

ABOLISH THE WHITE RACE

by any means necessary

THE WHITE RACE
The white race is a historically constructed social formation—historically constructed because (like royalty) it is a product of some people's responses to historical circumstances; a social formation because it is a fact of society corresponding to no classification recognized by natural science.

The white race cuts across ethnic and class lines. It is not coextensive with that portion of the population of European descent, since many of those classified as "colored" can trace some of their ancestry to Europe, while African, Asian, or American Indian blood flows through the veins of many considered white. Nor does membership in the white race imply wealth, since there are plenty of poor whites, as well as some people of wealth and comfort who are not white.

The white race consists of those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects,

than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it, in return for which they give their support to the system that degrades them.

The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race. Until that task is accomplished, even partial reform will prove elusive, because white influence permeates every issue in U.S. society, whether domestic or foreign.

Advocating the abolition of the white race is distinct from what is called "anti-racism." The term "racism" has come to be applied to a variety of attitudes, some of which are mutually incompatible, and has been devalued to mean little more than a tendency to dislike some people for the color of their skin. Moreover, anti-racism admits the natural existence of "races" even while opposing social distinctions among them. The abolitionists maintain, on the contrary, that people were not favored socially because they were white; rather they were defined as "white" because they were favored. Race itself is a product of social discrimination; so long as the white race exists, all movements against racism are doomed to fail.

The existence of the white race depends on the willingness of those assigned to it to place their racial interests above class, gender, or any other interests they hold. The defection of enough of its members to make it unreliable as a determinant of behavior will set off tremors that will lead to its collapse.

Race Traitor aims to serve as an intellectual center for those seeking to abolish the white race. It will encourage dissent from the conformity that maintains it and popularize examples of defection from its ranks, analyze the forces that hold it together and those that promise to tear it apart. Part of its task will be to promote debate among abolitionists. When possible, it will support practical measures, guided by the principle, *treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity*.

DISSOLVE THE CLUB

The white race is a club that enrolls certain people at birth, without their consent, and brings them up according to its rules. For the most part the members go through life accepting the benefits of membership, without thinking about the costs. When individuals question the rules, the officers are quick to remind them

of all they owe to the club, and warn them of the dangers they will face if they leave it.

Race Traitor aims to dissolve the club, to break it apart, to explode it. Some people who sympathize with our aim have asked us how we intend to win over the majority of so-called whites to anti-racism. Others, usually less friendly, have asked if we plan to exterminate physically millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of people. Neither of these plans is what we have in mind. The weak point of the club is its need for unanimity. Just as the South, on launching the Civil War, declared that it needed its entire territory and would have it, the white race must have the support of all those it has designated as its constituency, or it ceases to exist.

Before the Civil War, the leading spokesmen for the slaveholders acknowledged that the majority of white northerners, swayed above all by the presence of the fugitive slave, considered slavery unjust. The Southerners also understood that the opposition was ineffective; however much the white people of the north disapproved of the slave system, the majority went along with it rather than risk the ordinary comforts of their lives, meager as they were in many cases.

When John Brown attacked Harpers Ferry, Southern pro-slavery leaders reacted with fury: they imposed a boycott on northern manufacturers, demanded new concessions from the government in Washington, and began to prepare for war. When they sought to portray John Brown as a representative of northern opinion, Southern leaders were wrong; he represented only a small and isolated minority. But they were also right, for he expressed the hopes that still persisted in the northern population despite decades of cringing before the slaveholders. Virginia did not fear John Brown and his small band of followers, but rather his soul that would go marching on, though his body lay a-mould'rin' in the grave.

When the South, in retaliation for Harpers Ferry, sought to further bully northern opinion, it did so not out of paranoia but out of the realistic assessment that only a renewal of the national pro-slavery vows could save a system whose proud facade concealed a fragile foundation. By the arrogance of their demands, the Southern leaders compelled the people of the north to resist. Not ideas but events

were in command. Each step led inexorably to the next: Southern land-greed, Lincoln's victory, secession, war, blacks as laborers, soldiers, citizens, voters. And so the war that began with not one person in a hundred foreseeing the end of slavery was transformed within two years into an anti-slavery war.

