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The Price of Race Privilege

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Americans are being squeezed. The mounting crisis caused by global economic restructuring and the Great Recession is taking its toll on all Americans, especially people of color, African-Americans, Hispanics and Native-Americans. However, too often overlooked in analyses of the deepening crisis is its effect on a growing number of the traditionally more privileged white populations. They too are being squeezed.

Part I of this two-part story focused on four economic issues affecting the nation's white majority — wealth, income & poverty, bankruptcy and education.

This part focuses on four more personal issues affecting white Americans – drug addiction, suicide, obesity and homelessness.

Racism is America's great shame, endemic to the body politic, social life and personal relations. For nearly a half-century, Republican politicians have exploited racial divisions by promoting the Southern strategy, playing the “race card” to win elections. The strategy has long been successful and will likely be played out yet again in the upcoming 2016 campaign.

However, given the changes since the '60s, old-fashioned terms of racial stereotyping like “nigger” and “wet back” can no longer be publically uttered. They have, however, been replaced

by equally coded terms like “inner city rioter,” “welfare cheat” and “undocumented.” No matter the rhetorical obfuscation, everyone knows what the coded expressions mean.

The Republicans strategy has long been to assure white voters, especially poor and working-class people, that their “white skin privilege” made them better-off than people of color. Sadly, this story has long been true; on average, whites have been better off than America’s demographic minorities. However, such race-based deception can only work for so long; its time is may be running out.

White Americans are being, simultaneously, eclipsed and squeezed – and they know it. Their relative proportion of the country’s population is shrinking while their economic gains stagnate. A century ago, wave after wave of mostly white European immigrants – Irish, Italian, Eastern Jews –recast the nation’s demographic make-up. Often forgotten, the white gentry of the day, old-line WASPs, denied that these immigrants were white. Their arrival took place as U.S. economic and military prowess began to assert itself.

Now, a century later, a new wave of immigrants is arriving from all over the world, but especially from the embattled continental South. Unfortunately, this demographic shift is occurring as U.S. economic prowess is being eclipsed and its military hegemony flounders. Like a tectonic plate, the global economic reordering now underway is fostering postmodern feudalism. The lords of America’s 21st manner or plantation are the new robber-baron gentry, financial capitalist putting the squeeze on an ever-growing number of Americans.

And white people, like black, Hispanic and other Americans, are caught in the Great Squeeze. It is an era marked by growing inequality and mounting social deprivation. How whites deal with this social reordering will very much determine the nation’s fate.

* * *

Considerations of four personal issues affecting white Americans – drug addiction, obesity, mental health and homelessness – follow.

Drugs

A recent NPR story on the pre-campaign election circuses in New Hampshire and Iowa featured a spot on the rising drug crisis besetting heartland American. As it reported, “Drug overdoses now kill more Americans than traffic accidents. And, in many places, there’s a growing acceptance that this isn’t just a problem for other people.” Ted Gatsas, the mayor of Manchester, NH, lamented, “A dose of heroin is now cheaper than a six pack of good beer.” Political hopefuls like Gov. Chris Christie, Hillary Clinton and Sen. Rand Paul voiced their concern about the issue. Most revealing, the NPR report focused on victims of the heroin plague and used a coded language – “isn’t ... other people” (i.e., people of color) – to denote white citizens; remarkable the word “white” was never uttered, although those profiled were white residents.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), overdoses (i.e., “drug poisoning”) are “the number one cause of injury-related death in the United States, with 43,982 deaths occurring in

2013.” It found, based on data from 28 states, that the “death rate for heroin overdose doubled from 2010 through 2012.” Drilling down, it found there were 8,257 heroine deaths, most involving men aged 25–44 years.

In 2013, an estimated 25 million Americans were using illicit drugs, about 9.4 percent of the population aged 12 or older; this is up to from the 2002-09 rate of 7.9 percent. The drugs used were marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants and prescription-type psychotherapeutics. Among whites, illicit drug use increased to 9.5 percent from 8.5 percent in less then a decade.

Illegal drug usage in the post-Prohibition era has gone through three phases. During the ‘50s-‘70s, hipsters and hippies, white and black, smoking the evil weed. Second, in the ‘80s, a “crack cocaine scare” gripped the nation following the adoption of the infamous Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1986) and the launch of the “war on drugs.” The Act made penalties 100 times harsher for crack than for powder cocaine convictions; 85 percent of those jailed for crack cocaine offenses were black, despite the fact that the majority of users were white. In the post-Great Recession era, the drug war is seen as a failure by a growing number of politicians and ordinary Americans. They share a belief its time to change the nation’s drug laws (e.g., decriminalize marijuana) and make drug busts for usage and small sales less punitive (e.g., end 3-strikes laws).

Among whites today, drug use or abuse is rampant. In 2013, the “legal” drug of choice was alcohol, where nearly three-fifths (58%) were drinkers and nearly a quarter (24%) binge drinkers. The use of tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes, cigars) among whites is still over one-quarter (28%). With regard to “illegal” drugs, in ‘13, marijuana was Americans favorite means of getting high, accounting for four-fifths (81%) of illicit drug users, about 20 millions users per month. Among full-time college students, whites have the highest rate of illegal drug use at 25 percent.

Methamphetamine (“meth”) was once the drug of choice among white males (e.g., outlaw motorcycle gangs and blue-collar guys) and remains so, but is losing its appeal. In the ‘90s at the height of its popularity, the Open Society estimates there were only one million meth users. Today, its use has spread to white women and Hispanics.

