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The Fallacy of Race: A Post-Racial America

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Abstract: *This exploratory essay analyzes the idea of race in contemporary America. A brief historical overview of the concept is provided and early anthropological ideas of race are compared and contrasted to the current popular idea of race in the United States. Theories taken from cultural studies are applied to the idea of race in America to provide a new understanding on this complex construct. The study concludes that the labels of "white" and "black" in contemporary American have more to do with cultural identity than with phenotypical traits such as skin color and facial features.*

1. Introduction

Race as an anthropological concept had a prominent role during the 19th century (Cotton, 2009; Davidheiser, 2008). At the time the world population was divided into: mongoloid, Caucasian, Negro, and aborigines. The previous classification system was based on physical features that included the shape of the skull, height, and in some cases skin color. Nevertheless skin color was not considered to be as important as other physical traits such as facial features. This can be attested in the inclusion of Indians in the Caucasian group regardless of skin color. This classification system was largely abandoned by the discipline due to its utter failure to explain behavior (Macdonald, 2007). Ethnographers could easily observe that a Negro who grew up in London would eventually behave as any other Londoner would. Thus, the concept of culture became increasingly important in the field of the Anthropology and in the social sciences in general (Dubinskas, 1992; Pieterse, 2009).

Even though race retreated in importance at the academic level it remained an important concept in the field

(Davidheiser, 2008; Melle, 2009; Williams, 1997). Americans continued to understand their reality based on a very simplified version of early race theories. The many categories were simplified into two "black" and "white" (Davis, 1991). Nuances were ignored in favor of the simplest yet most irrational system possible. Anyone with a trace, in most states more than five percent, of non European Caucasian blood was automatically labeled black (Davis, 1991). The reasons for the rise of this system are complex and involve economic and socio-political factors. Nevertheless the resulting labels were useful in some cases in order to predict behavior and culture. With the end of slavery labels became even more important for some people due to the abolition of the clearest legal barriers between the groups (Lemert, 2004). One of the most interesting challenges to traditional ideas of race and racism are the many exceptions to the rule.

During the very strict apartheid regime in South Africa some clearly non-Caucasian groups were legally classified as "White" (O. v. Feigenblatt, 2008; Ottaway, 1993). One example of this was the Japanese. Why would they classify Japanese as "white" when they were clearly not Caucasian in the strict racial sense? Moreover, why was no cognitive dissonance felt by White South Africans when doing so? More recent examples in the United States can be observed with Asian Americans many of them are considered white by their colleagues and friends and in their private conversations "white" Americans talk freely about black people. On the other hand there are also many examples of Asian Americans who are accepted as black by that community. How can "A" be both "B" and "C"?

The case of Barack Obama further complicates the issue of race in America. Is someone who is half Caucasian and have Negro "black" or "white"? Or should the person be considered mixed? It is very difficult to answer this question objectively in America due to the politics and emotional issues involved. For Barack Obama the answer would clearly be that he is "black". This label is partly what made his presidency progressive in the eyes of the country and of the world. Nevertheless a similar question connected to the "identity" of a pair of earrings can be used to portray the

unscientific nature of the answer provided by the President. If the earrings are made of an alloy that is fifty percent silver and fifty percent gold how the earrings should be labeled? Are they "gold" or "silver" earrings? Obviously the earrings are and will always be partly gold and partly silver regardless of the label. The same can be said of President Obama, he will always be the son of the Negro and of a Caucasian mother from a strictly racial perspective.

The following section examines the interesting case of Rachel Dolezal, an NAACP leader who identified herself as black for many years even though both of her biological parents are Caucasian (Ford & Botelho, 2015). Cultural theories are applied to her behavior and most importantly to the public's reaction to the revelation of her biological race.

