Race Matters

The New York Times recently reported that members of the Congressional Black Caucus are concerned that President Obama has not showed greater concern for African Americans who are suffering disproportionately in the recession. While acknowledging his efforts to advance racial consciousness, some say he has failed to lead on the race issue. During his campaign for president, Obama said that race is an issue this nation cannot afford to ignore. There continue to be racially connected “disparities that can be traced to inequalities passed on from earlier generations.” He cautioned, however, that we should embrace the burdens of the past without becoming victims of that past, and People of Color need to join their grievances to the larger aspirations of all Americans. Joining with others to address grievances is an important organizing tool to effect change, but it has its dangers: each group can be dealt with as bringing individual needs, which through negotiation, find resolution in a particular piece of legislation, government program, or action. The systemic and historic influences on each group can be put aside to identify one set of needs everyone can agree to. This can foster the illusion that redress can be only achieved in a post-racial, non-divisive, color blind manner, or we will be trapped in the divisiveness of explicit dialogues about the effects of racism. Shelby Steele says that this is Obama’s bind: to appeal to post-racialism in order to get things done or speak up for the needs of the Black community, and thereby alienate white voters. How can one break out of this bind in order to deal with systemic racism and work for redress for all Americans?

What is Post Racialism?

According to John a. powell of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, racism in the U.S. is understood as “the conduct of racist individuals consciously engaging in discriminatory activity directed at a particular victim.” Instead of having a systemic source, racism is seen as a psychosocial act of individuals or institutions managed by bad actors. “If one does not engage in conscious acts of racism, or better still does not see race as a reality, then there can be no racism or racialization. Good Americans are beyond race. Race does not matter—much.” A frontal attack on racial conditions is seen as divisive. “The post-racialists see the civil rights activists and the explicit racists as locked in a struggle that is already antiquated and outmoded. According to this view, it is not just a distraction, it is divisive. The alternative to this old, tired battle is post-racialism. The question of where we are with regard to race then becomes binary. We are either in a divisive space from the past where we continue to assert the dominance of conscious racism, or we are in a post-racial world where race really does not matter to most Americans. To post-racialists, white Americans’ support of President Obama is proof positive that we are in, or rapidly approaching, a new, post-racial era.” The conservative version of post-racialism, color blindness, leads some conservatives to argue that marginalized groups will find redress if they “adopt the proper cultural values so that they may take advantage of the new race-blind landscape. The opportunity is there; if Blacks and Latinos fail to take advantage of this new arrangement, it is their own fault. For the conservatives, it would be a moral and legal mistake to have the state intervene. The post-racialists are more likely to support state intervention, but they are reluctant to do much unless it can be framed in a universal manner where an explicit consideration of race is largely off the table” (powell, 2009).

Is President Obama Pursuing a Post-Racial Strategy or Caught in a Bind?

Conservative commentator, Shelby Steele says President Obama cannot win White support without bargaining (appealing to post racialism) and he cannot maintain minority support without playing the very identity politics that injure him with Whites (satisfying the Black Caucus among other groups). He is bound within what Steele calls “America’s ongoing racial neurosis”: to be a Bargainer or Challenger. Bargainers make a pact “with White society: I will not ‘guilt’ you with America's centuries of racism if you will not hold my minority status against me. Whites love this bargain because it allows them to feel above America's racist past and, therefore, immune to charges of racism. By embracing the bargainer they embrace the impression of a world beyond racial division, a world in which Whites are innocent and minorities carry no anger” (Steele, 2009). This is to join with others and avoid divisiveness. The Challenger is someone “who presumes that Whites are racist until they prove otherwise by granting preferences of some kind to minorities. Whites quietly see the at challengers like Jesse Jackson who use the moral authority of their race's historic grievance to muscle for preferential treatment” (Steele, 2009). Steele argues that Obama looked too much like a Challenger when he nominated Sotomayor for the Supreme Court.
How Can We Deal with Systemic Racism?
While Affirmative Action Programs have contributed to inclusion of People of Color, the failure to deal with systemic racism has impacted their agency within major institutions. According to Elfi Martinez, the major shortcoming of Affirmative Action Programs was failing to address the natural follow-up question “Now what?” People of Color have gained representation in major institutions, but in many cases they have not gained support and access to informal channels of power like mentoring or challenging assignments. They are often stuck in place while others move up the corporate ladder. This has led to a revolving door effect, as people learn that they will not move into roles with more authority. “Instead of focusing on retaining the talent attracted by Affirmative Action, Diversity today often focuses on the diluted goal of Inclusion, where individual differences are honored and celebrated. While admirable, such programs do little to manage Group and System-level dynamics of power, which is where many Diversity Programs now fail. Diversity issues are mistakenly addressed solely at the individual level, where issues are seen as complaints from weak people and tossed into the corporate trash can.” For People of Color to find agency in dominant institutions, Diversity Programs need to address “group-level issues, the golden benefit of Diversity - unlocking the passion and commitment of diverse talent on a global landscape” (Martinez, 2010).

According to Philip Howard, President Obama inhabits two contradictory situations: a central office of power in the United States as well as an oppressed location by virtue of his racial positioning within the American racial hierarchy that places Blacks at or near the bottom. The choice is to be bound as Steele says, or to not lose sight of “the fact that one of the longstanding contradictions of American democracy…is that serving the democratic rights of People of Color (in this case, African Americans) seems to be considered within dominant discourse to be at loggerheads with serving the rights of ‘all Americans,’ while, in actual fact, these projects should be seen as reinforcing each other. For example, addressing the injustices of the criminal justice system, education, housing, banking, and other institutions toward African Americans is regarded in dominant discourse as though it meant bowing to illegitimate demands of a special interest group for special privileges rather than as a necessary step in securing universal access to the lofty democratic rights and privileges about which the United States boasts. To speak out about racial injustices is to be President for all Americans” (Howard, 2010). Also, in order to break the bind that hinders agency there is a need as Teasley and Ikard (2010) say for race analysis that addresses the economic and structural forces that have oppressed and marginalized all non-Anglo-American ethnic groups.

What Can be Done?
The alternative to avoiding talking about race in order not to be divisive is to continue to engage in surfacing the racist codes and behaviors we have learned and seeking ways to acknowledge systemic disparities while working for changes that can benefit the many. We need to go beyond the bind of Bargainer or Challenger, race-blind or identity politics. We need to ask not whether we are race-blind but how race matters. In a recent presentation, PBS’ Gwen Ifill said, “Race is about understanding the value of difference.” The objective is not to embrace one set of cultural values but foster working and social situations where differences can interact. As Martinez says, “The bottom line is that identity group memberships matter and should be constantly explored and examined. ‘Who are our people?’ is a key question. But often in the halls of power, the dominant group revels in its exclusivity - why rock the boat? But the great strides in our society have come from group and system-level interventions such as the Civil Rights and Women’s movements. For members of dominant groups, especially along race and gender lines, I challenge you to stay conscious of your group-memberships. Fight the urge to live on autopilot, seeing only what you want to see.”

References
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