Barack Obama and the Politics of Race

The Myth of Postracism in America

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Many scholars across racial lines argue that the historic election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States marks the dawning of a “postracial era” in our country. Despite this claim and unprecedented enthusiasm that abounds within African American circles about the direction of race relations in this country, there seems to be a glaring ideological disconnect between the desire and reality of a race-free society. Focusing attention on this disconnect and the symbolic capital of “hope” that Obama’s presidency constitutes for the Black community, this article exposes the potential pitfalls of wholesale investment in postracial thinking, particularly for the most economically vulnerable African American populations. Chief among the questions that the authors ask is how African Americans can productively address the continuing challenges of race-centric oppression under an Obama administration that is itself an embodiment of this postrace thinking.

Keywords: postracial thinking; rhetoric of hope; race; postracism; James Baldwin; inequality; capital of hope

White Americans find it as difficult as White people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that Black people need, or want. And this assumption—which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt White standards—is revealed in all kinds of striking ways, from Bobby Kennedy’s assurance that a Negro can become president in 40 years to the unfortunate tone of warm congratulations with which so many liberals address their Negro equals. It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal—an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the White man’s sense of his own value (Baldwin, 1962, pp. 94-95).
When Baldwin (1962) takes Robert F. Kennedy to task in *The Fire Next Time* for conflating the election of a Black president in 40 years with African American socioeconomic progress (and Kennedy was clearly not off in his prediction by much), he is not discounting the historical significance of such an event. Given that many of Baldwin’s political ideals are in line with Barack Obama’s, it is hardly a stretch to say that if Baldwin were alive today he would find much in Obama’s election and presidency of which to be enthusiastic and even proud, especially as an African American. Baldwin’s chief point is that, however well intended are his motives, Kennedy’s postrace declaration is fundamentally flawed because it renders invisible the material realities of “race” as a significant and determining factor in shaping interracial power relations. Here, Kennedy “races” the African American experience and naturalizes the experiences of the dominant culture, meaning in this instance that the true cause for celebration is not necessarily the election of a Black president but that African Americans would have “excelled” to White norms of success. Not seeing race in this instance only benefits Whites because it allows them to ignore their unearned privilege and hold Africans Americans up to a high social standard for which no group, including Whites, can realistically achieve. That said, it would be a mistake to interpret Baldwin’s rejection of Kennedy’s postracial declaration as a rejection of the promising possibilities of a postracist society. His chief argument in *The Fire Next Time* is that our end goal as a society, of what he rightly deems cultural and racial hybrids, should be to obliterate racial categorization. His point is that we cannot hope to achieve this end goal if, like Kennedy and uncritical proponents of postracial thinking, we prematurely foreclose the discourse on race and jettison in the process a useful gauge for understanding and correcting problems of social inequality in the United States.

Of course, the racial and political climate in the United States has dramatically changed from the 1960s when Baldwin penned his now iconic essay. For many citizens, including a significant segment of the African American population, Barack Obama’s election does mean that the time has come to foreclose the discourse on race. An undeniable reality is that his presidency has engendered a new and indeed intoxicating feeling of optimism across race, class, and gender lines and pressed many of us to reassess, if not overhaul, our basic assumptions about the ways that “race matters” in the 21st century. Even though it is important not to underestimate the symbolic and real significance of Obama’s historic presidency and the groundswell of interracial enthusiastic and goodwill that has accompanied it, it is equally as important not to overestimate it either. Using Obama’s election as
hard evidence that we have transcended race in the United States, many political proponents of postracial thinking are agitating for the end to all race- and ethnicity-centered social policy mechanisms aimed at reducing social inequities. This argument is indirectly reinforced in academia where an emerging and intensifying perspective is that class should replace race as an analytical marker because it provides a better gauge for understanding the racial and ethnic economic disparities among and between racial and ethnic groups (Curtis, 2009).

In this essay, we demonstrate that despite all the advancements we have made to explode racial inequalities—advancements that have doubtless cleared the way for Barack Obama’s historic rise to the presidency of the United States—we have a significant way yet to go and on multiple socio-economic fronts before we can actualize true racial transcendence. Highlighting the salient disconnect between the Obama-inspired optimism among African Americans that a race-free society is imminent and the realities on the ground that reveal a decidedly bleaker social and economic outlook, we consider, at once, the pitfalls of postracial thinking as it pertains to African American agency and policy formation to end social inequities and the potential for Obama’s “rhetoric of hope,” to borrow Atwater’s (2007) phrasing, to be transformative in material and substantive ways for our most economically vulnerable communities. To lay the groundwork for our engagement with Obama’s real and symbolic import, we spend the first segments of the essay contextualizing and historicizing the idea of postracial thinking. What will become clear is that we are fundamentally dealing with old ideas that have found new life in the Obama era. The pressing issue at hand is if Obama can “change” or strategically recalibrate this perceived postracial paradigm to attack social inequities that break starkly along racial lines or become a “bound man,” to riff on Shelby Steele’s (2008) convenient phrasing, and become a prisoner of his own “color-blind” rhetoric, reifying the status quo instead of challenging it.

