

Rampant Racism in America (1)

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Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, it appears that things have changed in American society, but on close examination things have turned worse.

African-Americans are at the bottom of the totem pole economically: there have been so much bitterness, in-fights among ethnic minorities which were not so evident in the 50s and 60s. It seems that racism has taken a different form than it had been in the past.

Some say that there is no racism any longer with the improvement of social and legal structures in society. But the fact is that there still is rampant racism in American society. This became evident in the Presidential elections in the past with the whites' maneuvering and willful manipulation of black voters: malfunction of voting machines in poor black areas. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina made an ugly expose of the Presidential irresponsibility in caring for the victims and slow federal responses to the national crisis.

In this article reasons and clues for solutions for rampant racism are being explored and elucidated in two parts.

Key Words : Racism, White Supremacists, Black Nihilism, Presidential Accountability, Despotism

Preface

It has been slightly over forty years since Martin Luther King delivered in front of well over 230,000 people that famous and lingering speech "I Have A Dream" in Washington, D.C. in 1963. Have King's dreams, at least some of them, have come true in American society today? Some say that American society has changed a great deal with a series of civil rights laws such as 'no racial discrimination in public schools, ' Voters' Registration Law, and many others. It appears on the surface that America has changed, but it is also true that what should have changed remains unchanged: so many public schools remain segregated especially in inner cities every day: African-Americans are at the bottom of the economic totem pole: high suicide rates among the African-American youth; a large number of those incarcerated are African-Americans: highest unemployment rates exist among African-Americans. Billions of dollars have been poured into the war in Iraq, but Hurricane Katrina victims, poorest

African-Americans in New Orleans, Mississippi and Alabama have been deserted by the Federal Government. It simply means that racism still exists in America today. Except in a few institutions 'Affirmative Action' which was spawned by the Civil Rights Movement, has been nullified. The very Federal Supreme Court that affirmed the unconstitutionality of racial discrimination in public schools has now branded 'Affirmative Action' through which an African-American student was admitted into Law School at the University of California at Berkeley as reverse discrimination. Back in 2001 Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley publicly announced that UC Berkeley no longer honored the Affirmative Action policy within the university structure either in terms of admitting students or hiring faculty, which meant that African-American students had to compete against white students in entering law school on equal terms with no racial preference. Since then many other universities have followed suit in like

manners. This decision has also impacted many secular corporations which previously had to abide by the Affirmative Action policy in hiring ethnic minority personnel and has encouraged to stop applying Affirmative Action to their management policies.

Some others insist that America has not changed: it has not become any better than the Civil Rights struggle era of the 60s: it has even become worse. Quite a few whites claim that there is no need to talk about racial justice, because enough has been done already to upgrade the life and work of African-Americans in American society. It is true today that there is no longer lunch-counter sit-ins, or racial segregation in public facilities. So it appears that equality prevails. There are even African-American-owned corporations; even in large corporations there are African-American executives. Quite a few middle-class African-Americans have moved out of the ghetto areas to move into the former white section of cities. But the number of those who have succeeded is very limited. The poor sections of inner cities as in Atlanta, Georgia have been gentrified by the city ordinance, and yet the political process of gentrification has left the really poor sections just as they are. Only the middle-class African-Americans have reaped the benefit of the gentrification policy, but the very poor have been abandoned as in the case of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There are African-American doctors, lawyers, politicians, mayors, police-chiefs, university Chancellors, Presidents and professors, but the very number is limited. If one looks at the surface of American society, one gets an impression that equality prevails and that ethnic minority people are given equal opportunities to go up the social ladder in America, but as stated above, the number of those who have been successful is very minimal. African-Americans comprise about 13% of the total American population, so whites argue that it is natural that the number of successful African-Americans in the corporate or legal fields is limited. It appears that there is a strong force at work that keeps ethnic minorities, especially African-Americans, from participating more fully in the mainstream of American life to acquire a larger piece of the American pie; wealth, representation in civic, economic, and political arena. This force is intentionally created and is reinforced by white power structure which keeps them at a lower level of life. As long as African-Americans remain in servitude and ask for favors and hand-outs from the white elite, they are ready to doll out some left-overs. But if African-Americans start claiming their fair

