



# SHINING THE LIGHT ON WHITE

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*Challenging White Supremacy: A Workshop for Activists and Organizers*  
excerpted from *Exercise Manual Fall, 1998.*



## Historical Origins of White Privilege

In the early 1600's, 50 wealthy Englishmen bought stock in the Virginia Company of London. Their stock options included large parcels of (Indian) land in the new colony of Virginia, as well as the right to govern the colony.

These English gentlemen did not intend to work their lands in Virginia. To get workers, they contracted with English merchants who delivered impoverished English teenagers and kidnapped Africans. By the second decade of colonization, working servants, both English and African, outnumbered English gentlemen by perhaps 100 to 1. Living and working conditions for African and English laborers were horrendous. Workers were regularly whipped, nearly starved to death, denied days of rest, and refused permission to marry. English servants, who were supposedly protected under English poor laws, had limited times of servitude, but owners disregarded the laws. Those servants who were freed as required, usually died within a few years.

Under these conditions, African and English servants struggled to survive and resist their common oppression. They traded together; they made love together, and they made war together against their masters. Most servants were armed, since the wealthy used their servants to protect the frontiers against "hostile Indians."

Virginia records document ten servant revolts in the mid 1600's, culminating in the famous Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. African and English servants, free workers and farmers, demanded land and pay for their labor. They burned down Jamestown, the colony's capital. Colonial rulers had to call in the British army to subdue the rebellion, Colonial landowning legislators responded with a series of Slave Codes enacted from 1680 through 1705. These codes legalized chattel slavery (the child of an enslaved woman would be enslaved for a lifetime) and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. The codes equated the terms "slave" and "Negro," thus institutionalizing the world's first system of racialized slavery.

The codes also set out the "rights" of and restrictions for "servants." At first, servants" referred ambiguously to both Africans and English. But as "slave" became synonymous with "Negro," (the Spanish word for "Black,") "servant" came to mean "white," the term which replaced "English," "Christian" or "wench" to refer to poor or indentured Europeans.

As the codes tightened the legal noose around enslaved Africans, they simultaneously loosened the legal bonds on En-

glish indentured servants. English or "white" servants were granted specific forms of *privilege* or preferential treatment which was specifically denied to slaves, or "Negroes."

For example, the codes stipulated that servants could challenge unjust behavior of their masters in court; servants, both men and women, were entitled to specific "freedom dues," paid in tobacco (the legal tender of the colony) when their term of servitude was over. Servants could get a small plot of land, provided they promised to guard the frontiers. Poor white males were offered the first paid jobs in the colony—on the slave patrols. They got bounties for every slave they caught.

All these "privileges" were specified as being available only to "white" people. However, if any poor whites acted in solidarity with any Africans, they would be physically branded, and their privileges removed. Thus the term white became synonymous with *privilege* in colonial law.

In conclusion, a study of the historical origin of the term *white* suggests that: "*White*" is a political term. It was specifically created by colonial rulers to prevent oppressed people from different continents from uniting to confront their common oppressors. "*White privilege*" is a relational term. It is the other side of the coin of *racial oppression*. In the U.S. white supremacy system, they go together. *White* was originally a class term. The privileges of whiteness were first granted by the colonial ruling class only to the poor and servant class of Europeans.

Colonial rulers did not need privilege. They had power. In a few generations, the institutional privileges for the white poor would wipe out the material basis for unity with oppressed Africans, as their daily lives grew further apart. (Bacon's Rebellion was the last multiracial revolt of the oppressed during the colonial era.)

Colonial rulers used the existence of these privileges to convince poor white people that the little they had was due to their racial superiority, rather than to preferential treatment combined with hard work. *The impact of white privilege on white people's daily lives reinforced the ideology of white arrogance and "legitimized" their dehumanization of people of color.*

In summary, the system of white privilege for non-ruling class whites reinforces the system of racial oppression against people of color. And the *complementary systems* of white privilege and racial oppression maintain the system of white power for ruling class whites.

