



Racism in Trump's America: reflections on culture, sociology, and the 2016 US presidential election¹

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Abstract

Despite much positive change in the post civil rights era, U.S. notions of racism and white supremacy remain powerful elements of American culture. The adaptability and enduring power of these forces can be seen in the emergence of a new historical epoch best describe as the era of Laissez Faire Racism. Prevalent attitudes among white Americans, certain theoretical arguments and hypotheses in American sociology, as well the election of Donald Trump rest upon the on-going operation of racism. In particular, I attribute Trump's electoral success to three critical dilemmas of race that defined contours of the 2016 presidential election: (1) worsening economic inequality in the presence of rapidly changing ethno-racial demography; (2) intensified political partisanship in the presence of well-institutionalized racially coded campaign strategies and rhetoric; and (3) the failure of the Clinton campaign to simultaneously champion the interests of working and middle class families and galvanize the previously powerful multiracial Obama coalition. I speculate on how to forge more effective multiracial coalitions in the future.

Keywords: racism; Trump; 2016 presidential election; inequality

Despite living in a post-civil rights America, a place many folks not so long ago were rushing to declare 'post-racial' (Hollinger 2011; McWhorter 2008; Johnson 2008), America still has a deep problem of racism. The term racism and the social phenomena it is intended to grasp are troubled and troubling. The term has been overused and often used indiscriminately as a cudgel to silence and intimidate (Sleeper 1997). Yet, there is often no other way to characterize words, actions and circumstances we are witnessing than as instances of racism. We now inhabit a moment where this term is likely to be more and more in use, not less. For good cause, I might add, given the political success of Donald Trump and the white supremacist rhetoric and forces his campaign mobilized,

validated, and to which Trump appears committed to delivering for in a variety of social policy commitments (Blow 2017).

But if serious scholars are to use the term racism, it must have reasonably clear boundaries and meaning. When is it appropriately applied and when is it an unfair characterization? What should we know about its origin and evolution, if we are to make intelligent use of the term and to work toward the reduction of words, deeds, and circumstances we regard as racist? Can we fairly conclude at this point there is an important element of racism in Trump's electoral success and early efforts at governing? Accordingly, to answer these queries the argument I develop will, in part, be conceptual and require dwelling on definitions of terms. In part, the argument will rest upon a historical foundation and backgrounding. And, in part, the argument will focus on the context and features of the 2016 campaign. All of these matters contain an element of concern with questions of dignity, morality and the bridging (or, conversely, the amplification) of group boundaries and divisions defined by ethnoracial distinction (Lamont 2000; Lamont et al. 2016).

I argue herein that a core if not the primary factor in Donald Trump's electoral success and much of what so far appears to be his policy agenda rests on deep-rooted racism and white supremacist presumptions in US institutions and culture. The argument rests not on any single discrete empirical observation or claim but rather, first, on an appreciation of the nature of racism and its evolution in the US; second, an understanding of how its cultural reach and permeative effects shape even efforts to develop sociological knowledge about social inequality; and third, illustrations of how several concrete dilemmas of race in the 2016 campaign worked to Donald Trump's favour. On the latter, I maintain that the US experienced an electoral contest in which a white billionaire Republican was able to (a) more effectively cast himself as a champion of the lower, working, and middle classes than his Democratic rival; this was made possible (b) by the continuing and durable power of race and racial prejudice in our national politics and political discourse, and, frankly, (c) by a sort of paralysis of progressive discourse brought about by the constricting power of the economic elite in our governing institutions and fear on the part of progressive politicians to appeal to minority voters.

On racism: discourse, core meaning, and cultural centrality

Racism is an overused, complex, poorly understood but also indispensable notion for diagnosing American society and particularly its political dynamics. It is thus important to bear in mind the origins, functioning and features of important changes in racism in the US. Then, I address the dynamics of the recent election and political process we've gone through over the initial nine

months or so of the Trump administration. Lastly, I offer some brief recommendations on how to move forward in a positive fashion in the days ahead.

Two illustrations help clarify the fraught nature of racial discourse today and why it is so hard to talk in public as well as in the academy about how to best recognize and respond to racism. Consider the case of now former West Virginia County Development Corporation Director Pamela Ramsey Taylor. Shortly after Trump's election in November, she posted on Facebook a brief note reading: 'It will be refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady in the White House. I'm tired of seeing a Ape in heels' (Schmitz 2016). Clay West Virginia Mayor Beverly Whaling quickly replied to Ramsey Taylor's post with a pithy and enthusiastic: 'Just made my day Pam.' It is hard to imagine a more coarse denial of human dignity than is reflected in these remarks.

