

White Racial Delusion

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“There is not a Black America and a White America....there’s a United States of America.” So proclaimed Barack Obama, to wild applause, at the launching of his national and global celebrity in his instantly lauded 2004 Democratic Convention Keynote Address.

Polls taken in the wake of the jury verdict that exonerated George Zimmerman for stalking and killing Trayvon Martin do not jibe well with that nationalist and color-blind claim. Fully 87 percent of black Americans questioned in an ABC News/Washington Post poll found that Zimmerman’s murder was “unjustified.” This opinion is *shared by just one third of white Americans*. A third of the whites polled said the killing was “justified” and another third were “unsure” – this despite the fact that the armed Zimmerman rejected a police dispatcher’s order that he stop following Trayvon and leave the matter (young Martin walking around with candy, that is) to public authorities. ABC reports further that:

“By a vast 86-9 percent, African-Americans...disapprove of the verdict acquitting George Zimmerman...while whites approve by 51-31 percent. Blacks, by 81-13 percent, favor federal civil rights charges against Zimmerman; whites are opposed, 59-27 percent....More broadly, 86 percent of African-Americans say blacks and other minorities do not receive equal treatment as whites in the criminal justice system. Again, far fewer whites, 41 percent, share that view – a division that has prevailed, to varying degrees, in ABC/Post polls dating back 20 years.” **[1]**

The refusal of 59 percent of whites to admit the widely documented fact of anti-black bias in the criminal justice system is consistent with the findings of a Tuft’s Harvard survey two years ago. That survey found that for the first time a majority of whites preposterously believed that “*whites have replaced blacks as the primary victims of racial discrimination in contemporary America*” **[2]**.

The notion that whites are more discriminated against than blacks in the U.S. today finds no evidence in the nation’s social and economic outcomes. Fully 28 percent of African Americans, and 37 percent of black children, are officially poor, compared to 10 percent of whites and 13 percent of white children. **[2A]** Thirteen percent of blacks are officially unemployed, compared to 7 percent of whites. “As of 2010,” the *New York Times* reported last April, “white families, on average, earned about \$2 for every \$1 that black and Hispanic families earned, a ratio that has remained roughly constant for the last 30 years.” But blacks have suffered a far bigger fall in income since 2007 than any other racial group and their net worth (disproportionately concentrated in housing) has fallen to its lowest level in decades. A recent Urban Institute study shows that the wealth gap between blacks and whites, “already dismal” before the onset of the Great Recession, has widened in the wake of the latest economic downturn. As *Times* reporter Anne Lowery observes:

“when it comes to wealth — as measured by assets, like cash savings, homes and retirement accounts, minus debts, like mortgages and credit card balances — white families have far outpaced black and Hispanic ones. Before the recession, non-Hispanic white families, on average, were about four times as wealthy as nonwhite families, according to the Urban Institute’s analysis of Federal Reserve data. By 2010, whites were about six times as wealthy. ...The dollar value of that gap has grown, as well. By the most recent data, the average white family had about \$632,000 in wealth, versus \$98,000 for black families and \$110,000 for Hispanic families.” **[3]**

To make matters worse, black Americans make up 40 percent of the nation’s globally unmatched

prison population of 2.3 million, even though they comprise less than 12 percent of the U.S. A minority within a nation that makes up just 5 percent of the world's population, Black Americans make up 11 percent of all people behind bars on Earth. [4] A shocking 1 in 3 adult black males carry the crippling lifelong stigma of a felony record, a critical barrier to employment, housing, and much more.[5]

Whites' new majority notion that they are more discriminated against than blacks is also unsupported by carefully controlled studies of racial bias in hiring, lending, home-selling and renting, and service provision. Perhaps nobody has done more to demonstrate the persistence of anti-black racial prejudice than Princeton sociologist Devah Pager. As she explains on her faculty Web site, she "investigate[s] discrimination in low wage labor markets by hiring young men - who differ only by race, ethnicity, or criminal background - to pose as job applicants, presenting identical qualifications to employers for real entry level jobs." Her work "shows substantial evidence of hiring discrimination, with black men receiving call-backs or job offers at only half the rate of equally qualified whites. *In fact, a young black man with a clean record does no better in his search for low wage work than a white man with a felony conviction.*" [6]

Pager's research demonstrates that black men pay a much higher job search price than do white men for possessing a felony record. More remarkable, however, is her finding that *whites with criminal records do as well as blacks without such records* in the search for employment - a stunning outcome that has been demonstrated across different experiments in different U.S. locales.[7]

