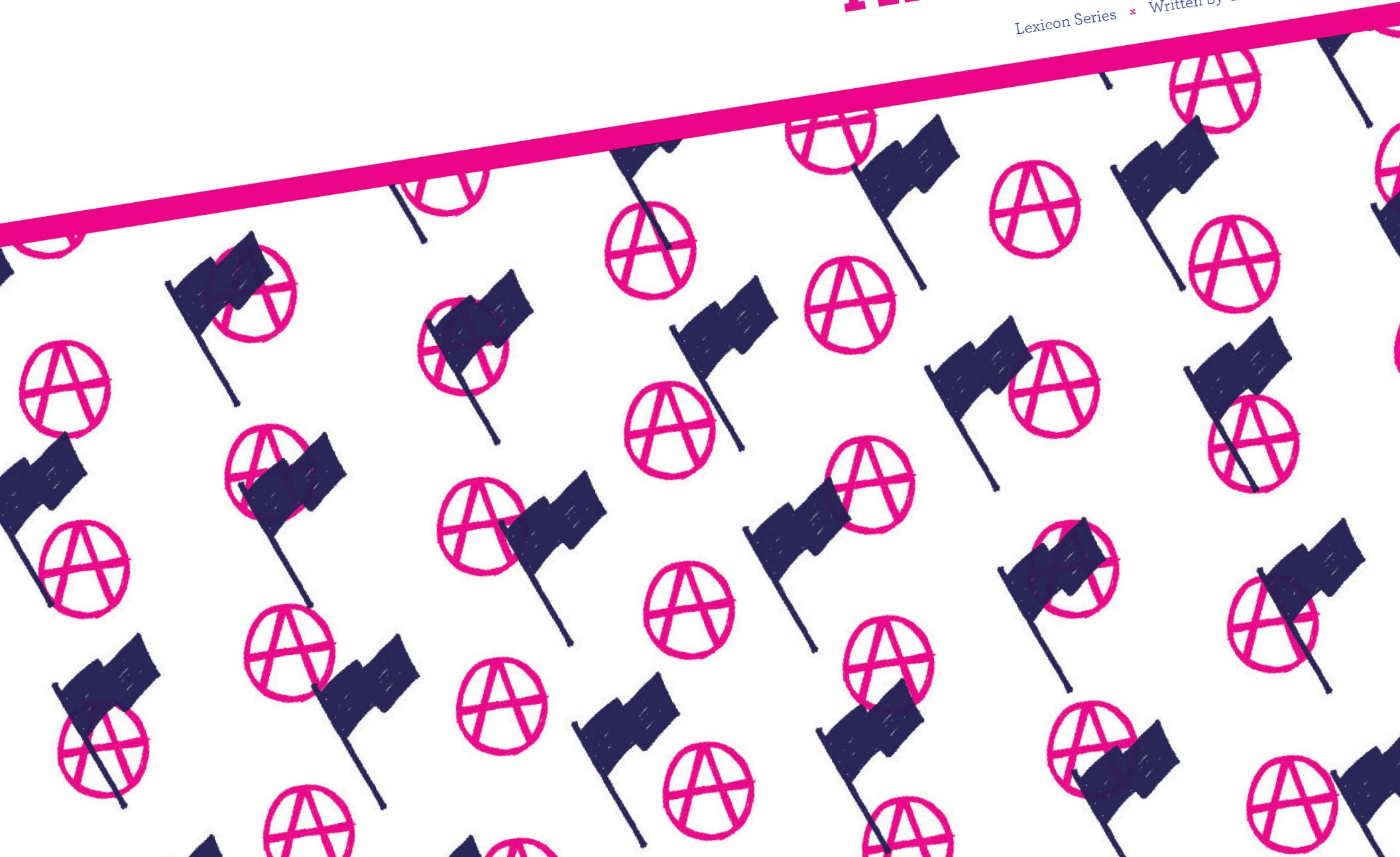


ANARCHISM

Lexicon Series ✕ Written by Cindy Milstein



The Lexicon series aims to convert words into politically helpful tools—for those already engaged in a politics from below as well as the newly approaching—by offering definitional understandings of commonly used keywords.

Lexicon Series created by the **Institute for Anarchist Studies**

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As such, we're generally neither particularly good nor efficient at directly democratic processes. Assembly decision-making mechanisms are hard work. They raise tough questions. But through them, people school themselves in what could be the basis for collective self-governance, for redistributing power to everyone. More crucially, people self-determine the structure of the new from spaces of possibility within the old.

Anarchism gives voice to the grand yet modest belief, embraced by people throughout human history, that we can imagine and also implement a wholly marvelous and materially abundant society. That is the spirit of anarchism, the ghost that haunts humanity: that our lives and communities really can be appreciably better. And better, and then better still.

"By anarchist spirit I mean that deeply human sentiment, which aims at the good of all, freedom and justice for all, solidarity and love among the people; which is not an exclusive characteristic only of self-declared anarchists, but inspires all people who have a generous heart and an open mind."

—Errico Malatesta, *Umanita Nova*, April 13, 1922.

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These ethics still animate anarchism, supplying what's most compelling about it in praxis. Its values serve as a challenge to continually approach the dazzling horizon of freedom by actually improving the quality of life for all in the present. Anarchism always "demands the impossible" even as it tries to also "realize the impossible." Its idealism is thoroughly pragmatic. Hierarchical forms of social organization can never fulfill most peoples' needs or desires, but time and again, nonhierarchical forms have demonstrated their capacity to come closer to that aim. It makes eminent and ethical sense to experiment with utopian notions. No other political philosophy does this as consistently and generously, as doggedly, and with as much overall honesty about the many dead-ends in the journey itself.

Anarchism understood that any egalitarian form of social organization, especially one seeking a thoroughgoing eradication of domination, had to be premised on both individual and collective freedom—no one is free unless everyone is free, and everyone can only be free if each person can individuate or actualize themselves in the most expansive of senses. Anarchism also recognized, if only intuitively, that such a task is both a constant balancing act and the stuff of real life. One person's freedom necessarily infringes on another's, or even on the good of all. No common good can meet everyone's needs and desires. From the start, anarchism asked the difficult though ultimately pragmatic question: Acknowledging this self-society juggling act as part of the human condition, how can people collectively self-determine their lives to become who they want to be and simultaneously create communities that are all they could be as well?

Anarchism maintains that this tension is positive, as a creative and inherent part of human existence. It highlights that people are not all alike, nor do they need, want, or desire the same things. At its best, anarchism's basic aspiration for a free society of free individuals gives transparency to what should be a productive, harmonic dissonance: figuring out ways to coexist and thrive in our differentiation. Anarchists create processes that are humane and substantively participatory. They're honest about the fact that there's always going to be uneasiness between individual and social freedom. They acknowledge that it's going to be an ongoing struggle to find the balance. This struggle is exactly where anarchism takes place. It is where the beauty of life, at its most well rounded and self-constructed, has the greatest possibility of emerging—and at times, taking hold.