It is our faith—and with those who do not share it we shall not argue—that the majority of so-called whites in this country are neither deeply nor consciously committed to white supremacy; like most human beings in most times and places, they would do the right thing if it were convenient. As did their counterparts before the Civil War, most go along with a system that disturbs them, because the consequences of challenging it are terrifying. They close their eyes to what is happening around them, because it is easier not to know.

At rare moments their nervous peace is shattered, their certainty is shaken, and they are compelled to question the common sense by which they normally live. One such moment was in the days immediately following the Rodney King verdict, when a majority of white Americans were willing to admit to polltakers that black people had good reasons to rebel, and some joined them. Ordinarily the moments are brief, as the guns and reform programs are moved up to restore order and the confidence that matters are in good hands and they can go back to sleep. Both the guns and the reform programs are aimed at whites as well as blacks—the guns as a warning and the reform programs as a salve to their consciences.

Recently, one of our editors, unfamiliar with New York City traffic laws, made an illegal right turn there on a red light. He was stopped by two cops in a patrol car. After examining his license, they released him with a courteous admonition. Had he been black, they probably would have ticketed him, and might even have taken him down to the station. A lot of history was embodied in that small exchange: the cops treated the miscreant leniently at least in part because they assumed, looking at him, that he was white and therefore loyal. Their courtesy was a habit meant both to reward good conduct and induce future cooperation.

Had the driver cursed them, or displayed a bumper sticker that said, "Avenge Rodney King," the cops might have reacted differently. We admit that neither ges-

ture on the part of a single individual would in all likelihood be of much consequence. But if enough of those who looked white broke the rules of the club to make the cops doubt their ability to recognize a white person merely by looking at him or her, how would it affect the cops' behavior? And if the police, the courts, and the authorities in general were to start spreading around indiscriminately the treatment they normally reserve for people of color, how would the rest of the so-called whites react?

How many dissident so-called whites would it take to unsettle the nerves of the white executive board? It is impossible to know. One John Brown—against a background of slave resistance—was enough for Virginia. Yet it was not the abolitionists, not even the transcendent John Brown, who brought about the mass shifts in consciousness of the Civil War period. At most, their heroic deeds were part of a chain of events that involved mutual actions and reactions on a scale beyond anything they could have anticipated—until a war that began with both sides fighting for slavery (the South to take it out of the Union, the North to keep it in) ended with a great army marching through the land singing, "As He died to make men holy, let us fight to make men free."

The moments when the routine assumptions of race break down are the seismic promise that somewhere in the tectonic flow a new fault is building up pressure, a new Harpers Ferry is being prepared. Its nature and timing cannot be predicted, but of its coming we have no doubt. When it comes, it will set off a series of tremors that will lead to the disintegration of the white race. We want to be ready, walking in Jerusalem just like John.

WHAT KIND OF JOURNAL IS THIS?

Race Traitor exists not to make converts, but to reach out to those who are dissatisfied with the terms of membership in the white club. Its primary intended audience will be those people commonly called whites who, in one way or another, understand whiteness to be a problem that perpetuates injustice and prevents even the well-disposed among them from joining unequivocally in the struggle for

human freedom. By engaging these dissidents in a journey of discovery into whiteness and its discontents, we hope to take part, together with others, in the process of defining a new human community. We wish neither to minimize the complicity of even the most downtrodden of whites with the system of white supremacy nor to exaggerate the significance of momentary departures from white rules.

We should say that there are some articles we are not interested in publishing. Since we are not seeking converts, we probably will not publish articles that lecture various organizations about their racial opportunism. Also we probably will not publish articles promoting interracial harmony, because that approach too often leaves intact differential treatment of whites and blacks and provides subtle confirmation of the idea that different races exist independently of social distinctions.

In the original film version of *Robin Hood* (starring Errol Flynn), the Sheriff of Nottingham says to Robin, "You speak treason." Robin replies, "Fluently." We hope to do the same.

