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WHITE SUPREMACY

Charles W. Mills

The term *white supremacy* is ambiguous. Some speakers use it to refer to a particular sort of social structure, one characterized by white domination; others use it to refer to a particular variety of white racism, the kind that justifies such a social structure; while for others, the term can be used to denote both. In this chapter, I will focus on white supremacy as social structure, though, as I have argued elsewhere (Mills 2003), it might be better thought of as socio/political/economic structure.

But why include a chapter on white supremacy in a philosophy reference work (as against a social science text) in the first place? The point is to enable a better understanding of the workings of race. Whatever one's metaphysical view of race (eliminativist, naturalist, social constructionist, hybrid social-natural position), the history and significance of white racial domination cannot be denied, even if people's views on the ontological implications of that domination will diverge. Both from a descriptive point of view, then, in understanding the interplay between the social order and race (however conceived of), and from a normative point of view, in terms of social justice, a theorization of racial domination in general and white supremacy in particular (as the most important form, historically, of racial domination) is crucial. Like Marxism and feminism, its better known philosophical counterparts for class and gender theory, critical philosophy of race is generally predicated on the assumption that the most fruitful way to do philosophy is to start with human beings in their embodied identities and embedded socio-historical positioning (Alcoff 2006). A genuine illumination of the realities of the human condition, both descriptive and prescriptive, requires the construction of non-idealizing abstractions that do not ignore the architecture of social oppression (Cudd 2006). Marxism and feminism in their various incarnations have tried to make this case plausible for class society and patriarchal society. Mapping a white supremacist social order can thus arguably be seen as a complementary task for the philosophical theorization of race.

In developing a critical conceptualization of white supremacy, I suggest that the best strategy is to draw on popular usage (so as to maintain some continuity with the everyday sense) while revising it where necessary in the light of a more socio-politically informed understanding of the history of race. Developing a grasp of the essential features of the phenomenon may thus require breaking with conventional analyses in certain respects.

In this spirit, then, I propose the following characterization of white supremacy. White supremacy is (1) a particular kind of oppressive social system, sub-national or

national or international, coming into existence (2) in a time period in which race has emerged as a significant social category and social reality, and (3) whiteness and nonwhiteness are recognized racial identities, and (4) whites have and exert differential power in creating and controlling the evolution of the social system in question, and/or in blocking changes to it that would substantially reduce their domination, whose end is originally (5) the systemic, significant, and illicit differential advantaging of all or most whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group in various important social spheres.

Let me now go through each of these conditions in detail.

White Supremacy as Historically Existent and Oppressive

First, then, *white supremacy* is intended to designate a social system, or set of social systems, that were uncontroversially historically existent at one time and are either, in different guise, *still* existent today (though this is obviously a more controversial claim), or that have at least left a racial legacy the understanding of which requires the concept. The clear-cut cases, frequently compared with each other because of their history of explicit and formal juridical subordination of nonwhites, are the United States and apartheid South Africa (Fredrickson 1981; Marx 1998; Jung, Costa Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva 2011). However, I would claim that a broader and more useful concept that is still tracking the crucial features of the phenomenon under investigation can be produced by dropping as a prerequisite the stipulation often associated with it of *de jure* white privileging. In the more extensive sense that includes *de facto* domination, the European nations and the Euro-colonial world in general can be seen as white supremacist, insofar as “whites” were (are) dominant over and privileged with respect to people of color across the planet (Mills 1997; Winant 2001). So white supremacy was originally (and is still . . . ?) global, the famous international “color-line” identified more than a century ago by W.E.B. Du Bois (2007 [1903]) that is now increasingly the subject of research in critical International Relations (IR) theory (Lake and Reynolds 2008; Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015; Vitalis 2015).

By contrast with an analysis that focuses just on individual racism, then, or even on an institutional racism framed withal as socially deviant, *white supremacy* as a term has much more far-reaching implications. It is claiming that white domination can be found across entire social systems, indeed the world, with major ramifications in multiple spheres. As such, the concept challenges both orthodox mainstream liberal understandings of the Western social order that frame race and racism as “anomalies” to an inclusivist liberal democracy and orthodox Marxist understandings that reduce racial domination to capitalist class domination. *White supremacy* is thus both descriptive and (negatively) normative, in that it asserts the historic existence of such social systems and indicts them for their *injustice*, as against the neutral or approbative characterizations typical of the past (Stoddard 1920). (Compare the feminist appropriation from male political theory of the term *patriarchy*, and its similar negative revalorization.) A racially supremacist social order is one that should be morally condemned by us, one that we should be seeking to dismantle.

