

An Open Letter to White Progressives and Radicals

Anonymous

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Dearest white progressive/radical,

Recent events in which reported progressives and radicals, purposely or ‘unintentionally,’ marginalized people of color, their lives, images, thoughts and struggles — after prompting a ‘what the fuck’ — remind me this seems so familiar.

No, you won’t need to tune out the comments about ongoing racism that you always tune out, until a white person says the same thing. To you, white progressive or radical, here are some other thoughts to consider.

Your society — and if you’re white, it is your society, regardless of your political pretensions to the contrary — and your way of life are built on a foundation of white supremacy. As a result, history glorifies whites; power is defined by whites; white chauvinism is such that white people assume the right to opine on things they know nothing about and make cultural assumptions about people of color that are misleading, racist and often wrong; and police, no matter how many brown faces you badge up, fundamentally will always act in the service of white power, as they always have. You’ve got it good, for real.

Yet, in a space where enlightenment, compassion and justice are supposed to be seeking a space to flourish, you believe you’re somehow above your society where such white supremacy was spoon-fed to you since birth. Then you take offense when a person of color points out such a fact.

I will spare myself the lecture about the lives people of color lead and the things we face, which you are happily and willfully ignorant of and defensive about. W. E. B. DuBois and a bunch of other people have shed many tears explaining how racism and white supremacy have disfigured this world and made a joke of the concepts of justice and freedom. Reading a book is on you anyway.

I will not bother to throw in all the asterisks about poor whites, everyone being oppressed, whiteness as a political construct and whatever. You’ll be more than happy to dig up qualifiers for racism and your innocence from now through the next Stone Age when you get done reading this.

What gets my goat is your fear.

When confronted, rather than listen openly, you refute any perception of bigotry in your ultra-pure movement or that maybe, just maybe, people of color might have credible/valid points, that even minuscule errors might have been made and you have some work to do. Our effort to candidly communicate issues we see is returned with the posture that you and your movement are above growing, learning or reproach. White privilege has trained you white folks since the spoon that you are an authority, THE authority. You know what's best and right, whether you say it openly or not, because you're white.

True power is never having to wonder how the world is perceived by someone different than you, having the luxury of manipulating that someone's experience in whatever way you deem appropriate, and sitting pretty amid a status that is far better than people of color, and thinking you got here because you stuck to the Protestant work ethic of working hard. You have been educated and given messages, oh nice white progressive/radical, your entire life that people of color don't know our history and experiences and can't possibly have the tools to critically understand the world around us or your behavior. You practice the teaching every day that we people of color are here for your use. Maybe it was not worded that way, but it is certainly the outcome.

When people of color raise a criticism of your practice, rather than listen to the spirit of the matter, you play pilgrim and go for the smallpox blankies. Throwing in ad hominem attacks on people of color rather than addressing the issues solves nothing, but sure distracts people. So does chatting up what you assume of our personalities and politics, or rather what you want to paint as an extension of what we believe, even though chances are you have absolutely no clue what we really think. Don't believe me? You're picking apart the language in this essay right now — throwing in buts, discrediting comments with any minor example that contradicts a statement and figuring out every tactic to cling to your alleged superiority. It happens. White privilege has taught its subjects to do this all the time.

Typically, your goal is not discussion, but to win, destroy and one-up at any cost. Anything smelling of an admission of fault is always layered under such a large heap of self-righteous bullshit that it reminds us, with you at least, an apology is never an apology at all. People of color commenting about racism and marginalization are always without merit, and are negative, irrational, authoritarian, not precise enough, liars, reverse racists — you name it. Our disinterest in recanting our concerns about racism and then fetching massa a pillow so we can make you feel comfortable in your privileged position are cast by you as callous. You did nothing wrong, of course. It's all in our heads. You are progressive or radical. Thus you are cleansed and above question from the colored people or anybody else you deem below you. You and your white activist pals dismiss us, as you always do, and go on about your day.