shares of the American wealth and power, then whites fiercely fight back to keep African-Americans where they are. Whites' hatred of African-Americans has been exhibited in numerous ways during the Civil Rights Movement era of the 50s and 60s: in a film "Mississippi Burning" a young black man was captured by a white deputy-sheriff only for speaking to a white woman and taken to a cotton field, beaten up and almost slaughtered. An F.B.I agent who held the cracked head of the black man muttered, "Why this much hatred!" This white F.B.I agent just could not comprehend why whites hated blacks to that extent. There is something in whites which makes them hate blacks. There is no actual knowing what it is. But if the real reasons or the causes of hatred is discovered, whites' hatred of blacks can be identified and dealt with properly, if not eradicated. The fact of the matter is that so many whites the writer talked to do not understand why whites hate blacks that much. It is not merely emotional: it may be in the genes, when they are born; a proclivity to detest what is foreign to their experience. Racism is not born, however, but is bred at home and in social contexts. In the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-violent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia there is an exhibit of a horrifying photograph in which a smiling little girl with white parents is looking at a lynched black man hanging from a tree. When this girl grows up, she probably is going to have the same kind of feeling towards blacks as her parents. Racism is not merely emotional or even personal; it is ingrained in social and legal and cultural institutions. Institutional racism begets individual racism

So many whites (from the 50s and 60s) have felt superior to blacks, because they have white skins: 'black' has been associated with darkness (blots and crimes), dirt and something sinister and therefore injustice, while 'white' has been associated with 'purity,' cleanliness, blamelessness and therefore the sense of justice. How can this century-old thinking be changed? Probably it will never change, unless human mind is renewed from within. However, humans alone will not be able to accomplish this. There are millions and millions of so-called 'Christians' in America who believe in God's equal creation of every man and every woman. But judging from the content of the Declaration of Independence in which God's equal creation of every man was affirmed, blacks were not part of God's creation, because they were slaves and therefore were not considered human. In order for true human equality to be affirmed and realized, there would have to be another Constitutional Amendment which states in no uncertain terms that 'every' man does include

Nobu T. Imaizumi, Rampant Racism in America (1)

every human being, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. This may serve as a springboard for spawning a new understanding of God's creation. It is not that easy, however, to instill this kind of thought among the white elite, because there still is a strong force at work which persistently keeps blacks in servitude as in the past long history in America. Therefore, it would be well to take a closer look at how racism still persists in American society today in concrete terms.

1. Institutional Racism

A. Philip Randolph, great black labor leader states:

At the banquet table of life there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything. And if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything. And you can't take anything without organization.¹

Randolph was keenly aware of the fact that without organization (labor union in his case) nothing would be gained. He was also aware that without institutions blacks would not be able to advance themselves in American society. However, these very institutions are the ones that have kept blacks in servitude for so long. Back in the fifties whenever blacks were tried in court, the jury was all white and the white judge always rendered a verdict in favor of whites, even when it was clear that whites were in the wrong. In the 60s in Mississippi a white man was tried for a murder trial of a black man: the white judge and the white jury all acquitted the white man who had murdered the black man only for looking at a white woman with wanting eyes. The judge said, "Although I do not condone what you did, mind you, but your action was influenced by the outside evil force, so I will suspend the sentence." (Film, Mississippi Burning). This was justice in those days and there was absolutely nothing blacks could do about the apparent injustice. The very need for organizations (institutions) Randolph was talking about was what kept blacks in servitude. The legal institution has changed since then, but the Federal Supreme Court's decision that the Affirmative Action was reverse discrimination is a good indication that the legal institutions have not changed that much. Randolph was actually talking about the need for black-controlled and black-owned institutions, but

