does not completely protect the white man's woman, any more than it protects his car or his stereo; but it tries, and statistics show that the safest thing to be in this country is a white woman.

Those who disagreed with my statement offered as evidence their own experience of being harassed by police or physically abused in the presence of police who turned the other way. I don't question their accounts; indeed they prove my point: they come from women who show in their dress and manner that they have chosen not to be the property of any man, and therefore have placed themselves beyond the shield of whiteness.

That is a very un-white thing to do and I should think that as anarchists the women on the editorial board would consider it a badge of honor that they are not entirely part of the white race (an oppressive social formation). Instead, they insist on identifying themselves as "white women." Well, they can't have it both ways: either they act like white women ("ladies") and subject themselves to the degrading protection of the patriarchal state that despises them, or they renounce that particular white-skin privilege. If they renounce it, they must recognize that in doing so they are taking a big step toward becoming something other than white, and can expect to be

fair game for every pig in and out of uniform who wants to assert his masculine right over public property. Surely, they don't think they can take part in revolutionary politics while continuing to be white, or that they can cease to be white without paying the price.

Noel Ignatiev, co-editor Race Traitor

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