Reintroducing the Black/White Divide in Racial Discourse

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Does it matter that most of the problems that disproportionately affect black Americans don't stem from racism — or at any rate, modern day racism? . . . These issues just aren't particularly black anymore.
William Raspberry[1]

Conventional wisdom tells us that the playing field for blacks and whites has been leveled, or is as close to being even as is practically possible.[2] The increasing diversity of the nation's population and the success of many, but by no means all, immigrants are often interpreted as further proof that the continuing problems of African Americans are of their own making. Unfortunately, this misconception applies virtually across the board whether the discussion is employment, housing, education, or virtually any aspect of private or public life in the United States. Immigration is not the only factor, and may not be a particularly significant factor, in explaining why, as Stephen Steinberg cogently observes, "the extension of race beyond the binary of black and white . . . has deflected attention away from the unique and unresolved problems of race *qua* African Americans." And as he continues, "The result is that the nation congratulates itself on its ‘diversity' and celebrates its ‘multiculturalism,' while the problems of African Americans continue to fester." (51) But, again, immigration alone cannot account for this racial narrative. The factual inaccuracy of this celebratory perception seems matched only by the nation's commitment to it. The doors have swung open, we are informed. It is time for blacks to take advantage of the opportunities that have been made available to them, as other groups are doing. As *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry concluded, "White America, I am saying, has done a reasonably decent job of increasing opportunity for minorities, and those who were ready took full advantage."[3]

But the social science evidence of the persistence of widespread, systemic racial discrimination (and not just racial disparities), as well as the uniquely disadvantaged status of black Americans is overwhelming.[4] No doubt many racial gaps have been reduced and overt discrimination has been ameliorated in recent decades. Many of the barriers confronting racial minorities today, and particularly African Americans, include deindustrialization and the loss of manufacturing jobs, globalization and the flight of blue collar and white collar jobs overseas, and other forces that may not be rooted only or explicitly in intentional racial discrimination.[5] But if current forms of discrimination are more subtle, they remain pervasive. And blacks remain the primary target. That is the important story Steinberg tries to tell us, and one that needs to reverberate throughout research, policy, and popular circles. If this amounts to "playing the race card" so be it. In fact, those effectively playing the race card today are primarily whites and white- controlled institutions who continue to benefit from the privileged position of their race.

For example, recent research found that white job applicants with a felony conviction on their record were more likely to get a job than comparable black applicants with no criminal record.[6] Applicants with white sounding names are more likely to obtain employment than those with black sounding names.[7] The most recent national housing discrimination study found that racial minorities encountered unlawful discrimination in approximately one out of every five visits to a real estate or rental agent.[8] Even when homeseekers contact housing providers by telephone, linguistic profiling (whereby the provider recognizes the race of the caller and provides less service to those with a recognizable black voice) results in African Americans experiencing discrimination in efforts to buy or rent a home even when they do not even meet the housing provider.[9]

The nationwide housing study noted above found that blacks and Latinos encountered similar levels of discrimination. However, in light of other research finding that dark skinned Latinos face far more discrimination than do light skinned Latinos, at least part of the discrimination they encounter may well be racial rather than ethnic discrimination.[10] In addition, other research has clearly demonstrated that blacks are the least favored neighbor by all other racial and ethnic groups. When asked to describe their neighborhood preferences one-fifth of whites opted for a neighborhood that has no blacks as did one-third of Hispanics and more than 40 percent of Asians. The share of respondents expressing a preference for no whites, Hispanics, or Asians in their community was smaller for each group.[11] Other research demonstrated that whites explicitly avoid blacks and black areas and that such avoidance results from a clear election to avoid blacks as a racial group and not just those factors often associated with black neighborhoods (e.g. high crime, poor schools). That is, white respondents indicated they would not purchase a home in a neighborhood that had all the features they claimed they wanted, including safe streets and good schools, if there was a substantial presence of black residents. A presence of Asians or Latinos exerted no similar adverse impact on whites' stated willingness to purchase such homes.[12]

