

Dealing with Racism in the Age of Obama

Barack Obama's spectacular victory is being celebrated as the end of racism in the United States. Of course it is no such thing. Racism will persist in spite of the various testimonials by Chris Matthews (and many other pundits) about how profoundly they were moved by Obama's triumph. It will outlive the professions of post-racialism on the part of John McCain and numerous other politicians. And it will survive the flood of national self-congratulation we can expect to deluge the country.

However sincere or opportunistic these announcements that we are now "beyond race," we remain in a society where the median black family possesses about one-twelfth of the median white family's wealth, where more than 12 million Latinos are undocumented, where an estimated six million cases of housing discrimination occur every year, where black unemployment rates are double those of whites, and where black college graduates can expect to earn about the same pay as white high school graduates. It will take more than a presidential election, however momentous, to change those patterns. More than charismatic leadership will be needed to overcome a system of inequality and injustice that is so deeply woven into the national social fabric.

Indeed I haven't even finished the list of racial illnesses that afflict us: I haven't mentioned incarceration, profiling, homelessness, medical racism, or disenfranchisement, for instance. It's a very long list: what we radical academics call structural racism is not about beliefs about or even actions directed at those considered racially different (meaning in general those not considered white). No, structural racism is about inequality and injustice in practice; it's about the way things work, regardless of the reasons why. So if vast inequalities in wealth persist across racial lines, for example, that may not be because white people intend to impoverish black or brown people; it may just be a result of years and years of some people doing better than others. Inequality accumulates. Injustice becomes normal; it comes to be taken for granted.

Think of the game "Monopoly." The players start out equal, right? Everyone has two \$500s, five \$100s, and so on. But by the end of the game, one player has a monopoly: one owns all the property, and the other players are so mortgaged up, so much in debt, that they can't play any longer. So the game ends: there are winners and losers. But then what happens? They put all the stuff back in the box, and when they play "Monopoly" again, everyone starts out equal again.

Well, you can see where I'm going with this. Imagine a game of "Monopoly" as a generation in your life, or a full lifetime for that matter. What if, when the game ended, the winner got to keep "Boardwalk," "Park Place," "Marvin Gardens," and all the rest, and the loser just stayed in debt? When the next game started, what would be the loser's chances (the next generation's chances) if the game began where the last one ended? What if the next game also began where the last one finished? And the next, and the next? Structural racism, and in fact structural inequality of all kinds, works like that. It locks people into their unjust fates.

OK. Back to Obama. His win hardly puts an end to this system, but it's still momentous, because it shows us a way forward, a way to reduce if not eliminate racial injustice and inequality. That way is not through redistribution of resources, at least not primarily; although of course that was McCain's charge against Obama, that he was a "socialist," that he wanted to "spread the wealth around."

However desirable that would be in theory (and Obama did make some remarks during the campaign about a more progressive distribution of wealth), in practice any policy designed to redistribute wealth seriously would be defeated in the United States. The political obstacles to such policies would be way too high, much too formidable to overcome, especially if they emphasized race. How could Obama get people to put the "Monopoly" money back in the box? How could he cancel all those mortgages? How could he start a new game with everyone equal? He might be a great leader, a progressive guy, but he's not a revolutionary, and the country ain't ready for revolution.

There are other problems as well. The United States is not just afflicted with racial inequality; there is serious class inequality too, as well as gender inequality. Working people, poor people, and most women too -- whatever their racial identity -- also have to start each new "Monopoly" game with scarce resources. Indeed they inherit the inequality, the negative wealth, the "Monopoly mortgages," left them by previous generations. Most whites are generally not burdened as badly by class or gender as most nonwhites -- for whom class and gender inequalities combine with structural racism. But most whites still lose at "Monopoly."