Although it happens at any level of society, one experiences this most personally in small-scale projects—from food cooperatives to free schools to occupations—where people collectively make face-to-face decisions about issues large and mundane. This is not something that people in most parts of the world are encouraged or taught to do, most pointedly because it contains the kernels of destroying the current vertical social arrangements.

AT ITS CORE, ANARCHISM IS INDEED A SPIRIT—ONE THAT CRIES OUT AGAINST ALL that's wrong with present-day society, and yet boldly proclaims all that could be right under alternate forms of social organization. There are many different though often complementary ways of looking at anarchism, but in a nutshell, it can be defined as the striving toward a "free society of free individuals." This phrase is deceptively simple. Bound within it is both an implicit multidimensional critique and an expansive, if fragile, reconstructive vision.

Here, a further shorthand depiction of anarchism is helpful: the ubiquitous "circle A" image. The A is a placeholder for the ancient Greek word *anarkhia*—combining the root *an(a)*, "without," and *arkh(os)*, "ruler, authority"—meaning the absence of authority. More contemporaneously and accurately, it stands for the absence of both domination (mastery or control over another) and hierarchy (ranked power relations of dominance and subordination). The circle could be considered an O, a placeholder for "order" or, better yet, "organization," drawing on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's seminal definition in *What Is Property?* (1840): "as man [sic] seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy." The circle A symbolizes anarchism as a dual project: the abolition of domination and hierarchical forms of social organization, or power-over social relations, and their replacement with horizontal versions, or power-together and in common—again, a free society of free individuals.

Anarchism is a synthesis of the best of liberalism and the best of communism, elevated and transformed by the best of traditions that work toward an egalitarian, voluntarily, and nonhierarchical society. The project of liberalism in the broadest sense is to ensure personal liberty. Communism's overarching project is to ensure the communal good. One could, and should, question the word "free" in both cases, particularly in the actual implementations of liberalism and communism, and their shared emphasis on the state and property as ensuring freedom. Nonetheless, respectively, and at their most "democratic," one's aim is an individual who can live an emancipated life, and the other seeks a community structured along collectivist lines. Both are worthy notions. Unfortunately, freedom can never be achieved in this lopsided manner: through the self or society. The two necessarily come into conflict, almost instantly. Anarchism's great leap was to combine self and society in one political vision; at the same time, it jettisoned the state and property as the pillars of support, relying instead on self-organization and mutual aid.

Anarchism as a term emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, but its aspirations and practices grew out of, in part, hundreds of years of slave rebellions, peasant uprisings, and heretical religious movements around the world in which people decided that enough was enough, and the related experimentation for centuries with various forms of autonomy.

Anarchism was also partly influenced by Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century, which—at its best—popularized three pivotal notions, to a large degree theorized from these revolts. First: Individuals have the capacity to reason. Second: If humans have the capacity to reason, then they also have the capacity to act on their thoughts. Perhaps most liberating, a third idea arose: If people can think and act on their own initiative, then it literally stands to reason that they can potentially think through and act on notions of the good society. They can innovate; they can create a better world.

A host of Enlightenment thinkers offered bold new conceptions of social organization, drawn from practice and yet articulated in theory, ranging from individual rights to self-governance. Technological advancements in printing facilitated the relatively widespread dissemination of this written material for the first time in human history via books, pamphlets, and periodicals. New common social spaces like coffeehouses, public libraries, and speakers' corners in parks allowed for debate about and the spread of these incendiary ideas. None of this ensured that people would think for themselves, act for themselves, or act out of a concern for humanity. But what was at least theoretically revolutionary about this Copernican turn was that before then, the vast majority of people largely didn't believe in their own agency or ability to self-organize on such an interconnected, self-conscious, and crucially, widespread basis. They were born, for instance, into an isolated village as a serf with the expectation that they'd live out their whole lives accordingly. In short, that they would accept their lot and the social order as rigidly god-given or natural—with any hopes for a better life placed in the afterlife.

Due to the catalytic relationship between theory and practice, many people gradually embraced these three Enlightenment ideas, leading to a host of libertarian ideologies, from the religious congregationalisms to secular republicanism, liberalism, and socialism. These new radical impulses took many forms of political and economic subjugation to task, contributing to an outbreak of revolutions throughout Europe and elsewhere, such as in Haiti, the United States, and Mexico. This revolutionary period started around 1789 and lasted until about 1871 (reappearing in the early twentieth century).

Anarchism developed within this milieu as, in “classical” anarchist Peter Kropotkin’s words, the “left wing” of socialism. Like all socialists, anarchists concentrated on the economy, specifically capitalism, and saw the laboring classes in the factories and fields, as well as artisans, as the main agents of revolution. They also felt that many socialists were to the “right” or nonlibertarian side of anarchism, soft on their critique of the state, to say the least. These early anarchists, like all anarchists after them, saw the state as equally complicit in structuring social domination; the state complemented and worked with capitalism, but was its own distinct entity.

Like capitalism, the state will not “negotiate” with any other sociopolitical system. It attempts to take up more and more governance space. It is neither neutral nor can it be “checked and balanced.” The state has its own logic of command and control, of monopolizing political power. Anarchists held that the state cannot be used to dismantle capitalism, nor as a transitional strategy toward a noncapitalist, nonstatist society. They advocated an expansive “no gods, no masters” perspective, centered around the three great concerns of their day—capital, state, and church—in contrast to, for example, The Communist Manifesto’s assertion that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” It’s not that anarchists didn’t take this history seriously; there were other histories, though, and other struggles—something that anarchism would continue to fill out over the decades.

As many are rediscovering today, anarchism from the first explored something that Marxism has long needed to grapple with: domination and hierarchy, and their replacement in all cases with greater degrees of freedom. That said, the classical period of anarchism exhibited numerous blind spots and even a certain naïveté. Areas such as gender and race, in which domination occurs beyond capitalism, the state, and the church, were often given short shrift or ignored altogether. Nineteenth-century anarchism was not necessarily always ahead of its day in identifying various forms of oppression. Nor did it concern itself much with ecological degradation.

Of course, comparing classical anarchism to today’s much more sophisticated understanding of forms of organization and the myriad types of domination is also a bit unfair—both to anarchism and other socialisms. Anarchism developed over time, theoretically and through practice. Its dynamism, an essential principle, played a large part in allowing anarchism to serve as its own challenge. Its openness to other social movements and radical ideas contributed to its further unfolding. Like any new political philosophy, it would take many minds and many experiments over many years to develop anarchism into a more full-bodied, nuanced worldview—a process, if one takes anarchism’s initial impulse seriously, of always expanding that worldview to account for additional blind spots. Anarchism was, is, and continually sees itself as “only a beginning,” to cite the title of a recent anthology.