Ironically, the growing diversity of the nation's population may be making it even more difficult for blacks to secure their rights via the very mechanisms that are supposed to protect them. Between 1990 (two years after passage of the Fair Housing Amendments Act adding families with children and handicapped as protected groups) and 2003, scarce enforcement resources were being reallocated in a manner that undercut the ability of fair housing agencies to protect the rights of African Americans. The number of complaints of racial discrimination filed with HUD and related public fair housing enforcement agencies dropped from 3,729 to 3,198 and the number of complaints charging discrimination against African Americans dropped from 3,367 to 2,756.[13]

The costs of such racial discrimination are wideranging and severe. Life expectancy, the quality and quantity of public education, the safety and security of neighborhoods, access to public accommodations, treatment by the criminal justice system, and almost every aspect of public and private life varies with race, with whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, and other minority groups somewhere in between on virtually every measure.[14] These inequities and disparities are perhaps captured best by measures of wealth, and particularly the role of inheritance in the accumulation of wealth. Wealth, of course, accrues over generations reflecting both historical and contemporary discrimination with the costs (and benefits) felt in many concrete ways by current residents, whether or not they actively or intentionally ever participated in any discriminatory act. White privilege is most explicitly demonstrated by inequalities in the distribution of wealth.

As of 2002, the median household net worth for whites was $88,651, compared to $5,988 for blacks and $7,932 for Latinos. Just 13 percent of whites had zero or negative net worth compared to 32 percent of blacks and 26 percent of Latinos. Inheritance figures, which are available just for whites and blacks, suggest the extent to which such disparities are unearned. Whereas 24 percent of whites receive an inheritance, just 11 percent of blacks do so. Among those who get an inheritance, whites receive $115,000 on average compared to $32,000 for blacks.[15] And these figures do not reflect the gifts children receive during their parents' lifetimes. To illustrate the significance of these disparities, whites on average are more than twice as likely as blacks to be able to provide a healthy downpayment on a home even in the nation's most expensive housing markets or to pay tuition for four years at almost any college or university for one child from an inheritance. Given these disparities in wealth, it comes as little surprise why whites do better than others, and particularly better than blacks, on almost every measure, and that they do so over generations.

All of this raises the age-old question of what is to be done. Steinberg offers a number of familiar recommendations, mentioning in passing what may be the most important challenge ahead, creating a political mobilization that will turn potentially effective ideas into actual policy and practice. There is no lack of ideas, many of which have been attempted with some degree of success in the past. The civil rights movement of the 1960s did away with many of the legal barriers confronting blacks and

other minorities. Affirmative action opened doors to higher education and employment opportunities that previously did not exist. Enforcement of fair housing laws has generated over $191 million for victims of unlawful discrimination. The reparations movement has secured some benefits for various minority groups from the public sector and some private businesses may soon also be making such payments. The Community Reinvestment Act has generated more than $4 trillion in mortgage loans for previously underserved communities, particularly those with large black populations.[16]

The primary challenge today is mobilizing an effective political coalition that can secure the public policies and private practices that can eliminate remaining discriminatory barriers. In fact, a number of effective organizations and coalitions have emerged in recent years that have achieved important victories on a range of social justice issues. Though many are, by design, interracial groups that do not always pursue race-specific matters, they provide useful models for racial justice initiatives. Examples include ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Center for Community Change, the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Justice for Janitors, the National Fair Housing Alliance, and many more. These efforts have culminated in living wage ordinances and inclusionary zoning laws in more than 100 communities, increases in many minimum wage statutes, greater access to mortgage and small business loans in traditionally underserved communities, creation of land banks and community land trusts to provide more affordable housing, and many other initiatives to assist low-income and minority families as well as communities with large low-income and minority populations.[17] Many of these organizations learned their trade from the civil rights movement. Now the civil rights movement may be able to learn some things from them.

Clearly there are many social justice battles yet to be fought. As Steinberg observes, nothing in his argument is intended to discount the very real mistreatment suffered by various racial and ethnic groups, other minorities in American society, and low-income families in general. But if justice is to be achieved, it cannot be pursued at the expense of the group which has experienced the most extensive and abusive treatment throughout the nation's history and still confronts "unique and unresolved problems of race." Contrary to William Raspberry, many of the remaining issues are black issues. Recognizing the continuing black/white divide is a vital next step in the struggle for racial justice in the United States.

Footnotes

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3. William Raspberry, "Show Blacks How to Fill Their Glasses," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2005.

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15. Thomas M. Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African- American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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