

Race,¹ the Enduring Power of an Illusion in a “Color-blind²” Society

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“We Don’t See Things and then Define Them, We Define Them First And Then We See Them”—Walter Lippmann

On July 4, 1992 Justice Thurgood Marshall gave a speech that questioned the progress of race relations since the Brown Decision of 1954. Justice Marshall said, “I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories, and that liberty and equality were just around the bend. I wish I could say that America has come to appreciate diversity and to see and accept similarity. But as I look around, I see not a nation of unity, but of division—Afro and white, indigenous and immigrant, rich and poor, educated and illiterate” (Higginbotham 1996, picture caption).

These are lines from one of the last two speeches Justice Marshall gave six months before his death, January 24, 1993, and just thirty eight years after the passage of Brown v. Board of Education decision 1954, which ended the fifty eight year reign of de jure—Jim Crow—segregation, at the federal level, instituted with the passage of Plessey v. Ferguson of 1896 in which the Supreme Court of the United States *subscribed to the doctrine that legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts and laid down the separate but equal ruling for the justification of segregation.*

Conversely though, it would be the dissenting opinion of Justice John Marshall Harlan in the 1896 Plessey v. Ferguson ruling that, ninety six years before Justice Thurgood Marshall’s last speech, fore-grounded the notion of “color blindness.” Harlan in his interpretation of the

¹ Race, cannot be defined outside the economic, political, ideological systems which in turn grant or deny access to wealth, education, housing, police protection, and prestige to those harnessed in its yoke. Robin D.G. Kelly says, “race is how people assign meaning to how you look.” Yet another definition of “race” is social meaning, public policy, and private action that act upon those differences. Sidney D. Willhelm says “race” in the United States became a “dominant, autonomous social value”(Willhelm 1970, viii).

² There is the continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete and objective—there is also the opposite temptation to see race as a *mere illusion*, which an ideal social order [a “colorblind society] would eliminate. Ideologies, which “race” and “Colorblindness” are, are about meaning in the service of power. “They are expressions at the symbolic level of the fact of dominance. As such, the ideologies of the powerful are central in the production and reinforcement of the status quo—ideologies comfort the rulers and charms the ruled much like an Indian snake handler” (Bonilla-Silva 2006). “...rulers receive solace by believing they are not involved in the terrible ordeal of creating and maintaining inequality, the ruled are charmed by almost magic qualities of a hegemonic ideology....The central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames of set paths for interpreting information. These set paths operate as cul-de-sacs because after people filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 25-26).

Constitution, he viewed the white race as the dominant racial group. One hundred and twelve years ago Justice John Marshall Harlan argued in his dissent that, “The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievement, in education, in wealth and in power. So I doubt not, it will continue to do for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no case here, Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens” (Bell 2004, 26). Harlan in holding conceptual opposites together in his mind could have only made this statement if it was draped in the robe of white supremacy—ironically one has to be able to see color in order to determine the color white is to be the supreme color.

What then were Justice Harlan and the Supreme Court up to? Derrick Bell gives us some insight into this by helping us to untangle this racial knot. Bell suggests that the Court’s “rejection of the petitioners’ plea...systematically gloss[ed] over the extent to which Plessey’s simplistic ‘separate but equal’ form served as a legal *adhesive* in the consolidating of white supremacy in America. Rather than critically engaging American racism’s complexities, the Court would substitute one mantra for another: where ‘separate’ was once equal, ‘separate’ would be now categorically, in practice, unequal,” Bell continues by saying that, “by doing nothing more than reworking the rhetoric of equality [the Court] foreclose[ed] the possibility of recognizing racism as a broadly shared cultural condition” (Bell 2004, 27). More precisely, colorblindness covers the deep chasm between the ruling whites and the ruled whites. The glue of racism that holds together these two opposing social and economic positions postpones dealing with in any meaningful way the terrible social inequalities that inhabit the social, political, economic, and cultural terrain of the Untie States.

