The Price of Slavery

Matthew Skulicz

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When I was teaching English at the local community college in Buffalo NY, I worked for several weeks with my friend Gene Grabiner from the Sociology Dept. on a new course proposal for the college’s honors program. On one day, in the midst of our conversation about the divisiveness of the recent OJ Simpson trial, which particularly affected our inner-city campus, I said to him that America is still paying the price for slavery. He, as was I, was a confirmed liberal of the farther left of center type. He stopped and looked up at me and said nothing.

Now, in the midst of the chaos roiling around Donald Trump, of his racism and his fanatical White Supremacy, which has become an outwardly visible obsession of his, I hear those words again—our nation is still paying the price of enslaving those millions of innocents from the forests and plains of Africa and of hauling them under the most brutal conditions to the shores of this continent, where the slaveowners expected these formerly free and dignified people to conform to their new situation and learn to love as we Christians knew how to love our neighbor.

The irony is so vigorous here that it bears stating in words. The life of the Christian faith is nowhere in this nation more evident than in the faith of the Black Christian churches. While White people have wizened to their Christian faith, so that their faith is often a morally satisfying patina of the soul rather than an urgency to bring about communal justice and cooperation, and have failed to bring their faith to its fulfillment in love of neighbor in these many decades since our Civil Brawl with each other, the Black American culture is still alive with faith in the will of God and tenderness toward those who suffer. And at the moments of their greatest toil and grief, to whom do those folks turn but to their pastors and ministers, for leadership and for understanding—every time, from the time of the Freedom Riders to the death of George Floyd.

I speak now as a White American, ever of the liberal persuasion. And I say this: The continuing burden of having enslaved those millions, and then, once they were freed, of having resentfully cast them into a merciless second-class citizenship, to mistreat them further under the laws of Jim Crow—this burden is felt heavily both by the formerly enslaved and by the holders of White Privilege who continue to mistreat them and on whom the additional burden of *crimes against humanity* falls.

The burden of enslavement falls on the formerly enslaved in the continued disrespect, hatred, and violence perpetrated by White Privileged Americans against them, even to this day, 135 years after the abolition of slavery in this country. After the Civil Brawl, the hope of the Reconstruction Era, when Black congressional representatives had a brief moment to work toward bringing their people out of the darkness which slavery had imposed on them, the greed of the White “entrepreneurs” who lusted after their 40 acres *and* their mules drove the Southern Black citizenry into a new form of enslavement, then called “sharecropping.” The people were kept in ignorance, without schooling and with meager means of subsistence. The intricacies of finance and business—inventions of the White brain—remained unopened to them, so they had little chance of prospering in business.

But of all the crimes perpetrated on them, the worst was that the hands of their White oppressors were never far from their throats. They were bullied and beaten by hooded White men, who brought death by lynching to their families and who instilled dread fear among their neighbors. Emancipation was the law, but the horrors of enslavement had not ceased.

And while through the years changes have been made in the White establishment’s treatment of the people formerly enslaved, those changes have not uprooted the core inclinations of the Privileged White majority. That is, “corrections” have been made by foresightful men in power in the cause of justice and to soothe the dissonances in tender consciences, while the essence of the old Southern order persists. For every attempt to bring the formerly enslaved nearer to their just place in this society and to equality before the law (as well as other minority groups despised by those in whose troubled hearts, the Civil Brawl is still being fought and the way of hate prevails), the White Supremacists among us continue to create obstacles to the realization of our national ideals in the lives of Black Americans, and of other oppressed minority groups, or they continue to put prices on our citizens’ access to the civil liberties which are their due. Recent evidence of this are the obstacles being erected to discourage voters’ participation in the current national election, and with regard to the second case, court decisions in Florida and other states demanding that ex-felons who have served their time and been released from prison pay all debts and fines associated with their imprisonment before they are permitted to exercise their right to vote.

It’s true that we no longer have public hangings in our town squares, and that the mockery of Black people and their cultural ways in public entertainment (such as *The Amos and Andy Show*, and characters such as *The Jack Benny Show*’s Rochester and the singer Al Jolson in blackface on 1950’s television) has been put out to pasture.

But the Black people who still live in poverty in the “Black neighborhoods” throughout the nation, drinking contaminated water from their house taps, their children eating the lead-based paint off the walls of their unmaintained slumlord rental or Section 8 housing, living in food insecurity and in dread of the violence on the street, by both the resident denizens of the streets and by law enforcement, who often exercise the privilege of their badges by gratuitous shows of force or by more felonious acts of terrorism on the citizens of those communities.

