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What kind of politics are enabled by the study of white identity and/or white privilege?

AMC Panel Response

“Checking your privilege? Perspectives on the politics of white identity”

White identity and white privilege scholars argue that we must understand whiteness and the advantages it confers to address racial inequity and inequality. But the contrary is true. Whiteness and white privilege studies buttress a racially inegalitarian status quo. The claim that one’s whiteness provides meaningful information about one’s beliefs and experiences reifies racial categories used to exploit and dehumanize nonwhites. And the claim that whiteness confers “privilege” hampers efforts to realize meaningful racial equality by undermining cross-racial worker solidarity and calls for universal goods. Ultimately, scholarship that centers “understanding whiteness” and “white privilege” promotes conservative politics that harm most Black and brown Americans.

Marxist activists and critical race theorists Noel Ignatiev and Ted Allen are widely recognized as the forefathers of whiteness studies and white privilege discourse. Like Marx—who wrote that “labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin, when in the black it is branded”¹—Ignatiev and Allen believed that social, economic, and political equality could only be advanced by a unified, multiracial proletariat. However, unlike their predecessors, Ignatiev and Allen argued that overcoming white supremacy was a *precondition* of proletarian revolution. To dismantle white supremacy, they asserted, white workers needed to renounce their “white-skin privileges.” Ignatiev and Allen explained that such privileges—like “a monopoly of the skilled job” and “health and education facilities superior to those of the nonwhite population”—were developed by the bourgeoisie to inhibit the formation of a united working class opposed to bourgeois interests.² While these fleeting privileges enticed white workers, Ignatiev and Allen argued that they were ultimately shackles. By deterring cross-racial worker solidarity, these “privileges” subverted white workers’ true material, social, and human interests.

Contemporary white privilege theorists agree with Ignatiev and Allen that white people must abandon their privileges to advance racial equality. However, unlike Ignatiev and Allen, these scholars argue that white privileges meaningfully improve the lives of all white people, and

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I*, ed. Fredrik Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1867), Chapter 10, Section 7, 195.

² Noel Ignatin and Ted Allen, “The White Blindspot Documents,” in *Revolutionary Youth & the New Working Class*, ed. Carl Davidson (Aliquippa, PA: Changemaker Publications, 2011), 159-160.

they abandon the fight for cross-racial, worker solidarity. In 1969, the Weathermen—drawing inspiration from third world and Black liberation movements—initiated this break with Marxist thought. Ever since, calls for racial solidarity and universalized goods have been increasingly supplanted by calls for identity politics and particularized demands. This shift has come at the expense of the most exploited members of society, including the majority of Black and brown Americans.

Examining what whiteness scholars mean by “white” and “white privilege” reveals the quotidian politics their work promotes. Although “white” is not used univocally in or across these works, when the term is used, it consistently reifies racial categories. Take the definitions of “white” offered by white privilege scholars Barbra Flagg and Charles W. Mills. Flagg defines a white person “as an individual of European descent who...has no known trace of African or other non-European ancestry.”³ Mills similarly equates European and white when he writes, “Both globally and within particular nations...white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract.”⁴ Here, both Flagg and Mills (astoundingly) use segregationists’ one-drop rule to taxonomize people by race. Although those who identify as white usually have European ancestry, “white” and “having European ancestry” are not synonymous. There have always been groups within Europe excluded from the categories—e.g., Aryan, Anglo-Saxon, etc.—analogous to the American category of “white.” By using “white people” as a proxy for “Europeans and their descendants,” Flagg and Mills—like many white privilege scholars—advance white supremacists’ position that race is objectively discernable.

When not appealing to geneticist or culturist understandings of race, white privilege scholars use circular logic. Whiteness, they claim, confers power and privilege because powerful and privileged people are white. Mills also offers *this* understanding of whiteness when he asserts, “Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.”⁵ White guilt evangelist Robin DiAngelo does so too when she states, “Race...was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage.”⁶ In these statements, Mills and DiAngelo, like most white privilege scholars, assume their conclusions from the outset: white people created whiteness to secure white privilege, they profess. In so doing, these scholars obscure

³ Barbara L. Flagg, “‘Was Blind, but Now I see’: White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent,” *Michigan Law Review* 91, no. 5 (March 1993): (953).

⁴ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk about Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 7.

the origins of “white” and “whiteness” and the mechanism through which these concepts are maintained. Rather than demystifying and undermining whiteness, they naturalize it.

The phrase “white privilege”—as used by its scholars—similarly undercuts efforts to confront racial disparity and inequality. In my work, I argue that “white privilege,” as it appears in the literature, takes one—or some combination—of five different meanings. “White privilege” may mean that: (1) white people have greater access to material resources than do nonwhites, (2) white people enjoy rights nonwhites cannot, (3) white culture and white perspectives are viewed as normal, (4) white people psychologically benefit from a sense of racial superiority, and (5) white people are not discriminated against for being white. Almost all of these definitions of white privilege distort reality and buttress racial inequality: only the last avoids these pitfalls. Yet this final definition does little more than assert that racial discrimination exists.

