COLORBLIND AMERICA: FACT, FANTASY, OR OUR FUTURE?

COLOR BLIND PRIVILEGE: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF ERASING THE COLOR LINE IN POST-RACE AMERICA

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The dominant view in the United States is that we are now a colorblind nation. Rap and hip-hop are thoroughly mainstream commodities available for sale in every mall across the country. Celebrities, CEOs, high-level politicians, and opinion makers are drawn from every racial and ethnic group. Race, the mainstream media would have us believe, no longer matters. Charles A. Gallagher argues that the story of colorblindness promoted in the mass media disguises a more troubling reality: continued racial inequality. How does presenting the United States as a colorblind nation serve various political, ideological, and social functions?

Introduction

An adolescent white male at a bar mitzvah wears a FUBU shirt while his white friend preens his tightly set, perfectly braided cornrows. A black model dressed in yachting attire peddles a New England yuppie-ting look in Nautica advertisements. It is quite unremarkable to observe whites, Asians, or African Americans with dyed purple, blond, or red hair. White, black, and Asian students decorate their bodies with tattoos of Chinese characters and symbols. In cities and suburbs, young adults across the color line wear hip-hop clothing and listen to white rapper Eminem and black rapper Jay-Z. A north Georgia branch of the NAACP installs a white biology professor as its president. The music of Jimi Hendrix is used to sell Apple Computers. Du-Rag kits, complete with bandana headscarf and elastic headband, are on sale for $2.95 at hip-hop clothing stores and

family-centered theme parks like Six Flags. Salsa has replaced ketchup as the best-selling condiment in the United States. Companies as diverse as Polo, McDonald’s, Tommy Hilfiger, Walt Disney World, Master Card, Skechers sneakers, IBM, Giorgio Armani, and Neosporin antibiotic ointment have each crafted advertisements that show a balanced, multiracial cast of characters interacting and consuming their products in a post-race, color-blind world.⁶

Americans are constantly bombarded by depictions of race relations in the media which suggest that discriminatory racial barriers have been dismantled. Social and cultural indicators suggest that America is on the verge, or has already become, a truly color-blind nation. National polling data indicate that a majority of whites now believe discrimination against racial minorities no longer exists. A majority of whites believe that blacks have as good a chance as whites in procuring housing and employment or achieving middle-class status while a 1995 survey of white adults found that a majority of whites (58%) believed that African Americans were better off finding jobs than whites.⁵ Much of white America now sees a level playing field, while a majority of black Americans see a field which is still quite uneven. Best-selling books like The End of Racism⁴ and Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World suggest the United States is not very far from making color blindness a social and political reality.⁵ The color-blind or race neutral perspective holds that in an environment where institutional racism and discrimination have been replaced by equal opportunity, one’s qualifications, not one’s color or ethnicity, should be the mechanism by which upward mobility is achieved. Whites and blacks differ significantly, however, on their support for affirmative action, the perceived fairness of the criminal justice system, the ability to acquire the “American Dream,” and the extent to which whites have benefited from past discrimination.⁶

This article examines the social and political functions color blindness serves for whites in the United States. Drawing on information compiled from interviews and focus groups with whites around the country, I argue that color blindness maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a post-race, color-blind perspective provides whites with a degree of psychological comfort by allowing them to imagine that being white or black or brown has no bearing on an individual’s or a group’s relative place in the socioeconomic hierarchy. My research included interviews with seventeen focus groups and thirty individual whites around the country. While my sample is not representative of the total white population, I used personal contacts and snowball sampling to purposively locate respondents raised in urban, suburban, and rural environments. Twelve of the seventeen focus groups were conducted in a university setting, one in a liberal arts college in the Rocky Mountains and the other at a large urban university in the Northeast. Respondents in these focus groups were selected randomly from the student population. The occupational range for my individual interviews was quite eclectic and included a butcher, construction worker, hair stylist, partner in a prestigious corporate law firm, executive secretary, high school principal, bank president from a small town, retail workers, country lawyer, and custodial workers. Twelve of the thirty individual interviews were with respondents who were raised in rural and/or agrarian settings. The remaining respondents lived in suburbs of large cities or in urban areas.

What linked this rather disparate group of white individuals together was their belief that race-based privilege had ended. As a majority of my respondents saw it, color blindness was now the norm in the United
States. The illusion of racial equality implicit in the myth of color blindness was, for many whites, a form of comfort. This aspect of pleasure took the form of political empowerment ("what about whites' rights") and moral gratification from being liberated from "oppressor" charges ("we are not responsible for the past"). The rosy picture that color blindness presumes about race relations and the satisfying sense that one is part of a period in American history that is morally superior to the racist days of the past is, quite simply, a less stressful and more pleasurable social place for whites to inhabit.

The Norm of Color Blindness

The perception among a majority of white Americans that the socioeconomic playing field is now level, along with whites' belief that they have purged themselves of overt racist attitudes and behaviors, has made color blindness the dominant lens through which whites understand contemporary race relations. Color blindness allows whites to believe that segregation and discrimination are no longer an issue because it is now illegal for individuals to be denied access to housing, public accommodations, or jobs because of their race. Indeed, lawsuits alleging institutional racism against companies like Texaco, Denny's, Coca Cola, and Cracker Barrel validate what many whites know at a visceral level is true; firms which deviate from the color-blind norms embedded in classic liberalism will be punished. As a political ideology, the commodification and mass marketing of products that signify color but are intended for consumption across the color line further legitimate color blindness. Almost every household in the United States has a television that, according to the U.S. Census, is on for seven hours every day. Individuals from any racial background can wear hip-hop clothing, listen to rap music (both purchased at Wal-Mart) and root for their favorite, majority black, professional sports team. Within the context of racial symbols that are bought and sold in the market, color blindness means that one's race has no bearing on who can purchase an SUV, live in an exclusive neighborhood, attend private schools, or own a Rolex.