The comments of both the Director and the Mayor were denounced as racist. Mayor Whaling quickly resigned but also added the following account of her statement: 'My comment was not intended to be racist at all. I was referring to my day being made for change in the White House. I am truly sorry for any hard feelings this may have caused. Those who know me know that I'm not of any way racist. . . . Again, I would like to apologize for this getting out of hand' (Browning and Bever 2016).

Likewise, consider the remarks of Carlo Paladino, co-chair of Trump's New York State presidential campaign. He wrote, after wishing for President Obama to die of Mad Cow disease, that 'I'd like her,' referring to Michelle Obama, 'to return to being a male and let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe where she lives comfortably in a cave with Maxie, the gorilla' (Moses 2016a). Paladino faced howls of outrage as well. He initially responded that his remarks were not racist, simply 'old-style humor' (Tempey 2016). As the criticism mounted he said: 'I made a mistake. I could not have a made a worse choice in the words I used to express my feelings' (Moses 2016b).

On the face of it, both sets of remarks invoke old-debasing stereotypes of African Americans (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams and Jackson 2008; Goff et al. 2014). Indeed, they hark back to some of the invidious origins of intellectual racism in the legacy of such ideas as the 'great chain of being' where Africans were placed closer to apes and other primates than white Europeans (Kendi 2016). It is not just critical or biting humour; it is explicitly de-humanizing. Yet, when called on it, these folks earnestly try to claim they are not racist. It is an ironic accomplishment of the post-World War II and post-civil rights movement eras, that 'racism' is now a bad, stigmatizing thing. Today, cross-burning Klansmen and Sheriff Bull Connor circa 1963 are the defining cultural images and understanding of racism that dominate the common-sense mindset. As such, in order to qualify as racist, one must be an angry, frothing bigot ready to turn dogs on peaceful protestors or ready to blast those kneeling in prayer with high pressure fire hoses, or preparing to spit on teenagers trying to walk into a high

school door while hurling racial epithets in a merciless rage. The ordinary, casual, polite expression of totally dehumanizing stereotypes in everyday discourse, therefore, cannot be racist in the post hoc logic of the likes of Ramsey Taylor and Carlo Paladino and many, many others. For me, these excerpts from real political life capture both much of the deceptive and potentially destructive power of racism as well as its deep historical and cultural roots, and permeative presence.

Let's pose in a direct and narrow sense the question of just how should we define racism? For a long time now I have found William Julius Wilson's (1973) definition of racism or racist ideology to be a clear and cogent specification. Accordingly, racism is 'an ideology of racial domination or exploitation that (1) incorporates beliefs in a particular race's cultural and or inherent biological inferiority and (2) uses such beliefs to justify and prescribe inferior treatment for that group'. It is thus a set of ideas or beliefs about relatively durable patterns of difference and inequality between human social groups. In other circumstances I might advance the case of keeping a sharp distinction between the terms racism as a property of larger social systems or collectives, and racial prejudice as a trait that varies across individuals but will for now elide that discussion.

What are the roots of racism? Where does it come from? Fortunately, I do not believe there is any evidence that 'racism' is a natural human inclination. To be sure, much validated social science research has established that we classify things creating groups and conceptual boundaries, including ways of grouping our fellow human beings, not simply objects in the physical, material world. It is one of the most basic things the human mind does. But there is enormous variation and great historical contingency and change in the exact categories and boundaries we come to recognize. And despite several hundred years of efforts toward this end, no one has yet, nor will they ever, fashion a scientifically defensible set of natural race categories (Morning 2011 and Prewitt 2012). Notions of racial inferiority and superiority are, in the main, a social invention traceable to the era of imperialism, colonialism and capitalist expansion particularly in the encounter between what we might loosely call the global North and global south (West 1982; Hacking 2006). By this calculus, some notion of white supremacy and of the inferiority of darker peoples, especially those hailing from the African continent, is quite old (Gossett 1997; Kendi 2016). And the sort of egalitarian hopes and post-racial rhetoric of the recent American experience are of very youthful vintage indeed.

