Introduction to Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Issues Companion

Race and Ethnicity, 2008

In 1857 the U.S. Supreme Court turned down a petition from Dred Scott, an enslaved African American seeking to sue his master for his freedom. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, in delivering the majority opinion, wrote that Scott had no right to bring any suit to the federal courts, because blacks were not lawful citizens and could never be granted civil rights or equal protection under the law. Further, members of "the unhappy black race," declared Taney, were inferior to whites and thus forever "doomed to slavery."

One hundred and fifty years later, attitudes toward and the discussion about race in the United States have changed radically. From the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, enormous progress has been made, so that all races now enjoy rights of citizenship and are entitled to full legal protections. The alleged "inferiority" of blacks is thoroughly discredited, as are notions of white "supremacy." Racially discriminatory speech and practices restricting where nonwhites can live, work, and go to school are prohibited. Illustrating the profound changes that have taken place, when in February 2007 Barack Obama, a Harvard-educated lawyer, senator, and African American, declared his candidacy for president, he was immediately viewed as a front-runner for the Democratic nomination. Chief Justice Taney's grim prediction, it seems, could not have been more wrong.

Progress, but Racial Inequalities Persist

Yet, despite these remarkable gains, race continues to be the United States' most difficult and divisive social issue. Even as an African American pursues the country's highest elected office, racial inequalities and tensions persist in American life. Studies consistently show that minorities still face far greater obstacles than whites when it comes to employment, education, and health care. Statistics indicate that the poverty rate for black, Hispanic, and Native Americans is triple that of whites. Nonwhites are more likely to be incarcerated, more likely to drop out of school, and less likely to own a home. Racial profiling, the dismantling of affirmative action, hate speech, and the portrayal of minorities in the media rank as some of the country's most socially charged issues. Racially tinged incidents continue to take place, as seen in race riots in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2001 and in Benton Harbor, Michigan, in 2003.

And while Senator Obama's successes are indicative of how far the nation has progressed, the hurdles he faces show too how much work remains to be done. Even as pundits acknowledge Obama to be one of the most intelligent and charismatic candidates to take the national stage, attention has focused on his race. First, questions arose about his ethnic identity. As the son of a white American mother and black Kenyan father, it was asked, could he show he is "black enough" to win the support of the African American community? When it was discovered that some of his mother's ancestors may have been slaveowners, several commentators argued this was evidence that he was not a "true" African American. Another storm erupted when Senator Joseph Biden referred to Obama as "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean." And then, less than three months after announcing his candidacy, Obama was placed under the protection of the Secret Service security detail because of racist threats.

On one hand, then, the United States has made great strides in regard to its attitudes toward race and ethnicity. But on the other hand, race continues to be a difficult issue that affects the country's social and economic stability. This sense of the country having moved forward while remaining crippled by its past mistakes is a
pervasive problem. One recent event illustrates exactly how strained the country's relationship is toward race and reveals that, despite legislative changes, race remains at the forefront of daily life.

Hurricane Katrina: Racism Exposed?

In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States, causing destruction in cities in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Particularly hard hit was New Orleans, which flooded when nearly every single levee in the city was breached. Across the world, people viewed the images on television of a city devastated, its citizens homeless, and its government paralyzed. They also saw that, overwhelmingly, the victims of the tragedy were poor, and black. Footage shown was of black people stuck in their houses, wading through filthy floodwaters with floating corpses to help their loved ones, and trapped in the Louisiana Superdome awaiting rescue that was slow to come.

Different groups had different reactions to the media coverage. For many black leaders, the images exposed the deep-seated racial and economic problems that had long besieged New Orleans and the country as a whole. Many argued that it revealed the inequalities that had existed beyond the tourist spots of the French Quarter and Garden District but that had gone unnoticed: black people living in desperate poverty without the means to escape their plight. They contended that it showed how race and poverty in that city, and the entire country, are highly correlated, but largely ignored. Black leaders also complained that the media in its portrayals of the desperate situation had played into stereotypes by referring to white people as "finding" food while black people doing the same were said to be "looting."

Black members of Congress expressed anger at the slow federal reaction to Katrina, and many charged that race was a factor in the sluggish response. The rap artist Kanye West ignited controversy when he declared that the situation was as dire as it was because "George Bush doesn't care about black people." The event sparked a national debate about race in America, and the months afterward saw discussions in the media about poverty and racial inequality. Joining the conversation, Obama pointed out the link he saw between Katrina and the legacy of race in the country: "I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane. They were abandoned long ago—to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness."

For many white commentators, however, the images of Katrina's aftermath did not call up racial issues; race was not viewed by the white community as the defining factor in the tragedy and its mishandling. For some whites, the real issues were poverty and the failure of the Bush administration to heed warnings that such a disaster could strike. Many pointed out too that the large numbers of black victims seen on television were due to the population demographics of the city, and that it could not be claimed that one race suffered disproportionately in the tragedy.

The discussion prompted by Katrina soon fizzled, ironically because of these divisions along racial lines. Whites and nonwhites simply perceived the issue differently. A national survey showed that seven out of ten blacks said the disaster showed that racial inequality remains a major problem, while six out of ten whites said this was not an important lesson of the disaster. A Pew Research Center poll found that two-thirds of African Americans said the government's response to the crisis would have been faster if most of the victims had been white, while 77 percent of whites disagreed. As many news analysts, both black and white, pointed out, the disaster and its aftermath was an unfortunate reminder that dialogue about race in the United States is fraught with tension and, because of deep differences in outlooks between different ethnic groups, resolution is rarely achieved.
The Legacy of a Racialized Past

A century and a half after Dred Scott, it cannot be denied that significant racial progress has been made in the United States. The last 150 years have witnessed struggles by minorities to win the freedom and equality promised by the U.S. Constitution, and numerous legislative victories have granted them complete equality before the law. The country is more integrated than even half a century ago, as people of all races interact socially and in the workplace. Considering its troubled racial history—from the usurpation of Native American lands to the use of blacks for slave labor to the tacit assumption for five centuries of white superiority in institutions and daily life—the United States has come far.

But events such as Katrina make clear that below the surface, racial animosities continue to foment, and despite important advances, Americans still have not come to grips with its racialized past. Katrina prompted some critics to argue that in the twenty-first century, minorities are still second-class citizens who for all practical purposes do not enjoy the full complement of rights taken for granted by whites. For these critics, Chief Justice Taney's dire 1857 outlook is not so far from the truth. For others, however, hope remains, even if complete success is a long way off—commentators suggest that what is required to transform race relations are deep institutional changes, and these will take time. But in the meantime, these analysts assert, encouraging, if imperfect, signs, such as the presidential bid of a strong black candidate, might help to light the way by initiating honest and sustained dialogue among Americans about race.

Further Readings

Books


• Michael Eric Dyson Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006.


**Periodicals**


• Cornel West "Exiled from a City and from a Nation," Observer, September 11, 2005.


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