 Noel Ignatiev

IMMIGRANTS AND WHITES

AT THE TURN of the century, an investigator into conditions in the steel industry, seeking employment on a blast furnace, was informed that "only Hunkies work on those jobs, they're too damn dirty and too damn hot for a 'white' man." Around the same time, a West Coast construction boss was asked, "You don't call an Italian a white man?" "No, sir," came the reply, "an Italian is a dago." Odd though this usage may seem today, it was at one time fairly common. According to one historian, "in all sections native-born and northern European laborers called themselves 'white men' to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans they worked beside."¹ I have even heard of a time when it was said in the Pacific Northwest logging industry that no whites worked in these woods, just a bunch of Swedes.

Eventually, as we know, Europeans of all national origins were accepted as "whites"; only rarely and in certain parts of the country is it any longer possible to hear the Jew or the Italian referred to as not white. The outcome is usually hailed as a mighty accomplishment of democratic assimilation. In this essay, I shall argue two points: first, that the racial status of the immigrants, far from being the natural outcome of a spontaneous process, grew out of choices made by the immigrants themselves and those receiving them; second, that it was in fact deeply tragic, because to the extent the immigrants became "white" they abandoned the possibility of becoming fully American. Finally, I shall speculate a bit on the future.

The general practice in the social sciences is to view race as a natural category. A representative example of this approach is the book by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1973). The authors declare the subject of their study to be the "white working class." As well-trained sociologists, they are careful to specify what they mean by "working class," but they do not find it necessary to define "white." *Of course everybody knows* what is "white." However, for some, including this writer, the inquiry becomes most necessary just at the point Sennett and Cobb take for granted.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to review the work showing the origins in the seventeenth century of "white" as a social category. The term came into common usage only in the latter part of the century, that is, after people from Africa and people from Europe had been living together for seven decades on the North American mainland.

In an April 1984 essay in *Essence*, "On Being 'White' . . . And Other Lies," James Baldwin wrote that "No one was white before he/she came to America." Once here, Europeans became white "by deciding they were white. . . . White men—from Norway, for example, where they were Norwegians—became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women."

Now it is some time since settlers from Norway have slaughtered any cattle, poisoned any wells, or massacred any Indians, and few Americans of any ethnic

background take a direct hand in the denial of equality to people of color; yet the white race still exists as a social category. If it is not an inherited curse, whiteness must be reproduced in each generation. Although Sennett and Cobb treat it as a natural classification, they recount a story that reveals some of how it is re-created. One of the characters in their book is a man they call Ricca Kartides, who came to America from Greece, worked as a building janitor and, after a few years, "*bought property in a nearby suburb of Boston*" (emphasis added).

What social forces, what history framed the fearful symmetry of Mr. Kartides's choice of location? Was that the turning point in his metamorphosis from a Greek immigrant into a white man? What alternative paths were open to him? How would his life, and his children's lives, have been different had he pursued them? There is a great deal of history subsumed (and lost) in the casual use of the term "white." Even in the narrowest terms, "white" is not a self-evident category. Barbara J. Fields recounts the apocryphal story of an American journalist who once asked Papa Doc Duvalier what portion of the Haitian people was white. Duvalier answered unhesitatingly, "Ninety-eight percent." The puzzled reporter asked Duvalier how he defined white. "How do you define black in your country?" asked Duvalier in turn. When the answer came back that in the U.S. anyone with any discernible African ancestry was considered black, Duvalier replied, "Well, that's the way we define white in my country."² Along the same lines, every character in Mark Twain's novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, black and white, is of predominantly European descent.

If whiteness is a historical product, then it must be transmitted. Like all knowledge, white consciousness does not come easily. In one case in a small town in Louisiana at the beginning of the century, five Sicilian storekeepers were lynched for violating the white man's code: they had dealt mainly with black people and associated with them on equal terms.³ In her short story "The Displaced Person," Flannery O'Connor describes how the immigrant is taught to be white. The story takes place shortly after World War II. A Polish immigrant comes to labor on a small southern farm. Among the other laborers are two black men. After he has

been on the farm for a while, the Pole arranges to pay a fee to one of the black men to marry his cousin, who is in a DP camp in Europe, in order for her to gain residence in the U.S. When the farm owner, a traditional southern white lady, learns of the deal, she is horrified and undertakes to explain to the Pole the facts of life in America.