E pluribus u num —from many different whites, one white “race”--and the zero sum game

Justice Harlan’s opinion was not something that appeared from thin air. There had been of a number of decisions and pronouncements setting in place whites as the dominant group above Africans (blacks) and other non-whites. We get a glimpse of this nascent formation of the

racial state,³ for instance, in 1773 a student at the Harvard Commencement argued in a speech that slavery did not violate the law of nature, “Blacks,” he asserted, “were inferior to whites, and for the good of all should be kept in subordination.” In 1790 the Naturalization Act was passed and “one of the questions to be settled was who was worthy of citizenship in the new nation, which would claim to be the model for all future democracies. John Hope Franklin tells us that, “the question was answered without much debate. Only white aliens, the law of 1790 specified, could become naturalized citizens of the United States....Any free black person imprudent enough to migrate to the United States could not hope ever to become a citizen” (Franklin Quasi-Free).

Another case that advantaged and enhanced whiteness in the era of the common-man was the Dred Scott case of 1857. Scott, a slave sued in the State Circuit Court of St. Louis alleging that he was taken north of the Missouri Compromise (1820) line which according to the terms of that statute, automatically accorded his freedom. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney summarily dismissed the matter and dealt a resounding blow to abolition, not to mention also to the prospects of freedom for Dred Scott. In giving his decision Taney, “declared the United States to be a government of white men and Negroes to be beings of an inferior order and so far inferior that they had no rights the white man was bound to respect” (Franklin).

What were the social, political, economic forces that coalesced to bring into existence a racialized state in the British Colony in what would eventually become the United States?

Before 1670 all free men, some Africans and some Europeans, had the vote. But the social, political, and economic elites at the time worried about the potential for rebellion among those— who Governor William Berkeley described as the six out of seven “people [who] were poor indebted discontented and armed—landless men—and who had, [in fact] been disfranchised by the legislature that same year” (Buck 2001, 21). In a little more than half a decade after the legislature disfranchised the voting rights of landless men, Nathaniel Bacon, a frontier

³ Anthony Monteiro states in The Black Scholar article, “Race And Empire: W.E.B. Du Bois and the US State,” that “...the US state,...from its inception has been racialized...”(Monteiro, Summer 2007, 35). Omi and Winant argue that race [in the US] operates as a central axis of social relations, pervades social life, operates at both micro [the level of signification: meaning symbols], and macro [social structures, institutional] levels, and permeates individual psyches and relationships as well as collective identities and social structures. Succinctly stated, racial formation is the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. **John Locke** wrote in his *Fundamental Constitution of 1669* “Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion so-ever” (Franklin 2000, 69). Locke’s *Constitution Of Carolina* recognized slavery in the colony. **John Punch** incident of 1660 and a year later 1661 the actual statutory recognition of slavery in Virginia.

landholder, formed a militia to drive Native Americans off the land in order to make room for white settlers. After Governor Berkeley charged Bacon with treason causing the dispossessed freemen, a large crowd of Africans and Europeans marched against Jamestown, and sent the Governor fleeing. The British Colonial elites were horrified by what the Bacon rebellion revealed, it “was a dramatic exhibition of the tendency of poor free people and indentured servants, all angry, to make common cause regardless of ancestry” (Buck 2001, 20-21). Prior to the Bacon rebellion, the master class became increasingly concerned that the European and African indentured servants frequently identified with each other and exhibited what as Pem Davison Buck says, “was to their masters horror the alarming tendency of African and European indentured servants not only to join poor and disgruntled, but free Europeans and Africans to make common cause against the elite was an even greater cause for alarm” (Buck 2001, 20). If you will, these cross ancestral and, to a certain extent, class coalitions, and even fragile alliances were one problem—yet an even more alarming problem that troubled the British colonial elites was the fact that it became more difficult to isolate European indentured servants from the free European population, “so that even temporary enslavement became harder to enforce” (Buck 2001, 20). The reality was that run away European blended in with the rest of the European population and was difficult if not impossible to distinguish between the two groups. And added to this the British Colony was suffering from a shortage of European workers who stopped coming to the Colony as indentures because the word was out that it was becoming more and more difficult to survive their indentured contracts—this development nettled the Colonial elites. The threat of perpetual servitude was real to the British and European indentured servants, and conversely the loss of this cheap labor to the elites threatened their ability to accumulate wealth. “To meet the need for labor,” Sidney Willhelm says in his book, *Who Needs the Negro?* it “became necessary to induce migration from Europe by withdrawing the negative features of perpetual servitude. [And] since no greater numbers could be expected from, Africa by these abuses, stringent regulations remained for Negroes in servitude” (Willhelm 1970, 1-2). Thus European/ Christians would progressively discover the positive value in their white⁴ skin, by securing the privileges, prestige, limited power, and freedom that would be denied the African whose servant status, and bodies, inexorably, would be transformed into property (Buck, Willhelm, Zinn). And so, “Color then emerged,” as Willhelm says, “as the token of slave status;

