

America in the Era of Post-Racial Racism

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Abstract

The history of America has been closely pegged with racism and discrimination against African Americans. It's an issue the founding fathers struggled to address in the early stage of the great nation and, as a result, it has continued to haunt American society during slavery, Jim Crow's segregation, and modern day legalized a systematic racism. Since the inception of America, the house of democracy has been plagued with cracks of racism and discrimination against African Americans, women and other minority groups. The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency stirred wonder throughout the world and some hastily predict the demise of racism. Obama's presidency does not end racism; instead it has been marked by tragedies and attacks due to senseless violence. Thus, on the eve of electing a new President with two most discussed and unpopular candidates, Racism is still a puzzle. My point is that racism is deeply rooted and highly flexible, not that it is completely immune to amelioration. As it has for hundreds of years, race-or, more accurately, "racism"--will remain a principal means through which American society structures and justifies inequality.

Keywords: Racism, demise, slavery, discrimination, inequality.

1. Introduction

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."(King Jr.1963).

The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency is racially momentous. Does Dr King's dream come true? Does the election of President Obama end racism in America?

Few would gainsay that the elevation of an African American to the most powerful and most public position in American national life signals a remarkable step toward racial equality. But what exactly does Obama's election portend for race in America?

It's true that, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency has inspired many to marvel at the seeming evaporation of race as a basis for social ordering in the United States, a euphoria often expressed in proclamations that we now live in a "post-racial" America. The very fact of his ascendancy to the country's most powerful position suggests that a sea change in race relations has already occurred; simultaneously, his elevation to the most public position of national authority guarantees that for the next several years, at least, conversations on race, and perhaps even on racism, will occur almost daily, likely furthering racial progress. After eight years of Obama's presidency race dialogue is far from being the best. Besides, Obama's presidency does not succeed in uprooting the roots of this deep-seated social cancer, which is racism. Worse, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is too high; the Blacks and the minorities' incarceration rates are exponentially increasing; the number of unarmed minorities killed by police is appalling. Somewhere else, the tumultuous years of 2014 and 2015 in some U.S metropolitan cities and the killing of five policemen in Dallas shouldn't let any researcher indifferent. Thus, these social turmoil obviously indicate that America, the great nation is sitting on a powder keg. Last but not least, Barack Obama's Dallas Police Memorial Address delivered on 12 July 2016 confirms to what extent this issue requires scrutiny. This paper also aims at suggesting ways and means of building a greater and a fairer America.

2. From Martin Luther King Jr. to President Obama: Racism, a social cancer

As Dr. King, Trina, Stephanie, and President Obama reminded us,

"The promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Like cancer, racism/white supremacy is a societal illness. To people of color, who are the victims of racism/white supremacy, race is a filter through which they see the world. Whites do not look at the world through this filter of racial awareness, even though they also comprise a race." Trina Grillo & Stephanie M. Wildman.

“Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven’t fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students.” President Barack H.Obama.

Some fifty- three years after the march on Washington, African Americans and other minority groups lag far behind their white counterparts in enjoying the America’s economic pie and the American dream. The following gloomy board on race relations in terms of Education, Poverty and Justice leads us to conclude that All men are created equal but some Americans are more equal than others.

The landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 established that the state laws that had created separate public schools for African American and white students were unconstitutional and would no longer be part of American society, thus ending racial segregation in public schools. This decision overturned the 1896 ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had upheld the state laws requiring racial segregation as long as the facilities were “*separate but equal*”. “*Separate but equal*” was built on notions of white supremacy, which provided legal justification for “Jim Crow” laws that required separate accommodations for whites and blacks in many U.S. states and cities, laws that continued right into the 1960s. The *Brown* decision was supposed to end segregation within the American public schools system and ultimately lead to the destruction of racial discrimination in other areas of American life. The idea of an integrated education society where all colors can become one and enjoy the benefits of this great nation remains lost and continues to be embedded into the notion of race- based education. Despite the legalized eradication of school segregation, Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project reported that schools today are more segregated than they were in past. The report shows that U.S. schools are becoming more segregated in all regions for both African American and Latino students. The Civil Rights Project also reported that we are celebrating a victory over segregation at a time when schools across the nation are becoming increasingly segregated. (Gallup Poll, 2013).