how many black-controlled institutions are there in America? It is true that there are some black-owned entrepreneurs, legal representatives on the federal, state and local levels, but the number is very limited. Having black representatives in political institutions does not necessarily mean that they serve the needs of black communities. Thurgood Marshall was just about the only black Supreme Court justice who was the conscience of America, who labored to meet various needs of black and other ethnic minorities' legal needs. To Marshall all people meant 'all' people and he treated each individual as a dignified human existence. It is probably impossible to find a replacement who is as committed to human dignity and equality as Thurgood Marshall. The Supreme Court today is controlled by the Republican Presidents' appointees and therefore nothing much, such as another Constitutional Amendment mentioned earlier, can be expected from them. Despotism nepotism, and favoritism are the order of the day even in the legal institutions. So there is a growing need for institutions and organizations which can be managed, if not entirely controlled, by blacks. 'Controlling' means that blacks can take in benefits for the sake of their communities throughout America. Minority empowerment means that seeking appointments to the benches of the Federal Supreme Court and all the way down to the local courts; seeking more representation to economic institutions, corporations and educational institutions. In order to do that we must first upgrade the dilapidated education and providing needed job training with the black youth. More workers, paid or otherwise, are desperately needed who can commit themselves to providing more equitable educational and vocational training and at the same time seeking out potentially capable black youth and procuring necessary financial support and scholarship for them from various Foundations and other sources. It is a sad fact that even though there are a number of 'successful' blacks in many fields, they have 'abandoned' African-American communities in order to be on equal footing with the white elites. Therefore, those black youth thus trained and empowered should be encouraged to come back for the betterment of their own communities.

James Bell states that after post-Civil War Reconstruction was defeated in 1877 and the era of Jim Crow was ushered in during the mid-20th century, America's elite universities and well-respected "scientists" advanced claims of biological evidence connected to black physical features to inferior

1 Davis Smiley, *The Covenant* (The Third World Press, 2006), P. ix.

intelligence and predisposition to criminal behavior. The "evidence" further fueled the national hysteria about a growing black population and offered justification for criminalizing black men.² University scientists should take the blame for such inconclusive "evidence." These scientists and researchers are also the victims of ingrained racism within institutions of higher education. If the very institution of higher education, which is supposed to cultivate and conduct unbiased research and development, is fabricating 'unscientific' proof of black inferiority, who can one really trust? It only goes to show that even institutions of higher education are racist-oriented. This national hysteria and biased scientific research by scholars has given rise to further pre-conceived prejudice that all black men have a proclivity for criminality - from a cradle-to-prison. It is no wonder then that many blacks believe the term "racial justice" is an oxymoron. This is another case of institutional racism. James Baldwin wrote:

If we-and now I mean the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others-do not falter in our duty now, as many Blacks, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us:
GOD GAVE NOAH THE RAINBOW SIGN, NO MORE WATER, THE FIRE NEXT TIME !³

Now these words were written by James Baldwin back in 1963 during the Civil Rights struggles. Baldwin was bold enough to call for immediate action primarily by whites and handful of conscious blacks. Baldwin mentioned only a handful of blacks, because in those days blacks were still sedated and did not feel they had any power to change their own predicament. Things are naturally different today, or so they seem: there are quite a few vocal blacks, scholars, politicians, corporate executives who are in a position to help reshape and give an impact to American society. One of the foremost African-American scholars of the day, Cornel West has this to say: "My basic aim in life is to speak the truth to power with love so that the quality of everyday life for ordinary people is enhanced and

white supremacy is stripped of its authority and legitimacy."⁴ Just about when America was driving race matters out of their consciousness, West reminded America once again of crucial race matters which were still plaguing the country. The fact that the book sold millions of copies is a good indication that race matters was still in the subconscious psyche of Americans. West talks about his own experience of having been stopped on fake cocaine charges and was taken into custody.