⁴ They only had European ancestry in common with the elites (Buck 2001).

the trace of color became the trace of slavery” (Willhelm 1970, 2). The silent covenant, between white elites and the white working-class, would be worked out in a number of ways between the landowners, colonial elites and working-class whites. For example, according to Derrick Bell, “The landowners convinced working-class whites to support African enslavement as being in their interests, even though these yeoman workers could never compete with wealthy landowners who could afford slaves” (Bell 2004, 30). To further bolster their position slaveholders appealed to working-class whites by giving them the chance to vote and be as Bell argues further, “urging them, owing to their shared whiteness, to unite against the threat of slave revolts or escapes [and] alliances between white working-class and African slaves” (Bell 2004, 30).

In 1787 Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention delegates (elites) gathered, pressured by fears of further slave revolts, moral suasion of abolitionist, opposition of white labor whose wages were being undermined by the very nature of slavery to drive the wages of free labor lower and lower—also a number of Northern and mid-Atlantic states (Connecticut, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia) were beginning to pass laws prohibiting the importation of captive Africans for slavery. In response to this development, slaveholders muzzled the Northerners by successfully arguing in favor, as Bell says, [of] “the belief that private property was *the* indispensable foundation for personal freedom made it more difficult for northerners to confront the fact of slavery squarely” (Bell 2004, 32).

A Faustian bargain was struck between the delegates, across class-lines and regional lines, at the Constitutional Convention where the delegates did in fact recognize that slavery was ultimately incompatible with the doctrines of freedom and liberty that characterized this revolutionary generation, (and the nascent Republic). As Bell tells us, “The delegates [though] hypocritically avoided the word slaves [in the Constitution] referring instead to persons whom the states shall think it proper to import, or persons bound to service or labor,” Bell continues by saying that this, “Evasion, though, was insufficient to disguise the sacrifice of those who would suffer the cruelty of slavery” (Bell 2004, 32). In short, the framers of the new Constitution for the new Republic, in order to guarantee liberty and inclusion in the new government for all decided that the hopes and dreams of blacks, both those few free ones and the many slaves, would be deferred, more pointedly, sacrificed to resolve the deep class divisions and tensions that exist(ed) between white people located in differ social positions.

Sixty two years later Frederick Douglass in a 1849 speech, publicly exposed the hypocrisy of the implied race-blind (color-blind) nature of the Constitution when he says that “the Constitution, while cunningly framed was made in view of the existence of slavery, and in a manner well calculated to aid and strengthen that heaven-daring crime” (Bell 2004, 33). Thirty eight years later in 1887 at the Centennial of the Constitution, which Frederick Douglass refused to attend the Celebration because, as he declared, “[s]o far as the colored people of the country are concerned, the Constitution is but a stupendous sham...keeping the promise to the eye and breaking it to the heart....They have promised us law and abandoned us to anarchy” (Bell 2004, 33).

Tom Watson, in 1892, a populist leader was a staunch advocate of a union between black and white farmers. He tried unsuccessfully to expose the Faustian (hegemonic⁵ arrangement) bargain struck between poor whites and white elites. Watson vigorously tried to convince poor whites of the adverse economic effects of segregation: Watson said, ‘you are kept apart [so] that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars you both’ (Bell 2004, 42).

