

## Race: Is It Still Relevant?

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### Comment from a Black Voice

From *The Race Card* by Richard Thompson Ford\*

**T**oday we need a way of talking about race that captures its still-often brutal salience, its nuances, and its complexities. We have to understand a society where blacks are both elites and the underclass, where black faces can sell both five thousand dollar designer handbags and increased prison construction.

The idea of an irredeemably “white supremacist” public culture doesn’t jibe with a world where many of the most prominent and respected celebrities, politicians, and industrial leaders are black. It doesn’t reflect the dominant attitudes of many young adults who find racial difference a matter of casual interest, fluid role-playing, or relative indifference.

It’s wrong to dismiss the widespread admiration enjoyed by black musicians and athletes with the cynical observation that blacks are “relegated” to the role of entertainers. The fact is, celebrities are the closest we have to a visible American aristocracy.

Does this mean that racism is a thing of the past? Not at all. But today’s race relations are more complex and contradictory than those of the unambiguously white supremacist past.... I agree that in some sense we are living in a “post-racist” society. But the word “post” in “post-racist” doesn’t signify the end of racism, or even necessarily the beginning of the end. It means the “next stage” of racism—in the same way postmodernism doesn’t mean the end of modernity but rather a later stage in a long transitional process.

Post-racism ... is not the same as old-school racism. It’s not as destructive, not as mean-spirited, not as crude, and not as blameworthy. But it isn’t exactly a great big hug and kiss either.

\*Richard Thompson Ford is the George E. Osborne Professor of Law at the Stanford University Law School.

### Comment from a White Voice

From an interview with Tim Wise\*

**Interviewer:** In the wake of last November’s election, *Forbes* Magazine published an essay entitled, “The End of Racism.” How do you interpret the election of Barack Obama?

**Tim Wise:** For African Americans, Obama’s election

can’t be anything but meaningful and of course it does change everything. But for *Forbes* to say racism has ended is entirely different. *Forbes* is written, published, and edited by people who played little role in the progress of the last 50 years. I question their motivation for proclaiming an end to racism.

Obama’s presidency changes everything because it is something none of us could have foreseen 20 years ago. But it also changes nothing, because I predict it will have little impact on racism in our society. When Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister of Pakistan, it didn’t end sexism there. If I were to say that India, Israel, and Great Britain have no sexism because all have had female heads of state, would my comment even be taken seriously?

The success of individual persons of color does not change reality for the rest of the approximately 90 million people of color in the U.S. In a way, it is easier for a person of color to become president than for a person of color to become, say, the head contractor in rebuilding after Katrina. In an election you need only a slight majority to win and the bigots’ votes can be canceled out. But a job interview is often with only one person, and if that interviewer has any racial bias whatsoever, the odds are that a person of color won’t get the job.

I refer to today’s racism as “Racism 2.0.” It’s the kind that says we like black and brown people—if they are enough like us. We like Obama because he “transcends race.” This is a much more subtle kind of racism. I think that there will be a version 3.0 and 4.0. The issue will shift, but the problem will still be there. We’re not done with the conversation.

\*Tim Wise is a white southerner who has authored four books, spoken at more than 400 universities and colleges and was hailed as “one of the most articulate and courageous critics of white privilege in the nation” by African American scholar Michael Eric Dyson.

## Reflections

**L**ate in July, Henry Louis Gates, a distinguished professor of African-American history with 18 years of tenure at Harvard, was confronted by two officers from the University police as he struggled to open the front door of his home. Not recognizing him and suspecting criminal intent, the officers

asked Gates for identification, which he quickly produced.

What happened next is still somewhat nebulous, but the Professor did become agitated enough that the officers felt justified in arresting and charging him with disorderly conduct. The whole issue would probably have blown over rather quickly except that when asked about the Gates incident at a press conference President Obama unwisely suggested that “the police acted stupidly.” That off-hand remark was enough to stoke the fires of a fierce national debate over racial profiling.

More than likely, there are lessons to be learned on both sides. Public servants should be aware, as Henry Thompson Ford observes, that “In our racially charged society, a minor snub or simple lapse of etiquette may be misinterpreted as a racial insult.”

For his part, Glen Loury, another black Ivy League professor writes, Dr Gates needs to understand that “given the realities of contemporary society, the police have a tough and often thankless job to do.”

What didn’t occur, however, was a candid public conversation around the ongoing problem of biased and unequal treatment of minorities in our society. Once President Obama had invited Professor Gates and the arresting officer James Crowley to the White House for a beer, the issue became yesterday’s news. That’s regrettable because other students and faculty of color at Harvard had suffered similar indignities. Its unfortunate, too, because two thirds of all black men—including someone as estimable as Colin Powell—believe they have been stopped by police on account of their race; because Justice Department data tells us that black and Latino males are two to three times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts, even though the latter are much more likely to be carrying drugs or weapons.

