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*Think Piece  
Rethinking Superiority: Reflections on Whiteness  
and the Cult of 'Progress'  
by Tim Wise*

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As of this coming year, high school students in Philadelphia, PA will be required to take a course in African American history in order to graduate. In a recent [column](#), I lent my support to the new prerequisite, and responded to those who have attacked the plan, most of whom have criticized such a course for being “divisive,” or too narrowly focused, or otherwise a distraction from the presumably more important (and unrelated) work of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Having grown accustomed to hostile e-mails in response to my internet-based essays, I was utterly unsurprised then by the missive I received, shortly after the piece went up on my website a few weeks ago. Therein, the author attacked the black history requirement, offering reasons for his objection that I suspect were far more honest than those put forth by most, and which reasons were also considerably more racist in both tone and content.

Indeed, his racial hostility virtually leapt off the page when he insisted among other things, that no sub-Saharan African nation had developed a wheel prior to contact with whites, and that ancient Egypt (which he grudgingly admitted was, as with modern-day Egypt, located in Africa) wasn't really African in the sense of being a black nation.

Finally, he self-confidently proclaimed that “blacks have contributed between nil and zilch” to American history, and thus were unworthy of any classroom attention, let alone an entire course dedicated to their non-achievement. To be more specific, my detractor insisted that blacks have contributed no technological advances, no scientific discoveries, or other inventions that would merit a class on Black History.

There is much one could say here, and perhaps some will question why I would even bother to respond at all. Yet the ubiquity with which such pedantry finds its way into my web browser suggests that letting it slide will hardly make such views go away. At the very least, this kind of vapid argumentation points up a number of disturbing conclusions about the people who forward it, and those who believe it – and let us be clear, with regard to the last bunch, the numbers are far greater than are willing to say so openly. Bottom line: racists almost always tell you more about themselves than the people they seek to denigrate, and this is no exception to that rule.

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First, let us take note of what appears to be an ironclad truism: namely, that those who rush to herald the superiority of their own group have themselves rarely accomplished anything. Rather, they seek to live vicariously off the achievements of others with whom they share nothing more than some distant national or ethnic lineage. They are singularly unimpressive, in most cases, when it comes to professional or personal greatness, however defined – and certainly as defined by their own terms. Along these lines, I feel confident that had my e-critic ever done anything in the fields of science and technology, such that he could point to his own life as evidence of white superiority, he would have told me so.

But of course, it is never the inventor who proclaims his or her work to be evidence of ethnic or genetic superiority; it is not the great playwright or sculptor who announces to the world that their art signifies the racial or cultural supremacy of the group to which they belong. Only life's losers seek out evidence of their own brilliance or potential in the works of others. Only those who secretly harbor suspicions of their own *inferiority* feel compelled, as a general rule, to insist upon how much better than you they are. Real superiority, measured along whatever axis one may choose, tends to demonstrate itself, without the need of cheerleaders.

As for my electronic adversary, it's not as if anything he said was new. Racists have long sought to dismiss the contributions made by folks of color – not only those made to science, art and literature, but even the importance of the manual labor to which millions were largely limited under slavery and apartheid. Several years ago, I recall that neo-Nazi David Duke dismissed the contributions made by black workers to the growth of the American republic, by suggesting that horses could have done the physical labor performed by slaves.

Putting aside the matter of how horses can be taught to harvest crops, or build levees, without which the homes and lands of the white planter class would have been washed away, there is another, more pressing issue. That others *could* have done the work in question hardly matters: the fact is, others *didn't*; black slaves *did*, and that makes all the difference.

Lots of folks *could* do lots of things. I *could* pick up the garbage every week in my own neighborhood and haul it to the city landfill. But I don't. Three guys do – two black, one white, none of them, presumably with my level of formal education – whose contribution to the community in which I live is absolutely indispensable: more so, indeed, than my own. That I *could* do their job is beside the point. I don't, and unless they do it, my block is screwed. But under the logic of elitists, their contribution is minor, while the stockbroker who may (against my wishes) choose to move into my neighborhood, would be considered a model and vitally important citizen.

Getting back to the point: Had it not been for that unimpressive labor on the part of blacks, the American Revolution itself would not have happened, dependent as it was on profits from industries that relied on slave labor. In that sense, to suggest that blacks have contributed nothing to American history, is a logical absurdity because in the absence of black labor there would have been no US American history to which they (or anyone else) could have contributed.

As for black folks' supposed lack of achievement in terms of technology, science and the like – as well as the utterly specious claim about the lack of the wheel in pre-slavery Africa – I could spend several thousand words referring readers to the evidence on this subject, compiled by African and European scholars alike, which demonstrates both the racism and absurdity of such arguments. But for those truly interested in this material – and that would exclude pretty much anyone inclined to take my critic's diatribe seriously – you would be better served to seek out the information yourself, seeing as how it will be far more adequately presented therein than I could do here. You can begin with the works of Cheikh Anta Diop, Molefi Asante, and Walter Rodney, among others; and for those whose racism leads them to dismiss black scholars on these subjects, you can always examine the voluminous writings of Basil Davidson: one of the most respected

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Africa scholars in modern history, who is decidedly both white and British.