Correspondingly, such a reconceptualization has dramatic normative implications for Western political philosophy, whether in the mainstream Anglo-American analytic tradition or the Critical Theory tradition. John Rawls (1999: 6–7, 8) famously shifted

the focus of political philosophy from the issue of political obligation to the issue of the justice of the “basic structure” of society, which he pointed out has such a profound determinant effect on people’s life chances. But his theory of justice took distributive justice in perfectly just, “well-ordered” societies of “strict compliance” as its starting point, and he never moved on to the exploration of “compensatory justice” in unjust societies, which he himself conceded was one of the “pressing and urgent matters” of “partial compliance theory.”

Neither he nor his innumerable disciples and commentators over the past 45 years (see, for example, Mandle and Reidy 2014) have made any attempt to theorize the moral challenge posed by white supremacist societies, with racialized “basic structures,” despite the fact that all of the Anglo settler states (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa) can arguably be so characterized (Fredrickson 1981; Goldberg 2002; Pateman, in Pateman and Mills 2007: chapter 2; Carey and McLisky 2009; Vickers and Isaac 2012). Albeit in a different idiom, Continental Critical Theory is likewise supposed to be concerned about emancipation from oppressive social structures. Yet race, colonialism, and white racial domination’s repercussions for Europe and the Euro-colonial world it created have been consistently marginalized in this literature also (McCarthy 2009; A. Allen 2016), despite Lucius Outlaw’s (1990) call more than a quarter-century ago for a Critical Theory of “race.” In neither body of work, then, is white supremacy recognized as a system of domination in itself, and the correction of racial injustice and racial oppression prioritized as a central imperative.

The Emergence and Periodization of Race

To put white supremacy into its historical context, we need to turn to the more general issue of the emergence of race as a social category. Note that even if racial naturalism is correct (races as socio-independent biological entities), races might not have been *recognized* as existent. So a periodization of race (in this case as an acknowledged social category) would still be appropriate, and this obviously holds *a fortiori* if social constructionism is in fact the correct position on the metaphysics of race.

Suppose we are in a historical epoch, T1, before racial categorization has begun. Then we could not even have racism, let alone racial domination. Racism, whether conceptualized in affective/volitional terms, as in Jorge Garcia’s (1996) work (racism as *ill-will*), or in cognitivist/doxastic terms, as in Tommie Shelby’s (2002; 2003) work (racism as *ideology*), requires the idea of races: the human race as divided into R1s, R2s, R3s . . . But even when race, R, as a concept enters the world as a self- and other-categorization, this is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition, for racism. For it is possible that the R2s, say, could be viewed without ill-will by the R1s, and/or as racial equals, without claims of hierarchical superiority/inferiority. (Admittedly, this would not be so for Sally Haslanger’s [2012] recommended conceptualization of race, which builds domination directly into the concept.)

Moreover, the advent of racism need not lead to R-domination, since while the R1s and R2s could regard each other in racial and racist terms, neither might have the power to subordinate the other. So the establishment of a particular variety of R-supremacy—say this happens at T2—requires (a) the existence of race as a category and identity under which the relevant groups understand themselves (b) racist feelings of, for example, R1s toward R2s and/or racist beliefs about R2s by R1s (c) the subordination of (all

or some of) the R2s by the R1s in a process significantly shaped, whether initially and/or subsequently, by R1 racism.

The point of specifying these criteria is to rule out as R-supremacist a situation where, say we (as time-traveling anthropologists from the twenty-second century exploring, with the help of a generous research grant, the T1 epoch) discover societies in which groups categorizable for *us*, by *our* norms, as R1s and R2s, are in hierarchical social relations, but have no concept of race themselves. So those who are (for us) the R1s do not exhibit racism against those who are (for us) the R2s and have not been motivated by such sentiments or ideologies in establishing and/or maintaining the social order, though they may have negative anti-R2 sentiments/ideologies of other kinds. Racial domination, I am contending, requires the intersubjective recognition of race by the members of the society *themselves*, by the standards of *their* time, in order for it to count as such. And the reason for the time hedge (“whether initially and/or subsequently”) is to accommodate the possibility that race and racism are not initially crucial to the process of social subordination, but become so in the consolidation of the system. Some theorists have argued, for example, that anti-black racism is more the consequence than the cause of Atlantic slavery, the original motivation being simply pecuniary (E. Williams 1994 [1944]; Shelby 2002). So Atlantic slavery could *become* racial slavery, part of a system of white domination, without necessarily having begun as such.

