

Post-Race Rhetoric in Contemporary American Politics

Written by Angie Sassano

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ANGIE SASSANO, MAR 16 2015

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The Ferguson Grand Jury's decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson, after he shot dead an unarmed Michael Brown, tells of an America where white interests remain protected over black lives. Yet in the wake of Brown's death, and the subsequent protests in the city of Ferguson, a national awakening occurred. Since then, Brown's death has become a symbol of the political and legal injustices faced by Black Americans, who continue to be treated as second rate citizens in the United States.[1] Though the discrimination has become harder to identify, the case of Michael Brown demonstrates that racial divides are still embedded in America's political culture. In early 2015, as the slogan "Black Lives Matter" crosses the nation, Americans are once again confronted with the realisation that they live two different nations: the first a White America that no longer sees race as significant; the second a Black America wherein race continues to cast a long shadow over just how free and fair the United States can claim to be.

Race is an integral part of American politics. Systemic racial subjugation, a legacy of historical injustices from the practice of slavery through to the Jim Crow laws, is a lynchpin of the American political system.[2] But even as contemporary developments move politics beyond old racial tensions, a new racial divide has begun to emerge between the 'race-conscious' policies adopted by the liberals and the 'colour-blind' policies of the conservatives.[3]

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At first glance, the notion of a 'colour-blind' America has obvious appeal. However, when examined further, claims that politics in the United States is colour-blind or post-race actually have damaging implications for the racial tensions and prejudices which remain institutionalised. Indeed, colour-blind policies not only makes race invisible. It also silences past and ongoing inequalities and injustices. Racism is institutionalised in the United States, something which is a result of over three centuries of legalised racial inequalities. This history, which continues to have a present, cannot be undone in one sweeping motion.[4] In this essay, racial politics will be examined in contemporary American society. By analysing the ongoing Ferguson protests, and post-race rhetoric which has been endorsed by conservatives and also under the Obama presidency, this essay will identify that America is a society still burdened by racial injustices which favour white citizens.

A Colour-Blind and Post Race America?

American politics has been marred by institutional racism, something which has been entrenched within governmental structures.[5] Through the practice of slavery, for instance, Confederate states were able to create a white supremacist society.[6] Even subsequent constitutional amendments – from the abolition of slavery under the Thirteenth Amendment, the right to own property under the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) and political enfranchisement under the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) – have not enough to overcome the systemic racial inequality.[7] The legislation of black repression through Jim Crow laws – laws which segregated and dehumanised black citizens well into the second half of the twentieth century – exemplify the structural nature of racial politics in America. It demonstrates that institutional racism prevails in the political consciousness; that beyond legality – that is, constitutional amendments humanising black citizens in the political arena – political behaviour has persistently exhibited racial sentiments. This is the “deep paradox” within the American political system[8] – that a nation so invested in the principles of liberty and freedom is simultaneously invested in sustaining racial discrimination and injustice.[9] The result has been a political distrust amongst black citizens towards their government that stems from “historical and contemporary racial experiences.”[10]

Through the endorsement of a 'colour-blind' America, political actors continue to enable the perpetuation of racist power dynamics and attitudes within political institutions. Many may wrongly connect ideas of progressive politics with the concept of 'colour-blind,' to look beyond the race of a person. Yet it is a concept with harsh implications that often silences the plight of black American citizens. Predominantly adopted by white citizens,[11] colour-blind policies suggest a political society that is absolved of racial inequalities and barriers. However, this is a suggestion which ultimately negates the importance of acknowledging racial issues within political spheres.[12] In effect, it grants conservatives the ability to accuse liberals of racism for recognising the racial inequalities within institutions.[13] Colour-blind advocacy holds significant consequences for black political actors since the sheer claim of “colourblindness” disregards the “lingering debilitating effects” caused by racial discrimination.[14] Subsequently, it regards institutional racism as an inconsistency, not a structural complication.[15] The promotion of colour-blind politics is a theoretical issue which enables the perpetuation of structural injustices. It relies on “repurposing” racial rhetoric which subsequently advances conservative rights, and abets white supremacy in a political arena.