For more information about CWS write: 2440 16th St. #275, S.F., CA 94103 or call (415) 647-0921

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## White Privilege

U.S. institutions and culture give *preferential treatment* to people whose ancestors came from Europe over peoples whose ancestors are from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world; and *exempt* European Americans — white people — from the forms of racial and national oppression inflicted upon peoples from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world.

This *web of institutional and cultural preferential treatment* is called **white privilege**. In a white supremacy system, white privilege and racial oppression are two sides of the same coin.”

Non-ruling class white people are both oppressed and privileged. They are oppressed most significantly on the basis of class, gender and sexuality, and also on the basis of religion, culture, ethnicity, age, physical abilities and politics. At the same time, they are privileged in relation to peoples of color.

## 300 Years of Affirmative Action for White People

1663: In Virginia, English female indentured servants are no longer allowed to work in the fields; they can only work in their masters' house. African women still work in the fields.

1680 - 1705: Virginia “servant” codes specify that white servants can testify in court get “freedom dues,” a plot of land, and the right to marry someone else who comes from Europe. (Racial intermarriage is banned.)

1790: The Naturalization Act, the first act of the first U.S. Congress, guarantees that white immigrants can become citizens, which leads the way for them to become owners of land. “Non-white” immigrants are denied the right to be citizens. (This provision was not changed until 1952.)

1830: The Indian Removal Act, initiated by President Andrew Jackson, removes the Choctaw, Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Seminole Indians from the most fertile land in the South. White slave owners take over the land, use enslaved Africans to grow the cotton that creates the wealth for both Southern and Northern ruling and middle class whites. Cotton becomes the major export of the new nation.

1848: In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico cedes half its national territory to the United States. Mexicans living north of the Rio Grande become U.S. citizens, but they no longer automatically own the land their families have tilled for centuries. Under U.S. law, the land goes to those with papers. Mexicans do not have papers. White lawyers “representing” Mexican land owners swindle millions of acres by taking land as their legal fees. Mexican-Americans become the first farm workers on lands their families once owned.

1862: During the height of the Civil War, U.S. soldiers are also waging war on indigenous nations in the West. Millions of acres of Native land are taken by bloodshed. This land is distributed to white people only. The Homestead Act makes 50 million acres available, at low cost, to white working class homesteaders. The Morrill Act creates land grant colleges to build a new white middle class. And 100 million acres of Indian land are given free to the railroads.

1880's-1914: Millions of Southern and Eastern European immigrants come to the U.S. They can bring their families,

marry, travel to find work and eventually get citizenship. But during the same period, Chinese immigrants, except for merchants, are excluded from immigrating. Chinese workers are not allowed to bring their wives, nor to marry non-Chinese Americans, so they cannot create families.

1887: The Dawes Land Allotment Act forbids communal land ownership by indigenous people, and encourages Indians to sell their lands to whites. As a result, millions of acres go to white squatters.

1947 on: Under the G.I. Bill, the federal government authorizes the largest affirmative action program for white people in the nation's history. Millions of returning veterans get preferential treatment in jobs, suburban home loans, and college education. But these federal programs do not challenge institutional racism in employment, housing or education, so almost all the benefits go to white men and their families.

1954: One of the most significant effects of *Brown v. Board of Education* is the firing of thousands of Black teachers and principals in southern Black schools, after these schools are integrated with white ones. School Boards say that white parents will not let their kids be taught by Black teachers. So the major beneficiaries of *Brown v. Board of Education* are the thousands of white (mostly female) teachers and white (mostly male) principals who get the jobs in these newly integrated schools.

1994: The passage of “*Three Strikes You're Out*” in California leads to imprisonment for thousands of Black and Brown men while providing a major source of well paid jobs for mostly white working class men — as prison guards.

1996 to date: The passage both of *Proposition 209* in California and Washington State's '98 *Initiative 200* ends a brief interlude of 30 years of affirmative action for people of color. California, which will be the first state in the nation to have a majority population of people of color, leads the way in returning to a 300 year tradition of affirmative action for white people. Over a dozen other states have similar legislation pending.



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