Some fifty-three years after the March on Washington and the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, 76% of African Americans attend segregated schools according to The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, which reported that “across the country, 43 percent of Latinos and 38 percent of blacks attend schools where fewer than 10 percent of their classmates are whites.”(CRP 2012).

The Civil Rights Project at UCLA also reported that more than one in seven black and Latino students attend schools where less than 1 percent of their classmates are white. According to a New York Times article by N.P. Kleinfield in the 2009-10 school years, half of New York City’s public schools were 90 percent black and Hispanic. Progress has been limited since the days of the Little Rock 9 and the quality of education depends on the zip code that you live in; white suburban students remain ever more isolated from interactions with students of other races and classes.(Kleinfield 2011).

Segregation of Latino students are most pronounced in California, New York and Texas, while in some states, inner city schools are mostly black or brown. The most segregated cities for blacks include Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Philadelphia and Washington. D.C. Gary Orfield, Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA indicated that “Extreme segregation is becoming more common.” (Gary 2012). According to Professors Feagin and Barnett,

“...despite the positive effects in education and other areas resulting from the Court’s *Brown* decision, the decision has by no means been successful in dismantling institutionalized racism in American education”. They note that, “although schools may be officially desegregated, they nevertheless remain effectively segregated due to the following: discrimination in schools by administrators, teachers, and students; racial bias in school curriculum; the separation of students into different ability tracks reflecting racial, class, and gender stratification; and the use of standardized testing that contains significant racial and class bias.(Feagin& Barnett 2005).

According to author Gene A. Budig’s (2013) “No simple answers to racial inequality,” educational achievement in 2010 is important not only unto itself but also because it directly relates to levels of health, employment, income and civic engagement. Average public high school graduation rates for whites are 83%; for blacks 66.1% and Hispanics 71.4%. Low-income, Hispanic and African-American students are more likely to need remediation than their wealthier white peers (41% of Hispanic students and 42% of African-American students require remediation, compared to 31% of white students.) The percentage of 25 to 29-year-olds who have a bachelor's degree is 39% for whites, 20% for blacks, and 13% for Hispanics. The study also indicates that National Assessment of Student Progress score gaps between blacks and whites in mathematics and reading have not changed in 20 years. Schools are becoming more segregated: Approximately 4% of black and Hispanic students attend schools that are more than 90% minority, up from less than a third in 1988.

This continued racial inequality in educational opportunities can be attributed to a number of factors: (1) underperforming, poorly financed schools characterized by low quality of teaching, large class sizes, and inadequate facilities that perpetuate underachievement by minority students; (2) school assignment policies that

promote segregation; (3) school district boundaries that are coterminous with town boundaries and local land use, zoning, and taxation powers; (4) systems of ability grouping and tracking that consistently retain or place minority students in lower level classes with less exposure to curriculum that builds critical analytical skills; (5) failure to counteract differences in parental income and educational attainment--factors that impact a child's development and which often correlate with race; and (6) lower teacher and administrator expectations of minority students.(John& Callie 2007). Furthermore the issue of race, racism and education is exacerbated by white flight, defector racial segregation. In fact, education for whites, black and brown students depends on the zip codes they live in.

Today, the average white child attends a school where 77 percent of the other students are white. The average black student attends a high school where only 30 percent of the other students are White. For example, in New York State, 60 percent of all Black students, including those in New York City, attend schools that are at least 90 percent Black. Nationally, 76 percent of Latinos attend predominantly minority schools. (John& Callie 2007). This increased segregation is problematic for a number of reasons, racially segregated minority schools tend to have dramatically fewer resources and employ less experienced teachers. These disparate educational resources lead to larger class sizes, substandard facilities, lower per pupil spending, and fewer counseling services. Furthermore, segregated minority schools are more likely to be housed in high-poverty neighborhoods that have high crime rates and limited access to community resources that enhance learning and development. (John &Callie 2007).

The implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* remains one of the most disappointing policies in America's civil rights history and the challenge of giving a good education for every American citizen still remains a mere dream . Does Obama's election ends economic inequalities among Americans?

The American dream which is the notion that all Americans control their own destiny and that with hard work, discipline, and skills, economic prosperity lies just around the corner. If only Dr King were alive, he would notice that he had waged a vain war on poverty--since in America today, the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. If only Dr King were alive Dr. King would no doubt be alarmed at the economic plight of many Americans in 2016. As the following economic trends through history in America show.

Over the course of U.S. history, each successive generation of Americans has done better than the previous generation; Julia et al. (2008) the rising economic tide has tended to lift all boats. Income inequality, however, has risen since the late 1960s. (Julia et al.2008).There is more space between those at the top and those at the bottom, and people at the higher end of the economic hierarchy tend to improve their economic positions at a faster rate, and with greater success, than those at the lower end. (Julia et al.2008) . In other words, the tide has not lifted all boats equally. In 1973, for example, the median wage was \$12.53 an hour. (Edelman 2005). In 2003, the median wage was \$13.62. (Edelman 2005). That is a difference of \$1.09. Thus, in 2003, half of all full-time workers earned only a little more than the same cohort was making thirty years ago. While wages at the bottom were frozen, the salaries of CEOs at large companies rose at staggering rates. By one report, CEO salaries increased from 42 times the rate of entry-level workers in 1982 to approximately 411 times that rate in 2004. (James et al.2006). One consequence of all of this is that today, income distribution in the United States is highly concentrated at the top, with the top 1% of the population earning more than 20% of all income and the top 10% earning almost half of all income. (David 2007). The disparities are even greater when it comes to wealth, which includes not only income, but home equity, stocks and bonds, and the value of jewelry, furniture, and other possessions.(Rakesh et al.2011).

Moreover, notwithstanding the rags-to-riches fairy tales that have captured the imaginations of so many Americans, the likelihood of moving from the bottom of the economic hierarchy to the top is small. Researchers recently found that "42[%] of children born to parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution remain in the bottom, while 39[%] born to parents in the top fifth remain at the top." (Isaacs2011) These figures are "twice as high as would be expected by chance."(Rakesh et al.2011). In addition, "[o]nly 6[%] of children born to parents with family income at the very bottom move to the very top." (Rakesh et al.2011). Thus, it seems the tale of economic prosperity that is so emblematic of the American Dream is for many just that--a dream. In the immortal words of Ray Charles, "them that is got are them that gets."(Charles 1960).

Despite this alarming evidence of growing economic inequality in the United States, there has been little sustained advocacy of note around this issue since the 1960s. President Johnson declared a war on poverty, but it was eclipsed and drained of resources by the Vietnam War.(Guian et al. 2012). For a brief moment, Hurricane Katrina caused some academics and members of the press to pause and examine issues of class, but that too has seemingly fizzled. (Kristi 2008) And many will recall John Edwards' eight-state poverty tour as part of his 2008 bid for the Presidency,(John 2007) an undertaking which proved unsuccessful.

In short, Economic empowerments of the ethnic races in the 21st century, legalized and systematic discrimination and access to opportunities all continue to hamper the dream of economic prosperity among the minority groups.

Turning to American criminal justice system, the last news are far from being better. Even the most