From its beginnings, anarchism’s core aspiration has been to root out and eradicate all coercive, hierarchical social relations, and dream up and establish consensual, egalitarian ones in every instance. In a time of revolutionary possibility, and during a period when older ways of life were so obviously being destroyed by enormous transitions, the early anarchists were frequently extravagant in their visions for a better world. They drew on what was being lost (from small-scale agrarian communities to the commons) and what was being gained (from potentially liberatory technologies to potentially more democratic political structures) to craft a set of uncompromising, reconstructive ethics.

COLONIALISM

Lexicon Series × Written by Maia Ramnath



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To struggle against it, then, must also include historically contextualizing our own economic, political, and geographic locations. This enables us, among other things, to understand the connections between the rights of immigrants and indigenous peoples, both forcibly displaced by the demands of the global economy and militarization of borders, and recognize, unweave, and replace persistent racism, sexism, and all other related patterns of oppression by which colonial dominion has been justified.

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COLONIALISM CAN REFER TO A TRANSNATIONAL PROCESS OF DOMINATION, the policies by which it is carried out, and the ideologies that underwrite it. Modern colonialism has taken various forms since the Iberian, British, and French (and later German, Belgian, and Italian) incursions into Asia, Africa, and the Americas—whether for armed trade, armed missionizing, or armed settlement—began to escalate from the late fifteenth century onward.

In its “classical” historical form (roughly the late eighteenth to mid-twentieth century), the colonial relationship consisted of a metropolitan center ruling its conquered satellites from afar, through a combination of proxy rulers and local colonial administration answerable to the “home” power. For the metropole, holding colonies maximized its advantage relative to other so-called Great Powers by securing access to resources and strategic points. Meanwhile, a colony would be cemented into a position of economic dependency by which the metropole sucked surplus value from its claimed possessions in the form of plundered raw materials (mineral wealth, flora and fauna, and plantation cash crops), while selling manufactured goods back to them. The residents of a conquered region thus played the roles of superexploited cheap or coerced labor and captive consumer markets, while their own prior modes of subsistence and production were decimated. This economic pattern required colonial rulers to maintain a strong military presence as well as a trained class of native collaborators to make its local administration and policing feasible.

The act of initial takeover, from the perspective of surplus wealth extraction (aka developmental aid), is sometimes called the moment of primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession. The latter term makes it clear that this wasn’t just a singular, originary event long in the past but rather a process that constantly continues to expand, regularized through a symbiotic combination of direct governmentality and subsidized corporate activity.

This kind of formalized system collapsed when the two world wars broke up the European imperial powers. New superpowers, however, were already emerging to take their place as global imperial rivals. As international politics froze into their cold war polarization while the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa attempted to maintain their hard-won independence outside either bloc, Kwame Nkrumah popularized the phrase neocolonialism to describe the situation they now risked. What he meant by calling neocolonialism “the highest stage of imperialism” (in reference to Vladimir Lenin’s famous formulation of imperialism as “the highest form of capitalism”) was that even if formal political independence was recognized, “freedom” was in substance meaningless if global economic power imbalances still replicated or even exceeded those of the classical colonial period.

Nkrumah was Ghana's first democratically elected leader, and one of the key figures in both the Pan-Africanist movement and Non-Aligned Movement of decolonizing countries in Africa and Asia as well as in India, Egypt, Indonesia, and Yugoslavia. Joined by Latin America—which by then had already been struggling for almost 150 years against exactly that kind of relationship to the United States—the countries of what we now call the Global South formed the “Tricontinental” alliance against recolonization in all but name: by proxy in local conflicts, covert ops to install dictators subservient to the desired interests, or economic domination.

More recently still, what's been called globalization since the 1980s and 1990s manifests as more of the same, but in a drastically intensified form. With the Soviet Union out of the way, the Washington Consensus laid out the principles of neoliberalism to be exercised on the same regions, now primarily through mechanisms like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G20, and World Economic Forum. The conditions for International Monetary Fund loans required adherence to structural adjustment programs demanding that the entirety of a recipient country's social programs be eliminated, privatized, and deregulated, and that all its financial resources previously geared toward public goods like health, education, housing, and transportation be moved toward servicing debt—that is to say, wealth redistribution toward a transnational capitalist elite, or a tiny point of a pyramid supported by a vast base of the dispossessed.

In this way, decolonizing or “developing” countries have been locked in perpetual debt, sacrificing collective welfare to the demands of corporations and their sponsors—by no coincidence, the same pool of corporations that have profited the most from the U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq over the last ten years. What we're now seeing in North America and Europe—the widespread loss of homes and livelihoods—are the effects of neoliberalism, or exactly what's been going on for decades in the Global South. (Here's a parallel: when fascism overtook Europe in the 1930s, many recognized that the same genocidal logics and draconian techniques had long been routine in the colonies. What was new was the application of these dehumanizing techniques and ideologies to the metropoles, to people previously classified—though in some cases precariously—on the near side of the racial and cultural divide instead of to those conveniently far away.)

Hence, what North Americans now experience resonates in form with the most recent manifestation of colonization. But there's an important difference: history, along with our resulting locations, literally and figuratively.

The continued expansion of capitalism has always depended on colonialism—that is, on externalizing its costs and reaching ever farther afield for inputs. This means that a political entity with an interest in generating profit has to project its power outside its territorial jurisdiction in order to do so—and that's imperialism. This may occur through economic or military means, hard power or soft, or some combination thereof.

