

A Note on Race and Politics in the United States

Sherrow O. Pinder*

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, California State University, Chico, USA

The impetus for this brief commentary derives from the idea that the politics of race in the United States continues to be a public affairs issue. Given that it is important for political scientists to debate race and politics in the United States, as a multifaceted area of American politics, the Journal of Political Science and Public Affairs provides an open forum for different methodological approaches and diverse perspectives and positions on race and politics. In fact, we are witnessing a time where race, in terms of its metonymic intensifications, is analyzed and discussed through a variety of coded signifiers such as culture and class. Hence, any effort to stage a standoff that race matters or not in the United States would have to recognize the ontology and epistemology of race and its modalities of visual performance, that is, not what race is, but what race does. Race is something that is ascribed to blacks and other nonwhites. Whites, on the other hand, are unraced and unmarked, which positioned whites as members of the dominant group.

With the election of a black man, Barack Obama, to the highest position of power, conventional wisdom has it that, in the United States, there is a “declining significant of race”. In fact, in 2006, Joe Klein of *Times* magazine praised Obama for “transcend[ing] the racial divide so effortlessly” and bringing together, to borrow from John Hope Franklin, “the two worlds of race”. This discursive reconstruction of America’s race relations has forged a broad social consensus, frequently expressed in claims that the United States is now a post-racial society. Post-racial simply means that whatever racial issues the United States might have once had, because of the election of Obama, a black man, as the President of the United States, these racial issues have disappeared. And since post denotes sequentiality, a movement beyond, in this case, race, and yet blacks and other nonwhites continue to be viewed in racial terms, I think that the term post-racial is, in itself, enigmatic.

Notwithstanding the fact that post-raciality has evolved from a racist ontology, epistemology, ethic, and ideology, it has powerfully upheld and saturated, in many ways, the discourse in which it continuously flows. Race, in spite of its so called disappearance, continues to configure and reconfigure power relations, which legitimize and extend the interests of the dominant group. In fact, the nonappearance of race and racial meanings project onto to blacks and other nonwhites a racialized presence. It is partly for this reason that unarmed black and Latino men, especially, continue to be harassed, assaulted, and killed by white police officers, which, for the most part, is seen and interpreted as police susceptibility and endangerment that these groups pose. In fact, based on a certain racist episteme, what is seen is already in part a question of what it, the racist episteme, produces as the seeable and the constrictions on what it means to “see”. What comes to my mind is the killing of Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer in Oakland, California, on January 1, 2009. Taking my cue from Cornel West that in the United States “race matters”, I want to, in this inaugural editorial, briefly draw upon the myths of a post-racial United States.

Notably, Obama, in his political campaigns for presidency, was well aware that race matters in the United States and of the racist forces at work. Hence, he strategically distanced himself from issues pertaining to race, and vigilantly (too vigilantly for some) avoided to engage with the issue of “race-based politics”. Race-based politics has

to do with supporting a black agenda, the kind that was taken up in Gary, Indiana Black Political Convention, in March 1972. It is not a secret that when black politicians embraced race-based politics, they barely received any white votes. One can enumerate at length the black politicians, including former Tennessee Congressman Harold Ford, New Jersey Mayor Cory Booker, New York Governor David Patterson, and Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, who have not pursued race-based politics in order to gain white votes. Also, in the 1980s, Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition campaigns were, for the most part, not centered on race-based politics.

In fact, Obama, during his first presidential campaign, had to prove that he had no racial agenda and, thus, was surrounded by a mostly white staff. In other words, Obama had to work hard to make whites feel safe and secure by insisting that race does not matter; we are all America. This was evident his 2004 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention. Obama, taking up the colorblind model, stated: “There’s not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and an Asian America; there’s the United States of America”. With this in mind, “One America” rhetoric became a part of his campaign strategy. And we can understand, to a great extent, why Reverend Wright’s angry outbursts, in opposition to racism as a mammoth catalyst for positioning blacks and other nonwhites as second class citizens in the United States, were openly condemned by Obama. Obama suggested that Reverend Wright has a “profoundly distorted view of [the United States]—a view that sees white racism as endemic”.

