

## **Tim Wise F.A.Q.s**

**[www.timwise.org](http://www.timwise.org)**

*Note: Tim Wise is an anti-racist facilitator and writer that has some helpful definitions he offers up in this FAQ produced based on the questions he routinely received. This is not the complete FAQ as some pieces weren't relevant to our Compass Working Capital discussion. Again, this is just one additional resource among many. This is by no means comprehensive and is meant to be used in conjunction with the other homework readings provided for our November 9, 2017 meeting.*

### **1. How do you define racism?**

As with other “isms” (like capitalism, communism, etc.), racism is both an ideology and a system. As such, I define it in two ways.

As an ideology, racism is the belief that population groups, defined as distinct “races,” generally possess traits, characteristics or abilities, which distinguish them as either superior or inferior to other groups in certain ways. In short, racism is the belief that a particular race is (or certain races are) superior or inferior to another race or races.

As a system, racism is an institutional arrangement, maintained by policies, practices and procedures — both formal and informal — in which some persons typically have more or less opportunity than others, and in which such persons receive better or worse treatment than others, because of their respective racial identities. Additionally, institutional racism involves denying persons opportunities, rewards, or various benefits on the basis of race, to which those individuals are otherwise entitled. In short, racism is a system of inequality, based on race.

### **2. How is racism different from white supremacy?**

White supremacy is the operationalized form of racism in the United States and throughout the Western world. Racism is like the generic product name, while white supremacy is the leading brand, with far and away the greatest market share. While other forms of racism could exist at various times and in various places, none have ever been as effective and widespread in their impact as white supremacy, nor is it likely that any such systems might develop in the foreseeable future.

### **3. Do you think all whites are racist?**

It's a simplistic question, with a complicated answer. I believe that all people (white or of color) raised in a society where racism has been (and still is) so prevalent, will have internalized elements of racist thinking: certain beliefs, stereotypes, assumptions, and judgments about others and themselves. So in countries where beliefs in European/white superiority and domination have been historically embedded, it is likely that everyone in such places will have ingested some of that conditioning. I think all whites — as the dominant group in the U.S. — have been conditioned to accept white predominance (or what some call

hegemony) in the social, political and economic system, and to believe that white predominance is a preferable arrangement for the society in which they live, the neighborhoods in which they live, the places where they work, etc.

*However*, this doesn't mean that all whites, having been conditioned in that way, are committed to the maintenance of white supremacy. One can challenge one's conditioning. One can be counter-conditioned and taught to believe in equality, and to commit oneself to its achievement. These things take work — and they can never completely eradicate all of the conditioning to which one has been subjected — but they are possible.

In other words, we can be racist by conditioning, antiracist by choice. That racism is *part* of who we are does not mean that it's *all* of who we are, or that it must be the controlling or dominant part of who we are. By the same token, just because we choose to be antiracist, does not mean that we no longer carry around some of the racism with which we were raised, or to which we were and are exposed.

#### **4. Do you think people of color can be racist against whites?**

At the ideological level, anyone can be racist because anyone can endorse the kinds of thinking that qualifies as racism, as defined above. At the systemic level, people of color can be racist in theory, but typically not in practice, and certainly not very effectively. Although a person of color in an authority position can discriminate against a white person, this kind of thing rarely happens because, a) such persons are still statistically rare relative to whites in authority, b) in virtually all cases, there are authorities above those people of color who are white, and who would not stand for such actions, and c) even in cases where a person of color sits atop a power structure (as with President Obama), he is not truly free to do anything to oppress or marginalize white people (even were he so inclined), given his own need to attract white support in order to win election or pass any of his policy agenda. Ultimately, there are no institutional structures in the U.S. in which people of color exercise final and controlling authority: not in the school systems, labor market, justice system, housing markets, financial markets, or media. As such, the ability of black and brown folks to oppress white people simply does not exist.

Having said that, it is certainly true that in other countries, people of color could have power sufficient to discriminate against others, including whites. Although even anti-white bias in those places is somewhat limited by the reality of global economics and the desire for good relations with the West, it is possible for persons of color in those places to mistreat whites individually and, occasionally, collectively (for instance, the treatment of white farmers in Zimbabwe by the Mugabe government). But it is absurd to believe that anti-white racism, practiced by people of color, remotely equates as a social problem to white racism against people of color. While all racism is equally objectionable morally and ethically, they are not practically equivalent by a long shot.

