

Decentering Whiteness

Written by Jeff Hitchcock

Speech given at the 3rd National Conference on Whiteness

University of Chicago, November 7, 1998.

I use the term whiteness to describe such things as white racial identity, white culture and European Americans as a people. This is different and broader from how other people may use the term.

At the Center for the Study of White American Culture we've developed a perspective we call decentering whiteness. In brief, we say that...

- * Whiteness forms center of our society in the United States
- * We believe no single racial or cultural group should control the center
- * We need to take whiteness out of the center and replace the center with multiracial values

When we talk about being in the center of society, by that we mean having access to power, control of resources and having the ability to enforce one's values. In the United States we have government, with the presidency, the Senate and the Supreme Court and these are overwhelmingly white, and for that matter, male, which is itself an element of whiteness. We have Fortune 500 companies, which are overwhelmingly controlled by white people. We have white families in control of a disproportionately large measure of the wealth of the country. We have a majority of white people who believe living and working in circumstances that are overwhelmingly white is normal, okay, acceptable, and even worth seeking out.

By saying we need a multiracial center, we mean no single racial group should control the society's resources, power and values, and every racial and cultural group should have access to these things.

Racial and cultural groups can, and probably will, be centered on their own cultural and historical experience. There's nothing wrong with that so long no single group monopolizes the center. Instead of a white presidency, we need a multiracial presidency. After 42 white men in a row, it's time for a change. We need a multiracial Senate and Supreme Court. We need multiracial ownership and control of our corporations.

We need values which say living in a multiracial community is normal, positive and something to be sought out. Something which banks, municipal governments, churches and civic associations proactively endorse. And that goes for other elements of our experience as well. To repeat, we need to take whiteness out of the center and replace the center with multiracial values.

In a way, that's not saying anything new. But we want to emphasize two things about this approach. First, these two processes are linked. You cannot do one without the other. You can't leave whiteness in the center and add multiracial values to it. Trying to put everything in the center is not possible. Not only will that not work, but trying to make it work just leaves whiteness as central. We're saying whiteness should be on the margin of society along with other racial groups that are centered on their own experience, and the center itself should be multiracial. But the center can't be multiracial until whiteness, and those values that center on white culture and experience, are moved out of the center to the margin. So really we are talking about two aspects of the same problem.

Second, it will take a multiracial effort to accomplish this. It's obvious it will take a multiracial effort to create a multiracial center. But it will also take a multiracial effort to decenter whiteness. People of color cannot force whiteness from the center. If they could, it would have happened already. But white people, as a group, will not leave the center of our own accord. So it will take both the external push from people of color and the internal agitation by white people to decenter whiteness.

Even though decentering whiteness and creating a multiracial center are linked, we can take a closer look at each process. This being a conference about whiteness, I want to look specifically at what it will take to decenter whiteness. If there's anything I want you to take with you today, it's this formula. In order to decenter whiteness we need to name it, we need to blame it, we need to reframe it.

Name it, blame it, reframe it.

NAME IT

Naming it. That's one of the things this conference is about. White culture has been described as invisible, normative, transparent, raceless, and the undefined definer of others. These are all descriptions that come from within whiteness itself. Most white people cannot name whiteness. Sure we know which box to check on the census form. But

when it comes to identifying a common experience, heritage, outlook and culture, we can't name it.

Of course if we can't name it, then we can't talk about it, and if we can't talk about it, then we can't change it. In fact, that's what not naming it is all about. Rather than calling it for what it is, we pretend whiteness is something universal. We name ourselves Americans, individuals or universal beings. But, when we finally name ourselves as white, we're forced out of the neutral zone and there's only two ways to go. Either we can try to uphold the rightness of whiteness and become conscious advocates for white supremacy, or, we can aspire toward creation of a multiracial community in which white people no longer run things.

BLAME IT

Now some people who are beginning to name themselves as white may ask, why not call a truce between the races and create a world in which no one is blamed, especially because of their race? We need to reject this sort of "me too" multiculturalism that celebrates white cultural experience but leaves the centrality of whiteness intact. Whiteness must take some blame. Without making this abundantly and commonly clear, then multicultural celebrations of whiteness as difference are hollow, shallow, selfish and dangerous.

There is plenty to blame whiteness for. There is no crime that whiteness has not committed against people of color. There is no crime that we have not committed even against ourselves. I don't want to diminish the need to face up to our history, but even more important we must blame whiteness for the continuing patterns today that deny the rights of those outside of whiteness and which damage and pervert the humanity of those of us within it.

Blame, as hard as it may be for us white people to accept, blame must fall on whiteness so long as whiteness keeps its grip on the center. Whiteness is not neutral. It looks out for its own interests. We need to accept that white culture cannot deliver multiracial comfort. It can only deliver white comfort. White culture cannot deliver multiracial safety. It can only deliver white safety. White culture cannot deliver multiracial community. It can only deliver white community. White culture cannot deliver multiracial justice. It can only deliver white justice. White culture must give up the center if multiracial justice, multiracial community, multiracial safety and multiracial comfort are ever to become central to our society.

REFRAME IT

But we can't tell whiteness to surrender the center and then not give it a place to go. We can't tell whiteness to stop masquerading as universal, as normative, or as American and then deny it the room to be white in at least some other measure. We can't destroy whiteness without destroying blackness and other racial constructs. Though often antagonistic, they are profoundly linked. It may be good to eliminate all racial constructs entirely, but I don't think it's likely. And how would we know that has happened when even today whiteness in many sectors says race no longer applies.

We can easily fall back into the trap of centering whiteness as universal and raceless. Naming it and blaming it are necessary, but they not enough. We need to keep from being locked into blame and ask what is the role of white people in a multiracial society. We need to foster new concepts. I don't know what all these concepts might be, but let me offer some suggestions.

- * We need to create decentered white people who value multiracial community above white community.
- * Toward that end, we need white people who value the leadership of people of color and who visibly and effectively reject any high level process where that leadership is not present.
- * Speaking of following the leadership of people of color, we might consider a name change from white to European American. Now there's no magic to changing names. Already some avowed white supremacists refer to themselves as European Americans, so let's not pretend that changing names will automatically change the underlying process. But at the same time it does shift the emphasis from race to heritage and it's probably a move in the right direction.
- * We need to answer an old call for new white leaders who can act as models and move our people away from an irresponsible white supremacy and into a responsible multiracial citizenship.
- * We must disrupt the historic process of assimilation to whiteness that still continues today, and begin a new historic process whereby those people who are white begin to assimilate to a multiracial version of America.

* We need to promote a concept of multicultural celebration that recognizes European heritage in a realistic and balanced way, and use it as a tool to ask what it means to be white in our society.

* We must allow those who want to be culturally white to be so, provided they surrender the center to those who want to be culturally multiracial.

* Finally, we need to accept and embrace the fact that European blood and European heritage have flowed and mingled more deeply and intimately among Americans than simply within those we now call white, and that many whom we now call white carry the blood and heritage of other continents unrecognized within us.

Name it, blame it, reframe it. These things won't come easy and they won't come without pain. It can easily take the next century to complete this task. But start we must and start we have, at our modest little Center for the Study of White American Culture, here at the more ambitious National Conference on Whiteness, and throughout the country in the academy, in our places of worship and among the grass roots.

Taking whiteness out of the center is the task of a lifetime, but I believe it can be done and I believe together we will make it happen.

Thank you.