Abolishing whiteness has never been more urgent

Noel Ignatiev showed us how.

Mark LeVine

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A woman holds a sign during a rally against guns and white supremacy after Dayton and El Paso mass shootings in front of the White House in Washington, DC on August 6, 2019 [Reuters/Kevin Lamarque]

Noel Ignatiev never set out to be a hero. His goal was quite the opposite: to be a “traitor” to a race that for much of his life would not accept him and whose inherent toxicity, he believed, would permanently impede the possibility of the United States living up to its ideals.

On November 9, the historian died, leaving behind a body of work explaining why and how Americans ought to abolish “whiteness”. As the country faces a surge in white supremacist violence and rhetoric, there may be no better time to engage with – and embrace – his ideas.
Becoming white

Ignatiev was born and raised in the same progressive – and for some, radical – American Jewish tradition that moulded Bernie Sanders (who was born less than a year before him). He grew up in a mixed-race area of Philadelphia where he witnessed the extent and depth of anti-black racism. In the late 1950s, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, but dropped out after three years and focused on leftist activism.

He took up a job in a steel mill, becoming a labour organiser among the mostly African American workforce before completing a PhD at Harvard (where he was accepted despite his lack of a college degree) in 1995.

Ignatiev was a member of the last generation of Jews who experienced what it meant to be considered less than white in the US – at least until the present generation experienced a sharp rise in anti-Semitic attacks after the election of Donald Trump. He understood the malleability of race and its reality as a social, ideological and political, rather than biological, construct.

The majority of Jews embraced whiteness as it became more readily available to them from the 1960s onwards, believing it offered unprecedented protection against any possible resurgent anti-Semitism. Ignatiev, however, saw the solution to Jews’ problems, and those of the US at large, in abolishing it.

Abolishing whiteness is different to merely challenging “white supremacy” or “white privilege”. What Ignatiev understood was that for most self-identified “white” people there is, a normally invisible, boundary to how far they will go in working for true racial equality. Unsurprisingly, those boundaries become apparent around issues – such as equal access to education and jobs – that might threaten or merely inconvenience the advantages and privileges of whiteness.

A recent example is the controversy surrounding a school desegregation plan in the city of Columbia, Maryland – a town established in the 1960s as an integrated community symbolising the “Next America”. The opposition to the plan reveals how those who enjoy privilege will behave in ways they would otherwise consider racist when they are called upon to potentially sacrifice some of that privilege to benefit long-disadvantaged African American and Hispanic communities.

This should not surprise us. While whiteness and its avatar, “Western civilisation”, have for centuries declared themselves to be the epitome of Enlightenment and freedom, historians have demonstrated not only the historicity of whiteness and its contingency, but that whiteness emerged directly and almost exclusively through its connection to imperialism/colonialism, slavery, genocide and modern-day racism.

We need only think of all those smiling white faces in photos of lynchings across the American south – what WEB Du Bois described as “the writing of human hatred, a deep and passionate hatred … on the pale, white faces” – to understand how the ontological pleasure gained from participating in the humiliation and extermination of black people is the most enduring identifying marker of whiteness.

One would have better luck taking wetness away from water – at least you can freeze it – than to rip the racism out of whiteness. Even the US’s first black president could not freeze the racism that has always defined this country. Instead, despite his best efforts, his presidency unleashed a torrent of renewed racial animosity and policies, all embodied by the ultimate avatar of white nationalist masculinity, Donald Trump.

Abolishing, not reforming whiteness

Ignatiev’s historical argument to abolish whiteness was developed most fully in his 1995 book How the Irish Became White.
Since the English colonisation of Ireland, the Irish had been considered less than fully human. But Irish immigrants to the US were accepted as white in the era before the civil war as many supported slavery and violence against (free) black people. It was a transformation that enabled them to achieve better jobs at higher wages and be accepted as full citizens in what was still a juridically white republic.

The book was part of a slew of research by scholars that began to emerge in the 1980s – including scholars such as David Roediger, Theodor Allen, Karen Brodkin, Steve Martinot, Cedric Robinson, Nell Irvin Painter, Alexander Saxton, Matthew Frye Jacobson, George L Mosse, David Theo Goldberg, and Alana Lentin – who explored the idea of whiteness as an ideological, psychological, social and political construct and set of governing mechanisms, rather than a biological or even determinatively cultural one. What all of the analyses had in common was a focus on the intersection of race, class and gender in powerfully hierarchical ways over long periods.

