



Trump is the mask torn off of who we white people are and have been

James Joseph Scheurich

To cite this article: James Joseph Scheurich (2017) Trump is the mask torn off of who we white people are and have been, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30:10, 1053-1059, DOI: [10.1080/09518398.2017.1312612](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312612)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312612>



Published online: 14 Nov 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 30



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Trump is the mask torn off of who we white people are and have been

James Joseph Scheurich

School of Education, Indiana University – Indianapolis (IUPUI), Indianapolis, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

Currently, most white people seem to think that Trump and his values are some cruel, insane, accidental distortion of US society. In counterpoint to this view, I argue that he is not. Instead, Trump is mainly the 'liberal' or 'conservative' mask torn off of who we white people have been and what we have allowed in our name. This country was built on a foundation of the genocide of about 80% of the Indigenous People and the theft of their land. We followed this with Black slavery, which provided money and power in both the North and the South to make the US a powerful nation worldwide. Furthermore, though we fought a civil war over slavery, within 20 years, power in the South was returned to the slave masters, and Jim Crow was born, which continued the psycho-social-cultural and economic exploitation of blacks and which we followed with the New Jim Crow. We also stole the land of the Indigenous People of the Southwest by conducting an imperial war and breaking treaties. Today, before Trump, we have had state sanctioned (police) murder without consequences of people of color, persistent xenophobia toward varying groups across our history, the rape and murder of women though there is very little of the reverse, a capitalism that is dependent on poverty and wages people cannot survive on, widespread climate denial, extensive hunger and homelessness, among other deleterious conditions. However, that the white wealthy power elite led us down this path is not an excuse. We went along. For the crumbs they offered, we chose them over our true sisters and brothers. We whites are simply not who we say to ourselves we are. Our history and our sociology do not support our self-view. To have any chance, then, to move forward toward a more humane, equitable, inclusive, caring future, we must recognize and take responsibility for who we really are today and who we really have been.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 March 2017
Accepted 24 March 2017

KEYWORDS

White supremacy; Whiteness; white racism

Prelude

What I am going to say here may make some people uncomfortable, especially (heads up) white people. Because of White privilege and the sociocultural dominance of Whiteness, most white people avoid and ignore how destructive our country has always been and continues to be. We have learned, to some degree, to believe the dominant mythologies that we have been taught over and over. Also, while I usually have a stronger focus on racism, much the same could be said about sexism (that men rarely see how misogynist our country has been and continues to be), about heterosexism (even with recent change and gains, that most heterosexuals do not see how homophobic our country has been and continues to be), about ableism (that those who see themselves as 'able' do not see how deeply

ableist our country has been and continues to be), about classism (that those who are middleclass or higher blame those with less even though the capitalist system requires low incomes and poverty for a substantial portion of our people), and about xenophobia (that most people ignore how xenophobic our country has been and continues to be).

Regardless of the potential discomfort, I am going to try to be as blatantly honest and straightforward about the horrors and hatred in our history that are systemically embedded in the very foundations of our society and continue to be infused throughout it, even though this is denied in the dominant narrative, the mythology about our good, kind, heroic, democracy-loving country and selves. The truth about our country is somewhat loosely like the movie, *Matrix*. The socially constructed dream that we white people live within works hard to hide the US dystopia: where black men are shot for no justifiable reason by police who are not punished for murder (and this has been going on since slavery); where folks of all races are left without sufficient food, shelter, health care, and employment because the capitalist system literally requires this maldistribution of goods and services (and this has been going on since the beginning of the country); where trans* folks are murdered because of who they are (and this has been going on since the beginning of the country); where everything is inequitably distributed by race (and this has been going on since the beginning of the country); and where women are regularly raped and killed by men though the opposite rarely happens (and this has been going on since the beginning of the country) – just to give a few examples.

I could keep going. There is much, much more. Our true history is horrible, fetid, foul, and undeniable. Yet, many of us, especially white people, go on day to day with our good life, the so-called American dream, and act as if none of the horror is true, acting as if the deep inequities in our society are not socially produced and even required to maintain the social system as it is, to maintain us in our white privilege. For example, if we are middleclass or above, we act as if these class levels are not being maintained by a deeply destructive socioeconomic system that literally requires inequity. Or, even though climate scientist are screaming (in their own polite scientist way) that we are destroying a climate that can sustain human life so quickly that even now we have likely condemned our children and grandchildren to a truly difficult future, we still go about our lives as if we can ignore all of this because it might impinge on the privileges of our lifestyles, our clothes, our cars, our houses, our salaries, our tech toys.

