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We Have a Black President, But That Doesn't Resolve the Deep Racism Built into the American Psyche

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It was summer 2004 when most of us first became familiar with Barack Obama. Then an Illinois state senator, the U.S. senate candidate delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston: the first of his many now-famous orations on a national stage. Therein he delivered several applause lines, but none were as big as when he proclaimed:

"There's not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America."

Though one might welcome such a statement were it offered in the future and aspirational tense -- as a heartfelt plea for true equality -- Obama proclaimed it in the descriptive and present tense. In so doing he traded intellectual honesty for easy and predictable ovation. After all, 2004 was the same year that research from MIT and the University of Chicago found that job applicants with "white" names were 50 percent more likely to be called back for an interview than those with "black" names, even when all their qualifications were indistinguishable. And with black and brown unemployment standing at double the white rate, even as the new upstart from Chicago poured forth rhetoric professing national unity (and with the median white family possessing 8-10 times the net worth of the median black or Latino family), it should have been apparent that Obama was engaged in political science fiction rather than the description of sociological truth.

Post-Racial Liberalism: Its Origins and Trajectory

To be fair, of course, the rhetoric of post-racial liberalism wasn't something invented by the current President. Rather, it has its roots in the period immediately following the passage of civil rights laws in the 1960s. It was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for instance -- an advisor to President Johnson before becoming a United States Senator -- who first suggested that the nation would do well to engage in "benign neglect" when it came to the issue of race.

According to Moynihan, persistent inequities between whites and blacks could best be addressed by the passage of race-neutral, universal programs to help all in need; that, in addition to focusing on presumed cultural defects in the black community, from single parent families to crime to an inadequate attachment to education and the labor market. While conservatives made some of the same arguments about so-called black cultural pathology during this period, what distinguished post-racial liberalism from the new cultural racism of the right was its stated commitment to reducing racial disparities, albeit by non-racial means.

By the late 1970s, the leading herald of post-racial liberalism was University of Chicago sociologist, William Julius Wilson, an African American scholar (now at Harvard) whose books, *The Declining Significance of Race*, and later, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, put forth the two main pillars of post-racial thought. The first of these was that racial inequities were now mostly the result of race-neutral factors like deindustrialization, the mismatch between jobs (increasingly in suburbs) and people of color (who lived mostly in cities), and inadequate investment in education and other public goods. The second pillar of Wilson's position was the political calculation that white backlash to things like affirmative action now made it

necessary to push universal, race-neutral solutions to those problems, rather than race-specific programs and efforts. In short, we needed to talk less about racism, and more about class.

It is this race-neutral approach (which involves both a rhetoric of racial transcendence and a colorblind public policy agenda), which Barack Obama advocated in his best-selling policy book, *The Audacity of Hope*. And it is this same approach that he endorsed all throughout the campaign for the Presidency, and which he has articulated consistently since winning the election. When asked about persistent health disparities between whites and blacks, for instance, Obama has maintained that universal coverage and making health care more affordable for all is the best way to close those gaps. When asked about the depression-level job situation in communities of color (in which even blacks with college degrees are nearly twice as likely as their white counterparts to be out of work, and college educated Latinos 2/3 more likely than similar whites to be unemployed), Obama has insisted that a "rising tide lifts all boats," and so the stimulus package and other measures to get the economy "moving again" are the best remedies for the suffering of folks of color.

But as I show in my new book, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* ^[3], President Obama and other adherents to the post-racial liberal philosophy are flatly wrong. In fact, not only are they wrong about the ability of "universal" programs to reduce racial disparities in health, income or education; they are also wrong about the political value of race-neutral approaches. At the end of the day, avoiding conversations about race will not boost support for progressive social policy, and may in fact undermine it.

Why Colorblind Policy Cannot Solve Racial Disparities

To begin, race-neutral policies cannot possibly solve persistent racial inequities. Because so many of those disparities are caused by racial discrimination -- not merely the residue of past racism but ongoing racial discrimination in the present-day -- universal efforts, though valuable, will prove insufficient. If people of color face discrimination in employment, housing, education and the provision of health care (and I document fully in *Colorblind* the considerable extent to which they do), economic stimulus legislation, universal health care, or better-funded schools will be inadequate to the task of closing racial gaps. Companies that get the stimulus money for construction projects, for instance, will still provide unequal opportunity to black and brown folks; doctors will continue to treat their patients of color unequally (as has been documented by numerous studies), and schools, though better funded, will continue to track students of color into remedial classes, regardless of their ability, and discipline them more harshly even though rates of misconduct are similar among all racial groups.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of the inadequacy of race-neutral, universal policy comes in the arena of health care. As I note in *Colorblind*, the racial gaps in health outcomes between whites and blacks, for instance, are mostly unrelated to mere issues of coverage, affordability, or health care access. In short, they are not about economics. Consider the following:

