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The Foundation of American Racism: Defining Bigotry, Racism, and Racial Hierarchy

by
James Jennings

It cannot be denied that much progress has been realized regarding the issue of race in the United States. In a major survey of race relations for *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one journalist stated:

A cursory view of race relations in America in 1989 indicates that conditions are markedly improved when compared to the circumstances which existed a little less than 30 years ago. No one who has any appreciation of the history of blacks in this nation can deny this indisputable fact. Thirty years ago, in many parts of this nation, not limited to the deep South, a system of racial apartheid existed. Blacks were denied access to public accommodations and were not being hired in public employment as firefighters, police officers or clerks in government offices. . . . Neighborhood segregation was as commonplace in most cities as it is today in Johannesburg, South Africa.¹

If we examine surveys of the attitudes of white Americans towards black Americans, there is support for the idea that prejudicial attitudes have declined significantly in the last 20 to 30 years. For example, a comparison of Lou Harris poll questions asked of Americans in 1963 and 1978 and reported in *Newsweek* illustrate a decline in some aspects of racial prejudice. In 1963, 30% of all respondents agreed with the statement: "Blacks are inferior to white people." By 1978 only 15% of the respondents agreed with this statement. In 1963 white Americans were asked if they agreed with the following claim: "Blacks have less native intelligence than whites." In that year 39% agreed, while in 1978, 25% agreed with the statement. When white Americans were asked if they agreed with the statement: "Blacks tend to have less ambition than whites," 66% agreed in 1963, but by 1978, 49% agreed.²

Despite the fact that current surveys reveal a decline in the level of white prejudice towards blacks, however, the number of hate groups and incidents of



racial harassment and violence is rapidly increasing. In addition, while black and white Americans seem to be interacting more in the work place, residential segregation continues to be a major problem. Furthermore, there are indications that the political attitudes of blacks and whites are not only different on many philosophical and economic issues, but are becoming increasingly divergent.

This increasing divergence is supported by a survey conducted by the Joint Center for Political Studies in 1986.³ The survey found that while 48% of the white respondents across the nation were satisfied "with the way things are going in the U.S. at this time," only 21% of all black respondents were satisfied. Both blacks and whites were asked the following question: "Do you think most white people want to see blacks get a better break, or do they want to keep blacks down?" Forty-three percent of whites felt that most whites want to see blacks get a better break; but a major block of blacks, 40%, believed the opposite, that is that most whites preferred to continue in a position of racial dominance. In this same survey 38% of all black respondents said they felt that the "civil rights of minority groups" was one of the three most important issues in the 1984 presidential campaign, but only 6% of the white respondents felt the same way.

Many scholars and civic activists argue that the United States is now in a "post-civil rights" period, and that racism is declining significantly as a factor in determining the social and economic conditions of blacks in this country.⁴ At times, this perception is accompanied by the belief that blacks now have major economic and educational advantages vis-a-vis whites. As Omi and Winant write:

The state of black America is worsening when measured by indications such as unemployment rates, number of families falling below the poverty line, and the widening gap between white and black infant mortality rates. Yet despite these continuing problems, the American population remains callous about the situation of blacks and other racial minorities. A new mood of “social meanness” pervades the U.S., and many Americans resent having to provide for the “underprivileged.” Indeed many feel that far from being the victims of deprivation, racial minorities are unfairly receiving “preferential treatment” with respect to jobs and educational opportunities.⁵

Many would dispute the claim that blacks have made it in America or that they now enjoy favored treatment. They counter that racism is still very much part of the social and economic fabric of American society today.

