

Love or Racism
Achieving Human Potential in an Age of White Supremacy
By
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Let's begin by remembering the Sixties, an era in American history when many would agree major progress was made in the areas of racial justice and equality. The Civil Rights Act was passed during President Johnson's administration, guaranteeing that any U.S. citizen, regardless of "race or color," has the same legal rights and opportunities as any other citizen. Despite this major legal victory, many whites, especially Southern whites, resisted the law, often through brutality and white terrorism, and by inventing the myth of reverse racism, which some actually called, "black supremacy"—the false belief that politically empowering blacks leads to discrimination against whites—and to myths that blacks are hyper sexualized and pose a threat especially to white women, and to myths of their innate criminality and laziness. These reactions and others went on to stifle what progress the Civil Rights Act was supposed to guarantee.

In fact, racial progress remained stymied for another hundred years. Yes, I said a hundred years, because I've been talking about the 1860s, not the 1960s. That's when the 1866 Civil Rights Act was passed during Andrew Johnson's Presidency, a President who unsuccessfully attempted to veto it. The fact that a hundred years later another Civil Rights Act was passed while another President Johnson was in office is a weirdly coincidental example of history repeating itself, but the real irony is that, after an entire century, after an Act was passed by Congress declaring, "all persons born in the United States were now citizens, without regard to race, color, or previous condition;" after the 13th Amendment of 1865 abolishing slavery, after the 14th Amendment of 1868 guaranteeing all U.S. citizens equal treatment under the law, and the 15th Amendment of 1870 prohibiting any State from denying the right to vote to any citizen based on "race, color, or previous condition," too little had changed.

In 1964, a century later, we had to pass yet another Civil Rights Act, guaranteeing many of these same Constitutional guarantees all over again, as well as the Voting Rights Act just a year later, outlawing racial discrimination in voting. Since then, another half century has passed, yet, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva succinctly says, to this day, "blacks and most racial minorities lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators."¹ In other words, little has practically changed in this country for most nonwhites since 1964. Despite 150 years of regurgitating legislation at the highest level guaranteeing equal treatments under the law, a gravely disproportionate number of nonwhites, especially African Americans, flood our overcrowded prison system in our era of Jim Crow mass incarceration, justified by the near ancient myth of black criminality, spawned by the political desire of politicians to prevent African Americans from voting for their opponents. And since 2010 alone, 14 Republican controlled states have instituted voter suppression laws targeted mostly at nonwhites, a ploy

¹ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

that has become even easier to pull off since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights act just a few years ago in 2013.

How is it, after so many laws have been passed guaranteeing an end to racism and white supremacy, these plagues still exist in our society today? I'm sure the answer to this question is complex, but this morning I'd like to focus on one reason that seems to be a big part of it. Our Civil Rights Acts and Amendments haven't worked very well because they've not been passed for the right reason—love. For, according to my understanding, love, justice, and equality are all synonyms. Justice is what love looks like, and equality is the outcome of justice. So, our laws aren't just, and can't lead to equality, if they're not motivated by love. And what exactly is love? I agree with psychologist Erich Fromm who says, "*the most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love...*" includes, "*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person's] life.*" Hence, we will know our laws are motivated by love if they demonstrate this sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, respect for their individual uniqueness, the wish to let them be who they are, and to remove any obstacles standing in the way of letting them achieve their fullest potential.

White Supremacy is the opposite of love for this very reason, because it excludes nonwhites from these very qualities—responsibility, care, respect, knowledge, and the wish to further their lives. Although I'm a liberal, I do not use this term, "White Supremacy" liberally. It's being thrown around in a lot of unusual ways these days, but my use is the traditional definition as expressed, for example, in the Oxford English Dictionary as, "The belief that white people are superior to those of all other races, especially the black race, and should therefore dominate society."² I personally prefer Sociologist Nicki Lisa Cole's definition in her article, *The History of White Supremacy: A Sociological Definition*;

Historically, white supremacy has been understood as the belief that white people are superior to people of color. As such, white supremacy was the ideological driver of the European colonial projects and U.S. imperial projects: it was used to rationalize unjust rule of people and lands, theft of land and resources, enslavement, and genocide.³

I like Cole's more precise definition because it indicates White Supremacy is more than just a belief, it is also systemic, giving power and resources to some, while intentionally leaving others out. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva actually defines the term to mean, "racially based political regimes that emerged post-fifteenth century."⁴ Think about that, he's saying White Supremacy is 500 year old systems! Traditionally speaking, then, White Supremacy has had something to do with either believing there is something inherently superior about being

² Lexical definitions like this attempt to provide the most commonly understood meaning or meanings of a term, which is why its definition in the *Cambridge Dictionary* is similar, "The belief that people with pale skin are better than people with darker skin;" and why *Merriam-Webster* defines a *white supremacist* as, "a person who believes that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races."

³ <https://www.thoughtco.com/white-supremacy-definition-3026742>

⁴ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Reiner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 11.

white, and/or to do with social, legal, and economic structures and injustices constructed upon this belief. Thus, according to this definition, being white does not make someone a White Supremacist anymore than being a Muslim makes someone a terrorist. As a Unitarian Universalist, I don't believe in original sin, that there is any arbitrary congenital condition that makes any of us fundamentally flawed.

