

Penn Response/wbm

At a crucial moment in *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) – it's when a young white woman has disappeared and she's believed to have been raped and murdered by a "damned black beast" – Thomas Dixon describes the effect of their fear and anger on the assembled crowd. "In a moment," he says, "the white race had fused into a homogenous mass of love, sympathy, hate and revenge. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the banker and the blacksmith, the great and the small, they were all one now."

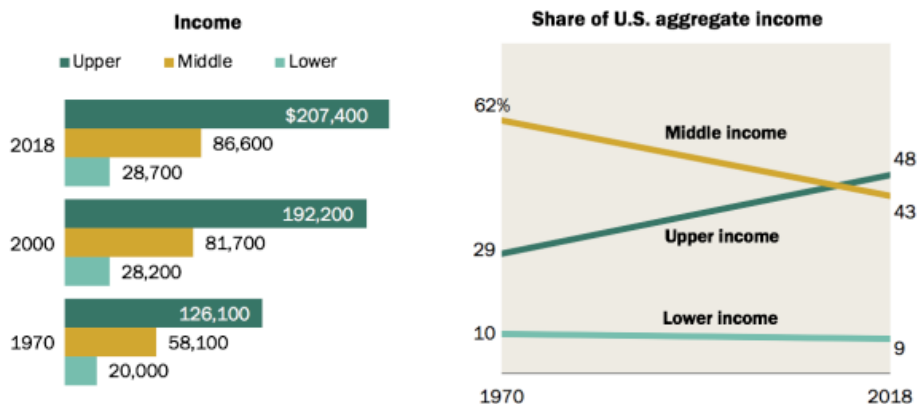
I know about this moment because, 25 years ago, I wrote what might plausibly (or at least partially) be described as a literary history of white identity (*Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism*) and this passage seemed to me then as it seems to me now very useful for understanding what white identity did – it made people who were in many respects very different (rich and poor, learned and ignorant) feel that they were in a crucial sense the same. But, of course, that's too anodyne a description. It would be better to say it made them *mistakenly* feel they were the same. As Judith Stein argued, in a world where the class interests of white planters and industrialists depended on "the exploitation of black labor" and thus on preventing blacks and poor whites from uniting to assert their class interests, both white identity and black identity were useful inventions¹. From the standpoint of capital, it was important for poor whites to see blacks not as fellow workers but as "beasts." And, also from the standpoint of capital, it was at least as important for blacksmiths to see bankers not as their class enemy but as their racial brothers.

Today, of course, among liberals, it's black identity more often than white that's invoked as a technology of solidarity. Think of Kimberlé Crenshaw's praise for Critical Race scholars at Harvard Law School articulating a "radical" "redistributional conception of law teaching jobs" which viewed those "positions as resources that should be shared with communities of color."² If you were to characterize the relation between poor black people and black Harvard professors in terms of class rather than community, it would be adversarial – the difference between people who get paid a great deal of money to make capitalism work and people who get paid almost no money also to make capitalism work. . But once you replace class with color, the rewards of your job at Harvard can be imagined as shared with rather than extracted from at least some of the people who are cleaning your office and serving your meals. Apparently, we hope that even if Dixon's dream hasn't come true – if the white students at Bunker Hill Community College aren't filled with pride by the sight of all the white students at Harvard – racial identity might still work for black people, turning rich people of color into the representatives rather than the adversaries of poor people of color.

By contrast, the value of white identity today is as a site of abjection. What today's blacksmith has in common with the banker is not the "soul of a race of pioneer white freemen" but a knapsack filled with privilege. Nonetheless, that knapsack performs the same function. In a society where, for the last half century, the difference between rich people and the poor (of all races) has steadily increased, it redescribes that difference as the disparity between white and black.