The passive interaction whites have with people of color through the media creates the impression that little, if any, socioeconomic difference exists between the races. Research has found that whites who are exposed to images of upper-middle class African Americans, like the Huxtable family in The Cosby Show, believe that blacks have the same socioeconomic opportunities as whites. Highly visible and successful racial minorities like Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice are further proof to white America that the nation's efforts to enforce and promote racial equality have been accomplished. Reflecting on the extent to which discrimination is an obstacle to socioeconomic advancement and the perception of seeing African Americans in leadership roles, Tom explained:

If you look at some prominent black people in society today, and I don't really see [racial discrimination], I don't understand how they can keep bringing this problem onto themselves. If they did what society would want them to, I don't see that society is making problems for them. I don't see it.

The achievement ideology implicit in the color-blind perspective is also given legitimacy and stripped of any racist implications by black neoconservatives like anti-affirmative action advocate Ward Connerly, Shelby Steele, and Clarence Thomas, and Asian American Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao. Each espouses a color-blind, racenutral doctrine that treats race-based government
programs as a violation of the sacrosanct belief that American society only recognizes the rights of individuals. These individuals also serve as an important public example that in a post-race, color-blind society climbing the occupational ladder is now a matter of individual choice.

The new color-blind ideology does not, however, ignore race; it acknowledges race while ignoring racial hierarchy by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences which whites and racial minorities can purchase and share. It is through such acts of shared consumption that race becomes nothing more than an innocuous cultural signifier. Large corporations have made American culture more homogenous through the ubiquity of fast food, television, and shopping malls but this trend has also created the illusion that we are all the same through consumption. Most adults eat at national fast-food chains like McDonald's, shop at mall anchor stores like Sears and J.C. Penney's, and watch major league sports, situation comedies, or television dramas. Defining race only as cultural symbols that are for sale allows whites to experience and view race as nothing more than a benign cultural marker that has been stripped of all forms of institutional, discriminatory or coercive power. The post-race, color-blind perspective allows whites to imagine that depictions of racial minorities working in high status jobs and consuming the same products, or at least appearing in commercials for products whites desire or consume, is the same as living in a society where color is no longer used to allocate resources or shape group outcomes. By constructing a picture of society where racial harmony is the norm, the color-blind perspective functions to make white privilege invisible while removing from public discussion the need to maintain any social programs that are race-based.

How then is color blindness linked to privilege? Starting with the deeply held belief that America is now a meritocracy, whites are able to imagine that the socioeconomic success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function of individual hard work, determination, thrift, and investments in education. The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political, and economic arrangements that whites are privileged to receive. This perspective insinuates that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for social inequality. Color blindness allows whites to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as they proclaim their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals by the “color of their skin.” This perspective ignores, as Ruth Frankenberg puts it, how whiteness is a “location of structural advantage societies structured in racial dominance.”

Frankenberg uses the term “color and power evasiveness” rather than color blindness to convey how the ability to ignore race by members of the dominant group reflects a position of power and privilege. Color blindness hides white privilege behind a mask of assumed meritocracy while rendering invisible the institutional arrangements that perpetuate racial inequality. The veneer of equality implied in color blindness allows whites to present their place in the racialized social structure as one that was earned.

Given the pervasiveness of color blindness, it was not surprising that respondents in this study believed that using race to promote group interests was a form of racism.

Joe, a student in his early twenties from a working class background, was quite adamant that the opportunity structure in the
United States did not favor one racial group over another.

I mean, I think that the black person of our age has as much opportunity as me, maybe he didn’t have the same guidance and that might hurt him. But I mean, he’s got the same opportunities that I do to go to school, maybe even more, to get more money. I can’t get any aid... I think that blacks have the same opportunities as whites nowadays and I think it’s old hat.

Not only does Joe believe that young blacks and whites have similar educational experiences and opportunity but it is his contention that blacks are more likely or able to receive money for higher education. The idea that race matters in any way, according to Joe, is anachronistic; it is “old hat” in a color-blind society to blame one’s shortcomings on something as irrelevant as race.

Believing and acting as if America is now color blind allows whites to imagine a society where institutional racism no longer exists and racial barriers to upward mobility have been removed. The use of group identity to challenge the existing racial order by making demands for the amelioration of racial inequities is viewed as racist because such claims violate the belief that we are a nation that recognizes the rights of individuals, not rights demanded by groups. Sam, an upper-middle-class respondent in his twenties, draws on a pre- and post-civil rights framework to explain racial opportunity among his peers:

I guess I can understand my parents’ generation. My parents are older, my dad is almost sixty and my mother is in her mid-fifties, okay? But then the kids I’m going to school with, the minorities I’m going to school with, I don’t think they should use racism as an excuse for not getting a job. Maybe their parents, sure, I mean they were discriminated against. But these kids have every opportunity that I do to do well.

In one generation, as Sam sees it, the color line has been erased. Like Sam’s view that there are opportunities for all, there is, according to Tara, a reason to celebrate the current state of race relations.

I mean, like you are not the only people that have been persecuted—I mean, yeah, you have been, but so has every group. I mean, if there’s any time to be black in America, it’s now.

Seeing society as race-neutral serves to decouple past historical practices and social conditions from present-day racial inequality. A number of respondents viewed society this way and pointed out that job discrimination had ended. Michelle was quite direct in her perception that the labor market is now free of discrimination, stating that “don’t think people hire and fire because someone is black and white now.” Ken also believed that discrimination in hiring did not occur since racial minorities now have legal recourse if discrimination occurs.

I think that pretty much we got past that point as far as jobs. I think people realize that you really can’t discriminate that way because you will end up losing... because you will have a lawsuit against you.

Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg sees this narrative as part of the “continued insistence on implementing an ideal of color-blindness [that] either denies historical reality and its abiding contemporary legacies, or serves to cut off any claims to contemporary entitlements.” It also means that whites can picture themselves as victims of reverse discrimination and racism, as Anne, a woman in a focus group explained:

Why is it so important to forget about, you know, white people’s rights? I mean, not that, not being racist or anything, but why is it such a big deal that they have to have it their way or no way when it should be
a compromise between the two, and the whites should be able to voice their opinions as much as the blacks do.

There is the belief that whites have been silenced by race politics and as Jodie explains, "The tables have turned where they're getting more rights than we have. Like it never balanced out."

The logic inherent in the color-blind approach is circular; since race no longer shapes life opportunities in a color-blind world, there is no need to take race into account when discussing differences in outcomes between racial groups. This approach erases America's racial hierarchy by implying that social, economic, and political power and mobility are equally shared among all racial groups. Ignoring the extent or ways in which race shapes life opportunities validates whites' social location in the existing racial hierarchy while legitimating the political and economic arrangements that perpetuate and reproduce racial inequality and privilege.

Color Is Now a Matter of Choice

Leslie Carr suggests "the roots of color-blind ideology are found in classic liberal doctrines of freedom—the freedom of the individual created by the free capitalist marketplace." Within the context of a free-market model, color blindness has come to mean that ignoring or attending to one's racial identity is a matter of individual choice, much like the ways in which whites can choose whether or not to emphasize part of their ethnic background. Many whites, for example, claim to be Irish on St. Patty's Day. Some Italian Americans feel purchasing a meal at the Olive Garden Restaurant is an ethnic dining experience that reconnects them to their immigrant past or fictive ethnic family tree. Some whites don kilts at Highlander Fairs or dress as medieval artisans or knights at Renaissance Festivals. These individuals experience their ethnicity as an option. There is no social cost to "being ethnic" for a day, nor does this voluntary behavior circumscribe opportunities in life. The color-blind narrative holds that affirming racial identity is, like whites who have the luxury of an optional ethnicity, an individual, voluntary decision. If pride in one's ethnicity and by extension one's color is a matter of choice, then race no longer matters as an independent force which organizes social life, allocates resources, or creates obstacles to upward mobility. In post-race, color-blind America, one can now consume images and products for, from, and about any racial or ethnic group. Racial styles, like clothing fashion, food choices, or musical preferences are like interchangeable, mix-and-match commodities for sale at the mall.

The color-blind narrative allows racial identity to be acknowledged in individual and superficial ways but using race to assert group demands violates the cherished notion that as a nation we recognize the rights of individuals rather than group rights. Within the color-blind perspective, it is understood that one does not choose one's race, but one should be conscious, or at least cautious, not to make race more than background cultural information. In a post-race, color-blind world, race can be seen, but pointing out race-based inequities should not be heard. The idea of identity, race, and the fluidity of individual choices was part of Jeff's explanation of race relations:

It just seems like a gap's been bridged, where people don't have like separate things. You know, like in past generations there were things that each group had to itself, but now it's like there are plenty of things you can find in, like, black people that white people do. You know, there's music; rap music is no longer... it's not a black thing anymore... When it first came out, it
was black music, but now it’s just music. It’s another choice, just like country music can be considered like white hick music or whatever. You know, it’s just a choice.

Tom makes the point that race categories exist, but assimilation allows any individual to become an American, if they so choose:

Blacks don’t seem, poor blacks seem like they’re more immigrant than we are.

Interviewer: In what way?

Because they try to keep pushing the differences. You know, like I said, the Asians just meld in a little bit better than the blacks... Why do they have to be caught up in being African American? They’ve been in America all their lives. They were born here. They’re not African Americans. That’s just separate.

There was the perception that Asians did not embrace identity politics or use their racial identity to promote group rights. As Mike, a young white man in a focus group told me:

It’s just becoming like really, really popular for black students to be black and proud and racist. But with Asians, it’s not that way. I mean there is a magazine Ebony for strictly black people—I’ve never really read it, I mean there is no magazine for just Asian people. There’s nothing saying, like, “Asian power.”

Comedian Chris Rock points to how erasing the color line and color blindness are linked when he asked rhetorically “What does it say about America when the greatest golfer in the world [Tiger Woods] is black and the greatest rapper [Eminem] is white.” Rock’s message is clear: No role or occupation (at least in sports and music) is now determined by skin color. By allowing anyone to claim ownership of racial styles, colorblind narratives negate the ways in which race continues to circumscribe opportunities in life. The color-blind approach requires that these preferences, while racially bracketed, be available to all for purchase or consumption. At its core, the color-blind philosophy holds that racial minorities can succeed if they rid themselves of any notion that their race entitles them to special treatment. Racial identity can still be expressed or acknowledged, but one’s race should mean nothing more than a tendency towards individualistic expressions, like music, foods, or clothes.

Within the color-blind perspective, it is not race per se which determines upward mobility, but how much an individual chooses to pay attention to race that determines one’s fate. According to this perspective, race is only as important as you allow it to be. As Kevin, a 33-year-old white male custodial worker in Colorado told me:

I never really look at anyone as a color, you know. Your skin’s a color, but that doesn’t mean... I don’t know, I never look at someone being black or Chinese. Yeah, you’re Chinese because of the way your eyes are slanted, but you talk just like me. You’re just like me. I don’t look at you any different than you being me. You know, that’s how I’ve always looked at it. You know.

Implicit in this expression of color-blindness is that color does not matter as long as blacks and Chinese assimilate to the point where they are “just like” Kevin. As a member of the dominant group, Kevin has the privilege of defining color blindness as the expectation that racial minorities will mirror his own cultural and social experiences while denying how racism shapes the experiences of racial minorities.15

When racial identity shifts from being an individual expression to one that is used to organize politically or make group-based grievances, whites view it as racist. Mary believes that race is used to force whites to think about color and inequality:

I think that they are making it worse for themselves. I think that anybody can see in
this country—I think it’s you [blacks]. It doesn’t matter what color you are. I mean, sure there are black things but why put it on a T-shirt? Why not just have a plain black T-shirt? Why would you have to make such a big statement that pushes people away, that threatens people. I would never want to threaten anybody.

