



RACIAL FAIRNESS AMERICA

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Isn't this just a new kind of White Saviorism?

White Saviorism is not a well-understood concept among most white Americans. Though you can intuit some of its meaning from the name, you have to dig deeper to mine the many ways it has been manifested in our land, and how harmful it has been.

***Let's start with a definition.** White Saviorism is an apparently benign but actually destructive attitude in some white people. Their desire to make a difference also enables them to feel capable of deciding what's best for other people who are not like them, and free to put their ideas into effect without deeply understanding the culture or the true desires of the people they seek to help – and therefore without grasping the implications of their actions, while barreling ahead without the consent of the people they are “saving.”*

Others may apply other definitions depending on context, but this definition works for Racial Fairness America.

White Saviorism is usually offensive to People of Color because it involves white individuals (or white-dominated organizations) assuming that they know better than the people they want to help: that they understand better, are more capable, and sometimes even that God is on their side. Talk about presumptuous!

White Saviorism is further offensive because of the vast historical and cultural context, which might seem irrelevant to individual white do-gooders, but can be of great significance to contemporary People of Color in our country. White Saviorism smacks of the colonialist and imperialist efforts of many white countries during many centuries to subjugate and then “improve” people in distant lands that they considered ignorant, primitive, and often not even really human.

The Merest bit of History¹

White people got off to a terrible start in the Americas, and never totally got it right. Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors in the 1500s saw Indigenous people as the source of free labor (i.e., slaves) and riches (theft, plunder), and later free land and soldiers. Missionaries came to save souls, but also (in many cases, not all), amassed wealth and raped women. English settlers in what is now the United States initially had some good relationships with native tribes – being in

¹ For a fuller and much more stomach-churning summary of white treatment of Blacks, read Carol Anderson's *White Rage* (2016)

the minority, it behooved them to be respectful. But more and more, as white people gained power they simply took what they wanted from people they considered inferior in every respect. Massacres on both sides began to occur, which periodically erupted into actual wars, some of which were won by the tribes. But as the white people continued to arrive, and to build, and to expand westward, Indigenous peoples were rounded up and sent further and further west, mostly to lands that looked like they would be of no interest to white people. But, for instance, when gold was discovered in the Badlands of the Dakotas where Sioux tribes had been sent, well, clearly that was land best suited for white people after all.

Meanwhile, the first African slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619. Then more and more were stolen or bought from their homelands and taken to America until the slave trade (run by northerners and English and other foreigners) and slave plantations (almost entirely in the South) ended with the Civil War. But that was followed by “Reconstruction” and the Black Codes that quickly put whites back in power in the South, generating near-slave conditions, bitter anti-black crusades involving the KKK abetted by the law enforcement and justice systems, then by Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and conditions countrywide that always favored white people to the detriment of Black people. The Civil Rights movement was a partial victory for Black people, but later legal decisions upheld challenges that undid many of these gains. In recent decades, the “justice” system was “enhanced” by new legislation, enforcement procedures, tweaks to judicial guidelines, and bigger prisons, much of which was specifically meant for Black and Latino people, though hardly anyone would say it in so many words. Most recently, Trump and many of his followers thought it was time to bring back open, unabashed racism, which is still going strong.

Pop Quiz: Given this history, can anyone think of any reason at all why our communities of color should feel the least bit untrusting of the white majority – their intentions, their methods, and their supposed efforts to “help”?

Markers of White Saviorism

White Saviorism is identified mostly by the nature of what’s being done, the intentions behind it, and the results it achieves.

What’s being done:

- Is it something the recipients WANT or just something *you* think they should have?
- Is it something they are comfortable getting from *you*?
- Are you (or other White people) *profiting* from it, or using it to enhance your own reputation?
- Does it respect their culture and traditions?
- Are people of the applicable ethnic or racial group(s) prominent in numbers and authority on your management team? Do they have a decisive voice in determining which things are done, and how?