I know. Stop. It is too negative. Too much. Too depressing, even if true. No. If this country is actually to move forward in any significant way, we white people have to see, really honestly see, the true, horrible nature of our society, especially we middleclass and above white people who are so privileged and protected by the way our society is organized. While we may not be the super wealthy and powerful running the country, we get enough of the bread to keep our mouths shut, to not question the system too loudly, to not question our national history and mythology, to not see that our privilege is drawn from negation and damage of others, and thus to not do anything that will risk our portion of the bread. Again, our privilege – our clothes, cars, houses, salaries, tech toys – directly depend on the negation and damage of others.

However, despite all of this, despite how bad it really is and has always been, I really do have hope. Like Paulo Freire and bell hooks, among many others, I believe that there is a possibility in all of us, even we white people. I believe we do have the possibility of opening our eyes to how destructive our current system is and we do have the possibility of acting to change our world to be one that embraces and supports, that loves, all people regardless of differences. I believe we can create a humane, equitable, inclusive world. But no Laurence Fishburne-Keanu Reeves gang of anti-matrix revolutionaries is going to come and save us. We must save ourselves. First, though, we, especially we white people, need to analyze and understand our current circumstances, where, more recently, we came from and who Trump and his regime¹ are. That is, the hard part, looking in the mirror at ourselves.

What made Trump possible?

In my opinion, there is no question that Trump is vilely racist, misogynist, heterosexist, ableist, and xenophobic – at a minimum. He is also massively insecure, narcissistic, and pathologically thin-skinned

while being an authoritarian bully. In short, I see him as a hideous demagogue in training practicing the darkest of arts. In addition, he is choosing to appoint not the most conservative government in decades, as the pundits are saying in their normalizing of his appointees, but the most extreme right wing government that this nation has had since at least World War II.

However, while Trump is a unique individual with all of his methods and madness, that he could garner extensive attention and get elected requires a context that would support this. He, like all of us, exists within a socio-historical context that created the conditions for his emergence and victory. Consequently, we must consider not just who he is as an individual but also what those contextual conditions have been and are. We must examine the conditions that have created him, made him and his election possible.

First, contrary to what many 'liberals' would like to believe, we live in a country that is and has always been, from its 'originary' moments, deeply violent, racist, cruel, sexist, narrow-minded, heterosexist, self-absorbed, classist, arrogant, ableist, ignorant, and xenophobic. For example, that our society was literally founded on White supremacy is inarguable. An honest look at our history – from the genocide of some 80%, 80%!, of the indigenous people through slavery to the new Jim Crow and the continuing murder of black men by state actors (the police) – tell us this. An honest look at the sociological research and data focused on housing, education, health, law enforcement, employment, the media, etc. tell us the same. No matter that the dominant narrative says the opposite; our history and the sociological research and data confirm we have been a White supremacist capitalist nation from our beginning, which itself was drawn from Euro-White supremacist colonialism. Similar examinations of our history and sociological research and data would confirm the same about our systemic sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and xenophobia.

Thus, all of this *systemic* inequity was there long before Trump. Largely white police were freely killing black men and receiving no punishment before Trump. The rape of indigenous women by white men was largely ignored before Trump. People went hungry and tried to live on a minimum wage before Trump. Trans* folks were mistreated and killed for who they are before Trump. The tax and financial structure has been arranged so the wealthy could get even wealthier and the rest of us would have less before Trump. Voting laws were to restrict the voting rights of blacks, Latinx, and the poor before Trump. White right-wing (conservative is a misnomer) radio in white rural and small town areas has been spreading vicious hatred toward everyone except White, right wing, Christian² heterosexuals before Trump. Though young white men use marijuana more than young black men, police hyper-targeting of young black men for marijuana use has destroyed hundreds of thousands of black men along with enormous damage to their families before Trump. Middle and working class white families got their main economic boost with federal housing loans that were unavailable, by law, to blacks (and unavailable in any area near blacks) before Trump. People with psychological, mental, and physical differences (not disabilities because that is prejudice) were being excluded from work, education, housing, and relationships before Trump. *All* of these systemic inequities were there before Trump.