As Mary’s comments make clear, embracing racial symbols that serve to socially isolate and challenge the racial status quo is a “threat.” Implicit in this exchange is that it is not very pleasurable for Mary to interact with those who would use race to promote a political agenda.

The respondents below were bothered by what they saw as a double standard concerning beauty pageants; blacks could have their own pageant but whites could not. Their anger is, at least based in part, on an understanding that the norm of color blindness has been violated. Jodie lamented that:

You know, it's amazing. Like, even, like even, like the Miss America pageants. There’s a black Miss America pageant. But there’s also black contestants in the Miss America pageant and then there’s a separate pageant for blacks only. And if we had a separate pageant for whites only I just think that things would be . . . more hell would be raised.

Michelle was also bothered by her perception that the idea of race was taken too seriously by blacks:

You know, it just seems, even for silly things, even the fact that you have to have black women in the Miss America pageant but then they have their own Miss Black America pageant. You know, like that type of thing, and it's like, come on. . . .

John, a 22-year-old male from New Jersey, also felt that whites were held to a different set of social expectations than blacks:

I watch Miss America and we’ve had what, a black Miss America three out of the last five years, yet they do have a black Miss America (contest). They don’t have white contestants, they only have black contestants. Now, I’m not saying that a black person can’t enter the white contest, but it’s just kind of ironic that here a black woman enters a predominately white contest and, you know, usually a Miss America’s supposed to be representative of the whole population, yet only 12% of the population is black. . . . It just kind of seems strange that if a white person tried to enter a black contest, forget it, you’d have mayhem.

Viewed within the color-blind perspective, the Miss Black America pageant is a form of institutional racism because it denies all racial groups full access to participation. The Miss Black America pageant is, as suggested above, racist for excluding whites because of the color of their skin. The long history of racial minorities being excluded from white organizations and institutions as the reason behind why black, Latino, and Asian organizations were formed in the first place is now only viewed as irrelevant.

Like the anger expressed over what was perceived as a racial double standard concerning the Miss America pageant, Malcolm X also came to represent challenges to the color-blind perspective, which were viewed as illegitimate because they advocate group solutions to race-based inequities. As one respondent told me about Malcolm X:

He got into Buddha [sic] and changed his violence. When he was younger, I think that’s when he was violent but in the years before he was killed I think he definitely went towards peace, like Martin Luther King. I don’t know why they can’t wear Martin Luther King hats [instead of Malcolm X hats].

Color blindness has emerged as America’s newest racial mythology because it provides a level-playing-field narrative that allows whites to inhabit a psychological space that is free of racial tension. This new era of
color blindness is a respite from the racial identity movements which often result in white guilt, defensiveness, or the avoidance of racially charged issues. Color blindness provides whites with the belief that they live in an era that is free of racism. Convinced that these racist attitudes and practices are over, whites today are able to define themselves as racially progressive and tolerant. Within this universe where racial differences are almost meaningless, whites are able to claim that their privileged social position relative to racial minorities reflects individual achievement rather than the fruits of white supremacy. The constant barrage of color-blind messages and messengers reinforce and confirm that the egalitarian and meritocratic norms that undergird American culture are intact. Embracing color blindness allows whites to be blind to or ignore the fact that racial and ethnic minorities lag behind whites on almost every measure of quality of life. Color-blind pleasure means whites are able to think about contemporary race relations as a clean slate where the crimes of slavery, Jim Crow, institutional racism, and white privilege have been ended and the racist sins of their grandparents have been erased.

Our Survey Says —
“Color-Blind Nation”

National survey data suggest that a majority of whites view race relations through the lens of color blindness. A 1997 Gallup poll found that a majority of whites believe that blacks have “as good a chance as whites” in their community in procuring employment (79%). A Kaiser Family Poll (1997) found that a majority of whites believe that blacks are doing at least as well or better than whites in income and educational attainment. The poll found that “almost two-thirds (64%) of whites do NOT believe that whites have benefited from past and present discrimination against African Americans.” In their study on racial attitudes, Schuman and associates found that when white Americans are asked to account for black disadvantage, the most popular explanation is that of black people’s lack of motivation or will power to get ahead. These surveys suggest a majority of whites view the opportunity structure as being open to all, regardless of color. Not only do whites see parity compared to blacks in access to housing, employment, education, and achieving a middle-class life style, but where differences do exist, whites attribute racial inequities to the individual shortcomings of blacks.

Reflecting on affirmative action, Monica articulates an all-is-now-equal argument as to why color should no longer matter in hiring decisions or school admissions:

I think all the backgrounds have come a long way to where they don’t need it any more. Basically everyone has equal opportunity to get a certain job, to get into a certain school, and now it should be based on your performance and not for what you are.

Drawing on an ideology of egalitarianism and meritocracy, Monica believes, as most white Americans do, that color is no longer a factor in obtaining employment or a quality education. Given the premise that racial equality has now been achieved, Monica is able to argue that achievement and not skin color should shape the allocation of resources. In other words, since the playing field is now level, any group claims to address real or imagined inequities are illegitimate. Joan voiced the anger that whites should in some way be held accountable for past or present racial inequities.

That’s what bothers me. They say “we” have been oppressed. They have not. The students here at the university right now have not been oppressed. They did not
experience the Watts riot, they didn’t experience physically being hosed down by police. Granted, the white population was responsible for that, but we are not. We are not responsible. Therefore, we should not be put out because of that. We didn’t do it. We’re not doing it now, therefore they have no right to say, well, we’ve been oppressed.

