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Racism or White Supremacy?

Since I wrote the piece in Nygaard Notes #639 about not calling Donald Trump a racist, I've begun to think more broadly about where and when to use the term "racism."

The philosopher Charles W. Mills says that "Current debates about 'racism' are hindered by the fact that the term is used in such a confusingly diverse range of ways that it is difficult to find a stable semantic core." That is, the word "racism" means so many things to so many people that it makes it hard to know what we're talking about.

I've thought about this before. It was back in the year 2002 that I said in these pages, "I actually prefer the term 'White Supremacy' over the term 'racism.'" Now, in 2019, it's more than a preference, and that's partly for the reason that Mills mentions, but there's a more important reason as well, which I will now discuss.

Classical Liberalism

In the world of philosophy there is a concept called "liberalism" which in its classical definition is based on the Enlightenment idea that the liberty of the individual is a core value. The 17th-Century Enlightenment philosopher John Locke is sometimes referred to as the "father of modern liberalism." Cornell scholar Isaac Kramnick tells us that "All the important figures of the revolutionary generation, including John Otis, John and Sam Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Benjamin Franklin, were disciples of Locke. His writings shaped sermons in Revolutionary pulpits and editorials in Revolutionary newspapers. The Declaration of Independence, in fact, reads like a paraphrase of Locke's influential Second Treatise of Civil Government."

In 1772, four years before the Declaration of Independence, Sam Adams published a leaflet entitled "The Rights of the Colonists," the first line of which reads like this: "Among the natural rights of the Colonists are these: First, a right to life; Secondly, to liberty; Thirdly, to property..." The mythology of the origins of the USA has it that the new nation was based on such classically liberal ideas. Of course it was not. Women's property was generally

controlled by men. African slaves had no rights to either liberty or property. Indigenous people were also enslaved, and the entire colonial project was based on taking possession of native property, that is, land.

When one holds thoughts, beliefs or attitudes that contradict each other, or when one's actions don't "fit" with what one believes or thinks, it gives rise to what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance". The dissonance must have been intense in revolutionary times, as the liberal philosophy by which the revolutionary leaders said they aspired to live stood in stark contrast to the actual practice of racial, sexual, and class exclusion that characterized the social contract of what was to become the United States of America.

Something had to be done to address the discrepancy between the practice and the promise of the colonial nation-building project. Addressing such a discrepancy was not a new problem. Back in NN #600 I discussed the intense moral dilemma posed by the contradiction between Enlightenment ideals and the terrible crimes committed by the Europeans as the capitalist world economy was being constructed. The intellectual traditions that the colonial leaders brought with them from Europe included an ideology that today we might call Rich White Male Supremacy, or RWMS. This would be the interrelated rationalizations that had been created in order to justify the various conquests perpetrated by the European powers even as they exalted the "natural rights" and "universal rights" that their philosophers claimed as the basis of their sociopolitical structures.

RWMS—based on the dehumanization of all non-RWMS—was thus used to justify the exclusion of many, perhaps even a majority of, colonial residents from equal membership in the "family of man." No "natural rights" for them!

Which leads us back to 2019 and the question of terminology. Why do I advocate for using the term White Supremacy instead of Racism?

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Greetings,

Being a writer, it will surprise no one that I love words. But this issue of Nygaard Notes goes beyond loving words to ponder why it's important to choose our words carefully. It's not because I have some cockamamie idea about getting people to be "politically correct." Heavens, no! Rather it's because the names we give to things shape our understanding of those things.

I must love words, because I've published over 1.5 million of them so far in the pages of Nygaard Notes (1.7 million, actually). Yet, somehow, this is the first time I've ever typed the word cockamamie. Probably won't be the last.

What a cockamamie editor's note!

Nygaard

Racism *from page 1*

Definitions

As Mills says, the word "racism" means different things to different people. But I think the Wikipedia "simple English" definition captures the essence of what many USAmericans believe: "Racism is the belief that some races are better than others, and the actions that can happen from those beliefs."

The problem with this common understanding is that it leaves the impression that racist thinking and behavior ("belief" and "actions") are somehow distributed throughout a population in a sort of random way ("some races" and "others"). This is certainly true of prejudice and bigotry, which are often mistaken for racism. Anyone, after all, can be prejudiced or bigoted.

But a look at history shows us that the ideology that we know as racism—including the grouping of people by "race" and even the idea of "race" itself!—was developed and refined over the centuries not in some *random* way, but specifically for the benefit of white people and at the expense of those who were judged to be other than white.

And that judgement about whiteness or non-whiteness, upon which so terribly much depended, was a judgement reserved for those with the power to make the judgement stick. Which fits with the definition of "Supremacy": "The state or condition of being superior to all others in authority, power, or status."

I think the reader can see where I'm going with this.

"The Real Issue"

Here I want to recall some words of Charles W. Mills that I published back in 2016. I featured them as my "Quote" of the Week, without elaboration, fully intending to place

them in context at some point. (It took me three years to get back to it!) Here is Mills:

"The dominant interpretation of white racism in the white population is probably individual beliefs about innate nonwhite (particularly black) biological inferiority, and individual hostility toward people of color (especially blacks). Given this conception, most whites think of themselves as nonracist—one positive thing about the present is that nobody wants to be a racist, though this has also motivated a shift in how the term is defined—while continuing to hold antiblack stereotypes. But in any case, with the decline in overt racism in the white population, the real issue for a long time has not been individual racism but, far more important, the reproduction of white advantage and black disadvantage through the workings of racialized social structures. The idea of white supremacy is intended, in part, to capture the crucial reality that the *normal* workings of the social system continue to disadvantage blacks in large measure *independently* of racist feeling. Insofar as ... our attention as philosophers concerned about justice is supposed to be on the 'basic structure' of society and its workings, the concept of 'white supremacy' then forces us to confront the possibility that the basic structure is itself systemically unjust. Corrective measures to end racial injustice would thus need to begin here."