The Dynamics of Race and Politics in America

The notion of a postracial society has been with us for some time. It became a convenient tool of the political Right as a form of backlash to affirmative action policies enacted during the 1960s and the 1970s. It is a cause championed by those who benefit from its use as a form of social capital in maintaining the status quo of the American power structure (Marable, 2000) where African Americans and those of Hispanic/Latino
When have posited that African Americans, then, compose only 14.6\% of the median net worth of Whites, and Latino families even less at 13.2\% (Muhammad, 2008). Given these economic disparities, we are interested in the tangible analysis of race as a form of social capital, and we seek to assess substantive issues that are affected by postracial thinking and actions.

Race Analysis

An appropriate analysis of race and social outcomes should not only address economic and structural factors that affect the life course of African Americans (Mason, 1997, 2001) but also be attentive to historical mechanisms that have transcended generations of the American republic in the oppression and marginalization of non-Anglo-American ethnic groups. Marable (2000), Mason (1997, 2001), and Myers (2002), to name a few, have introduced formulations that directly engage this type of analysis. Generally speaking, race analysis is the systematic application of the tools of historical and cultural analysis to understand the social and economic circumstances facing Blacks and other non-Anglo racial/ethnic group members. Clarifying the pressing need of such an analysis, Myers writes, “Many of the core problems that occur in the study of race relations can be characterized as problems that pit efficiency against equity” (p. 171). Myers defines efficiency as any method that is aimed at the conditions of inequality for historically disadvantaged groups, but not at the expense of the majority. The discourse on efficiency is much more palatable than attempts to enact social policies that focus on equity, which, in general, is couched to the public as giving one group an advantage over another (i.e., affirmation actions).

As a substantive issue, there are two primary categories in the analysis of race: One is viewing race as a social construct, and the other is viewing it as a biogenetic construct. Any cursory review of scientific literature finds several inherent challenges to race as a social construct: (a) It does not explain human biological and ethnic variations, (b) its meaning has been diluted and subject to various social and cultural interpretations, (c) there is a lack of consensus of its meaning within scientific disciplines, and (d) when used as a causal genetic variable, it perpetuates biological determinism to the exclusion of other causal factors for human behavior and social
conditions (Kittles, 2008). The key point here is that the idea of race as a social construct can be appropriated and/or manipulated to conceal a more scientific analysis of race based on biogenetic factors or outcomes. What this means in practical terms is that when “race” as a biological factor is invoked in public discourse, even when someone like Obama uses it to promote racial unity as he does in his famed “Race Speech” (discussed in greater detail below), it can easily be dismissed or misinterpreted as either biological determinism (i.e., social Darwinism) or racial divisiveness based on phenotype. Even though the pitfalls of such thinking are well documented scientifically (Kittles, 2008; Rutledge, 1995), there has yet to be a productive discussion of this phenomenon as it pertains to the national politics on racial discourse.

The Myth of a Postracial Society

We submit that many proponents of postracial thinking give race what logicians (Copi, 1978) refer to as existential import—the notion of attributing a tangible property to race that really does not exist—when it is politically convenient to do so or to intentionally obfuscate the realities of clear and present social inequity for oppressed populations in the United States. Those who give race existential import tend to collapse the distinctions between the two primary categories of race as if they are interchangeable.

Legislatively speaking, this prevalent mind-set means that even social justice policies designed to combat social inequities based on race tend to be ineffective because they grow out of faulty logic and skewed perceptions of racial realities. As Myers (2002) suggests, “The process of getting the right answer to an incorrectly formulated policy question is characteristic of many race-related policy questions” (p. 175).