Neither Joan, nor the white race, should be “put out” for past racist practices. The color-blind perspective is a historical rendering of the actions of the near and distant past as events which are disconnected from contemporary racial inequality.

James expresses a number of the trends found in the surveys cited earlier. After stating that “hey, everybody’s got the same opportunity” when asked about what his views were on the idea of white privilege, James countered that:

They say that I have white privileges. Uh, and if they say it’s like because where I live, I live in a big house or something like that, they’re wrong, because that’s not a privilege. That’s something my parents worked for. And if they don’t live in a big fancy house that’s something that their parents didn’t work for. And if they want to change that . . . . I’ve got black people living across from me. Uh, they’re no different than me. They’re different from the black people down here because they worked for what they wanted. These people [blacks in a poor segregated part of the city], they don’t have to live here. There’s no one holding them back. They can get into school as well as everybody else can. I was lucky my parents could pay for school and I didn’t need financial aid. . . . You know, the opportunity is there. You’ve just got to take hold of it.

James suggests that when class background is taken into account whites and blacks are the same. The blacks who are unable to leave poor, segregated neighborhoods reflect individual shortcomings on the part of blacks, not structural obstacles. Rob implies that it is hard work and individual merit, not one’s skin color that matters. Examining his own mobility, Rob remarks, “I don’t know if their situation is any different than mine. I mean, I can only gauge on the fact that I’ve been busting my ass for the last ten years to get to where I want to be.”

How Color Blind a Nation?

The beliefs voiced by whites in national survey data and my own interviews raise an empirical question; to what extent are we now a color-blind nation? If educational opportunity, occupational advancement, health, upward mobility, and equal treatment in the public sphere can be used as indicators of how color-blind we are as a nation, then we have failed. U.S. census figures present a picture of America that is far from color-blind. In 1999, over 73% of white households owned their own homes compared to 46% for blacks, 45% for Hispanics, 53% for Asians, and 56% for American Indians. In 1993, whites had about ten times more in assets than blacks or Latinos. Median family income in 1998 was $42,439 for whites, $25,351 for blacks, $27,330 for Latinos, and $46,637 for Asians. In 1997, almost 25% of whites over the age of 25 had four years of college or more compared to less than 14% for blacks and Latinos. In 1997, 8.6% of whites compared to 26.5% blacks, 27% of Latinos, and 14% of Asians lived at or below the poverty line. A national study found that even after controlling for individual credit history, blacks in 33 states were charged more for car loans than whites. Health statistics tell a similar tale. Whites have lower rates of diabetes, tuberculosis, pregnancy-related mortality, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and are more likely to have prenatal care in the first trimester than blacks, Latinos, or Asians. In
1997, 15% of whites did not have public or private health care coverage compared to 21.5% for blacks, 34% for Latinos, and 20.7% for Asians.23

In 1998, blacks and Latinos were also underrepresented as lawyers, physicians, professors, dentists, engineers, and registered nurses. A Glass Ceiling study commissioned by the federal government found that when one reaches the level of vice president and above at Fortune 1000 industrial companies and Fortune 500 service industries, 96.6% of the executives are white males. Nationally, white men comprise 90% of the newspaper editors and 77% of television news directors.24 In 1999, the Department of Justice found that blacks and Latinos were twice as likely as whites to be subject to force when they encounter a police officer, were more likely to be subjected to car searches during a traffic stop, and were more likely to be ticketed than whites. Although blacks and whites are just as likely to use drugs, almost two-thirds of those convicted on drug charges are black.25 Congress does not represent the racial and ethnic diversity of this country. In 2000, blacks were 13% of the population, Asians and Pacific Islanders 4%, and Latinos 12%. Yet the House of Representatives was only 9% black, 4% Latino, and 0.9% Asian. The U.S. Senate is 97% white and only 2% Asian and 1% American Indian, and therefore has no black or Latino members.26 In early 2003, there were no black or Latino governors. According to another report, if you were black and living in Florida, you were four times as likely as whites to have your ballot invalidated in the 2000 presidential election.27 We are not now, nor have we ever been, a color-blind nation.

The Cost of Racialized Pleasures

Being able to ignore or being oblivious to the ways in which almost all whites are privileged in a society cleaved on race has a number of implications. Whites derive pleasure in being told that the current system for allocating resources is fair and equitable. Creating and internalizing a color-blind view of race relations reflects how the dominant group is able to use the mass media, immigration stories of upward mobility, rags-to-riches narratives, and achievement ideology to make white privilege invisible. Frankenberg argues that whiteness can be “displaced,” as is the case with whiteness hiding behind the veil of color blindness. It can also be made “normative” rather than specifically “racial,” as is the case when being white is defined by white respondents as being no different than being black or Asian.28 Lawrence Bobo and associates have advanced a theory of laissez-faire racism that draws on the color-blind perspective. As whites embrace the equality of opportunity narrative they suggest that

laissez-faire racism encompasses an ideology that blames blacks themselves for their poorer relative economic standing, seeing it as a function of perceived cultural inferiority. The analysis of the bases of laissez-faire racism underscores two central components: contemporary stereotypes of blacks held by whites, and the denial of societal (structural) responsibility for the conditions in black communities.29

As many of my respondents make clear, if the opportunity structure is open (“It doesn’t matter what color you are”), there must be something inherently wrong with racial minorities or their culture that explains group-level differences.

