Borrow & Loot
LESS GUILT
MORE SOLIDARITY

Somewhere in the early chapters of Dan Berger’s excellent book Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity, the thought occurred to me: “Fuckin’ finally!” It took a lot of time, and a lot of middling books on the white New Left, but someone had finally got the essence of what was right and what was wrong with the New Left on race.

Contrary to popular belief, it wasn’t that the “excesses” of Weather (and contemporaries in the SLA) were a matter of going “too far” in their opposition to white supremacy. Nor is it true that Weather weren’t guilty of excesses (including guilt trips, idealizations of black liberation fighters, the idea that the waning hippie movement constituted a revolutionary vanguard, etc.). Instead, and this is what makes Outlaws a unique addition to New Left history, we should have a better framework: that paradoxically, excesses and extremism are a retreat, rather than advance, in radicalism.

It is with that framework that I think we need to explore the phenomenon of white guilt. That we need to have a frank discussion of what it is, and what it means for the movement.

“White Guilt” is one of those terms that has a lot of baggage. Everyone from the fully fascist to the merely conservative uses it; “liberals” are constantly chided with it; and white people who don’t want to struggle around issues of race and racism use it as a trump card. When people use the term, it’s generally just a pejorative way of saying, “get over it” (“it” being racism).

This is where we need to separate the phrase’s connotation from its denotation -- its explicit meaning, from its implicit one. “White Guilt” is not like the conservative use of “Femi-Nazi” which both denotes and connotes negatively. And more importantly, “white guilt” is in fact, an objectively observable phenomenon to it -- one which happens all too often.

Thus, I think we should find some utility in the concept, and instead of chucking it, rethink it. We need a radical critique of white guilt.

That critique should free itself of the temptation toward the conservative, even if all too often we see radicals (both white activists and activists of color) succumb to it, with a line that is generally, “Whites shouldn’t struggle around racism; that’s what black / Latino / Asian folks are supposed to do.” This is really just a warmed over version of the idea that there should be immutable racial categories (i.e., there is “black music” “white music”; whites shouldn’t listen to black music and vice-versa. I’ll call this the “Wigger Problem.”)

Instead, the problem of white guilt needs to be approached radically. Why is it so grating? So harmful? How is it just plain out of sync with reality? I will do my best to come up with some formulations:

White guilt isn’t struggling against one’s own inherited racism, or to look at one’s benefits from white supremacy critically. The idea that such inquiries are bad (and even taboo, as certain anarchists and Trotskyists have argued) is not only not Left, they’re downright fascist. We like the freedom to inquire, do we not?

White guilt is, rather, a problem of the direction of that inquiry and not the effort. The problem arises out of the inclination and premise of white guilt: that whites are (as if by natural right) omnipotent, and therefore all problems of race are of their doing; particularly, that this is a matter of personal guilt. That premise is reactionary, not revolutionary, and it’s not surprising that it leads to dumb conclusions. What are those conclusions?

First, that since there is the presumption of the omnipotence of whites and whiteness, somehow the solution to everything is for some noble and symbolic sacrifice of one’s whiteness in the name of anti-racism, some gesture of impotence, i.e., “Since the darkies are going hungry, the solution is for me to (fast/dumpster dive/insert your own masochistic action here).” Such gestures are impotent -- against white supremacy most of all.

Second, that since whites are omnipotent, that inequalities disappear away as if by magic if whites put their mind to it. One sees this logic in the mini-genre of “Nice White Lady” films (Dangerous Minds, Freedom Writers, etc.) in which a Nice White Lady becomes a teacher and, as if by sheer force of will, changes her class of soon-to-be-criminal black teenagers into semi-literate young adults.

The assumption of white omnipotence becomes a true problem, not so much due to the masochism of whites (though, it should be said, whites should quit it with this business of cutting themselves -- it does nobody any good). It is that it assaults the personal dignity of people of color with a thousand cuts. It renders us people of color as merely objects of white affection; however much affection sugarcoats it, we’re treated as objects upon which whites can cast their emotions upon -- and not a fellow subject, which would really subvert white guilt.