However, more recently, in response to the expanded focus on equity and inclusion that came out the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the second wave women's movement, GLF (Gay Liberation Front) activism, the Anti-War Movement focused on the Vietnam War, and the worldwide youth movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, along with other similar efforts and movements, there has been a major national effort by the wealthy and powerful right wing to stop and reverse the gains of such activism. As Michelle Alexander (2012) and many others have pointed out, this more recent right wing response could be argued to have begun with Nixon's Republican Party 'Southern Strategy.' Nixon and the right wing wealthy whom he served developed a range of strategies to stop and reverse the new 'progressive' focus on equity and inclusion. The Koch brothers are one good example of these wealthy right wing individuals. In her excellent book, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (Mayer 2016), the Pulitzer prize author, Jane Mayer, shows how the Koch brothers strongly oppose any equity efforts and care nothing about exploiting people and destroying environments just so they can have their way, make more and more money, and possess more power, while, as Mayer points out, they think they are better and smarter than everyone else when they are in fact totally immoral gangsters in expensive clothes, cars, and houses.

To achieve their goal of stopping this recent 'progressive' wave of change, the wealthy rightwing elite instigated and funded several strategies. In general, these strategies would take a specific focus of progressive change, like Black power, and reframe it into a negative that they could communicate to a targeted group of the electorate, typically middle and working class whites, groups that would be susceptible to the negative message. For example, as Michelle Alexander (2012) has explained, playing on white people's long history of fear and hatred of blacks (drawing originally on the fear of slave revolt), they turned this into a focus on 'law and order,' which required no racial specificity but was understood by the targeted population, middle- and low-income whites, to mean restricting the expansion of rights to blacks. The law and order focus then gave whites a 'legitimated' (and seemingly non-racial) reason (or what Haney López (2015), along with others, has called 'dog whistle politics') to oppose any increase in Black rights. Thus, the right wing economic and political leadership understood that they had to use democracy against itself. They understood they had to have a large, consistent, dependable block of voters who they could manipulate into supporting their agenda. This block of voters, as we saw intensely energized in the Trump election, was heterosexual, often evangelical, whites living in rural, small town, small city, and suburban areas, i.e. those who generally favored conservative cultural values opposed to the more liberal, more diverse, more inclusive 'urban' values.

Although these and similar political strategies ultimately date back to the imaginary, socially constructed 'origins' of the US as a nation (and even further back into European colonialism), their current form is played out through the manipulation of the white middle and working classes against any 'other' that can be negatively targeted, including blacks, Latinx, Asian Americans, the Indigenous people; LGBTQI folks; those with physical, mental, and emotional differences (not disabilities); and women (e.g. against ERA, Equal Rights Amendment, and against women's control of their own bodies in terms of pregnancy choices). In other words, this white voting block was manipulated, played, by wealthy right wing whites to hate and fear anyone who was different than they so that this hatred and fear could be used both to reverse any expansion of the demos and to increase the power and wealth of the manipulators. For example, the Reagan and two Bush administrations did much more to increase the power and wealth of the right wing than they did to serve the 'cultural' desires (like repression of LGBTQI folks and ending abortion rights) of the white people they were manipulating. In other words, to be clear, the wealthy right does not really care about middle and working class whites and their needs; they only use them to serve their needs, which they have been doing since slavery.

One of the main ways they manipulated these white people was right wing radio, like that of Rush Limbaugh, and then Fox TV, and now social media. If you drive through rural areas of the country, virtually everywhere, there is a virulent, a virulent! hatred of difference being spewed out 24-7 on talk radio. I have driven through these small town and rural areas. The hatred is intense and non-stop. Their audience is being pumped up to high levels of hate. Therefore, in my view, it is not only that the white Trump voters are racist, though they are, it is that there is a powerful, wealthy right wing group that has developed and supported a public media infrastructure whose purpose is to literally increase the levels of racism, xenophobia, and hatred, while often calling themselves Christian. While this started out only on radio, eventually, a major right wing TV channel emerged to do a somewhat more acceptable form of the same hatred, and now we have other new media that are even more hate filled than right wing TV.

Thus, my two main points so far. First, this country was founded on hate and exploitation. We committed horrendous genocide against incredibly wise and beautiful civilizations just to gain control of the land (no matter how bad you think it was, it was worse; read Dunbar-Ortiz's (2015) *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*), and then we used that land for slavery, either for agriculture in the South or for shipping and finance based on slavery money in the North. This slavery then funded the financial growth and power of the US into becoming a major international power. This was followed by a destructive history of the old and new Jim Crow, deadly battles against labor power, use of law and policy to exploit and oppress various groups, etc. In other words, contrary to our popular dominant narrative of how good we are as a people, an honest history tells something very different.³

Second, in recent history, since Nixon, we have experienced multi-dimensional rightwing strategies to reverse gains made by the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, the women's

movement, the LGBTQI movement, the Chavez-led farmworkers movement, etc. And a critical feature of these rightwing strategies has been the manipulation of middle and working class, heterosexual, Christian whites as a voting block to support the maintenance of an order that serves the wealthy right, even though this order leaves only crumbs for the middle and working class white folks.