When racial conflict like the arrest of Dr. Henry Louis Gates of Harvard University occurred and President Obama criticized the police who arrested Dr. Gates for “acting stupidly” and pointed to a long history of racial profiling in America, his criticism made many whites highly annoyed. They espoused that President Obama interfered with what seemed to them to be a matter of law enforcement. Of course, President Obama recanted his statement and claimed that “all parties misread and overacted to the situation”. In a word, this kind of conflict makes visible the myth of a post-racial United States. Also, the myth is further highlighted, when, for example, an article published by the *New York Times* in 2011 draws our attention to a University of California Los Angeles undergraduate student protesting the “hordes of Asians” admitted to the university in spite of their refusal to assimilate to “American manners”, or when a nondenominational church in Florida endorses an Islam phobic protest that is referred to as the “International Burn a Koran Day”. These occurrences arrive at a moment when multiculturalism and cultural diversity, as solutions

*Corresponding author: Sherrow O. Pinder, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, California State University, Chico, USA, E-mail: spinder@csuchico.edu

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to an array of discriminatory practices toward the racially constituted “others”, continue to organize public affairs in the United States.

In the midst of the Obama administration, countless examples of white victimology as is expressed in the ultraconservative Tea Party movement, calling for “taking the country back” and “returning the American government to the American people”, show that race and racial meanings are not transforming themselves any time soon. Moreover, the Tea Party’s disparaging reaction to the Obama administration makes visible John Hope Franklin’s “two worlds of race”, one black and the other white, “two nations separate and unequal”, to borrow from Andrew Hacker, which W.E.B. Du Bois, ages ago, explained and defined as the color line. For him, the color line was the overreaching problem of the twentieth century. The permissible racial divide is still at work in the twenty-first century in black ghettos and superghettos, the prison systems, urban schools, high unemployment and underemployment of blacks, Latinos, and other racialized ethnic groups. Comments such as “Obama is too worried about black people and the poor” from right-wingers and demonstrations against President Obama’s health care reform bill show that race matters. It is no surprise that, according to 2010 Rasmussen poll, 13 percent of black respondents reported that race relations in the United States is getting worst.

When Obama is portrayed on posters as an African witch doctor, wearing tribal regalia and even as a monkey, this is instructive of what Charles W. Mills refers to as the “racial contract”, the way American society is structured “to bring in race”. And given that race is an organizing principle of race relations in the United States, the United

States continues to be overwhelmed by its race problems. For example, we can see for ourselves the currency of race and racial implications in the very vehemence with which laws are put in place to reinforce, perpetuate, and uphold racial profiling. In the name of seemingly protecting the United States from another terrorist attack, the Patriot Act (the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001) permits racial profiling at U.S. borders and airports, which violates people’s hard won civil rights and liberties. In post 9/11 America, it is this kind of boomerang effect that, for the most part, goes unnoticed.

More recently, it is the 2010 Arizona Senate Bill 1070, particularly, “the show me your papers” provisions, which was not struck down by the Court that subjugates, marginalizes, and silences the racially constructed “other”. And while the Bill functions typically to reinforce a conception of an American as white, it is another form of America’s traditions of restricting the liberties and rights of blacks, Latinos, and other racialized ethnic groups. Underlining this process, there is another deeper problem that surfaces. Race, as a signifier, is pegged to other identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and mental and physical abilities and disabilities. Precisely, for this reason, instead of promoting the United States as a post racial society, we need to dislodge structures and systems that are in place working to disempower blacks, Latinos, and other non whites. By framing race-related issues in terms of post-raciality, practical approaches to deal with inequalities stemming from race and racial thinking are ignored. As a starting point, then, to unravel the myth of a post racial United States of America, a Fanonian critique of race becomes obligatory.