

The Changing Face of America

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Multi-culturalism is merely one small step toward a new way of talking about race relations today.

How do we describe our altered racial landscape?

New language to describe the complexity of contemporary race relations in America will necessarily wander outside the familiar black-white race relations framework. Multiculturalism is merely one small step toward a new way of talking about race relations today. Some have noted, however, that projecting multiculturalism as the idea vision for America in fact jeopardizes efforts for racial justice.

Multicultural education, for instance, may celebrate America's diversity, but it often ignores the power and persistence of "elite white male privilege." On the other hand, many fear that multiculturalism's pluralist premise fosters racial polarization and identity politics. Thus, it is reassuring to those who are morally committed to racial justice and those who fear the "balkanization" of American society to retain the black-white paradigm. Nevertheless, a new language is needed. The black-white paradigm, helpful as it may be in describing power inequity, no longer - if it ever did - reflects social reality.

The Data of a New America

Throughout the past 30 years, the influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean has dramatically altered America's racial landscape. Brought up in New York City, Tim observed the explosive growth of its Chinatown and the emergence of three other "Chinatowns" in Queens and Brooklyn during the past three decades. He also witnessed the incredible proliferation of Korean and Chinese churches all over the metropolitan area.

On the other end of the country, David, a native of Southern California, also saw the effects of the 1965 Immigration Act as Latinos and Asians accounted for much of the tremendous population growth in the region. The increasing presence of Latinos not only affected the Roman Catholic churches in metropolitan Los Angeles, but also boosted activity in a wide array of Protestant church contexts. Asian immigrant churches and temples in the past three decades have also altered the religious landscape.

These observations are supported by the demographic shifts of the racial composition of American society toward even greater diversity. In the next two decades, the non-Latino white population is expected to decline from 75.6 percent to 64.9 percent of the population (in 1995, white people numbered 193.9 million). The African-American population is now more than 33.1 million, while the population of American Indians grew to 2.2 million. But the greatest growth has come from Asian and Latino immigration. Three-and-a-half million Asians resided in the United States in 1980, but now there are more than 9.75 million. The Latino population has exploded from 9.07 million in 1970 to more than 22.75 million today. Latinos will probably outnumber African Americans in the next century, growing from 8.7 percent to 15.4 percent of the population. Asians are projected to grow from 3.3 percent to 6.5 percent of the population.

Most of the growth is taking place in major metropolitan regions such as New York City, Chicago, Miami, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Los Angeles. The concentration of populations in these areas is already having a major impact on local politics and foreshadows the future of American race relations.

Consequently, the larger cities are witnessing the formation of multilingual and religiously diverse communities, which have not been seen since the turn of the century. This time, however, the diversity appears to be greater. It appears that the world is, indeed, coming to America.

A closer look at the "new" immigrants reveals quite a different portrait than stereotypical images. A large proportion of immigrants are well-educated professionals, young risk takers, and not impoverished. Even those who "fit" the stereotypes, such as poor migrant workers from Mexico or refugees from Vietnam, usually embody "American values" of hard work and rugged individualism.

Nevertheless, this portrait can be misused for political purposes. While negative stereotypes of "job-stealing immigrants" and the "welfare mom" are employed regularly to justify immigration restrictions or the dismantling of the welfare state, positive images are also used to undermine policies designed to rectify ongoing racial discrimination (such as affirmative action) and undercut the moral sway of the call for racial justice. Asian-American educational and economic "success" stories, for instance, are often used to exhort others to "stop whining!" The burden of proof has shifted from white racism to non-white "cultures of victimization." Thus, jeremiads for justice have been reduced to nagging complaints.

The Illusion of Race

While the perceived success and pariah status attributed to various immigrants has been used to alter the character of American politics vis-à-vis race relations, another development may also change our concepts of race. The growing acceptance and rate of interracial or interethnic marriages portends a very different kind of understanding of race relations in the future (for example, 60 percent of third generation Japanese-American sansei marry outside of their ethnicity or race). While it is likely that racial and ethnic organizations will persist, children of intermarriages will challenge rigid concepts of race and ethnicity.

Additionally, scholars of race are concluding that racial identity is much more "plastic" than previously imagined. It is a socially constructed and politically determined means of marking differences and creating inequality that has little basis in biology, culture, or behavior traits. Thus, to link intelligence to one's skin color will now draw the ire of many scholars who would debunk that way of thinking as "essentialist." After all, the differences within racial groups are larger than those between them.

At first glance, this doesn't appear very provocative. It simply repeats the traditional liberal critique of early 20th-century white supremacy (which attempted to demonstrate that the white race was innately superior to others). If there are no "colored" races - only the one human race - then the ideology of white supremacy would have no basis in reality.

The plasticity of our cultural identities and the recognition that no real basis for racial distinctions and consciousness exists raises a number of questions: Should not our public policies therefore be colorblind? Should we not strive to be rid of ethnic churches in favor of integrated ones? Would not Afrocentric education and Korean congregations be expressions of race consciousness that may lead to reverse discrimination? Given the changing face of America, it is understandable why many advocate the elimination of race consciousness altogether. Broadening the black-white paradigm to include other race conscious groups sounds like a prescription for social chaos.