#### **5. What do you mean by white privilege?**

White privilege refers to any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatment, which persons deemed white will typically enjoy, but which others will generally not

enjoy. These benefits can be material (such as greater opportunity in the labor market, or greater net worth, due to a history in which whites had the ability to accumulate wealth to a greater extent than persons of color), social (such as presumptions of competence, creditworthiness, law-abidingness, intelligence, etc.) or psychological (such as not having to worry about triggering negative stereotypes, rarely having to feel out of place, not having to worry about racial profiling, etc.).

Operationally, white privilege is simply the flipside of discrimination against people of color. The concept is rooted in the common-sense observation that there can be no *down* without an *up*, so that if people of color are the targets of discrimination, in housing, employment, the justice system, or elsewhere, then whites, by definition, are being elevated above those persons of color. Whites are receiving a benefit, vis-a-vis those persons of color: more opportunity *because* those persons of color are receiving less. Although I believe all persons are harmed in the long run by racism and racial inequity — and thus, white privilege comes at an immense social cost — it still exists as a daily reality throughout the social, political and economic structure of the United States.

The fact that white privilege exists and that all whites have access to various aspects of it, does not, however, mean that all whites are wealthy, or that in competitions for jobs and other opportunities, whites will always win. The fact of general advantage doesn't require unanimity of outcomes favoring whites. In certain situations, other factors will effect the distribution of opportunities: among these, socioeconomic status, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religious identity, age, or physical disability. There are, after all, also such things as class privilege, male privilege, straight privilege, Christian privilege, and able-bodied privilege. And these other forms of privilege exist — and generally provide greater opportunity to their respective group members — even though there are rich people who lead miserable lives despite their money, and there are men, heterosexuals, Christians, and able bodied folks who are poor. On balance, it pays to be a member of any of those dominant groups. And the same is true with whiteness.

## **6. What is the connection between racism and the class system/capitalism?**

The connections are substantial. To begin with, the development of modern white supremacy was very much connected to the way in which the class system developed, especially in the West. In the U.S., for instance, planter elites during the colonial period used the notion of whiteness as a way to split class-based coalitions that often developed between enslaved Africans and indentured Europeans (who were only slightly above slaves themselves). Afraid of rebellions that would threaten their power and their material domination of the poor, elites carved out special legal protections for all Europeans, which placed them above persons of color, and gave them a stake in the system. The landowners and political elites also utilized poor whites on slave patrols, to give them a sense that they were a vital bulwark against black uprisings, and regularly stressed the superiority of Europeans. By convincing white working people that their interests were rooted in skin color, rather than economic need, wealthy Europeans helped link the development of the class system to the development of white supremacy.

As capitalism developed, nationally, internationally, and then globally, elites often used racism and notions of white supremacy to maintain and extend their power. In rallying the masses to support militarism and

imperialism for the benefit of the wealthy — as with the war with Mexico, the conquest of Hawaii, the invasion of the Philippines, or several military adventures throughout the twentieth century — notions of racial superiority were regularly deployed to justify those actions undertaken for the benefit of international investment and the growth of capital.

**7. Well if racism and capitalism are linked in this way, isn't the real issue economics? Doesn't this mean that racism is just an extension of class oppression, and that only by ending class oppression or capitalism can we really hope to address racism?**

The issue is race *and* class. Even people of color who are not poor or working class face racism in housing, schools, the justice system, and the labor market.

More importantly, although modern racism's roots may be located largely in the development of the class structure, this doesn't mean that capitalism is the only source of racism, nor that ending class inequity is the only way to effectively conquer white supremacy. To begin, the class system is not the only source of white supremacy. Such notions have also been inculcated by the Christian tradition in the West, and the racialized way in which Christianity developed as a force in Europe, for instance. And today, with hundreds of years of racist conditioning behind us, notions of white superiority have become ingrained in millions of people, with or without active manipulation by elites, and even when those whites are not in direct competition with people of color for "stuff" (as they are often not, within a racially bifurcated class system). As W.E.B. DuBois noted, over time, white supremacy invested white folks with a "psychological wage," which allows them to feel superior to people of color, even if they ultimately pay a price for their indulgence of white privilege and advantage. In other words, white racism can now take on an auto-pilot effect, even if elites do not, as they once did, actively manipulate working class emotions. That is not to say that such manipulation no longer occurs, merely that it is no longer a necessary condition to keep white working class folks in line.

