

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

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Race and reality

We can act as if race doesn't matter if we want. Yet, it matters a ton, even though it shouldn't. We need to keep it in mind and do what we can to remedy its negative impacts. While we might hope that race was a thing of the past, recent happenings suggest that it isn't something that will disappear so quickly.

Let's get one thing straight right off the top. Biologically speaking, there is no such thing as unique/distinct races of humans. That is, grouping people, as has been done for hundreds of years, on the basis of the way they look—skin color, hair type, facial features, etc.—cannot be defended scientifically. People's phenotypes (the technical term for "observable traits") are not connected to other genes, e.g., the ones that make them predisposed to certain diseases or give them the ability to read or run fast. (Obviously, one's physical and mental achievements are strongly influenced by environmental factors as well.) This is still hard for many of us to believe because for several centuries powerful members of society, here and abroad, tried very hard to convince the masses that people who looked a certain way were subhuman and, therefore, able to be treated like animals or "beasts." This provided the necessary rationale for slavery and the colonization of much of the world, and is still found in more subtle forms today when it is used to legitimize warfare against (or neglect of) certain groups.

Once one realizes that science rejects racial categories, then it becomes obvious that all forms of discrimination or racism are entirely social constructs. A close look at human history tells us that racism didn't exist until relatively recently. These two interconnected facts are critical to understand if one is going to be able to interpret modern forms of racism.

Together they suggest that current episodes of racism (as I will present below) are completely arbitrary. That is, they are performed as a result of a long history of deliberate attempts to divide (and, often, conquer) people and not because we, humans, are somehow "wired" to do so. With this solidly in mind, we can more objectively look at the many stripes of modern racism.

Let's start at the top—the President of the United States. Is he "black"? Sure he is (according to all sides of the debate). But why? Because he had a dark-skinned father who was born in Kenya, Africa? It certainly wasn't because of his mother, who was "white" woman born in Kansas. Why don't we hail Obama as "white"? Historically, in many states throughout the U.S., having any African ancestry (aka, the "one drop rule") resulted in a person being designated "black"—which always meant a loss of political as well as other rights.

Many years later, Barack Obama is still categorized in this way. But, why does this matter? Is it racist to refer to him as a "black" (or an African-American) person? Referring to anyone as "black" or "white" isn't necessarily wrong, but all too often it is done for the wrong reasons or leads to unfavorable results. For example, the attention paid to President Obama's shade of skin distracts us from what is really important—the policies he does (or doesn't) champion. People of all forms of political persuasion let race get in the way of judging him on his own merits. Those who want to celebrate his current status—as the first "black" president—often are uncomfortable criticizing him. Obama

supporters have said to me, "I am not going to criticize the first black president," or, "he isn't God but he is a lot better than the alternative." This unwillingness to openly critique President Obama has us, a little more than a year into his Administration, voluntarily paralyzed to collectively wield mass public opposition to his many questionable positions/actions—i.e., increased funding for war, support for more coastal oil drilling, expansion of coal and nuclear energy sources, and rejection of a "single payer" or "public option" health care policy.

Some on the "right" show such vitriol towards Obama that one has to think that his race at least contributes something to their ire. Congressman Joe Wilson's yelling "liar" on the floor of Congress (during Obama's health care speech) represents a clear disrespect of the office, apparently now tarnished by the presence of a "person of color." While it is true that these behaviors might have been elicited if some "white" Democrat were President, I have a hard time believing they would have been so visceral and even violent.

While the above responses to Obama's race are of consequence, there are much more important indications of active racism today. Let's look at some statistics presented in the *State of the Dream* report put out by United for a Fair Economy. Blacks are three times more likely to be in poverty than whites, 24 percent versus 8 percent. Unemployment for blacks is nearly twice the rate for whites (in 11/08; *State of the Dream*). In 2007, blacks, on average, had incomes 41 percent lower than whites (in 1968, black incomes were 45 percent lower; this rate of relative improvement will bring parity in the year 2354!).

But the most poignant statistic is this one: black families have only one-tenth the amount of wealth as white families (according to Howard Shapiro in his book, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*). Other forms of overt racism are the 3 percent of black men that are in prison (compared to 0.4 percent of white men) (Hoover Institute, 2006).

These statistics may appear to suggest hardship for blacks but many can't see these as clear indications of racism. But they are. All of these economic and social inequalities are a natural fallout from the nearly 300 years of racialized slavery in North America which was followed by a long period of limited economic, political, and social rights given to those that were designated as "black." All of this is very unfortunate. Most of us have nothing to do with it, at least not directly. However, all of us are implicated at some level. Acting as if the playing field is level (when it isn't) only makes the situation worse.

We need to be vigilant to correct past (and present) injustices. Pretending that race doesn't matter will only make it matter far more for those have already suffered the most because of it. Living like it does matter may allow us to one day truly live like "brothers and sisters."