The gaps in income between upper-income and middle- and lower-income households are rising, and the share held by middle-income households is falling

Median household income, in 2018 dollars, and share of U.S. aggregate household income, by income tier



Note: Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income. Incomes are scaled to reflect a three-person household. Revisions to the Current Population Survey affect the comparison of income data from 2014 onwards. See Methodology for details. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (IPUMS). *Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority*

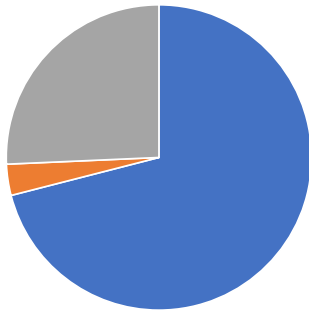
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Pride in white identity defended the class system by reassuring poor whites that what they had in common with rich whites – their whiteness – was more valuable than what separated them – their money. Guilt about white privilege defends the class system by reassuring rich whites (and rich people of color too) that if they can just redistribute not the wealth but the skin colors of the people who hold the wealth, everything will be OK -- that the underrepresentation of black and brown people among the rich (rather than the mere existence of the rich) is the problem.

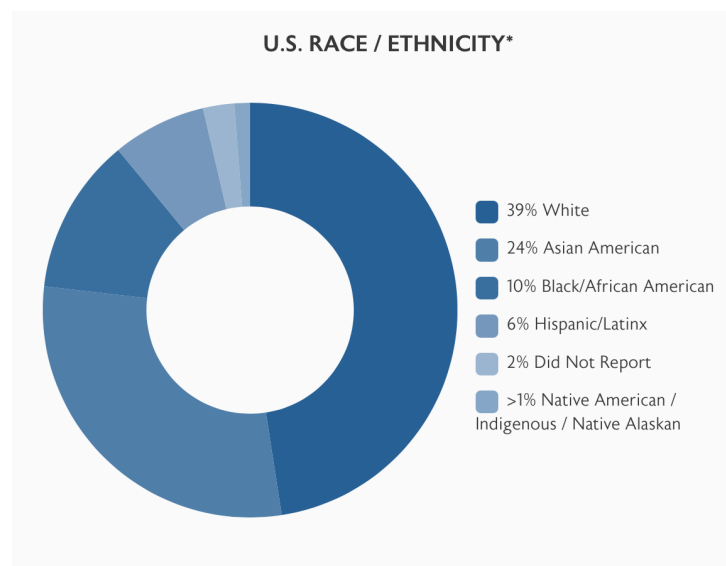
Nothing illustrates the appeal of this vision better than institutions like the ones we represent. At Penn, for example, the student body is about 41% white, 7.5% black, 10% percent Latinx and 20% Asian.⁴ The proportions aren't perfect but they're way better than the numbers for income. If I showed you the chart below and told you the 71% in blue was white people at Penn, we'd all be outraged. But when I tell you it's rich people, no one's even surprised: Penn so white is a scandal; Penn so rich is a business model.

Economic “diversity” at Penn (and the others)



Median family income	\$195,500
Average income percentile	82nd
Share of students from top 0.1%	3.6%
...from top 1%	19%
...from top 5%	45%
...from top 10%	58%
...from top 20%	71%
...from bottom 20%	3.3%

So white identity does a lot of work, and -- since naturalizing the inequalities produced by capitalism confronts rich people not with the prospect of their extinction but only with the need to add a few black and brown people to their mix -- it does it mainly for rich white people. Every time a white student at Wharton checks his privilege, a venture capitalist gets her wings.⁵



Wharton MBA, class of 2022

But if you ask most white people to check their privilege, they're hard put even to find it. The bottom 50% of white people hold less than three 3% of white wealth. And if it's still true that (despite Wharton's leadership) most of the rich people in the U.S. (81% of those making over \$200K) are white (next come Asian Americans with 9%, what's left is divided between black and brown people), it's also true that most of the poor people are white, and it makes no more

sense to translate the fact that white people are over-represented among the rich into white privilege than it would to translate the over-representation of Asian Americans into Asian privilege. Or rather, it makes exactly the same kind of non-sense. What good is the money of rich Asians to poor Asians? Actually, in the same post-1970 period in which inequality in the U.S. has been increasing, it's increased most among Asian Americans who, if only in this respect, truly are the model minority — they've led the way in income inequality.⁶

Furthermore, it's not just that the focus on white privilege hurts poor white people, it also hurts poor black people. Why? Because, in making the gap between whites and blacks the primary object of our attention we ignore a crucial contributor to keeping black people disproportionately poor: the fact that even though the various anti-discrimination measures put into place over the last half century have been effective in producing a 30% rise in relation to white earnings, the general (non-race specific) increase in inequality between blacks and whites has utterly negated that rise and left things almost exactly where they were in 1968.⁷ Of course, even the vanished 30% rise would not be enough, and no one (in this discussion anyway) thinks we should abandon a complete commitment to anti-discrimination. But anti-discrimination can't make things better for poor black people as long as everything else is making things worse for poor people of every race.