This has all been very abstract, since I wanted to illustrate the more general potential scope of the idea of R-domination, whether in our own planetary timeline or possible alternative timelines. What, however, is the actual history? Two main competing periodizations can be found in the literature: race and racism as distinctly modern, or at the oldest, dating to the late medieval epoch (Hannaford 1996; Fredrickson 2015 [2002]) and race and racism as going back to the ancient world (Isaac 2004; Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler 2009).

For the former, racism is primarily Western in origin, a creation of European expansionism, so that racial categories and whiteness would be more or less coeval. Thus Nell Painter’s *History of White People* (2010: 1) contends that in antiquity “neither the idea of race nor the idea of ‘white’ people had been invented, and people’s skin color did not carry useful meaning.” But others disagree. Benjamin Isaac argues in his *Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2004) that race and racism do indeed go back to the classical period, but that this was a non-color-coded racism, in which Greeks, as naturally free, were contrasted to naturally servile Persians. So on this account, the emergence and periodization of race would need to be separated from the emergence and periodization of whiteness. We would have had Rs and the belief in an R1/R2 hierarchy that did not include “whites.” Had such racial consciousness been sufficiently widespread, Alexander the Great’s later conquest of the Persian Empire would have resulted in a racial social order in the classical world: R1-supremacy under the aegis of an unambiguously racialized Hellenization.

The Emergence, Periodization, and Scope of “Whiteness”

The arrival of white supremacist systems on the planet, then—say this happens at T3—requires the emergence of “whiteness” as a racial category, not just the emergence of race, and, apart from the establishment of relations of domination between R1s and R2s where R1s are “white,” the intersubjective role of this identity in creating and/or

perpetuating the system. As argued above, it is not enough for those in the dominant group to be retrospectively characterized by *us* as having this identity; they have to think of *themselves* this way. Conquest of dark-skinned non-European non-Christians by light-skinned European Christians does not suffice to establish white supremacy if race is absent from the latter's own self-characterization—if, say, religion is the sole pertinent identity for them.

Given this stipulation, the European conquest and gradual establishment over several hundred years of relations of colonial and imperial domination over the rest of the world will not be coextensive with the spread of a subjugating whiteness. The question—and this is an empirical question, though obviously with a conceptual aspect—will be when and where whiteness and a corollary nonwhiteness as significant identities actually arise in specific locations *L*. Moreover, even when whiteness does eventually emerge, not all Europeans will automatically share in it. So white supremacy in location *L*₁ may privilege a less extensive population of “whites” than white supremacy in location *L*₂. (I specify location rather than country since white supremacist systems are not necessarily coextensive with a nation. If the country is large enough, one could find regional variations, so that in one nation white supremacist systems could coexist with non-white-supremacist systems.) It could even be logically possible, at least in a constructionist ontology, for the white populations in different locations on the planet to be defined/“constructed” completely differently, so that there would be no overlap among them. I know of no actual historical examples of this kind, but it is an instructive illustration of the possibilities opened up by an anti-naturalist metaphysics.

We also have to take into account intra-epochal/intra-T3 variations in and evolutions of whiteness, whether globally or locally. For example, the acceptance into whiteness of, say, previously excluded R2s, as well as the possibility of the expulsion from whiteness of previous R1s now relegated to R3 status. On an alternative Earth, it might have been the case that white supremacy never came into existence at all. Some other ethnic/national/continental group might have become hegemonic, establishing brownness as the superior R1 category and brown supremacy as the global system. Or consider the possibility, on our own Earth, of a conceivable future timeline, of a T4 post-whiteness, in which—whether through widespread miscegenation, or just revisionist categorization—whites disappear altogether as a racial category and white supremacy with it.