This is the reality of the situation, which is why most mainstream African American commentators generally sympathized with Henry Louise Gates. Each of them had at least one and sometimes several stories of humiliation and helplessness to tell.

So while race may gradually be receding as an issue in American society it is hardly irrelevant. Much has been accomplished. Minority men and women now serve as respected, tenured faculty at our most prestigious universities while others have become the world’s most popular and well-paid celebrities. Seventy-four black, Latino and Asian Americans currently serve in the House of Repre-

sentatives and, of course, Barack Obama now occupies the most powerful position on the planet. These are definitely signs of progress.

Many of the slights, indignities, and restrictions that people of color endured prior to the pre-civil rights revolution are less in evidence. “Facial discrimination”—formal policies that explicitly assign preferences on the basis of race—are no longer tolerated. Members of minority groups rarely find themselves excluded from a restaurant, hotel, movie theater, country club, or swimming pool.

The end of legally sanctioned segregation and the adoption of measures to ensure equal opportunity have made us a very different country. For most of the first half of the 20th century most white Americans considered the Ku Klux Klan a reputable “mainstream” organization. Its membership during the 1920s included several U.S. Senators and the entire state legislature of Indiana. During that same period, Madison’s own mayor openly endorsed the Klan. But today, Henry Thompson Ford observes, “Racial justice is among the most touted of achievements of American society,”

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It is a source of national pride and a valuable international export. ... Racism is not only unfair and irrational, it is regarded as unpatriotic and anti-American. And, according to this story, racism is also deviant, deviant in the literal sense that it is rare, and deviant in the colloquial and pejorative sense that it is twisted, sick, and repellent.

So, does this mean that we have now moved *beyond* race and that it need no longer be treated as a serious political, social and economic issue? Not exactly, for, as Henry Thompson Ford notes, “Post Racism” doesn’t mean the *end* of racism.

On the contrary: “The enduring chasm of race is still with us,” former UW-Madison historian Timothy Tyson writes in his eye opening book *Blood Done Sign My Name*. Black Americans fall behind their white counterparts in almost every observable measure of well being: life expectancy, infant mortality, HIV infection, achievement test scores, crime victimization rates, employment rates, income and wealth levels. Moreover, Tyson points out, “Almost half of all African American

children grow up in poverty in a de-industrialized urban wasteland.”

To be sure, a significant number of African Americans as well as Latinos and Asian Americans have noticeably improved their social and economic status in recent decades. Many more people of color now enjoy middle and upper-class lifestyles. Nevertheless, we still have a long way to go before Martin Luther King’s dream is fulfilled because that dream was, as Tim Wise notes, “a lot bigger and broader than a few blacks becoming millionaires or president.”

**In 2007 the average black family’s wealth was only one-tenth that of the average white family—and that figure actually represents a decline from just three years earlier.**

If racism is no longer as virulent or conspicuous as it once was, black Americans still suffer significantly from past practice. Take family net worth for example. In 2007 the average black family’s wealth was only one-tenth that of the average white family—and

that figure actually represents a *decline* from just three years earlier.

And there is more. Since the beginning of the current recession, the black unemployment rate in Chicago has increased four times faster than for whites, and far more black families are losing their homes because they purchased sub-prime mortgages in much greater numbers during the housing bubble. The same story has been playing out in communities across the country.

Forty years after the elimination of most legal barriers, a high percentage of African Americans still are mired in poverty, still under-achieving. Why? Is it because there are so many irresponsible black fathers, as some have suggested? Is it because a violent, dysfunctional ghetto culture has been made to seem glamorous? Has a psychology of victimization caused black Americans to question their ability? Do African Americans suffer from a genetic deficiency that no amount of affirmative action can possibly cure? All of these have been offered by one party or another as possible explanations.

But what about history? What about three centuries of slavery and another century of Jim Crow segregation as severe as South African apartheid? In *The Debt*, a book that calls on the American government to pay racial reparations, Randall Robinson writes:

No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch.

According to Robinson the social, educational, and economic inequality that affects tens of millions of African Americans has clear historical antecedents. Take, for example, the huge gap in assets between black and white Americans—an economic liability that does much to inhibit upward mobility. “Black families, Naomi Klein glumly observes, “usually have little besides debt to pass on from one generation to another.”