In discussing whiteness scholars’ definition of “white,” I have already articulated much of my argument against the third understanding of white privilege—that white culture and white perspectives are viewed as normal—and will not address it further for brevity’s sake. I will also not examine the fourth definition for the same reason. Here, I offer a brief discussion of the remaining three.

Whiteness scholars often use the first definition of “white privilege” above: that white people, on average, have greater access to material resources than do nonwhites. To support this claim, they note that Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans all experience higher rates of poverty than do white people. However, this fact does not justify using “white privilege” as a proxy for “economic privilege.” That nonwhites are disproportionately under-resourced does not make most white people well-resourced. In 2017, 10.1% of non-Hispanic white Americans lived in poverty.⁷ Given that 1/20th of the total U.S. population consists of white people living in poverty, it is not only absurd to equate whiteness with economic security—let alone economic privilege—it is unethical. By implying that economic hardship primarily derives from the differential treatment of whites and nonwhites, this equivalence distracts from the systemic mechanisms that underlie material disparities. Because, like many nonwhites, many whites receive a \$7.25 minimum wage, experience asset poverty, are uninsured, and unemployed, using “white privilege” to denote “economic privilege” obscures how such injustices contribute to economic hardship.

⁷ “Poverty Facts: The population of Poverty USA,” Poverty USA, 2021, <https://www.povertyusa.org/facts>.

Instead, by using “white privilege” to denote “economic privilege,” white privilege scholars exclusively highlight the racial wealth gap. In so doing, they sidestep questions of economic justice and focus solely on the well-being of upper-class nonwhites, ignoring poor and working-class people of color.

The call to close the racial wealth gap does not adjudicate between lifting all races to the “white standard” (meaning that 10.1% of nonwhites would still be under the poverty line) or lowering all races to the “Native American standard” (meaning that 25.4% of all Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, would be living under the poverty line).⁸ Of course, a white privilege scholar might counter that she and her peers obviously advocate for increasing the economic security of nonwhites, not decreasing that of whites. But, for anyone concerned with the material well-being of *all* nonwhites (or all humans, for that matter), this is not assuring. Why strive for having 1/10th of nonwhite Americans living in poverty? Why not aim higher? Ultimately, white privilege discourse is unconcerned with nonwhites whose economic hardships would go unaddressed by closing the racial wealth gap. When disaggregated, “the racial wealth gap is almost entirely about the upper classes in each racial group”.⁹ “The overall racial wealth disparity is being driven almost entirely by the disparity between the wealthiest 10 percent of white people and the wealthiest 10 percent of black people,” and “97 percent of the overall racial wealth gap is driven by households above the median of each racial group.”¹⁰ By focusing on the racial wealth gap, white privilege scholars promote the betterment of wealthier nonwhites, leaving economic justice unexamined and the situation of poorer nonwhites unchanged.

White privilege scholars also use disparities in the criminal justice system to assert that white people enjoy rights nonwhites cannot. My critique of the first definition applies to the second as well. Undoubtedly, overt racism and racial bias contribute to the overrepresentation of nonwhites at every stage of the criminalization process. But, asserting that “white privilege” drives this disparity fails to identify its underlying causes. Mass incarceration was created and is maintained to: enrich profit-driven actors (like the owners of private prisons and the phone companies that service them); house the mentally ill and homeless; criminalize the activities of unemployed, labor reserves to fuel worker competition, and so on. While nonwhites are disproportionately the victims of this system and dehumanizing them helps perpetuate it,

⁸ “Poverty Facts: The population of Poverty USA.”

⁹ Matt Bruenig, “The Racial Wealth Gap Is About the Upper Classes,” *People’s Policy Project*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2020/06/29/the-racial-wealth-gap-is-about-the-upper-classes/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

privileging the white majority is not mass incarceration's *raison d'être*. In suggesting that white privilege produces racial inequity in the criminal justice system—and that white people renouncing said privilege can rectify this—white privilege scholars fail to offer pragmatic solutions to inequities and injustices in the American justice system. Moreover, it is entirely unclear how white people can, or why they should, renounce the “privilege” of having their rights protected, were they to have this privilege in the first place. But, nonwhites are not the only people disproportionately warehoused in prisons. So too are low-income and mentally ill white people.

The fifth definition of white privilege states that those socially identified as white are not discriminated against for being white. This is absolutely true. Yet, this truth can be—and, until recently, was—expressed more productively. Characterizing humane treatment as a “privilege” is not a marker of a progressive, antiracist agenda. Abolitionists did not call freedom a “privilege,” they called slavery an injustice. Civil rights leaders did not call voting a “privilege,” they called voter suppression an injustice. And we should not call avoiding racial prejudice a “privilege,” we should call discrimination an injustice.

However, white privilege scholars rarely use this fifth definition of white privilege. This is because they want to do more than rename “racial discrimination” “white privilege:” they want to describe how racial discrimination privileges white people and how white privilege perpetuates racial discrimination. Yet, even this final, bare-bones definition of “white privilege” fails to promote racial equity or equality. Instead, it, like the other forms of “white privilege,” helps sustain the inegalitarian status quo.

All told, the study of white identity and white privilege encourages moralization and rumination, not understanding and action. It is a politics that tells white elites to make more room for nonwhite elites, poor and working-class white people that they are privileged, and, once again, ignores poor and working-class Black and brown people.