White Supremacy in the Movement Against the Prison-Industrial Complex

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WHITE SUPREMACY IS DEFINED AS 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" (Martinas, n.d.). It is deeply embedded and entrenched in the foundation and social institutions of the United States. I wish to explore the role and various manifestations of white supremacy in leftist politics, specifically in the emergent movement against the prison-industrial complex. I posit that white supremacy is (re)produced and perpetuated by most white, self-proclaimed activists who fight different aspects of the prison-industrial complex. Through various forms of paternalism, reformist politics, romanticizing struggle and violence, exotification and exceptionalism, and neocolonial divide-and-conquer tactics, whites propagate their privilege and power in their organizing and activism. I use the terms "we" and "white activists" almost interchangeably, for this article is primarily directed to an audience of white progressives, a group of which I consider myself a member.

The crux of my argument is not that white supremacy is an inevitable evil that is the undoing of any social movement. Instead, I attempt to critique white progressives whose actions, though well intentioned, are laden with manifestations of white supremacy and challenge them to embrace a more radical politics, one that makes anti-racism a central tenet in any analysis and subsequent action against a white-supremacist state. We cannot begin to fashion a creative blueprint for a struggle that attempts to actualize a world free of domination without fundamentally understanding the ways in which our various actions, as white individuals and organizations, perpetuate the hierarchies and oppressions against which we wage our battle. Proceeding without fundamentally questioning the forms of oppression that are reproduced in our "activist" work ultimately relieves the state of the need to take an active role against our efforts. That is, we will have already fulfilled the prophecy of white supremacy and ensured the failure of true

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freedom. We must not deny or make light of its power to destroy movements for justice. Therefore, we must be consistent, disciplined, and cognizant of ourselves, which means being unafraid to check the reproduction of privilege on the part of fellow whites. In this fast-track, fascistic police state, in which racist sentiments of nativism and xenophobia are becoming as American as apple pie, there is an ever-present need for white activists to dedicate themselves to an anti-racist struggle. They must reframe and interrogate their roles within the larger movement. Before we can begin to transcend the barriers of race, we must understand the deeply rooted nature of white supremacy and the various forms of oppression faced by different peoples of color.

The movement against the prison-industrial complex is multifaceted in its efforts to dismantle and combat different evils. Thus, hundreds of organizations throughout the nation are working on issues such as the death penalty, detention of immigrants, police brutality, health care within prisons, policing of youth, and the militarization of public schools. This work is necessary to build a mass movement that seeks to destroy the prison-industrial complex, and ultimately the state and its founding principles (capitalism, white supremacy, and male supremacy), but we must critique the methods and politics of many white liberal individuals and organizations involved in this work.

The international movement around political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal is a perfect example in terms of its ability to highlight the various manifestations of white supremacy. A large percentage of Abu-Jamal's supporters were galvanized by the conflicting "facts" used to convict him of murdering Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner in 1981. Morally opposed to the death penalty, many people have worked tirelessly to poke further holes in the prosecution's shoddy case. Death penalty work is inherently reformist and reaffirms and legitimizes the role of the state; whereas the decades of caging an individual might be unjust and unfortunate, putting someone to death is altogether wrong. Under this logic, the more than two million souls facing humiliation, violence, and torture behind bars at least have been spared from capital punishment. In December 2001, the state removed Abu-Jamal from death row in a strategic move. How will the state's action affect the movement for his freedom? Will removing the threat of capital punishment stunt its growth and longevity? Will the anti-death-penalty contingent retract from the struggle since their main goal has been attained? At every junction, the state will trump reformist movements against the prison-industrial complex, given the government's preemptive actions to counter and maintain divisions in the work of activists.

The anti-death-penalty movement prides itself on seeking "truth" to fight for the freedom of prisoners unjustly accused of crimes. However, the anti-death-penalty movement uses state terms such as innocence and guilt, thereby legitimating the government's definition of crime (individual activity) and its understanding of who constitutes criminals (people of color and poor people). The state's

responsibility for propagating violence and visiting terror upon various poor communities of color within and beyond U.S. borders is thus absolved. What if Mumia Abu-Jamal had shot and killed Daniel Faulkner? Would his caging be justified or at least founded? Either way, we continue to focus on the individual act and effectively negate the state's role in establishing the conditions necessary for crime to exist. In an essay on political prisoners, Angela Davis (1998: 45) approaches the state's definition of crime and the criminal with an understanding that acts of survival are necessary in an unequal capitalist society. She states, "the occurrence of crime is inevitable in a society in which wealth is unequally distributed, as one of the constant reminders that society's productive forces are being channeled in the wrong direction." White activists in particular must embrace a much more radical politics, one that understands the hegemonic effect of using state language and frameworks. Their work and analysis must reflect their understanding of state-sponsored terror and violence and not reiterate white supremacist politics.

