

A Word About Labels

I imagine that some people have a negative reaction, at least initially, to the phrase White Birminghamians for Black Lives. I do as well.

I think this is because at some deep level, the use of labels is always offensive. We know in our hearts that labeling ourselves and others comes from a bad place.

Social scientists tell us that race is a social construct, based not on measurable differences in physiology but rather on our history of division for the purpose of exploitation. We know this is true, and so the use of racial labels strikes us as impolite and off-putting, or worse, as crass and crude. It seems unnecessary to use these words, and better avoided.

I agree with all of that, and yet I realized that it is necessary at this time to make use of the labels as we work to expose them as obsolete and as lies.

What is the meaning of the word “white”, and what is the meaning of the word “black”? What is the content of those words?

“Whiteness” has essentially meant having the option, because of one’s skin color, to be oblivious to the mistreatment of those of darker color. It means having the luxury or privilege of avoiding the negative consequences of having a racial label applied to us at all. And being white has meant one of two things:

- being of the exploiting class economically, or
- identifying with the exploiting class and choosing not to see or raise objection to their manipulation of power for their own advantage.

“Blackness” has meant being the recipient of innumerable kinds and instances of discrimination and violence because of the social status assigned to people of African descent through all the generations of US history. And blackness has come to mean being of the community that oppression has produced, with both its positive and negative features.

I actually think that in the last eight years it is possible to see white people being jealous of black people because of their sense of community. Whites have felt left out as black people have had a president who regards them highly, and whom they highly regard. Whites were drawn to the man who most visibly disrespected the first black president, and then elected that man *their* president. They wanted a president who regarded *them* highly. They wanted to feel and experience the mutual affection that they could see that Obama gave and received from his supporters. It is abysmally sad and revealing that their longing for community, based on the empty value of “whiteness”, has given them (and the whole nation and world) a charlatan who betrays them with his every action, and that this is obvious to everyone but to those who elected him.

White Birminghamians for Black Lives makes the point that it is possible for whites to make another use for — create another way of — being white. Like the abolitionists and the civil rights allies before us, it is possible for white people to interpret whiteness as a responsibility to not be silent. In that sense, we do have a racial burden, a racial assignment, and it is that we do not have the luxury of remaining silent and at the same time retaining our self respect. That’s a pretty big burden. Not as big as the burden of fearing for our lives at the hands of the police, or of not being able to find employment commensurate with our skills and potential, or of being unable to get a decent loan rate, but a burden and a responsibility still. And why should we escape any special responsibility? Is life not something that is so beautiful and so precious that it is worth shouldering some responsibility for?

The name White Birminghamians for Black Lives is metaphorical. It means “all those who believe — white, brown, and black — that white people should shoulder their responsibility for bringing an end to racial exploitation, doing action together to make this point”. All are needed, all are necessary, all are welcome, and all are included.

So although I am repelled by racial labels, and feel that their invention and employment constitute one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the human family, I am using them to try to help bring about a world in which my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will find it unnecessary to keep them any longer.