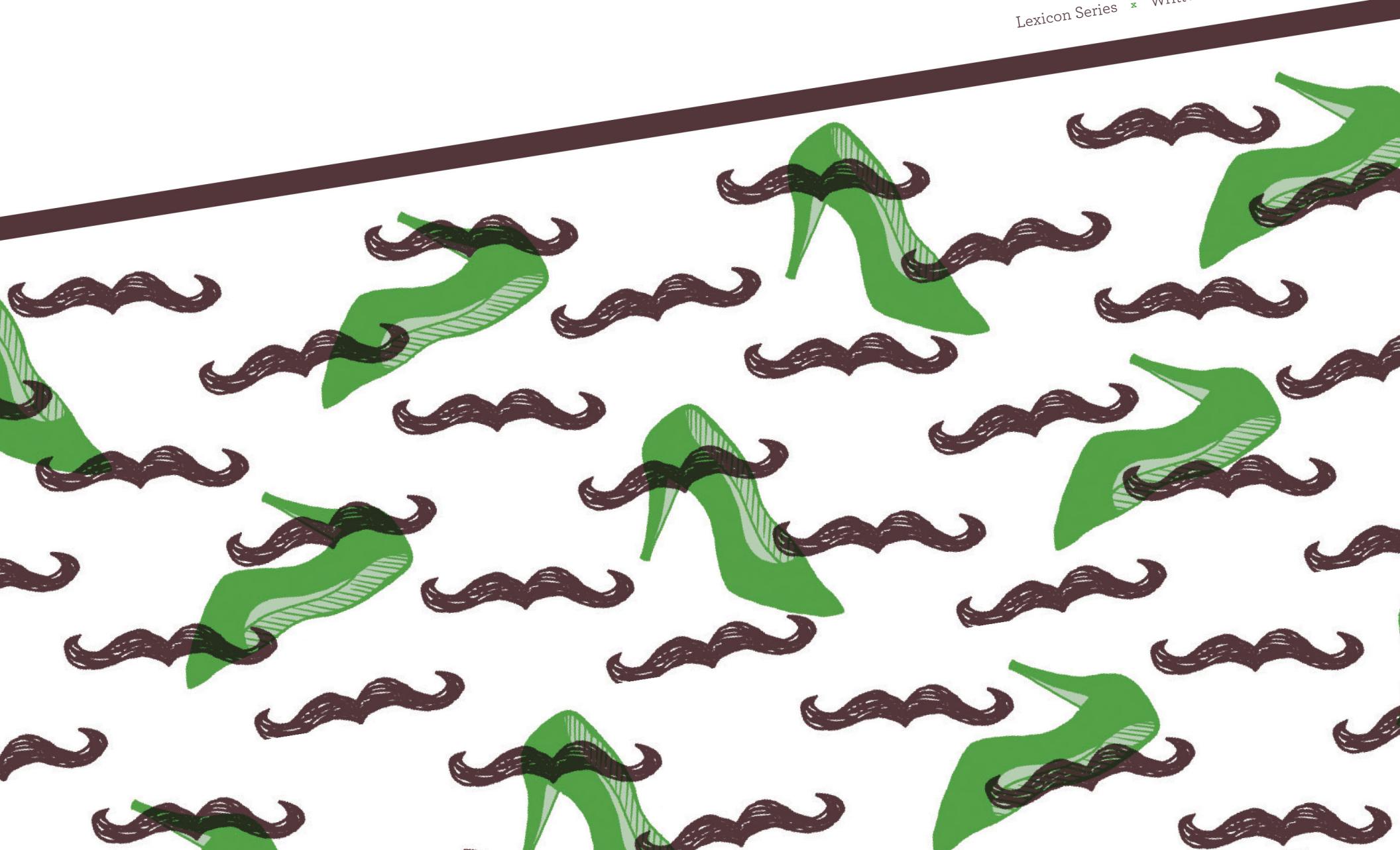
Furthermore, colonial projects and imperial projections require some form of racism as a legitimizing base. The stability of all colonial systems has ultimately depended on maintaining, at great effort, a strict line, supposedly existential but in truth ideological, of which one side must be portrayed as irredeemably alien, primitive, inferior, evil, scary, and/or less human. That was the only way to create justification for enslavement or genocide, whether to a public whose participation was required or another power. Some forms of this have included Christian missionary efforts, Orientalism, racialist pseudoscience, and the liberal civilizing mission, aka the white man's burden. This is why anticolonial resistance movements in the Global South have so often been interconnected with antiracist mobilizations in the Global North; they were both linked manifestations of the same phenomenon, same logic, and same historical processes.

Two of these processes—two related techniques of colonization—are of particular relevance to contemporary repertoires of civil disobedience and their relationship to space. The first is military occupation, in which an imperial power moves its army into a place to demand its submission by brute force. The second is a subset of the colonial enterprise known as settler colonialism—in which an imperial power engages in what amounts to ethnic cleansing or a massive population transfer, by moving its own people permanently into a region, rather than just defending bases or enclaves. Occupation in these contexts means the illegitimate claiming of space: invasion, conquest, sanctioned vigilantism against prior residents. That, of course, is the dirty open secret on which the United States was founded: there is no unoccupied land here.

This is why decolonization may actually be a more accurate term for what protest movements that utilize occupation as a tactic intend to do when they establish a sustained presence in a space claimed by government, military, or corporate entities, such as (to name just a few examples) the American Indian Movement did at Alcatraz, the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters, and elsewhere since the 1970s; students did at universities throughout California and New York in 2008–9; and Argentinean workers did in their factories in 2001. The first example is certainly a more direct opposition to explicit colonization and conquest in the textbook sense. Nevertheless, all such actions are essentially moves toward reversing the process of dispossession; dismantling relationships of inequity and the legal/governmental structures that protect them; halting the suck of wealth extraction from the bottom to the top of the pyramid; restoration of the commons; and refusal to sacrifice the priorities of collective social well-being to the profits of an elite few. When externalized and mapped onto racialized divisions between an elite and a population to which it is seen as external, these grievances are all aspects of the colonization process.

GENDER

Lexicon Series ✕ Written by Jamie Heckert



acknowledge, celebrate, and develop diverse, cooperative, caring economies, emphasizing their viability as real alternatives.

Indigenous activist-scholars and anarchist anthropologists note that many cultures, and even some nations, do not have the same impulse to define clear borders or police their own people— forms of social control that are taken for granted as politics. Let's notice in our own lives the difference between the official stories of who is in control and how life actually works. How might we nurture the elements of our society that work cooperatively with other people as well as ecosystems to create freedom, equality, and abundance?

Like power, gender is everywhere, running through our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the earth, and the relations between nations, classes, and cultures. And like power, it is not a problem in itself but instead a question of how we do it. Gender can be a pattern of control, violence, and domination. Or it can be just another way of talking about the beautiful diversity of human existence.

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ecological impact, or even through shopping. Making people insecure about their bodies, and then offering products and services to address the supposed imperfections, is fuel to the fire of a growth economy, unsustainable on a finite planet. Self-centeredness (associated, for example, with certain success-oriented versions of masculinity) can also lead to seeing the bodies of other people, other species, and the earth itself as merely “resources” available for one’s own benefit rather than beings in their own right.

Gender is a living, evolving system. It has no fixed truth. It changes as we change our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the world. Gender diversity is about the incredible beauty of life’s capacity to overflow, undermine, subvert, and refuse all the categories we put on it, ourselves, and each other.

Compassion can motivate people to seek each other out, to support and nourish each other, to do gender differently. Men who want to let themselves be gentle become friends. Women who know they can be strong organize together and share skills. Drag queens and kings, bi people and transfolk, lesbian women and gay men, and queers of all sexualities make spaces for themselves and each other to connect, share, and play. Friendships, networks, and movements can also include, cross, or transcend all these identities and more.