Several recent Supreme Court decisions illustrate the tenuous status of laws and court decisions considered critical in moving American society towards social and racial equality. For instance, the decision in *Wards Cove v. Atonio*⁶ shifts the burden of proof on to the alleged victim of racial discrimination. The *Martin v. Wilks*⁷ decision gave white male employees of the Birmingham Fire Department the right to challenge a 1974 consent decree to hire qualified minorities, although these white firemen were not employed at the time of the decree. The *Richmond v. Croson*⁸ decision outlawed a requirement for 30% construction contract minority set asides in the city of Richmond, Virginia. The program had been es-

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established because over a period of time blacks, comprising 30% of Richmond’s population, had received less than 1% of all construction contracts from the city. And, finally, the *Runyon v. McCrary*⁹ decision made it more difficult for an alleged victim of discrimination to sue under one of the oldest civil rights laws in the United States — Section 1981 of the 1877 Civil Rights Act. Thus, while in some ways the country has moved towards embracing the idea of racial equality, in many other significant ways there is a growing resistance to this development.

Further examples of this resistance include the approximately 2,900 racial incidents reported across the United States between 1980 and 1986, including 121 murders, 138 bombings, and 302 assaults.¹⁰ In

1989 the Southern Poverty Law Center issued a report that states that hate violence in the United States has reached a crisis stage.¹¹ The report also indicates that there are 230 known organized hate groups, and that more than half of all hate crimes in the last decade occurred during the last two years.

Where, then, do we stand as a modern society in regards to race and race relations? In order to analyze and comprehend the nature of race relations and its impact on politics in American society today, the definition and conceptual differences of three important terms must be understood. These terms are: bigotry, racism, and racial hierarchy. Much of the current debate on the status of race and race relations has focused on the definition of bigotry and racism and on what kind of evidence is most important in determining the reasons — and therefore solutions — to the growing social and economic crisis in the black community. The concept of racial hierarchy has received less attention. However, understanding the existence of racial hierarchy and how it is maintained is critical to understanding race relations in America and to recognizing the appropriate policy approaches and political programs necessary to arrest deteriorating black living conditions.

The difference between bigotry and racism should also be made clear. Bigotry is a manifestation of prejudice, which is defined by Pierre L. van den Berghe as: “Any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences (whether real or imagined) between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such differences are a legitimate basis for invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.”¹² Bigotry is any act of racially, ethnically, or religiously based prejudgment, harassment, or violence.

As stated earlier there are many indications that bigotry against blacks is increasing in the United States. The list of recent incidents is lengthy and includes a rise in incidents on college campuses as well as an increase in the number of reports of harassment and violence directed against blacks or others advocating racial and social equality. The following is a sampling from this lengthy list:

- In 1981, a 19-year-old black man was lynched in Mobile, Alabama, in order to show “Klan strength in Alabama.”¹³
- Again in 1981, a black woman was maimed with a pipe bomb hurled through the window of her home by whites protesting her move to a white neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan.¹⁴
- In 1982, a gasoline bomb was hurled through the window of a home recently purchased by a black family in a white neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts.¹⁵
- In 1984, a black family moving into a white

neighborhood outside of Chicago was attacked on their first night in the neighborhood by about 12 armed whites who hurled bricks, bottles, and pipes through the windows. It was reported that during this attack police cars cruised past the house on three occasions without stopping.¹⁶

- In 1986, at Howard Beach in Queens and at Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, there were two racially motivated killings of black men.
- In one week of December 1989 in Atlanta, Birmingham, Savannah, and Jacksonville bombings were directed against public officials who have taken stands on racial and social equality.

While bigotry remains a significant problem in terms of race relations, it is not the major problem. Bigotry is not synonymous with racism. It certainly is a manifestation of racism; but these two terms should not be confused. Racism is the existence and institutional maintenance of a racial hierarchy in American society. This definition is similar to the definition of “institutional racism” utilized by the National Conference of Christians and Jews:

[A]ny policy or practice of an institution which benefits one race at the expense of another. It is not the motivation of the institution or its members that counts. It is what results from the policy or practice that counts and determines whether that institution is racist.¹⁷

Racial hierarchy is the situation where blacks occupy a subdominant status relative to whites in most arenas of social interaction between blacks and whites. Racial hierarchy is a fundamental cultural reality for Americans. Racism as a consequence of this racial hierarchy, therefore, is also an integral component of American dominant culture.