Noted conservative provocateur Steele (1990) offers a striking case in point in his book The Content of Our Character. Decrying the problems of affirmative action legislation and policies aimed particularly at African American socioeconomic progress, Steele opines, “The great ingenuity of interventions like affirmative action has not been that they give [White] Americans a way to identify with the struggle of Blacks, but that they give them a way to identify with racial virtuousness quite apart from Blacks” (p. 93). Clearly operating on the idea of race as existential import, Steele collapses the distinctions between race as a biogenetic reality and race as a social construct. Only Blacks are biologically “raced” and have a history of race. In stark contrast, Whites are unraced (i.e., American and “normal”) and have no history and role in racial oppression. Little wonder then that
Steele can claim that Blacks receive affirmative action because of radicalized thinking and White guilt. Based on his faulty logic and ahistorical race analysis, Blacks are responsible for the problem and the solution of racial inequality. Lost too in his formulation is the fact that White women, not Blacks, are arguably the biggest benefactors of affirmative action policies in the United States.

Steele's analysis on race and social policy is just one example of postracial thinking that cleverly shifts the burden of racialized thinking to the victims of racial inequality. Others include William Julius Wilson's (1980) *The Declining Significance of Race?* John McWhorter's (2001) *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, and, more recently, Thomas Sowell's (2005) *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*. To be clear, we find the uncritical preoccupation with past racial social inequities unproductive and potentially dangerous. Ours is not a desire to create and/or perpetuate a false dichotomy, pitting postracial thinkers against divergent thinkers on race and politics. Rather, our central aim is to call attention to problematic formulations that shift the public discourse from a focus on verifiable racial inequalities to a focus on race exclusively as a property of existential import. However well intended, these postracial formulations operate discursively as efficient methods of downplaying historical and contemporary inequities and their linkage. To be precise, they deemphasize race as a substantive narrative toward achieving social equity through policy implications on the one hand and emphasize race as a measure of social efficiency on the other (Myers, 2002).

In its current form, then, postracial analysis clouds more than clarifies our understanding and critical assessment of human deprivation for some of our most vulnerable citizens. The greatest tragedy is that their issues are misrepresented and/or misinterpreted one-dimensionally as self-inflicted and, concomitantly, the exclusive responsibility of the individual/group to ameliorate. Given the ways that dominant social perceptions have historically trumped socioeconomic and scientific realities in U.S. policy formation, it becomes imperative that we challenge and reject, if necessary, postracial thinking that romanticizes self-determination or ignores our rocky historical legacy of racial inequities in the United States.

The Symbolic Capital of Hope

Obama's famous rhetorical dexterity has given progressives as well as centrists reasons to believe he shares their values and outlook. (Hayes, 2008, p. 14)
If one were to base one’s assessment of Barack Obama’s presidency solely on the postracial media hype that largely defined his presidential campaign and that continues to dominate the ways that the United States and the international communities view him, the historical contribution of other Black political figures who transcended the politics of race and that facilitated the ascendency of Barack Obama could easily be disregarded. Suffice it to say, there is a long history of political rhetoric and rhetorical speech making among African American politicians that precedes Obama’s rise and political oratory fame. This point is expressed in several recent works on the Obama presidency. For example, in *What Obama Means . . . for Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future*, Asim (2009) highlights the history of what he refers to as “secular sermonizers”—orators who invoke a sort of American scripture through the best language that the nation has produced via the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Included in this elite, interracial fraternity are Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Barbara Jordan.

Dealing more squarely with Obama’s connection to the African American rhetorical tradition in the *Rhetoric of Hope*, Atwater (2007) demonstrates that Obama’s success is the outgrowth and culmination of a history of inspirational Black rhetoricians who have galvanized large interracial constituencies around the idea of hope and the possibility for racial reconciliation and equality. She cites the 1984 presidential campaign of Jesse Jackson as a key historical marker in the rise of the charismatic image and ethos of a unifying Black leader in American national politics. She asserts that his campaign simultaneously brought together national and international backing and transcended feeling of White supremacy through a unifying sense of universal possibility. Obama’s “audacity of hope” rhetoric is for Atwater a revised and updated version of Jackson’s “keep hope alive” slogan. Common rhetorically to both is their use of symbols to get Americans to care about . . . [and] regain hope and faith in this country, and to believe that we [Blacks and Whites] are more alike than we are different with a common destiny and a core set of values. (p. 123)

However we contextualize Obama’s legacy, the fact is his campaign and presidency have ushered in a new feeling of optimism in American, especially for African Americans. An April 2009 *CBS News/New York Times* poll bears this out, showing that the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States indicates that for the first time many Black Americans feel good about the overall state of race relations in the United States: “[59%] of African-Americans
say race relations in the U.S. are good, compared with only 29% who thought so less than a year ago, before the election of Barack Obama” (“State of Race Relations,” 2009, p. 1). Of Blacks, 61%, and 81% of Whites, agree that there has been real progress in diminishing racial discrimination in the United States since the 1960s. This compares to a December 1996 poll where only 37% of African Americans felt that real progress in race relations has been made since the 1960s. What is more, a December 2008 article in The Economist reports that 80% of Black Americans polled say that Obama’s victory is “a dream come true,” and 96% of them think it will improve race relations (“Search for the Promised Land,” 2008).

