

“The Death of White Racism”Part Two of a Two-Part Series

Since the racist three-fifths compromise in 1787, the U.S. government has been largely designed to perpetuate undemocratic, unequal power for white elites at the expense of nonwhites and the majority of the white population as well. Since the founding of this nation, only four African Americans have served in the U.S. Senate—Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, representing Mississippi during and immediately after Reconstruction, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, and Carol Mosely Braun of Illinois. Only two blacks have served on the Supreme Court—Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas. The lack of black representation has been no accident.

Therefore, the demand for black reparations, while at first appearing to many to be racially divisive, is absolutely essential to the process of constructing a new democratic discourse on the historical origins and meaning of race in American society. Both white conservatives and white neoliberals, for very different reasons, want to take “race” off the political table. We can’t allow them to do it.

To deconstruct and to uproot the structures of white racist privilege, they must be identified by name; we cannot reach a nonracist future unless we talk frankly about our common racist past. At the grassroots level, in thousands of faith-based institutions, neighborhood centers, union halls, and community networks and coalitions, a new discussion about overcoming the living legacy of structural racism must begin.

The reparations debate is also helpful in giving white Americans a better understanding of the different ways that white privilege is reproduced. Every day, white Americans receive the

message that they are entitled to better treatment and a better quality of life than everybody else on the planet—and especially people of African descent. The higher rates of home ownership, longer life expectancies, significant advantages in annual incomes and personal net wealth, favorable treatment by police and in the courts, and so on, are all woven into the fabric of whites' daily lives.

What whites also need to understand is that white privilege is best exercised when *nobody talks about it*. Traditional liberals, for example, studied and measured the dynamics of black inequality and oppression; conservatives deny both exist. Yet what unites both is their focus on the “black problem,” as if we are the ones with the problem. If the real problem is structural racism, then the challenge before us is reconstructing and reconfiguring white American identity. That will require a massive reeducation campaign that would enable whites to study their own history from our point of view. The reparations discussion will generate healthy tensions but also a broader, more universal understanding of where we've been as a nation.

Why should middle-class white folks engage in this new democratic conversation with the most marginalized and disadvantaged members of their society? From the long view of history, white supremacy is not a sustainable idea. As Du Bois once observed, “whiteness” is a relatively new concept. “The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing,—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed,” Du Bois wrote in 1920. “The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction.” Intellectually and in terms of scientific thought, there is no absolutely biological justification for the defense of white superiority. In terms of labor force projections in the United States, the work force has become and is still becoming increasingly brown and black. As the median age of the white population

grows older, whites will become increasingly dependent on the material contributions of nonwhites to the running of the economy and society.

The great danger, of course, is that white Americans, becoming acutely conscious of what white privilege is, will fight desperately to keep it. Much of the reactionary populism, national chauvinism, and anti-immigrant bashing by politicians like Patrick Buchanan is motivated by the desire to maintain the entitlements of being “free, white and twenty-one.” But there is another alternative: a multicultural democratic society.

Through political education, and through struggle, white Americans can come to appreciate a new history, one in which they have frequently been marginal in the construction of democratic traditions. Can we imagine an American society with a national commitment to eliminating the major racialized deficits that separate blacks and whites into their respective racial universes: in life expectancy, health-care access, college enrollments, quality public education, and home ownership? Could we dream of a time when racial epithets, racial profiling, and the discriminatory redlining practices of banks and lending institutions decline in significance, if not disappear? Racial peace will not and cannot be sustained without justice; but with justice, a new relationship and a democratic renewal of American society can occur.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. “Along the Color Line” is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable’s column is also available on the Internet at www.manningmarable.net.