



THE WONDER-BREADING OF OUR COUNTRY

Excerpted from *Subjective Side of Politics*

a *Tools for Change* pamphlet

Power operates on many levels—the political, the institutional, the personal. Power is not an abstraction. It is given shape and texture by the land, the people and their culture. To restore our connection to nature enabling us to live in harmony with the earth and one another, we have to look at how power, politics and place have woven a troubled history for us to inherit. The history of the United States raises fundamental questions of human identity and points to the necessity of creating a new sense of self arising from respect for diversity, the honoring of cultural integrity and the re-creation of community made possible as we regain our connection to place and past.

In the U.S. the opening of opportunity to increase our standard of living has been made possible by racism. Racism is woven into our every assumption. Whether or not we are engaging with people of color, it is a part of us, just as sexism doesn't evaporate when women are not present. Race and class are deeply entwined in our experience. Because of the central role that race and class play in the economic and social development of our country, we need to unravel how they are each used as a means of control.

Talking about race and class makes us all uncomfortable. This is especially true for those of us of European descent. Looking at these issues reminds us of a painful past. At some level we are aware that whatever comfort and security we have in our lives has been made possible by the genocide of Native Peoples and the stealing of their land, the enslavement of African Americans, the illegal

annexation of Northern Mexico, the use of Chinese labor in building the West while denying them the right to own land, and the abuse of all working people. These truths are troubling. When we allow ourselves to think about them, they create a vague feeling of guilt for a situation we didn't create and feel powerless to change. For most of us, it's easier to ignore these issues and go on with our lives. We don't realize denying our past not only keeps us from understanding the horror of our history, but it also hides from us the lives and values of those who struggled against these injustices. Their legacy points the way to creating a new future.

Race is a *political* category. The term "white" was established as a legal concept after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 to separate the indentured servants of European and African heritage who united against the colonial elite. Prior to this time, most Africans and Europeans were able to look toward a time when they would be free from the harshness of servitude. After the rebellion, however, slavery became the permanent condition for Africans. On the other hand, indentured Europeans, at least in theory, could work their way out. "White people," institutionalized in the legal system were given claim to a future, while Africans were cast as less than human. The creation of "white" meant giving privileges to some, while denying them to others with the justification of biological and social inferiority.

Resources attained as the result of racist policies made upward mobility an exclusive "white" privilege. People of color provided the labor for the

most back-breaking and dangerous work needed for developing the country, thus forming an underclass from which all whites benefited.

This is not to say that all Americans of European descent accepted these benefits. We have a long tradition of women and men who dedicated their lives to the struggle for justice. It is precisely because they offer us a vision of our power to change things that they are hidden from us. Almost every American knows the song "Amazing Grace," yet most of us are unaware it was written by a captain of a slave ship who became a leading abolitionist. Few of us know the names of Wendell Phillips or William Lloyd Garrison, whose writing and speaking drove the issue of slavery into the center of American politics. While we are taught the names of Civil War battles, we never learn about the Southerners who voted against secession. In Alabama thirty-nine percent of the white men voted "No!" How much of this was a result of tactics like those of the anti-slavery women's organization that would ring meeting houses, beating on pots and pans to drown out the speeches of pro-secessionists?

Nor is it to say that all Americans of European descent were of the same class. In fact, those of the working, middle and owning classes have played significantly different roles in maintaining the institution of racism. Since the beginning, the owning class has used the lower classes to enforce racism. To improve their lot, lower class whites were the ones who killed native Americans and Mexicans in the move west. They also were the overseers, administering punishment to

any African who rebelled. People in the lower class were responsible for the terrorism and random violence necessary to maintain the system. These whites, powerless in relation to the power brokers, gained a sense of personal power over people of color. Obviously not solving the injustice done to them, they ameliorated their pain with a sense of superiority and more material advantages. This dynamic continues today. The most intense expressions are in the popularity of the KKK, and other white supremacist groups, including some who actually call themselves the Identity Movement. Incidents of violence against people of color in neighborhoods, subways, parks and college campuses are on the rise. The most insidious racism is the silent acceptance of it by the vast majority, creating the climate that sanctions inhumanity.

While the owning and middle classes look down upon or ignore such brutal behavior, or elevate it to valor in the conquest of the West, it is this very activity that enforces their positions of power and privilege. The upper classes indulge in the fantasy that they are not the ones who are racist, when, in fact, it is they who create the policies that maintain the institutional inequities upon which their wealth depends.

The Colonial elite created “white” as an identity of superiority for people of European descent. If those of the lower classes were to look above them, the prerequisite of upward mobility was to deny their own particular cultural heritage, family ties, and loyalty to place, trading these for the idea that they were just the same as those on the top—white, male, Protestant, heterosexual, able-bodied and serious. No longer Germans, Italians, Finns or Swedes, they were “whites.” Each wave of immigrants had to wait their turn to become “white,” enduring ridicule and discrimination as they filled the space between “white” and the underclass. This is the wonder-breeding of America. Cultural ties were

traded in for a piece of the American pie.

This trade is made at a tremendous cost. Giving up our ethnic identities, we lose our emotional security and our sense of self. We are no longer rooted in a community and a way of life. The only way to regain respect is by displaying our wealth, from the fanciest car to the biggest house. Consumerism is more than greed. It is the frenzied effort to belong. Our identity has become what we own. The richness of our various cultural heritages has been replaced by a “white” identity whose roots are not in a history of a people with a particular place, culture and language. “White” identity was born out of the establishment and maintenance of privilege.