The new drugs of choice among white Americans are psychotherapeutic drugs and heroine. A 2010 report from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that, during 2009, 2.4 million individuals used psycho drugs, including pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives used for nonmedical purposes. Most alarming, it found for 2007 – the last year data was available — deaths from unintentional overdoses from such drug use increased to approximately 27,000. Almost a decade later, one can only wonder what is the number of current deaths? According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, “Adolescent girls and women older than 35 years have significantly greater rates of abuse and dependence on psychotherapeutic drugs than men.”

Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health recently reported that between 2002-2005 and 2008-2011 there had been a 75 percent jump in heroin usage among "Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites." "The noteworthy increase in the annual rate of heroin abuse or dependence among non-Hispanic whites parallels the significant increase in nonmedical opioid use during the last decade and the growing number of heroin overdose deaths described for this race and ethnic group in recent years," noted Dr. Silvia Martins, the study's lead epidemiologist.

Suicide

Some refer to the American West as the "Suicide Belt," the region of the country with the highest suicide rates. As one researcher asked: "Why Westerners are so much more likely than people in other parts of the country, particularly those in the East, to kill themselves?" No one has an answer to this vexing question.

In 2013, whites had the highest suicide rate in the country, at 14.2 per 100,000; American Indians and Alaska Natives were second with a rate of 11.7. However, during 2005–2009, the highest suicide rates were among American Indian/Alaskan Native males with 27.6 suicides and Non-Hispanic White males with 25.96 suicides. Among women, Non-Hispanic Whites had the highest rate with 6.7 suicides.

Special consideration of suicides among active duty service-people and veterans of the U.S. military is troubling, especially in light of the most recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the aging of Vietnam War vets of the '60s. The U.S. Army reports that between 2008 and 2012, the number of active duty soldiers who've committed suicide increased by 30 percent, to 349 from 268. While there is considerable debate about extent of suicides among veterans, Sen. John McCain and others have cited Veterans Administration figures putting the total at 22 vets per day or over 8,000 a year. Many of these are white men.

Obesity

Americans are getting pudgy, putting on the pounds. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, nearly two-thirds (64%) of American adults are overweight. While people of color suffering higher rates of overweight than whites, 63 percent of whites are overweight. The greatest concentration of overweight whites are in the red states: Alabama (66%), Arkansas (69%), Georgia (64%), Indiana (67%), Iowa (67%), Mississippi (67%), Nebraska (67%), North Dakota (68%), Oklahoma (67%), South Dakota (67%), Tennessee (68%), West Virginia (69%) and Wisconsin (67%).

Being overweight is not the same as being obese. Both are calculated in terms of "body mass index" (BMI). In a 2013 study on obesity, income and race, Pew Research provided this definition: "A person's BMI is his or her weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of his or her height (in meters), rounded to one decimal place. A BMI of 25 or more is considered overweight; 30 or more is considered obese." Pew divided income into three categories calculated against the poverty level: (i) up to 130%, (ii) between 130% and 349% and (iii) above

350%. Looking exclusively at white men and women by income, it found that in at the lowest income level, 30 percent of men and 39 percent of women were obese; among more middle-income whites, 35 percent of men and 38 percent of women were obese; and among the highest income group, 32 percent of men and 28 percent of women were obese.

Homelessness

In the 1950s and 1960s, the typical homeless person was white, male and in his 50s. Today, principally people of color suffer homelessness. The

Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness estimated in 2012 that homelessness was experienced by 1 in 403 families; however, only 1 in 141 African-American families experienced homeless compared to 1 in 990 white families.

Looking specifically at homelessness among white Americans, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimated in 2009 that 35 percent were homeless. It also noted, “people experiencing homelessness in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time.”

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Drug addiction, suicide, obesity and homelessness are issues affecting all Americans; they are indicators of how people cope with crisis by taking it out on themselves. Each person who shoots up, kills him/herself, is obese or homeless is both an individual failing to effectively cope with deeply personal issues and a painful symptom of the spreading loss of faith in the social system.

White privilege is under attack, less so by people of color who are poorer and suffer greater than by the policies of the – mostly white — 1 percent. Racism plays a key – if unspoken – role in the repression of white people; it keeps them blind, in denial, to what causes their deepening immiseration.

Race is at the center of three critical issues that will likely play significant roles in the upcoming '16 election – police killings of unarmed people of color, inequality and immigration. The nearly daily media reports of “police lynchings” make inescapable the police’s role in enforcing racist customs. The suburbanization of poverty, with inner-city people of color being pushed to the impoverished suburbs, reflects the out-of-site, out-of-mind campaign now redrawing the urban landscape. The politicians and people who resist immigration reform today conveniently forget that their ancestors were once immigrants. More so, many fear the loss of their white skin privileges as their population majority is projected to shrink to a minority later this century.

How will the tyranny of white skin privilege be broken? How will the Republican ace-in-the-hole Southern strategy finally be ended?

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Since 2000, the number of [white] hate groups has increased by 30 percent

It estimates that since Pres. Obama's 2008 election the number of such group rose 1,360 in 2012 from 813 in 2008; in 2014, there were 874 such groups.

One can only hope that as the Great Squeeze takes its toll on more and more white people, they will find common struggle with other Americans from all backgrounds rather than the 1 percent who, like puppet masters, pull the strings on all-too-may politicians and pundits.