For those who come out of a Marxist tradition, and who insist that the working class has false consciousness, which leads them to ignore or misunderstand their true interests — and that this consciousness has been instilled in them largely by capitalists — what is often ignored is the way that white privilege, relative to people of color, has served as the transmission belt of false consciousness. By investing white workers with a sense of their whiteness as property — albeit an inadequate form of property, relative to real material well-being — white privilege and racism provide to whites an alternative sense of their own self-interest. As such, the ability of working people to form effective cross-racial coalitions (which would be needed in order to fundamentally challenge or alter the current class arrangements in the U.S.) is itself made less likely precisely because of white racism and institutional racial inequity and privilege. To the extent whiteness confers certain relative advantages to whites, it makes it less likely that those whites will join with people of color to alter the class system or even push for reforms that would benefit all working people (universal health care, more equitable distribution of wealth, greater investment in education, job creation, etc). So if anything, the equation put forward by those who say "the real issue is class, and we need to end capitalism before we can end racism," may be exactly the inverse of reality. It may be, instead,

that before any substantial alteration in the class system can become possible, we will have to attack white racism and substantially diminish it.

**8. Why don't you discuss other forms of oppression, like sexism, heterosexism, etc?**

I do. Several of my essays address these critical matters, and I often discuss them in my speeches as well: especially the way in which these systems of oppression interact and interrelate. That said, I do focus mostly on racism and white supremacy. Likewise, others focus mostly on sexism/patriarchy, straight supremacy, ableism, etc. And all of this work is important in order to replace systems of oppression with systems of justice.

**9. People of color have been writing and speaking about these issues for years. Why should people listen to you, rather than them, when it comes to learning about racism? In fact, doesn't listening to you, or having your voice echo so prominently on these matters in the media, for instance, crowd out the work and voices of people of color?**

They shouldn't listen to me *rather* than people of color. They should read materials and listen to the words of any antiracist, white or of color, to the extent that work is helpful in understanding the way white supremacy operates, and to the extent that it may point the way towards strategies for combatting it. Fact is, most of the important scholarship about racism and white supremacy has come from people of color. And I highlight that work in my own books, my essays, on the recommended reading list of this website, and in every venue in which I operate. Because of the inspiring uprising in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO — and the particularly amazing writing, blogging, videos, poems and other media being created by people of color in its wake — it is now my personal policy to make sure that for every piece of original writing I post on social media, I am sending out at least 10 pieces created by black and brown folks and/or people of color-led organizations. In this way, I hope to direct readers to the wisdom of people color (some of which they might not see otherwise), and use my platform to promote the work of writers, scholars and activists of color in this critical time for the social justice movement.

So far as my work is concerned, I am mostly aiming my words towards other whites, who may never have been exposed to these subjects before, or who have only been exposed to a critique of racism coming from people of color, and who therefore may never have seen another white person challenge racism in any substantive way. The dangers of not speaking out as a white person are myriad: it allows whites to think racism is only a black and brown issue (rather than something that endangers us all in the long run); it allows whites to dismiss the critiques of racism offered by people of color, precisely because they can be perceived as narrowly self-interested; and it allows whites to never have to examine their own conditioning or privileges, since few members of any privileged group tend to respond constructively to criticisms of their privileges coming from marginalized group members (at least at first).

There is no doubt that whites need to take the words and work of people of color seriously. But that won't happen just because it should. It won't happen just because we get angry at the way whites currently often

don't do this. If those of us who are white and who are out there writing, blogging, or speaking against racism suddenly disappeared, it would not lead to a sudden white epiphany that we should begin, as whites, to really hear an antiracist critique coming from people of color. Not being exposed to a book or essay of mine would not cause those persons no longer exposed to my writing to suddenly pick up Malcolm X, or DuBois, or bell hooks. If anything, being exposed to the work of white antiracists — particularly when we prominently mention those persons of color who have influenced us — may prompt white readers or persons in our audiences to seek out those scholars for the very first time.