The crucial issue becomes if this new and growing optimism will result in substitutive structural change. Though this is certainly a many-sided issue with an infinite number of potential outcomes, we focus on what we see as the best- and worst-case scenarios based on what we have witnessed thus far in Obama’s presidency. To consider the best-case scenario first, African Americans are much more likely now than ever before in history to feel that they have agency because Barack Obama broke through not only a glass ceiling insofar as ascending to the highest office in the country but also a collective psychological racial barrier. Assuming that this African American optimism is sustainable beyond the euphoria of the historical election, it may result in a renewed energy to fight against social inequities based on race. It seems all but certain that it will encourage more African American participation in politics at the national and state levels. If people feel their perspectives and actions matter, there is a high probability that they will be more inclined to get involved in reshaping their communities for the better. For the youngest generation of African Americans, it may prove the biggest advantage of all because, unlike generations before them that hoped for, preached about, and agitated for these types of changes, they have at their disposal palpable evidence of what is possible. We can also find optimism in the fact that Obama has directly and repeatedly engaged the problem of social inequalities based on race, even if in strategic and lofty rhetoric that emphasizes nation over race, forward thinking over historical reckoning, interracial healing over group accountability. If we take into account the dynamics of racialized thinking that inform and complicate how Obama can talk about race and speak to social inequities based on race, we can view his fence-straddling rhetoric as a necessary, if regrettable, political ploy.

Consider his famed “Race Speech,” for example. The racial reality from the standpoint of the dominant culture was, and continues to be, that African Americans cannot be objective when it comes to discussing race,
that they tend to embrace victimization and blame Whites rather than accept responsibility for their actions and take charge of their destiny. Caught, as the cultural saying goes, “between a rock and a hard place,” between wanting to not appear the victimized Black and alienate his White voters or to ignore the legitimate experiences from which his pastor Jeremiah Wright’s racial skepticism derived and potentially upset his Black ones, Obama strategically refocused the debate from the White historical disenfranchisement of Blacks to Wall Street greed and Washington political corruption as the indirect blame for past and existing racial strife. Even though there were undoubtedly many African Americans who were not thrilled with his rhetorical sleight of hand and how it minimized White participation in Black social and economic domination, most, it seems from the rounding support he received from Black communities, appreciated his difficult circumstances even if they ultimately disagreed with the romanticized portrait of Black–White tensions that his speech projected.

An optimist might also see Obama’s selection of, say, Eric Holder to the office of attorney general of the United States as a promising sign that he understands the limitations of postracial thinking. Indeed, on February 18, 2009, when Holder stirred up national controversy during his first major national address by stating that “in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards” (Cooper, 2009, p. A26), Obama did not cave to the then mounting pressure from the political Right to denounce Holder. Instead, he remained conspicuously silent on the issue for nearly a month, finally offering what amounted to only a mild rebuke in an interview with the New York Times: “If I had been advising my attorney general, we would have used different language” (Cooper, 2009, p. A26). When pressed to clarify whether he agreed with Holder, he responded in a way that both dignified Holder’s comments (he never patently stated that he disagreed with Holder) but also, at once, remained in keeping with his rhetoric of hope:

I’m not somebody who believes that constantly talking about race somehow solves racial tensions. . . . What solves racial tensions is fixing the economy, putting people to work, making sure that people have health care, [and] ensuring that every kid is learning out there. (Cooper, 2009, p. A26)