- Black women with college degrees have higher rates of infant mortality for their newborns than white women who dropped out after eighth grade; and children born to black women with college degrees have three times higher infant mortality rates for their children than similar white women.
- Black women who received early and consistent prenatal care while pregnant have infant mortality rates for their children that are nearly double the rates for white women who received no prenatal care at all.
- Black women and Latinas who come to the nation poor or lower-income actually see their health status decline over time, even as their income status typically improves. And foreign born black women (including those from the African continent) come to the U.S. with health outcomes comparable to those of white women. But after a generation, their daughters' health status has declined to that of other African Americans.

So what is it about being black or brown in the United States that affects health, independent of economics or health care access? The research says, as mentioned above, that unequal treatment at the hands of physicians is part of the problem; but even more so, we have to look at the cumulative impact of racism on black and brown bodies over time. What the research increasingly finds is that racialized stresses, like dealing with discrimination, causes a "weathering" effect on people of color, which has repercussions for blood pressure and affects the proper functioning of the cardiovascular, metabolic and immune systems. Over 100,000 people of color die each year because of excess mortality rates relative to the rates for whites, and it appears as though a substantial amount of that excess mortality can be laid at the feet of black and brown folks' experiences with racism. Universal, colorblind policy cannot possibly hope to remedy problems such as these.

How Colorblindness Can Make Things Worse

In fact, by refusing to talk openly about the race-specific causes of racial disparities, those who adhere to post-racial liberalism may actually worsen the extent of those disparities. First, the rhetoric of racial transcendence and the public policy agenda of colorblind universalism tend to further the already-ingrained problem of white denial. After all, if we don't talk about a problem, it becomes easier to assume it isn't a problem any longer. Considering how prevalent denial of racism already is among white Americans (and has been in every generation, truth be told), intensifying this "see no evil" approach can only serve to limit the extent to which we are able to do much about the reality of discrimination.

Secondly, the refusal to talk openly about racism can lead Americans to increasingly rationalize the disparities that continue to exist. So, for instance, even a young child can readily observe substantial disparities in the United States, which play out across racial lines. They can see that where people tend to live, where they tend to go to school, and what kinds of jobs they tend to have, often have a distinct racial cast to them. If the society in which these children live is actively discussing and seeking to remedy the reasons for those disparities, including discrimination in the present and the inertia of past injustice, then those children can develop a fairly nuanced understanding of how things got to be the way they are, and how we might solve the problem. But if we are actively de-emphasizing the discussion of racism and discrimination -- in other words, if we are stripping away the context necessary to understand the phenomena those children are observing -- young people will likely grow up assuming that inequity is "just the way things are," or worse, that the disparities must be due to some people just being "better" than others. In short, post-racial liberalism in the name of colorblindness can enhance racially-biased thinking: the ultimate irony.

Finally, since the right continues to hammer racialized themes in their attacks against progressive public policy, the decision by erstwhile liberals to avoid discussing race only serves as a form of unilateral disarmament in the face of conservative race-based bullying. If the right continues to accuse the President, for instance, of only pushing health care as a form of reparations for slavery (as Glenn Beck has said), or of "hating white people" (Beck again), or of being "more an African colonial despot" than an American (as Rush Limbaugh has proclaimed) it is doubtful that his decision to avoid discussing race will help him much. The right will continue to push buttons of white racial resentment, no matter what Obama does. To not push back, or worse, to deny as he has the obvious -- that much of the intense hatred for his agenda is due to racial bias -- only makes the president appear weak. In this sense, post-racial liberalism isn't even astute politics.

Why Post-Racial Liberalism is NOT Good Political Strategy

Contrary to the claims of post-racial liberals, colorblind policy efforts like universal health care or jobs programs do not truly help build support for progressive social policy. In large part this is because even universal efforts at social uplift for the "have nots" tend to be perceived as racial handouts by large segments of the white public.

For forty years, the rhetoric around any policy intended to improve life for those who are struggling economically has been racialized, so much so that international comparisons of social program spending and public attitudes have found that the biggest reason why the United States has a more paltry system of social support for the poor, relative to our European counterparts, is the perception that here, blacks will abuse whatever programs exist. In other words, white racial resentment and bias causes large numbers of white Americans to "hear" black and brown people, even when a politician like President Obama isn't talking in racialized terms. So health care becomes a "giveaway" for "illegal aliens" or "lazy welfare recipients" (almost always perceived as black).

