

Racism Refusing to Go Away - US Past and Present

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“THE WAY TO stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination.” — Justice Sonia Sotomayor, from her dissenting opinion after the Supreme Court majority ruled April 22 that states can ban affirmative action in college admissions. Sotomayor is of Puerto Rican descent and the first Latino to serve on the Supreme Court. She was born and grew up in the South Bronx, New York.

“Liberals today mostly view racism not as an active, distinct evil but as a relative of white poverty and inequality. They ignore the long tradition of this country actively punishing black success — and the elevation of that punishment, in the mid-20th century, to federal policy. President Lyndon Johnson may have noted in his historic civil-rights speech at Howard University in 1965 that ‘Negro poverty is not white poverty.’ But his advisers and their successors were, and still are, loath to craft any policy that recognizes the difference.

“After his speech, Johnson convened a group of civil-rights leaders, including the esteemed A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, to address the ‘ancient brutality.’ In a strategy paper, they agreed with the president that ‘Negro poverty is a special, and particularly destructive, form of American poverty.’ But when it came to specifically addressing the ‘particularly destructive,’ Rustin’s group demurred, preferring to advance programs that addressed ‘all the poor, black and white.’” — Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2014. Coates, a senior editor and blogger at *The Atlantic*, grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, in a Black working-class family.

“(P)olicy decisions dealing with welfare, work, and war during Jim Crow’s last hurrah in the 1930s and 1940s excluded, or differentially treated, the vast majority of African Americans. It also traces how inequality, in fact, increased at the insistence of southern representatives in Congress, while their other congressional colleagues were complicit. As a result of the legislation they passed, blacks became even more significantly disadvantaged when a modern American middle class was fashioned during and after the Second World War. Public policy, including affirmative action, has insufficiently taken this troubling legacy into account.” — from a penetrating analysis in *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality In Twentieth-Century America* by Ira Katznelson (first published in 2006, W.W. Norton). Katznelson is a professor of Political Science and History at Columbia University.

“The fact that some African Americans have experienced great success in recent years does not mean that something akin to a racial caste system no longer exists. No caste system in the United

States has ever governed all black people; there have always been 'free blacks' and black success stories. even during slavery and Jim Crow. The superlative nature of individual black achievement today in formerly white domains is a good indicator that the old Jim Crow is dead, but does not necessarily mean the end of racial caste. If history is any guide, it may have simply taken a different form." — from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Revised Edition, 2012, The New Press) Alexander is a civil rights lawyer and professor of law at Stanford Law School.

THE ISSUE OF race and racism has been at the center of American culture, politics and capital development since European colonialists first set foot on land they claimed as theirs.

As these quotes show, the group at the center of U.S. formation and history has been and remains the former slaves from Africa. There is no such thing as "American history" separate from and independent of the largest unitary ethnic/racial group, African Americans.

U.S. history since the 1960s is a reflection of what Sotomayor calls "centuries of racial discrimination." White supremacists don't see it that way. Modern conservatives don't either. Their view is that all special efforts to help former slaves (actually "reverse discrimination") are ludicrous since the Constitution is "colorblind."

They claim to stand on the shoulders of Martin Luther King who advocated an end to legal segregation and a race-neutral interpretation of the Constitution. The fact that King and others fought to end white racism, which is why they advocated colorblind law to end legal segregation, is conveniently missed by those who benefit from historic white privileges.

(Chief Justice John Roberts cynically responded to those who support affirmative steps to end historic discrimination, saying "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race. ")

The Counterrevolution

In fact, the counterrevolution against full equality for African Americans began soon after president Johnson signed the Civil Rights, Voting Rights and Housing Acts into law in 1964, 1965 and 1968 respectively. Johnson also initiated executive orders for affirmative action programs in government hiring to take on institutional discrimination. Rightwing pundits at the time said these decisions would destroy "America."

The U.S. Constitution that conservatives say must be read as it was written ("originalism") excluded people of color as citizens. There was no need for immigration laws then, and it was understood that slaves and Native peoples were not citizens. (Native peoples were denied U.S. citizenship until 1924.)

As Coates documents, African Americans in the South after the Civil War were considered "outside of the law" by whites. African Americans had their land, if they owned any, taken from them without fear of legal repercussions. Whites could abuse and rape women, and lynch those who resisted.

The Great Migration, from World War One through the 1950s, was due to the apartheid-like system in the southern states. Blacks then found out that once "up North," where Jim Crow no longer ruled, their "outside" status continued.

African Americans were locked into ghettos and denied loans to purchase homes in "white

neighborhoods.” The real estate industry urged whites to move out when Blacks moved into their areas — profiting from depressed property values as they left, then gouging Black families with higher fees and rent.

The great myth pushed by many liberals is that the New Deal laws benefited all races. As Coates and Katznelson document, that was not the case. Affirmative action for whites (sometimes called “white skin privileges” that gave them legal and de facto advantages) explains why the poorest white worker can view Blacks, even of the middle class, as inferior.