Leslie Carr argues that color blindness is not the opposite of racism; it is another form of racism...30 I would add that the form color blindness takes as the nation’s hegemonic political discourse is a variant of laissez-faire racism. Historian David Roediger contends that in order for the Irish to
have been absorbed into the white race in the mid-nineteenth century "the imperative to define themselves as whites came from the particular public and psychological wages whiteness offered" these new immigrants.31 There is still a "wage" to whiteness, that element of ascribed status whites automatically receive because of their membership in the dominant group. But within the framework of color blindness the imperative has switched from whites overtly defining themselves or their interests as white, to one where they claim that color is irrelevant; being white is the same as being black, yellow, brown, or red. Some time ago, Ralph Ellison asked this important question about race relations that continues to go unanswered:

What, by the way, is one to make of a white youngster who, with a transistor radio glued to his ear, screaming a Stevie Wonder tune, shouts racial epithets at black youngsters trying to swim at a public beach. . . .32

My interviews with whites around the country suggest that in this post-race era of color-blind ideology Ellison's keen observations about race relations need modification. The question now is what are we to make of a young white man from the suburbs who listens to hip-hop, wears baggy hip-hop pants, a baseball cap turned sideways, unlaced sneakers, and an oversized shirt emblazoned with a famous NBA player who, far from shouting racial epithets, lists a number of racial minorities as his heroes? It is now possible to define oneself as not being racist because of the clothes you wear, the celebrities you like, or the music you listen to while believing that blacks or Latinos are disproportionately poor or over-represented in low-pay, dead-end jobs because they are part of a debased, culturally deficient group. Having a narrative that smooths over the cognitive dissonance and oft time schizophrenic dance that whites must do when they navigate race relations is likely an invaluable source of pleasure.

NOTES

1. FUBU (For Us By Us) is a black-owned manufacturer of urban, hip-hop style clothing.
2. For an excellent overview of how the media construct a view of race relations that is overly optimistic, see Benjamin DeMott, The Trouble With Friendship: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995).
9. For an outstanding discussion of how color blindness is used politically by neoconservatives, see Amy Ansell, New Right, New Racism: Race and Reaction in the United States (New York: New York University Press, 1997);


24. Feagin, 2000


30. Carr, p. x.


The discourse of colorblindness focuses on managing the appearance of formal equality without worrying overmuch about the consequences of real-world inequality. Proponents of a colorblind ethos define freedom and equality exclusively in terms of the autonomous—some would say atomized—individual. This individual has no historical antecedents, no important social relationships, and no political commitments. By structuring the primary concerns around the idea of freedom for an everyman or everywoman, proponents of colorblind analysis locate that atomized individual in an abstract universe of rights and preferences rather than within an obdurate social structure that may limit or even predetermine a person’s choices. In relationship to the state and to the market, the paramount virtue of the colorblind universe resides in treating each abstract individual the same as every other. By subjecting rules to this metric of simple sameness, people are legitimizd through the appearance of abstract fairness.

Three rules seem to govern this colorblind universe. First, race is all about skin color. It is not a marker for social status, history, or power but is simply a false construction of phenotype that relies improperly on ascriptive physical identifiers of “blood” or ancestry. This is what some commentators call “formal race.” Others refer to it as “biological race.” Formal or biological race treats all race as pigmentation and grants all racial classifications symmetrical status. When race is only pigmentation, all racial classifications are equally bad, despite hierarchies of privilege or disadvantage that accompany the racial assignation.
Thus, the second rule of colorblindness is that recognizing race is the equivalent of holding onto unscientific notions of racial biology. If race is essentially "made-up," with no scientific basis, then critics of race argue that treating people differently based on these made-up categories is unacceptable. Even if members of different "races" are treated "the same," each person so identified is denied his or her essential individual humanity. Moreover, when one notices race, one is implicitly manifesting racial enmity or racial preference. Since racial classification enabled a Jim Crow legal system to perpetuate false assumptions about biological inferiority, noticing race is in essence a throwback to racism.

The third rule is that racism is a personal problem. Unlike capitalism or socialism which are economic system, or democracy which is a political arrangement, racism, racial hierarchy, or any institutionalized racial discrimination is not an economic or historic system, political arrangement, or social structure. Under the third rule of colorblindness, racism lacks any necessary nexus to power or privilege, and any observed connection is incidental, merely a result of the actions of people with a bad heart. Racism is a psychological disease of individuals, not a social plague. Racism is not produced by environmental toxins, nor is it reinforced by cultural forms or institutional practice. It is simply an irrational defect of the individual mind. It afflicts the aberrant soul who is vulnerable to prejudice or even self-hatred. The challenge for the judiciary, therefore, is to discern and eliminate to the greatest extent possible any public identification of race, since the identification is per se stigmatizing.

For those who believe we are already close to a colorblind society, formal fairness outweighs other concerns. They prefer rules like colorblindness even when such rules hide or reinforce relationships of privilege and subordination. The dangers of continuing to notice race are so profound that they justify doing nothing about the historic and present effects of the nexus between race and political and economic power. Not only is it wrong for the government to notice race, it is wrong for the political system to permit racially affected groups to mobilize in either their own self-interest or the larger public good.

In response to the claims of those who take a colorblind approach, we argue, as a practical matter, that it is impossible to be colorblind in a world as color-conscious as ours. Moreover, efforts to be colorblind are undesirable because they inhibit racialized minorities from struggling against their marginalized status. The rule of colorblindness disguises (sometimes deliberately) or normalizes (sometimes unwittingly) relationships of privilege and subordination. It gives those who have enjoyed little power in our society no mechanisms for understanding and challenging the systemic nature of their oppression. It affirms the existing imbalance in power relations; all that must change is for the privileged within the society to learn to tolerate on an individual basis those who were previously raced black or brown. Racial difference is relegated to celebratory holidays that capture the nostalgia of a time when we once thought we were different, but whose celebration reaffirms how essentially "the same" we truly are. This approach does not involve any fundamental rethinking of how race has socially and politically constructed privilege. The way race has been used both to distribute resources and to camouflage the unfairness in that distribution remains invisible. And the political space, where groups come together to give voice to their collective experience and mobilize to engage in fundamental social change, vanishes.
Racial Inequality Is Not a Problem of Individuals

Most people who oppose racism today believe that it is a psychological condition which distorts a person's thinking about people of a different "racial" phenotype. They believe in the changing-people's-thinking approach to racism. This approach, we argue, poses several dangers.