But what set Ignatiev apart from his colleagues was his belief – no doubt drawn from his years as an activist rather than just an academic – that the construct of whiteness not only should, but could be done away with.

It was not the kind of neoliberal “post-racial” society imagined at the start of the Obama era that he sought, but the emergence of a truly progressive set of identities that would enable the alliances necessary to fight against the larger capitalist system that required whiteness as its cornerstone ideology.

These arguments are laid out by Ignatiev and other like-minded scholars in the journal Race Traitor, established in 1993 “to run the film backwards, to explore how people who had been brought up as white might become unwhite”.

With a masthead that declared “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity”, and whose first words in its first issue urged readers to “Abolish the white race – by any means necessary”, it was obvious what the political and scholarly aim of Race Traitor would be.

In 16 issues over a dozen years, scholars from a variety of disciplines unpacked how whiteness emerged and why and how it could be “abolished”, based on the belief that “until that task is accomplished, there can be no universal reform, and even partial reform will prove elusive, because white influence permeates every issue in US society, whether domestic or foreign”.

**Beyond ‘anti-racism’**

Ignatiev urged those able to identify as white to “be reverse Oreos”. “Defy the rules of whiteness – flagrantly, publicly … Challenge behaviors that reproduce race distinctions.”

He was critical of simple “anti-racism” efforts precisely because they “admit the natural existence of ‘races’ even while opposing social distinctions among them”.

Instead, his abolitionist path was based on a realisation that “race itself is a product of social discrimination; so long as the white race exists, all movements against racism are doomed to fail”.

Reading his work and that of his colleagues, it becomes clear that almost every element of white identity that one might want to preserve is already contained in other identities – ethnic, religious, national, cultural – which do not inherently marginalise and dominate others and whose positive characteristics are diminished rather than augmented by association with whiteness.

Perhaps most importantly, Ignatiev helps us understand that “the white race is a club, which enrolls certain people at birth, without their consent, and brings them up according to its rules”. “For the most part the
members go through life accepting the benefits of membership, without thinking about the costs. When individuals question the rules, the officers are quick to remind them of all they owe to the club, and warn them of the dangers they will face if they leave it.”

This is exactly what is happening in the city of Columbia, as even more recent members of the “white club”, such as those of Indian and East Asian heritage, have joined in opposing desegregation efforts, despite the historical and ongoing prejudice against them.

Decolonising and dethining

Although he did not specifically engage decolonial theories, Ignatiev’s writings are clearly sympathetic to and have been cited by decolonial theorists, who were among the first to understand the ongoing coloniality of power, even in the postcolonial era.

When Ignatiev’s approach is added to the work of decolonial theorists, intersectional feminists like Kimberle Crenshaw, Holocaust scholars like Zygmunt Bauman and the focus on necropolitics by Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, a strong theoretical foundation for a truly liberatory analysis of contemporary racial capitalism and chauvinistic nationalism (whether “white”, Hindutva, Zionist, “Chinazi”, Russian or myriad other exclusivist identities) emerges.

So, too, do the deep links between these racist nationalisms and the support for environmental devastation – or worse, for mass violence against perceived others justified in the name of a zero-sum struggle for ever diminishing resources.

Finally, Ignatiev’s wholesale condemnation of an irredeemable whiteness and the identities that flow from it helps us understand how, in Achille Mbembe’s words, whiteness “became the mark of a certain mode of Western presence in the world, a certain figure of brutality and cruelty [and] singular form of predation” that turned all those labelled as black into “a community whose blood stains the entire surface of modernity”.

Writing in Issue 3 of Race Traitor in 1993, regular contributor and anti-racist activist Christopher Day argued that “the grip that whiteness has on the consciousness of the majority of people in this society is an immediate and persistent obstacle to building any serious movement for radical change in this country. It is not a simple matter of doing the right thing, because whiteness obscures in our minds what the right thing is.”

James Baldwin put it even more succintly: “As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.”

Today, we would add that as long as 150 million Americans define themselves as white with all the expectations, privileges and violence that accrue to that identity, there is no hope for us as a nation. Of that, as Noel Ignatiev spent his life demonstrating, there can be little doubt.

*The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance.*

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Mark LeVine teaches History at University of California and presently holds visiting professorships at Lund University’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the University of Bologna.