2. "Passing" and Cultural Identity

The social phenomenon of "passing" is not new and has a long and difficult history in the United States. Before the Civil War and before the civil rights movement many mulatto Americans (mixed between Negro and Caucasian) decided to adopt the "white" identity due to the many benefits it entailed (Melle, 2009). Depending on the phenotype (external physical characteristics) and the visible behavior of the individuals it was possible for many mulattos to identify themselves as "white" and to be accepted as such by their communities and by the law (O. F. v. Feigenblatt, 2009; Lemert, 2004). Many of them assimilated completely to mainstream "white" culture and in some cases their children were not even aware of their mixed ancestry. This was an inherently social act in that in order for the individual to become "white" he or she had to be accepted as such by the community. At the same time a parallel process happened at the intrapersonal level in that the person had to internalize their new identity. A discrepancy between the community's accepted identity for a person and his or her intrapersonal identity would lead to an uncomfortable psychological condition called cognitive dissonance. Alignment between the interpersonal and intrapersonal identities results in a well integrated and functional individual.

Other well known examples of "passing" involve the Jewish community in Europe during World War II (Roberts, 1997). The concept of "race" has also been mistakenly applied to Jewish communities in Europe. People who are physically and genetically indistinguishable from the majority population were labeled "Jewish". Many people of Jewish ancestry and mixed ancestry "passed" as non-Jews during that period of time. There is a similar situation in Latin America with the so-called "mestizos" (Eakin, 2007; Williamson, 1992). This term was originally coined to refer to those of mixed Caucasian and Native American blood. Over the centuries the term was extended to people of native American ancestry who had fully assimilated to Hispanic culture. Thus a racial concept was eventually expanded to include culture as its most important criteria.

Other minority groups have gone through similar experiences in their long and tortuous path towards full social acceptance. Irish and Italian Americans were treated as second class citizens for many years and the same can be said of German Americans before them (Loewen, 2007; Nayak & Malone, 2009). Eventually many Italian-Americans and German-Americans simply became Americans and were fully accepted by mainstream American culture. The case of European minority groups in the United States shows that even for Caucasian groups the process towards full acceptance was long and difficult and centered on the issue of culture.

3. The Inconvenient Fact of High versus Low Culture in Contemporary America.

Dr. Max Webber, the famous German Sociologist and philosopher understood the natural tendency to substitute our ideals for reality and thus facing serious difficulties in understanding the world around us (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005; Ritzer, 2008). Thus, he termed some facts about the world that some people may find contrary to their values or ideas as "inconvenient truths". An example of this could be the existence of widespread poverty even in developed countries such as the United States. Another example could be the fact that many people are poor due to structural

problems in the economy rather than due to their own lack of effort or ability. Those facts are "inconvenient truths" because they contradict many of the most deeply held tenets in American society such as the ideal of the American dream and the idea that everyone has a chance to succeed. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the reality we would like and the ontological reality that can be measured.

One "inconvenient truth" in America is that there is a high and a low culture and that in many cases cultural barriers transcend the concept of race. Different socio-economic strata display different behaviors and follow distinct sets of norms (Guinier, Fine, Balin, Bartow, & Stachel, 1994; Jiang, Perry, & Hesser, 2010; Thelin, 2011; Trujillo, Bowland, Myers, Richards, & Roy, 2008). One way to understand this is with the anthropological term of "subculture" sometimes called "lifestyle" in the business literature (Broome, DeTurk, Kristjansdottir, Kanata, & Ganesan, 2002; Jordan, 2003; Stewart & Knowles, 2003). Therefore people from different socio-economic groups inhabit different cultural worlds. Linguists have studied language differences in different economic groups and marketing specialists have long known that different socio-economic groups respond to different types of stimuli. Learning specialists have also observed marked differences in child-rearing practices between different groups (O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008; Rogers, 1996).

The assimilation of the norms and values of the dominant group leads to acceptance and to higher social prestige. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, a person who has successfully gone through the process of acculturation and has internalized the culture of the dominant group has a higher chance of being accepted as a respected member of society than one has not. This simple conclusion is based on the premise that in every known society there is a certain set of norms, mores, folkways, and values that together are considered to be "high culture" in comparison to alternative norms and values which is not held in as high esteem by the society known as "low culture" (Caplan, 1995; Gulliver, 1988; Kessler, 2009; Lemert, 2004; Llosa, 2012; Macdonald, 2007). This is a Webberian "inconvenient truth" in that anthropologist have

not found a single society without social stratification and differences of social prestige and power (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2007; Faubion, 2007). Based on the previously posited relationships it is possible to predict that a mongoloid who has fully internalized "high culture" will be accorded more prestige by society than one who has not. Therefore a member of a dangerous gang in Los Angeles who is "racially" Asian/Mongoloid will not be accepted by the dominant members of society as full members while his cousin who graduated with a PhD from NYU and who has fully assimilated will. In this case "race" is being kept constant and thus the variable that changes is the degree of assimilation into "high culture".