History is Important

The racist origins of the Constitution and its three branches of government are important to understand. The institutional discrimination that exists cannot be rooted out without studying this history and its impact on current reality. It’s the point that Justice Sotomayor tried to convince the majority of the Supreme Court to see — and failed.

The untold history reveals is why racism continues to be the underlying issue of American politics even after the election of the first, and highly educated, African American as president in 2008, and despite many Blacks getting high positions in corporate America.

These exceptions, as Alexander explains in *The New Jim Crow*, camouflage the reality for the vast majority of African American, Latino and Native peoples.

As Coates explains in his *Atlantic* essay:

“The early American economy was built on slave labor. The Capitol and the White House were built by slaves. President James K. Polk traded slaves from the Oval Office. The laments about ‘black pathology,’ the criticism of black family structures by pundits and intellectuals, ring hollow in a country whose existence was predicated on the torture of black fathers, on the rape of black mothers, on the sale of black children. An honest assessment of America’s relationship to the black family reveals the country to be not its nurturer but its destroyer.

“And this destruction did not end with slavery. Discriminatory laws joined the equal burden of citizenship to unequal distribution of its bounty. These laws reached their apex in the mid-20th century, when the federal government — through housing policies — engineered the wealth gap, which remains with us to this day. When we think of white supremacy, we picture COLORED ONLY signs, but we should picture pirate flags.”

The relentless conservative drive to turn back the clock on racial (and class) relations requires a true reading of American history. African American leaders too who have “made it” into the middle and upper class refuse to lead a fight back to broad-based discrimination because they believe they can survive a white backlash.

It is delusional to believe that a version of the past cannot recur. (One example in California; since affirmative action in college admissions was banned in 1996 there has been a double digit drop in African American admissions.)

Institutional discrimination must be rooted out, using affirmative action for African Americans not only in hiring and admissions but granting full access to government backed loans/grants for home and land ownership.

For the vast majority of working class and extremely poor Blacks the race issue is their daily life. The fear that one's son or brother could be the next Trayvon Martin or as a Black male you could be sent to prison and denied all your rights is real.

Failure of Liberals

President Johnson was correct when he said "Negro poverty is not white poverty." Poverty can't be broken without government power, as when federal troops were used in parts of the South to desegregate public schools.

Many whites in the South are taught revisionist Southern history, not U.S. history. They identify with the Confederate flag and myths about the South and its so-called benign past.

For a majority of whites living in the South, the only issue is white superiority of Blacks — the way it's been since colonial times. The main reason there were "Dixiecrats," the true name of southern Democrats, is because President Roosevelt and other liberal northern Democrats agreed to exclude the South from new progressive legislation. After Lyndon Johnson got Congress to adopt the civil rights laws, the change of white Southern party loyalties was inevitable.

The official trade union movement (with few exceptions) also agreed to have Jim Crow locals in the South and refused to take on racism of white workers or fight for the rights for African Americans. Independent pressure campaigns by African Americans were required to desegregate the war industries during World War Two and after the war.

Dixiecrats are now "Dixieicans," but there is no change in their biased racial outlook. Were the Republicans to stop using the race card, white "Dixieicans" would look for a new party to protect their narrow white skin-based ideology.

The challenge is to recognize that there will be no slow demographic demise of white racism and white supremacist ideas. Their power, especially on a state level where voting rights and other laws are enacted, must be broken. ("States' rights" were enshrined in the Great Compromise at the founding of the country to allow the South to keep its slavery-based economy.)

The ruling class continues to treat white terrorist violence of the "patriot" anti-government groups and armed thugs who are white differently that it does unarmed Muslims, Blacks and other peoples.

Repay Stolen Wealth

Is there a case for reparations? Absolutely. What that would mean in the current context is up for negotiations. No doubt the land theft, the mortgage/loan scams beginning with the discriminatory "middleman" contracts sold to Blacks for homes when the FHA wouldn't do so, and the current foreclosure epidemic are just some episodes that justify the need for immediate financial restitution.

The wealth stolen over generations is available. It is in the vaults of the big banks and major U.S. corporations.

Coates calls on Congress to adopt a bill submitted by Detroit's representative John Conyers to study the reparations issue. While not a solution, it can serve as a tool to have the history lesson and debate about institutional racial discrimination. Perhaps that's the greatest benefit, as white society as a whole will never support reparations as long as it remains ignorant or refuses to confront the

real history of the country.

As Coates notes, Germans didn't want to pay reparations to Jewish holocaust survivors either. ("It wasn't us; it was the Nazis." How often have I heard whites tell me "it wasn't us" about slavery and legal and institutional segregation?) Some has been paid: Japanese Americans received modest restitution for wartime expropriations and imprisonment by the U.S. government.

Will the ruling class do so peacefully? In my view, it will require a massive movement, bigger than the civil rights effort, to make winning reparations possible.

The starting point is to recognize that African Americans have been cheated and stolen from as a people. Once that is recognized by society, everything is on the table for discussion and resolution.

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P.S.

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