But there are limitations to this updated version of the 19th-century abolitionist call for "one bloodism." It cannot adequately address the consequences of ongoing racial discrimination even if racial distinctions do not exist biologically. It cannot compensate for the years of Euro-American accrual of privilege and power at the expense of

"Third World" people. It ignores the fact that our skin color, despite the declining legitimacy of race, still determines our social location and the way we treat each another. Racial distinctions may be nothing more than sociopolitical constructs, but they are not harmless illusions.

The Persistence of Racism

Because it is a powerful illusion that shapes the quality of life of all Americans, race remains a significant factor in our society. Some believe that the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, which ended legal segregation, marked the beginning of the end of racial discrimination. But its persistence can be seen in recent incidents of violence directed at Asians and African Americans, racial discrimination in corporations, and in the growth of white supremacist groups.

Equally persistent, however, is the belief that these incidents are aberrations in a normally non-racist society. Denials and denunciations by different people when presented with the notion that America is racist are an indication of the great divide or confusion over the persistence of racial discrimination today. The confusion lies in the conscious or subconscious desire to reduce American racism to an epiphenomenon or a dependent social variable. The following examples illustrate this point:

1. *Psychological reductionism*, which is the belief that racism is a set of individual attitudes. But overt expressions of prejudice do not account for the structural racial inequities woven into the fabric of society.
2. *Ethnic reductionism*, which confuses race and ethnicity. Ethnicity refers to one's national origins and cultural roots, while race is defined politically and based on skin pigmentation. Sociologists who ignore the race factor tend to place all people in the ethnicity paradigm, thus presupposing the gradual structural assimilation of immigrants and non-whites into American society over time. However, the facts do not square with this grand vision. "Racial minorities," unlike the European immigrants of a century ago, do not easily integrate into mainstream America. This is most clear among African Americans, but it is also true of Latino and Asian immigrants. The basic flaw in ethnic reductionism is the use of the European immigrant experience of assimilation as the model for other groups.
3. *Economic reductionism*, which suggests that economic injustices trump racial injustices. Many argue that talking about racial justice is divisive, while working for economic justice brings unity. In fact, some would substitute class-based for race-based policies because they appear to be colorblind and thus more fair. Economic reductionism is one of the major reasons why Asian Americans are often not considered a group that faces racial discrimination. Asian-American educational and economic attainment are almost always presented so favorably (though not accurately) that Asian Americans tend to drop out of the picture in studies linking the degree of racial discrimination to economic achievement alone. But this ignores the fact that even wealthy and educated people of color are discriminated against.

If race were really a harmless illusion, then it could be reduced to prejudice, ethnicity, or poverty. But if it is viewed as a significant factor in America, then one can conclude that race is at the core of American society. Historians and sociologists are increasingly coming to this painful conclusion. The problem - past and present - lies in recognizing the persistence and pervasiveness of "white" identity, power, and privilege in America. To insist that American society is colorblind is to ignore how "whiteness" defines what is considered "normal" and "aesthetically pleasing" in our culture.

The Need for Identity Politics

An old Chinese proverb is applicable here: "If you want to know what it's like to be a fish, don't ask the fish." So immersed are we in a society shaped by "white" definitions of reality that few are even conscious of it. Sometimes it seems that being "white" in America means being racially neutral. But this is clearly false.

Historians such as David Rodeiger have noted that "whiteness" itself is a sociopolitical construct in which people from diverse European backgrounds were assimilated into an identity that conferred privilege and segregated their poor members from non-whites. Because "whiteness" became so firmly rooted in the American subconscious, even many well-intentioned Euro-American civil rights activists could not see that their visions of an integrated society meant conformity to these "norms."

Black nationalism and other race-conscious movements can therefore be seen as a reaction to the pervasiveness of "whiteness" in society. In its most apocalyptic expressions, identity politics can advocate for permanent segregation (for example, white militia groups and some black separatists share this conviction). But for others it is viewed as the most practical means of finding a place and a voice at the American table. In the future, perhaps, when race is no longer a factor in creating social inequality, the politics of identity will be put to rest. But not now, not yet.

It seems that things used to be so simple. Racial discrimination was easy to detect. The remedy was also simple (though very difficult to act upon) as Christians hearkened back to the abolitionist cry of "one blood!" "Integrate, don't segregate" became public policy and the touchstone of Protestant activism. But that was 30 years ago.

Today, segregation abounds. Christians committed to racial justice should resist the temptation to gloss over the differences and inequalities caused by a fallen world and society. At the same time, the Pauline vision of a new creation where our particularities are embraced beneath the canopy of "the beloved community" should remain our great hope. How can Christians walk the fine line between the two?

First, recognize and name "white" privilege and power over all of us. It separates "white" people from their non-white brothers and sisters. It creates in many people of color a revulsion for people who look like themselves. Ultimately, it is an idolatry that confers benefits to only a select group in our society.

Second, reject extreme forms of identity politics. Let us keep our eyes on the prize - the beloved community. Our racial identities do not define us completely, for we are named after the One who has redeemed all humanity.

Third, support and take part in ministries that stress racial partnership while respecting the presence of "ethnically based" groups. Eleven o'clock on Sundays may be America's most segregated hour, but instead of passively decrying this reality, work so that the flock scattered on Sunday will be ready on Monday to be partners in mission.

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