Racism In America Is Over

The question someone like me has been asked to answer several times a week since Nov. 5 has been, “Are we now in a post-racial America?”

Giving an answer requires that we know what the question really refers to: whether America is past racism. Moreover, the point is largely racism against black people, i.e., Barack Obama, i.e., the people who are America’s eternal shame, and so on. We are not really thinking about racism against Arabs. Most of us have a sense that the Asian pitching in on how the question applies to her is vaguely beside the point.

So, in answer to the question, “Is America past racism against black people,” I say the answer is yes.

Of course, nothing magically changed when Obama was declared president-elect. However, our proper concern is not whether racism still exists, but whether it remains a serious problem. The election of Obama proved, as nothing else could have, that it no longer does.

I make that claim while quite sure that in 2009, a noose or three will be hung somewhere, some employer will be revealed to have used the N-word on tapes of a meeting, and so on. America will remain imperfect, as humans have always been.

It’s not an accident, however, that increasingly, alleged cases of racism are tough calls, reflecting the complexity of human affairs rather than the stark injustice of Jim Crow or even redlining. A young black man is shot dead by three police officers and only one of them is white. A white radio host uses a jocular slur against black women—used for decades in the exact same way by black rappers celebrated as bards.

The issue, then, is degree. When it comes to racism, too many suddenly think in the binary fashion of the quantum physicist: either there is no racism or there “is” racism, which, no matter its nature or extent, indicts America as a land with bigotry in its warp and woof.
But anyone who wants to take this line from now on will have to grapple with the elephant in the middle of the room: the president of AmeriKKKa is black. If the racism that America is “all about” is the kind that allows a black man to become president, then I’m afraid the nature of this “all about” is too abstract for me to follow, and most Americans will feel similarly. It’s time to change the discussion.

As such, all of the AmeriKKKa-type rhetoric is now performance. Acts of racism should be condemned, of course. However, the gesture of claiming that each such thing should “remind us” of the dirty secret of what America is “still all about” now qualifies as a superstition, like hanging garlic in a doorway. That is, the 2005 movie Crash, in which prejudiced Angelenos take out their grievances on one another, was a melodrama, not a reflection of The Real America.

Important: Those who come away from this piece thinking I am writing about Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton might as well have read the back of a soup can. Recreational potshots against celebrity preachers are just that, and the influence of those two on how black people think has been long overrated.

I refer, rather, to millions of Americans of all colors who think of racism as a hot topic at all. Journalists, academics, community leaders, concerned citizens, NPR listeners—all must break the habit of supposing it is our moral duty to keep racism front and center in discussions about how to help disadvantaged black people. Because in 2009, that’s all it is—a habit.

The gulf is vaster by the year between the aforementioned crowd’s sense of racism’s role in black people’s lives and the reality of the problems black people actually face. The uptick in black-on-black homicides over the past decade, for example, is grievous.

However, the young men are not shooting each other because white people don’t like them. OK, one might fashion an involved, subtle argument as to how when a 15-year-old in Brooklyn shoots another one in the face, it is traceable to racism—likely “societal” or “institutional.”
However, there are two problems with this line of reasoning. First, arguments like these are too arcane to unite the nation behind some kind of relief effort. People being hosed to the ground in Birmingham was one thing. But what would the “anti-racist” plan be now? How do you “eliminate racism” of the kind that sparked a chain reaction that led to that 15-year-old having and using that gun?

Second, think about it: Even if you could wave a magic wand and eliminate this “racism” today, the murders we are dealing with would continue.

In the same way, how is the AIDS crisis in black America due to racism—i.e., in a way such that we could eliminate that racism and see AIDS disappear? Millions of black schoolchildren never learn to read well because teachers’ unions have no interest in the phonics-based, drill-focused program called Project Follow Through that has been proven since the ’60s to teach poor kids to read well. The role of racism in this is decidedly obscure.

A generous way of describing this, as Richard Thompson Ford put it in the best 2008 book on race, *The Race Card*, is “racism without racists.” In many of these cases, racism was the spark in the past (i.e. white flight in 1969), but is no longer the problem in the present (the way to keep teens from shooting each other is not to ask whites to come live in black ghettos in 2009).

Yet is that really so obscure a point? That Ford had to carefully compose a whole book presenting it as a symptom of the suspension of disbelief that thinking Americans have long learned when it comes to “racism”: that black problems must always, somehow—and no matter how counterintuitive it may seem—be due to something for which white people are responsible.

The latest expression of that way of thinking was the widespread conviction that open racists were still so common, determined and powerful in America that color could keep even a rock star phenomenon like Barack Obama from being elected president. Indeed, it is precisely
the sentiments of these shadowy racists that get people so worried when a black writer like me says racism is no longer worth our extended attention. I am supposedly enabling something that is ever poised to have, well, some kind of effect.

But with Obama’s election we saw that one thing these backward people cannot stop is a black family ending up in the White House. And really, what else were we worried about them affecting? Wasn’t it mostly their effect on elections? Surely we do not care how such people feel about black people, just in and of itself? I don’t, and I can do without a white person worrying for me about how bohunks feel about me. I doubt my feelings are unusual.

So, if I have to give a single answer, it is, yes, we can call ourselves a post-racial country. W.E.B. DuBois was correct that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”—or at least it was for most of that century. In this 21st one, however, the color line is not the problem in any sense we can honestly consider logical, useful or even compassionate.

We must stop pretending otherwise, partly because we end up embracing weakness. When decrying racism opens no door and teaches no skill, it becomes a schoolroom tattletale affair. It is unworthy of all of us: “He’s just a racist” intoned like “nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah!”

More important, however, is that we waste time and energy more usefully directed to actually helping people. There are few things more grim than spending the afternoon at a panel discussion on programs assisting (black) ex-cons to get on their feet and keep jobs, only to find that the big news on race that evening is people being studiously offended that someone on Fox News made a joke about Barack Obama’s “baby mama.”

Obama himself has urged us to think larger than this. We are poised at a moment when legions are considering how to make life better for the less fortunate, how to make the damaged nation a better place, living up to the ideals it was founded upon.
It would be a tragedy if any more than a few professional hotheads took this as an opportunity to continue obsessing over racism, rather than conceiving of ways to help the poor. Many suppose the two are the same, and it is precisely that idea that is outdated.

The point is valid even when the terminology is “societal racism,” “institutional racism” or “white privilege.” Obsessing over things that cannot be changed and are not the real problem anyway is of no use to anyone. Doctoral theses carefully teasing out the role of “racism” in this phenomenon or that one will seem about as useful to posterity as the scribings of an alchemist.

There are white and black people whose brains, if submitted to an EEG, would light up most brightly at the mention of the word “racism” (and dim quickly at the mention of the word “policy paper”). I designate 2009 as the first year in which people like this, insisting that racism is black America’s most urgent problem—or even one of black America’s most urgent problems—are no longer worthy of extended engagement.

Yes, I mean it. This is a time when we can afford to let the past be the past. Obama’s election showed us that we can, and his call for action requires that we do.

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