What is more, a key part of white guilt is that it’s an entirely mechanical process of emotional manipulation. There are no politics to it. Reason is uninvolved in the transactions of white guilt; instead, there is only emotional release in being a do-gooder for a day.

We need to move forward from this, together. In the place of white guilt, what
Do I Have to Be Naked to Get in Your F**kin' Zine?

don't seduce yourself with / my otherness / my hair / wasn't put on top of my head to entice / you into some mysterious black voodoo / the beat of my lashes against each other / ain't some dark desert beat / it's just a blink / GET OVER IT

I'm convinced that 9/10ths of white privilege is simply the ability to take what are full-time conditions imposed upon people of color, and to take them up on a part-time basis. Or at least that's the way it plays out in the movement.

Once upon a time in the late 1990's, when I didn't feel as as sure of my own politics (much less myself) I was active in NYC's anarchist scene. I haunted the anarchist hangouts of the time -- the little hole in the wall infoshop Blackout Books and later the even tinier May Day Books. If nothing else, they those places could give you a subculture and a few people to talk to. And, of course, zines.

Unlike a lot of folks who glorify the heyday of the anarcho-scene (post-Seattle, pre-9/11), I have to say with retrospect that there was a lot of bullshit out there. Especially in the zines. Lots of lifestylism, kooks, people who were really giving out too much information.

What became a source of friction for me as an anarchist of color, was that as I grew from a teenager into an adult the color of my skin became more and more of a prison to me in daily life, right around the time the drop-out wing of the anarchist scene became prevalent. Lower East Side squatters I could deal with -- at least they sank down roots in New York. The folks who did summit-hopping in between cross-country jaunts were free and high on the rails, while I was getting to the age where I would start being passed by for hail cabs on the street.

I started burning out when Fighting for Our Lives by CrimethInc. had its first printing. That was the time period when I felt that the licenses anarcho-kids could take were too much of a reminder of the unfreedom I was living under.

I can honestly say that I'm not of the school that thinks CrimethInc. must be destroyed. I'm no longer an anarchist, so I'm no longer offended that they've perverted my ideology.

I would say, however, that I am disappointed and have every right to be, in an project that, on the one hand, wants everything to do with the stylings of our struggles and nothing of the struggles themselves. And in the main, what has disappointed me in CrimethInc. has been the cynicism with which the project has operated. It would be one thing if their material were simply superficial image-mongering -- if it were what people usually accuse it of being, just another spectacle by a bunch of dumb kids. But that is not the case. There is a certain depth of knowledge there; certainly enough for them to know their Situationists from their Futurists, and to know that Baader-Meinhoff had killer fashion-sense but shit for politics.

What has been infuriating about CrimethInc.'s publications have been their way of annihilating anything which does not explicitly fit the scene -- the dropout ethos, the hardcore shows, the riot folkies and so forth. It amounts to a subconscious self-censorship, if not an outright pandering to the lowest common denominator. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than with CrimethInc.'s adventures outside of whiteness.

Fighting for Our Lives stands out as a case in point. It's a sampler to the whole CrimethInc. idea, and taken on those terms it succeeds; above average writing, fashion magazine slick design. And it understands the idea of branding quite well; you don't sell the product (in this case anarchism), you sell what the product is supposed to give you (joy! love! bliss!).

Scratching the surface though, FFOL maintains a typically chauvinist position: appropriate the trappings of the Third World peoples, but don't bother with the content of their politics. There's plenty of photos of people of color, mostly "exotics" of some unnamed foreign land
"Do I Have to Be Naked" cont'd
(and especially erotic exotics of Hottentot Venus-type) -- and yet nothing that bothers with race or white supremacy other than a nebulous "we're against that stuff." In the realm of theory, the rhetoric of FTOL is very much against abstraction/representation and for a self-determination/autonomy, yet in their thrall of the image, the only existence CrimethInc. seems to imagine for people of color is a purely abstract/representational form without content. In short, there is neither autonomy nor self-determination, just an image that may be massaged for the message.