It is equally important to expose in the movement around Mumia's case the great exceptionalism that occurs. From the onset, white supremacy based its existence on the sub-humanization and subsequent oppression of peoples of color. Can super-humanization also be a form of white supremacy? Mumia himself has taken strong stances against his superhero status, trying instead to focus attention on the plight of those suffering in Pennsylvania prisons or to shed light on various forms of oppression throughout the world. His autobiographical *Live from Death Row* is not plea for his own salvation, but rather a political act in defiance of the state's attempt to silence his revolutionary voice. A tool for political education, it seeks to understand the multifaceted nature of state violence. How many people know of Mumia's political ideology or have read his works? Similarly, the rock star status of abolitionist and former political prisoner Angela Davis has served to neutralize her radical messages. Most people are unaware that her onetime co-defendant, Ruchell Magee, remains incarcerated to this day. Recently freed political prisoner Geronimo ji Jaga (2001: 72) has discussed this phenomenon:

> I did not join a movement to sign autographs. I did not join a movement for fortune or fame. I joined a movement to win.... But I have to explain to you that we are under collective discipline not to promote ourselves. We cannot promote individuals, we can only promote the revolution, the struggle. When you confront the level of commitment of someone like Ruchell Magee, or Hugo Pinell, Leonard Peltier, Sundiata Acoli, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Marilyn Buck, Susan Rosenberg, and on and on and on,...understand that we don't care if you say free this person, free that person, or put our names on posters. We didn't join the movement for that. We understood that we were making a sacrifice...that we might go

> to prison, that we might get killed, that we might end up exiled — because we knew the nature of our enemy.

Exceptionalism falls in line with the state's individualistic politics, diverting attention away from sites of collective struggle. Thus, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Davis arguably serve a performative function for most white activists who iconize their heroes, completely unaware that they have effectively diffused any galvanizing potential of the political education and revolutionary analyses of their idols. Joy James (1999: 122) critically analyzes the trend toward the racialized iconization of Angela Davis:

> Progressive icons are significant because they function to popularize political movements and struggles. However, this popularization partly reflects selective political memory and representations skewed toward elite leadership and symbolism. Selective memory, masked by an uncritical valorization of icons...deflects attention from revolutionary politics and rank-and-file leadership.

Along with exceptionalism, tokenism and paternalism take place in many organizing efforts by white-dominated groups fighting the prison-industrial complex. Having been criticized for their perpetuation of racism or equipped with an understanding that racism has been a major barrier in the movement for social justice, many well-intentioned white folks wish to incorporate an anti-racist approach into their work. Seeking a quick resolve, the problem of racism is often superficially addressed, however. Focusing on tangible and visible solutions, they tokenize individual people of color, perhaps by bringing a few nonwhite people into public spaces and circles of power (as board members, speakers, etc.), in an attempt to demonstrate the "diverse" nature of the struggle and those that make up the fight. This is not to say that every attempt to incorporate people of color is inherently racist and self-serving. As white activists, we must fight the neocolonial divide-and-conquer tendencies that run deep for those with power and privilege. The state disingenuously places nonwhite faces in public positions, a posture we cannot reproduce while simultaneously leading the struggle. Addressing white supremacy through superficial solutions will only widen the racial gap. Does not the fact that whites are able to select people of color for inclusion in our efforts reaffirm our power and privilege?

Given our unique position as beneficiaries of the white supremacist state, we must be cognizant of our ignorance of the oppression faced by people of color and refuse to act paternalistically toward their struggles or claim them as our own. Doing so can render these voices, initially intended as weapons that threaten the state's legitimacy, completely neutral. Thus, in the movement against the prison-industrial complex, we must ask ourselves: Whose struggle is this? How does the movement we are building fight the various forms of oppression and attempt to

actualize a world free of domination? This must not be conflated with, or reduced to, feeling a sense of entitlement. Rather, we must address who is facing the bulk of state violence. What is the role of whites when there is an obvious war being waged against various peoples of color?

These questions segue into a discussion of the role of whites in popular struggles for liberation, national and otherwise. The 1960s and 1970s were a historic moment when anti-colonial battles were being waged throughout the world. Internal colonies within the United States were also resisting the centuries of racist domination imposed on them by the empire. The growing revolutionary potential in various communities of color throughout the U.S. posed a serious threat to the state. To ensure its future, the government created a multi-tiered assault that employed counterinsurgency warfare to dismantle the offensive. Whites were visibly present and took an active role in the Civil Rights Movement and against the Vietnam War, but when the level of government violence began to increase, they did not receive the brunt of this repression. The main targets of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) were groups such as the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement, which suffered enormous casualties, thousands of arrests and subsequent prison sentences on trumped-up charges, and internal conflicts due to carefully crafted programs of infiltration and manipulation.

Some whites understood their obligation to their comrades in the movement who had stepped up their struggle, putting themselves on the line and engaging in various actions of armed self-defense. They sought to deflect some of the state's violent energy away from people of color. These whites were an aberration and were even criticized by fellow white progressives who disagreed with their use of force. The issue of violence and armed self-defense in any movement against an imperial power can occupy hundreds of pages. For the sake of brevity, I wish to discuss how arguments for pacifism perpetuate the state's white supremacist agenda.