Sometimes people cling to gender identities to feel safe. At other times, they might hold them lightly. Different spaces, different practices, can help people feel safe enough to drop some of their own borders and self-policing in order to experience gender lightly, playfully.

Families can, of course, also embody alternatives to normative gender. Single mothers or fathers, joint mothers or joint fathers, and transgender parents all show that children do not need two parents of supposedly opposite genders. Gender diversity in children can be respected and honored. People can become conscious of how work is divided within the home.

We can be less fixed and more experimental with our roles as well as identities. Sometimes people create their own families, defined less by blood kinship and more by affinity, friendship, and intimacy. People in social groups, movements, and even neighborhoods can become family, developing their own rituals and relationships. Housing cooperatives, queer networks of friends and lovers, or extended families of other sorts all highlight that the heavily gendered ideal of the nuclear family is only one possibility among many.

Economics and politics can be done differently, too. The dominant systems of capitalism and the nation-state are not the only options. They do not even represent the majority of ways that people engage in economics or politics but instead simply demand the most attention. Feminist geographers and economists, for example, highlight the diverse economies that exist around the world—all the various forms of producing, consuming, sharing, and working—that don’t fit into the narrow (and macho) definition of the economy. We can

GENDER IS A SYSTEM OF CATEGORIZING OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

(including bodies, desires, and behaviors) running through every aspect of culture and society, and intertwining with other categories and hierarchies (race, class, sexuality, age, ability, and so much more). Various aspects of biology (for example, genitals, chromosomes, and body shape) are interpreted to mean that human beings naturally belong in one of two categories: male and female. But if we look more closely, we might question the nature of gender. Biology, human and otherwise, is wonderfully diverse.

Nature doesn’t give us these two options. We interpret and categorize, and then come to believe that those interpretations, those categories, are the truth. Gender doesn’t just happen. People define it, invent it. Even genital surgery on intersex bodies is described as corrective, as though nature had made a mistake by not conforming to our binary thinking.

Because we invent gender, we can do it differently. This becomes clear when we look at the many ways that throughout history and across cultures, different aspects of social life and personality have been part of defining gender. What counts as a “real” man or a “good” woman, as masculine or feminine, varies from place to place and time to time. In some (sub)cultures, gender hasn’t been limited to two options but instead includes recognition of three, four, or many genders.

The usual story in countries like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, however, is that there are only two options. And while these states may offer formal, legal equality, in practice they still largely value those characteristics associated with men and masculinity (for instance, independence, control, and strength) over those associated with women and femininity (say, interdependence, love, and gentleness). This hierarchy can be subtle or blatant, woven together with other hierarchies through institutions and systems, socialization and culture, in ways that produce many complex effects. In dominant cultures, mind and reason are imagined as both separate from and superior to body and emotion; so too is whiteness privileged over color, action over rest, hetero over homo, and firmness over tenderness.

Gender can be more or less rigid. Supposedly abnormal, unnatural, or improper gender behavior can be met with social censure ranging from teasing to bullying, discrimination, imprisonment, forced medical “treatment,” sexual violence, emotional abuse, and even murder. This violence is most obvious when it comes to transgender people, or those who otherwise transgress the social assumption of two fixed and natural genders. Why does gender transgression trigger such strong emotions, even to the point of violence? Perhaps it is because none of us are perfect examples of a real man or real woman. No one can live up to these abstract ideals, with all the contradictory messages about what they even mean.

Most people twist themselves into knots trying to conform to what they think they should be, rather than simply being aware of who they actually are. Self-

policing one's gender can feel so familiar, so habitual and subtle, that the effort put into conforming may seem natural and effortless. Yet there is something profoundly liberating in growing self-aware of the habits we hold on to out of fear or shame, and when it feels right, learning to let them go.

Gender isn't just an individual experience, though. It's intertwined with all of our relationships and social institutions—many of which presently, if sometimes inadvertently, serve to constrain, hurt, or control most people. Perhaps the most obvious structure that does this today is the family, where people generally first learn to notice the anxieties and expectations that come with gender. Even the very idea of what a family is and how it works (or what it should be and how it should work) is inextricably linked with gender.

The idealized nuclear family, for example, is defined as consisting of a monogamous, married, and reproductive heterosexual couple led by the male "head of household." If the woman works outside the home, as is often economically necessary at this stage of capitalism, she is still likely to do far more of the housekeeping, emotional labor, and child care—with little or no recognition of such tasks as work. Children are given gender labels from birth and may be expected to conform to them. And while being the head of household has its privileges, masculinity is frequently tied to one's ability or not to provide financially for the family, which in turn leads to a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and shame in class-based societies.

The wider political economy is also gendered in oppressive and exploitative ways. Just as women's labor inside the home is typically taken for granted, all sorts of feminized labor is taken for granted in capitalism too. When people talk about "the economy," they usually are referring to a narrow and official definition that only includes paid work, the production of materials or knowledge, and the sales and distribution of those products. The economy, in this understanding, doesn't include the bearing and (unpaid) caring of children nor the (unpaid) housework on which any economy depends.

Nor does capitalism and related colonialist projects truly recognize the traditional knowledge of noncapitalist cultures, whose extensive histories of, say, working with plants are exploited by pharmaceutical and agricultural corporations. Feminists of color have long noted the linkages between colonialism's unacknowledged dependence on the skills, wisdom, and labor of people of color and women of all races. Many celebrated historical figures in colonial nations are both white and male. There is nothing wrong with white men per se, but neither is there anything as special about them as cultures of white supremacy and gender hierarchy would encourage us to believe. Besides, no one does anything on their own. We all depend on the efforts of others. While understated in capitalist thought, such efforts have inherent worth and point the way to alternative economies.

Indeed, when work associated with women and femininity (such as teaching, nursing, cleaning, and listening) is paid, it's paid much less than work associated with men and masculinity (such as sports, finance, leadership, and talking). This gender hierarchy is further tied up with race and class inequalities when, for example, higher-status women move into work traditionally associated with men, thereby leaving feminized labor to lower-status women.

The nation-state, too, is gendered. Like the traditional head of household, the head of state offers protection in exchange for obedience. Its other characteristics (including rigid borders, competitiveness, aggression, and independence) are also those linked to certain versions of men and masculinity. Some nations invade others in order to demonstrate their dominance, which once again involves hierarchies of race and wealth. Like individuals or households competing for economic success, nation-states are inherently insecure. By simultaneously creating fear and promising security, they endlessly justify their existence.

The ways we categorize humanity into races, ethnicities, classes, and countries are all gendered. Consider common stereotypes: the passive East Asian woman, the hypersexual black man, the exotic other from across the border (whether of nations or neighborhoods). Colonial invasions have long been justified by white men (and women) drawn to both wealth and playing the hero, allegedly protecting brown women from brown men. Ongoing inequalities are reinforced by continuing to cast brown women and men, especially those in the so-called developing world, in the role of a victim in need of charity.