Distinguished theologian and public intellectual Cornel West observed that:

The notion that black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West. The idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity remains problematic and controversial within prestigious halls of learning and sophisticated intellectual circles. The Afro-

American encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy, which is embodied in institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions. (West 1982: 47).

We all too easily forget that white supremacist notions thoroughly permeated Enlightenment thinking (Mills 1997). This base of cultural legitimacy can be illustrated by the extent to which racist declarations appeared in the writings of the major figures of the Enlightenment including Kant, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, and the US's own Thomas Jefferson.

Consider the remarks of David Hume who wrote:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admitted for very slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly (Popkin 1978, pg.213).

An embrace of equally white supremacist notions can be found in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1999[1785]), he declared:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior . . . and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous . . . Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above that of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.'

For his part, Emmanuel Kant invoked Hume as an authority on the depth of racial differences in capacity. In reference to one reputed example of creative thought coming from a black person Kant declared: 'And it might be there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid' (West 1982: 63).

I review the remarks on race and white supremacy by these eminent enlightenment thinkers in order to underscore a key subtext of my argument: racism is a deeply, deeply rooted feature of US culture, the fashioning of our most basic institutions, of how we conceive of many, many things including what we regard as sources of truth versus falsehood, ugliness versus beauty, purity versus pollution and debasement (West 1982; Hacking 2006). Undoing and thoroughly uprooting a multilayered, social phenomenon of this reach, complexity, and

centrality is a project of genuinely daunting scope and difficulty. It is also, therefore, a project of inescapably extremely *longue durée*. A massively destructive civil war, the deadliest conflict in American history by orders of magnitude, did not undo it. A 10- to 15-year period of intensive civil rights struggle followed by conflict-ridden desegregation and affirmative action efforts have certainly not undone it (Bobo and Kluegel 1993).

In other work I have argued that we have shifted from a society organized by an ideology, a set of institutional arrangements, and supporting cultural matrix dedicated to a segregationist, Jim Crow Racism social order to one now organized by an ideology, a set of institutional arrangements, and a cultural matrix best described as the Laissez Faire Racism social order (Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1997). This order is one where a putatively race neutral or colour-blind state and market place accedes to as much racial inequality and division as individual taste, talent and inclination are said to create. As the distinguished historian George M. Fredrickson once put it: 'The legacy of the past racism directed at blacks in the United States is more like a bacillus that we have failed to destroy, a live germ that not only continues to make some of us ill but retains the capacity to generate new strains of a disease for which we have no certain cure' (2002). The racism of the present is at once a less stark and absolute variety than its predecessor but it still severely disfigures American culture and the body politic.

The durability, adaptability and transformative power of racism is partly a product of how we acquire such ideas, outlooks and beliefs. Anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld (2012) has conducted comparative research over many years on how children acquire what we might call racial prejudice or individual level racist inclinations and outlooks. His results greatly complicate our common understandings of the social origins of racist thinking. He, like many others, finds that children start to perceive colour difference early in life. That they invoke culturally available racial categories of self and other with considerable dexterity by ages 5 to 7. More consequentially for my argument, Hirschfeld calls into question, for example, just how important direct socialization by 'bad' or bigoted parents is to the reproduction across generations of racist attitudes and beliefs. He does not suggest that parents and significant others in a young person's immediate environment are unimportant, but rather we need to appreciate that children are becoming fully functioning social beings by taking in information from a great variety of social sources. If the larger social, cultural and political environment is one wherein members of an identifiable social group are disadvantaged, are of lesser status and esteem, are disliked or feared, children receive these many signals whether their parents like it or not, and actively take into themselves, to some degree, whatever seems important to successful navigation of that larger society. Thus, even if parents may be actively trying to socialize their children to be anti-racist, children are not immune to

the great variety of stimuli coming at them from a large array of experiences and information sources where they can discern that some types of people are privileged and some are not; that members of some groups are accorded great esteem and immediate respect where others are not; and where individuals in some social categories seemingly fit in and have their presence or claims taken for granted whereas others do not encounter such a regular, warm embrace.

The great successes of the civil rights era, and they are many, did not eliminate segregated communities (Massey and Denton 1993; Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996); did not eliminate vast inequalities of income and especially wealth that align with race (Oliver and Shapiro 1995); did not undo oppressive policing Practices and cultures (Alexander 2010; Hinton 2016); and did not instantaneously erase centuries of racist ideological and mass cultural production. The post-World War II, civil rights and affirmative action eras dislodged the formal legal underpinnings and everyday practices under one particular racist regime and ideology: the *de jure* racism of the Jim Crow era. In its wake a new, qualitatively different but nonetheless still basically racist regime has taken shape.