cursory engagement with American criminal justice at the start of the twenty-first century drives home the twin points that the United States puts people under the control of the correctional system at an anomalously high rate, and that it shuts behind bars an overwhelmingly disproportionate number of black and brown persons. A 2009 report shows that one in every thirty-one adults in the United States is in prison or on parole or probation; broken down by race, that is one in every eleven African Americans, one in twenty-seven Latinos, and one in forty-five whites.(Pew Center on the States, 2009) . These two facts extremely high rates of subjection to the “carceral” system and the highly disproportionate targeting of nonwhites-form the essence of racialized mass incarceration.(David 2001) . A dramatic, unprecedented expansion in the rate as well as the social impact of incarceration in the United States has been underway since the late 1960s. Between 1970 and 2003, the number of people in state and federal prisons serving at least one year behind bars rose from around 200,000 to 1.4 million.(Mauer 2006) . At the end of that period, county jails warehoused another 700,000 persons either awaiting trial or serving sentences of under a year, while a further 4.7 million persons were on probation or parole. (Mauer 2006) . Putting these numbers together leads to the astounding conclusion that in 2003 the correctional system held under its coercive thumb *more than one in every twenty* adult males in the United States. (Mauer 2006) This incarceration rate, the highest in the world, exceeds the highest rate in Europe by 500 percent.(Loic 2008) The United States has 5 percent of the world's population, but holds 25 percent of the planet's prisoners.(Butler 2009).

It is generally agreed that discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin is morally wrong and a violation of the principle of equality. The equality principle requires that those who are equal be treated equally based on similarities, and that race not be a relevant consideration in that assessment (May and Sharratt 1994: 317.) May and Sharratt’s report shows a number of biases in our criminal justice system that one can only conclude that RACE continue to define the role of our criminal justice system in the 21st century. According to Michael Sclafani’s Civil Rights in Present Day America, “In the year 2010 there were 220,700 black individuals that were incarcerated for some reason, compared to 38,000 white people during the same year.” (The Center for American Progress 2012). These numbers are astounding compared to the entire population of African Americans in the country. With these statistics you would never think that this big of a gap would exist in the number of people who are incarcerated during the year. There is a difference of 182,700 blacks compared to whites in prison, which shows that the rate of African Americans being incarcerated is exponentially higher than the rate of white American incarcerations in society. All these statistics on African American incarcerations show that there is a major difference between African Americans being arrested and imprisoned compared to other races.

According to the Sentencing Project in 2013 report, «One in every three black males born today can expect to go to prison at some point in their life, compared with one in every six Latino males, and one in every 17 white males, if current incarceration trends continue.»(Sentencing Project report 2013). The report shows the staggering racial disparities that permeate the American criminal justice system and concluded that “Racial minorities are more likely than white Americans to be arrested,” the report explains. “Once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted; they are more likely to face stiff sentences.” The report also cites, “The disparities don’t end with arrests. Because blacks and Latinos are generally poorer than whites, they are more likely to rely on court-appointed public defenders, who tend to work for agencies that are underfunded and understaffed. What is more alarming is the criminal justice system war on drugs and minority incarceration rates.

Also, “Racial disparities within the justice system have been exacerbated by the war on drugs. The drug war led the country’s population of incarcerated drug offenders to soar from 42,000 in 1980 to nearly half a million in 2007. From 1999 to 2005, African Americans constituted about 13 percent of drug users, but they made up about 46 percent of those convicted for drug offenses.” (Sentencing Project report 2013)

Whatever the arguments are, there is a direct connection to race, racism and our criminal justice system and the underlying issue remains that race continues to play an important part in all public policy implementation. Not only in poverty, education and criminal justice, but in so many other facets of American society, race continues to define who Americans are and takes away the best of what American can become. In this line of thought, President Obama is then right when he hammered during his address at a Dallas memorial for five slain police officers,

“ racism persists across the country, and none of us is entirely innocent” or immune, including our police departments... white people and people of color experience the criminal justice system differently .Blacks are more likely to become incarcerated and more likely to get the death penalty for the same crime.” President Barack H.Obama.

President being at his wits’ end, and showing his impotence for not having succeeded in fixing racism puzzle, he confessed: “I’m not naive; I’ve spoken at too many memorials during the course of this presidency. I’ve hugged too many families that lost a loved one to senseless violence.” President Barack H.Obama.

Will the next tenant of the White House give up the fight against this social scourge? Aren't there any possibilities for change?

As a house divided against itself cannot stand, what should be done for setting up a greater and a fairer America?