First, it reaffirms an essentialist view of race as merely a biological holdover from a less enlightened time that lacks any present political or social meaning. It suggests that racism is simply an inappropriate way that some individuals categorize groups of people who are in fact phenotypically different but whose physical differences amount to nothing important. This approach does not leave any space for other kinds of differences that people of color do in fact experience. These experiences are written off as some aberrational individual commitment to racialism that is obsessive and negative.

Second, the changing-people's-thinking approach not only locates the problem in the individual but it locates the remedy there as well. All that is necessary to overcome racism is for an individual to become better informed about different racial groups.

Third, in the changing-people's-thinking approach, either not speaking of race at all or speaking of it as a uniformly bad thing trumps all other options. This so-called neutral stance becomes almost inevitable after one has defined racism solely as an individual problem and an aberrant one at that. Racism is chased into the closet, and we are surprised when someone openly expresses intolerant views. Conservatives and progressives alike get caught in this trap and end up as speaking police, monitoring what people may say but feeling no compulsion to do anything about the racial hierarchy that shelters the root sources of bigotry. What surprises us about open bigotry is that it is public, not that it exists.

If we do not shift the locus of conversation to make visible the effects of such deeply held but unspoken attitudes, they will tend to normalize inequality. We will all then be tempted to explain the terrible condition of people of color as resulting from the behavior of the victims themselves. Having cleansed the social discourse of any mention of race and having policed expressions of bigotry, we will come to view any remaining racial dimension to observed injustices and inequities as a function of the way "those people" of color conceive of and structure their social life.

Colorblindness Masks Entrenched Racial Inequality

The colorblindness doctrine assumes that race is an individual attribute that should be of no consequence. For that reason, those advocating colorblindness as both means and end fail to recognize patterns of racial inequality and perceive no need to look more closely at data associated with these collective accidents of birth. They fail to see that an economy which is largely unaccountable to democratic institutions and principles of justice merely compounds inequality through the generations.

Stripped of concrete features like race, a black family earning $50,000 a year, for example, seems financially identical to a white family with the same income. Yet, this assumption of sameness does not take into account the effects of structural inequality compounded over time. Data on the generational effects of inequality show that blacks earning $50,000 or more have a median net worth that is barely one-half the median net worth of their white counterparts.
Most Americans have difficulty accumulating wealth. Income, understood principally as wages and salaries, does not easily convert into wealth because immediate necessities deplete available resources. Although income is distributed in a highly unequal manner in the United States (the top 20 percent of earners receives 43 percent of all income, while the poorest 20 percent of the population receives 4 percent of the total income), the distribution of wealth is even more unequal, and that inequality grows with each succeeding generation. In 1900, 39 percent of the wealthiest men in America emerged from wealthy families; by 1950, 68 percent of the wealthiest were born into wealth. By 1970, this figure climbed to 82 percent. That same year, only 4 percent of the richest men came from modest origins.

Income has been used as a surrogate for wealth at least in part due to the existence of little reliable data on wealth accumulation. But income alone offers an incomplete, skewed assessment of the inequality in life chances among different individuals and groups. The reality for most families is that while income may supply basic necessities, wealth is a critical resource for improving life chances, securing prestige, passing status along to the next generation, and influencing the political process. Wealth also provides financial stability during times in which needs overwhelm income.

Even at a time when the economy is good and when the unemployment rate for people of color is at an all-time low, blacks will not be able to sustain their economic gains until they can convert income into asset accumulation. Yet as the sociologist Dalton Conley points out: “At the lower end of the income spectrum (less than $15,000 per year), the median African American family has no assets, while the equivalent white family holds $10,000 worth of equity. At upper income levels (greater than $75,000 per year), while families have a median net worth of $308,000, almost three times the figure for upper-income African American families ($114,600).” The median net worth of whites is twelve times that of blacks. Similarly, the average white household controls $6,999 in net financial assets while the average black household retains no net financial assets whatsoever.

Owning a home is the primary method of equity accumulation for most families in the United States. Not surprisingly, disparities in home-ownership rates contribute to the black-white wealth disparity. As of 1997, only 44 percent of blacks owned their homes, in contrast with 71 percent of whites. Not only are blacks less likely to own homes, but when they do own homes, their asset is less likely to accumulate value than that of white homeowners. The value of housing in black neighborhoods increases at a lower rate compared with similar units in predominantly white neighborhoods. Black households are less likely than white households to have their wealth invested in financial assets, rental property, and businesses or farms that are likely to produce income. Black assets more often are tied up in a home and consumables, such as a car or household goods. As a result, black families are less able to expand their income than white families, and thus the disparity in wealth perpetuates itself.

What these comparisons of income and wealth illustrate is not just the effects of historical discrimination in particular cases but the effects of an entire complex of social relations, reflected in poorer housing markets, less adequate schools, reduced access to banks and other sources of capital, hostile relations with police authority, and increased crime. The cumulative impact of these disparities requires an explanation that does not merely excuse the current distribution of assets.
Efforts to pass these effects off to class are unavailing. When trying to explain the wealth gap between blacks and whites, Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro used a large number of controls in their work—income, age, sex, marriage, children, number of working people within the household, education, occupation, work history, and region. With these controls, Oliver and Shapiro confirmed that nonracial factors standing alone cannot explain the black-white wealth gap.

The status of both the black poor and the black middle class is much more precarious and unstable than that of their white peers. Between 1980 and 1996 the absolute incomes of the poorest blacks declined dramatically, as compared with a small decline in the income of the poorest white families. Even as poverty in the black community declined overall, those who remained poor became poorer still. The percentage of black men between ages 25 and 34 who earn less than the poverty line for a family of four jumped from about 20 percent in 1969 to just over 50 percent in 1991.