Some might prefer to call this new regime 'structural racism'. I offer a modest dissent from this labelling for the simple reason that each and every historical epoch of racism has been a form of structural racism: the term is thus not illuminating. Slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a form of structural racism. Jim Crow in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century was a form of structural racism. The term structural racism thus does not help us differentiate between the two or clarify either the uniform or distinctive elements of each era.

For some, of course, it might be preferable to label this period one of color-blind racism (Bonilla Silva 2016). Aside from a general distaste for oxymoronic terminology, the phrase literally is intended to designate its opposite: thinking and behaviour motivated by explicit attention to and action on the basis of race. The phrase is catchy and speaks to a type of principle invoked in much current racial discourse. However, effectively equating colour-blindness as it does with racism is a dubious analytical strategy as it simultaneously muddies, obscures and misdirects at least as much if not more than it clarifies.

Laissez-faire racism, for me, identifies this new era as one where longstanding values of meritocracy, individualism, majority rule and competition in a free marketplace (Kluegel and Smith 1986) weave together as rationalization for persistent racial inequality in a putatively anti-discrimination, race-neutral democratic state. Time does not allow a full review of the relevant evidence here, but empirical research has shown that the changing character of racial stereotypes and attitudes on issues dominating racial politics exhibit distinct differences tied to age or generation, region, and level of education quite consistent with this claim of a new dominant racial ideology taking shape (Bobo and Kluegel 1997; Bobo 2004).

On sociology: cultural embeddedness and a failure of perspective

Sociology as a discipline is inescapably caught up in this American cultural matrix of racism and white supremacy. The truth value of this argument can be seen in theoretical models and analytical choices that, first, expressly privilege a class analytic lens over a race analytic lens, or that try to reduce race to its purely economic underpinnings; in research traditions and theories that, second, largely fail to recognize race as a scope or limiting condition on their generalizability and relevance; and, third, in hypotheses about black-white inequality that are various domain specific variants of a 'black deficit' argument. Each of these three 'theoretical practices' of American sociology hardly recognizes its own embeddedness in, or worse yet, complicity with a larger cultural matrix of racism and white supremacy. This is not the place to fully develop the idea, but an expressly Du Boisian Sociology offers the promise of rising beyond such shortcomings of prior research and theory (see especially Morris 2015; Bobo 2000 and 2015).

One exemplar of the effort to reduce a thoroughly racialized phenomena to a putatively more basic economic foundation occurs in Conley's (1999) argument about the black-white wealth gap. He asserts that this gap is fundamentally a matter of class resources of a parental generation. There is nothing about race per se but rather about family of origin economic resources that matters for wealth accumulation. This argument has several deep weaknesses, most notably its insensitivity to the history of legal slavery and Jim Crow segregation and discrimination (de jure in Southern states and de facto outside the South) as factors that produced race-based family differences in economic resources. It is also insensitive to the cumulative, multigenerational and reinforcing character of race-linked inequalities (Pettigrew 1981; Reskin 2012), a sort of embeddedness in a sociologically racialized dynamic that saw the black-white wealth gap greatly widen – essentially doubling in magnitude – in the wake of the Great Recession (Kochar, Fry and Taylor 2011). Moreover, there are clear signs, even within the data Conley uses to try to establish his point, that blacks simply are not positioned in the economy or physical geography or social network space in ways that make even their narrowly 'economic resources' comparable to those of otherwise educationally or occupationally equivalent whites (Killewald 2013). Thus, while plausible in some purely asocial statistical modelling sense, Conley's analysis is theoretically wrong. It is theoretically wrong because it effectively ignores the historical importance of race and tries to remove the contemporary sociological depth of racial inequality from thinking about the dynamics of black-white inequality.