Identity is a person’s reference point, telling us where we come from, where we are going and with whom—our source of pride and loyalty—in short, our sense of who we are. Clearly, an identity based on “white” is fraught with problems. It has no culture, thus leading to the rip-off of other people’s cultures to fill the void. It obscures the past and the values of those who fought against dehumanization and exploitation. Yet those of European ancestry do identify as “white.” This is manifested in the working class as a sense of superiority coupled with the fear that they will lose what little privilege they’ve managed to acquire—a fear that is intensifying as the economy squeezes them out.

For the middle classes, “white” identity is based on maintaining their innocence. Overt violence is much less fashionable. Therefore the worst epithet that a middle class white person can be given is that s/he is racist. This calls into play an *unconscious* loyalty that pervades all interactions—a white bonding. When racism is charged, the response is not to look at what happened and the impact of actions, but to defend the innocent intent of the person behind them.

White identity here is about protecting “their own,” not about justice.

This dynamic was made clear in the Undoing Racism Workshop we attended a while back. An African American man was giving a presentation on so-called heroes in our history. He got to Andrew Jackson and described the Trail of Tears in which one quarter of the Cherokee people died. A woman who originally had introduced herself as one of those “white, middle class, suburban types” spoke up defending Jackson, saying “everybody makes mistakes.” We must ask why was this her first reaction? She wants to work against racism or she would not have committed a full weekend to attend the workshop. Yet she identified with Jackson, not with the Cherokee people. Her reaction diverted attention from what this land-grab made possible for whites. This serves the dual purpose of getting each other off the hook and keeping out of view both the injustice and the privilege it provides. It is deeply ingrained in the white middle class first and foremost to identify with and defend one another. Once again the power taboo is operative: the status quo is maintained and the experience of the locked out is kept invisible.

Obviously, these dynamics keep racism in place. To get rid of it, the institutions themselves must be changed. But to do that successfully, we must rid ourselves of “white” identity and embrace our true cultural identities. For many of us, this will be an opportunity to come to terms with the fact that we are the children of many different and distinct cultures—African, Irish, Jewish, Chippewa, Spanish, Armenian, Chinese, Syrian, Hungarian.... In the process of reclaiming our ancestors we can learn something about the complexity of our American identity and the importance of consciously deciding the values and traditions we want to pass on to the next generation. The lives and values of those who refused to accept “white” privilege and who resisted expansion

and exploitation are an important legacy from which we can rebuild our loyalty to family, place and past.

Today, the entanglement of race, class and identity is even more difficult to unravel. In the past, the homogenization of “whites” was made possible by the expanding American pie. Now the pie is shrinking. At the very moment when the “locked out” succeeded in getting legislation to guarantee them a piece, everything had been doled out. The result is that the reality of power and privilege is even more obscured. The actual conditions of all women and men of color is worse than before the civil rights movements. For example, there is now a greater disparity between the incomes of whites and people of color and between men and women than before the movements. Yet this reality is hidden behind the faces of the few visible tokens who have positions of “power.” This visibility fosters the idea that “anyone can still make it.” For the first time, people who knew survival depended on sticking together are now encouraged to think that their security rests in breaking or hiding ties to the community. Community bonds get cut in the desperate dash to make it into the middle class. Now, people of color, like the whites before them, engage in the homogenization process, relinquishing ties to family, place and past.

Even those of us who have managed to retain some ties to family, place, and past, often find ourselves in a sterile atmosphere of homogenized, middle class norms. Virtually every situation that brings together different people—from the corporate workplace to the political coalition has its parameters of appropriate behavior set by the wonder-breeding process. Power relationships are invisible, conflict taboo, accountability to anything other than our narrow, prescribed function is non-existent.

The texture of our experience is smoothed over and replaced by an atmosphere that focuses on personality and taking care of individual feelings, rather than looking at the social conditions out of which they arise. The middle class manages—keeps everything running smoothly and makes us feel better while accepting things as they are. Their role is to keep class antagonisms invisible.

We each are viewed as isolated individuals, devoid of heritage, responsibilities and relationships. This focus is played out in the continual judging of our own and one another’s acceptability. So we always have to prove ourselves. Somehow, we’re never quite good enough. Competition rules, obscuring everyone’s integrity. Even the white, male, Protestant, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, serious person, sometimes has his doubts. Principle doesn’t even enter the scene. The middle class, who are there by virtue of relinquishing their heritage, have created a culture of estrangement characterized by alienation, isolation and constantly having to be on guard. Everyone is individually free to “do their own thing.” Yet we are social beings in interrelationship, whether we acknowledge it or not. This means we cannot be supportive of one another without mutual accountability.

The middle class views accountability as constricting, when, it is the very thing that enables us to trust one another. In the name of respecting freedom, we cannot challenge one another. If we can’t talk about new ways of being together, how are we ever going to create them?

PAMPHLETS FROM *Tools for Change*:

*The Subjective Side
of Politics*

*Breaking Old Patterns
Weaving New Ties: Alliance Building*

READER’S COMMENTS:

This makes visible the hidden barriers that block our ability to work together effectively. It’s full of concrete strategies for creating a context that welcomes everyone’s contributions.

--Sister Guadalupe Guajardo

A very important piece of work for both emerging and established organizations. Although it’s good for individuals, it’s best to study it collectively and use it for training programs.

--Richard Moore

Tools for Change offers training, consulting, and facilitation services on justice issues and the bringing together of history, heart, spirit, values and vision.

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