But even if we don't hold White Supremacist beliefs and don't intentionally seek to unjustly exclude others from the benefits of society, whatever our color, doesn't mean we aren't part of a White Supremacist system that was set up long ago by those who did hold these despicable ideas. Again, as Bonilla-Silva so succinctly puts it, "after a society becomes racialized, racialization develops a life of its own."⁵ As we have been forced to realize since the illegitimate election of a White Supremacist President, which has emboldened White Supremacist groups, there are plenty of people still around today who continue to hold these sickening beliefs. But, I suspect, there are far more of us, people of many colors, who don't maintain these ideas and are, nonetheless, trapped in racist systems established long ago by White Supremacists who exterminated, enslaved, and exploited nonwhites.

Over the past 150 years, at least, we've tried, as I've mentioned, to resolve this problem, but, again, not for the right reason, not, that is, because, as a nation, we have been fundamentally committed to the welfare and fulfillment of all people. Let's consider Thomas Jefferson, heralded as the key proponent of the principles of independence, freedom, and democracy our country is supposed to stand for. In his book, *Stamped from the Beginning*, about the history of racist ideas in America, history professor and Anti-Racist researcher, Ibram X. Kendi writes, "Jefferson maintained that 'Men' were 'endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' As a holder of nearly two hundred people with no known plans to free them, Thomas Jefferson authored the heralded American philosophy of freedom."⁶

Although remembered as an abolitionist, Jefferson did not consider blacks equal to whites and did not believe it possible for them to live together as such. Instead, like many calling for an end to slavery, he wanted to see freed slaves sent back to Africa, explaining that, "the real distinctions that nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."⁷ In his, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson again claimed that nature has made clear distinctions between blacks and whites, that blacks were less attractive, less intelligent, and were better suited for hard physical labor. So, like many abolitionists of his day, Jefferson could not accept an America that included free Black men and women.

Jefferson is also well known to have begun using fourteen-year-old, Sally Hemmings as a sex slave when he was 44 years old. When, two years later, he'd taken her to France, pregnant with his child, she planned to petition the French authorities for her freedom. Jefferson promised he'd give her special privileges and set her children free if she'd agree to return

⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶ Kendi, Ibram X., *Stamped from the Beginning*, Nation Book, New York, NY, 2016, p. 104f.

⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

home with him. She bore between five and seven of his children. We don't know how many because he didn't officially claim his kids. He did keep his promise and freed those who didn't die before becoming adults. How gracious of him to honor his word and grant freedom to his own children.

When the 1807 Slave Trade Act made importing slaves illegal, Jefferson, like other plantation owners, began aggressively breeding domestic slaves to make a profit off the new demand for homegrown human chattel. He once told a friend, "I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm."⁸ Except for Sally Hemmings and her children, Jefferson never freed one of the estimated 600 or more slaves he held during his lifetime, and, upon his death in 1826, still had over 200 hundred men, women, and children he considered his property.

And what of that other revered figure of Presidential mythology, the man even the freed slaves praised as the Great Emancipator, the Black Moses? Upon inviting a delegation of Blacks to the White House in 1862, seeking their support, Abraham Lincoln, like Jefferson, argued in favor of colonization, that is, of sending freed slaves back to Africa, something most slaves and freedmen were against. "The Black race, he told them, could never 'be place on an equality with the white race' in the United States,"⁹ that there would be no war if it weren't for the Blacks, and that it would be "extremely selfish" for them to resist deportation to Liberia. Of this conversation, the great Frederick Douglas said Lincoln had showed, "his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy!"¹⁰ Lincoln later told Horace Greely that, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it..."¹¹

After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, plans were in place to grant former slaves a patch of land upon which to build a new life and, for the first time, to reap the rewards of their own labor. Many argued they couldn't be truly free without it. But instead of giving the land confiscated during the war to the former slaves who had once been forced to work it, Kendi says, "90 percent had gone to northern Whites over the widespread protest of local Blacks,"¹² insuring a level of racial poverty that has lasted to this day.

In addition to land, those freed demanded suffrage, the right to vote, a right Lincoln was against. During a Presidential debate, he once insisted;

I am not nor ever have been in favor of making [Black people] voters or jurors... There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.¹³

⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

⁹ Ibid., p. 219.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 230.

¹³ Ibid., p. 205f.

My friends, there can be no stronger indictment of White Supremacy than words like these. These two great liberators, Jefferson and Lincoln, like so many abolitionists in American history were simultaneously White Supremacists in both thought and deed. Some pursued abolition for economic purposes. Some for political purposes. And some, because they genuinely believed slavery was cruel and evil, yet remained White Supremacist in their beliefs—that even if freed, there’s no way for Blacks and Whites to share society and live together as equals. And this is the dichotomy, the milieu out of which the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 emerged, not out of genuine love, the kind of love that is fundamental to all types love, love based upon care and respect and the desire to see other blossom, to fully become themselves, uninhibited by prejudice and hate.

In moving forward, lest we wait again until the 2060s to pass another Civil Rights Act, we must make love, genuine love, the cornerstone of all we do toward racial equality. The reason racism, like all forms of oppression and domination are unjust, is because it prevents certain people, precious people, people born with so much beauty and genius to share, from fully unfolding and becoming all that they are meant to be. In his 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. Martin Luther King said, “A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution.” Today we cannot wait another half century for another meaningless Civil Rights Act to be passed, or another hundred years, or even longer. We can no longer revolt against racist feelings and sentiments. We must, rather, have a love revolution that finally changes the ideas and institutions that continue to hold people down, we must attack the racist prison and criminal justice system, the racist housing, education, and employment systems that are keeping too many of us down, with love—with the belief that all people, ALL people, are equal and deserve care, respect, freedom, and the opportunities to fully express themselves and become all they are meant to be.