Why are African Americans so short on capital? Many reasons can be cited. Freed Southern slaves who were given property following the Civil War were often forced off of it. For instance, in 1898 a white-power clique overthrew the duly elected biracial government of Wilmington, North Carolina. The city’s thriving black middle class was then disenfranchised, disempowered, and in many instances evicted from their homes and businesses.

This same pattern was repeated in cities throughout the South and, as James Loewen’s research reveals, in many small midwestern towns. Between 1890 and 1940, successful black tradesmen, entrepreneurs and homeowners were driven out of their communities and deprived of their property. Intimidation and persecution of African Americans resulted in a wholesale exodus—a retreat from hostile towns and suburbs back to the South or into the North’s burgeoning industrial centers. This helps to explain at least in part why many African Americans have long suffered severe economic disadvantage.

The Federal government didn’t help matters. The Social Security Act of 1935 specifically excluded farm workers and domestics, the vast majority of whom just happened to be people of color. After World War II, African Americans were singularly unsuccessful at procuring FHA and VA loans or benefits provided by the GI Bill—programs that helped produce the white middle class. For years the Fair Housing Act, which prohibited sellers from showing racial preference, was not enforced. Thus people of color were prevented from buying the sort of homes whose value would appreciate quickly.

Lack of capital is one of the primary reasons people stay poor. Without assets, they have nothing to invest nor can they borrow money on reasonable terms. When a person has to rely on usurious sub-prime mortgages and predatory payday loan outfits, they only dig themselves a deeper hole. That is why microfinance initiatives that provide poor people with affordable capital are so important. This is one concrete action that each of us, working through a community like FUS, can take to correct long-standing historic inequities both here and in the developing nations of the world.

We have, in many respects, moved into that post-racial world described by Richard Thompson Ford, and Americans are more easy-going about and accepting of racial differences than at any time in our history. But as the forgoing illustrations indicate, the grim consequences of centuries of discrimination remain to be dealt with.

One would think that with a black man in the Oval Office and a progressive majority in both houses of Congress that a major effort would be made to “narrow the gap” between those two parallel lines that Randall Robinson alluded to. But that’s not likely to happen because, as Naomi Klein recently observed, “The White House is only interested in hearing about projects that are ‘race neutral’”—no project that specifically targets historically disadvantaged groups will be considered.

President Obama is well aware that racial inequality is still a serious problem for this country. He said as much in that eloquent pre-election speech in which he explained his relationship with the controversial Rev. Jeremiah Wright and highlighted racism’s nasty legacy.

But Obama doesn’t believe that attacking the problem directly is an option because it would cost him too much political capital. Many whites voted for Obama on the supposition that his candidacy “transcended race” and that he would not use his considerable influence in order to preference people of color. That is why, as Tim Tyson laments, “the kinds of employment, education, and infrastructure initiatives that it would take to heal the enduring scars of slavery’s legacy are off today’s political chart.”

But politics aside, what does a post-racial era demand from each of us? Acquiring a more accurate historical perspective would be quite helpful. Only by knowing our nation’s history can we really understand the present. That is something we have scrupulously avoided doing. There is still not a single national monument in Washington D.C. com-

memorating the slaves who built the White House, nor is the savagery of slavery and Jim Crow truthfully detailed in high school history books. What this country sorely needs but will probably never have, Tim Tyson says,

... is a national truth and reconciliation commission like the one that has tried to mend the scars of apartheid in South Africa; any psychiatrist can tell you that genuine healing requires a candid confrontation with our past. ... If there is to be reconciliation, there must be truth.

White people need to understand that we now live in a society of “racism without racists,” as Richard Thompson Ford puts it. There aren’t very many living bigots or unrepentant segregationists to point a blaming finger to. But the social and economic problems spawned by past offenses remain—problems that demand social and economic solutions. What we need now is not a collective sense of guilt, but a collective sense of responsibility.

Second, we can make an effort to become aware of the subjective and often distorted nature of our perceptions. Recent psychological studies of underlying attitudes repeatedly show that 88% of white Americans still test positively for anti-black bias. We do a pretty good job of compensating for such sentiments through conscious effort, but that bias does cause us to discount African American accounts of discrimination and injustice.

Like homophobia, deep-seated racial prejudice is more readily corrected by active engagement than by reasoning—entering into the risky world of flesh and blood relationships. Studies have shown that whites who have at least one close black friend exhibit less implicit bias than those whose social circle is racially homogenous.

And, finally, we need to nurture hope, for American society has made considerable progress and there is no reason why that trend can’t continue. Let us carry with us, then, these words of Abraham Lincoln, a man who understood as well as anyone the promise of America.

The Founders who signed the Declaration of Independence ... meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be constantly looked up to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence ... augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.