“Mr. Guizac,” she said, beginning slowly and then speaking faster until she ended breathless in the middle of a word, “that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can’t talk to a nigger that way. You’ll excite him and besides it can’t be done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can’t be done here...”

“She no care black,” he said. “She in camp three year.”

Mrs. McIntyre felt a peculiar weakness behind her knees. “Mr. Guizac,” she said, “I don’t want to have to speak to you about this again. If I do, you’ll have to find another place yourself. Do you understand?”

The story ends tragically as a consequence of the Pole’s failure to learn what is expected of him in America.

In what relation, then, does whiteness stand to Americanism? If adoption by the immigrant of prevailing racial attitudes is the key to adjusting successfully to the new country, does it then follow that to become white is to become American? The opposite is closer to the truth: for immigrants from Europe (and elsewhere, to the extent they have a choice), the adoption of a white identity is the most serious barrier to becoming fully American. (From a *political* standpoint the degree of cultural assimilation is largely irrelevant. The two least culturally assimilated groups in the country are the Amish of Lancaster County—the so-called Pennsylvania Dutch—and the Hasidic Jews; yet both enjoy all the rights of whites.)

Like Cuba, like Brazil, like other places in the New World in which slavery was important historically, the United States is an Afro-American country. In the first place, persons of African descent constituted a large portion of the population

throughout the formative period (how large no one can say, but probably around one-fifth for most of the first two centuries). Second, people from Africa have been here longer than most of the immigrant groups, longer in fact than all groups except for the Indians, the “Spanish” of the Southwest (themselves a mixture of Spaniards, Africans, and Indians), and the descendants of early English settlers (who by now also include an African strain). Above all, the experience of people from Africa in the New World represents the distillation of the American experience, and this concentration of history finds its expression in the psychology, culture, and national character of the American people.

What is the distinctive element of the American experience? It is the shock of being torn from a familiar place and hurled into a new environment, compelled to develop a way of life and culture from the materials at hand. And who more embodies that experience, is more the essential product of that experience, than the descendants of the people from Africa who visited these shores together with the first European explorers (and perhaps earlier, as recent researches have suggested), and whose first settlers were landed here a year before the Mayflower?

In *The Omni-Americans* (New York, 1970), Albert Murray discusses the American national character. He draws upon Constance Rourke, who saw the American as a composite, part Yankee, part backwoodsman (himself an adaptation of the Indian), and part Negro. “Something in the nature of each,” wrote Rourke,

induced an irresistible response. Each had been a wanderer over the lands, the Negro a forced and unwilling wanderer. Each in a fashion of his own had broken bonds, the Yankee in the initial revolt against the parent civilization, the backwoodsman in revolt against all civilization, the Negro in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged but which nonetheless made a perceptible outline.⁴

“It is all too true,” writes Murray, “that Negroes unlike the Yankee and the backwoodsman were slaves.... But it is also true—and as things have turned out even

more significant—that they were slaves *who were living in the presence of more human freedom and individual opportunity than they or anybody else had ever seen before.*” Later he writes:

The slaves who absconded to fight for the British during the Revolutionary War were no less inspired by *American* ideas than those who fought for the colonies: the liberation that the white people wanted from the British the black people wanted from white people. As for the tactics of the fugitive slaves, the Underground Railroad was not only an innovation, it was also an extension of the American quest for democracy brought to its highest level of epic heroism.

American culture, he argues, is “*incontestably mulatto.*”

After all, such is the process by which Americans are made that immigrants, for instance, need trace their roots no further back in either time or space than Ellis Island. *By the very act of arrival*, they emerge from the bottomless depths and enter the same stream of American tradition as those who landed at Plymouth. In the very act of making their way through customs, they begin the process of becoming, as Constance Rourke would put it, part Yankee, part backwoodsman and Indian—and part Negro!

It is very generous of Murray, as a descendant of old American stock, to welcome the newcomers so unreservedly. But what if their discovery, as he puts it, of the “social, political, and economic value in white skin” leads them to “become color-poisoned bigots”?