But, alas, there are significant, and perhaps even dangerous, consequences bound up in the, at times, uncritical optimism that abounds in Barack Obama’s presidency and his near-hypnotic rhetoric of hope. Inspiring though it may be to Americans in general and African Americans in particular,
Obama’s rhetoric of hope has the potential to engender a false sense of hope, masking the realities of gross racial/ethnic disparities and inequality and worsening economic conditions, not only for many Black communities but also for the majority of Americans in general. The fact is that wealth disparities are increasing in the United States, particularly for the majority of African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos (Muhammad, 2008). To illustrate, the top 1% of income earners (the superrich) took home an average of $29.6 million in income in 2006, as compared to only $5.4 million in 1980 for this same group. Compare this to 1980, when “families in the bottom 90 percent averaged $30,446 in income, after adjusting for inflation, $72 more than the $30,374 comparable families earned in 2006” (Thompson, 2009, p. 25). In his essay “Race and Extreme Inequality,” Muhammad (2008) explains that the small wealth gains of recent decades for Blacks and Latinos have all but evaporated with the subprime mortgage meltdown. When compared to Whites, Blacks are 3 times more likely to receive a subprime home loan and 4 times more likely to receive a subprime refinancing home loan. It is estimated that African Americans will lose between $71 million and $92 million during the subprime financial meltdown; similarly, Hispanics will lose between $75 million and $92 million in the marketable worth of their homes from subprime loans.

We find it ironic that the media largely ignore the increasing economic and wealth inequality but are fascinated to the point of obsession with the less substantive properties of a postracial national dialogue. Void of critical analysis, and fixated on the possibility of a postracial America, the discourse on many pressing economic issues as they pertain to social inequality, class, and status is romanticized at best and vacuous at worst (Bobo & Charles, 2009). For example, the discourse on the national economic recession is framed as a discussion of how the challenges of American financial institutions will affect international markets and the plight of the middle class, but not the poor. Fiscal policies crafted by the executive branch of government and endorsed by Congress brazenly rewarded negligent investments with a financial bailout for lucrative banks and their executives at the expense of tax payers; this was succeeded by state legislators and municipalities cutting services and benefits to public universities and schools and health care programs for the poor. Banks and corporations cannot fail, but families and communities can. There is no discourse or discussion on the poor, who are disproportionately Black and Hispanic, and how they will fare in this era of economic downturn for the United States (Muhammad, 2008).

It can, at times, be difficult to discern Barack Obama’s take on such issues because of his shifty and shifting rhetoric of hope. Indeed, Obama’s
rhetoric masterfully straddles the line of existential import. It provides little in the form of giving substance to race, but it also does not totally deny the agency of race as a substantive entity and as a battle cry for racially oppressed populations seeking equity and social justice. When asked by a reporter at the press conference on his first 100 days in office what he may do about the disparities in unemployment and underemployment for Black men throughout that nation, President Obama replied, “Keep in mind that every step we’re taking is designed to help all people” (Washington Wire, 2009). Although President Obama believes that affirmative action policies are still needed in the United States, he contradictorily maintains that race is an inappropriate discussion for policy analysis.

Yet as masterful as President Obama is at gauging the pulse of the nation’s tolerance for racial discourse, when he did “step out of bounds” as determined by the criteria of White America, speaking on race, say in the case of the questionable arrest of a prominent African American Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, his comments were partly responsible for his summer 2009 national approval ratings decline. According to a July 2009 Pew Research Center publication, his comments, where he stated that the arresting Cambridge, Massachusetts, police officer, who was White, acted “stupidly,” were followed by a national approval ratings drop from 53% to 46% within 48 hours of his comments. Ironically, although more White Americans disapprove (45%) than approve (24%) of his comments on the Gates arrest, the same Pew research poll indicates that “Obama is widely liked by the public on a more personal level, with close to three-quarters (74%) saying they like the kind of person he is and the way he leads his life” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2009, p. 1).

Generally speaking, the social and economic success that Barack Obama has enjoyed before and after his rise to the presidency is atypical to the experiences of most African Americans. But the country’s inherent fixation with race as an a priori in its national discourse and as an accompanying explanation for many of its social ills—mostly to the disadvantage of Black people—is something that even a master rhetorician like Obama may not be able to overcome, as his drop in presidential approval ratings indicates. As Julian Bond notes in an April 2009 forum on affirmative action, wealth, race, and ethnicity, “Changes in our society, not least in the election of our first African-American president, do not signal a shift in our [racial] temperature . . . [or] mean the difficulty of the climb [to socioeconomic prosperity] has been erased for all others” (Curtis, 2009, p. 6). Moreover, a 2008 Pew Research poll shows that nearly half (45%) of African Americans born to middle-income parents during the post–civil rights era have descended into near poverty or poverty as adults (Younge, 2008).
But, the danger here is not just for African Americans: The symbolic capital that facilitates the development of a postracial euphoria, that beguiles America at the beginning of the Obama administration, has created a sort of mystique that somehow quells the clamor of national moral degradation and the impact of near financial implosion on the poor. It is not so much the ascendancy of Barack Obama as the symbolic hope that he brings for all of America, renewing the country’s “Camelot” experience, invoking the country’s stance as a leader in the democratic world, and championing the country’s subconscious psychic fixation with race as an inescapable, romantic national saga.