On our own Earth, the actual historical pattern has been a core “whiteness” (roughly Anglo) that is generally recognized across the world, in keeping with Srdjan Vucetic's (2011) judgment that the “Anglosphere” (the British and American empires) has historically been the most important of the Euro-dominant imperial orders. Controversy then centers on the “off-whiteness” or (depending on the theorist) even “non-whiteness” of other Europeans and Euro-descended immigrant groups, whether in their own country or in immigrant destinations. Consider, for example, the cases of the Irish in Britain; English versus French populations in Canada; Italians, Greeks, and Slavs a century ago in the United States, or Hispanic whites today; the Portuguese in the Caribbean; Anglo-Celtic versus NESB (Non-English Speaking Background) European immigrants to Australia; Euro-descendant populations in the self-conceived *mestizo* “racial democracies” of Latin America; Jews across the planet. How “white” and privileged are they respectively in different times and places? Again, it must be emphasized that this is not an a priori but an empirical/conceptual question, requiring both historical research

and careful theoretical analysis to be settled (Andrews 2004; Garner 2007; Carey and McLiskey 2009; T.W. Allen 2012; Vickers and Isaac 2012; Telles 2014; Watson, Howard-Wagner, and Spanierman 2015).

In the United States, where “critical whiteness studies” has been most extensively developed, the racial status of the Irish, for example, has been the source of ongoing dispute. One of the most famous books of the 1990s that established this literature was Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (2008 [1995]), the titular claim that Irish immigrants to the United States were not originally categorized as whites, and so could not have been part of white supremacy (see also T.W. Allen 2012). Comparable claims, inspired by Ignatiev’s book, would later be made about Jews and other “European ethnics” from eastern and southern Europe (Slavs, Greeks, Italians, etc.) (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005). But some scholars have argued, against this line of analysis, that the appropriate conclusion was not that the Irish, Jews, and other immigrant Euro-“ethnics” were actually nonwhite in the United States, but rather that they were *inferior* whites (Guglielmo 2004). In other words, while located on a lower rung of an intra-white hierarchy of races, they were nonetheless still white, and as such positioned above the unambiguously inferior nonwhites, such as blacks and Native Americans. Indeed, early twentieth-century categorizations of Europeans, though later abandoned, differentiated several “white” races within Europe itself (for example, Nordics, Alpines, Mediterraneans) (Painter 2010).

However, even if the “inferior white” rather than “nonwhite” verdict is sustained, such heterogeneities in the category remind us that not all whites can be said to share equally in the power relationships and benefits provided by “whiteness”—an “intersectionalist” point that needs to be generally borne in mind, and applying, of course, not merely because of intra-white “ethnic” differentiation but also gender and class differentiation. From first-wave feminism onward, white women have depicted themselves as subordinated by white men, and in some cases have analogized their experience to racial oppression (De Beauvoir 2011). If you cannot vote, cannot hold political office, and cannot (because of the concept of “coverture”) have a legal personality separate from your husband’s, can you really be said to be equal power-holders in, equally complicit with, and equal beneficiaries of white supremacy? But critics, especially women of color, have retorted that white women do benefit from this system, even if not to the same extent as males, that historically they have offered little resistance to it, and that over the last century they have attained much more power than previously, so that the indictment of complicity is indeed justified (Roth 2004).

Somewhat comparably, class differences within the white population—highlighted in the United States by the contemptuous designation of “white trash” for those in the lower Euro-American echelons (Eisenberg 2016)—have standardly been cited by white Marxists in particular as showing that it is the ruling class, not “whites” as an undifferentiated group, who should be seen as the real creators and movers of the racial order (if it is even conceded that it is a “racial” order). On this diagnosis, white workers and the white poor—far from benefiting from white supremacy—are actually likewise its victims, since race has been used to weaken the trade union movement, keep down wages, and pre-empt the development of a powerful oppositional force against capital (T.W. Allen 2012). Again, critics have replied that such political analyses ignore the history of white working-class agency in making and affirming a white identity for themselves, keeping nonwhites out of unions, and generally signing on to rather than rejecting the

“wages of whiteness” in their multiple aspects (Roediger 2007). Hence the long, often bitter debate from the late nineteenth century onwards between the white left and black radicals—sometimes from within, often from outside, white socialist and communist parties—about what theoretical framework should be employed to bring race and class together, how or if white racism can be overcome, and whether the “whiteness” of the white working-class is ultimately more causally and explanatorily significant than their identity as workers.