A good illustration of the dynamics at play can be found in former Republican Senator Sam Ervin's racial rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s. Ervin's work on drafting of the Southern Manifesto condemned the results of *Brown v. Board of Education*, whereby he claimed it was a state right to allow segregated organisations and institutions to operate.[16] He later defended this claim by noting it was not a statement advocating racial inequality, but a statement which recognised the constitutional importance of individualism.[17] This suggests that the Constitution, in all its glory of paving the way of individual rights, should not be counteracted by public policies that are conscious of racial inconsistencies.[18] In essence, Ervin, and likeminded conservatives, transformed racial political language by claiming policies should be made “without regard to race.”[19]

One can postulate that this has set a precedent for white conservative political actors to regard race-conscious citizens as being responsible for enflaming racial issues. The 2010 Shirley Sherrod controversy is a prime example of the implications of colour-blind conservatives employing race as a tool to further their own political dominance. The controversy regarded the firing of US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Agent, Shirley Sherrod, when footage of her seemingly denying government benefits to white farmers was released by conservative blogger,

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Andrew Breitbart.[20] The released footage was later revealed to be doctored by Breitbart, to accuse Sherrod, and black citizens, for being responsible for perpetuating racial injustices through supposed reverse racism. However, the controversy revealed the deeply embedded power dynamics of white political dominance over blacks. Sherrod's statement was taken out of context, whereby she was highlighting the need for black citizens to rise above seeking "retribution" for their past and current discriminations.[21] As Breitbart, and conservative news outlets, such as *Fox News*,[22] tarnished Sherrod's reputation, it established that race was still operating "malignantly." [23]

Alongside colour-blind advocacy, the proclamations that American politics is post-race express equally harmful repercussions, something which was evident during the 2008 Presidential campaign. Many Americans were quick to signal the end of institutionalised racism with the election of the first black American President. As Barack Obama took the Presidential Oath of Office, the marginalised and disenfranchised hoped that he would act as a voice to right the wrongs of racial discrimination which subordinated black citizens as insignificant and almost non-existent political actors. Obama's *A More Perfect Union* Speech on March 18, 2008, symbolised his racial position and set the precedent of his "post-race posture." [24] This posture claimed America to be free of the past racial injustices and political inequalities.[25] The following excerpt of Obama's speech is indicative of this controversial stance:

"[the] implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former Pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation, that rightly offend white and black alike..." [26]

Post-race ideals are evident in this excerpt and during Obama's presidency more broadly. Although the speech in its entirety made reference to racial inequities and racial politics, the undertones suggest that Obama avoided utilising rhetoric which primarily appealed to minority and more importantly black communities by connecting America's history as a challenge which whites and blacks face together. By claiming that his candidacy was not a means of "racial reconciliation," [27] Obama essentially distanced himself from the racial consequences of his eventual Presidency. Moreover, his dispute of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's "controversial comments" regarding race and politics [28] revealed that Obama's belief in a post-race society removed contemporary American politics from the country's damaging legacies of racial discrimination.

Enlightened Exceptionalism: America's Modern Racism

Since then, Obama's post-race stance has enabled white political actors to discriminate against blacks in a seemingly implicit, progressive and even "anti-racist" manner. [29] Here, the concept of Enlightened Exceptionalism encompasses a new form of nuanced racism which perpetuates structural conditions enabling the racial oppression of blacks. [30] Defined as an "updated version of white supremacy," by distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable black citizens, Enlightened Exceptionalism is a refined racist thought which focuses upon cultural conditions of blackness that can be corrected rather than the institutions which have repressed them historically. [31] It is ultimately founded on historic ideals of assimilation that blacks need to live up to white expectations and those who do are exceptional blacks. Subsequently, it is a white supremacist philosophy that forces black citizens to rid themselves of "blackness" and engage in values of racist white people. [32]

Two political episodes exemplify Enlightened Exceptionalism in action. The first episode occurred when then-Democratic Senator, Joe Biden, applauded Obama for being a "mainstream African American," a figure all Americans could regard as an "articulate and clean and a nice-looking guy." [33] The second instance came in 2009, when former Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid, linked Obama's appeal to his "light-skin" and lack of a "Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." [34] These statements highlight the repercussions of post-race politics, where white politicians dictate the behaviours of black citizens. It propagates the image of a black person as a citizen who needs to rise above their cultural setbacks – that is, the way in which they talk and look – in order to be seen as viable political actors. In other words, Obama's success came from the fact that he has managed to move successfully beyond his 'blackness.'

