

Food—Systems—Racism: From Mistreatment to Transformation

By Eric Holt-Giménez and Breeze Harper*

Racism—the systemic mistreatment of people based on their ethnicity or skin color—affects all aspects of our society, including our food system. While racism has no biological foundation, the socio-economic and political structures that dispossess and exploit people of color, coupled with widespread misinformation about race, cultures and ethnic groups, make racism one of the more intractable injustices causing poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Racism is not simply attitudinal prejudice or individual acts, but an historical legacy that privileges one group of people over others. Racism—individual, institutional and structural (see Box 3)—also impedes good faith efforts to build a fair, sustainable food system.

Despite its pervasiveness, racism is almost never mentioned in international programs for food aid and agricultural development. While anti-hunger and food security programs frequently cite the shocking statistics, racism is rarely identified as the cause of inordinately high rates of hunger, food insecurity, pesticide poisoning and diet-related disease among people of color. Even the widely-hailed “good food” movement—with its plethora of projects for organic agriculture, permaculture, healthy food, community supported agriculture, farmers markets and corner store conversions—tends to address the issue of racism unevenly.¹ Some organizations are committed to dismantling racism in the food system and center this work in



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their activities. Others are sympathetic but are not active on the issue. Many organizations, however, see racism as too difficult, tangential to their work, or a divisive issue to be avoided. The hurt, anger, fear, guilt, grief and hopelessness of racism are uneasily addressed in the food movement—if they are addressed at all.

This Backgrounder is first in a series about how racism and our food system have co-evolved, how present-day racism operates within the food system, and what we can do to dismantle racism and build a fair, just and sustainable food system that works for everyone.

*Eric Holt-Giménez, Ph.D. is the Executive Director of Food First. A. Breeze Harper, Ph.D., is Executive Director of The Sistah Vegan Project www.sistahvegan.com, and Senior Diversity Analyst & Strategist (Ethical Consumption, Technology, Higher-Ed, and Food Sectors) [Critical Diversity Solutions](http://CriticalDiversitySolutions.com).

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Caste, Food and Capitalism

The term *racial caste* describes a “stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom.”² Racial caste is one consequence of a hierarchical imbalance in economic, political and social power (sexism and classism are others). In North America and much of Europe, this racial caste system privileges light-complexioned people of Northern European ancestry.

Any country that has been subjected to Northern colonialism has been structured by a racial caste system in which ‘whiteness’ concedes social privileges. This system was originally developed to justify European colonialism and enable the economic exploitation of vast lands in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Outright dispossession through genocidal military conquest and government treaties affected 15 million indigenous people—most of whom were farmers and lived in towns—throughout the period of US “westward expansion.” Colonization was largely carried out by white planters and aspiring white smallholder-settlers.³

In the Americas, Europeans and people of European descent murdered and dispossessed indigenous populations for their natural resources, sometimes enslaving them (e.g., the Spanish Catholic missions and *encomiendas*). People from West African regions were enslaved, forcibly shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and sold as chattel to do backbreaking labor, primarily on sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations. While slaves acquired through war and trade had been part of many societies for thousands of years, widespread commerce in human beings did not appear until the advent of capitalism and the European conquest.

The super-exploitation of enslaved human beings on plantations allowed slave systems to out-compete agrarian wage labor for over two hundred years. Under slavery, human beings were bought, sold and mortgaged as property. The tremendous wealth generated from slavery was sent to northern banks where it was used to finance military conquest, more plantations and ultimately, the industrial revolution.⁴ The centrality of slavery and dispossession in the emergence of 19th century capitalism flies in the face of many myths about our food system (and capitalism). As Bekert⁵ points out,

“[It] was not the small farmers of the rough New England countryside who established the United States’ economic position. It was the backbreaking labor of unremunerated American slaves in places like South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama... After the Civil War [and Abolition], a new kind of capitalism arose, in the United States and elsewhere. Yet that new capitalism—characterized first and foremost by states with unprecedented bureaucratic, infrastructural, and military capacities, and by wage labor—had been enabled by the profits, institutions, networks, technologies, and innovations that emerged from slavery, colonialism, and land expropriation.”