Having and Deploying Differential White Power

The specifics of the genealogy and reproduction of the system are thus crucial to its identity. Access to, and use of, differential white power in the creation/maintenance of the white supremacist social order needs to be part of its conceptualization. For it is at least logically possible that contingent circumstances might so conspire as to advantage (those categorized as) whites in the social order, though they did not contrive to bring about this state of affairs themselves, nor do they block attempts to dismantle the resulting social system. Imagine, say, a natural disaster that only affects some parts of the country and the racialized nonwhite populations living there (by stipulation not because of racialized causality). Then a situation of radical comparative white advantage and nonwhite disadvantage could be nationally created that has nothing to do with “white” causality. (By contrast, the 2005 Hurricane Katrina calamity in New Orleans could legitimately be characterized as a “social” rather than natural disaster because of course it was precisely *as a result* of a previous history of racism, segregation, and governmental indifference to their fate that poor African Americans in the city were so vulnerable, and thus so differentially and disastrously affected.) So, especially if whites seek to equalize these differences, I would not term such a society or sub-national system a white supremacist one. White supremacy as a negative normative description implies oppression, as emphasized from the start, and this is different from a social formation accidentally created that whites are happy to reform.

In our actual world, of course, differential European power (bracketing the question of when it became “white”) was originally blatantly manifest in the uncontroversial form of the violence of the military subjugation of non-Europeans, even if this history is now increasingly subject to what has been called “postcolonial forgetting.” In the conquest of the Americas, North, South, and Caribbean, in Africa and Asia, in Australasia, wars were fought with indigenous populations, in some cases genocidal, to take their land and/or subjugate them to European rule and/or displace them for the installation of white settler communities. The racial slavery of the Atlantic slave societies required ongoing coercion, a watchfulness for the dangers of slave rebellion, and a corresponding willingness both to use pre-emptive punishment and to retaliate with massively disproportionate force against local insurrections. Even after emancipation, freed blacks across the Americas, denied equal resources and equal opportunities to achieve material well-being, were perceived as a potential threat to the social order, to be constantly monitored and subjected to imprisonment and punishment.

In the United States in particular one also needs to take into account the role of white race riots and lynchings in terrorizing the black population, where in a sense the white citizenry as a group are authorized (through the non-intervention or merely token punishments by official bodies) to take up a parastatal capacity to maintain racial

order. And across the colonial world, of course, armies, militias, national guards, and a politicized police force were formally delegated with the task of suppressing indigenous resistance. Nor is this a matter of the remote past, if one recalls that colonial wars and counter-insurgency campaigns against national liberation movements (Vietnam, Algeria, Kenya, Portuguese Africa, South Africa) were still being fought only a few decades ago, or that blacks and Amerindians in the Americas, and indigenous peoples in Australia, continue even today to be differentially subject to police violence and to be disproportionately represented in the prison system. As David Theo Goldberg (2002) has argued, the idea of a racial state should not be limited to what are usually represented as the “outlier” cases of Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, and the American Old South. Rather, insofar as the modern state presides over and facilitates inequitable treatment by race—whether through active intervention or non-intervention when a genuine commitment to racial equality would have mandated it—it is in general a racial state.

Not all whites, of course, were/are involved in such wars and other overtly repressive measures, and in some cases sections of the white citizenry protested and politically organized against them (abolitionist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-war, and civil rights movements). But usually the majority of the white population were content to go along with these policies, thereby arguably giving them their “tacit consent.”

However, power can also be “softer,” manifest not in overt violence but, for example, in a two-tiered juridical system with one set of legal rules for whites and another set for people of color, whether formally, as under American Jim Crow and European colonial rule, or informally, as in the post-colonial and post-civil rights epoch. Economic constraint—the necessity of making a living in societies controlled by whites—also “materially” limited options for people of color, whether because of the threat of outright dismissal from one’s job for any would-be activists agitating for social reform, or simply the overwhelming daily burden of trying to find the wherewithal to keep oneself and one’s family alive, that left no time for any activity other than that aimed at simple survival.