A third issue of context is that the leadership of the Democratic Party, the party which should be the home of progressive, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, anti-heterosexist, anti-xenophobic politics, has colluded with the wealthy elite, both rightwing and liberal. Indeed, in my view, the Democratic Party is today more dependent financially on the economic elite and more deeply connected to Wall Street money than even the Republican Party. While there are certainly progressive elements within the Democratic Party, rather than focus primarily on and fighting for the progressive values of equity and inclusion, the leadership of the Democratic Party has given in to the gains of the right so that the Democratic Party leadership could hold on to some small pieces of power. They sold out rather than continued to fight, leaving those who are most in need of equity and inclusion even more vulnerable. In short, they have failed the people they have said they were dedicated to serve.

A fourth contextual factor is that the material world *has* changed; the globalization of capitalism and power and the intense growth of technology⁴ are rapidly and deeply altering human life. Money, people, and products can now move around the world, virtually or physically, much faster and easier than ever. All of the old national boundaries of the prior era have become sieves. One critically important effect of this is that the 'buyout' and privilege that middle and working class whites were provided by the rightwing elite is no longer working like it did in the past. That 1950s white way of life sold to them by the right elite is dying. Their small towns (where I am from) are dying as their children move to the cities where the jobs and fun are. The work that paid them enough for a decent middle class or even working class life is disappearing due to cheaper labor in other countries and due to technology that significantly decreases the use of people to make things or to carry out processes, both of which are owned and run by the elite whites who have been manipulating these white folks. In addition, white middle- and working-class folks now see on television and social media people of color in sports and entertainment making far more money than they and making statements critical of whites (i.e. being 'uppity'). They see Black Lives Matter leading demonstrations that get considerable attention and support to stop white police from freely killing people of color whenever they want as many whites assume that is how it should be, i.e. that people of color are innately bad and thus that white police should be able to take them down anytime anywhere. Consequently, these middle and working class whites see the order they committed to, the order that was sold to them by the rightwing elite, falling apart, even though the sociological research shows overwhelmingly that they as white people continue to have much more privilege in virtually all areas of social life than folks of color do. Perception, though, is reality, and as their way of life is now being undermined by capitalist globalization and technology (again, owned and run by the White elite who manipulates them), they want to blame someone, maybe even hurt someone, so they can return to the 1950s. Consequently, for many of them, they want an authoritarian savior to destroy their enemies and give them back the future they thought they had.

Trump enters stage right with his rightwing cronies

Into this context of a stage created by our old history, new history, and failure of the Democratic Party steps Trump. He did not create these conditions, but he is ready and willing to exploit them. On one hand, in my view, he is certainly an odious person. He is, to me, clearly a pathological narcissist who seems totally unable to conduct any reflection on his own weaknesses of character or hear any critique of himself as having any validity. Indeed, he often undermines himself by his thin-skinned response to any critique. However, these are normal characteristics of demagogues and dictators. It could even be argued that such characteristics are required for anyone willing to do the damage and destruction of demagogues and dictators. On the other hand, his politics are, in my opinion, equally odious. He has loudly evidenced his racism, ableism, heterosexism, climate change denial, and xenophobia along with his misogynist views of woman. This is also often true of demagogues and dictators. It is common, and

probably necessary to their kind, that they embody, unquestioningly, deeply destructive prejudices and biases of a significant portion of a nation or people. Their goal, then, and Trump's, in my view, is to create that destruction (today called 'disruption' to normalize the process) to the satisfaction of themselves and those who support them. However, rather than retrieve their imagined white 1950s, they will most likely get a future that will take what resources they have left, leaving them worse off than ever, and leaving those with a shred of humanity horrified at what they have wrought.