All of which is to say, the failure of CrimethInc., especially with regard to race, is a failure on its own premises. CrimethInc. professes scorn for the conventional and mainstream, but theory and practice it champions are nothing if not a funhouse mirror image of the mainstream society. Its words call for a flight into fantasy, but can't even do that very well -- all we have are images that would be just as much at home in the dry academic discourse on "savage" Africa and the "exotic" East, made all too real through the history of imperialisms both European and American. Therein lies a deeper problem behind CrimethInc. What little there is of a real idea of what, precisely, this project is about came out in a recent CrimethInc. missive:

"Our essential project is to nurture anti-authoritarian consciousness and desires outside the traditional sites of workplace organizing and identity politics. This does not mean we consider those sites unimportant, or that we wish for everyone to prioritize the sites we have chosen based on our own specific circumstances and means."

"CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective Humbly Requests Clearance to Resume Activity"

The explicit disassociation from identity-politics could be thought of as a redeeming factor, were it that CrimethInc. actually opposed identity politics. But stripping liberation struggles of the oppressed nations of the world of their content, simply for display is exactly the opposite; it is identity politics incarnate, a seduction by image without any actual subjectivity to it.

"Less Guilt" cont'd

we people of color need out of our white allies and comrades is solidarity. Returning to Berger and the subtitle of his book (the Politics of Solidarity), we need to recognize that politically, we are for solidarity not because it makes us feel good, but because solidarity is necessary to our common survival. Because simply in order not to be annihilated, we have to open up a thousand fronts and bust holes in a thousand walls, and that order is awfully tall for any one people in the United States to accomplish.

So when the time comes for that war to stop our own annihilation, and we as peoples of color are forced to fight back at white supremacy, what we need is less guilt and more solidarity. Guilt is a luxury nobody can actually afford; it is a masochist's ego trip that does nothing for us, the movement, or for prospects of a real revolution.

Borrow & Loot...

is a one-shot zine about race and the movement. It has been written, edited, and executed almost completely on a lark.

These are the thoughts, inspirations and preoccupations of Daniel, a lone member of Students for a Democratic Society, a man of color who stands on the shoulders of giants and waves a middle finger to the pigs.

The title comes from a well-known episode in the media's coverage Hurricane Katrina. The caption to a photo of a white man exiting a store with a bundle of food called it "borrowing." The captions to a couple of photos of black people exiting stores with bundles of food called it "looting."

Paging Dr. Freud! Your slip is showing. That quick compare and contrast in captions captures to me the essence of a culture which counts white supremacy and privilege as its bedrocks. This is a world where some folks got the credit to borrow and others... well, don't.

So let those who can borrow, borrow; for the rest us, it's time to loot.
HAVE THE COURAGE
TO READ THESE BOOKS!

This Bridge Called My Back
Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga

Wretched of the Earth
Frantz Fanon

Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America
Juan González

How the Irish Became White
Noel Ignatiev

Born Palestinian, Born Black
Suheir Hammad

Soledad Brother
George Jackson

Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor
Peter Kwong

The Color of Wealth
Meizhu Lui, Barbara Robles, and Betsy Leondar-Wright

On Practice & Contradiction
Mao Zedong (Slavoj Zizek, ed.)

The Huey P. Newton Reader
Exile: Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Conversation
Pramoedya Ananta Toer

John Brown, Abolitionist
David S. Reynolds

Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement & Suharto’s Coup d’Etat in Indonesia
John Roosa

The Cost of Privilege: Taking On the System of White Supremacy and Racism
Chip Smith

Palante:
Young Lords Party
Young Lords Party & Michael Abramson

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Orientalism
Edward Said