

Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity

AN INTERVIEW WITH NOEL IGNATIEV OF
RACE TRAITOR MAGAZINE

What is a race traitor anyway?

A traitor to the white race is someone who is nominally classified as white, but who defies the rules of whiteness so flagrantly as to jeopardize his or her ability to draw upon the privileges of the white skin.

“Race” has meant various things in history. We use the term to mean a group that includes all social classes, in a situation where the most degraded member of a dominant group is exalted over any member of a subordinate group. That formation was first successfully established in the 17th century. By then there already existed a trade across the Atlantic in laborers. Traders from both Europe and Africa sold their countrymen and were not held back because they were of the same color as those they sold. Slavery was a matter of economics. At the time it was the most efficient way of guaranteeing a labor force—provided it could be enforced.

As Theodore Allen points out in *Invention of the White Race*, the white race meant not only that no European-Americans were slaves, but also that all European-Americans, even laborers, were by definition enforcers of slavery. In the Chesapeake Bay Colony (Virginia and Maryland), people from Africa and people from Europe worked together in the tobacco fields. They mated with each other, ran away and rebelled together, at first. At the end of the 1600s, people of African descent, even those who were free, lost certain rights they had had before and that even the poorest and most downtrodden person of European descent continued to enjoy. In return for these privileges, European-Americans of all classes came to be part of the apparatus that maintained Afro-Americans in chattel slavery (and themselves in unfreedom). That was the birth of “race,” as we use the term.

What do you mean when you say that race is a social construction?

We mean that it is the result of social distinctions. Many black people have European ancestors, and plenty of so-called whites have African or American Indian ancestors. No biologist has ever been able to provide a satisfactory definition of race—that is, a definition that includes all the members of a given “race” and excludes all others. Attempts to do so lead to absurdities: mothers and children of different races, or the phenomenon that a white woman can give birth to a black child, but a black woman can never give birth to a white

child. The only possible conclusion is that people are members of different races because they are assigned to them. Of course, differences exist between individuals, and the natives of West Africa in general had darker skin and so forth than the natives of the British Isles, but groups are formed by social distinctions, not nature.

Can you provide an example of a people suddenly becoming "white"?

The Irish are as clear an example as any. In Ireland, under the Protestant Ascendancy, Catholic Irish were the victims of discrimination identical to what we in America call racial, and were even referred to as a "race." Karl Marx, writing from England, reported that the average English worker looked down on the Irish the way poor whites in the American South looked upon Afro-Americans. Yet over here the Irish became "whites," by gaining the right to vote while free Negroes were losing it, by supporting the Democratic Party (the party of the slaveholders), and by preventing free Afro-Americans from competing with them for jobs. The overcoming of anti-Irish prejudice meant that the Irish were admitted to the privileges of whiteness.

What do you mean by the "new abolitionism"?

We believe that so long as the white race exists, all movements against what is called "racism" will fail. Therefore, our aim is to abolish the white race.

How does your position on race and whiteness differ from the standard political stance of anti-racism?

Racism is a pretty vague term. It has come to mean little more than a tendency to dislike people for the color of their skin. Most anti-racists, even while they oppose discrimination, believe that racial status is fixed and eternal. We hold that without social distinctions, "race" is a fiction. The only race is the human race.

Even if a person declares him/herself a "race traitor," to the vast majority of people in this society, he/she is still white and therefore allowed all the privileges of the "white club." Is it possible to abolish the white race, ironically, only as white people?

The white race does not like to relinquish a single member, so that even those who step out of it in one situation find it virtually impossible not to rejoin it later, if only because of the assumptions of others—unless, like John Brown, they have the good fortune to be hanged before that happens. So-called whites have special responsibilities to abolition that only they can fulfill. Only they can dissolve the white race from within, by rejecting the poisoned bait of white-skin privileges. If that is what you mean by abolishing the white race "as whites," then we have no quarrel.

What is the relationship between capitalism and racism?

Capital itself is color-blind, and the capitalist system, as such, recognizes nothing but atomized individuals acting independently in the market. There are places in the world where it exists without race. In this country race is central to the system of social control:

It leads some workers to settle for being “white” when they could, with some effort, be free.