The intentions behind it:

- Are you doing it because you think the recipient(s) of your help (or their community) are inherently incapable, just don't try hard enough, or for any other racist reason?
- Are you trying to make people more like *you*, instead of more like *their own* ideals?
- If you are getting involved to learn more, that's a noble goal, but it's an unfair burden on People of Color to have to educate *you*. Are you pursuing other ways to get there?
- Is it because you feel guilt, whether for your own past racist attitudes or actions, or for things your ancestors did, or on behalf of white society in general? These feelings may or may not be justified, but if that's your motivation, your need to pay for the sins of the past is really about *you*. Your focus needs to be on the *other* person or people, and you really have to get to know them before you can understand whether you even *can* be of any benefit to their cause.
- Is this some kind of game for you, or experiment, or do you respect the people you wish to serve the same way you would respect your friends and family?
- Are you newly "woke" and just eager to go make a difference somehow?²

The results being achieved:

- Do you have a sound, objective way of determining whether the benefits are worth the costs? Could some other way, especially one arising from the intended beneficiary community itself, do it better, more economically, more insightfully?
- Are your efforts impairing the work of others? Getting in their way? Reducing the effectiveness of their own fundraising, for example?
- Are any people in the community you're trying to "help" actually doing worse because of your efforts, even though others maybe are being helped?
- Is it enhancing or diminishing local pride? Is it bringing people together, especially people of different races and backgrounds?

What Racial Fairness America, Inc. is doing to avoid being a White Saviorism project

Though we can't fully control what happens among local affiliates, we consider these principles essential:

- The National organization and local affiliates are intended to be multi-racial and multi-cultural, especially in their leadership.

² "Woke" is now mostly an insulting term for white people who have recently noticed, read about, or observed something about the systemic unfairness of American treatment of Blacks in particular, but other races as well. They often mistake their small knowledge as full understanding and deep empathy. They are also, often, suddenly motivated to step up and do something, even though they do not understand the issues well or have any substantial knowledge of what racism means and how it feels. This enthusiasm often gets in the way of other efforts that are more carefully planned and that have been built by people who do have first-hand experience and therefore have a good idea what helps and what doesn't.

- White people will not be deciding who gets the benefits. Formal or informal groups serving People of Color can put in a claim on any available resources, and apply them to any lawful purpose that *they* think will benefit their people.
- This sounds harsh, but charitable groups that serve people of *all* colors equally will *not* be eligible, if that help will go largely to a majority race that is white.
- If two groups want the same resource, or if one is clearly taking more than its share, or if the resource is financial and would benefit almost any organization, a local committee composed entirely of People of Color will work out a solution. This “Distribution Committee” can also make occasional exceptions to other guidelines, if there are special circumstances.
- Though white people will get many leadership positions (mostly so they can tap white wealth), members of discriminated-against communities should have roughly equal representation on the Board of Directors, and far more than equal representation on the Advisory Committee and the Distributions Committee.
- In general, paid jobs in local affiliates will be open only to People of Color, while white people will be encouraged to be volunteers (though we are somewhat constrained by federal and state anti-discrimination laws). Top leadership positions, even if paid, should be determined by leadership excellence, however, not by race; we intend and expect this to produce a good balance by race.

Closing Comments

Our nation is long past rampant slavery and genocide. But it is also far from true equality of opportunity and equal justice under the law. We’re all caught in this transition. People trampled by white society are still fighting for their rights, and even for simple acceptance as being fundamentally equal in their humanity and desires as anyone else. White people are divided amongst those who resist change, those who advance it, and those just standing aloof.

These times are unlike any earlier times, and so we’re all faking it to some extent, struggling for the best ways to get through this long transition, with much frustration that we can’t be there now. Some wish to turn back the clock, and some hope for a new kind of multi-racial, multi-cultural nirvana that could, in principle, be achieved soon, though that seems unlikely yet.

While we’re along this way, there are opportunities to maximize cooperation or to go it alone. Motivations are confused and not always unselfish. The motivations of white people in particular are under examination, which is totally appropriate. But white people are not the only ones who can go astray, think they have all the answers, make unkind assumptions based on ethnicity, or impute motives unfairly. We all need to look inside ourselves, not just others.

It is surely time for white people to experience examination, criticism, and sometimes penalties, even criminal penalties. But it is not the time for them to stop striving for true equality. We have to all be in this together.