An example of the failure to recognize race as a scope or limiting condition involves assimilation theory in sociology. Although widely seen as a powerful theoretical approach for years, assimilation theory has long faced difficulty in accounting for the experiences of African Americans and other racialized

minorities. This difficulty did not prevent some advocates from advancing a strong claim that the experience of blacks in the US would (or at least should) follow those of Southern, Eastern, and Central European white immigrants to the US (see especially Kristol 1966 and Glazer 1971). Much careful empirical work has shown the manifold ways in which the hurdles and barriers faced by African Americans exceeded those facing European immigrants (Lieberson 1980). And yet the repeated failure of this theoretical model to easily map onto the experiences of, until recently, the single largest minority group in the US has somehow not been counted as a signal failure of the theory calling for serious rethinking and revision (Jung 2009; Fox and Guglielmo 2012). This theory succeeds to the extent to which you erase the black population from analytical view, a transparent mistake inasmuch as the groups exist in the same larger social system though clearly in differently privileged positions (Fox and Guglielmo 2012).

It is easy to find many varieties of the black deficit argument ranging from the Moynihan Report's (1965) depiction of the black family as a 'matriarchy' yielding a 'tangle of pathology'; the 'acting white hypothesis' as a force in minority youth culture that undermines school achievement (Fordham and Ogbu 1986); or real differences in criminality hypothesis as an explanation for greater rates of black incarceration (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). [The Moynihan controversy is such a well-rehearsed case with recent clashes (compare Massey and Sampson 2009 to Gans 2011) that it is more useful to focus on a more recent case.]

Consider the case of the 'acting white' hypothesis pressed most vigorously by anthropologist John Ogbu and colleagues. None of the efforts to test the hypothesis with high quality, nationally representative data have found clear support for the claim (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997). Even those studies pointing in the direction of some effects are highly conditional, identifying contingencies based in school racial composition and administrative practices such as elaborate tracking, especially tracking that results in privileging white students into college-prep and AP courses in mixed raced schools (Tyson 2011). Hence, what evidence there is for this type of cultural deficit argument seems almost wholly dependent on social environments where strong overarching racial structural dynamics are at work.

Of key significance across all of these examples of deeply problematic sociological hypotheses is that they each rest upon a failure to take systemic racial inequality as a basic or primary structuring factor in creating some relevant pattern of social inequality. Instead, race is to be variously reduced to a purely economic logic, to be glossed over as a peculiar exception to the power of a putatively general theory, or to be understood as a reflection of the substantially intrinsic shortcomings of blacks themselves. Each of these analytical postures, quite commonplace in the discipline, I suggest must ultimately be regarded as

social scientific manifestations of a largely unrecognized embeddedness in a broader cultural matrix that favours the theoretical obfuscation, misperception and rationalization of black disadvantage and inequality.

On race, racism and Trump in the 2016 election

With respect to forging a link to current events and our racial politics it is instructive to recall an old term: the ‘Reagan Democrat’. Consider the following description developed in the definitive book on the subject, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* by Thomas and Mary Edsall, published in 1991. They were trying to understand why Republicans kept winning the White House, and, based on research by pollster Stanley Greenberg, they offered the following diagnosis:

These white Democratic defectors express a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics. Blacks constitute the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being black is what constitutes being middle class; not living with blacks is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live. The special status of blacks is perceived by almost all of these individuals as a serious obstacle to their personal advancement. Indeed, discrimination against whites has become a well-assimilated and ready explanation for their status, vulnerability, and failures.

In the wake of the Trump campaign, we might now replace the word ‘blacks’ with minorities or at least add Mexican immigrants and Muslims to the list, and, *le viola*, we’ve updated those trenchant analysis to 2016/17.

To my mind, then, the election outcome is the product of important features of the economic context, of racism and our racial ethnic context, and how these two factors have shaped our political parties and discourse in ways that allow the economic elite more power than ever before. There are deep, ongoing and highly adaptive conditions of racism at the institutional, cultural and individual levels that prefigure and play out in our national political discourse. I believe there are strong prohibitions against direct, honest discourse on this matter. Scholars will surely look back on these times and observe, as philosophers of race Robert Gooding-Williams and Charles Mills have written, ‘It was the most postracial of times, it was the least postracial of times’ (2014).

I want to draw attention to three points of contradiction or dilemmas of race that cost Hillary Clinton the White House in 2016: one, stemming from the tensions between simultaneous growth of income inequality and of ethnoracial diversity of the US population; two, the tensions that arise from both deepening partisanship, on the one hand, and what has become the routine racialization of our politics, on the other; and three, a paralysis in progressive voices around the

power of the economic elite, versus a fear of appeals to black and other minority voters.

