



What Do You Stand for? Who Do You Stand With?

Paul Kivel

Since the publication of the first edition of my book *Uprooting Racism?: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* over twenty years ago there are a massive number of studies and other forms of documentation demonstrating the workings of racism in everything from its devastating impact on the lives and opportunities of people of color to how white people think, act and talk about racism, what benefits we gain from it and how it is perpetuated in the everyday practices and policies of our organizations and institutions.¹

Despite all of this documentation, it has taken the disruptive, bold, and creative leadership of the Movement for Black Lives, the courageous resistance of Native peoples at Standing Rock and the national prisoner's strike, coupled with the increasing visual evidence of everyday violence against people of color, to bring racism to the attention of white people in the US. And even with this leadership and visual evidence, there is a white culture of denial and minimization about the existence and centrality of racism. Despite pervasive segregation and discrimination in education, housing, health care and the job market; despite widespread surveillance, control and punishment of people of color through the welfare, child welfare, foster care, education, police, immigration and criminal/legal systems; despite hate crimes, police brutality, racial profiling and everyday forms of what has been called micro-aggression against people of color, a November 2015 poll showed that while most white people believe acts of racism still occur, less than half (43%) believe racism is a major societal problem² and 56% said racism wasn't a problem in their community.³

In fact, I often hear references to a "post-racial" society, a belief the Civil Rights movement and subsequent legislation "took care of all that," and a feeling that having had a Black man as president proved we have moved beyond race in the United States.

We are now in a third, major phase of racism/white supremacy in US history. The first phase included the military invasion and conquest of North America including theft of the land, genocide against Native Americans and the mass enslavement of Africans. The second phase encompassed Jim Crow exploitation, segregation, industrialization, violence, and the assimilation of European immigrants into a system of white Christian cultural supremacy. The third and current phase is the stage of capitalism termed neoliberalism. Racism, a constantly shifting and adaptive system of white dominance, has looked different in each of these phases.

Neoliberalism is the current strategy of the ruling class (basically "the 1%") dating from the 1960s. It promotes so-called market strategies, i.e., deregulation and privatization, over public institutions and public services. These strategies eliminate public oversight, eliminate restrictions on corporate practices, and drastically reduce the size and scale of government at every level, especially the social services they provide. Attacks on unions, wages, and working conditions follow, along with attempts to divide poor, working-, and middle-class people around issues such as immigration, gay rights, reproductive rights and Islamophobia. Claiming to be "race-neutral" (even though their policy applications and impact are intentionally racialized), neoliberal advocates use phrases such as "individual choice," "meritocracy," "standards," "efficiency," and "level playing field" to justify policies which continue to strip resources from communities of color and poor and working-class white communities while concentrating even more wealth in the white, Christian ruling class.

The evidence of pervasive, life-destroying racism throughout our society persists — not only in statistics and broad patterns of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization, but also in the





everyday experiences of people of color. For example, on our neighborhood's NextDoor listserve, I routinely read vague racialized descriptions of the suspicious activity of my neighbors of color which I know often lead to calls to police and harassment for them. And I constantly see the displacement of entire communities of long-time residents of color from Oakland by young white gentrifiers who can afford higher rents, and expect cafes and upscale restaurants, better services and "safer" streets.

Every day I hear a new story, read a new report, witness the devastating impact of racism on our community. I don't ask for these stories, but I listen carefully when I hear them. I don't take them personally or try to defend white people. I know these stories are not about me and sometimes the white people involved have no conscious intention of hurting a person of color. These stories are about the everyday discrimination and disrespect towards people of color racism produces and people of color have to live with.

I have become even more acutely aware of how interdependent our lives are and how dependent I am on the low-paid work of people of color in the United States and in other countries. I look at the label on my jeans, shirts and underwear; I track the work that produced my computer, TV and cell phone; I learn more about who grows, picks, packages and prepares the food I eat; I notice who cleans the public buildings and classrooms I use. Usually people of color perform the poorly paid, low-status jobs which allow me to enjoy the benefits of inexpensive clothes, low-priced electronic equipment, cheap food and clean and well-maintained public spaces.

My daily life is interwoven with the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of people of color. Yet so much of their lives, work and culture is ridiculed, exploited or rendered invisible by our society I often don't see or make the connections. My ignorance and subsequent inaction contribute to their exploitation, discrimination and marginalization. I become a partner in racism, a collaborator in injustice.

Determination is what it takes to confront racism. We need to keep going back and picking up the task no matter how uncomfortable, angry or frustrated we become in the process. Being an ally is like that. We keep learning, doing our best, leaving something out, making mistakes, doing it better next time. It is a practice, not an identity — and it is best done in collaboration with others.

We must each ask ourselves:

- What do I stand for?
- Who do I stand with?
- Do I stand for racial justice, the end of discrimination and racial violence and a society truly based on equal opportunity?
- Do I stand with people of color and white allies in the struggle to uproot racism?

Copies of the new 4th edition of *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* can be ordered from www.paulkivel.com or from your local independent book store.

Endnotes

1. See the bibliography at <http://paulkivel.com/resource/bibliography-racism/>.
2. Catherine E. Shoichet. "Is Racism on the Rise?: More in America say

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racism is a 'big problem.'" CNN, November 25, 2015. [online]. [cited November 27, 2016]. cnn.com/2015/11/24/us/racism-problem-cnn-kff-poll/index.html.

3. Janie Valencia. "Majority of White People Say There's Racism Everywhere, But Not Around Them." Huffington Post, September 9, 2015. [online]. [cited November 27, 2016.] huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-people-racism-poll_us_55a91a4fe4b0c5f0322d17f2.

4. This transfer is estimated to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars: Amaad Rivera et al. Foreclosed: State of the Dream 2008. United for a Fair Economy, January 15, 2008. [online]. [cited May 4, 2017]. faireconomy.org/dream8.





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