In our time, the racist members of urban police departments taunt or surround or threaten Black men, often with little or no cause, until their targets’ “fight or flight” reflex takes control of them, which gives the police justification of beat them—and often, to murder them, apparently with little fear of prosecution or punishment. Those Black adults who are not killed outright are warehoused in for-profit prisons —including children, who in Florida, for example, can be tried as adults though they are as young as 10 years old.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Is such treatment systematic oppression, similar to the oppression of those enslaved on the plantations? The numbers answer this question.

* Although non-Hispanic Black people make up 13% of the American population, 33% of the state and federal prison populations are non-Hispanic Black people.
* Under current conditions, 1 in every 3 Black men born in 2001 can expect to do time in prison at some point in their lives, whereas the rate for White men is 1 in 17.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nothing in these data can explain the disparities between the imprisonment of Black men and White men except that they result from the focused, willful, and organized efforts of law enforcement to find reason to bring as many Black men into the criminal justice system as they can.

In our lived experience, the most obvious among these systemic offenses are the many incidents of blatant misuse of deadly force against unarmed Black American civilians, resulting in the unjust deaths of citizens guilty of no violent or felonious offense.

The murder of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta testifies to the injustice of this disease of White Superiority which has infected, from the beginning of this nation, the relationships between Black Americans and their White counterparts. On June 12, 2020, a mere 18 days after the police murder of the unarmed Black citizen, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, which triggered a vociferous, nationwide, and interracial outcry against the killing by police of unarmed Black American citizens at a rate far higher than the corresponding crime committed against White Americans, Rayshard Brooks fell asleep, drunk, in the drive-through line at a Wendy’s restaurant in Atlanta. The bodycam worn by APD officer Devin Brosnan shows the officer approaching Brooks’s car and politely rousing him to consciousness. Brosnan, after observing Brooks’s condition, reasonably tells Brooks to pull his car into a parking space away from the flow of the Wendy’s line traffic. Brooks does so. Brooks steps out of his car and Brosnan engages Brooks in a civil conversation, in which Brooks suggests that he leave his car in the Wendy’s lot and walk to his sister’s house nearby.

Brosnan had called for backup before approaching Brooks’s car, and it was during Brooks’s ensuing conversation with Brosnan that APD officer Garrett Rolfe arrived as backup. The interaction between Brooks and Brosnan had been peaceful and cooperative to that point. Rolfe, however, was more aggressive, without sensing that Brosnan had everything under peaceful control and that the reasonable resolution had already been voiced—that Brooks would simply walk to his sister’s house and stay there until he sobered up. Rolfe, however, had a more confrontational attitude and without discussion with Brosnan, arrested Brooks by holding Brooks’ arm and began to handcuff him.

The handcuff maneuver triggered an escape response in Brooks who scrambled to the top of the heap of three, acquiring a taser gun from one of the officers along the way. Brooks attempted to stop the officers’ advance toward him by firing the taser at the officers. Then he turned and ran. Rolfe fired on Brooks, killing him.

The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police was similarly a violent reaction to a Black man’s attempt to avoid arrest and predictable imprisonment for a non-violent offense—passing a counterfeit 20-dollar bill at a convenience store—for which Floyd may have been entirely innocent.

Nonetheless, a clear pattern is established in these two cases, and it is reflective of many, many other cases of police over-reaction, resulting in the death of the apparent “offender” when that person is a person of color. The pattern is this. Police approach a Black male suspect on a minor issue, such as selling individual cigarettes on the street. The police, overlooking the “innocent until proven guilty” constitutional protection of all citizens, treat the suspect disrespectfully and aggressively until the Black man feels trapped and tries to escape. Then the officers fire on the unarmed, escaping suspect (rather than chasing him on foot, which many of them are in no physical condition to do), often killing him.

We await an honest and transparent, independent and non-political government investigation of the pervasiveness of incidents which follow this pattern. Such an investigation will answer the question whether the treatment of Black male citizens in such situations is comparable to the treatment of White male citizens, or whether the implicit brotherhood of White Privilege causes a more neighborly exchange between offender and responding officer, resulting in a more tolerant and peaceful resolution to the incident.

I am a 76 year old White male, and I have been stopped many times by the police in many different settings and arrested in several of those incidents. And I can affirm that never once was I abused or treated roughly or unjustly by the police officers present.