He was stopped simply because he was black. A black magazine reports on running an experiment on 'DBW'- driving black and white. This magazine reports⁵ that during certain hours on the same street drivers were going at about the same speed, and the number of blacks stopped by the police far exceeded that of whites. Some black men were spread eagle and body searched for drugs, while the white drivers got away with no such search at all. The magazine also reports that when youth gathered on a street, there was more chance of black youth questioned and taken into custody for no apparent reasons than white youth. These are but small instances, but they can be magnified. One just has to be a member of a minority group to realize the magnitude of racial harassment on a daily basis. Baldwin as well as West remind all Americans, especially African-Americans of the magnitude of racial problems they encounter almost every day and call for concrete action to alter the situation. But before one can engage himself/herself in concrete action, one needs to know not only subtle manners but overt ways in which racism is practiced in society. West's analysis of contemporary racism is to the point: racism breeds first of all nihilism in which many African-American youth as well as adults are left hopeless. Hopelessness, meaninglessness and disillusionment is the order of the day for many African-Americans. Where does the sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness come from? Is it from their laziness, as whites have imagined wrongly? Hopelessness and meaninglessness comes from the sense of powerlessness in that they have no power to do anything about the predicament they find themselves in. This breeds the sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness. African-Americans learn in their early stage that they cannot go anywhere in American society. This then strips many African-American youth of any incentive to learn to upgrade themselves, because learning and education does not guarantee

2 As quoted in the Covenant, P. 49.

3 Ibid.

4 Cornel West, *Race Matters*(Vintage, 1994), P.8.

5 *Driving Black and White*(Emerge Magazine, September, 2001), P. 78.

Nobu T. Imaizumi, Rampant Racism in America (1)

any chance to advance themselves in society. This does not mean, however, that African-Americans do not have to assume responsibility: they need to make an effort to upgrade themselves. Upgrading themselves must accompany some chance of social success. If they see no chance of success, then this drives many African-American youth to drugs, delinquency and other social vices. Whites look at this phenomenon and accuse African-Americans of laziness, tardiness, and lack of motivation to succeed. Cornel West in his best-selling book, *Race Matters*, talked about the deep sense of nihilism among black Americans. Now in *Democracy Matters* he further examined the content of this nihilism and says that he examined the increasing nihilism in black America as the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness. This monumental collapse of meaning, hope, and love primarily resulted from the saturation of market forces and market moralities in black life and the present crisis of black leadership.⁶ Materialism (market forces) not only affects blacks, but the whole of America. It goes without saying that American success means material success and black Americans naturally are driven to this material success as well, but in the process they discover that somehow promises of wealth does not apply to them. From thence comes the sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness. But more than anything else, what is really crippling black America is, as West pointed out, the lack of black leadership. Back in the 50s and 60s black America began to see and have hope under the striking leadership of Martin Luther King. King was able to galvanize tens of thousands of blacks all across America, trying to give them hope and meaning in their struggles for gaining God-given human rights. Since his assassination, however, some of his aids like Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy, tried to carry the ball and lead blacks to further success. As a result quite a few middle-class blacks came into being, but in the process of material success they left their own community to join the whites in suburban lily-white communities. Except for a few successful black professionals, the majority of blacks have been left in dilapidated black communities. So on top of the lack of black leadership what is really missing is the lack of leadership among the poor blacks. Who is going to impart hope and meaning to them? There has been some legal change, but economically the great majority of blacks are still where they were in

the 60s. Successful blacks have abandoned their own communities and do not look after those who are left behind. Perhaps successful blacks cannot afford to think about those left behind: they had to come out of the slums to go up the ladder of professional success. Unless strong black leadership emerges from among blacks, not much hope is in the offing. This, however, is not entirely a sole black issue. Whites naturally have a role to play in this. Ralph Ellison wrote:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the outsides. Many whites could look at social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not an American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term "niggers" - it made them feel instantly American. But that was tricky magic. Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man's value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is somehow black.⁷

This rather lengthy quotation by Ralph Ellison is quite intentional, for it precisely tells the history of America and how racism started. Racism was not innate in the original American Continent. The only inhabitants were natives called Indians, who revered natural environment and were in touch with the whole of creation. Slavery goes as far back as 1400s in Europe and European immigrants brought it with them to the new Continent and began the process of annihilation of native Americans. Later on they began to invade the sacred land of the natives, and started calling these natives "savages." To many Europeans these natives were rough, rugged and knew nothing of civilization and the Renaissance, whose experience made them refined. The natives were first curious about the new invaders and even helpful toward them. So many European invaders had lost goods on the way over: they were met by fierce storms (Hurricanes?) or attacked by treacherous Scandinavian Vikings who killed some

6 Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (The Penguin Press, 2004), P.26.

