



What is white supremacy?

By Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez

“White Supremacy is an 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.”

(Definition by the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, San Francisco, CA)

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY IT IS A SYSTEM?

The most common mistake people make when talking about racism (White Supremacy) is to think of it as a problem of personal prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: political, economic, social, cultural, legal, military, educational, all our institutions. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.

By not understanding that racism is systemic, we guarantee it will continue. For example, racist police behavior is often reduced to “a few bad apples” who need to be removed, instead of seeing that it can be found in police departments everywhere. It reflects and sustains the existing power relations throughout society. This mistake has real consequences: by refusing to see police brutality as part of a system, and that the system must be changed, we guarantee such brutality will continue.

The need to recognize racism as being systemic is one reason the term White Supremacy is more useful than the term racism. They refer to the same problem but:

A. The purpose of racism is much clearer when we call it “white supremacy.” The word “supremacy” means a power relationship exists.

B. Race is an unscientific term for differences between people. Although racism is a social reality, it has no biological or other scientific basis. There is a single human race.

C. The term racism often leads to dead-end debates about whether a particular remark or action by an individual person was really racist or not. We will achieve a clearer understanding of racism if we analyze how a certain action relates to the system of White Supremacy.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY WHITE SUPREMACY IS HISTORICALLY BASED?

Every country has a creation story—it can also be called an origin myth—which is the story people are told of how their country came into being. Ours says the United States began with Columbus’s so-called “discovery” of “America,” continued with settlement by brave Pilgrims, won its independence from England with the American Revolution, survived a civil war, and expanded westward until it became the enormous, rich country you see today.

That is the origin myth we are all taught. It omits three giant facts about the emergence



of the United States as a nation. Those facts demonstrate that White Supremacy is fundamental to its existence:

1. The United States is a nation state created by the conquest of other peoples in several stages. The first stage was the European seizure of territory inhabited by indigenous peoples, who called their homeland Turtle Island. Before the European invasion, between nine and eighteen million indigenous people lived in what became North America. By the end of the so-called Indian Wars, about 250,000 remained in what is now the United States, and about 123,000 in what is now Canada (see *The State of Native America*, ed. by M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992).

That process created the land base of this country. The seizure of Indian land and elimination of indigenous peoples was the first, essential condition for the existence of what became the United States. The first step, then, was military conquest and what must be called genocide.

2. The United States could not have developed economically as a nation without enslaved African labor. When agriculture and industry began growing in the colonial period, a tremendous labor shortage existed. Not enough white workers came from Europe and the European invaders could not put the remaining indigenous peoples to work in sufficient numbers. Enslaved Africans provided the labor force that made the growth of the United States possible.

That growth peaked from about 1800 to 1860, the period called the Market Revolution. During this time, the United States changed from being an agricultural/commercial economy to an industrial corporate economy. The development of banks, expansion of the credit system, protective tariffs, and new transportation systems all helped make this possible. The key to the Market Revolution was the export of cotton, and this was made possible by slave labor. So the second, vital step in the creation of the United States was slavery.

3. The third major step in the formation of the United States as a nation was the seizure of almost half of Mexico by war--today's Southwest. This expansion enabled the U.S. to reach the Pacific and thus open up valuable trade with Asia that included markets for export and goods to import and sell in the U.S. It also opened to the U.S. vast mineral wealth in Arizona, agricultural wealth in California, and new sources of cheap labor to build railroads and develop the economy.

To do this, the United States first took over by military force the part of Mexico called Texas and made it a state in 1845. The following year it invaded the rest of Mexico and seized its territory under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the 1846-



48 War on Mexico. In 1853 the U.S. acquired a final chunk of Arizona. by threatening to renew the war if not agreed. This completed the territorial boundaries of what is now the United States. Those were the three foundation stones in the creation of the United States as a nation. Then, in 1898, the U.S. takeover of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba by means of war against Spain extended the U.S. to become an empire. All but Cuba have remained U.S. colonies or neo-colonies, providing new sources of wealth and military power for the United States. The colonization and incorporation of Hawaii completed the empire.

Many people in the United States hate to recognize the truth of the three steps. They do not like to call the U.S. an empire. They prefer the established origin myth, with its idea of the U.S. as a democracy from its early days.

III. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THAT WHITE SUPREMACY IS A SYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION?

The roots of White Supremacy lie in establishing economic exploitation by the theft of resources and human labor. That exploitation has then been justified by a racist ideology affirming the inferiority of its victims—and this continues today. The first application of White Supremacy or racism by the Euroamericans who control U.S. society was against indigenous peoples, whose land was stolen; then Blacks, originally as slaves and later as exploited waged labor; followed by Mexicans when they lost their land holdings and also became wage-slaves. Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and other Asian/Pacific peoples also became low-wage workers here, subject to racism. Arab workers have also been exploited in this way.

In short, White Supremacy and economic power were born together. The United States is the first nation in the world to be born racist (South Africa came not long after) and also the first to be born capitalist (not just replacing feudalism, for example, with capitalism). That is not a coincidence. In this country, as history shows, capitalism and racism go hand in hand.

IV. HOW DOES WHITE SUPREMACY MAINTAIN AND DEFEND A SYSTEM OF WEALTH, POWER AND PRIVILEGE?

Racist power relations are sustained by the institutions of this society together with the ideology of Whiteness that developed during western colonization. The first European settlers called themselves English, Irish, German, French, Dutch, etc.--not "white." Over half of those who came in the early colonial period were servants. But by 1760, about 400,000 of the two million non-Indians here were enslaved Africans. The planters who formed an elite class in the southern colonies, were outnumbered by non-whites. In the Carolinas, 25,000 whites faced 40,000 Black slaves and 60,000 indigenous peoples in the area.