But for my purposes, I would suggest a different approach to these kinds of slurs on persons of African descent: one that does not focus on a tit-for-tat comparison of the accomplishments of whites and blacks, Europeans and Africans, in an attempt to tally up the ledger and proclaim one or the other the historical victor. Nor would this approach spend considerable energy seeking to prove even those things which are eminently provable: that indeed there were several African civilizations (including sub-Saharan) in existence while Europeans were still, for all intent and purposes, sitting in the woods.

Rather, I would argue that the entire basis for comparison offered by racist commentators is flawed; the paradigm under which greatness is being assessed is problematic, and the premises underlying the slanders upon Africa and the accolades for Europe are wrongheaded. In short: the Europhile interpretation of what constitutes cultural superiority and accomplishment is itself subjective, and more than that, terribly stultifying as a measure of human worth.

To suggest that we should gauge the legitimacy of a culture based upon its technological achievements is to elevate the importance of *things* over and above the importance of people. It would require that we extend the label, superior, to any culture with advanced technological prowess, even if that technology were put to use in such a way as to exterminate others, or ultimately in such a way that led to the extinction even of the culture that created it.

We would be forced to conclude that any technological advance whatsoever, no matter how dysfunctional, makes the group to which its creator belongs superior and more worthy of praise than others. So instead of viewing the creation of nuclear weaponry (a technological “contribution” to be sure) as evidence of a fundamentally pathological and destructive tendency among the whites who brought it forth, we are expected to praise the genius behind it, taking no note of the consequences now made possible by such “progress.”

By contrast, hunter-gatherer societies that nurture respect for one another, mutual interdependence, compassion and cooperation – and who by and large engage in little or no predation against others or the land base upon which they depend – would be considered inferior in this cosmology. That such an approach for ordering societies as better and worse is tendentious, to say the least, should be obvious, but won't be to those who have bought into the white supremacist view of things.

Furthermore, the “great man” paradigm of historical analysis – which is what my attacker's e-mail was promoting – by definition constitutes an assault on the dignity and worth of the vast majority of the globe's inhabitants, including almost all citizens of even the most advanced nation-states. After all, few of us will ever invent anything of note, compose a symphony, discover a cure for a deadly disease, or manage to accomplish any of the other things that the “great man” theorists extol as the only important human victories. By the standards of ruling class history, most Americans, of whatever race, are essentially useless, and have accomplished nothing.

Likewise, entire cultures (and not just black and brown ones) come up short in such an analysis. Iceland, for example, has lots of folks who would be considered white, and very few who wouldn't be, yet they have hardly made a huge mark in the worlds of science, technology, or literature; so too for any number of Central European nations. What we think of as European Civilization is really quite limited: composed of the historic, scientific and artistic achievements of only a handful of nations, and even then, involving only a small fraction of the persons of those states, most of whose citizens have been little more than peasants for the bulk of recorded history.

Thus, if we suggest that “technological achievements” or contributions are what mark a people as having history worth knowing about, then we would have to teach almost nothing about Finland, as with Cameroon:

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a coupling most racists would reject, but which their own taxonomy of relevant history makes necessary.

Beyond all this, it was actually the next part of the angry e-mail that struck me as especially worthy of discussion: the part after its author claimed that blacks had contributed nothing to American history. This was the part where he proffered the opinion that rather than contribute, blacks had “merely *survived* American history.”

The snide remark was made as if to suggest that survival, even of the hideous racial history of this land – from being bought and sold, to raped, to having fingers cut off for learning to read, to being lynched, or relegated to the lowest-rung jobs and living in the poorest neighborhoods – counted for *nothing*. As if surviving such history – even if we accept the nonsensical proposition that this was all that black folks had managed to accomplish – was no more impressive than chewing gum and walking at the same time.

Imagine, to survive attempted cultural and physical genocide does not, on this view, merit wonder or amazement, let alone a class to discuss how such a thing could be possible: this, in a nation that has made surviving a few weeks on an island *with television cameras and emergency medical assistance at the ready* something for which the last person standing should be rewarded *one million dollars*. In a nation where surviving the consumption of raw pig snouts or bull testicles might well win you \$50,000 on *Fear Factor*.

Since when has survival been seen as such an unimpressive accomplishment? Does not surviving the concerted attempt to destroy or at least subjugate one’s people say *something* about the character of those who manage the feat? Does not leading a struggle for freedom, and the advancement of human dignity not suggest that the persons in question have made a substantial contribution to the nation in which they live, and indeed the world? By what moral, ethical or practical standard could one fairly argue otherwise?

Interestingly enough, it was once believed that survival of one’s racial group demonstrated the group’s superiority, and as such, blacks would likely die off, unable to make it in a world where their biological defects would cause them to go the way of the dinosaur. Whites, it was argued were superior, and this was proven – or so the argument went – by the way in which whites *survived* any obstacle thrown in our path: the journey to the new world, harsh winters in the colonies, wars with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, or with Mexico. What marked peoples of color as inferior was their presumed *inability* to survive, especially blacks after emancipation, who were thought incapable of fending for themselves absent the guiding hand of their masters.