Their development into Americans is arrested. Like certain insects that, under unfavorable conditions, do not complete their metamorphosis and remain indefinitely at the larval stage, they halt their growth at whiteness.

John Langston Gwaltney wrote, in *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York, 1980), “The notion that black culture is some kind of backwater or tributary

of an American ‘mainstream’ is well established in much popular as well as standard social science literature. To the prudent black American masses, however, core black culture *is* the mainstream.” At issue is not, as many would have it, the degree to which black people have or have not been assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. Black people have never shown any reluctance to borrow from others when they thought it to their advantage. They adopted the English language—and transformed it. They adopted the Christian religion—and transformed it. They adopted the twelve-tone musical scale—and did things with it that Bach never dreamed of. In recent years they have adopted the game of basketball—and placed their own distinctive stamp on the style of play. And they have adopted spaghetti, okra, refried beans, noodle pudding, liver dumplings, and corned beef, and modified them and made them a part of ordinary “drylongso” cuisine.

It is not black people who have been prevented from drawing upon the full variety of experience that has gone into making up America. Rather, it is those who, in maddened pursuit of the white whale, have cut themselves off from human society, on sea and on land, and locked themselves in a “masoned walled-town of exclusiveness.”

All this is not to deny that whites in America have borrowed from black people. But they have done so shamefacedly, unwilling to acknowledge the sources of their appropriations, and the result has generally been inferior. The outstanding example of this process was Elvis Presley, who was anticipated by Sam Phillips’s remark, “If I can find a white man who sings like a Negro, I’ll make a million dollars.” Other examples are Colonel Sanders’s chicken and Bo Derek’s braids. There are exceptions: Peggy Lee comes immediately to mind.

Can the stone be rolled back? If race, like class, is “something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships”—to borrow the words of E.P. Thompson—then can it be made to unhappen? Can the white race be dissolved? Can “white” people cease to be?

I cite here two details which point to the possibility of the sort of mass shifts in popular consciousness that would be necessary to dissolve the white race. The first

is the sudden and near-unanimous shift by Afro-Americans in the 1960s from the self-designation "Negro" to "black" or "Black." (Among prominent holdouts are Ralph Ellison and the Negro Ensemble Company.) The shift involved more than a preference for one term over another; although its precise implications were and still are unclear, and although much of its substance has disappeared or been reduced to mere symbol, there seems little doubt that the initial impulse for the change was a new view among black people of their relation to official society. "Black" stood in opposition to "white."

The second detail I cite is an apparently trivial incident I happened to witness. At Inland Steel Company's Indiana Harbor Works in East Chicago, there used to be a shuttle-bus system that operated at shift-change time, picking up workers at the main gate and delivering them to the various mills within the plant, as much as a mile away. One morning, as the bus began to pull away from the gate, I saw, from my passenger's seat, a man running to catch it. He was in his early twenties, apparently white, and was dressed in the regulation steelworker's garb—steel-toed shoes, fire-resistant green jacket and pants, hard hat—underneath which could be seen shoulder-length hair, in the fashion of the time, the early 1970s. The driver pulled away and, as he did so, said over his shoulder, "I would have stopped for him if he'd had short hair."

That small incident brought home to me with great force some of the meaning of the revolution in style that swept so-called white youth in those years. At the time, many young people were breaking with the values that had guided their parents. In areas as seemingly unrelated as clothing and hair styles, musical tastes, attitudes toward a war, norms of sexual conduct, use of drugs, and feelings about racial prejudice, young people were creating a special community, which became known as the counterculture. In particular, long hair for males became the visible token of their identification with it. It was a badge of membership in a brotherhood cast out from official society—*exactly the function of color for Afro-Americans*. As that incident with the bus driver reveals, and as anyone who lived through those years can testify, it was perceived that way by participants and onlookers alike.

Granted that only a minority of eligible youth ever identified fully with the counterculture, that the commitment of most participants to it was not very deep, that few in it were aware of all its implications, that the whole movement did not last very long, and that its symbols were quickly taken up and marketed by official society—nevertheless, it contained the elements of a mass break with the conformity that preserves the white race.

