

Two Americas — Where Racism Lives

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Contents

- [Racism Persists](#)
- [Breathing While Black](#)
- [The Threat of White Nationalis](#)
- [Lessons from Du Bois](#)
- [Radical Debates](#)
- [Toward New Mass Resistance](#)

IN CASE YOU thought we now live in a “colorblind country” where justice is equal and fair for all — the view of the 5-4 Supreme Court majority that gutted the Voting Rights Act — the Black and white responses to the murder of Trayvon Martin should put that delusion to rest.

His killer, George Zimmerman, racially profiled 17-year-old Martin, then claimed self-defense when Martin challenged him. The Florida jury, five white women and one Puerto Rican woman, acquitted him after discussion of race — the central issue — was excluded from the trial. It became Zimmerman’s word against the dead teenager’s short life. The trial centered on Martin, not Zimmerman’s stalking and point-blank shooting of an unarmed Black youth.

Only the Puerto Rican juror interviewed afterwards felt that Zimmerman “got away with murder.” She said the prosecution had failed to provide evidence of “intent” to murder Martin. Since the victim is dead, and the cops let Zimmerman walk away from the crime, that’s not a surprise.

It took mass protests to even get the police and prosecutors to arrest Zimmerman, and charge him with second-degree murder. His lawyers attacked Martin as the criminal during the trial and declared Zimmerman the victim.

Ongoing protests could lead to a civil rights charge from the Justice Department — although that’s a long shot — and a civil wrongful death suit against Zimmerman by Martin’s parents.

Racism Persists

A typical headline appeared after the acquittal in the *Washington Post* (July 27): “After Zimmerman verdict, a racial divide lingers.” The article notes, “Whites, by a slight majority, 51 percent, approved of the verdict, according to *The Washington Post*-ABC News poll. In the Pew poll, 49 percent of whites approved of the verdict, with 30 percent disapproving.

“Further, the Pew poll found that 78 percent of Black respondents thought the case ‘raises important issues about race that need to be discussed.’ But only 28 percent of white respondents agreed with that statement, with 60 percent saying race was ‘getting too much attention.’”

The white apologist, anti-Black media led by Fox News and right-wing talk radio launched vicious smears on the civil rights leadership and president Obama for raising the issue of race after the

verdict. The focus of these racist outbursts was to shift the issue from a light-skinned Latino (Zimmerman is half Peruvian) to so-called Black-on-Black crime in cities like Chicago.

The stark reality is a very segregated America. In a de facto segregated society, most Blacks are killed by other Blacks just as most whites are killed by other whites. Yet no white media pundits talk about white-on-white crime, gun violence, single parent families, etc. These apply only to Blacks as reasons for high African-American incarceration.

In fact, the FBI report on the Martin shooting said it was not racial profiling, but a criminal profiling of Martin by Zimmerman because of his hoodie and other attire. No one genuinely believes that a white high school teenager wearing a hoodie in his own complex would be stalked by Zimmerman.

The data show that the criminal justice system is racially biased. The reality is this: if a Black kills a white person, compared to a white killing a Black person, we all know who gets the worse sentence. The issue is an unequal, unfair criminal justice system.

One well-known statistic shows how the system is based on racism and institutional discrimination. Blacks are only 13% of the population but 40% of prison population (2009 Department of Justice statistics). "Stop and frisk" laws in cities like New York are overwhelmingly directed at people of color — yet few are ever charged with a crime.

Yet the "whites as victims" propaganda can lead white people who don't see themselves as racists to take anti-Black positions. Because they buy the lie that the civil rights movement "gave" Blacks special privileges — that's how they see programs that make up for discrimination in education or hiring — many white people who were okay with ending legal segregation and inequality now believe they are the victims of what Fox News demagogue Bill O'Reilly calls the "race hustlers" and "civil rights establishment."

It is a short step from this attitude to full blown racism and support for white nationalist/nativist ideology.

Breathing While Black

President Obama and Attorney General Holder — the first African Americans to hold those jobs — both acknowledged the unique history of African Americans after the Zimmerman verdict and the divided response in the country. Some on the left say that this was due to the rise of public protests led by the civil rights leadership, young people and others outraged by the acquittal.

I believe Obama and Holder were genuine. President Obama said at his unexpected press conference that there are "very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store" or "the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off." "That," he said, "includes me."

"Those sets of experiences inform how the African-American community interprets what happened one night in Florida," Obama added. "And it's inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear."

This led to a chorus of upper middle-class Blacks from lawyers and business executives to elected officials stepping forward to tell their own "being Black but assumed suspicious" stories such as Driving While Black, Walking While Black, Being a Black Man where it is not evident you have a

Harvard education or work at a top Wall Street firm.

This type of institutional racism is the lived reality of Two Americas, where a majority of white people, including working-class whites, still act primarily in solidarity with other whites rather than with Blacks of their same class and social standing.

The code phrases “Reagan Democrats” and the “Southern strategy” camouflage an underlying reactionary white nationalist ideology, protecting white folks’ false perception that keeping whites on top is better than helping Black or Brown people.

The racism is still so deep in much of the South that most whites don’t know what all the fuss is about bigots like Paula Deen exploiting her low-paid Black cooks, who actually created most of the southern style recipes and meals that she takes credit for!

The Threat of White Nationalism

This defense of “white skin” advantage — an incipient white nationalism — explains why a Black conservative president is so reviled by the Republican Party. Barack Obama barely received 10-25% of white voters in southern states (13% Alabama, 14% Georgia, 10% Louisiana, 23% Texas, 24% Tennessee and Arkansas, reported in the Daily Kos).