Is there such a thing as a “white culture”?

No. There is Italian culture, and Polish, Irish, Yiddish, German, and Appalachian culture; There is youth culture and drug culture and queer culture; but there is no “white” culture—unless you mean Wonder Bread and television game shows. Whiteness is nothing but an expression of race privilege. It has been said that the typical “white” American male spends his childhood as an Indian, his adolescence as an Afro-American, and only becomes white when he reaches the age of legal responsibility.

In an autobiographical essay, Joel Gilbert says that most of his whiteness has washed away and that he has “plenty of black inside.” How is it possible for a white person to have “plenty of black” inside? How is it possible for whites to wash away their whiteness? Should a black person accept a white person’s claim to have “a lot of black inside”?

Politically, whiteness is the willingness to seek a comfortable place within the system of race privilege. Blackness means total, implacable, and relentless opposition to that system. To the extent so-called whites oppose the race line, repudiate their own race privileges, and jeopardize their own standing in the white race, they can be said to have washed away their whiteness and taken in some blackness. Probably a black person should not accept a white person’s claim to have done that, but should watch how that person acts.

A common theme in Race Traitor is that of whites “crossing over” into black culture, or what you have called “black assimilation.” A lot of the examples you cite of people “refusing to be white” involve white people—especially youth—imitating black cultural forms. The line between “crossing over” into black culture and ripping off black culture is a mighty fine one; where do you draw it? Is there a necessary connection between “crossover” and the abandonment of whiteness? What makes white “crossover” in the ‘90s different from white youths and big businesses “crossing over” and ripping off black music in the ‘40s and ‘50s?

In culture, the line between rip-off and respect is the willingness to pay the dues, if necessary to forgo the social advantages of being white, in order to achieve genuineness of expression. There is no necessary connection between cultural assimilation and rejection of whiteness: The crowds at professional basketball games prove that; and on the other hand, immigrants to this country may speak no English and have no interest in American culture and still refuse to take part in the oppression of black people. But for many, the rejection of whiteness seems to entail some engagement with Afro-American culture, because that is the first cultural expression of resistance they encounter, and it speaks powerfully to them. You are right to point out that whites have been ripping off Afro-American culture for years. Fundamentally, the crossover of the ‘90s may not be different from that of the past, although it may make a difference that the process of social dissolution is now more advanced. By itself, crossover represents a potential for race treason, not the actuality.

How does wanting to abolish racial classifications avoid doing away with cultural differences, which is what most liberal attempts to “confront racism” do?

For us, black and white are political categories, separate from, although not unrelated to, culture. One of the effects of white supremacy is that it represses the cultures of Afro-Americans and other peoples of color. If that repression were removed, who knows how they would flourish. Moreover, American culture is, as Albert Murray has pointed out, incontestably mulatto. Without race prejudice, Americans might discover that culturally they are all Afro-American, as well as Native American, and so forth.

Abolition also brings up issues of identity. People of color, in struggling against oppression, often turn toward their precolonial cultures and earlier examples of resistance to find an identity that can inspire them today. What can a so-called white person turn to after abandoning whiteness? Does s/he seek inspiration in prewhite cultures such as Judaism, Celtic or Germanic tribes, in ethnic identities such as Irish, Italian-American, etc.? In committing treason against the white race, must we seek these “intermediate” identities, abandon all identities in favor of a universal humanism, or something else?

I don't know. So far as I am concerned, there is nothing wrong with people seeking out the Celtic or Germanic tribes, or ethnicity, or anything else that can provide them with a vital alternative to whiteness, although I have my doubts about how real these are or can be made to be for modern Americans, and the last time somebody built a mass movement around Germanic tribal myths it led to big trouble. We might do better to promote models of amalgamation. The Seminole Indians, as I understand it, were composed of the remnants of several native groups who had earlier been dispersed, plus a number of runaway slaves, plus some deserters from the army. They came together and fought three wars against the U.S. government. They were never really defeated. The Seminole tribe might be a model that could inspire people. Time will tell.

In being a race traitor, to whom do you announce your treason—fellow so-called whites? Is it ever appropriate to tell a person of color that you have abandoned your whiteness?

I would never say that, although I might say I was working on it.