Finally, across all these societies it was generally the case that government-run educational systems and the popular media, as well as the organizations of civil society, acted as agents of legitimation for the existing white order, creating what Antonio Gramsci would have termed a white “hegemony.” Or, in Miranda Fricker’s (2007) more recent conceptualization, an epistemic universe in which the derogation as credible knowers of nonwhites saying the “wrong” thing, and the vigilant pre-emptive exclusion or targeted eradication (where pre-emption had somehow failed) of oppositional anti-racist hermeneutical ideas and frameworks, made systemic white epistemic injustice the cognitive norm. A white “epistemology of ignorance” would govern social cognition, affecting not merely whites as the beneficiaries of the system but also people of color as potential resisters of it (Sullivan and Tuana 2007). “Whiteness” would eventually become not merely a set of political and socioeconomic power-relationships, but a kind of ontological and epistemic state imbued with its own worldview-shaping power, a carrier of epistemic violence, a “racial frame” for understanding social reality (Feagin 2010). As a way of being, as a form of life, whiteness in this sense now itself constitutes one of the most formidable obstacles to a more equitable racial order, operating as it does at the most basic cognitive, affective, and phenomenological level (Dyer 1997; Yancy 2008; Alcoff 2015).

The Advantaging of Whites

Finally, it is natural to run together white power and (what is now called) white privilege. But we need to separate them if only for the purposes of analytic clarification and testing our intuitions.

Consider a somewhat sociologically implausible scenario: whites have differential power in the society, but do not use this power to advantage themselves. So we would have white domination—which for some would be enough to count as white supremacy—without systemic white privilege, at least in all its familiar forms. (Differential political access can itself be seen, obviously, as “privilege.”) Whites would be benevolent rulers, racial paternalists, seeking to ensure, without racial favoritism, that all races in the social order prosper equally.

Should this count as a situation of white supremacy? The problem is, of course, that our linguistic intuitions on such matters are shaped by the actual history, and perhaps close counterfactual variants of that history that are in neighboring rather than distant worlds. So we are intellectually handicapped in considering such a scenario because no historical societies of this kind have ever existed. But, freeing our imaginations from the bonds of the actual, what would we say of this situation as a hypothetical? Here we enter the realm of the stipulative, and my own intuitions might not match the intuitions of others. But I think that “privilege” as systemic significant differential white advantage is too closely tied to the concept of white supremacy in common parlance for this component to be regarded as logically expendable. So a system of white domination where whites control the social order but nonwhites have the same access and opportunities, income and wealth, as whites would not, I think, count in everyday parlance as white supremacist, and should not so count for us.

The “illicit” in “illicit differential advantaging” obviously also needs specification. If it were really the case—as of course it is the case in the white racist imaginary—that whites were at the top of the social order because of being smarter and of more industrious character than everybody else, then it would be harder to justify using *white supremacy* in a pejorative way (though a Rawlsian [1999] could still argue for the irrelevance of racial “desert” of this kind). “White supremacy” would then just be a recognition that whites are in fact supreme, the superior race on the crucial metrics. So the claim has to be that differential white advantage is unfair because white pre-eminence does *not* in fact stem from such factors but rather from the violation of nonwhite rights, both currently and historically. The strongest case will be if it is Lockean “negative” rights—rights to life, liberty, and property—that can be shown to have been violated, since these are the rights uncontroversially recognized as legitimate in the liberal tradition. Libertarian Robert Nozick (2013 [1974]: 149–153, 344n2), for example, incorporates rectificatory justice into his Locke-inspired theory of justice, and—in an admittedly brief discussion—seems to be open to the possibility that reparations for wrongs done to black Americans could be justified. What would have to be established is that the present-day conditions of African Americans can plausibly be demonstrated to constitute, through inherited disadvantage, an ongoing transgression of Lockean rights. Positive “welfare” rights, by contrast, are highly contested, and would be repudiated by the political right as social democratic/“socialist” rather than liberal.

Note also that I have specified “significantly.” The justification here is that—if we imagine social variables readily quantifiable such as educational attainment,

employment profiles, income, wealth, poverty rates, imprisonment, life expectancies, and so forth—it would seem odd to label a system white supremacist if the white “edge” was generally minute, only, say, in the region of 0.1%. White privilege must be substantial for the judgment of white supremacy to be appropriate (L. F. Williams 2003; Oliver and Shapiro 2006).