Use of the term "racism" reinforces the idea that the problem is, as Mills puts it, "racist feeling" and "individual hostility." Use of the term "white supremacy," on the other hand, puts the emphasis on what Mills calls "the real issue" which is "the reproduction of white advantage and black disadvantage through the workings of racialized social structures."

In conclusion, I will list some reasons why our use of the term "racism" causes problems, followed by some reasons why we might benefit from using the term "white supremacy" instead. ↗↗↗

RACISM

- The term Racism has been used so much and in so many ways that it has lost its descriptive power.
- The common understanding of the term Racism reflects the cultural confusion between the concepts of a social problem (group-based domination) and a psychological problem (prejudice and bigotry).
- Use of the word Racism reinforces the mistaken belief that racism is Individual, Conscious, and Intentional.
- Once “individualized”, any person can be afflicted, since racist sentiment can originate anywhere and be directed at anyone.

WHITE SUPREMACY

- The word “white” in White Supremacy places the group at the center rather than the individual.
- The word “supremacy” in White Supremacy focuses on power, authority and status instead of individual emotional states such as hostility, fear etc.
- “*White*” Supremacy reminds us that it is a specific group that is understood to be “superior to all others in authority, power, or status.”

- By naming the beneficiaries of the system, the term White Supremacy invites people to ponder the meaning of “white” and “whiteness” in the specific cultural context of the USA in 2019.
- While “racist” has become an often-used epithet, the term “white supremacist” is far less familiar and thus less easily put into use as an oversimplified label.
- The term White Supremacy implies that we are talking about systems and institutions rather than individuals.
- (Quoting Mills) “The concept of ‘white supremacy’ forces us to confront the possibility that the basic structure is itself systemically unjust.”

Effectively engaging with a cultural illness or a social injustice begins with a clear understanding of the nature of the problem. And understanding begins with naming the problem, because the name we give to something reflects our understanding of that something. I’m not advocating that we police our speech to make sure we use the “correct” language. I’m advocating that we continue to sharpen our understanding of the problem of racial injustice, and let our speech reflect that sharpened understanding.

And my understanding at the moment tells me that the issue is not mean people versus nice people. The issue is a racialized system that was set up to allow white people to dominate everyone else. The issue is White Supremacy. ♦

Thoughts and Words

I’m old enough to remember when Jesse Ventura was the governor of Minnesota (1999-2003). So I remember when Playboy magazine published a lengthy interview with the Governor in which he said some things to which many people objected. Perhaps it was his comment that “Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people.” Maybe it was when he noted that “If I could be reincarnated as a fabric, I would come back as a 38 double-D bra.”

Responding to criticism of his remarks, Ventura responded as many people respond in such circumstances: He said that he should be lauded for his honesty. “I speak my mind,” the Governor said on NBC’s *Meet The Press*. “If it offends some people, well, there's not much I can do about that. But I'm going to be honest. I'm going to continue to speak my

mind, and that's who I am.”

A wonderful response to this nonsense was provided by a woman who wrote a succinct letter to the editor of the local newspaper. She wrote (and I think I remember it exactly) that “My problem with the Governor is not that he says what he thinks. It’s that he thinks what he says.”

Now I’ll say what I think: I think that most people, most of the time, think what they say. That’s a part of the reason that words have meaning. The words we use, and how we use them, tell people who we are. And this is true whether we want them to or not!

Sometimes a criticism of another person’s language is
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motivated by a desire to come off as “holier than thou” or (in progressive circles) more “woke.” Sometimes it’s not really criticism at all, but is just an attack meant to injure the person whose language offends. But at its best, the plea for “politically correct” language is a plea to interrogate the thinking that resulted in those particular words being used in that particular way at that particular time. Done lovingly, to point out the bigoted or hurtful nature of someone’s speech is a gift, as it gives that person an opportunity to look inside and see themselves as others see them. It’s like telling a friend that they have food on their face, or (in the old days) that their slip is showing. It’s awkward, but it’s what friends do.

White privilege offers a number of promises to white people. One of them is that we will be spared the often-painful experience of looking inside to see the various ways that we benefit from and perpetuate white supremacist habits and systems. It’s hard to look at! And there is very little support for white people in a white supremacist social system for such self-assessment.

That’s one of the reasons that we need to work together, in community, to begin to transform the norms of white privilege into new norms of interracial solidarity. The goal is not to function as some sort of language police trying to enforce the use of “politically correct” words. The goal is to challenge the thinking that produces such words in the first place. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“The Ideology That Preserves Systems of Power”*

This week’s “Quote” is from a document called “Establishing a Common Understanding of Racism and White Supremacy,” put out this year by the progressive Catholic Sisters’ group NETWORK:

A concept critical to our examination of race and racism is white supremacy. We define white supremacy as ‘the ideology of racial hierarchy born out of historical European domination that drives the system of white superiority, power, and control in our country. This ideology is often unconscious and impacts class and social status for whites and people of color.’

As you may notice, the most-recognized use of white supremacy—when an individual or association professes an ideology of white racial dominance—is of course included in this definition. White supremacy, however, is not limited to those instances. Instead, it extends to the ideology that preserves systems of power and control that uphold whiteness in our country. White supremacy, then, is much more prevalent in the structures of our society than we are comfortable admitting.

Read the whole document HERE:

<https://networkadvocates.org/recommittoracialjustice/understanding/>

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