And, even if it could and you could eliminate the gap between black and white without radically decreasing the gap between rich and poor you would not, of course, have a more equal society, you would just have a racially proportionate unequal one. Which, it seems to me, is the great utility of the concern with white privilege today: it replaces a goal that is utterly antithetical to capitalism (equality) with a goal that neoliberal capitalism has learned to embrace (racial equality). In doing so, it transforms the leftist ambition to eliminate the gap between the rich and the poor into the conservative ambition to make sure that racism doesn't play any role in determining who gets to be rich and poor. Thus, coupled with the concept of systemic racism, the concept of white privilege succeeds in emptying the commitment to equality of any political edge and redeploying it on the fields of human resources and personal morality.

Systemic racism has its origin in the theory of institutional racism, which "challenged the idea that inequality" resulted from "prejudice alone," and pointed to the ways in which "social institutions" could produce "different opportunities" for whites and blacks.⁸ But what began as the effort to explain racialized consequences even when some people weren't actually racist has now become a way to describe a society in which almost everyone is imagined to be in some degree racist -- "biased" if not exactly prejudiced, and insufficiently alert to the racialized consequences of their actions, words, etc. This is how antiracism becomes a moral and personal project; as Ibram Kendi says, "The heartbeat of antiracism is confession... We must continuously reflect on ourselves so that we can reflect on our society" (*Be Anti-Racist*). Of course, some of us end up reflecting more on other people than ourselves but the point is the same: antiracism centers the individual's effort to be good. And it's no respecter of class; it enables us to distinguish between the virtuous and the unvirtuous poor; more useful still, it enables us to distinguish between the unvirtuous poor and the virtuous rich and, perhaps most useful of all, it enables us to distinguish between the virtuous and unvirtuous rich.

My point here is not that these distinctions are illusory but that they're *merely* moral, that is, moral instead of political. Morally, we all prefer rich people who don't lie and cheat and who give money to causes we approve and who actually follow through and recruit more people of color into higher management. Politically, why should we care how rich people behave? Our goal is to redistribute wealth and transfer power to workers, to get rid of rich people not to make them more effective HR managers.

Of course, I don't mean to suggest that anti-racism in itself is conservative; I mean that anti-racism by itself is conservative. This conservatism is obvious when we worry about racism on corporate boards or about how many people of color get to teach at or attend elite universities. But it's even there when we worry about the disproportionate number of unarmed black people shot by the police or about the disproportionate number of people of color in poverty. Conservatism is baked into the logic of disproportionality, into an anti-racism or anti-sexism that identifies the injustice of inequality with discrimination. And it's that identification that's promulgated by the interest in white identity and white privilege, which is why the only thing we should do with white identity is expose it for the con it is and why the effort to get rid of white privilege should be understood as simply an instance of the universalist effort to get rid of privilege itself.

¹ Judith Stein, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States." *Science and Society* (1974/75), 451.

² Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mark Lilla's Comfort Zone." <https://thebaffler.com/latest/mark-lillas-comfort-zone>
Crenshaw is right to criticize Lilla's liberalism but the boundaries of her own comfort zone are made vivid in her satisfaction that now "every corporation worth its salt is saying something about structural racism and anti-blackness" and in the process "outdistancing" the Sanders campaign.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/us/politics/bernie-sanders-protests.html> It's as if the desired alternative to corporate liberalism is an at least equally corporate radicalism.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/> Presumably nobody looking at those "middle income" numbers will be surprised by the recent emergence of an increasingly angry petite bourgeoisie.

⁴ <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/university-of-pennsylvania/student-life/diversity/chart-ethnic-diversity.html>

⁵ Rich students checking their privilege is, of course, a more honestly conservative politics; no one ever claimed that *noblesse oblige* was "progressive."

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>

⁷ See Robert Manduca, https://sociologicalscience.com/download/vol-5/march/SocSci_v5_182to205.pdf For more extended discussion of the political uses of income and other racial disparities, see Michaels and Reed, <https://nonsite.org/the-trouble-with-disparity/>

⁸ Frank Dobbin, *Inventing Equal Opportunity* (2009), 229.