Which brings us to this issue of how white antiracists supposedly “crowd out” the voices of people of color. First, although such a thing is possible, it is also just as likely that hearing the voice of a white antiracist may get other whites interested in the subject and cause them to seek out the works of people of color as a result. So while there is a “supply side” issue (in that, for instance, on a given day, typically only one speaker is going to be brought to x campus to speak, and if it's me it's not going to be a person of color), there is also a “demand side” issue, meaning that if the profile of antiracism and interest in antiracism is raised by the presence of a white speaker, as messed up as that is, if it results in *more* such presentations on those campuses by people of color, the result is more exposure not only for me, but those persons of color as well. This is, in fact, what happens at most of the schools to which I have spoken. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Likewise, if faculty and staff of color at those institutions — who are the ones who primarily arrange for my presentations there, not white administrators as mistakenly claimed by one prominent critic of mine recently — say that hearing a white ally opens up the minds of their students to hearing their own black or brown wisdom on the subjects, is that a good thing or a bad thing? Would it be better to not provide that supportive voice? To say, in effect, “Nah, y'all handle it, because, ya know, for me to open my white mouth might attract too much attention and credit, so I'm just gonna stay out of it, and let you deal with those folks on your own. Good luck!”

When it comes to campus speeches, there is simply *nothing* to suggest that a school bringing me in, or any of the other relative handful of white antiracists who are on the so-called lecture circuit, actually diminishes the opportunity for people of color to speak on those or other campuses. As the persons arranging for those speeches on campuses readily attest, we are not getting one of, say, three generic spots in a given year for antiracist speakers. Rather, we are filling a specific niche that year — in effect, the “white antiracist slot.” In other words, persons at these schools believe, for reasons that one has to assume are legitimate and better known to them than the rest of us, that bringing a white ally to campus will *supplement* the voices of people of color that are *already* being offered on the campus, whether in the person of guest speakers, or by existing faculty and staff. In other words, because we are filling a particular perceived need and role, to *not* bring me, or another white antiracist to campus, would *not* mean that that particular evening's presentation slot would have gone to a person of color. There simply would have been one less antiracist event that year at that school. It is unclear to me how that outcome would be of benefit to the antiracism struggle.

There are over 4400 degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States, at least 1500 of which bring in speakers and presenters on matters of race and racism, with several hundred of these hosting 3-5 such events annually. This means that in any given year there are probably *at least* 2500 presentations on American college campuses regarding the subject of race and racism. In a good year, I might do 50 of those. If someone didn't get one of the other 2,450 slots, I'm not sure how responsibility for that fact can be laid at the feet of any one person. Obviously, 50 cannot crowd out 2,450.

Interestingly, the complaint about how I crowd out the voices of people of color is often made by the same people who condemn the fact that I charge for my presentations, or who claim that I charge too much and "profit" from racism. Yet, there is inconsistency in these arguments. The fact is, were I to offer to speak for free (or for a drastically reduced amount, relative to my current fee), I would end up with *more* work, and even *more* exposure, not less, because cutting the cost would allow me to effectively underbid other persons (including many people of color) who lecture on these issues. If it were cheaper to bring me in, even *more* institutions would do so. So, in that case, I would be crowding out other voices far more so than I could theoretically be doing now, precisely because I would make myself so "affordable." If anything, by keeping my fee relatively high (though far lower than many other prominent persons on the lecture circuit), I price myself out of certain markets, thereby ensuring that speaking slots remain open for other voices, perhaps less currently prominent, but who need to be heard. If the crowding out argument has any validity then, keeping my fee structure relatively high minimizes the amount of such displacement for which I could be responsible.

As for my media profile, the simple truth is, if one were to make a list of the 10-15 individuals who have the highest media profiles on matters of race, and who are most often turned to as commentators on race matters in this country, one would find that I am either the only white person on that list, or perhaps one of two or three (a couple of others might be featured in stories about Neo-Nazi or hate group activity, for instance). So exactly, how am I crowding out people of color from positions of media prominence? Is the argument that *any* white antiracist presence in media is a problem? That all 15 of the most prominent media slots on this subject should be people of color? Although I think an argument could certainly be made that there are not enough Latino/as on the list, and that it is a serious problem that there are likely no Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders on the list, or indigenous persons, is it really credible to suggest that but for me, they would have that slot?