Racism’s Economic Foundation

Howard Zinn tells us in his article, “Drawing the Color-line” that, “Once the small planter felt less exploited by taxation and began to prosper a little, he became less turbulent, less dangerous, and more respectable. He could begin to see his big neighbor not as an extortionist but as a powerful protector of the common interests” (Zinn 1980, 38). Directly stated, the papering over of the deep structural differences between white elites and working-class rested squarely on the sacrificial alter of black rights and inclusions in the Republic—black people had (would have) no rights that white people need respect.

What then are the inclinations, the (seemingly) invisible forces, that impels both individuals and groups to act so predictably across various generations, various social positions to keep racialized groups in a subordinate position relative to white Americans? Bell explains

⁵ The hegemonic relationship between elites and working-class whites provided a psychological, cultural wage for whites that would/did not disrupt the economic and racial order.

this situation by giving a metaphor of “giant gyroscope in which black people and other racialized minorities are trapped. This gyroscope always moves back to its preplanned equilibrium, no matter how powerful the exertions and protestations of black people, “to the orientation toward dominance for whites over blacks” (Bell 2004, 77).

A scholar who gives us further insight on the nature of Bell’s “invisible giant gyroscope” is Amy L. Chua in her work, “The Paradox of free market Democracy.” Chua identifies a number of elements of what she calls “free market Democracy,” as she argues that [racism] has been the exploitative oil of capitalism that has mixed with and polluted the potentially purifying waters of democracy” (Chua 2000, 287-288). She further explains that “connected to [capitalism] is the ideology of racism in the United States and some other developed countries that has been a powerful force fracturing the lower classes and inducing large numbers of them to think, vote, and act in defiance of what might be expected to be their rational economic self-interests” (Chua 200, 287-288). In sum, racism operate as a lubricant in the service of capitalism, as Chua argues Bell too asserts that racism (and the creation of a large underclass) in the service of white solidarity, “has made poor and working-class whites feel better about their relative plight, giving them a consoling sense of superiority and status vis-à-vis African Americans, Latino Americans, and other groups of color perceived (in many senses correctly) as the sediment of the American stratification order” (Bell 2004, 79). This hegemonic relationship has more or less been successfully negotiated throughout the so called developed world. Cheryl Harris in her article “Whiteness as Property,” explains how this white solidarity became incarnated in everyday life for working-class whites. Harris show this by pointing out that in the United States property ownership is viewed as a measured of worth. She explains, that, “a great many whites with relatively little property of a traditional kind: money, securities, land—comes to view their whiteness as a property right” (Harris 1995, 276-291). The wages of whiteness, Harris explains, “are available to all whites regardless of class position, even those whites who are without power, money, or influence, whiteness, the characteristic that distinguishes them from blacks, serves as compensation even to those who lack material wealth” (Harris 1995, 276-291). In short, the oil of capitalism, racism, from the founding of the United States to the present has hindered the formation of political alliances between poor and working-class whites on one hand, and poor and working-class minorities on the other.

History⁶ serves as a guide to understanding the present.

The decades between 1960s and the 1970s Omi and Winant argue, “represented anything but a slow, steady evolution to a colorblind society” (Omi and Winant 1994, 5). These years were a period of racial contestation, attempts at coalitions and alliances and failed coalitions and alliances, and white backlash to the racial upsurge, and societal attempts to bring social equality to racially marginalized minorities. By the early 1980s with the ascension to Presidential power of Ronald Reagan he attacked, on one-side, many aspects of FDR’s welfare state by undermining and squeezing the economic safety, and on the other-side Reagan went after the national civil rights legislation of the Great Society era of 1964 and 1965 by eroding the protections and guarantees, respectively, of the Civil Rights Bill and the Voters Rights Bill. Disparaging racialized public discourse of the pre-Civil Rights era directed towards racialized minorities gave way to a new racial coded form of public racial speak (e.g. reverse racism, welfare queens, culture of poverty, war on drugs, war on crime) that represented a reaction to what Omi and Winant call the *rearticulation* of “race” espoused by racialized minorities in their social, political movements from the mid 1950s to the early 1970s. (Omi and Winant 1994)