Where do so many whites get the kind of racial attitudes and beliefs that lead them to approve a thuggish and armed white watch captain's vicious stalking and killing of an unarmed black teenager and to think - against all evidence - that Caucasians have replaced blacks as the leading victims of racial discrimination in the U.S.? While a full explanation would have to go back to the origins of North American racial oppression in the rise of black chattel slavery during the 17th century, part of the contemporary explanation comes from a deadly interaction that has developed over many decades between racial segregation on one hand and the picture of black America many whites get from mass media on the other hand. Persistent strong residential and social separation means that most whites have little direct or proximate contact with the mostly working and lower class black population and community. The large number of black Americans who struggle to get by with hard work in a terrible job market (particularly bad for black Americans) and under an unjust plutocracy are largely invisible to white America. The white population's main source of "information" on black Americans comes from the mass media, where two predominant black images prevail: (a) dangerous and threatening lower-class and ghetto-dwelling black criminals (mostly male) and gang-bangers; (b) highly successful blacks who have "made it to the top," even to the White House. The first category (a) are a regular staple on the local evening news and the local newspapers, their alleged hideous crimes and violence routinely reported without the slightest hint of any historical or socioeconomic context on the savage paucity of economic opportunity in the highly segregated, poverty-concentrating communities to which they are consigned. The second category (b) deceptively suggests the abundant presence of black faces in high places, feeding the inaccurate white sense that black Americans (still the poorest racial group in the U.S. except for the miserably oppressed and forgotten Native Americans) have somehow outpaced the white majority on the whole. And since the dominant white culture since slavery has long painted the black population with the terrible brushes of laziness, brutishness, irresponsibility, the only way that many whites can or will understand this alleged black rise is in terms of "reverse racism" - purported endemic anti-white discrimination.

It doesn't help that considerable white majorities have long drastically over-estimated the percentage of the U.S. population that is black and minority - something that only feeds whites'

fears that they are being flooded out of opportunities by hordes of blacks, Latino/as, and Asians. Or, of course, that a vast arch-reactionary right wing propaganda machine - proto-fascistic FOX News and the Teapublican talk radio empire being the most obvious representatives - is in place to regularly stoke white racial fears with fantastic claims that a liberal and even "leftist" government is using affirmative action and other terrible schemes to achieve supposedly undue racial reparations and that the current conservative and ostensibly black president is a radical Marxist Black Nationalist.

The fact that a black family sits in the White House holds no small symbolic importance in undermining many white Americans' willingness to acknowledge that white racism still poses any serious barriers to black advancement and equality. It is the last nail in the coffin of that lost willingness for millions of whites is my sense.

Also reducing the likelihood that whites are going to question and shed their racial delusions is the in fact terrible economic prospects faced by many millions of Caucasian Americans, especially but not exclusively working class whites, in the current American New Gilded Age. A recent exclusive Associated Press story based on some innovative research by Washington University sociologist Mark Rank reports that 79 percent - 4 out of every 5 - of U.S. adults now "struggle with joblessness, near-poverty, or reliance on welfare for at least parts of their lives, a sign of deteriorating economic security and an elusive American dream." The number includes 76 percent of whites who are now "engulfed" by "economic insecurity" by the time they turn 60, with economic insecurity defined as 1 year or more of periodic joblessness, reliance on government aid (e.g. food stamps) or income below 150 percent of the poverty level. As the AP reports, citing liberal Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson on the risks of growing "white alienation":

"Nationwide, the count of America's [officially] poor [as measured by the federal government's notoriously inadequate poverty level - P.S.] remains stuck at a record number: 46.2 million, or 15 percent of the population. Whites poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics are nearly three times higher, *by absolute numbers the predominant face of the poor is white* (emphasis added)...More than 19 millions fall below the poverty line of \$23,021 for a family of four, accounting for more than 41 percent of the nation's destitute, nearly double the number of poor blacks." **[8]**

No wonder working class whites are gloomy about the future. According to the latest biannual General Social Survey at the University of Chicago's NORC, just 45 percent of white Americans believe their family has a good chance of enhancing their economic status "based on the way things are in America today." Just 49 percent of "working class whites" (defined as whites without college degrees) think their children will do better than them. By contrast, even though the economic plight of minorities is considerable worse, two-thirds (67 percent) of nonwhite working class Americans believe their children will be better off.