Violence and terror are not to be taken lightly in any discussion. First, we must consider what we understand to be violence, especially as bourgeois white people, who comprised a major contingent in the progressive movements of the 1960s, and do today as well. We must be stringent in interrogating the hegemonic forms of media through which we are exposed to violence. In what light is that violence framed? What language is used and how are black and brown people normalized as criminals? The latter is so extensive that, as Joy James (1999: 29) points out, "punitive torture in the United States became inscribed on the black body." Should we not frame as violence the fact that a significant portion of the world's population suffers and ultimately dies from treatable communicable diseases due to lack of potable water and basic nutrition? Are structural adjustment programs and major financial institutions considered criminal for the death and destruction they perpetrate against Third World nations in the world? Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg (1998: 15) allude to this worldwide system of structural violence:

> Acrŏss the globe, wages are plummeting, indigenous peoples are being forced off their lands...and more and more people are being forced into illegal activity for their own survival as traditional culture and social structures are destroyed.

Has the U.S. government owned up to and begun paying for its crimes, including black slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, the theft of Mexico, colonization of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and the internment of Japanese Americans? Violence occurs on many levels in a capitalist and imperialist world. Whereas individual acts of violence are not to be overlooked, we must understand them within a larger context of systematic hierarchies and interrogate those who create the conditions in which individual acts of violence occur.

White activists have a long history of pushing for nonviolent forms of social change. Within the movement against the prison-industrial complex, as well, a distinction is made between those who commit violent and nonviolent crimes. Given this division, we are to assume that the 80% of women in prison convicted of nonviolent charges are unjustly incarcerated. According to this logic, the remaining 20%, although probably facing oppression and abuse, must be punished for their deeds. Seeking to aid a reformist battle, such notions embrace the white supremacist rhetoric of the state and are blind to the racist images of violence thus perpetuated. Such suggestions are often made from a position of comfort and privilege by those who have never been collective victims of violence. Indeed, our distance from violence is predicated on the fact that others are oppressed by it. In a pamphlet published by *The Movement,* Huey Newton discusses this removal from oppression among white activists:

> The white mother country radical is the off-spring of the children of the beast that has plundered the world exploiting all people, concentrating on the people of color.... The white mother country radical, in resisting the system, becomes somewhat of an abstract thing because he's not oppressed as much as black people are. As a matter of fact his oppression is somewhat abstract simply because he doesn't have to live in a reality of oppression.... The whites are rebels, many of them from the middle class and as far as any overt oppression this is not the case. So therefore I call their rejection of the system somewhat of an abstract thing.

Therefore, we must support comrades in liberation struggles, whose numbers are quickly decreasing through various forms of state domination. We must act, not stand, in solidarity with those who have sacrificed their lives for the self-determination of their peoples. The struggle for the acknowledgement and freedom of political prisoners and prisoners of war must be part of the fight against the prison-industrial complex.

Embracing the concept of armed self-defense does not necessarily translate

into picking up a gun. We must be equally wary of romanticizing violence that occurs from our distanced position. This can also perpetuate hegemonic images that pathologize peoples of color, images that were created to produce fear in, and consequently gain consent from, white people to justify their policing, imprisonment, and torture. The Black Panther Party did not pose a threat to the government because of their militant dress and attitude or because they were shown toting guns. Ultimately, Fred Hampton was murdered because of his extraordinary ability to organize various once-conflicting Chicago communities against a common enemy. In their groundbreaking work exposing COINTELPRO, Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall (1990: 135–139) shed light on the FBI's plot to discredit and neutralize Fred Hampton as the Chicago leader:

> Comparable methods were used in Chicago, where BPP leader Fred Hampton was showing considerable promise in negotiating a working alliance with a huge black street gang known as the Blackstone Rangers.... Tactics were employed to block or "destabilize" emerging alliances between the Chicago BPP and another black gang, the Mau Maus, as well as the already politicized Puertorriqueno Young Lords, a white street gang called the Young Patriots, and even SDS, the white radical organization.

We must clearly distinguish between armed self-defense and violence. We understand that the most serious acts of violence perpetrated against communities of color throughout the world over the last several centuries have been committed, sanctioned, funded, or supplied training by the U.S. government.

In the movement against the prison-industrial complex, various forms of white supremacy have served to obstruct opportunities for change. As white activists, we must be disciplined in our self-critique, constantly questioning our privilege and power. Taking an anti-racist stance is not an overnight decision, but rather a process. Since white supremacy takes on various forms, we must be cognizant of our language, ideology, and actions in attempts to create a new society. We must listen to the wisdom of white anti-imperialists who have experience in anti-racist struggle, urging us against elitist and authoritarian forms of organization. In the end, the masses must overtake the hierarchical social system. Therefore, creating an esoteric revolutionary vanguard is counterproductive, self-serving, and lacks the political humility and sense of collectivity needed to wage and sustain a long-term battle. Having a purist revolutionary politics and being ever so critical from a comfortable distance cannot match the threat posed by engaging a politics and fight with people for liberation and self-determination.

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