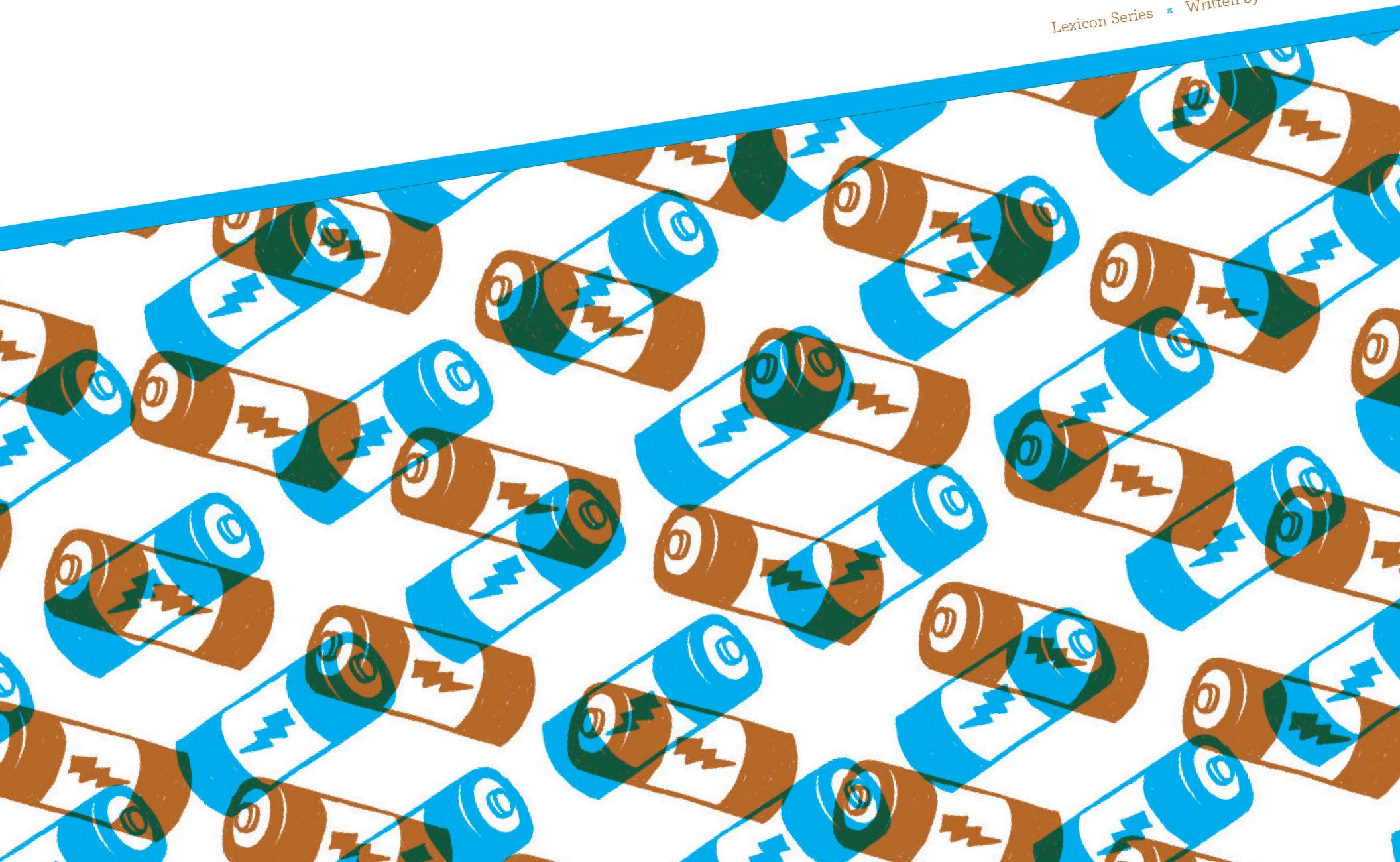
Gender divisions are rife with contradictions. Class hierarchies, for instance, can be based on a division between manual labor (using the body, which is associated with femininity) and so-called skilled labor (using the mind, and linked to authority and control, which are all associated with masculinity). Working-class masculine frustration often merely reverses this hierarchy, suggesting that the strength of using one's body is a more authentic form of masculinity, while upper-class men with their clean clothes and soft skin are effeminate.

Holding on to such resentment, to fantasies of superiority and a fear of different cultures, is itself part of a gendered culture uncomfortable with emotion. Instead of simply allowing emotions to exist and pass through us, or finding other healthy ways to deal with our feelings, most of us are taught to either cling to or reject them (which is really just another way of holding on). Learning to be comfortable with our desires as well as our fears is part of creating a world where we can live with and love ourselves along with each other in all our differences and similarities.

Even our relationship with the rest of the natural world ("Mother Nature") is connected to gender. Inciting fear and shame in people, about either their own gender or gendered others (such as queers or foreigners), induces a self-centered state of mind. When individuals feel threatened, they of course prepare to defend themselves. They may do this by supporting war, which has a profound

POWER

Lexicon Series ✕ Written by Todd May



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with power and wealth? Perhaps it is time to constrain the behavior of others through the means at our disposal. Moreover, when we see how political power operates, we can also see that those means are many. As long as we think of power solely as repressive, then struggle can only be a massive act of refusal. At times this is what is called for, and there is certainly much to refuse in the current arrangement of power.

But there is more. We can act in order to call attention to the way power operates. Civil disobedience and protest demonstrate for people who have not seen it yet the way that the forces of the police are aligned with the forces of wealth. They also empower people to think of themselves as actors rather than simply victims. Also, we can educate one another. If we have been taught to be entrepreneurs, we can teach one another to think and live otherwise. This education does not have to be, and should not be, simply among those who resist. It should also be an education of the larger public, so that rather than being constrained to live as they do, they might see other and healthier possibilities.

Political power, as constraint, is diverse, complex, and subtle. That might seem to be a source of despair. It is frequently difficult to see, operating in subterranean ways. Yet it is also a source of hope. If power is diverse and complex, this means that our tactics can be diverse and complex. To confront the current arrangements of power, we can develop alternative practices of power on a variety of levels, from reflection to confrontation to education to direct democracy. The difficulty is in seeing the ways in which power has not only blocked us but also has actually created us. The task is to create ourselves and our world differently.

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POWER IS ONE OF THE MOST ELUSIVE ASPECTS OF POLITICAL SPACE.

People are said to seek, hold, exercise, or lord it over others. On the Right, it is thought to be a reality that has to be seized. The world is a place where power speaks. Better it be ours than theirs. On the Left, power is often considered something dirty. It is something we must rid the world of if we are to achieve peace and equality.