If it were possible to find a considerable number of examples of situations where the "race" variable fluctuates but the overall process has the same results we would be able to separate the physical/racial aspects of discrimination from the socio-cultural factors. Therefore if Caucasian individuals who subscribe to "low culture" or who lack an understanding of "high culture" are accorded an equally low level of social prestige and acceptance as a negro individual then it will be necessary to redefine what is meant in the contemporary America by the terms "Black" and "White".

4. The Interesting Case of Rachel Dolezal

For many years Rachel Dolezal was accepted as a prominent leader and member of the NAACP and of the African-American community (Ford & Botelho, 2015). Dolezal lectures at the college level in the field of Africana studies and she was acknowledged by her friends and acquaintances as "black". Her dress, speech, and hairstyle also subscribed to what is normally understood as part of African American culture. Nevertheless her biological parents are Caucasian and childhood pictures of her show a very pale and blond Caucasian girl (Ford & Botelho, 2015). Recent statements by her biological parents revealed her Caucasian origin and resulted in a national controversy over her choice to identify as black. The media and many African American leaders pointed out the fact that she lied and that therefore she lost the trust of the community. Nevertheless,

it should be noted that Dolezal did not identify herself as "negro" but rather as "black" (Ford & Botelho, 2015). This is an important difference in particular for someone who is at the forefront of the fight for social justice and who is an expert in Africana studies. Surveys and other race related questions in the United States are based on self-identification as it is not required to submit any biological evidence or legal proof of one's racial identity. Moreover, the categories have changed and shifted many times in the last few decades as exemplified by the categories used for Latin Americans. Some questionnaires only provide one category labeled "Hispanic" which includes everyone who shares a culture derived from that of Spain regardless of skin color. Other questionnaires provide subcategories for "black" and "white" Hispanics and yet others use the term "Latino". Any student of a basic research methods class knows that the alternatives/attributes provided in a survey question should be related to the same construct or concept (Creswell, 2007; Druckman, 2005; Willis, 2007). Thus, providing the option of "black" and then following it with "Hispanic" is very confusing and misleading. It is clear that purely racial terms have given way to ethnic and cultural ones. Thus, the term "black" implies some cultural factors while "negro" does not. African American is even more focused on cultural factors. The simple case of a Caucasian Afrikaner who migrated to the United States one generation ago shows the problems of the system. Afrikaners are Africans and if they assimilate to American culture they would be African American. Yet they are clearly not "negro". What about a person of Indian descend who was born in the West Indies and then migrated to the United States? They could be labeled as "black" but they are not African American. Thus the term "black" is a hybrid term that includes some physical traits such as skin color but also includes some cultural factors.

Returning to the interesting case of Dolezal, it is perfectly possible that her understanding of the term "black" is different from that held by other people. Maybe Dolezal meant that she shared the cultural identity of those labeled as "black" and thus outside of the "white" mainstream in American society. The present lack of standardization and the blatant confusion of ethnic and racial markers in

American society mean that Dolezal has a strong argument in terms of claiming that she is "black". Unless the Federal Government adopts an official definition and establishes clear proofs in order to claim this identity, it is perfectly possible to undergo a process of transracial transformation. Nevertheless one important requirement for establishing a social identity is public recognition of that identity and this depends on the culture the people involved in the evaluation of this claim for a particular identity (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005). Thus, a person can claim that he or she is the best swimmer in the world but that claim needs to be supported by enough convincing evidence so that the social consensus approves overtly or tacitly the claim as valid.