7 Ralph Ellison, *What America Would Be Like Without Blacks*, as quoted in *Race Matters*, P.3.

of them and so lost just about everything they had on board. So the natives came out partly out of curiosity and partly from the sense of pity and compassion to help them plant and eat something these Europeans had never tasted before; wild turkey, corn and others. Thanks to the kindness of the natives Europeans were able to survive the chilly, cold winter. As they became self-sufficient, Europeans began to think that the natives were savages, not possessed with the kind of knowledge and refined experience they had brought with them. They also began to encounter black slaves and thought to themselves that these black slaves were below human and so did not deserve to be treated equal as humans. Herein lies the very root of racism in America. As institutions began to be established on the new Continent, these natives and black slaves were intentionally excluded from the institutional establishment.

Cornel West suggests something poignant:

To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgement of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us. And we must acknowledge that as a people - E Pluribus Unum - we are on a slippery slope, toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together.⁸

Since quite a few white Americans are not concerned about their ancestral roots, they could care less about who they really are, except being Americans. The publication of *The Roots* by Alex Haley, however, aroused in them some curiosity about their ancestral roots, which had been hidden for so long ever since the first Europeans came ashore.

There are tens of thousands of white European Americans who make pilgrimages to the old Immigration Processing Center off New York Island where they can retrieve their ancestral roots by computer. Because of this interest in their roots, white Americans have finally come to realize that Americans came in different colors and shapes, E Pluribus Unum does not mean just being 'white,' or painting everyone white or force white European values upon other ethnic minorities. In this process of multi-colorization, pluralism has become a way of life for many Americans. However, it was still in the embryonic stage and not all Americans recognized that Americanness did not mean only white. It took years and years before white European

Americans were able to internalize multi-ethnic and multi-cultural values. And even though some white Americans were able to internalize multi-ethnic existence within America, they still had a long way to go before they could externalize multi-ethnic co-existence in America. Multi-culturalism should mean inclusiveness as well as putting every ethnic group on equal footing, but whites would prefer to maintaining structural racism in which to keep minority ethnic groups, particularly blacks where they are. Whites doll out some help, as long as minorities stay below their level, but as soon as they come up to their level or when they see that ethnic groups go beyond whites' level, then they fiercely fight back and try to put them down. Whites go for multi-ethnic existence, as long as they know their own 'take.' However, when they find out they are losing what they have secured, they will make every possible effort to turn the tide and go back to white supremacist way of life. 'Promise' in the idea of the Promised Land and Manifest Destiny only belong to whites and not to any others. This is the very basis of structural racism. 'Manifest Destiny' naturally has a religious connotation and whoever is not within that fold would be considered to be out and outsiders. Natives(Native-Americans), blacks, Asians and other ethnic groups never knew Christianity, and therefore they are considered to be outside the realm of Manifest Destiny. There are millions of Catholics, and yet they too are outsiders, because even though they are white, they are not Protestant. We have seen the process of transition from 'assimilation and annihilation,' to the 'melting pot,' to 'tossed salad bowl,' to 'cultural pluralism,' and to 'multi-culturalism' in American history, but each way of life has proved to be ineffective, precisely because of structural racism in which whites were not willing to give up even part of what they have acquired: their precious possessions: economic, legal, social and cultural privileges. How to break down this thick wall of racism is the very question confronting us today. One needs to tackle this enormous problem on the governmental as well as individual level. If conscious Americans become aware of the magnitude of this nation-wide problem, and feel that something drastic has to be done fairly soon, we will all go down together. So the first step to correct structural racism is to begin to correct historical lies about the founding of the Republic by white fathers alone who conquered the 'savages' and cultivated and expanded the nation and building it up to what it is today, which has been taught in school.

⁸ West, *Race Matters*, P. 8.

Nobu T. Imaizumi, Rampant Racism in America (1)

Multiple ethnic contributions have made America what it is; this is something that really needs to be taught in every school.

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