For most of the period from 1945 to 1973, as our economy grew, incomes grew for everyone, and the income gap between the most affluent and the least affluent in the United States actually shrank. A quite different story has characterized the post-1973 period, particularly the post-1980 era. Since the Great Recession, a disproportionate share of income and wealth has gone upward to the already most well-off segments of the population. A recent report from the Institute for Policy Studies (2016) emphasized that income disparities have become so pronounced that America's top 10 per cent of earners now make, on average, nearly nine times the income of the bottom 90 per cent. Moreover, the top 1 per cent of the population now holds a share of wealth roughly equivalent to that of the same population at the time of the onset of the Great Depression. For much of the past two decades, the real value of income stagnated for the middle-income distribution, and those in the lower quintiles actually saw their purchasing power decline. These economic trends have consequences: more and more Americans are experiencing a sense of serious economic vulnerability and worry that they're not going to be able to pass on better prospects to their children.

At the same moment, we've witnessed a sharp rise in the share of the population coming from Asia and Latin America, as well as other parts of the globe. Figures by Brookings Institution senior fellow William Frey (2015) have shown that 64 per cent of the US population could be classified as white in 2010. Between 2010 and 2050, that percentage is expected to steadily decline, with the United States probably becoming a majority-minority population by 2040. In fact, we hit one important benchmark five years ago, when the majority of new births in this country were children of colour. Experimental research shows that when presented with evidence of these demographic trends, many white Americans tend to express a sense of threat from minorities and a greater emotional animosity toward them (Outten, Schmitt, Miller and Garcia 2012). They also begin to think, even more than they may have already (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Samson and Bobo 2014), in zero-sum terms about opportunities and resources (Norton and Sommers 2011). Moreover, there's some experimental work showing that drawing attention to these demographic terms has direct political effects. Psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson (2014) found that experimentally manipulating awareness of this racial population shift increases white identification with conservative political ideologies and the Republican Party. Enter Donald Trump. It should surprise no one that this nexus of conditions – sharply rising inequality and an increasingly acute sense of economic vulnerability for lower and middle-income Americans, in the context of rapid population change as we transition from a solid majority white population to a nation without a clear ethnoracial dominant group – opens the door to a powerfully resonant blend of antimorality populism.

But what role has partisanship played in the routine mobilization of race in our body politic? If we were to go back to the presidential contest of 1956 or 1960, you would find that the major party platforms of the Republican and Democratic Parties contained largely similar language about issues of civil rights and race. Indeed, both parties, at that time, actively competed for the black vote, to a degree. So there is no necessary connection between partisanship and issues of race. Beginning with the 1964 election, however, the two major parties began to sharply diverge on issues of civil rights and race. Ultimately, the Democratic Party clearly became the party of the effective governmental enforcement of full citizenship for African Americans. With that came a sea change in partisan alignments. The South went from being solidly Democrat-controlled to largely Republican-controlled. Black loyalty to the party of Lincoln, once something you could take for granted, started to weaken during the Franklin Roosevelt and New Deal era, accelerated under President Kennedy, and vanished and was replaced by a near-complete capture – and I do mean that word capture – by the Democratic Party in subsequent years (Frymer 1999).

An unfortunate effect of these developments is that both major parties, to a degree, depend on racial division for their electoral success. On the one hand, then, in a context in which Republicans are content to completely cede the black vote, Democrats only need to do so much to expect black loyalty. After all, where are black voters going to go? So even under Obama, nothing you could construe as a truly strong minority or black agenda is articulated within the confines of major party politics. On the other hand, especially as the population changes, the Republican Party worries more and more about mobilizing its base, and doing what it can to constrain the influence of Democratic voters, who increasingly are minorities. Not only is race thus increasingly aligned with voting by party identification, but political scientists and political psychologists have shown us that attitudes that we would characterize as racial resentments play an increasingly strong role in defining the meaning of those party attachments (Tesler and Sears 2010). The end result is what legal scholar Ian Haney-López (2015) has termed ‘dog-whistle politics’. Given improved racial attitudes and the successes of the civil rights era, however, openly bigoted appeals are fraught with the risk of backfiring, at least if directed at African Americans (the same can’t yet apparently be said of Mexican Americans, as we’ve just seen in the 2016 election).