I say “incipient white nationalism” because it doesn’t reflect a conscious position of most whites who take anti-Black positions, genuinely believing that African Americans have gotten enough for 200 years of slavery and segregation. In their minds, they didn’t cause slavery and segregation and shouldn’t have to pay for it. (The U.S. government has never actually apologized for slavery, or given the former slaves reparations.) The problem with something incipient is that it can grow into full blown white hatred and violence.

Martin Luther King Jr., wrote, in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.”

King stated, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” But most whites have never understood, or they simply reject, this lesson. That’s why white nativism/nationalism is a dangerous, reactionary threat.

Obama understands that threat, which is why he spoke out after the Zimmerman acquittal. Yet he supports the system and cannot take on the “whites as victims” demagogues. He therefore minimizes the threat. The president told a Black audience later that as bad as some of the states’ attacks are on voting rights and civil rights gains, it is not as bad as decades ago when Jim Crow segregation still existed, and Blacks were being lynched.

What Obama and other upper-class Blacks minimize is that without mass resistance, the clock can be turned back. Demographics (people of color becoming the U.S. majority by 2050) are neither destiny nor will automatically lead to real political power.

Power must be taken. A white power shift to a multiethnic ruling class is not inevitable. Subtle and opaque white racism is still stronger than working-class solidarity.

South Africa was a white minority-ruled country for 100 years before the majority could gain

political power. Even to get as far as we are today took illegal mass civil disobedience against unjust laws. Martin Luther King and other leaders were beaten and jailed by racist governors, cops and judges. The “new South” still defends their predecessors’ beliefs and uses code words like “states’ rights” and voter ID laws to suppress the rights of African Americans.

Lessons from Du Bois

There are different types of nationalism. The nationalism of an oppressed people, fighting their oppression by a dominant ruling nativist group, has progressive qualities, while that of the oppressor is entirely reactionary.

A central theme of the civil rights movement was to challenge the common view that Blacks were the “other” — not true Americans. The great Black historian, political activist and leader W.E.B. Du Bois explained how Blacks survived in a white dominated society. In his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

No white American experiences that double consciousness, which is the bedrock of Black nationalism and of the struggle for full equality in this society. It’s why race trumps class for most socialist-minded African Americans: How can the unity of workers and the oppressed occur unless confronting racism and white supremacy is front and center?

Blacks know this subconsciously, which is why we must have a double consciousness to survive day to day life. What Du Bois wrote more than century ago about the issue of working-class solidarity and race relations remains a central issue for the left and labor movements.

Radical Debates

In my own political evolution as a young student in Detroit in the late 1960s, I had these same discussions with Black Marxists I met at Cass Technical High School and Wayne State University.

Detroit was a center of Black radicalism and many Black socialists had read Lenin and Trotsky, Marx and Mao. What was debated was not the need for socialism but whether Black socialists should build an all-Black Marxist organization or join a multiethnic socialist group like the Young Socialist Alliance and Socialist Workers Party.

I advocated the latter, purely based on my understanding of Marxism (colorblind) and class analysis. It was a question of winning power, which I did not believe was possible by a Black nationalist based socialist group. Among my Black radical friends, many said that it was not possible to be in a predominantly white Marxist organization so long as racism drove all politics including in the labor movement and the left.

In truth, as I learned, the national question — the continuing oppression of Black people, both individually and collectively as a people — is the central issue of U.S. politics. Whether Black socialists are in a multiethnic group or an all-Black socialist formation is not decisive. Since all these

groups are small propaganda organizations working in larger milieus, the issue becomes focusing on the racism of the state and the dominant white power structure.

Unless this reality is understood, the far right's ideology will advance as it seeks to reverse modest liberal gains on equality. Not by accident, the U.S. Supreme Court rulings on affirmative action and diversity in higher education, and the defeat of voting rights in its last session, show that to be the case.

Toward New Mass Resistance

The Zimmerman acquittal was the final nail in the coffin for many of those who actually believe we are moving toward a "nonracial country" and the colorblind society King advocated more than 60 years ago.

The minority of bigots will only learn, as we used to say, by the crack of a "two-by-four." But the lesson of Black experiences and history is not only that white nationalists will try to convince a majority of whites (not just poor and working class) to back the rich over solidarity with their class allies. It is also possible to win whites to the Black struggle for equality through mass resistance, as occurred during the civil rights movement against unjust court decisions and unjust laws.

The divisions within minority ethnic nationalities will also persist. Latinos are of three colors — white, Brown and Black. A light-skinned Peruvian American, Zimmerman could stalk and racially profile Trayvon Martin, a dark-skinned African American. But Latinos who are Black face double discrimination for their skin color and language and culture.

Since all Blacks are assumed guilty of something, African-American males are taught at a young age not to trust cops and authorities. Obama as president of the most powerful country in the world will do little. But the fact he spoke up as a Black man shows how deep the racial/national divide is.

While the division affects Latino and Asian-American minorities, it uniquely impacts African Americans because of the history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. It's the point Du Bois explained when he described "the color line" as the central question of the 20th century, perhaps not imagining it would remain so in the 21st.

The lessons of Du Bois, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are as relevant today as they were when first given. We must all re-read and follow that history, their speeches and writings and apply the direct action tactics utilized to bring about fundamental change.

The positive news is that following the Zimmerman verdict and appeals to white fears, the new generation is beginning to rise up.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°166, September/October 2013:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3967>