I do not imagine that there are very many Black male citizens living among us who can say the same thing. Until I am proven wrong, I will continue to believe that Black citizens are treated as second-class citizens and that they are denied the respectful treatment and the tolerance which the police and the courts, and the governmental administration, habitually extend to White people.

Surely, this systematic mistreatment of Black Americans by their White counterparts expresses itself in the bitter sense of valuelessness that many Black Americans feel in the presence of White people, contending with them for jobs and for recognition in society, while other Black Americans feel simple rage and frustration that their own personal dignity, and their talents, and the contributions they could make to the well-being of the society which they and White people share, are systematically defeated. They angrily question why they encounter White Superiority at every turn when they examine White culture and see nothing in it that justifies that attitude of superiority.

In general, older and less well-educated Black Americans fall into the first category and carry in their hearts the dark and heavy burden of berating themselves for their separation from White culture and privilege. For them, this sense of alienation and of lifetimes spent enduring injustice is the price that they have paid and are still paying for the enslavement of their ancestors, so long ago passed.

The middle aged and well-educated Black Americans, and their children, have courageously taken their places in society and, courageously, they will not be removed from those places, won with such difficulty and labor—and pain—in our American democracy.

This resistance to continued White Supremacy is a source of fear and anger for many Privileged Whites, who believe in the supremacy of white skin over darker skin-toned people. And why do the Privileged Whites believe this?

I think the preference for pale or light-colored skin—active in many, many cultures worldwide—has much to do with establishing social rank in terms of the effect of the sun on working people. What I mean is this: If a man works hard in the fields to grow the food that his family eats, his skin becomes darker because of prolonged exposure to the glare of the sun. Meanwhile, those who luxuriate in the canopied tents of the wealthy have no need to burn themselves with labor under the hot sun. So paleness of skin becomes a symbol of the way of life lived by the wealthy or the princely of the society. Paleness of skin is associated, then, with wealth and luxury, while darkness of skin-tone is associated with constant and difficult labor for the necessities of life. Thus, those who are dark of skin may envy the wide-ranging and ostentatious lives of the rich and powerful, while these same rich and powerful may despise what they interpret as the constant desperate clamoring of the dark-skinned destitute who annoy the rich with their constant pleas for help with fulfilling those needs which the poor cannot fulfill themselves.

It is a sorrowful joke that White Supremacy is built of this artifice of excellence and luxury, because those who support the notion of White Privilege in this country at this time, and who are armed and ready to fight to the death to maintain it, are mainly laboring-class White people who earn their keep by the sweat of their brows. Somewhere in their worth-seeking souls they harbor the belief that they are of the same (Aryan) blood as the aristocrats whom they admire for their splendorous and boastful White Privilege—unaware that these same aristocrats disdain them, though they find them useful, and that these aristocrats would never stoop to riding with them in their muddy pickup trucks.

The joke’s on you, my ignorant brothers.

And these “aristocrats” who live in golden penthouses and hob-nob over caviar with clones of themselves—who are they, and where did they come from? They—almost all—are pretenders to nobility who came from peasant stock themselves. They are the newly-rich whose wealth is usually one or two generations deep, like Bill Gates’ and Elon Musk’s and perhaps Donald Trump’s. And in general, these “aristocrats” have tastes and civility as pocked and porcine as those aficionados of QVC and American Picker who admire them.

And the second sorrowful joke is that these “aristocrats” need to be surrounded constantly with declarations of their wealth, with the finest things that their money can buy, in order to be reminded constantly that they are made of more excellent stuff than the thoughtless and magazine-bound who admire them. For if they were to see themselves in their lavish provision for themselves for what in this democracy they truly are, they would find themselves to be nothing but portly men decorated in expensive suits and free-breath-inhibiting neckties, who have married one or more trophy wives, and have either separated themselves from their parenthood or else raised up raptors more gluttonous but less skilled than themselves.

The price that these “aristocrats” are still paying for this culture of superiority, the roots of which are dug deeply into the pain and destitution of those abducted millions of African natives on whose labors our American way of life, filled as it is with pretentious assertions of White Superiority and the brutal snuffing out of the lives of those who see that the emperor is parading himself without clothes, is the heavy burden of isolation in the pipedream of Inherent Personal Excellence, fed by the dark rivers of paranoia that some uprising of their victims will overthrow them, and of desperation to defend against death and the loss of their kingdoms, and of the boredom and essential meaninglessness of all that they have accumulated, and of the absence of any genuine human warmth, or of gratitude and joy in their lives. The mountaintop is lonely, cold, and filled with echoes for them, but they are dedicated to defending it against those who they fear would displace them.