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Bigotry and racism are often used interchangeably; thus when one really means to say, for example, “There is no bigotry here,” what is stated instead is “There is no racism here.” As a result we sometimes observe the ironic situation of people fighting bigotry at the same time that they ignore – and therefore strengthen – the basis of racism, which is the existing racial hierarchy.

This confusion is frequently reflected among whites who are quite liberal or progressive on other issues. In criticizing the white left for mobilizing to fight bigotry while downplaying the existence of ra-

cism and racial hierarchy in the United States, journalist Mimi Rosenberg stated:

While the white left participates in demonstrations against specific acts of brutality, it has not taken on an organizational character to develop a systematic and long-range approach to racism. The white left has devoted little time to developing a theoretical perspective on the circumstances and state of consciousness of white people that permits white supremacist ideology to take hold. Even less effort has been spent evaluating how the white left’s fundamental Euro-centric orientation has impeded our understanding of world affairs and constricted our vision of the process of social change. . . . We must identify racist ideas and then direct ourselves to the cultural apparatus that gives expression to them. The media, religious organizations and the school system are the dominant vehicles for the delivery of ideas.¹⁸

We can reiterate this argument by paraphrasing historian Peter Steinfels who wrote in his book, *The Neo-Conservatives*, that many whites approach racism as if it were but graffiti on a solid brick wall of social justice and equality.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, it

As long as blacks systemically occupy social positions lower than whites – that is, as long as racial hierarchy exists in this society – racism remains.

is bigotry that represents graffiti on the wall containing a major racial fault. The absence of bigotry in a particular setting is not a guarantee for the absence of racism or racial hierarchy.

The situation among blacks in American higher education is a clear illustration of racial hierarchy. Racial violence on the campuses of American colleges is rising. In 1986, for example, incidents of racial harrassment and violence were reported at many prestigious and elite schools, including Swathmore College, Dartmouth College, Brown University, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, and Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina.²⁰ Such incidents have continued to the present day on campuses across the nation. The existence of such bigotry has indeed upset many people – and justifiably so; yet the growth and existence of this kind of bigotry is coupled with a more serious problem – the continuing and increasingly rigid racial hierarchy in higher education.

Although the number of black high school graduates has increased significantly in the last decade and blacks are achieving higher SAT scores, the

number of blacks admitted into college has declined. And according to a report issued by the Education Commission of the States in 1987, only 3.9% of all full-time faculty in higher education were black, and many of these were employed at the one hundred or so historically black colleges.²¹ Under these circumstances, the elimination of bigotry from American college campuses does not ensure the breakdown of the racial hierarchy on those campuses.

Racial hierarchy, concretely measurable in terms of education, economics, and politics, is a social reality in the United States, even for those whites

Racial hierarchy and racism will prevent blacks, Latinos, and Asians from participating fully and productively in the labor market.

who would never utter a bigoted word or participate in an act of bigotry and who sincerely treat others, regardless of color, as equal human beings. The acts or intentions of individual whites is not the major relevant issue within the concept of racial hierarchy.

The suggestion that intention is irrelevant to the existence of racial hierarchy is consistent with the earlier work of sociologist Robert Blauner and with the idea of a "new racism" discussed by physicians William Grier and Price M. Cobbs in their work, *Black Rage*.²² Blauner proposed that white Americans enjoyed benefits of a racial order even if they consciously rejected prejudice and racism: "It cannot be avoided, even by those who consciously reject the society and its privileges."²³ Grier and Cobbs argued similarly that racism is becoming prominent, almost natural, even among well-intentioned whites. They state:

The hatred of blacks has been so deeply bound up with being an American that it has been one of the first things new Americans learn and one of the last things old Americans forget. Such feelings have been elevated to a position of national character. . . . The nation has incorporated this oppression into itself in the form of folkways and storied traditions. . . .²⁴

