

# Beyond the Whiteness – Global Capitalism and White Supremacy: thoughts on movement building and anti-racist organizing

by Chris Crass

One of the most exciting developments that has come out of the mass actions - in Seattle, Washington DC, Windsor, Canada, Philadelphia and Los Angeles - is the movement-wide discussion about racism, white supremacy and organizing strategies to build a multiracial radical movement for global justice. Elizabeth 'Betita' Martínez's widely distributed essay, "Where Was the Color in Seattle", put forward the question - why, if global capitalism has the greatest negative impact on people of color around the world and in the United States, was the direct action against the WTO so overwhelming white? Her essay helped launch a dialogue in alternative media and in activists groups throughout the United States and beyond.

Among activists of color, the question has generally been, "how can we bring an analysis of global capitalism and global justice to our local organizing efforts?" White activists have responded to Betita's essay by asking themselves, "how can we get people of color to join our groups and movement?" But this isn't the most useful question that we should be asking. The question to struggle with is, "How can we be anti-racist activists dedicated to bringing down white supremacy?" White activists need to work on developing our understanding of white supremacy, how white privilege operates in the activist movement and how we can bring a solid anti-racist politics to the work that we do.

The idea that we just need to get more people of color to join our groups is an example of how white activists have internalized white supremacy. It carries the idea that we have all the answers and now they just need to be delivered to people of color. The alternative, of course, would be something like, people of color have been organizing for a long time (500+ years), and we (white activists) have a lot to learn, so maybe we should find ways to form alliances, relationships, and coalitions to work with people of color and be prepared to learn as well as share.

The other major aspect of 'how can we get more people of color to join our group' is the idea that anti-racist consciousness develops through osmosis - i.e. that if white people sit in the same room as people of color, we will begin to understand how white supremacy operates and therefore we won't really need to talk about it. We need to be clear that multiracial doesn't automatically mean anti-racist. The US military is multiracial in composition, but clearly serves the interests of imperialism and white supremacy. Similarly, an anti-racist group of whites can work to end white supremacy. What we are envisioning is a consciously anti-racist and multiracial movement against global capitalism.

There is truth to the idea that white people learn about racism through interactions and relationships with people of color. But in terms of how we plan to do this work in activism, our goal cannot be to bring in people of color and expect that they will school us. Organizers of color have enough work already. In our pursuit to get educated, we need to

go to more events and actions organized by people of color and show support, listen and learn. We need to read the amazing writers that are out there . We can pay attention to how the system works (when we are in jail, in court, in classrooms, at work and on the street). We can build relationships and learn from each other. But, just as men cannot expect women to educate them about sexism and heteros cannot expect queers to give them the homophobia 101 class whenever it is deemed appropriate. White people have a responsibility to work on racism together and not just wait until a person of color brings it up.

Here's an example of this kind of dynamic. Men in Food Not Bombs (the group I've worked with) would often talk about sexism in terms of how can we get more women taking on more responsibility and create equal power. The conversations would sometimes turn to questions like, How can we check our behavior that is preventing women from taking on responsibility? And, What kind of internal culture do we have and how does it privilege men and keep women down? These conversations about what men should do were very useful - as men should worry less about what women are and aren't doing and think more about what they as men are and aren't doing. The women in the group are just as capable, just as responsible, just as intelligent, once men stop occupying all of the space and learn to share power. Men worrying less about appeasing women and more about ending sexism is what must happen.

This is how we need to think about racism. Too often I hear white activists talk about why more people of color aren't in the group - as opposed to whether or not we really have an understanding of how deeply racism impacts the issues we're working on and whether or not there are organizations and activists of color already working on these issues so that we can form working relationships.

White supremacy is a system of power. The definition of white supremacy that I use comes from Sharon Martinas and the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop. White supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege. White supremacy operates through racial oppression against people of color: slavery, genocide, anti-immigration, driving while Black, etc. Along with white privilege to white people: not being thought of as a criminal every time you walk into a store, for example. All the while, white supremacy, maintains real power for the ruling class who control the major institutions of society.

The impact white supremacy has on white folks is rarely looked at, especially in relationship to activism and organizing. White privilege means that white people don't have to think about racism. White privilege means that white people can think of themselves as normal and generalize universally that what they experience is the standard. White privilege is a major barrier to activism and has historically undermined radical multiracial and anti-racist movement building. An example is white radicals organizing actions that involve possible arrest without thinking about how people of color have a very different relationship to the police - i.e. police brutality is a daily reality in communities of color and people of color are treated different at the hands of police generally speaking. White privilege often

leads to white activists thinking that their way of organizing is the only way to organize and that their tactics are the most radical tactics.