And so it is that racism and prejudicial stereotyping—profiling, even—and strong-armed law enforcement, and the refusal to respect people of other skin tones and cultural backgrounds who you believe challenge the security of your job or the culture of your neighborhood, and the intentional withholding of those levels of services and of education and of health care which are accorded to the favored classes or groups, and preferential treatment of the members of some groups but not of other groups not only in legal actions but also in all the thousands of varieties of daily interactions among the citizens of our society—that all of these abhorrent, morally unsavory, uncivil, baseless, antagonistic, and hate- and fear-filled modes of behavior are the social girders on which our American way of life is constructed. These attitudes and opinions are trained into our children by the examples set by our leaders, both formal and informal, and by the interactions of daily life which form the characters of those innocent and wide-eyed children who learn how to be American by watching and by imitation.

What I am saying at this point is that White Privilege and White Supremacy are not aberrant modes of behavior for Americans. They are simply notable forms of typical American social behavior among people of all classes and skin colors, because of their often extreme manifestations.

The point is that all of us, of whatever color and ethnic identity, are raised in our local version of American culture to evaluate other people prejudicially, to dislike or fear or hate or take action against people simply on the basis of their racial or ethnic identities, which are different from our own and which we do not take the time to learn about or to understand. And this has been true since the first European set foot on North American soil.

The version of American culture into which we are born trains us to see the people we encounter not as individuals but as members of the groups we have learned to evaluate in specific ways. And this rule applies to *every* native-born American, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, level of education or income, or locale of birth. Every American has bigotry running cold in his or her blood.

I am not saying here that every American is an active racist. But there are many Americans among us who live with unexamined hearts—who never inquire into themselves or dare to call themselves out for their abusive attitudes toward people of other cultures or ethnicities. They encapsulate themselves in their conscious version of themselves as morally righteous, while their true, unexamined characters are on display to all those around them who watch their behaviors. And so, for example, I have seen polite, well-dressed elderly Southern White ladies here in Florida make a brief, exhaled sniff through their noses, slightly raised, and with their stares fixed on the passing young Black woman, as a statement of their felt superiority and of their less than kind evaluation of the Black woman.

Folks such as these ladies live in blind ignorance of who they are genuinely, since all their attention is on the disingenuous *personae* they are projecting themselves to be, in their company of friends. But their flash-point hatred lies not far beneath their manicured surface.

More dangerous than these ignorant self-justifiers are those “realists” who feel the bitter resentment and fear and hatred which stoke the flames of the racism they cherish like addicts within themselves. They do not judge their inclinations; rather, they engorge themselves with the intensity of those feelings. They are always alert for opportunities to indulge their sense of their own might. They are always ready to fight the chosen enemy as long as the group as a whole similarly enflames themselves for battle. These proud haters rarely attack their enemies on their own. They fight only when the group fights, and they are energized by the malevolent feelings of power which flood their group.

It is clear, then, that Black Americans, not only those who are impoverished and ignored, but also those who have achieved some social standing, continue to suffer the great burden brought upon us all by our former merciless indulgence in human slavery and our continued nurturing of our prejudices. And it is likewise true that White Americans as well suffer from the distress of our nation’s corrupted heart—a heart malignant with disdain and fear and hatred from the beginning until the present.

It will not do to argue that “my ancestors came to America a century ago, and so, neither they nor I have any responsibility for American slavery or for the conditions of Black people in this country.” The reason is this. The institution of American slavery, though the acts of involuntary enslavement and compelled servitude are now illegal, continues to cast its long shadow over our society even now. As I have just been explaining, Black Americans continue to feel the effects of the hatred and fear that generates White racism and the attitude of White Supremacy. And we Whites also, children of recent emigrants from Europe, likewise act—usually unconsciously—with an air of White Privilege, which is the lived result of the bedrock racism which underlays American society.

Any White person who shares in or has shared in the fruits of White Privilege—easy access to education, social networking with people powerful enough to do you “favors,” adequate health care and preferential employment opportunities, calm and cooperative law enforcement and governmental administration—cannot excuse themselves from the burden of enslavement on which the concepts of White Privilege and White Supremacy are founded. For they benefit from this social system from which slavery and its continuing burden derive.

The social disabilities being discussed here do not need to persist. We might ask, If we exclude prevailing attitudes of racism and prejudice, what other factors might account for these disparities between the rate of imprisonment of Black people vs. White people in our nation?