Class lines hardened as the distinctions between rich and poor became sharper. The problem of control loomed large and fear of revolt from below grew among the elite. Elite whites feared most of all that discontented whites -- servants, tenant farmers, the urban poor, the property-less, soldiers and sailors -- would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. As early as 1663, indentured white servants and Black slaves had formed a conspiracy in Virginia to rebel and gain their freedom.

Then, in 1676, came Bacon's Rebellion by white frontiersmen and servants alongside Black slaves. The rebellion shook Virginia's planter elite. Many other rebellions followed, from South Carolina to New York. The main fear of elite whites everywhere was a class fear. Their solution: divide and control.

On one hand, certain privileges were given to white servants. They were now allowed to acquire land, join militias, carry guns, and other legal rights not allowed to slaves. At the same time, the Slave Codes were enacted that legalized chattel slavery and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. The codes equated the terms "Negro" and "slave."

With their new privileges, those in the servant class were legally declared "white" on the basis of skin color and continental origin. That made them "superior" to Blacks (and Indians). Thus whiteness was born as a racist notion to prevent lower-class whites from joining people of color, especially Blacks, against their common class enemies. The concept of whiteness became a source of unity and strength for the vastly outnumbered Euroamericans -- as in South Africa, another settler nation. It became key to defending White Supremacy against class unity across color lines.

V. WHITE SUPREMACY AND MANIFEST DESTINY

In the mid-1800s, new historical developments strengthened the concept of whiteness and institutionalize White Supremacy. Since the time of Jefferson, the United States had its eye on expanding to the Pacific Ocean and establishing trade with Asia. Others in the ruling class came to want more slave states, for reasons of political power, and this also required westward expansion. Both goals pointed to taking over Mexico.

The first step was Texas, which was acquired for the United States by filling the territory with Anglo settlers who then declared their independence from Mexico in 1836. After failing to purchase more Mexican territory, President James Polk created a pretext for starting a war with the declared goal of expansion. The notoriously brutal, two-year war on Mexico was justified in the name of Manifest Destiny.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, born at a time of aggressive western expansion, said that the United States was destined by God to take over other peoples and lands. The term was first used in 1845 by the editor of a popular journal, who affirmed "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which



providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.”

The concepts of Manifest Destiny and institutionalized racism are profoundly linked. Even those who opposed expansion did so for racist reasons, as when some politicians said “the degraded Mexican-Spanish” were unfit to become part of the United States; they were “a wretched people . . . mongrels.”

In a similar way, some influential whites who opposed slavery in those years said Blacks should be removed from U.S. soil, to avoid “contamination” by an inferior people (see Manifest Destiny by Anders Stephanson, Hill & Wang, 1995). Native Americans have been the target of white supremacist beliefs that they were dirty, heathen “savages” and also fundamentally inferior in their values. For example, they did not see land as profitable real estate but as Our Mother. Such people had to be forcefully isolated on reservations. assimilated by being removed from their own culture, and having their own culture either outlawed or ridiculed..

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny established White Supremacy more firmly than ever as central to the U.S. definition of itself. The arrogance of asserting that God gave white people (primarily men) the right to dominate everything around them still haunts our society and sustains its racist oppression. Today we call it the arrogance of power and it can be seen in all U.S. relations with other countries.

One persistent example of that arrogance is the habit of calling this country “America” when that is the official name of almost an entire hemisphere composing over 20 other countries. From left to right, organizations and publications and individual leaders obliterate millions of other human beings, mostly of color, by mindlessly giving the United States the only meaning, importance, and reality worthy of recognition. We can assume it comes from habit, not conscious imperialism at work, but that is no excuse for not recognizing white supremacist thinking among our most progressive forces.

Finally, the material effects of White Supremacy on peoples of color are all too clear in terms of economic, social, political and cultural inequity. Even that ultimate affirmation of dominion, racist murder or lynching, still occurs to remind us that age-old power relations remain unaltered. That is not to deny the positive effects of long years of struggle to change those power relations, but to recognize that White Supremacy remains intact systemically, as seen in the constant harm it does to the daily lives and aspirations of peoples of color.

Less understood than the material are the psychological and spiritual effects of White Supremacy. Few whites understand what internalized racism does to people of color, who do not discuss those effects easily themselves. The self-hatred, desire to be like whites or even to be white, and assumption of inevitable failure are the dreadful legacy of White Supremacy’s teaching those lies by every means at its disposal. Maintaining



control over any community has always required not only physical domination but also the ideological domination that says: things are as they should be. As you inferior creatures deserve them to be.

VI. WHITE SUPREMACY AND GLOBALIZATION

Racism has never stood still or remained unchanged in history. Today we see new forms emerging from the rapid growth of globalization. We can see that White Supremacy has become more global than ever and millions of people of color have become globalized.

Global economic integration is not new in itself; we have seen the world capitalist economy in operation for centuries. But today it is an extremely powerful set of inter-related policies and practices with a huge field of operations. It includes the “global assembly line” for production, with parts made in different countries; the whole world defined as the potential market for a commodity; and technological advances that facilitate economic integration more than ever in human history. With corporate globalization has come a neo-liberalism that means privatization, deregulation, the decline of social services, and other policies.

The main victims are nations of color (politely called “developing” instead of impoverished) and peoples of color, as shown by the vast increase in migrant labor. The vast majority of immigrants to the U.S. today are the globalized: women and men, mostly of color, driven from home by dire personal poverty to find survival usually in the global capitals. New eruptions of White Supremacy often confront them.

It’s been said that militarism is racism in action. We could also say that globalization is White Supremacy in action, as never before. Manifest Destiny now rages across not only Las Americas but the whole world. Given current ruling-class policy at work in the U.S. today, such as privatization, we see that millions of people in the United States itself are increasingly victimized. Are we becoming a “Third World” country?