Now, seeing as how predictions of black extinction have fallen flat, and given the ways in which African Americans have thrived when given full opportunity to do so, racists have, by necessity changed their shtick. Now survival, as my electronic interlocutor would have it, means nothing, and is certainly not the evidence of superiority that his predecessors in the cult of white supremacy thought it to be. How very convenient for him: changing the tune to fit the bias.

To suggest that surviving the predatory ways of one’s captors and oppressors counts for less than the oppressor’s success at developing gadgets and commodities (but even then, only after having stolen the land, labor and mineral resources of other peoples first), is to turn technology into a fetish. It is to conclude that the person who creates instruments that clear-cut forests more speedily, that remove minerals from the Earth more expeditiously, and then belch poisonous by-products into the air once the minerals are converted to energy, is superior and worthy of more praise than the person who *merely survives* the destruction, but contributes far less to it.

By the logic of such objects fetishism, we should praise Dow for giving us Napalm, and view them as more worthy of historical praise than the Vietnamese civilians who *merely survived* the trenches burned into their backs by the product of all that white male genius. We should spend more time in class ruminating on the

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technological aptitude of the folks who create torture devices – think shock batons or genital clamps hooked up to car batteries – than we should to the victims of their torture, who do nothing except occasionally *survive* the depravity of the first bunch. Oppenheimer gets the praise, while the citizens of Hiroshima become a historical footnote.

It all makes sense, once you accept the internal logic of a culture fascinated by death and destruction – especially its ability to produce both with such amazing alacrity. Mere survival isn't nearly impressive enough, as it doesn't portend the kicking of anyone's ass, and what good are people who don't destroy and displace others?

Mere survival implies passivity, it's too feminine (God forbid) in a culture that values and venerates the masculine, and even then in only its most pathological manifestations. Men (*real* men at least) don't just survive: survival is for pussies. Real men create, they build, they destroy others who get in their way; they steal others' land, rape others' bodies, make the world over in their image, consider themselves God, and then proceed to act as though their delusional messianism were an indication of strength rather than their own spiritual depravity.

How cut off from your own humanity must you be so as to suggest that technology and other inventions are the ultimate measure of human worth? After all, a robot is capable of making any of the *things* that those who worship technology might consider evidence of cultural superiority. But no robot can be programmed to lead a struggle for human freedom, democracy, or liberty. No robot can be made to raise a child into an adult, or write a novel filled with pathos and irony, or any human feeling whatsoever. No robot can nurse a sick puppy back to health, solve any of a thousand moral dilemmas faced by real people everyday, write a screenplay that can make us cry, or devise something as lofty as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. To thus consider technology, ultimately *stuff*, as the evidence of a culture's superiority, is to engage in the ultimate in auto-dehumanization. It is to utterly miss the point of creation: whether seen as a God-given gift or an act of nature.

Surely, superiority in any meaningful sense is located less in one's ability to create and destroy, than in one's ability to empathize, and to *stop* doing the things one is doing that wreak havoc on the planet and one's neighbors. To develop the capacity to kill and maim on a grand scale is not a sign of superiority. To be capable of saying you're sorry, even for making the effort, might well be, but good luck finding anyone among the masters of the universe willing to do *that*.

And so as not to engage in too extreme a version of anthropocentrism, no robot can accomplish even that which bees accomplish everyday: pollinating plants that bring forth fruit, nuts and berries, and thereby keep the chain of life trotting along. In other words, even creatures to which we typically extend little if any credit for their intelligence, are more important to life on this planet than even the most impressive pile of technological junk upon which we are fixated at any given moment.

And if that pile of junk threatens our survival – either because the extraction of the minerals needed to produce it has degraded the ecosystem, or because the machine itself has as its purpose the bringing of death, as with guns, bullets or bombs – then we might more properly view its creators as either crazy, evil or both. We should certainly not consider them superior, unless our twisted concept of superiority involves the ability to extinguish life on the planet – unless the will to omnicide has come to represent, for us, the pinnacle of human achievement.

Sadly, perhaps that's the problem: perhaps we really *do* define superiority this way. The ability to rape the Earth, to destroy that which either God, or nature (or both) have given us, places us, in some sick way, *above God*, at least in our minds. By our actions we seem to be saying that although God may have been able to create the world in just six days, we can and will destroy it, if not as quickly, just as completely. The last time

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God tried to destroy the world he *failed* with that 40–day and 40–night flood thing. But what kind of destruction is that? That’s some minor league deity bullshit: we’ve brought on *global warming*. Checkmate, bitch.

So by all means, go out there and have a good time for what’s left of the summer, from which you can seek relief by downing a glass of water, containing dangerous levels of mercury. Just make sure to slap on some SPF–50 first – which we brilliant white folks *also* created – and don’t forget to thank us for saving your ungrateful life.

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