

Not an Inevitable Fact of Nature

'Seeing Whiteness in the Food System' Digs into Racism's Man-made Roots

By Brian DeVore

Before we truly address racial inequity in this country, we need to debunk certain myths that have driven antagonistic relationships between different groups. And one of the biggest, and most damaging, misconceptions is that race is a scientific, biological fact. In fact, the Genome Project has revealed that all human beings are 99.9% the same genetically.

"Nature did not make people into distinct races," said John Biewen, a veteran journalist and documentarian, during a recent Land Stewardship Project online presentation. "People constructed race."

Biewen was the keynote speaker for a "Seeing Whiteness in the Food System" online study group put together by LSP. For several weeks in March, over two dozen LSP members worked to trace the origins of "whiteness" in this country and how it has impacted people of color involved in our food and farming system.

"At the core of LSP's work is justice, stewardship and democracy," said Elizabeth Makarewicz, an LSP membership support specialist who organized the study series. "We believe we can't have a healthy food and farming system without creating healthy opportunities for all," she added. "Because whiteness is treated as the norm, it can be incredibly difficult for me as a white person to recognize how my race informs my life. But the work is well worth it — when we can articulate how whiteness shows up in our food and farming system, we are better equipped to create a new culture of inclusion."

The study group's discussions were guided by Biewen's work as a journalist. He is the audio program director for Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and, as a public radio journalist, has frequently covered issues related to racial inequity. Specifically, the study group examined the issues brought up in Biewen's groundbreaking Scene on Radio podcast series, "Seeing White." Through the 14-part program, he used interviews with historians, researchers, and activists to take a deep dive into the roots of racial inequality. Biewen is white and grew up in Mankato, Minn. He started his career with *Minnesota Public Radio*, and he said for many years he had a

pretty abstract view of issues related to the injustice's people of color face: "Racism is wrong, racists are bad people. I didn't feel personally implicated."

But in recent years, he's realized that it's not just people with "hoods and swastikas" who are the problem — it's a systemic issue related to how "whiteness" controls so many aspects of society. Because white people dominate, that puts the responsibility on them to deal with the issue of systemic racism. And to begin to deal with it, we need to address what's true and what's false.

For example, many assume racism started with some sort of "tragic misunderstanding." But it's actually rooted in a false narrative steeped in pure economics — Portuguese slave traders invented the concept of "race" in the 1400s to justify subjugating people of African origin and drawing wealth from their labor. It made it easier to exploit people

'Seeing White' Podcast

John Biewen's "Seeing White" podcast series is available at www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white.

Racial Justice & LSP

To stay up-to-date on LSP's racial equity work, including upcoming workshops, events, and opportunities to engage with other people doing important work in their communities, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/racialjustice.

if they were considered an inferior "other."

"It's about money, power, and control," said Biewen.

Once one realizes that the concept of race has been around since the 15th Century, it becomes clear it's not just an issue of attitudes and individual bigotry. "It's a tool to divide us and to prop up economic, political, and social systems that advantage some people and disadvantage others," said Biewen. "It's a handy tool to convince white folks who may or may not be getting a great deal out of our extremely stratified society to support the status quo. Powerful people leverage and enforce this weapon to maintain money and power in the hands of white people, and of a few white people in particular."

Those ideas came across the ocean to America and made it easier to justify slavery

here. Unfortunately, the conclusion of the Civil War didn't end the problem. Non-whites were not allowed to obtain land under the Homestead Act and because of racial red-lining in neighborhoods, many were denied access to government backed mortgages for housing provided by the New Deal. Even the benefits of the post-World War II GI Bill were not fully available to Black people in practice, although they were supposed to be by law. All of that makes it extremely difficult for people of color to build the kind of wealth that can be passed on to future generations. And today, there is a concerted effort to undercut the advances made during the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s by, among other things, limiting voting rights.

Another myth is that racial strife and racial injustice is mostly a problem south of the Mason-Dixon line. A look at the statistics tallying the results of racism — discrimination in education, housing, and the justice system, for example — shows these issues are as prevalent in the North as they are in the South. In fact, many of the most segregated cities in the U.S. are in the North. Based on race and socioeconomic status, Minnesota has one of the widest student achievement gaps in the nation, for example.

Biewen struggles with his own ignorance around the history of racial injustice. As a native of Mankato, he said he's embarrassed that he knew little about the 1862 hanging of 38 Dakota men in his hometown. It is the biggest government-sanctioned mass execution in American history.

"The violent extraction of Native American land made room for people who look like me," said the journalist.

So what do white people do? Biewen said it does little good to feel shame and guilt — foundations for a racially divided society were put in place long before any of us were born. But since many white people have benefited from this system, it's their responsibility to do something about the injustices it's spawned. That means listening to people who are being discriminated against, standing up in our local communities to injustices we witness, and supporting groups led by people of color. Biewen hopes that the intense attention that's been given to racial injustice since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis isn't a temporary "sugar high" that results in the country dropping off to sleep again.

"Will enough of us, including enough white people, stay awake and stay active to the point where we'll make real and lasting change?" he asked. "I genuinely believe that we all stand to benefit if we could create a society that's not built on the exploitation or oppression of anyone." □