Joel Dreyfuss and Charles Lawrence, in their book *The Bakke Case: The Politics of Inequality*, argue that the continuing rigidity of this "new racism" is a major problem in overcoming the gap between the two American societies, but they go on to state:

The greatest danger that the New Racism poses to minority efforts at equality is its assumptions that racism no longer exists, that whites have finally overcome several hundred years of cultural reinforcement, and that they can make objective judgments about the ability and per-

formance of minority-group individuals.²⁵

Another way of stating this idea is that the standardized and negative ways that whites think of blacks as a result of society's social, economic, and cultural arrangements have become normal.

The existence of racial hierarchy gives rise to certain ways of thinking about people of color generally, and blacks in particular. Many times incidents of racial bigotry become easier because whites have been socialized to think of blacks as somehow lower or not as significant as whites. This socialization takes place because U.S. citizens constantly see and experience racial hierarchy, and because they learn within a framework of racial hierarchy. The suggestion that a particular social and economic order gives rise to a way of racial thinking is similar to a recent observation by Adele D. Terrell, program director for the National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence:

My point is that the crossburnings and harassment which occur when an African-American family moves into a traditionally white neighborhood, or the name calling which occurs when an African-American student walks across an Ivy-League campus, or the racist cartoons that appear on the desk of the newly-promoted African-American supervisor are all to some extent manifestations of the same thought process . . . [that includes] . . . long-held beliefs that some groups of people are different and can be treated by different standards.²⁶

Racial hierarchy is manifested economically, educationally, culturally, and politically. In the economic and educational arenas it means that blacks as a group continually occupy a position much lower than whites as a group. Even when class factors are controlled, there is strong evidence of a racial hierarchy. In other words, poor white people are generally better off than poor black people; female-headed white families are significantly better off

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than female-headed black families; the poverty rate for married-couple black families is usually twice the rate for married-couple white families; and unemployment rates for blacks are generally higher than for whites with comparable levels of education.

The issue of whether racial hierarchy is intentionally constructed and maintained is not as important as its very existence because the issue of intent does

not diminish the impact such a hierarchy has on the social conditions of blacks. The existence of racial hierarchy and the evidence that it is becoming more rigid is proof that racism is still a major problem for American society. Even if acts of bigotry could be somehow erased or eliminated today, we still could not assert that racism is no longer a problem. As long as blacks systemically occupy social positions lower than whites—that is, as long as racial hierarchy exists in this society—racism remains.

What are the effects of racism and racial hierarchy? Many who discuss this question imply that it is only a problem for blacks. In fact, racism is harmful to whites as well as other people of color. Today, racism represents an enormous cost to the American economy due to the fact that the national labor force is growing in racial and ethnic diversity. Racial hierarchy and racism will prevent blacks, Latinos, and Asians from participating fully and productively in the labor market. According to many demographic studies and projections the work force will soon be one third people of color; between 1985 and 2000 the number of children in American public schools who are black, Latino, or Asian will increase dramatically. Most of the population growth of this country will be a result of the increasing population of black and Latino people and immigration from Africa, South America, and Asia.²⁷ The existence of racism and racial hierarchy in this kind of ongoing demographic metamorphosis is both expensive and economically suicidal for the nation.

The political responses to bigotry and racial hierarchy are different. Bigotry on the campus or on the street, for example, may be lessened or eliminated through legal action or even through an educational process that raises the level of awareness and respect for cultural and racial diversity. The elimination of racial hierarchy, however, is much more complicated and calls for a systemic, comprehensive approach. Racial hierarchy can only be eliminated through the challenging of economic, cultural, and political arrangements that help to maintain a social hierarchy between blacks and whites. While the elimination of bigotry is an important social goal for all Americans, the demise of racial hierarchy—which facilitates both bigotry and racism—will take place only when blacks have the political power to challenge and change both public and private institutional arrangements and practices that maintain racial hierarchy.

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