

Post-Racialism: Reality or Illusion?

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Abstract

Post-racialism has gained considerable attention in the last decade. The historic election of Barack Obama in November of 2008 as the first Black president of the United States initiated conversations about the beginning of a “post-racial” era. Post-racialism mimics colorblindness which was first articulated by racial progressives, and later conservatives co-opted this language. Both claim that race should no longer be considered a factor in awarding rights and resources due to racial progress. By examining the existing literature, I stress that the notion of living in a post-racial America does not respond to reality.

Keywords: colorblindness, post-racialism, race, racism

1. Introduction

In what is known as the post-civil rights era, the label “racist” carries a certain stigma. In contemporary America, colorblindness and racism coexist. In the colorblind sphere, racism is viewed as an act of individuals or hate groups and not as a system of oppression well-maintained in social institutions (Doane, 2014).

The term “colorblind” first appeared in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). At that time, the eight Supreme Court Justices voted to sustain the dogma “separate but equal” while Justice Harlan opposed it by stating that: “our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens” (Note 1). Years later, the term “colorblind” appeared again in Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous speech, “I Have a Dream” in 1963.

Colorblindness emerged again as rhetoric in the 1970s when conservatives began to attack affirmative action by arguing that such policies cause “reverse-discrimination.” During the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives began their fight towards “reverse racism” and advocacy for colorblindness (Korgen & Brunsma, 2012).

Post-racialism is a fulfillment of the colorblind ideology. Just like post-racialists, proponents of colorblindness minimize the significance of race, racism, and racial consciousness. I argue that colorblindness and post-racialism share the same meaning since both notions ignore the effects of systemic racism and how it has managed to integrate into this nation’s institutions, and culture (Barnes, Chemerinsky, & Jones, 2010, p. 977). Both undermine the necessity of race-based policies and protect the structure of white supremacy.

A distinction should be made between colorblindness as a reality and colorblindness as an approach to achieve equality for all (Haney-Lopez, 2010). Not recognizing race as a concept that matters has adverse effects for people who have historically been targets of institutionalized racism. Even though overt forms of discrimination have declined significantly over the years, racism has not vanished. What happens is that these blatant forms of racial discrimination have taken a different form, more subconscious but persistent (Mazzocco, 2015).

In this supposedly colorblind or post-racial era, many African Americans across this nation are still exposed to racial profiling, poor housing conditions, social isolation, and high unemployment rates (Logan, 2011).

2. Background of the Study

After the presidential victory of Barack Obama in 2008, many conservatives began to talk about the beginning of a post-racial era. However, for a nation that has allegedly progressed to a post-racial state, the continuous racial disparities that persist in various policies and practices make such claim questionable.

Mills’ Racial Contract theory can help interpret the rise of post-racialism. The Racial Contract is a political and moral agreement based on a white supremacy system in which there are two main groups; the dominant group, the “whites,” and the subordinate group, the “non-whites” (Mills, 1997, p. 3). By ignoring the persistence of racism in American society and encouraging

colorblind or post-racial policies is an indirect way of preserving racism. Post-racialism can be considered a demonstration of the Racial Contract's relevance because ignorance and silence on race-related issues help establish illusions such as post-racialism (Mills, 1997, p. 77). Racial Contract theory allows an exploration of the reasons behind the rise of post-racialism and analysis of many aspects of white ignorance in policymaking, which has historically favored whites and has excluded Blacks and people of color in general.

3. Objectives of the Study

Over the past decade, many scholars have attempted to define post-racialism. Sumi Cho (2009) defines post-racialism as a popular ideological expression of the 21st century that emerged during Barack Obama's presidency in 2008. In Cho's words: "post-racialism is a twenty-first-century ideology that reflects a belief that due to racial progress, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action" (Cho, 2009, p. 1589).

America is a nation in which slavery thrived for nearly 250 years, and no matter how long this country has maintained the title of the superpower, racism remains its greatest stigma. By ignoring the concept of race as suggested by post-racialists we allow systemic racism to remain integrated into the country's socioeconomic structure and consciousness. I argue that the notion of living in a post-racial era is an unfounded claim that consciously or subconsciously serves as a mechanism to promote colorblind policies while undermining race-based policymaking (Teasley & Ikard, 2010, pp. 413–414).

4. Methodology

Generally, in social sciences, case study analysis is a research design that examines an individual, an area, an event, or a phenomenon to uncover issues or provide answers to significant research questions (Note 2). This case study has to do with the phenomenon known as post-racialism that emerged after Barack Obama's presidency. When we talk about a phenomenon, we refer to a situation whose cause is challenged, and post-racialism is a phenomenon whose origin is questioned in this project. The data used for this study are secondary and are derived mainly from books, and journal articles.

5. Findings

Post-racialism has gained considerable attention in the last decade because it assumes that race should no longer be considered in policymaking since American society has moved beyond racism. However, racial inequalities in various areas, including education, the criminal justice system, healthcare, housing, and more, indicate that American society remains racially divided (Neville, Gallardo, & Sue, 2016, p. 7).

For example, data from the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) demonstrate that Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be stopped and frisked than Caucasians. Data indicate that in 2019, 13,459 stops were recorded in New York City. Out of those stopped, 7,981 were Blacks (59%), 3,869 were Latinos (29%), and 1,215 were Whites (9%) (Note 3). The aggressive stop-and-frisk practice adopted aggressively by the New York City Police

Department has initiated a national debate about the disproportionate effects of such policy on people of color (Note 4).