Carefully crafted slogans and rhetoric that play on underlying racial resentments and sensitivities has been a routine staple of Republican Party politics. Thus, in Nixon’s 1968 campaign, we get the Southern strategy and ‘law and order’ message. In 1980, Reagan launched his campaign for the White House in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney were murdered, with a speech calling for the enforcement of states’ rights. Reagan also frequently deployed the

'welfare queen' stereotype, or later that of the 'strapping young buck' using government-provided food stamps and welfare to live better than the rest of 'hard-working America'. By 1988, we get Willie Horton. In 2010 and 2012, we hear chants of 'taking America back', and then in 2016, we return to Reagan's 1980 slogan, 'make America great again'. The rhetoric of the Trump campaign is not some strange aberration, but merely the next extension in a worrisome pattern and trend. The racially tinged reaction against the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the emergence of the Tea Party, the solidification of Republican intransigence in the House and Senate, must be read in substantial measure through a racial lens (Tesler and Sears 2010; Parker and Barretto 2011; Knowles, Lowery, and Schaumberg 2010). Donald Trump's openly bigoted demonization of those of Hispanic heritage, especially Mexican Americans, when he launched his candidacy would be astounding, except that it is of a piece with the long-standing practice of dog-whistle politics and tacit racial appeals. Trump merely exploited the vulnerabilities of the moment, and upped the ante. Those who underestimated the power of this appeal included 16 major mainstream career Republican politicians, including some with otherwise bankable Republican political credentials and huge financial backing (e.g., Jeb Bush).

What is the bottom line? We inhabit a troubling moment of alignment of race, and racial-policy-related commitments, with basic party identities. This is not a healthy circumstance for our democracy. It ties racial division tightly to a well institutionalized political division, doing so at a time when partisan antagonisms are at historically acute levels (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

My third and final point here is the paralysis produced by the power of an economic elite that is constraining political discourse, and fear of appealing to and mobilizing the power of minority voters. If I had to diagnose the current moment, I'd go back to where I started: somehow, a billionaire, who has a gold-plated toilet in his highrise condominium in Manhattan, has a stronger appeal to poorly educated, working-class whites than a woman running as the head of the Democratic Party with some of the greatest egalitarian social policy credentials in mainstream politics one might have. How does that happen? One explanation is that Hillary Clinton simply wouldn't go after Wall Street, at least not in the way Bernie Sanders did. Clinton's campaign was clearly afraid to say, 'I'm going to represent you guys against these economic elites.' That economic message just wasn't there, especially at the end of the campaign, when her advertising was directed *against* Trump, and not expressly *for* average working- and middle-class Americans as against an unfairly enriched economic elite.

The alternative interpretation is to say that Clinton failed to effectively galvanize the Obama coalition, recognizing that Obama was re-elected in 2012 by hyper-black turnout, and even higher margins of Latino and Asian support than he had in 2008, thus more than replacing the two million white votes he lost with two million plus African American and other minority voters. One critically important fact that hasn't gotten much coverage to this point: in the

upper Midwest states that Clinton lost – Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania – the entire margin of Trump’s victory in each of those states can be accounted for by her lower black percentage vote, and lower black turnout, compared with Obama in 2012.

Despite what should be regarded as a centrally important element in the Democrats loss in 2016, leaders of the party are now largely shoving this fact out of view in favour of a media-driven narrative that it was the white working class who cost Hillary Clinton the White House. I strongly dissent from an analysis placing such primacy on the white working class. This bespeaks a mistaken analysis of what happened in the 2016 election and of what ought now be the strategy for the years ahead. Hillary Clinton did not lose because the white working class turned on her with special force. I see those defections as at least no more significant than those that occurred in the case of Jimmy Carter in 1980, or Walter Mondale in 1984, or Michael Dukakis in 1988. The problem, as political scientist and urban planner J. Philip Thompson put it, is that: ‘Clinton could not credibly remake herself as a champion of ordinary working people.’

We should all be acutely mindful that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by a substantial margin yet made strategic errors that cost her the Electoral College. The story of 2016 is not some new rebuke to Democrats or to a progressive coalition coming from the white working class. Not at all. It is, in my assessment, the failure of a democratic nominee to effectively claim and excite the full multiracial coalition – black, white, Latino, Asian and more – that elected Barack Obama in 2008 and comfortably re-elected him in 2012. Guarding against a repeat of that failure is what should concern us most. To wit, a candidate with a robust, top line, front and centre economic message and credible profile as a critic of Wall Street, the Big Banks, unchecked corporate power, and the top 1 per cent is the likely remedy.