The public expression of racial color-blindness came about in January 1985 when Reagan remarked that some Civil Rights Organizations are no longer needed because they have accomplished their goals—as Omi and Winant say, “School busing plans and affirmative action policies came under attack by the Reagan ‘revolutionaries’” (Omi and Winant 1994, 134). These Civil Rights remedies and mechanisms for achieving a modicum of racial equality were suddenly considered to discriminate against whites. For example, Reagan’s Attorney General, at the time, William French Smith dropped desegregation appeals in cities such as Kansas City and Houston and slowed integration efforts in Chicago, Phoenix, Albuquerque, and Rochester (Omi and Winant). In an important 1985 Supreme Court case, the Justice Department opposed the city of Indianapolis’ efforts to use hiring quotas to help minorities get jobs in local government.

To alter the perception of racial discrimination in the United States *the* Reagan administration stopped recording instances of discrimination in the country. For instance, Omi and Winant point out that, “In March 1985, the office of Management and Budget ordered the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Veterans Administration to stop

⁶ “...history acts as a lens, partially defining what is thinkable and unthinkable by limiting what we know and don’t know. We can’t act on an idea we haven’t thought, so the control of history, of what we are likely to think and know, is a source of immense power” (Buck 2001, 5-6).

tracking the racial and ethnic characteristics of Americans who receive benefits from these two agencies” (Omi and Winant 1994, 134). Affirmative Action was the biggest policy shift for the Reagan Administration, which was supplanted under the notion of creating a truly “color-blind” society the Reagan Administration sought to define and eliminate the “new racism” against whites. As Reagan’s U.S. Civil Rights Commission Chairman Clarence Pendleton, Jr. characterized it, [as] the new racists were “supporter of Civil Rights who exhibited the classical behavior system of racism. They treat blacks differently than whites because of their race.” (Omi and Winant 1994).

The neo-cons were turning the tables on the liberals who were now being blamed for racism. “Black, and other minorities, needed to be saved from liberal efforts to help them” (Omi and Winant 1994, 135). In sum, Reagan harnessed the discontent which had been simmering among the large number of whites who have felt threatened by the racial politics of the 1960s and 1970s. He opposed racial equality and civil rights for minorities in a manner which seemed on the surface “color-blind.”

In the early 1990s the tables were turned once again—the neo-cons were replaced by the neo-liberals with the election of Bill Clinton and Al Gore they sought in their own way to rearticulate the discourse of race in the United States without directly talking about it. By 1992 the nation as a whole continued to move toward a politic that would be dominated mostly by the white middle-class suburbanite vote. The suburban white mid-class voters were able gain a sense of community cohesion to fulfill communitarian impulses “by taxing themselves for direct services (e.g. schools, libraries, police), while both ignoring urban decay and remaining fiscally conservative about federal spending” (Omi and Winant 1994,). The “New Democrats” under the leadership of the former Governor of Arkansas William Jefferson Clinton sought a way to completely remove any discussion of race from the realm of public, and governmental policy discussions. For instance, as Omi and Winant state that, “The call for more jobs, better education, and increased social investment was especially well-suited for the benefits it offered to suburban, middle-class white voters who had been battered—though not on the scale of inner city residents—by recession” (Omi and Winant 1994). To dismiss charges of catering to minorities, Clinton adopted the rhetoric (racial coding), phrases like “personal responsibility,” and “family values” which (for that matter) was so successfully utilized by the right (Omi and Winant 1994, 150). By using race neutral, color-blind rhetoric Clinton was able to convince