As even Steele (1990) reveals, “Racist societies enforce the idea of race as home by making race an inescapable fate. So, still today, this fundamentally odd—even primitive—idea remains embedded in our democratic national culture, the legacy of our past” (p. 4). Thus, as demonstrated by Barack Obama’s fluctuating national approval ratings of which sentiments about race are an intricate component, his rhetoric of hope based on racial discourse is somehow viewed, as unfair as it may seem, as synonymous with any characterization of appropriate remedies for a radicalized and morally and economically ailing nation. In our opinion, even as it has successfully reduced and exacerbated national anxieties and raised our collective spirits, Obama’s rhetoric has also detrimentally obscured our national economic decline, the ballooning wealth disparities, and the probable chaos of fighting two foreign wars with no end in sight.

**Conclusion**

Through our analysis, we have identified three inherent challenges to postracial thinking and discourse and subsequent public policy analysis: (a) it obfuscates the meaning of race, (b) it ignores gross economic disparities between racial and ethnic groups and their historical and contemporary antecedents, and (c) it disregards the enactment of social policy mechanisms that maintain economic disparities. To this end, the dominant culture attempts to hold underprivileged Black Americans and other marginalized non-White groups accountable for their participation in a meritocracy while simultaneously ignoring the reality of past and present racial and ethnic inequality. From our position, many proponents of postracial thinking deny the reality that they claim the election of Barack Obama promotes, that is, the promotion of agency and self-determination for Black people. Giving Black Americans agency makes them subjects and stewards of their own destiny and not objects of the experiences and wishes of others (Asante, 2003).
To be subjects of their own experience and destiny in America, Black people will need many structural changes in American society. These changes should include social policy enactments and monetary investments that reduce educational and health care disparities and outcomes, greater investment and revitalization in the nation’s declining urban infrastructure where nearly 70% of African Americans reside, and grants for college and business entrepreneurship within Black communities (Muhammad, 2008). All of these suggested structural changes are similar to what FDR and the U.S. Congress enacted for White Americans at the end of World War II at the exclusion of Black Americans (Muhammad, 2008).

Although we acknowledge the significant milestone and meaning of the Obama presidency, we contend that in a capitalistic economy and society, freedom and self-determination in many ways constitute, at a minimum, economic viability and the accumulation of wealth. To this end, President Obama’s rhetoric of hope cannot change the fact that African Americans compose 12% of the U.S. population but possess only approximately 3% of the country’s wealth, that they have gained less than 2 percentage points in terms of wealth accumulation since post–Civil War Reconstruction (Davis & Bent-Goodeley, 2004).

The truth of the matter is that African Americans would like nothing more than to end racism and racialized thinking in America. Many African Americans not only understand their victimization based on race in the past but also understand the more sophisticated methods of racial inequality that reduce their capacity to engage in self-determination today. The problem for African Americans in terms of racialized thinking is not that they are fixated on race as the central theme in the progression of their humanity and their participation in the American experience. Rather, it is, as W. E. B. Du Bois prophesized nearly a century ago, their “unforgivable [B]lackness” that America will not put to rest.

Notes

1. As a biogenetic construct with sociocultural implications, race does matter because of its long historical significance as a convenient tool in the oppression of people based on phenotype. Dr. Rick Kittles (2008), a biogenetic scientist at the University of Chicago Department of Medicine, reviewed research findings examining household net wealth in relation to disease manifestation and individual genetic ancestry. His review of genetic research included populations in Cleveland, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. It included the genetic ancestry of Caribbean islands Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Thomas. Sampling Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics within these areas for their genetic makeup, Kittles determined that, as an aggregate, those individuals with the highest amount of DNA from West African ancestry (where
most of the slaves sent to the aforementioned areas came from) were the poorest in terms of wealth and health outcomes.

2. Readers should note that there are other scholarly works by these authors concerning the analysis of race and class in America.

3. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2009),

News about the arrest of the prominent African American Harvard professor at his Cambridge home was widely followed by the public and 79% are aware of Obama’s comments on the incident. Analysis of the poll data found that the president’s approval ratings fell among non-Hispanic whites over the course of the interviewing period as the focus of the Gates story shifted from details about the incident to Obama’s remarks about the incident.

References


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