In the political punk zine *HeartAttack*, activist Helen Luu wrote about the whiteness of the protests in Seattle as well as the left/anarchist movement generally. Luu looked at how middle class white activists often have the privilege to choose issues and to choose tactics and stated that they generally have less to lose by engaging in activism. People of color, on the other hand, generally have to focus their activism on survival issues - like police brutality, housing, welfare rights, environmental toxins next door - that impact their lives and communities in concrete ways. Luu argues that we need to rethink the way that we define activism and I would argue that white radicals need to seriously examine how we talk about issues and tactics, in terms of what is deemed militant and what issues are described as radical, in relationship to how white supremacy operates.

White privilege undermines solidarity is the way that white activists can be "blinded by the white". By this, I mean white activists often fail to comprehend the implications of communities of color organizing and building their capacities to fight to get toxins out of their neighborhood, for improved public transportation, for accountable public schools, for an end to police violence, for an end to INS deportation. The system of white supremacy defines white people as human, and people of color as inferior, subhuman, marginal - undeserving of services, let alone basic human rights. The racially coded public discussions of social policies illustrate the contempt white society has for people of color: fear of 'brown bodies' crossing 'white borders' with 'illegitimate and illegal brown babies' sucking up 'white tax dollars' in 'Black controlled welfare departments' of 'inner cities where welfare queen mothers raise the next generation of juvenile crime delinquents'.

The discussion around organizing and anti-racism was taken up by Jason Wade and Steve Stewart, in their article, "The Battle for our Lives" from the anarchist journal, *the Arsenal*. They argue that activists/organizers must develop analysis that connects sweatshop labor in Indonesia to sweatshop labor in the United States and demonstrate that global capitalism creates misery in the third world and misery in the United States as well. They write, "We need to take the momentum from the anti-global capitalism struggles and connect them with struggles against police brutality, for health care, against welfare cutbacks, for better access to education, struggles that grow from our neighborhoods and build a serious revolutionary critique, vision and movement to redistribute power back to our everyday lives." They argue, "We have to struggle around these 'everyday life' issues if we hope to build a more multiracial movement."

With this in mind, white activists need to think about anti-racist organizing in at least a couple of ways. One, white privilege is the flipside of racial oppression and each must be challenged if we are to move towards equality. Two, when people of color oppose racism they are also re-affirming their humanity in a social order that denies this and that is why struggles around racism have been such catalysts for revolutionary social change as they challenge the very foundation of this society - white supremacy. White radicals need to think about ways of talking about and organizing against white privilege - in the predominately white sectors of the movement and in general white society. It's also important for white radicals to remember that organizing against racism is also about freeing our own humanity from the grip of the ~~slave~~ society.

White radicals also need to think about how we go about forming working relationships with people of color. Gloria Anzaldúa, queer Chicana author/activist, writes about how white activists often talk about helping other people - helping the people at Big Mountain, the farm workers, indigenous communities working to keep toxins out of their neighborhoods, political prisoners, etc. Anzaldúa writes, as they (white folks) learn our histories and understand our struggles, "They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead". This is a major distinction - no white savior coming to make it all better, but rather white allies working in solidarity with people of color in a way that respects leadership and builds trust and respect.

White activists finding ways to show solidarity and act as allies with people of color is critical. It's not about helping other people with their issues or acting from a sense of guilt, but rather taking responsibility for racial injustice and recognizing how we are impacted by the issues. As Black feminist author/activist Barbara Smith says, "In political struggles there wouldn't be any 'your' and 'my' issues, if we saw each form of oppression as integrally linked to the others."

This is an exciting time with great possibilities. We need to be ready to make mistakes, make hard decisions and experiment with anti-racist organizing that really does aim at challenging white supremacy while confronting global capitalism.

In doing our work, it is important to have vision and hold on to it. When I think about and imagine the kind of movement of which I want to be a part, it is: multiracial and anti-racist - absolutely dedicated to self-determination for all oppressed people and ending white supremacy ; feminist with a commitment to develop new social relationships based on equality and bring down the social structures based on domination; queer liberationist with a commitment to challenging heterosexism and creating freedom to safely define our own sexualities and genders; multigenerational and full of energy, wisdom and a desire to make healthy communities for all of us to care for and learn from each other; anti-capitalist with a deep analysis of how the system deforms and dehumanizes us joined with a vision of a new order based on social cooperation and ecological sustainability; and democratic with a passion for collective liberation and empowerment, along with an eye for organizing strategies that have direct action, collective action and solidarity building at their core.

Together we can, forever we must.

**\*Chris Crass, 'Beyond the Whiteness--Global Capitalism and White Supremacy'**

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