The social justification for the commoditization of human beings was the alleged biological inferiority of the people who were used as property, and the divinely-determined superiority of their owners. This division of power, ownership, and labor was held in place through violence and terrorism. It also required constant religious and scientific justification constructed on the relatively new concept of “race.” Although enslaved peoples came from ethnically and culturally different regions of West Africa, they were classified as *Black*. Though slave owners came from different areas of Europe where they had been known by vague tribal names like Scythians, Celts, Gauls and Germani, they were classified as *White*.

Slavery and colonization produced over a century of “scientific” misinformation that attempted to classify human beings on the basis of their physical traits. Eventually, people were racialized into three major categories: Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucoid, with Caucasians awarded superior intelligence, physical beauty and moral character. Scientists argued over how to classify the many peoples that didn’t fit into these categories (such as the Finns, Malays and most of the indigenous people in the Americas). The messiness of the categories was unimportant to the political and economic objectives of racism. Systematically erasing the unique ethnic, tribal, and cultural backgrounds of the world’s people while elevating a mythical Caucasian race was a shameful exercise in egregiously bad science, but it endured because it supported the control of the world’s land, labor and capital by a powerful elite.⁶

Box 1: The birth and mutations of whiteness

From the beginning, the concept of race has been fluid, constantly accommodating to the changing needs of capital and the ruling class while undermining struggles for equality and liberation. For example, in the colonial Americas, there was little social difference between African slaves and European indentured servants. But when they began organizing together against their colonial rulers, the Virginia House of Burgesses introduced the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705. These laws established new property rights for slave owners; allowed for the legal, free trade of slaves; established separate trial courts for whites and Blacks; prohibited Black people from owning weapons and from striking a white person; prohibited free Black people from employing whites and allowed for the apprehension of suspected runaways. Much later, during the early 20th century, poor, light-skinned Irish Catholic immigrants living in the US were initially treated as an inferior race and experienced discrimination as non-white. As the Irish began to organize for their rights—often across racial barriers—they were steadily categorized as white, setting them apart politically—if not economically—from Black and indigenous people.⁷ Mediterranean people, some eastern Europeans and light-complexioned Latin Americans have had similar experiences.

Slavery had a tremendous influence on food and labor systems around the world and was the central pillar of capitalism's racial caste system until it was widely abolished in the late 19th century. In the US, after nearly three years of bloody civil war, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 released African-Americans living in Confederate states from slavery (though it took nearly two more years of war before ex-slaves could freely leave their plantations).⁸ The Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution finally put a legal end to slavery in the US in 1865. But after a “moment in the sun” African Americans living in the former Confederacy were quickly segregated and disenfranchised through “Jim Crow” laws designed to maintain the racial caste system in the absence of slavery.

Racial caste has systematically shaped the food system, particularly during periods of labor

shortage. During WWII for example, when much of the US's labor force was fighting in Europe and the Pacific, the *Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement* of 1942 imported Mexican peasants to keep the US food system running. Without them, the US could not have fought the war. After the war, the *Bracero Program* brought in over 4 million Mexican farmworkers. Mexican labor was cheap and legally exploitable. The “immigrant labor subsidy” transferred billions of dollars in value to the sector, turned WWII into a decades-long agricultural boon and transformed labor relations in agriculture.⁹

But just as African-Americans are not recognized for their role in establishing the US as a nation (or capitalism as its economic system), racial caste invisibilizes the contribution of Mexican farmworkers to the US's survival during WWII and stigmatizes Mexican-Americans as citizens. Similar scenarios have played out with Asian, Filipino and Caribbean immigrants. To this day, important sectors of the food systems in the US and Europe continue to be defined by dispossessed and exploited immigrant labor from the Global South. Their systematic mistreatment is justified by the centuries-old racial caste system.