Even among blacks and whites who both start at low socioeconomic positions as measured by parental occupation, whites who make it into the middle class accumulate more wealth than blacks who have traveled the same path. Blacks’ middle-class status entirely depends on income, whereas the status of the white middle class rests on the stability and security of assets. The writer DeNeen L. Brown illustrates this marginality and fragility when she explains what it means to be first-generation black middle-class: “To me that term doesn’t mean anything other than someone who is one step out of poverty and two paychecks from being broke. I have income but not true wealth.”

The average net worth of middle-class whites is nearly four times that of comparably situated blacks, and their average net financial assets are nearly 55 times greater than that of their black counterparts. This is true even within the context of real economic success. As Oliver and Shapiro note: “No matter how high up the mobility ladder blacks climb, their asset accumulation remains capped at inconsequential levels, especially when compared to that of equally mobile whites.” As a result, each generation passes on a form of “asset poverty” regardless of the level of mobility or occupational attainment achieved. Social mobility does not fully counteract the effects of the intergenerational transmission of wealth.

Access to higher education has always been an indicator of both social mobility and the capacity of families to transfer wealth across generations. What we find when we compare the opportunities of white and black people is a continuing gap in access to higher education between these two groups. Because of the dramatic changes occurring in our economy, what this differential means is that the distribution of access to our knowledge-based economy will be color-coded.

Most people believe (and the data confirm) that education positively affects wealth accumulation: high educational achievement typically leads to better-paying jobs, which in turn result in greater wealth accumulation. What is less clear is the effect that wealth has upon education. While ample research has explored the effect of family and neighborhood income upon student performance and attainment, few studies have focused on wealth. The studies that do exist provide some insight into this relationship. Conley found that financial contributions of parents to their children’s educational expenses have strong effects upon children’s educational expectations. Yet African-American young adults receive less financial help from their parents and return more money to their parents’ households than their white
counterparts during the period immediately following high school. These data suggest that African-American young adults are substituting work for schooling.

Conley found that the most significant wealth-based predictor of educational performance is parents’ liquid assets. (The most significant overall predictor, according to Conley, is parental educational level—another instance of the compounding of wealth over generations.) From this he infers that family-based educational financing is "probably more important than the differences in school districts associated with housing values." Conley states that wealth-based resource disparities at the district level (created by reliance on local property taxes, which fund the schools) account for approximately 10 percent of the gap in black and white standardized test scores. Furthermore, a decline in our social commitment to providing access to higher education for people of color is widening the gap. The declining support for public education compounds the problems in higher education. Black and other nonwhite communities feel the impact of this decreased support first and most powerfully, but it will affect all poor communities, regardless of color, in the long run. Everyone who depends on public education for upward mobility will suffer. Recent dramatic changes in the economy promise to magnify this disadvantage.

When Conley incorporated wealth factors into traditional educational analyses, a number of important elements in the cultural-deficit model for explaining educational disparities disappear. These include the pathologies supposedly created by female heads of households, receipt of welfare payments, parental age, parental occupational prestige, and parental income level. As the economist Marcellus Andrews puts it: “Working-class black people are muddling through an economy that no longer offers the prospect of middle-class life to hard working but modestly educated adults.” There is a simple way to look at the confluence of these facts. Black people as a group not only have lower incomes than whites but also reduced access to the major avenue of wealth creation and transfer in the middle and working classes, namely high-quality higher education. Race in this society tracks wealth, wealth tracks education, and education tracks access to power.

Race provides an analytic tool for understanding significant dynamics of American economic life, such as the largely unremarked upon absence of any automatic escalator from one class to the next, despite the Horatio Alger myth. The linkages between race and black poverty tell us more about race than they do about individual black people. Moreover, the linkage between race and poverty tells us as much about white people as it does about black people. It tells us that the most potent determinant of economic success lies in the accumulated assets that are passed on from one generation to the next. Racial disparities cannot be explained by reference to any simple binary in which blacks are poor and whites are not. Instead, the mechanisms making it so hard for black people to accumulate assets in a way that changes their life chances are the same mechanisms that keep poor whites poor. These mechanisms are compounded by race, but they are not totally explained by race. Race is instructive in identifying the workings of class, but it cannot be swallowed up into class.

Hugh Price, President of the National Urban League, challenged us in his 1999 State of Black America address to look at race as “endogenous,” that is, “something that is defined within a political-economic system and not at all natural or immutable.” Race cannot be defined outside the economic or political system; “it is defined by the economic system, to grant or deny access to
wealth accumulation." For the individual who is raced black, Price is pointing out links in a chain that may provide an important context for what otherwise might be interpreted as individual deficits, behavioral flaws, or cultural pathology.

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**SEEING THE BIG PICTURE**

Briefly glance through the Appendix. Based on your observations of statistics on race in this section, can you make an argument that the United States is now colorblind? How might you reconcile the ideal of colorblindness with the trends in the data?

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**THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW RACIAL HIERARCHY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY UNITED STATES**

Herbert J. Gans

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

In a timely and provocative article, Herbert Gans suggests that racial categories, as currently understood, are undergoing fundamental changes. He argues that the current racial hierarchy will collapse into two categories: black and nonblack. How will this happen and which racial and ethnic groups will be placed in each of these two categories and why?

Over the last decade, a number of social scientists writing on race and ethnicity have suggested that the country may be moving toward a new racial structure (Alba 1990; Sanjek 1994; Gitlin 1995). If current trends persist, today's multiracial hierarchy could be replaced by what I think of as a dual or bimodal one consisting of "nonblack" and "black" population categories, with a third, "residual," category for the groups that do not, or do not yet, fit into the basic dualism.

More important, this hierarchy may be based not just on color or other visible