

# Post-racialism and the New Civil Rights Movement

December 22, 2014



As the shouts of “Black Lives Matter” reverberate from the streets of Ferguson, Missouri to the bridges of New York City, mass protest is once again raising the issue of the persistence of racism, both institutional and individual. Young people, especially from within the black community, have assumed leadership by mobilizing in the tens of thousands and proposing new and insistent generational demands. Young white allies have joined in these mobilizations, taking up the slogans and reiterating the demands for justice. On the other hand, merely parroting the slogan of “No Justice, No Peace!” cannot transform white allies into committed anti-racist activists. While it seems that the ideology of “post-racialism” has now been buried under the bodies of so many unarmed black victims of police violence, the lingering appeal of “post-racialism” requires anti-racist whites to critique the mystifications that have inhered in that ideological formation.

In combating the white blind spot of “post-racialism,” it is necessary to acknowledge the continuing centrality of race in the United States. As a consequence of historical amnesia, social blinders, and cultural constructs, the reality of white supremacy remains invisible to the vast majority of whites. Even those young cosmopolitan whites sympathetic to the new civil rights movement want to transcend race without the difficult task of engaging in long-term and radical political struggle. As argued by bell hooks, “while today’s youth are eager to live in a world where racism does not exist, they do not want to do the political work of changing themselves or society” (*Where We Stand*, 81).

Post-racialism feeds on the work of social scientists, like William Julius Wilson, and policy-makers, like Barack Obama, who continue to de-emphasize race and stress class and universalist approaches to ending racial injustice. Invariably, such perspectives diminish the need to continue race-based remedies in the face of racial inequities, often highlighting, in the process, alleged pathologies among the poor and people of color. In critiquing Obama’s eliding of racism and poverty, Tim Wise asserts that “it has been a common trope of post-racial liberalism...to pay homage to the stark history of racism, (and) then switch gears and ruminate on how the problems of poor people in so-called ghettos are now distant from the mistreatment that so often met their ancestors” (*Color Blind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equality*, 37).

More perniciously, Obama’s policies and failures to contend with deepening racial inequalities and the larger context for aggressive policing further reinforce the illusions of post-racialism. Some African-American progressives and radicals like Cornel West have taken to admonishing Obama’s inability to address the very real economic and social dislocations that have fallen especially on people of color (as in the recent housing debacle). Indeed, in Obama’s response to the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, he has continued to sidestep the structural racism that is embedded, especially, in the criminal justice system. As asserted by Keeanga-Yamahta Taylor in her recent *Jacobin* article: “That Obama and Holder have launched initiatives to address policing in black communities, and yet phrases like ‘racial inequality’ (and) ‘mass incarceration’... are never invoked, raises questions as to whether this is a serious inquiry or a stalling mechanism designed to give the impression that action is being taken while they buy time in the hopes that black Americans will cool off” (“No More Eric Garners,” 12/13/14).

Instead of a vigorous anti-racist program, some white intellectuals and multiculturalist critics have

rallied around anti-racialism as a way to deflect a more radical critique of the persistence of white supremacy. Indeed, as argued by Alana Lentin in an article in the August 2011 issue of *Feminist Legal Studies*, “the post-racial agenda is intimately related to the rise of diversity as a less discomfoting way of admitting that full equality has not yet been secured” (164). So, instead of defending affirmative action in hiring and education, liberals have relied on diversity as a strategic demand, as in, for example, the University of Michigan Law School court case.

On the other hand, there are those progressive and radical whites committed to an anti-racist practice and politics. Such white anti-racism is not without its own contradictions and ideological impediments. One possible ideological impediment, advocated by those attached to the journal *Race Traitor*, is a call to repudiate one’s whiteness and the privileges that go along with it as a form of radical and contemporary abolitionism. For other anti-racists, like Mark Warren, such a position is less political than it is moral. According to Warren, “stressing privilege as a strategy to engage whites seems to emphasize the wrong thing. It focuses on the narrow and short-term benefit whites receive from racial hierarchy rather than the larger interest in a racially just future. Alone, it seems to engage shame and guilt rather than anger at injustice and hope for a better future.” For Warren, wallowing in guilt will only impede “a willing acceptance of the responsibility to act” (*Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Injustice*, 85 & 225). From a similar perspective, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva maintains that “anti-racist whites cannot just be ‘race traitors:’ they must engage in struggles to end the practices and the ideologies that maintain white supremacy” (*Racism without Racists*, 183).

Yet, young whites, in particular, are evidently acting, through their participation in the post-Ferguson demonstrations, in the struggle to dismantle the structural racism inherent in the criminal justice system. How they embrace an anti-racist practice over the long-term is an open question. Holding signs with the slogan that “Black Lives Matter” is only a first step in contesting the lingering traces of a discredited post-racialism. The long journey to destroy all the vestiges of structural racism will require extraordinary efforts to enact the most radical demands of the new civil rights movement, including listening to and accepting the front-and-center role of young people of color.

\*Fran Shor is an Emeritus Professor of History, Wayne State University, a member of the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights, and an active participant in post-Ferguson demonstrations.