After working long hours for Obama's campaign I danced, sang, and cried at a victory party for him on election day night. Joining me were people from every racial group, women and men, gay and straight, poor, working-class and middle-class, and even some wealthy people (like doctors and lawyers) who also wanted greater equality and

social justice in America. I fell into bed late at night, wondering: what's the way forward? How can this country address structural racism, which has been a lifelong obsession for me and so many others? How can we avoid settling for a merely symbolic victory? How can we steer clear of the trap of "colorblindness," the anti-racism "lite" that is now so common in America, especially white America. "I don't see race," many of my students tell me. "A person's just a person to me. I treat everyone alike." While they may be expressing some benevolent wishes with such statements, they are also denying the deep problem of structural racism that we face in this country, and that will endure under an Obama administration.

So what's the way forward? I believe that with his appeal to "the better angels of our nature" -- Lincoln's remarkable phrase -- Obama has begun to chart a new course. He holds out hope of greatly reducing, if not necessarily eliminating, the burden that structural racism imposes on us, not only on most racially-defined "minorities," but also on many whites. His political approach hinges on a synthesis of two seemingly contradictory tendencies: on the one hand he urges us to commit to a deeper democracy, a more rational and open political system in which people could acknowledge and work out their particular interests. On the other hand, he calls for heightened attention to our shared collective fate, our overarching social interests.

In both his speeches and his writings -- especially in *The Audacity of Hope* -- he has argued that the country must reinvent itself as a more self-conscious society. In this he echoes the democratic commitments of the civil rights movement and the allied movements it spawned: the new left and "second-wave" feminism. Think of the slogans those movements proposed: "power to the people," the "beloved community," "participatory democracy," or "the personal is political." All these appeals to democratic self-assertion from below are echoed today in Obama's slogan "yes we can," which is about far more than winning an election. "Yes we can" also derives from Cesar Chavez's slogan "si se puede" that became the motto of the immigrants rights movement during the big marches of 2006.

That is a vision of democratic, "bottom-up," self-conscious social activism. Obama is calling for American pragmatism in the true meaning of the word: self-reflective action. It's democratic because it refers to ordinary people, everyday life. Obama puts his trust in us.

On the other hand he is appealing to collectivity that transcends particular self-interest,

whether individual or group-based. Ask yourself: can you believe in an unregulated economy, a political system run by special interests, a cultural apparatus (media, schooling, science) driven by ideology or commercial objectives? Obama advocates a "smart" government. Well, such a government would not let the gap between rich and poor grow too wide. It would not abandon commitments to, say, educating working-class children as well as wealthy ones, or maintaining public health as well as private health. Such a government would recognize that without effective and socially responsible state regulation both society and economy will produce frighteningly self-destructive conflicts.

So back to structural racism now. The enormous task Obama sets for himself, and for the nation, is the reconciliation of activist demands for equality and social justice on the one hand, with common interests and collective well-being on the other. Investing in better schools across the nation (and especially in the ghettos and barrios), enforcing anti-discrimination laws, creating socially useful jobs at the lower levels of the American economy... these and similar policies will challenge racial inequality and injustice as well as general social inequality. They can be "race-conscious" but they will have to be class- and gender "conscious" too. Such policies will develop if activist groups demand them, but they will also have to meet overarching collective interests: to overcome inequality and injustice across the board, especially but not only in racially-identified "minority" communities.

Canvassing for Obama over these last few weeks, I constantly encountered the divided hearts and minds of many working-class white voters when I knocked on their doors. They knew they had been getting a bad deal from Bush and Cheney, and didn't trust McCain to offer them much better. But they feared Obama: would he be a black people's president or their president too? Their fear came from racism, from their belief that what would be good for blacks would cost them. It couldn't possibly also be good for them. It was a fear the Republicans had stoked as fiercely as they could, and a fear that was imbedded deep in American history and culture.

Yet millions of whites voted for Obama, more than had voted for Kerry, Clinton, or Carter. They were hoping that when the new game started, they wouldn't be stuck with the old "Monopoly mortgages." They were hoping, just as blacks and Latinos and women of all colors were hoping, that they'd start the new game with more resources, more power, more equality than they'd had under the corporations and Republicans in the past. They had hope.

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