

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

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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 peo-

ple 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

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

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.

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.

anti-Irish prejudice meant that the Irish were admitted to the privileges of whiteness.

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.

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,

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? Now 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

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. ■