white suburbanites that their interests would be paramount, and also to bring them back into the democratic fold. So then, in 1992 for the first time since the election of 1948, almost half a century, the Democratic Party platform made no specific pledge to address racial injustices and inequalities. What the Clinton administration was attempting to do was to construct a new consensus with respect to race, a framework that papered over longtime historic inequalities by promoting universal reforms and rejecting the demands of specific groups. As Omi and Winant say, “In many respects this neo-liberal agenda has rearticulated the right-wing racial logic which gained currency during the reaction of the 1970s and 1980s--It is in fact an effort to steal the racial ‘thunder on the right’” (Omi and Winant 1994, 151-152).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the issue of race is still salient but like the previous two and a half decades it continues to be discussed through the filter of “color-blindness.” In this current national election cycle, for instance, the issue of race in an overt way has not been foreground like it was during the two presidential election bids of Rev. Jesse Jackson in the 1980s. There has been much talk these days, by some, that the U.S. Presidential campaign of 2008 signifies a post-racial era in American racial politics, because of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama—a black man. During the fifteen months of this campaign there has been no discussion of the precarious situation of the hurricane survivors hurricanes Rita and Katrina which displaced, caused to be dispossessed over sixty percent of New Orleans’ black population, thousands of Vietnamese fishermen and the livelihood or sub-prime housing loans which disproportionately impacted black home-owners—many of whom were qualified for conventional home loans, or that the U.S. holds more of its citizens in jails and prisons than any other western nation—over one million of which are black, brown men and women. Even though the neo-cons with Reagan and both Bushes, and the neo-liberals with the like of Clinton, Gore, and the current presidential candidate Hillary Clinton both of these positions, strategies on dealing with “race” in the United States function as Derrick Bell says as a giant “invisible gyroscope” which seems to always position the current social, political, and economic order in its preplanned equilibrium, “to the orientation toward dominance for whites of blacks, [and other people of color]” (Bell 2004, 77). This said, Barack Obama, seems to represent the synthesis between the two positions (neo-con and neo-liberal), has some culpability in fostering this election season’s ethos of “colorblindness”—or as some are triumphantly chirring the arrival of “post-racial” USA. Even sounding somewhat like Reagan twenty-three

years earlier—when Reagan speculated that the U.S. has entered on a post-civil rights era and that the current need for civil rights organizations has passed—Obama in a statement earlier in the campaign broached the idea that black Americans are ninety percent of the way to equality. In another place he informed America that class was more in play in Jena six , Louisiana incident, and that incompetence during Katrina was, [in fact] “colorblind.”⁷ Thus, Obama has not been silent about race during his presidential campaign because he has talked about it in the statements mentioned above—but what Obama seems to offer us—is the erasure of race--through his avoidance of, except after his former pastor put him on the spot and forced him (Obama) speak publicly on race when he gave his Philadelphia speech on race in March of this years, any meaningful discussion of race, through his well crafted rhetoric of “audacity of hope” is in reality is an offering of “cheap change” to all who believe that “color-blindness” equals equality.

In closing in order to oppose racism we must notice race. We must learn and understand how racism has over the centuries been an enabler, if you will, the vital oil of U.S. and for the most part Western Capitalism, and because of this it is imperative that we *see* how in the United States of America that race is present in every institution, every relationship, every individual. This is the case not only for the way society is organized—spatially, culturally, in terms of stratification, etc.—but also for our perceptions and understanding on personal experience. Omi and Winant tell us that, “by noticing race we can develop the political insight and mobilization necessary to make the U.S., a more racially just and egalitarian society” (Omi and Winant 1994, 159). Thus, by *seeing*, by *noticing* race if we wish, if we desire to step out of our room of denial and implement changes in our society and truly affirm the humanity of all no matter what color, then the seemingly “enduring power of race” will pass from us and never be practiced again—we will have to change the structures of inequality that exist in society, and not merely settle for “managing the appearance of formal equality--anything less than this and the power of the illusion of race and the dominant myth of a “color-blind” society will endure.

⁷ Color-blindness focuses on managing the appearance of formal equality without worrying overmuch about the consequences of real world inequality—colorblindness makes it difficult for whites to confront the fact(s) of racism squarely. It seems to me that Mr. Barack Obama gives or represents absolution to white people for their racism—all one has to do is to vote for the black man, and all is forgiven, soon to be forgotten, we hope.

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