Is it just and realistic to assume that Black people are simply “more criminal” than White people? Such as charge is plainly false. This is evident especially in this present moment in history, which is witnessing the truth that, given the opportunities of good education and of a somewhat level playing field (certainly not yet cleared of every stumbling block and pitfall), Black Americans (and those of every minority ethnicity) are able to achieve success, respect, and historical importance on an equal footing with White Americans.

In this moment, we are seeing an outpouring of Black (and other minority) political leaders and thinkers who are eloquent, perceptive, and foresighted. We have witnessed and are continuing to witness Black Americans filling leadership positions in the Federal Government as well as in state houses—including the presidency of the United States and judicial seats on the United States Supreme Court.

In business, entertainment, and professional sports, we continue to witness Black and other minority people, including members of minority religious groups and of the LGBTQ community, rise to positions of success and considerable political influence, though these victories are not won as easily by minority people as they are by the well-connected and more-willing-to-overlook-indiscretions members of the Entitled, and often, Indulged White “aristocracy.”

In this present time, the reality is as it always has been: The powerful gather what the ordinary ones cannot defend or hold onto. However, in this time, the most talented, most intelligent, most industrious, and most passionate members of the Black community and of the other minority communities are carving out a place for themselves among the successful and powerful. In doing so, they are not only making a space for themselves in the American power structure, they are also opening the way for those in their own communities who are less talented and more ordinary than they are, to fill positions in the lesser tiers of the power structure and thus to build lives of respectability and affluence.

There is no doubt in my mind that this second American revolution is all to the good, for, as others have said before me, this is the revolution in which the foundational principles of our democracy, unfulfilled until this time, are coming to be realized. As minority people of all background and especially, minority women take their just and rightful places in American society, assuming leadership positions and other positions of power, and working to bring about a society in which truly “All persons are created equal before the law,” our society has some chance at least of becoming the just society which many of us read as the intention of the Founders in the documents of principle which we cherish.

I cannot deceive myself into believing that such a change will come about easily and without opposition. For what this change means, as the entrenched Right are already clearly aware, is that the White power elite will over time increasingly mutate into a mixed heritage power elite. The White majority in this nation will continue to lose its hegemony over government policies and programs. It will become increasingly weaker, in terms of absolute control, and it will be forced to make the final choice about the direction in which the growth of American democracy moves.

At that point, the people will have to choose one of three options. Each will involve social difficulties on a widespread scale. The first option is that the White majority will be forced to join coalitions of other power blocks in order to influence the directions in which American power turns. The White population will continue into the foreseeable future (if it is wise enough to elude the consequences of planetary climate change, now beginning to beset us) to be the largest population in this country. But its influence will shrink as other population groups grow in numbers. It is expected that these will be mainly the Latinx and Asian population groups, with the Black population remaining stable at its current 13-15% of the American population.

The three choices include the very real possibility that those who feel the need to maintain their supremacy come into armed conflict with minority populations—the second Civil Brawl which I mentioned earlier. The outcome of that option is unpredictable, relying for the most part on which contestant the U.S. military sides with—either the Power Elitists or the citizens seeking to live as ordinary Americans.

The second option—that White partisans enter into power coalitions as the Congress proceeds with its business—results in a more parliamentary form of government than we have at present, in which the acquisition of power by one group or coalition over another continues to dominate the congressional business. This is the *realpolitik* option. It results in the perpetuation of the processes of classifying—and profiling— individuals according to their membership in identifiable social or political groups—the most vulnerable of which remains the oppressed group.

In the third—ideal--option, people of all backgrounds and preferences see the value of living cooperatively rather than contentiously, that is, that we Americans begin to treat all other Americans as individual people, rather than as members of prejudged groups, and that as individuals, our fellow citizens respect each other not only for our shared values, but also for our cultural differences.

If this latter option were to be taken willingly by the citizens of this nation, with gratitude for their own freedom and with dedication to the proposition that such freedom is for every other person in our nation as well, then the American vision of a just and peaceful society, in which all persons may participate as equals, will at last be realized.

When we as citizens come to realize the positive value to the nation of all its constituents, then we will be able to understand our own positive value to the lives of all the others. While hate prevails, this is not possible because hate devours not only the dignity of the one who is hated—in the hater’s eyes; it also destroys within the hater his or her own dignity and self-respect, for which the arrogance of White Superiority is the meager substitute.

If and when we live together cooperatively and in peace, respecting one another and giving aid when necessary, as we now so often do in moments of individual crisis or danger, then we will become a true democracy of free and respectable people.

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1. https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)