Again, however intuitive the argument might sound at first, the math doesn't add up, nor, ultimately does the logic behind this allegation. Not to mention, over the past five years, I have had an average of four national television appearances per year. Four. Not forty. Not four hundred. Four. That this pathetically low number still places me among the 15 most commonly utilized commenters on race in the media is a reflection not on me, or even the way in which white voices are privileged in these discussions; rather, it is a commentary on how pathetic is the state of coverage of these issues generally in all major media in the nation.

Finally, and in a bigger sense, there are things on which we who are white antiracists can focus in our presentations, on which it wouldn't make much sense for a person of color to concentrate. For instance, to discuss our own white privilege is something that a white person can do with special authority, since the privileges belong to us. Though scholars of color discuss white privilege as a phenomenon, they cannot, by definition, give the discussion the same personal connection to white listeners as someone else who is white. They can — and do — discuss the personal impact of *not* having that privilege, but that is quite different for the white listener than actually hearing another white person discuss their advantages and the way those advantages implicate us in the system of oppression. Even more to the point, those of us who are white and speak out against racism often discuss (and it's a central part of my analysis) the harms of white supremacy for whites, despite white privilege. Clearly most people of color are not going to focus on that aspect of the problem, and with good reason: people of color, whose own lives immediately are impacted by white supremacy, are not likely to want to spend a lot of time worrying about what it does to *us*. But as whites, that aspect of the problem is precisely what we can bring to the discussion that *is* unique.

**13: But aren't your ideas just borrowed or even stolen from scholars of color? What have you contributed, uniquely, to the struggle? Or to the scholarship around race and racism?**

First off, all intellectual production borrows from past materials, theories and scholarship. That's what footnotes indicate. And everyone who ever produced knowledge *wants their ideas to be borrowed and mentioned by others*. That's kind of the point, actually. And every scholar of color who writes about race and racism also borrows in this way from past scholars — both of color and white — in their work. There is very little about race scholarship in the 21st century that is entirely new. However, scholars can build upon past work, and add to it in ways that are unique. Whether I have done that or not will be for others to discern, and yet those who accuse me of stealing other people's materials have actually rarely read my work at all. They watch a video on You Tube or see one article and assume that there is nothing unique in it, and thus, that it must be stolen work (although interestingly, they *never* actually name the people from whom they believe I've stolen or even borrowed unfairly).

Of course the concept of white racial privilege was first sketched out by W.E.B. DuBois roughly a century ago, so in some sense, anyone talking about that notion could be accused of "stealing" the concept from DuBois. But of course, just because a concept originates with someone does not mean that there is nothing left to say, nothing to add, no adaptations to be made, and no more examples to offer that might help illustrate the larger point to a modern audience. White privilege, for instance, has changed and shape-shifted in terms of how it operates in 2012, relative to DuBois's time. So if scholars refused to add to his theories today, for fear that they might be accused of "stealing," we would be left with 1920's argumentation in a 2012 world — hardly a recipe for moving the conversation forward. What I can offer to the scholarship is my own story, my own examples of white privilege in my life and how the concept has operated for me, so as to get other whites to explore the same for themselves. This is something that whites are not likely to



do because a person of color tells them to do so, but which they might, if encouraged to do so by another white person, especially one who models the way to explore those concepts for oneself.

The key when it comes to “borrowing” the work of others, is whether or not one gives attribution where attribution and credit are due. If a white scholar, for instance, writes a book in which a certain theory is engaged, but does not attribute the pioneering work of people of color in that arena and with regard to that theory, then of course the charge that they are unfairly taking advantage of others’ work would be valid. But that is most assuredly not what I do. In my books, and speeches, I mention the work of persons of color prominently, so as to give credit where it is due. But building upon the work of others is not stealing. It is called scholarship. To invalidate the practice would invalidate the entirety of higher education, since that is what students and all scholars are trained to do.