5. Policy Implications of Transracial Identity:

The case of Dolezal is challenging for both the right and the left of the political spectrum. On the one hand the struggle against racism is recognized as an important goal by the political left and it is still the most important goal of the NAACP (Davidheiser, 2008; Davis, 1991; Iloh & Toldson, 2013). Notwithstanding this emphasis given to the struggle against discrimination based on race, the disappearance of physical aspects of the concept of race from public discourse would present an important challenge to the political left and in particular to social activists. There are many reasons for this challenge but it rests mainly on the norms of contemporary Western society which frown on discrimination based on ascribed status, meaning characteristics over which the individual has no control such as biological sex and skin color, while allowing more discretion when dealing with achieved status (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005; Blau & Moncada, 2009; Williams, 1997). Examples of an achieved status are that of a convicted felon and a married woman. It is socially acceptable to discriminate convicted felons based on the logic that they had a choice and that they exercised control over their behavior. If the status of "black" or "white" becomes achieved rather than ascribed then it would be less controversial to discriminate since people would theoretically have a choice to change identity. A similar debate deals with the charged issue of gender and sexual preferences. When homosexuality was considered to be a personal choice rather

than a biological trait it was much easier to discriminate since it was considered to be an achieved rather than an ascribed status (Bem, 1993; Chodorow, 1997; Cinamon & Rich, 2002; O. F. v. Feigenblatt, 2010). With a greater acceptance of theories attributing sexual preferences to genetic and biological traits outside of the control of the individual it is no longer as acceptable to discriminate based on sexual preference (Jackson, 1997). If race becomes an issue of preference and sheds the physical aspects in favor of socio-cultural ones, then it will become easier to discriminate based on identity. On the other hand an acceptance that race is an option in America would weaken the bargaining power of many social activist groups in that the issue would expand considerably to encompass the cultural, economic, and political marginalization of many groups who share the subculture labeled as "black". This could include many Caucasians growing up in similar neighborhoods together with many Hispanics and even some Asians. This expansion of the issue would weaken political actions and would deprive activists of the strong psychological and cultural implications of the word "race" in America.

The issue of a transracial identity would also be problematic for conservatives and for the political right. Accepting that the marker of "black" is mostly a socio-cultural issue involving politico economic marginalization would bring to the fore of public debate the important issue of inequality and structural violence in America. Moreover, it would potentially create a broad coalition of Americans sharing this more flexible identity of "black". A broader coalition of marginalized Americans could potentially challenge the entire system or at least the most important tenets on which it is based.

Reactions to the Dolezal controversy from both sides of the political spectrum show this ambiguity towards a transracial identity. The leadership of the NAACP took great pains to avoid dealing with the biological aspects of the race issue while at the same time attempting to deflect attention towards the transparency and honesty aspects of the

controversy (Ford & Botelho, 2015). Conservatives attempted to simply to ignore the issue.

6. Recommendations and Consequences

The rise of transracial identities will have profound consequences on the American way of life and on the political alignment of the population. Tranracial identities will have the effect of lessening the importance of race as a social status marker while at the same time bringing to the fore other important social markers of status such as lifestyle and educational level. Socio-cultural markers of social class will become increasingly important and will determine political fault lines. Marketing companies are aware that socio-cultural markers are a better guide to predict interests and behavior than are strictly racial markers. Thus, two biologists who attended the same university may have more in common with each other regardless of race than a negro lawyer from Boston would have in common with a negro farmer in Georgia. Political Scientists have identified important interest groups based on social markers such as income, wealth, education, religion, and occupation (Guilhot, 2008; Rothman & Olson, 2001). With the weakening of race those interest groups will become increasingly important in national politics. This restructuring of the political spectrum will have a polarizing effect on American society and will lead to a similar political alignment as the one seen in most European countries. Political parties will have to shape their agendas and platforms based on socio-economic issues and will feel the need to represent a clear set of interest groups. Political parties in America already represent interest groups but race still plays an important role in elections, as was seen in the election of Barack Obama with the support of the majority of high and low socio-economic status negroes and minorities. Obama's platform was clearly focused on the interests of the working and the lower classes while enjoying the support of many upper and middle class minority voters due to the power of "race" in the political system. The recent political realignment of both the Democrat and Republican parties towards the left and the right respectively shows the polarizing potential of this dynamic. Economically conservative minorities will start to understand that they

48

have similar interests as their majority counterparts. Thus an unskilled Caucasian in Tennessee suffering from chronic unemployment and low wages will understand that he or she has more in common with an unemployed negro in New York city than with a Texas landowner, something that was aptly explained by W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to the racial structure of the South after the Civil War (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005).

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