Racism in the Food System

Calls to “fix a broken food system” assume that the capitalist food system used to work well. This assumption ignores the food system's long, racialized history of mistreatment of people of color. The food system is unjust and unsustainable but it is not broken—it functions precisely as the capitalist food system has always worked; concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental “externalities” disproportionately on to racially stigmatized groups.

Statistics from the US confirm the persistence of racial caste in the food system:

African-Americans once owned 16 million acres of farmland. But by 1997, after many decades of Jim Crow, several national farm busts and a generally inattentive (or obstructionist) Department of Agriculture (USDA), less than 20,000 Black farmers owned just 2 million acres of land.¹⁰ The rate

of Black land loss has been twice that of white land loss and today less than 1 million acres are farmed.^{11,12} According to the USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture, of the country's 2.1 million farmers, only 8% are farmers of color and only half of those are owners of land. Though their farm share is growing (particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers), people of color tend to earn less than \$10,000 in annual sales, produce only 3% of agricultural value, and farm just 2.8% of farm acreage.¹³

While white farmers dominate as operator-owners, farmworkers and food workers—from field to fork—are overwhelmingly people of color. Most are paid poverty wages, have inordinately high levels of food insecurity and experience nearly twice the level of wage theft than white workers. While white food workers' average incomes are \$25,024 a year, workers of color make only \$19,349 a year. White workers hold nearly 75% of the managerial positions in the food system. Latinos hold 13% and Black and Asian workers 6.5%.¹⁴

The resulting poverty from poorly paid jobs is racialized: Of the 47 million people living below the poverty line in the United States, less than 10% are white. African-Americans make up 27% of the poor, Native Americans 26%, Latinos 25.6% and Asian-Americans 11.7%.¹⁵

Poverty results in high levels of food insecurity for people of color. Of the 50 million food insecure people in the US 10.6% are white, 26.1% are Black, 23.7% are Latino and 23% are Native American.¹⁶ Even restaurant workers—an occupation dominated by people of color (who should have access to all the food they need)—are twice as food insecure as the national average.

Race, poverty and food insecurity correlate closely with obesity and diet-related disease; nearly half of African-Americans and over 42% of Latinos suffer from obesity. While less than 8% of non-Hispanic whites suffer from diabetes, 9% of Asian-Americans, 12.8% of Hispanics, 13.2% of non-Hispanic African-Americans and 15.9% of Indigenous people have diabetes. At \$245 billion a year, the national expense in medical costs and reduced productivity resulting from diabetes are staggering.¹⁷ The human and

economic burdens of diabetes and diet-related disease on low-income families of color are devastating.

Trauma, Resistance and Transformation: An equitable food system is possible

Recognizing racism as foundational in today's capitalist food system helps explain why people of color suffer disproportionately from its environmental externalities, labor abuses, resource inequities and diet related diseases. It also helps explain why many of the promising alternatives such as land trusts, farmers' markets, and community supported agriculture tend to be dominated by people who are privileged by whiteness.¹⁸ Making these alternatives readily accessible to people of color requires a social commitment to racial equity and a fearless commitment to social justice. Ensuring equity of access to healthy food, resources and dignified, living wage jobs, would go a long way towards "fixing" the food system.

Box 2 Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

"[The] great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity," which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source."¹⁹

The trauma of racism is inescapable. In addition to the pain and indignity of racialized mistreatment, people of color can internalize racial misinformation, reinforcing racial stereotypes. While white privilege benefits white communities, it can also

immobilize them with guilt, fear and hopelessness. Both internalized racism and white guilt are socially and emotionally paralyzing, and make racism difficult to confront and interrupt.

Difficult, but not impossible.