3. Building a greater and a fairer America

« (...) But I have asserted a firm conviction – a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people – that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds – by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.” President Barack H. Obama.

“I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories. We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust... We must dissent because America can do better, because America has no choice but to do better.” Thurgood Marshall

America has no choice but to do better, America has no choice but to build the great and the fair nation of which the founding fathers were dreaming of--“ We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and are endowed with some inalienable rights that is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” (America declaration of Independence 1776).

Electing a black man in the White House is a good thing, but it's not enough. From this perspective, duty bearers should wage war against this ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malady--racism in every levels of American society. If nothing is done we are not far from the break-up of the rainbow society, which is America. Witness the alarm bell put on through the massive protests against racial profiling and police brutality across major metropolitan cities in the US, and the slaying of five police officers in Dallas on July 2016. It's then necessary to develop strategies for change at societal level.

Over the past several decades, African Americans have been victims of racial profiling and police brutality. More than any other racial and ethnic group, they have been subjected to unnecessary stop and frisk, humiliations, racially motivated beatings, and even death by police officers throughout the United States. The dialogue to eradicate the demise of structural racism and institutional oppression against the African American community must continue. The question remains: How can we change the trajectory of race relations between black and white Americans; to rid the negative stereotypical opinions, racist perceptions and attitudes against the African American community and become a nation that is truly “post-racial”? Historical events over several centuries have been written and discussed, however the Trayvon Martin case served as a catalyst for greater awareness of the deadly impact of negative stereotypes.

To continue the dialogue of race relations and the incorporation of societal reform, Jost (2013) indicates that, “civil liberty advocates and minority groups are pressuring law enforcement agencies to eliminate racial and ethnic profiling and police brutality within their practices.” According to Bah & Lawrence (2000), there tend to be opposing viewpoints on racial profiling and police brutality in the news media. Very often, policing debates in the media tend to be either “institutionally driven” or “event-driven.”

Meaning that while elected politicians and police departments debate the issues of the policing institutions, minority leaders and civil rights advocates “have successfully capitalized on dramatic incidents of police brutality making a strong case for the elimination of racial profiling and discrimination by policing agencies.” (Bah 2005). In addition, we have witnessed a strong disconnect between two governmental entities as they grapple with the issue of race relations in the United States. One being the police departments themselves and the other elected officials and political figures that either have a personal connection to these tragic loss of lives of unarmed African American men or upholding the positions of their constituencies that voted them in office.

4. Conclusion

Few would deny that the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency is racially momentous. But after four decades of political reaction against the civil rights movement, what exactly does Obama's elevation portend? Coming in the midst of a wrenching economic crisis, there is reason to worry that perhaps financial gloom rather than moral enlightenment prevented voters from fixating on Obama's color. One must fear too that lost jobs, homes, and savings will prompt, as it has in the past, a rise in racism and xenophobia. Nevertheless, there

remains considerable reason to hope. Obama's election broke the electoral pattern established after the signing of the major civil rights acts of the 1960s, in which Democrats only won the presidency by nearly splitting the white vote in half. This alone may promise a fundamental political shift, for it suggests that Democrats no longer need compete so aggressively for the votes of an anxious white electorate through racially coded antiwelfarist and tough-on-crime appeals. And then there is the sheer fact of a black man standing in front of the seal of the President of the United States of America.

The power of race stems almost as much from its cultural meaning as its material impact, making the symbolism of a black presidential visage enormously forceful. So dare we predict an end to racism? My point is that racism is deeply rooted and highly flexible, not that it is completely immune to amelioration. To the question of whether to expect progress, the answer must be yes and no, for surely there will be both transformation and preservation of the racial status quo. (Reva 1996). The forms will evolve, and likely some further degree of emancipation will result, but just as surely racial stratification will perdure, succumbing only incrementally, and sometimes worsening. Eight years of Obama's tenure in the White House has been insufficient to effectively cure this social cancer. As it has for hundreds of years, race-or, more accurately, "racism"--will remain a principal means through which American society structures and justifies inequality.

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