Further suggesting the extent to which whites attach racialized meaning to Obama's health care efforts (no matter how deracialized he tried to make them), consider the results of one recent study, in which even whites with high levels of racial bias supported the Obama plan so long as it was described to them as Bill Clinton's health care reform proposal. In the study, support among these whites plummeted once they learned that the plan in front of them was Barack Obama's.

Interestingly, the research suggests that it is precisely when the racialized aspect of an issue or dispute is allowed to remain sublimated and below the surface that it tends to have the greatest ability to control people's opinions and actions. In other words, by allowing whites to remain behind a veil of racial innocence, in which place they are not made to confront the possibility that their opposition to things like health care might be due to racial resentment, post-racial rhetoric and policy discussions actually allow the subtle biases that are often at the root of that opposition to go unchecked. According to the evidence, talking openly about race and the extent to which racism might motivate some of that opposition--though it might make people angry in the short run--also tends to subconsciously prime more egalitarian thoughts and behavior.

Because most whites don't want to be racist, or act on the basis of racialized biases, they are often keen to rethink their

positions when confronted with the possibility that they may be doing just that. Post-racial liberalism, however, reduces the likelihood that white Americans will be forced to confront the gaps between their professed and perhaps heartfelt beliefs, and their implicit biases, and thus resolve the contradiction between what they say and what they do.

An Alternative to Colorblindness: Illuminated Individualism

In response to the growth of post-racial liberalism, I propose an alternative paradigm for thought and action: one that is in keeping with what the most recent research from the field of psychology tells us works for confronting our own racial biases, and what the sociological research tells us we need to do from a systematic perspective. This paradigm I call, Illuminated Individualism.

Illuminated individualism is based on the premise that our individual identities, experiences and perceptions are profoundly shaped by our group identities, including but not limited to our racial group. To be white, or a person of color means something. Thus, neither the abstract individualism peddled by the right, or the "we're all in this together" universalism of post-racial liberals, truly captures the current reality of life in the United States. In order to treat people as the individuals they are, we will have to take account of the lives they actually lead, and in part this means understanding the role of racism in our lives, and the extent to which our own perceptions and biases have been ingrained within a group context.

The research in this area is clear: only by recognizing the extent to which we have been conditioned to internalize racial biases can we hope to check and interrupt discriminatory behaviors. According to the best available evidence, when we make race salient, and raise the specter of possible racism (in a jury deliberation, job interview process, or other settings) we are actually more careful to act fairly and deliberately, and take special pains not to discriminate. Studies have found, for instance, that large numbers of whites (and even large numbers of people of color) have deep-seated implicit biases against blacks and in favor of whites. Because these are often held subconsciously they are difficult if not impossible to notice or interrupt unless one has been trained to think about them, excavate them and challenge them. But this necessitates, quite obviously, a race-conscious, not colorblind or race-neutral approach.

The good news is, when we call out racial biases in society and ourselves, we can in fact reduce the likelihood of acting on the basis of those biases. Anti-racism, in other words, takes practice. It takes deliberate efforts to check ourselves at every possible turn: as teachers in the classroom, employers during a job interview, police officers on the street, loan officers at the bank, and as parents in our homes.

And many of the things we can do to practice this color-conscious approach take no special government effort: rather, they are things we can do, each of us, individually and collectively in the institutional spaces where we operate each day. Among these, we can have open conversations with our children about racism and discrimination, past and present; we can make having experience in multiracial settings, and having a proven commitment to racial equity in the workplace or school a bona fide qualification requirement for jobs or slots in colleges. After all, in a twenty-first century in which the nation will become increasingly of color, whites who are either uncomfortable in cross-racial settings or inadequately committed to equity will become professional liabilities for institutions, actually impeding their ability to function.

Furthermore, we can train teachers in methods for creating equity in the classroom -- methods that, according to the research, require a color-conscious approach that takes full account of the way young people experience race and racism -- and push for public policies that reflect an understanding of the ongoing problem of racial bias. Among these: we can advocate for the declaration of racism as a public health issue (which would help facilitate funding for anti-bias training among physicians and in medical schools); we can fight for the requiring of racial impact statements before passing public policies that might have a disparate impact on different racial groups, and we can get serious about punishing companies that engage in discrimination.

In short, by recommitting ourselves to a public and private discourse that challenges racism and discrimination head on -- and that challenges us to rise to the better angels of our natures rather than remaining stuck in denial, silence, and political calculations that in the end aren't even strategically wise -- we can get back on track in the struggle for racial equity. It's a struggle worthy of our attention still, despite the ways in which we've sometimes obscured its importance over the past forty years.

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