

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by David Tutty. David recently returned to Aotearoa after nine years in South Africa and is a member of Pax Christi.

Seeking to be better allies: Learning to face Pākehā privilege

In June, last year, I offered an article arguing that to be better allies requires that we, Pākehā, have the courage to face our collective shadow side. I named that the formative influences of the Enlightenment, the dynamic of empire, the social construction of whiteness (the white New Zealander) and the impact of dominant Christian theologies have left us morally crippled, spiritually impoverished and epistemologically compromised. We have been left with a cultural arrogance where we have not questioned our dominance and privilege in Aotearoa and the pernicious nature of our colonisation of this land.

We have a collective shadow side and this present contribution seeks to focus on just one of the four formative influences – the social construction of whiteness which exposes the privilege gained through its dynamic. We, Pākehā, have benefited from the thefts of land, labour and wealth in colonial history and we have rationalised our benefits through the creation of a sense of self as (white) New Zealanders. We have also created institutions and processes to maintain our acquired dominance and privilege.

Many may not have heard of the social science discourses around whiteness. Concern about whiteness arose early in the 1980s as a response by white U.S. feminists to the charges of racism by black feminists. Since then, those who have focused on the dynamics of race have grown in their awareness that the category of race arose through economic and political expediency. And through this expediency, those racialised were exploited, disenfranchised and repressed in order to further the expansion of Western power and capital (see *Working through Whiteness: International Perspectives*, ed. C. Levine-Rasky 2002).

A key insight to help us understand how whiteness operates comes from feminists. Many

have seen the parallel between sexism and racism and named that white people have a race just as men have a gender (see Frankenberg R., *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, 1993:1). This has led them to understand the term whiteness to be the parallel to patriarchy as it is a way of naming the power dynamic within racism.

The use and maintenance of this power within racism is a dynamic reality and is not static. Initially, Ruth Frankenberg named whiteness only as “a location of structural advantage ... a standpoint ... from which people look at themselves, at others, and at society ... a set of cultural practices” (1993:1). But later she added that it was “a practice rather than an object ... [a] racial formation and historical process rather than ... static” (Introduction: Local Whiteness, *Localizing Whiteness in Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. R. Frankenberg 1997:20). Racism’s patriarchy is definitely an ongoing dynamic.

Now, I am aware that many will not be happy with the term whiteness as there are many limitations to the use of this term. Firstly, most Pākehā do not call themselves white as they prefer a national not racial categorisation. Secondly, many Pākehā are very aware that not all of us are privileged to the same extent. Gender, language, sexuality, class, ability, age and many more factors limit the level of social dominance and privilege we may have. And thirdly, some theorists see that the term whiteness is not helpful as it does not explicitly name the power dynamic involved and the way that this dynamic benefits those who are white. Some African American philosophers argue for the use of the term “white supremacy” as it “forces us to confront the possibility that the basic structure is itself systematically unjust” (Mills C. W., *Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness in What*

white looks like: African American philosophers on the whiteness question, ed. G. Yancy, 2004:32). Alongside this, there are a number of white American Catholic theologians who are actively focusing on “white privilege” as they are determined to turn their gaze on themselves and their group and seek to “dismantle” the privilege that they enjoy (see *Interrupting White privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* eds. L. M. Cassidy and A. Mikulich, 2007).

The majority of social scientists who write about whiteness do so for the purpose of contributing to change so that those who are white no longer acquire and deploy social, political and economic dominance. Their writings name strategies to work through whiteness for the purpose of better struggling against the inequalities that it caused. South African, Melissa Steyn, names two such strategies. Firstly, she argues that there is a need to seriously listen to the uppity voices that seek to interrupt our dominant way of thinking. And, secondly, she points to the need to expose the social constructions that arise from positions of power (see *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa*, 2001).

Steyn's first strategy is challenging. Our first task is to listen seriously to the voices of those who have been impacted by our Pākehā dynamic to acquire and maintain dominance in this land. These voices are named as uppity because they basically question and challenge what we see as normal and normative. Because of the rawness of this challenge, we very quickly disregard and discredit the source of the voices. For us, in Aotearoa, it is the challenges of Māori, be they academics or protesters, that we most need to take seriously.

Why, you might ask? It is because “the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity not only their own position but also that of the oppressor/privileged, and indeed the shape of the social systems as a whole” (Frankenberg 1993:8). This well-argued feminist insight is true because “there is a link between where one stands in society and what one perceives” (ibid.). So, in order to best listen, Pākehā, then, need to change where they stand so as to learn to see themselves as others see them.

Steyn's second strategy is to commit ourselves to exposing dominant social constructions. She argues that this strategy requires that we “expose whiteness and render it irreversibly visible”

(2001:xxvi). It is the second step because only after we, Pākehā, see ourselves as others see us can we then see what is largely invisible to us. Here, the problem moves from analysing the impact of racism on Māori to robustly exposing and critiquing the Pākehā processes of acquiring and maintaining dominance. Again, this strategy is a very challenging task. It is through exposing our cultural arrogance and the pernicious nature of our forceful colonisation can we begin to face the privilege we have gained in the process.

One African American philosopher, Lucius Outlaw, believes that what most deeply underpins white racial hegemony is greed and fear. He argues that these two “deep-seated sentiments and long cultivated passions” are “constitutive aspects of lived notions of whiteness” and these need to be exposed and dislodged (Rehabilitate Racial Whiteness in *What white looks like: African American philosophers on the whiteness question*, ed. G. Yancy, 2004:165). So it is for us, Pākehā, to decide whether this insight is also true for us. I suspect it is!

Any serious working through whiteness, any learning to face Pākehā privilege, is about choosing to leave our comfort zones. Altruism or logic is not enough motivation to do so. The only effective impetus is the realisation that we have been damaged and that we need healing. We have been morally crippled, spiritually impoverished and epistemologically compromised in the process and we need to work for our own liberation (see Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *White Economic and Erotic Disempowerment in Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* eds. L.M. Cassidy & A. Mikulich, 2007).

Seeking to be better allies effectively is choosing to face, to expose and to dismantle Pākehā privilege. Seeking to be better allies is about learning new non-dominant ways of being, thinking and acting as Pākehā. It is our task. It is our responsibility. No one else can do it for us. We are damaged because of our quest for dominance. We have to face our deep-seated greed and fear and we have much to learn.

If we have the courage to begin this journey we will come to understand that all the Pākehā-initiated institutions will have to be questioned, even the notion of the nation state. Seeking to be better allies will result in a new spirit within Pākehā, a new way of understanding economics and a radical new constitution for this country.