Yes, there is work to be done to assure that working- and middle-class whites do not see their fates as weakened by a demographically changing population or by better opportunities and fuller inclusion of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. Neither special coddling of the white working class nor continued marginalization of the legitimate aspirations and political importance of minority voters are the answers. Still, it is exactly the sort of personal engagement in multiracial collaborative efforts, truly working together for the common good, is what we most urgently need. Yet the racial segregation that continues to characterize our nation may just get in the way.

It is not my intention to sound an unremittingly pessimistic note. If there are takeaways here, they are perhaps threefold. First, the current moment is best read as complex. Changes in our institutions and norms, and in the outlooks and attitudes of the mass of Americans, have been significant and are not easily overridden or reversed. There are clearly contending political alliances out

there. There's no single, overarching axis of intolerance. If anything, a two-term Obama presidency signals something important about the majoritarian character of the mass public at this point, underlying racial inequality and division notwithstanding, and the real ultimate closeness in the overall vote – and the fact that Hillary won the overall vote.

Second, the success of the Trump candidacy should worry us all the same, because contrary to all expectations it didn't implode. In this context of economic anxiety, rising inequality, population change, and enduring problems of racism and racial inequality, there's something there that needs to arouse real concern, and to be fought against with vigour, because it's not hard to envision scenarios in which this dangerous mix becomes even more divisive and volatile. Events in Charlottesville, Virginia bring home forcefully the openly racist rhetoric and groups that Trump's political success has ushered into an era of greater perceived legitimacy.

Third, to reiterate the point I started on, race has always been an ingredient of American national politics. Its salience, explicitness and centrality vary from one election cycle to the next, but it's never been an irrelevance (Smith and King 2009). We've got to forget this postracial fantasy. The only way to make progress on racial issues is to face them directly and honestly. Assuming these inequalities, identities, and divisions are not there, are really attributable to something else more basic, or somehow shall just willy-nilly naturally go on to heal themselves is a serious error. Multiracial coalitions in politics in the US are certainly needed and are possible to achieve, given the right framing (Wilson 1999). However, such bridges can only be built when the legitimate grievances of all groups can be given effective voice and be heard by their potential coalition partners (Allen 2016 and 2017). Silencing or trying to erase from view the claims of key groups is unlikely to yield a winning strategy.

Conclusion

At the core of racism is a denial of full and common humanity for members of a particular group. From a long stream of leading thinkers of the Enlightenment to the racist everyday discourse of numerous Trump supporters, racism has found a well-rooted place in the American social landscape. Despite much positive change and development, the presumption of white privilege and of black and brown inferiority – in a cultural if not more 'essential' way – continue to exert effects in the American body politic.

In an era of acutely worsening economic inequality and a rising sense of material vulnerability across a wide swath of the American working and middle class Donald Trump fuelled and exploited anxiety about growing ethno-racial diversity in the US. He did so primarily by demonizing and scapegoating Mexican immigrants, ostracizing Muslims, and grossly stereotyping black

people and communities. The call to ‘Make America Great Again’ was a none-too-subtle dog whistle signalling an effort to return to an America where the material well-being and privileged position of white citizens would be protected and made something that could be again taken comfortably for granted.

A sign of how much progress has taken place in race relations, Donald Trump was the most deeply disliked presidential candidate in the era of modern political polling. Yet, Democrats lost to this deeply unpopular figure. I suggest that a combined failure of core message on matters of economic well-being and an inability and unwillingness to excite and mobilize the full multiracial coalition that had twice elected Barack Obama lie at the base of this failure.

Thus, it is fair to ask what would American society look like, what the 2016 presidential contest would have looked like or even more narrowly what American sociology would look like as a discipline, if we awoke to adopting the strong first-order presumption – as did W.E.B. Du Bois – that those of perceptible African ancestry were fully human? To presume that nothing should socially or materially differentiate members of this group from any other similarly situated, similarly resourced, similarly treated, and similarly perceived social collectivity. Furthermore, what effects would it have to speak candidly about racism and white supremacy as regrettable features of our cultural assumptions, our world views, and our institutions? Both sociology and American society writ large need to strive toward being ‘woke’ in exactly this sense, as Donald Trump’s surprising and troubling political success just proved beyond doubt.

(Date accepted: September 2017)

Note

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, 12 August 2017, Montreal, Canada. I thank

Victoria Asbury for her very skilled research assistance. The author alone is responsible for any remaining errors.

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