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These sentiments were recently reiterated by Obama himself as he called for national calm amidst the Ferguson riots. Referring to his “story of advancement,” which was simultaneously drawn together with the advancement of black communities at large, he implicitly called upon blacks to rise above the political and social parameters institutionally enforced upon them.[35] This call ultimately highlights Obama’s racial stance as appeasing the white attitudes that blacks essentially can lift themselves out of the conditions which they face. As Obama states that his advancement can be the advancement of all black citizens, it follows that the political institutions are not what is failing black Americans, but black Americans themselves are failing to rise above their conditions of blackness. It takes the responsibility away from political structures which have been built on the oppression of blacks to gain white superiority. By doing so, Obama justifies post-race antics and negates the importance of considering the institutional implications of race in society. Obama advanced because his blackness was not offensive to the white populace, as Enlightened Exceptionalism would have it. This follows that all black people need to act accordingly to be socially acceptable in order to politically and socially advance.

Yet, in the face of Obama’s plea to the nation, critics have pointed out that America must not unwittingly buy into this discourse of respectability, which holds that behaving in socially acceptable ways will cure black citizens of their politically perceived cultural illness.[36] Americans must guard against views, such as those articulated by Former New York City Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, that the issue of Ferguson is not one of police antagonism but the “internal brutality in the grips of thugs.”[37] But in the case of Ferguson, such a position ignores the inadequacy of an overly white dominated police force that fails to protect black citizens in their own communities. In doing so, it ultimately plays into the calls of whites that blackness is a cultural ailment that they as individuals can choose to rise above. Such damaging claims, coinciding with colour-blind attitudes, suggest race and politics are no longer intrinsically connected. They ignore the structural consequences of racist histories embedded within political institutions which have marginalised and disenfranchised black citizens to present day America. Without acknowledging these institutional failures, blacks will continue to be set up to fail in American society. As a result, the election of a black president, and the Enlightened Exceptionalism rhetoric which followed, only intensified the systemic racial issues rooted within the political system.[38]

Conclusion

As Ferguson becomes a symbol of America’s persistent racial challenges, white political actors have attempted to deflect the incident away from race. By claiming America to be colour-blind and post-race, they have paradoxically enabled American political institutions to project an innovative, even progressive form of racism. Yet in a colour-blind and post-race America, racial discrimination and violence has become more nuanced.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s statement on the Ferguson riots, that with “each of these shootings... [and] stand your ground atrocities, police and the judicial system are seen as enforcers of an unjust status quo,”[39] explore the institutional race relations which perpetuate racial injustices. The existence of racial inequalities, thus, stem from governmental structures which thrive on racial oppression, and should not be rendered redundant by duplicitous racial rhetoric. Ferguson is a symbol for the social and political damages inflicted upon black citizens. It highlights the malicious undertones existing within a post-race American society, that judicial institutions can ignore the racial subjugations and oppressions which exist and often result in the deaths of innocent black citizens. This only allows the racial inequities to thrive in a society geared towards protecting white dominated political institutions above the rights of black American citizens.

American politics believes that moving beyond racial rhetoric is more beneficial to society than acknowledging the entrenched racial inequalities and injustices which mar their social fabric. As political institutions such as the judiciary continue to fail to protect and represent innocent black lives, as they are marginalised, and unfortunately often killed at the hands of institutionally white dominance, it intensifies the need to bring race back into the political dialogue. The Ferguson riots explore that blackness is not a cultural ailment, but an institutionally oppressed and transparent history. Masking this injustice through post-race and colour-blind rhetoric only works to fuel racist undertones. Ferguson lives on in America, as a movement in memory of an innocent black life lost for the many innocent black lives lost and oppressed. Race needs to be thrust back under the political spotlight in order to confront and correct the institutional racism which persists in America.

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Written by: Angie Sassano
Written at: Australian Catholic University
Written for: Dr. Mark Chou
Date written: October 2014