"It's time," Wilson tells the Associated Press, "that America comes to understand that many of the nation's biggest disparities, from education and life expectancy to poverty, are increasingly due to economic class position." **[9]**

But it doesn't seem very likely that the nation's dominant ideological institutions are going to advance an honest discussion of class inequality - and class oppression - in America. Those institutions are themselves owned and controlled by the same very disproportionately white "1 percent" (the real economic elite is much smaller) that has been pulling the political and policy levers for decades to distribute wealth and power ever upward, to the point now where the 400 richest Americans possess as much wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the nation **[10]** and U.S. is more comparable to Latin America and Africa than it is to Western Europe and much of Asia when it

comes to inequality. The reigning cultural and ideological authorities prefer to keep the nation stuck in endless partisan battles and debates pitched around race, gender, sexual orientation, guns, religion and other “values” and identity-based “wedge” issue and divides – anything to keep the real economic ruling class and power elite in the shadows. As the prolific left author and commentator Chris Hedges recently noted on The Real News Network, “both sides of the political spectrum are manipulated by the same forces. If you're some right-wing Christian zealot in Georgia, then it's homosexuals and abortion and all these, you know, wedge issues that are used to whip you up emotionally. If you are a liberal in Manhattan, it's-you know, they'll all be teaching creationism in your schools or whatever...Yet in fact it's just a game, because whether it's Bush or whether it's Obama, Goldman Sachs wins always. There is no way to vote against the interests of Goldman Sachs.” **[11]**

The real pressure for a class-based understanding of American inequality will have to come from outside the system and the bottom up. Such understanding will have to challenge the elite’s longstanding game – as old as British Colonial North America and the early Republic **[12]** – of racial divide and rule. That challenge cannot be effective if it comes from a position of delusion and ignorance, white or otherwise, about the depth and degree of racial inequality and the rooting of that inequality in persistent white-supremacism and the ubiquitous demonization and shaming of black Americans and other minorities. White Americans need to shed their racial delusions and fears not in order to subordinate working class consciousness and activism to a strictly racial paradigm but in order to more effectively reach out to nonwhite fellow majority working class Americans in common struggle against the 1 percent, also known as the capitalist ruling class.

Selected Endnotes

- 1.** Gary Langer, “Vast Racial Gap on Trayvon Martin Case Marks a Challenging Conversation,” ABC News.
- 2.** “Whites Believe They Are Victims of Racism More Often Than Blacks: In Zero Sum Game, ‘Reverse Racism’ Seen as Bigger Problem than Anti-Black Racism,” Tuft’s University Web site (May 23, 2011).
- 2A.** Frederick C. Harris, “The Price of a Black President,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2012.
- 3.** Anne Lowery, “Wealth Gap Among Races Has Widened Since Recession,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2013; Harris, “The Price.” Many experts,” Lowery noted, “consider the wealth gap to be more pernicious than the income gap, as it perpetuates from generation to generation and has a powerful effect on economic security and mobility. Young black people are much less likely than young white people to receive a large sum from their parents or other relatives to pay for college, start a business or make a down payment on a home, for instance. That, in turn, makes their wealth-building prospects shakier as they move into adulthood.”
- 4.** NAACP, Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.
- 5.** Paul Street, *The Vicious Circle: Race, Prisons, Jobs and Community in Chicago, Illinois, and the Nation* (Chicago: Chicago Urban League, October 2002); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).
- 6.** www.princeton.edu/sociology/faculty/pager/
- 7.** Paul von Zielbauer, “Race a Factor in Job Offers for Ex-Convicts,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2005;

Devah Pager, *MARKED: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Bart Bonikowski, "Discrimination in a Low Wage Labor Market: A Field Experiment," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 74 (Oct. 2009):777-799; Devah Pager, and Lincoln Quillian, "Walking the Talk: What Employers Say Versus What They Do," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 70, no. 3 (2005):355-380; Devah Pager, 2005, "Double Jeopardy: Race, Crime, and Getting a Job," *Wisconsin Law Review*, 2005 (2):617-660; Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 108, no. 5 (2003):937-975; Devah Pager and Eric Grodsky, "The Structure of Disadvantage: Individual and Occupational Determinants of the Black-White Wage Gap," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 66, no. 4 (2001):542-567; Devah Pager and Lincoln Quillian, "Black Neighbors, Higher Crime? The Role of Racial Stereotypes in Evaluations of Neighborhood Crime," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 107, no. 3 (2001): 717-767.

8. Hope Yen, "Exclusive: 4 of 5 in U.S. Face Near-Poverty, No Work," *Associated Press*, July 28, 2013, 1:59 PM EDT.

9. Yen, "Exclusive: 4 in 5."

10. "400 Americans Have More Wealth Than Half of All Americans Combined," March 2011, *Journal-Sentinel PolitiFact Wisconsin*.

11. Chris Hedges, "America is a Tinderbox," July 24, 2013.

12. A classic text is Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

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