What kinds of relations with people of color are implied when one becomes a race traitor? How does a race traitor act politically with people of color?

Relations must be based on solidarity. People of color have a wealth of experience with white supremacy from which others can learn, but the fight against white supremacy is not something to engage in as a favor to anyone. All people who wish to be free have an equal stake—yes, an equal stake—in overturning the system of white supremacy. I'm reminded of the old IWW [Industrial Workers of the World, the “Wobblies”] slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all.” Decades of distortion have reduced the message of those words to the idea that you should oppose injustice against others today because if you don't it will come your way tomorrow. We believe in the original intent of the slogan. The Bible offers the same instruction: “Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them.”

Race Traitor does an excellent job of providing examples of individuals rejecting their whiteness and joining the human race, but there is little there of collective resistance. Where is the collective political strategy in a politics of abolition? How do we, collectively, abolish the white race?

For the white race to be effective, it must be unanimous, or nearly so. The reason is that if the cops and the courts and so forth couldn't be sure that every person who looked white was loyal to the system, then what would be the point of extending race privileges to whites? And if they stopped extending race privileges, what would happen to the white race? Our strategy seeks to bring together a determined minority, willing to defy white rules so flagrantly they make it impossible to pretend that all those who look white are loyal to the system of racial oppression.

We wish we could cite more examples of collective resistance. The whites who joined the rebellions in Los Angeles and elsewhere were a good example. The Attica prison rebellion was another. The initiative by Love and Rage to launch a campaign culminating in a day of action against immigration controls and anti-immigrant violence was a good project, but unfortunately it never got off the ground. Collective struggle is crucial, but at some point every white person has to choose, like Huck Finn, between being white and striking out for freedom.

In some articles you literally break the world down into a matter of black and white. Have you ever been accused of ignoring the struggles and perspectives of nonblack people of color, and how do you respond to this charge?

Yes, I have been. I think that the line between black and white determines race in this country, and all groups get defined in relation to that line. Don't forget, I am using black and white as political, not cultural, categories. I do not mean to neglect the real and independent histories of people of color who are not of African descent. But in some cases the talk about "people of color" obscures the essence of racial oppression. Chinese are people of color and in the past they suffered fierce oppression in this country, and still suffer the effects of prejudice, but would anyone argue that Chinese in America today constitute an oppressed race? They have been defined as an ethnic group, indeed the "model minority," as shown by the high rate of social mobility among them, the high proportion of marriages with European-Americans, and the presence among them of a substantial number of capitalists who function outside of a segregated market—all in contrast to the situation of Afro-Americans. Of course they might become an oppressed race again. Or they might choose to identify as black in the struggle against white power, as many of the so-called coloureds of South Africa have done.

It seems from your journal and from thinking about your ideas that abolishing the white race would bring about widespread, radical changes in other aspects of social life. Is race treason necessarily revolutionary in that it threatens not only white supremacy but class rule as well?

It would be good if people could forget that they are white and pursue their interests as workers, or women, or whatever else moves them. The problem is that American society does not allow anyone to forget, but injects race into every political controversy. For those

in power, the privileges granted whites are a small price to pay for the stability of an unjust social system. While not all forms of injustice can be collapsed into whiteness, undermining white race solidarity opens the door to fundamental social change in other areas. For so-called whites, treason to the white race is the most subversive act I can imagine.

How to Be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White

NOEL IGNATIEV

- Identify with the racially oppressed; violate the rules of whiteness in ways that can have a social impact.
- Answer an anti-black slur with, "Oh, you probably said that because you think I'm white. That's a mistake people often make because I look white." Reply "Me, too" to charges that "people on welfare don't want to work, they just want to stay home and have babies."
- Oppose tracking in the schools, oppose all mechanisms that favor whites in the job market, and oppose the police and courts, which define black people as a criminal class.
- Do not merely oppose these things but seek to disrupt their normal functioning.
- The color line is not the work of the relatively small number of hard-core "racists"; target not them but the mainstream institutions that reproduce it.
- Finally, do not reject in advance any means of attaining the goal of abolishing the white race; indeed, the willingness to go beyond socially acceptable limits of protest is a dividing line between "good whites" and traitors to the white race.