Normally the discussion of immigrant assimilation is framed by efforts to estimate how much of the immigrants' traditional culture they lose in becoming American. Far more significant, however, than the choice between the old and the new is the choice between two identities which are both new to them: white and American.

NOTES

This article, written in the spring of 1987, appeared in *Konch*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1990) in a slightly different version, under the title "'Whiteness' and American Character."

1. David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (New York, 1969), 120; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York, 1963), 66, 173.
2. "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, *Region, Race and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982).
3. Higham, *Patterns*, 169.
4. *American Humor: A Study of National Character* (New York, 1931), 98.

WHEN DOES THE UNREASONABLE ACT MAKE SENSE?

TWO POINTS DESCRIBE
Two points describe the line of *Race Traitor*: first, that the “white race” is not a natural but a historical category; second, that what was historically constructed can be undone.

The first of these points is now widely accepted; scientists have concluded that there are no biological standards for distinguishing one “race” from another, and social scientists have begun to examine how race was constructed and how it is reproduced. However, few scholars or activists have taken the next step: indeed, one might say that up to now the philosophers have merely interpreted the white race; the point, however, is to abolish it. How can this be done?

The white race is like a private club, which grants privileges to certain people in return for obedience to its rules. It is based on one huge assumption: that all those

who look white are, whatever their complaints or reservations, fundamentally loyal to it.

What if the white skin lost its usefulness as a badge of loyalty? What if the cop, the judge, the social worker, the school teacher, and the other representatives of official society could no longer recognize a loyal person merely by looking, how would it affect their behavior? And if color no longer served as a handy guide to the dispensing of favors, so that ordinary whites began experiencing the sort of treatment to which they are normally immune, how would this affect their outlook?

The rules of the white club do not require that all members be strong advocates of white supremacy, merely that they defer to the prejudices of others. The need to maintain racial solidarity imposes a stifling conformity on whites, on any subject touching even remotely on race.

The way to abolish the white race is to disrupt that conformity. If enough people who look white violate the rules of whiteness, their existence cannot be ignored. If it becomes impossible for the upholders of white rules to speak in the name of all who look white, the white race will cease to exist. The abolitionists are traitors to the white race; by acting boldly they jeopardize their membership in the white club and their ability to draw upon its privileges.

We recognize that this advice flies in the face of what is usually regarded as sound, practical sense. Even (we might say especially) in the ranks of the reformers, the conventional wisdom teaches that the way to achieve social change is to strive to express the desires of an existing constituency. That is perhaps why most social reform is so useless.

We are calling for the opposite: a minority willing to undertake outrageous acts of provocation, aware that they will incur the opposition of many who might agree with them if they adopted a more moderate approach.

How many will it take? No one can say for sure. It is a bit like the problem of currency: how much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to destroy the value of the official currency? The answer is, nowhere near a majority—just

enough to undermine public confidence in the official stuff. When it comes to abolishing the white race, the task is not to win over more whites to oppose “racism”; there are “anti-racists” enough already to do the job.

In a previous issue we wrote, “In a certain sense, the entire project of *Race Traitor* is to examine, from every possible angle, the moment when Huck Finn, and all the modern Huck Finns, decide to break with what Huck calls ‘civilization’ and take the steps that will lead to Jim’s, and their own, freedom.” Since we are talking about acts which are, by definition, unreasonable (because they fly in the face of all contemporary reasonable opinion), we could reformulate as follows the central problem *Race Traitor* seeks to address: When does the unreasonable act make sense?

In our pages we have published accounts from the past and present, where so-called whites have committed acts which defy reason but which turn out to have been socially effective. There are others we know of but have not written about, and still others we do not know of but want to report. We believe that to popularize such examples will contribute to altering current notions of what constitutes reason, and will encourage others to be still bolder.

Finally, we know how devilishly difficult it is for individuals to escape whiteness. The white race does not voluntarily surrender a single member, so that even those who step outside of it in one situation find it virtually impossible not to step back in later, if for no other reason than the assumptions of others. But we also know that when there comes into being a critical mass of people who, though they look white, have ceased to act white, the white race will undergo fission, and former whites will be able to take part in building a new human community.