However, such privilege does not require, of course, that *all* whites should be positioned above *all* people of color on the relevant metrics. (The poorest-off whites would then be located above the best-off nonwhites.) Rather, it just requires that whites as a group (as measured by averages, medians, horizontally displaced racial distribution curves, pairwise comparisons of corresponding racial deciles or quintiles, etc.) be so favorably located. Moreover, as earlier pointed out with respect to ethnicity, gender, and class, the white population will need to be disaggregated to take account of intra-white differentiations. If at some point the average or median metric for “whites” as a group begins to conceal intra-group differences so great that some significant component (say, the white working class) ceases to be significantly positioned above its nonwhite equivalent, then we might begin to question the appositeness of “white supremacy” as an accurate overall characterization.

Further complications arise if more than one nonwhite race exists, as of course will generally be the case. If we have, say, not just whites/R1s and R2s, but also R3s and R4s, how might different possible R combinations on the axes of power and benefit change our judgment of the appropriateness of the judgment of white/R1-supremacy?

If the R1s rule monoracially, and the R2s, R3s, and R4s are equally located at the bottom of the social ladder ($R2 = R3 = R4$), then R1-supremacy is obviously still the right assessment. Similarly (I would claim) if the R1s rule monoracially, and the other races are arranged in an $R2 > R3 > R4$ hierarchy of benefit, since white/R1-supremacy need not imply the *equal* disadvantaging of nonwhites/non-R1s. The R2s, let us say, are “model minorities,” held up as an admonitory example to the feckless R3s and R4s.

But what if the R2s have advantages *equal* to the R1s (while still lacking political power)? Can this still be represented as a state of R1-supremacy (since the R1s still control things), or does this category now need to be qualified? (A problem in such analytic logical permutations is, of course, that in real-world scenarios, variables that are logically separate may be causally linked. No Marxist would find credible the idea that a group with equal economic advantages, if that implies wealth and economic property, could be shut out of political power for long.) Or suppose the R2s do come to share political power, not just economic advantages, with the R1s. Can we still characterize the society as R1-supremacist, on the grounds, say, that the R2s are now, effectively, the *same* as the R1s?

This is by no means a purely hypothetical scenario. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich (2008), for example, have predicted that the United States, having been the paradigm white supremacist state for most of its life, is moving towards the Latin model of racial hierarchy, *pigmentocracy* in the classic formulation (Telles 2014). So “whiteness” would be rewritten and expanded as a category to admit groups currently not counted as white. Should we say that it would then be tautological to represent the society as still white supremacist, since “whiteness” is just being circularly defined to denote the race at the top? Or can we say that it is not tautological, because there are independent criteria for what it is to be an R1/white, and these other groups have now met these criteria? (Think of the traditional category of the “honorary white.”)

A related issue is that a society could continue to be black- and/or Amerindian-subordinating, or, more generally, R3/R4-subordinating, even while “whiteness”/R1-ness was being expanded, or even if the R1s were displaced altogether by the R2s, say. Just as the existence of anti-black and anti-Amerindian racism is independent of the existence of racism against other people of color, so black- and Amerindian-subordinating societies could have a change of racial personnel in the privileged socio-racial categories, while still maintaining blacks and indigenous peoples at the bottom of the social ladder. If in Latin America, for example, mulatto, mestizo, and other mixed ethnoracial groups were elevated all the way up to an equal status with “whiteness,” leaving “unmixed” blacks and Indians at the bottom, this might no longer count as white supremacy, but it would obviously still be a society of racial inequality and injustice. So perhaps in addition to the abstract category of R1-domination, where whites have traditionally occupied the R1 slot, we also need to develop the abstract category of R3/R4-subordination, where a particular global history makes particular racial groups the likely occupants of this bottom position in the racial order.

In mainstream scholarship and everyday parlance, white supremacy is usually restricted temporally to the historical epoch of *de jure* racism, and taken to be paradigmatically represented by the American Old South and South African apartheid. The corollary is a reluctance, or outright refusal, to concede the accuracy of the characterization outside of such cases. But if, as I would claim, the essence of white supremacy is significant and structural illicit white privileging in a social system of white-over-non-white domination, then we can legitimately conclude that the scope of the concept is much broader than commonly acknowledged, both in time and space, and of obvious importance for theorizing the sociopolitical and normative. *White supremacy* needs to be added to the philosophical lexicon not just of critical philosophy of race but social and political philosophy in general.

Related Topics

Chapters 7, 11, 12, 13, 17, 28, 31, 36

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