Since before the Abolition movement and the Underground Railroad of the mid-1800s, people have found ways to build alliances across racial divides. The history of the US food system is replete with examples of resistance and liberation: from the early struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to the Black Panther's food programs and the boycotts and strikes by the United Farm Workers. More recently, the Food Chain Workers Alliance have fought for better wages and decent working conditions. The increase of local food policy councils

run by people of color and the spread of Growing Power's urban farming groups reflect a rise in leadership by those communities with the most at stake in changing a system that some have referred to as "food apartheid." Oppressed communities have developed ways of healing historical trauma and there are peer counseling groups with skills for working through the immobilizing feelings of internalized oppression, fear, hopelessness and guilt. All of these resources and historical lessons can be brought into the food movement.

Racism still stands in the way of a "good food revolution." If the food movement can begin dismantling racism in the food system—and within the food movement itself—it will have opened a path not only for food system transformation, but for ending the system of racial caste.

Box 3 : Definitions

- **Interpersonal Racism:** This refers to prejudices and discriminatory behaviors where one group makes assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of other groups based on race. This set of prejudices leads to cruel intentional or unintentional actions towards other groups.
- **Internalized Racism:** In a society where one group is politically, socially and economically dominant, members of stigmatized groups, who are bombarded with negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth, may internalize those negative messages. It holds people back from achieving their fullest potential and reinforces the negative messages which, in turn, reinforces the oppressive systems.
- **Institutional Racism:** Where assumptions about race are structured into the social and economic institutions in our society. Institutional racism occurs when organizations, businesses, or institutions like schools and police departments discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly against certain groups of people to limit their rights. This type of racism reflects the cultural assumptions of the dominant group.
- **Structural Racism:** While most of the legally based forms of racial discrimination have been outlawed, many of the racial disparities originating in various institutions and practices continue and accumulate as major forces in economic and political structures and cultural traditions. Structural racism refers to the ways in which social structures and institutions, over time, perpetuate and produce cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. This can occur even in the absence of racist intent on the part of individuals.
- **Racialization:** This refers to the process through which 'race' (and its associated meanings) is attributed to something – an individual, community, status, practice, or institution. Institutions that appear to be neutral can be racialized, shaped by previous racial practices and outcomes so that the institution perpetuates racial disparities, or makes them worse. This is true of the criminal justice system, the education and health systems in our country, and so on.²⁰
- **"Reverse" Racism:** Sometimes used to characterize 'affirmative action' programs, but this is inaccurate. Affirmative action programs are attempts to repair the results of institutionalized racism by setting guidelines and establishing procedures for

finding qualified applicants from all segments of the population. The term 'reverse racism' is also sometimes used to characterize the mistreatment that individual whites may have experienced at the hands of individuals of color. This too is inaccurate. While any form of humans harming other humans is wrong, because no one is entitled to mistreat anyone, we should not confuse the occasional mistreatment experienced by whites at the hands of people of color with the systematic

and institutionalized mistreatment experienced by people of color at the hands of whites.

- **Racial Justice:** Racial justice refers to a wide range of ways in which groups and individuals struggle to change laws, policies, practices and ideas that reinforce and perpetuate racial disparities. Proactively, it is first and foremost the struggle for equitable outcomes for people of color.

Useful links

Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society: <http://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu>

Grassroots Policy Project: <http://www.strategicpractice.org>

Black Lives Matter: <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>

Unlearning Racism: <http://www.unlearningracism.org/>

Center for Social Inclusion: <http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/>

Growing Power: <http://growingfoodandjustice.org/race-and-the-food-system/dismantling-racism-resources/>

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Introduction to this special series

This Backgrounder is the first in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food

system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.

Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system. Different aspects of the topic can include land, labor, finance, food access, nutrition, food justice and food sovereignty organizations.

Food First is a “people’s think tank” dedicated to ending the injustices that cause hunger and helping communities to take back control of their food systems. We advance our mission through three interrelated work areas—research, education, and action—designed to promote informed citizen engagement with the institutions and policies that control our food.

398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618, USA
Tel: 510.654.4400
<http://foodfirst.org>
Email: info@foodfirst.org

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