Breaking the Cycle of White Dependence: A Call for Majority Self-Sufficiency

By Tim Wise

The experts call it "projection." When someone subconsciously realizes that a particular trait applies to them, and then attempts to locate that trait in others, so as to alleviate the stigma or self-doubt engendered by the trait in question.

It's a well-understood psychological concept, and explains much: like why men who are struggling with their sexuality are often the most outwardly homophobic. Or the way whites during slavery typified black men as rapists, even though the primary rapists were the white slaveowners themselves, taking liberties with their female property.

I got to thinking about projection recently, after receiving many an angry e-mail from folks who had read one or another of my previous commentaries, and felt the need to inform me that people of color are "looking for a handout," and are "dependent" on government, and of course, whites.

Such claims are making the rounds these days, especially as debate heats up about issues like reparations for enslavement, or affirmative action. And this critique is a prime example of projection, for in truth, no people have been as dependent on others throughout history as white folks.

We depended on laws to defend slavery and segregation so as to elevate us, politically, socially and economically. We depended on the Naturalization Act of 1790, to make all European immigrants eligible for nearly automatic citizenship, with rights above all persons of color. We depended on land giveaways like the Homestead Act, and housing subsidies that were essentially white-only for years, like FHA and VA loans. Even the GI Bill was largely for whites only, and all of these government efforts were instrumental in creating the white middle class. But it goes deeper than that.

From the earliest days, "whites" were dependent on the land and resources of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Since Europe offered no substantial riches from its soil, European economic advance was entirely reliant on the taking of other people's land by force, trickery or coercion.

Then these same Europeans relied on slave labor to build a new nation and to create wealth for themselves; wealth that was instrumental to financing the American Revolution, as well as allowing the textile and tobacco industries to emerge as international powerhouses. From 1790 to 1860 alone, whites and the overall economy reaped the benefits of as much as $40 billion in unpaid black labor.

Though apologists for black oppression enjoy pointing out that Africans often sold Africans into slavery, this too indicates how dependent whites have been on blacks: having to pay and bribe Africans to catch their own and deliver them to us so as to fatten the profits of European elites. We couldn't even do that by ourselves.

Then whites were dependent on Native peoples to teach us farming skills, as our ineptitude in this realm left the earliest
colonists starving to death and turning to cannibalism when the winters came in order to survive. We were dependent on Mexicans to teach us how to extract gold from riverbeds and quartz—critical to the growth of the economy in the mid- to late-1800's—and had we not taken over half their nation in an unprovoked war, the Pacific ports so vital to the modern U.S. economy would not have been ours, but Mexico's. Then we were dependent on their labor in the mid 20th century under the bracero program, through which over five million Mexicans were brought into the country for agricultural work, and then sent back across the border.

And we were dependent on Asian labor to build the railroads that made transcontinental commerce possible. 90% of the labor used to build the Central Pacific Railroad in the 1860's were Chinese, imported for the purpose, and exploited because the rail bosses felt they could better control them than white workers.

In fact, throughout U.S. labor history, whites have depended on the subordination of workers of color; on the marking of black and brown peoples as the bottom rung on the ladder—a rung below which they would not be allowed to fall. By virtue of this racialized class system whites could receive the "psychological wage" of whiteness, even if their real wages left them destitute. That too is dependence, and a kind that has marked even the poorest whites.

The plantation owners in the South were surely dependent on blacks, and for more than field labor. We relied on black women to suckle and care for our children. We relied on blacks to build the levees that kept rivers like the Mississippi from our doorstep. We relied on black girls to fan our sleeping white ladies so as to ensure their comfort. We relied on blacks to do everything: cooking, cleaning, making our beds, polishing our shoes, chopping the wood to heat our homes, and nursing us back to health when we fell ill. We prided ourselves on being (or aspiring to be) men and women of leisure, while black and brown folks did all the work. That and a lot more, is dependence, and yet we still insist they are the lazy ones.

And northern industrial capitalism relied on black labor too, especially to break the labor militancy of white ethnics by playing off one group of workers against the other. That too is dependence.

During the civil war, the Confederacy relied on blacks to cook for the troops and make the implements of war they would use in battle. Likewise, the Union relied on nearly 200,000 black soldiers to ultimately win the war. That too, is most assuredly dependence.

And white dependence on people of color continues to this day. Each year, African Americans spend over $500 billion with white-owned companies: money that goes mostly into the pockets of the white owners, white employees, white stockholders, and white communities in which they live. And yet we say black people need us? We think they are the dependent ones, relying as we assume they do on the pittance of an eroded welfare state? Now let's just cut the crap. Who would be hurt more: black folks if all welfare programs were shut down tomorrow, or white folks, if blacks decided they were through transferring half-a-trillion dollars each year to white people and were going to keep their money in their own communities?

Or what about the ongoing dependence of white businesses on the exploitation of black labor? Each year, according to estimates from the Urban Institute, over $120 billion in wages are lost to African Americans thanks to discrimination in labor markets. That's money that doesn't end up in the hands of the folks who earned it, but rather remains in the bank accounts of owners.

Our dependence on people of color even extends to our need to have them as spokespeople for our agendas: thus, the proliferation of high-profile conservatives of color who bash their own people for us; so we don't have to do it alone. Ken Hamblin, Clarence Thomas, Larry Elder, Walter Williams, and Linda Chavez: all of them, walking, talking, lawn jockeys, shining their lights for white supremacy.
And oh yes, our need for them is most certainly a form of dependence.

Then we rely on still more people of color to help further the agenda of white dominance; namely Asians, whom we proclaim to be "model minorities." "See how hard the Asians work," whites love to say, "why can't blacks be more like them?" Of course, we fail to mention the staggering poverty among Southeast Asians; or the fact that the most successful Asian sub-groups came to this country with business experience and usually college educations; or the fact that Asian Pacific Islanders still earn between 11-26% less than their white counterparts, even when their qualifications are equal. Never mind all that; the model minority myth has a power all its own, and is one more way in which whites have become dependent on those who are not.

Indeed, I'm beginning to think whites are so dependent on people of color that we wouldn't know what to do without them if there were no black and brown folks around; whites would have no one to blame but ourselves for the crime that occurred; no one to blame but ourselves when we didn't get the jobs we wanted; no one to blame but ourselves when our lives turned out to be less than we'd expected. In short, we need people of color—especially in a subordinate role—as a way to build ourselves up, and provide a sense of self-worth we otherwise lack.

To be sure, our very existence as white people is dependent on a negative: to be white has meaning only in terms of what it doesn't mean. To be white only has meaning in so far as it means not to be black or brown. Whiteness has no intrinsic meaning culturally; can anyone even articulate what "white culture" means? Not our various European cultures mind you—which do have meaning but have been largely lost to us in the mad dash to accept whiteness and the perks that come with it—but white culture itself.

In workshops I have asked white folks and people of color what they like about being black, white, or whatever they in fact may be. For African-Americans the answers always have to do with the pride they feel, coming from families who have struggled against the odds, fought injustice, persevered, and maintained dignity in the face of great obstacles. In other words, to be black has internal meaning, derived from the positive actions and experiences of black people themselves. Variations on the same theme tend to be expressed by Latinos, Asians and Indigenous peoples as well.

But for whites, if they can come up with anything, it is typically something about how nice it is not to have to worry about being racially profiled by police, or how nice it is not to be presumed less competent by employers, or discriminated against when applying for a loan, or looking for a home. In other words, for whites, our self-definition is wrapped up entirely in terms of what we are not—"the other." And for that to have any meaning whatsoever there first must be an "other" against which to contrast oneself.

And that is quite clearly the most significant dependence of all.