Speaking of power in these ways bars us from reflecting on what it is and how it works. After all, what does it mean to say that “power speaks” or that power is something we can rid the world of? When these phrases are used, do we really know what is meant by the word power? Rather than taking a stand on power itself, or else deciding whether it is good or bad, it would be best to understand it. It turns out that power is more complex than the simple stances toward it would have us believe. It works by repression and also creation. It can be a good thing or a bad one. It is sometimes in the hands of particular people, but frequently it isn’t. Instead, it arises and circulates through social relationships in a way that resists being appropriated by individuals or organizations.

We might think of power, at least political power, as the exercise of constraint on people’s actions. We should not confuse the term constraint with the word restraint. To constrain an action is to influence it to be a certain way. It is not necessarily to stop it from happening, although it could be that. It could also be a matter of making an action happen where it otherwise wouldn’t, or of influencing an action in one direction or another. And still we must be careful. To influence an action is not necessarily to influence someone to do something that they would not otherwise do or influence them in a way they don’t like. Sometimes things happen like that, but not always. When an educational system is set up that influences people to reflect on their social situation and change it when they find it intolerable, that is an example of the operation of power. But it is an operation that many people would approve of.

The idea of power as a constraint rather than as a restraint or repression is a new idea. For most of the history of political thought, power was understood to be a way of restraining people. That is why it is often associated with the state. The state, after all, is the most powerful restraining force in a society. Through the police and judicial system, the state can throw people in jail, taking away their freedom. In our society, it can also kill people. What could be more restraining to people than taking away their freedom or lives? And indeed, the state has power in this sense. It is not an irrelevant power, as many who have protested against government policy have discovered. When people on the Left criticize power, it is usually this kind of power they are thinking of.

Yet power need not be only repressive. Think of how our parents, schools, employers (when we can get a job), and even peers mold our behavior. This molding doesn’t just stop us from doing certain things. It makes or encourages us to do things. And there is more. The power from these people and institutions

not only makes us do certain things; it can make us want certain things. Far from being exercised against our will, power can operate in such a way as to form our will. Recently, we have seen not just the actions but also the will of both the Democrats and Republicans formed by those in the top 1 percent.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that the exercise of power in forming people's actions and wills is solely a matter of individual decisions. Much of the way power operates is structural. That is to say, it is part of the way a society is structured that people are formed to be the way they are. To see this, we can use a current example. It has been noticed that over the period of neoliberalism (roughly dating from the late 1970s or early 1980s), people have been encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs. This is true not only of our economic activity but also of our lives in general. We are encouraged to see ourselves as having a particular set of resources—our skills, genetic inheritance, or social intelligence—and using those resources to maximize our goals or desires. Through networking, peers are considered to be investments. Clothing is not only adornment but an investment in our social standing as well. Even children can be seen as an investment in one's future security.

All of this is in keeping with the neoliberal arrangement of power. We are encouraged, and we encourage ourselves and one another, to act like entrepreneurs. And in acting like entrepreneurs, we diminish the possibility of solidarity with one another.

How does this entrepreneurial orientation diminish solidarity? Entrepreneurs, in our neoliberal period, are taken to be individual investors, each on their own, alone and without support. It is no accident that social services are reduced or abandoned by neoliberal economics. Social services, like environmental regulation or infrastructure development, are collective projects. Entrepreneurs are individuals acting alone, investing their resources to develop their own vision.

All of this is convenient for those at the top of society. When we think of ourselves as individuals rather than as collectives, we fail to consider the importance of solidarity and collective resistance. We are more likely to treat others as competitors as opposed to comrades.

We should recognize, however, that this way of thinking and being does not arise because someone or some group decided that it should be this way. The elites did not get together at some secret meeting and say to themselves, "Hey, if we make people think of themselves as entrepreneurs, then we can keep them divided among themselves and hold all the wealth without being challenged."

Thinking of ourselves as individual entrepreneurs—indeed, making ourselves into entrepreneurs—is not the product of a conspiracy. It is structural.

The idea that power is often structural rather than conspiratorial is an old one. It can be found in the writings of Marxists, anarchists, and more recently with such thinkers as Michel Foucault. The rough idea is that power—whether it

represses or creates us to be certain ways—arises from the particular historical practices of a society. To be sure, it tends to benefit those at the top. But there is a difference between saying that power arrangements benefit those at the top and saying that the top few created those power arrangements for their own benefit. Entrepreneurship as a way of living benefits those at the top; they did not introduce it. It arose as the product of a number of elements that came together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as the oil crisis and consequent theoretical crisis for Keynesian economics, rise of neoliberal theory, and increasing ability to communicate and thus invest across larger geographic areas.

Political power, then, can be either repressive or creative, and either individual or structural. It can also be either good or bad. As we saw earlier, educating people to be reflective about and engaged with their social situation is a creative form of power that is good rather than bad. Among people who think of themselves as progressive, there is a tendency to think of power solely as a bad thing, something that must be overcome. This is largely because we confront power arrangements that are deleterious or even intolerable. When we look at how power works in the world, we are likely to think of it as something to be struggled against or overcome.

There are two mistakes here. First, we cannot rid the world of power. If power not only represses us but also makes us into what and who we are, then there is no outside to power. The task is not to eliminate power but instead to see how it operates in a society. That way, we can assess it, assess its effects, and challenge the specific arrangements of power that are oppressive to people's lives.

Second, power can be used positively. Power, let's recall, is the exercise of constraints on people's action. We are not only the object of constraint; we can also be its subject. We can be the agents of constraint, constraining the actions of others and "unconstraining" particular actions of ours.

We unconstrain our own actions when we come to understand how we have been molded to be otherwise than we would like to be (or more precisely, otherwise than we would like to be when we reflect on ourselves—since, as already noted, our desires can also be created). When we recognize the ways in which we have been molded into entrepreneurs, for instance, we can begin to resist that molding. We can open ourselves up in order to consider other ways of being, ways that involve solidarity with others. We stop thinking of ourselves in the ways we're told to, and start asking ourselves who else we might be and how else we might be together. This, in turn, may lead to new constraints. But if we have a positive vision, those constraints will replace the bad ones we are currently under with better ones.

In addition to unconstraining ourselves, we can constrain the actions of others. We have been taught to think that both wealth and poverty are earned. Really? Are those who struggle to make ends meet really less deserving than those

WHITE SUPREMACY

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Political movements in the United States must make the fight against any expression of white democracy an essential part of their strategies. The expansion of freedom for people of color has always expanded freedom for whites as well. Abolishing white interests is not “divisive,” “narrow,” or “reverse racism.” It’s the key to a free society.

xxx

BIOLOGICALLY SPEAKING, THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS RACE.

