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# The Problem of Post-Racialism

Milton Vickerman

*University of Virginia, US*

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*For Jessica, Hilary, and Hyacinth*

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# Acknowledgments

The contradiction between America's sense of itself as the leading light of democracy and its racism has always been jarring. This contradiction has lasted for centuries, providing undeniable proof of the society's willingness to live with dissonance on a nationwide scale. But the dissonance has also pricked consciences, spurring a desire for the country to live up to its higher ideals. Although there are different ways of accomplishing this goal, honesty requires us to admit to the societal problem of racism as the starting point. The most obvious example of this stance was the civil rights movement which, having clearly outlined the problem of racism, sought to overcome it through various forms of struggle. Unfortunately, it is also possible to seek after the lofty goal of a nonracist society by denying the existence of racism. Proponents of this approach may concede that once, a long time ago, such a problem existed, but they believe that it has now been eradicated. If people still talk about racism, it is because they have a mistaken view of American society.

This attempt at doing an end-run around the problem of racism in American society is the essence of post-racialism. It attempts to solve the society's fundamental contradiction between its espousal of universalistic principles and their denial through racial discrimination by arguing that only the principles, and the steps individuals take to attain these principles, matter. This is problematic, not because the goals of post-racialism are wrong, but because the post-racialist impulse begins by ignoring troubling truths about American society. It then becomes easier to take a rosier view of American life than is warranted. The alternative, which I argue for in this book, is not an unrelentingly grim picture of no social progress. Rather, it is a complex view of American society which recognizes that the country has, indeed, made major strides forward in bridging the gap between its ideals and its racial practices. From a racial perspective, the America of 2012 is a much better place to live than was the America of 1912. But old patterns of racism, which are deeply entrenched, persist. This combination of progress and racism is hard for many people

to understand, but it is present-day social reality for blacks and other racial minorities.

I think that this reality is evident in the triumph represented by Barack Obama's ascendancy to the presidency and the ways in which race has been used to delegitimize him since then. I discuss this in the Introduction and in Chapter 2 because though the book is not about President Obama, per se, he is the pivotal figure that has catalyzed the debate over post-racialism. My concern is with the idea of post-racialism more broadly, and in Chapter 3, I argue that post-racialism is not a new idea. Instead, one can find many other similar ideas floating around in American society. I refer to these as "post-racialisms." Although wrong-headed, these ideas are rooted in something real: the significant material and social progress minority groups have made over the course of the twentieth century. An analysis of these trends, however, illustrates that this progress is a mixed bag since it has simultaneously improved the lives of minority groups and preserved social inequality. Indeed, on some measures, social conditions for some of these groups – especially African Americans – are as bad as they have always been. I discuss these complexities in Chapter 4.

My research among middle-class African Americans has been especially influential in helping me think through the meaning of the contradictions between achievement and race because the black middle class embodies these contradictions. These African Americans exemplify racial progress but have not escaped race. I discuss this conundrum in Chapter 5, based on the research I conducted among a group of middle-class African Americans in a Washington, D.C. suburb. On this score, I am especially grateful to Tom Guterbock and the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia, US, for generously making this research possible. But I also thank other friends, colleagues, and students who read earlier drafts of the manuscript or helped in the research. These include Charity Donnelly, Toni Gordon, Sharon Hays, Jennifer Huang, Paul Kingston, Mildred Knowlton, Murray Milner, and Hephzibah Strmic-Pawl. These readers and co-researchers helped me a great deal but are not responsible for the conclusions that I outline in Chapter 6 of the book. These conclusions posit that race will continue to influence social life in the future but that the shape of race relations is not pre-destined. Consequently, though racism will likely continue in American life, its effects can be ameliorated.