News flash: you're not a victim, but a participant and collaborator in white supremacy. People of color have seen your behavior a thousand times reenacted by your fellow whites, 'good' and 'bad,' since our childhoods. Your attempts to shrug off, explain away, ignore, disrespect and act out are not original or progressive or radical. It's completely arrogant and pretentious to think you are unique. You are just another white person who benefits from the powerlessness of people of color, and does so proudly and without remorse or regard. Save the blankie, William Bradford. People far smarter and more politically mature than you have been doing the shame-and-blame for centuries, and probably sounded smarter and more mature doing it then than you do now.

When people of color talk about acknowledgment and respect for people of color, you talk about how the movement can't grow by focusing on 'small' struggles, but how big tent issues

(unity, class, feminism, war, etc.) play better with ‘people,’ who happen to be as white as you. No matter how crippling and prejudiced, you throw out false universals and analogies to fit the experiences of people of color into what point you must prove. Dare I point out the ‘ruling class’ you gnash your teeth over adores your loyalty to white privilege most of all? Nah.

You fail to grasp how, of all the issues you or I hold dear, whites in literally every case are the least impacted adversely among populations. You take for granted how white privilege shapes your world view and blanch at the suggestion that you hear out and take advice from people of color, who are often far more affected than you will ever be by a political situation, regardless of their social status or yours. You bleating about gender and class and anything else you can think of, fair-skinned one, sounds like one of many diversionary tactics used to deflect many an honest conversation about race. Still, you talk about your big tent. The problem is, when Third World people focus on white supremacy, whites take their crap and camp elsewhere.

Despite all this, you remain terrified.

It’s as if being the center of the political, historical, psychological, economic and military universe is not enough for you. The fear of looking over the castle wall of white privilege and acknowledging a fuckup grips you with the kind of discomfort no Black man walking into one of your hallowed meetings ever could. Saying white privilege is an issue is like saying you molest mountain goats on a regular basis. Saying a person of color has something to say that you should and WILL listen to and act on is like asking for a goddamn kidney. Woe be it to the person of color if one of you admits a mistake though. Then we have to kiss your ass (and the whites you vouch for) as the “good white people” ’til we’re both pushing walkers down the street.

For the vast number of people of color, just getting a concession is victory enough, let alone thinking YOU actually then do some work out of this deal.

I am almost inclined to qualify my comments as matters that are not about guilt, but rather of political principle. A few people of color defend you as a matter of political principle. Many more take your side because they know how power works and want a cut of the action, but I will leave it up to you to figure out which person of color is rocking which side of that equation. The ones who speak on your behalf on either end, I assure you, take endless shit from other people of color for being sellouts and having faith in their ‘hippie cracker friends.’ You don’t know about that, mostly, nor do or should you care. It’s not something you have to worry about after all. Those people of color who staked their political credibility on your smug asses get what we deserve. Still, it would be nice to think if you lived the politics you say you believe in, as they do, you would step it up a bit.

Other than that, I have absolutely no solutions to offer you. I can throw up resources for hours, but until you’re ready to make the break with white privilege and white supremacy on your own, no book or website I write about will help you. Until that time, you’re just one of those white people living off our backs, talking loud and saying nothing, like plenty before you.

Now before I go and you let the swords out like you just landed on the ‘New World,’ I could have written this letter like a doctoral thesis, citing Cornell West and Eduardo Galleano and all that. I doubt it would have made a difference, so I wrote it like I saw it. Generally, people of color like me lost faith in you and your ilk long ago and don’t bother saying anything. We just refuse to trust anything you say or do. I’m surprised I gave you this much of my time.

Instances of racism from white progressives and radicals like we see now are not new. People of color have confronted, struggled with and discussed whites for decades. Still, progressive and radical movements are overwhelmingly white, and the unwillingness by Caucasians to let white

privilege rule is as strong as it ever was, if not stronger. Some of us feel the effort we put into working with you far outweighs the benefits because there are more whites that stab us in the back than act as our allies. Always has been that way, and always probably will be that way under your society.

If you care to prove me wrong, be my guest. Maybe I am incorrect in that analysis, but I doubt it.

Oh yeah. Fuck Seal Press and Kevin Tucker.

Signed,

Another Anonymous Person of Color for illvox.org

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