As hard as they've tried, scientists have never been able to come up with an adequate definition of it. Yet the social and political effects of race are very real. Race is like a dollar bill—a human creation rather than a fact of nature that has value only because people say it does. And like money, people give race “value” because it serves a function in society. That function in the United States is to suppress class conflict. In the United States, the system of race (what we now call “white supremacy”) emerged in the late 1600s to preserve the land and power of the wealthy. Rich planters in Virginia feared what might happen if indigenous tribes, slaves, and indentured servants united and overthrew them. Through a series of laws, they granted the English poor certain rights and privileges denied to all persons of African and Native American descent: the right to be excluded from enslavement, move about freely without a pass, acquire property, bear arms, enjoy free speech and assembly, change jobs, and vote. For their part, they respected the property of the rich, helped seize indigenous lands, and enforced slavery. In accepting this arrangement, the English poor (now called “whites”) went against their class interests to serve their “racial” ones, and thereby reinforced the power of the rich.

This cross-class alliance between the ruling class and a section of the working class is the genesis of white supremacy in the United States. It continues to this day. In this system, members of the cross-class alliance get defined as white, while those excluded from it are relegated to a “not-white” status. By accepting preferential treatment in an economic system that exploits their labor, too, working-class members of the white group or “race” have historically tied their interests to those of the elite rather than the rest of the working class. This devil's bargain has undermined freedom and democracy ever since.

As this white alliance grew to include other ethnicities, the result was a curious form of democracy: the white democracy. In the white democracy, all whites were considered equal (even as the poor were subordinated to the rich and women were subordinated to men). At the same time, every single white person was considered superior to every single person of color. It was a system in which whites had an interest in and expectation of favored treatment, in a society that claimed to be democratic. It was democracy for white folks, but tyranny for everyone else.

In the white democracy, whites praised freedom, equality, democracy, hard work, and equal opportunity, while simultaneously insisting on higher wages, preferential access to the best jobs, informal unemployment insurance (first hired, last fired), full enjoyment of civil rights, and the right to send their kids to the best schools, live in the nicest neighborhoods, and receive decent treatment by the police. Even white women, who were otherwise denied full citizenship, enjoyed the benefits of white democracy, such as the right to legal representation, favored access to certain occupations (teaching, nursing, and clerical work),

easier access to better housing (including indoor plumbing, heat, electricity, and time-saving household appliances), and/or the all-important guarantee that their children would never be enslaved.

In exchange for these “public and psychological wages,” as W.E.B. Du Bois called them, whites agreed to enforce slavery, segregation, genocide, reservation, and other forms of racial oppression. The result was that working-class whites and people of color were oppressed because the working class was divided. The tragic irony is that many poor whites often did not get to make use of these advantages, yet despite this, they defended them bitterly.

The white democracy continues to exist, even after the end of slavery and legal segregation. Take any social indicator—graduation rates, homeownership rates, median family wealth, prison incarceration rates, life expectancy rates, infant mortality rates, cancer rates, unemployment rates, or median family debt—and you’ll find the same thing: in each category, whites are significantly better off than any other racial group. As a group, whites enjoy more wealth, less debt, more education, less imprisonment, more health care, less illness, more safety, less crime, better treatment by the police, and less police brutality than any other group. Some whisper that this is because whites have a better work ethic. But U.S. history tells us that the white democracy, born over four hundred years ago, lives on.

The white race, then, does not describe people from Europe. It is a social system that works to maintain capitalist rule and prevent full democracy through a system of (relatively minor) privileges for whites along with the subordination of those who are defined as not white. The cross-class alliance thus represents one of the most significant obstacles to creating a truly democratic society in the U.S.

This is not to say that white supremacy is the “worst” form of oppression. All oppression is equally morally wrong. Nor is it to imply that if white supremacy disappears, then all other forms of oppression will magically melt away. It is simply to say that one of the most significant obstacles to organizing freedom movements throughout U.S. history has been the white democracy, and that it remains a major obstacle today.

In a global economy (and a global recession), corporate elites no longer want to pay white workers the privileges they have historically enjoyed. Instead, they want to pay everyone the same low wages and have them work under the same terrible conditions.

Generally speaking, whites have responded to this attempt to treat them like regular workers in two ways. One is through “multiculturalism.” This approach, popular in universities and large corporations, seeks to recognize the equality of all cultural identities. This would be fine, except multiculturalism regards white as one culture among others. In this way, it hides how it functions as an unjust form of power. Multiculturalism therefore fails to attack the white democracy. It leaves it standing.

The other response is color-blindness, or the belief that we should “get beyond” race. But this approach also perpetuates the white democracy, because by pretending that race doesn’t exist socially just because it doesn’t exist biologically, one ends up pretending that white advantage doesn’t exist either. Once again, this reproduces white democracy rather than abolishes it.

There are right- and left-wing versions of color-blindness. On the Right, many whites sincerely insist they aren’t racist but nonetheless support every measure they can to perpetuate their white advantages, including slashing welfare, strengthening the prison system, undermining indigenous sovereignty, defending the “war on drugs,” and opposing “illegal immigration.” On the Left, many whites assert that race is a “divisive” issue and that we should instead focus on problems that “everyone” shares. This argument sounds inclusive, but it really maintains the white democracy because it lets whites decide which issues are everyone’s and which ones are “too narrow.” It is another way for whites to expect and insist on favored treatment.

Multiculturalism and color-blindness (on the Right or Left) are no solution to white supremacy. The only real option is for whites to reject the white democracy and side with the rest of humanity. Fighting prisons, redlining, anti-immigrant laws, police brutality, attacks on welfare (which are usually thinly disguised attacks on African Americans), and any other form of racial discrimination are valuable ways to undermine the cross-class alliance. So are struggles to defend indigenous sovereignty, affirmative action, embattled ethnic studies programs in high schools and colleges, and the right for people of color to caucus in organizations or movements. All of these struggles—which people of color engage in daily, but whites only occasionally do, if at all—seek to undermine whites’ interest in and expectation of favored treatment. They point out the way toward a new society.

We can see this in U.S. history, when fights to abolish the cross-class alliance have opened up radical possibilities for all people. Feminism in the 1840s and the movement for the eight-hour day in the 1860s came out of abolitionism. Radical Reconstruction (1868–76) very nearly built socialism in the South as it sought to give political and economic power to the freedmen and women. The civil rights struggle in the 1960s not only overthrew legal segregation, it also kicked off the women’s rights, free speech, student, queer, peace, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and American Indian movements. When the pillars of the white democracy tremble, everything is possible. An attack on white supremacy raises the level of struggle against oppression in general.

Even today, the white democracy stands at the path to a free society like a troll at the bridge. The task is to chase the troll away, not to pretend it doesn’t exist or invite it to the multicultural table. This doesn’t mean that people currently defined as white would have no role or influence in such a society. It only means that they would participate as individuals equal to everyone else, not as a favored group.