In support of this horrific future is Trump's appointments. He has not appointed the most conservative government since World War II, as suggested by normalizing pundits; he has appointed an extreme right wing government, often hideously wealthy, who commonly hold the same destructive biases as he has. In addition, most of his appointees, in my judgment, will want to dismantle and destroy the democratic and equity goals of the agencies they have been chosen to lead. As such, they will certainly convert these agencies into the pursuit of the degradation of the demos. For example, I believe Sessions will turn justice into the pursuit of injustice. I think DeVos is not only totally ignorant about education, she also only wants unregulated charters and vouchers and believes that all schools should be rightwing evangelical Christian (the hater version, not the Jesus version). The EPA will be used to further exploitation and destruction of the human-supportive environment, which will also be supported by the new Secretary of Energy, ex-Texas Governor Perry (who wears glasses so he can look smart). Finally, I am convinced that science, because it contradicts and undermines the Trump and company worldview, in my opinion, will be halted and repressed, as scientists are beginning to see. In other words, the whole apparatus of the federal government, just like with demagogues and dictators of the past, will be turned to a broad degradation and destruction of the social and physical world and especially any aspects of that world supportive of humane efforts to create equity, justice, and inclusion.

What a horrific picture I have painted. Surely it cannot be this bad. Surely Trump is worse. Worse than genocide of the Indigenous people and theft of their land. Worse than slavery. Worse than the KKK. Worse than Jim Crow. Worse than the vast imprisonment of men of color. Worse than rampant poverty and no medical care. Worse than being taught at public school that you are a failure. Worse than being trans* and fearing the violence that may be around any corner. Worse than your parents rejecting you because you are gay. Worse than being substantially restricted because you are said to be disabled. Worse than being a black male and fearing that at any time you may be killed the police who will likely be acquitted. Worse than going to school where the white culture dominates as a norm that degrades your culture.

Trump is not worse. He is only a more blatant example of our national white norms and behaviors. He is Whiteness with the slick, deceptive cover torn away. He is our white truth come home to roost. He is the effect of hundreds of years of white privilege. All of this horror is what makes our white lives (lies) possible – our clothes, our cars, our houses, our salaries, our tech toys. Our white privilege *requires* the horror, the destruction, the degradation. As a result, if we white people are to serious about creating a truly equitable, humane, loving world, we first need to look at and understand the world that has privileged us – and made Trump. If we try to move forward without honestly looking in the mirror at our white-privileged selves, our white-privileged history, and our white-privileged society, we will embed the horror into our future.

Notes

1. 'Regime' is a word that has many different meanings in many different contexts—different national contexts, different academic contexts, and even different cultural contexts. Merriam-Webster online (n.d.) defines it as '2 a: mode of rule or management, b: a form of government, c: a government in power, [or] d: a period of rule'. However, google.com's (n.d.) own dictionary defines it as 'a government, especially an authoritarian one', thus raising the possible issue of a potentially negative connotation. In contrast, many scholars use it in a more neutral, descriptive sense. Stone's work (1989) on 'regime theory' might be the classic example of this. In his well known and widely respected book, *Regime politics: Governing Atlanta*, 'regime' has no negative connotation; it is just descriptive, much like the Merriam-Webster definition. Thus, to understand the meaning the author intends, the context must be examined.

2. Having grown up as a serious Christian in a small, overwhelmingly white Midwestern town, I have long been deeply appalled at right wing and evangelical hatred of people who are different than whites in any way. This hatred spewed forth on many so-called Christian radio and TV stations is such a deep violation of the Jesus message of love and inclusion that it is almost unthinkable. Their *New Testament* must be vastly different than the one I have read.
3. I am not addressing foreign policy here, though it is often as hideous as domestic genocide and slavery. See Chomsky & Naiman, 2011, for that history.
4. While technology is to some extent driven by an internal logic, it is mostly being driven by the capitalist need to increase profit rather than by human need.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

James Joseph Scheurich is a professor in the School of Education at Indiana University, Indianapolis (IUPUI), having previously been at Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests are white racism/whiteness/white supremacy, qualitative methodology, and k12 school leadership and reform.

References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Chomsky, N., & Naiman, A. (2011). *How the world works*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2015). *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Google Online. (n.d.). *Regime*. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+regime&oq=define+&aqs=chrome.69i59j69i61j69i57j35i39j0l2.2296j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>
- López, H. (2015). *Dog whistle politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayer, J. (2016). *Dark money: The hidden history of the billionaires behind the rise of the radical right*. Norwell, MA: Anchor Press.
- Merriam-Webster Online. (n.d.). *Regime*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/regime>
- Stone, C. N. (1989). *Regime politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.