Over the years, the media has encouraged stereotypes and biases that portray Blacks as criminals resulting in many individuals adopting racially biased beliefs without always being aware of it. Since implicit biases are not always conscious, researchers cannot uncover them in surveys or questionnaires but can do so by examining actions. Both individual and institutional implicit racial biases have contributed to racially discriminatory policing practices. The systematic targeting of many communities across the country has resulted in many African Americans being overwhelmingly subjected to prevalent policing practices such as the stop-and-frisk (Stack, 2018).

6. Discussion

In July of 2004, Barack Obama, a then-Senator from Illinois, emerged as a rising Democratic star when he delivered the keynote speech for the Democratic National Convention. In that speech, he described America as a place where anything is possible and expressed his pride in his biracial background, family, and humble beginnings (Note 5). Despite his charming personality, Obama's blackness was the subject of many debates, because he was a non-traditional presidential candidate (Walters, 2007). During his campaign, he had to mobilize Black voters who questioned his blackness due to his biracial background and whites who were skeptical about a candidate of a different race (Carter & Dowe, 2015). Obama did not appear argumentative like other Black leaders, such as Jesse Jackson, but instead adopted a race-neutral approach (Veroni-Paccher, 2012). Obama's vision about hope and unity brought optimism about America's racial dynamics, and many saw in him a post-racial leader.

Former American political commentator Chris Matthews of MSNBC, after Barack Obama's election, stated that "He [Obama] is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour" (Note 6). Chris Wallace, a TV anchor, characterized Obama as a "post-racial figure" (Korgen & Brunsma, 2012). During an interview, Karl Rove, a former White House Deputy Chief of Staff who served during George W. Bush's administration, described Americans as "colorblind" and Obama as a "post-racial leader" (Note 7).

Despite these claims, Barack Obama stated in his farewell address in 2017 that the fight for equality and justice continues. He urged people of color to keep fighting for justice and whites to realize that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow cannot disappear overnight. He stressed that when people of color voice their concerns and frustration about disparities, they do not seek special treatment, they simply demand equal treatment as the American Constitution promised to all citizens of this nation (Note 8).

Obama became a symbol with different meanings for Black and white Americans. People of color saw in his presidency the possibility of their socioeconomic advancement. On the other hand, whites saw in Obama a colorblind leader who represented the possibility that anything can be attained with hard work regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The fact that Obama chose to distance himself from Civil Rights leaders and Black churches made

him appealing to his white supporters because, despite his blackness, he did not talk much about racism. Also, unlike other Black leaders like Jesse Jackson, he did not make whites feel guilty about the past. Instead, he gave hope and optimism about the future of race relations (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). Even though many viewed his victory as a sign that the past racial injustices had vanished, the reality does not reflect such a claim (Korgen & Brunnsma, 2012).

The denial of racial division and categorization does not solve the problem of racism, but in fact, it preserves it by allowing white supremacy to flourish. Not recognizing race as a concept that matters has adverse effects for people who have been the target of institutional racism. Post-racialists argue that race no longer matters. In other words, they support that there is no problem, thus, there is no need for discussion.

7. Conclusion

Is post-racialism the solution to the problem of racism? Can racism go away by simply not talking about it? I argue that colorblindness and post-racialism are unexamined, premature, and risky ideological expressions.

Obama said it himself: “After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society” (Note 9). America does not need to become a post-racial society but a post-racist society. Race is not the enemy of American society; racism is (Ta-Nehisi, 2015). Being “blind” to systemic racism is not going to make racial disparities go away. For those who consider Barack Obama’s presidential election a proof of the rise of post-racialism, recent events, and mass protests about racial disparities in this country call into question the rationality of proclaiming the beginning of a post-racial era (Barnes, Chemerinsky, & Jones, 2010).

Colorblindness and post-racialism appear well-intended. However, race-neutral policies should not be employed in a society where opportunities and access to resources are dispersed disproportionately based on one’s race. To address racial inequality, we cannot leave race out of the picture. The notion of living in a post-racial society is misleading (Luke, 2015). Achieving a post-racial society is not the solution to systemic racism. The goal is not to eliminate the concept of race but rather to abolish institutionalized racism—the biggest enemy America has yet to confront (Gines, 2014).

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Notes

Note 1. Plessy, 163 U.S. at 559 (Harlan, J., dissenting).

Note 2. University of Southern California (USC) Libraries, Research Guides, retrieved from the website: <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/casestudy>

Note 3. NYCLU, STOP-AND-FRISK DATA, Annual Stop-and-Frisk Numbers, retrieved from: <https://www.nyclu.org/en/stop-and-frisk-data>

Note 4. Ibid.

Note 5. Barack Obama, 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address delivered 27 July 2004, Fleet Center, Boston, retrieved from: <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dnc.htm>, accessed on May 6th, 2020.

Note 6. MSNBC's Matthews On Obama: "I Forgot He Was Black Tonight," Real Clear Politics, retrieved from www.realclearpolitics.com. Accessed on 6/3/2020.

Note 7. YouTube video: Chris Wallace and Karl Rove discuss Obama victory, link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42X41KzvS3E>

Note 8. The New York Times (2017), President Obama's Farewell Address: Full Video and Text. Retrieved June 3, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/us/politics/obama-farewell-address-speech.html>.

Note 9. Nesoff, J. (2017). The Myth of a Post-Racial Society After the Obama Presidency, Facing History and Ourselves, retrieved from: <https://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/the-myth-of-a-post-racial-society-after-the-obama-presidency> (direct quote)

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