

The Problem of Racial Discrimination in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's

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.Reçu le: 28.04.2017 - .Expertisé le: 30.06.2018 -.Accepté et publié le: 18.02.2019

Abstract

More than half a century after the civil rights movement, Americans are once again confronted to rethink their attitudes towards race; yet, before adopting a course that will determine the future of race relations into the twenty-first century, Americans must ask some fundamental questions about race and racism. Black people consider racism as a continuing problem, which limits their liberties as full American citizens. Civil rights activists complain that Blacks suffer from racial discrimination in getting a job, being promoted, applying for a loan, seeking justice from the police or the courts, even in getting a taxi, or being served in a restaurant. Black people support Affirmative Action as a way to fight the enduring effects of white racism. The Republican Party is becoming the party of whites, while the Democratic Party is dependent on its African American voting base. The question that still pervades American thought whether America is a racist society remains doubtful in the US. The real fact today is that race is a social reality and Americans may never be able to transcend it. Moreover, racism is the primary problem threatening African Americans today, being the only explanation for their problems.

Key Words

Civil Rights Movement- - Racism- African Americans- Racist Society- Social Reality.

Introduction:

American history has been characterized by four centuries of struggle during which African Americans fought in order to gain the same social and political rights as white people. With the advent of the civil rights movement of the 20th century, black people have benefited from many victories after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, giving them the opportunity to be full members in American society. However, racism has remained the central problem in American politics since the civil rights movement of the 1960's.

One of the greatest achievements of the civil rights movement was the struggle for racial justice. Consequently, the problem of racial

discrimination has been diminished but not completely eradicated from American society. However, the history of racism has been challenged by the election of a black president to the presidency of the US.

Obama's election meant the realization of a dream of equality and justice that fulfilled a historical hope, bringing African Americans a profound sense of victory and success. However, since the election of Barack Obama, some black people still complain of inequalities in education, employment, and housing.

1- The origins of Racism

Racism is an ideology, of intellectual or moral superiority based upon the biological characteristics of race. According to Webster's Dictionary, racism is a doctrine or teaching, claiming to find racial differences in character and intelligence, and asserting the superiority of one race over another. It seeks to maintain the supposed purity of a race, as well as any program or practice of racial discrimination or segregation based on such beliefs. Martin Luther King JR defined racism as a doctrine of the congenial inferiority of a people.³⁰

Racism flourished in Europe from the fifteenth through the twentieth century, even in places such as the Scandinavian countries where there were few slaves, or none at all.³¹ Racism is equated with slavery because both practices evolved together in America. In this respect, the American experience is historically unique.³²

The ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Assyrians all practiced slavery, and defined slaves as property. Indian temples regularly used slaves. The Greeks and Romans employed slaves as domestic servants, artisans, laborers, and soldiers. The term "slave" derives from the term "slav" referring to the large number of white slaves, captured from that region of Central Europe.³³

During the Middle Ages, in the Cosmopolitan slave markets of Baghdad and Constantinople, traders showed platforms to exhibit black slaves, white slaves brown slaves, and yellow slaves. In Europe, during this period, black slaves were relatively rare, were often treated better than Muslim slaves, and sometimes commanded a higher price. Great thinkers of the Enlightenment like Voltaire, Montesquieu, Kant, and

³⁰ Dinesh D'Souza, The End of Racism, 1995, p.27.

³¹ Ibid., p.36

³² Ibid., p.37.

³³ Ibid., p.38

Hegel were those who entertained racist views, although racism did not make up the main part of their philosophy.³⁴

Slavery was a racist institution that engendered so much suffering that it can be considered as the American Holocaust.³⁵ Racism had its origins in Europe; Africans were chosen for slavery in part because they were considered as an inferior race. Not all blacks in America were slaves and not all slaves in America were Black, that's why, we cannot consider racism and slavery to be synonymous.³⁶

Slavery was practiced for thousands of years in virtually all societies: in China, India, Europe, the Arab world, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas.³⁷ In the US, slave owning was not confined to whites: American Indians and free blacks owned thousands of slaves. Thus slavery is neither Western nor racist. What is uniquely Western is the abolition of slavery. The American founders articulated the principles of equality which formed the basis for emancipation and the civil rights movement.

African Americans were brought to the US against their will, in chains, where they endured the harshest forms of oppression during more than two and a half centuries. These slaves suffered deprivations from inadequate clothing, food, and medical attention. American slavery was not established because of racism but for the purpose of profit. It provided free labor to do the work of building the New World.³⁸

Thomas Jefferson, a Southern slaveholder, asserted that these people fought to secure the words that "All men are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights". The doctrine that slaves were equal to property generated human contradictions, because it was not easy for a society fighting in the name of liberty and equality to justify slavery. Therefore, slavery was in total contradiction with Jeffersonian principles.

Racism, as a form of hate, developed under Reconstruction, as poor white southerners, humiliated by their defeat in the Civil War protested against the rising political power of Southern blacks and their Republican supporters in the North.³⁹ A white racist organization

³⁴ Ibid., p.62.

³⁵ Ibid., p.69.

³⁶ Ibid., p.80.

³⁷ Ibid., p.22.

³⁸ Ibid, p.79.

³⁹ Ibid., p.170.

emerged named the Ku Klux Klan⁴⁰ (KKK) by the end of the nineteenth century and ended by the 1950's. During Reconstruction, blacks made considerable gains, escaping to Northern cities, creating a rich culture of learning, art, and music.

The Ku Klux Klan practiced lynching as a form of punishment. We have to mention that not only black people were lynched but also white people were. However, the Klan considered blacks as an easy target for lynching. It is said that between 1920 and 1925, this terrorist organization was a major force in American politics.⁴¹ Therefore, we can say that racism had flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Racism is an institution that aimed at destroying blacks economically and politically. American presidents of the time, like Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson had widely experienced segregation during their administrations. Moreover, violence against blacks was commonly practiced through lynching, especially in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.⁴²

Black people suffered not only from lynching but also of race riots which consisted of assaults of white mobs on black communities. Radical racists had upheld segregation with the aim of limiting their co-existing with a black population: they wanted to keep them in the slave condition, not as a free people.

Throughout the south, legal segregation was adopted; blacks and whites could not sit in the same sections in schools, restaurants, theatres, churches, post-offices, etc. Even parks and beaches had separate areas for colored and whites. Black people were a resilient group who endured many hardships, and from whom many black leaders emerged in order to challenge the practice of segregation, and to demand justice for the black community.

2- Civil Rights and Racism

The unique way for blacks to respond to early twentieth century segregation and discrimination was the civil rights movement, which was a spontaneous reaction against white prejudice. Between 1930 and

⁴⁰ Ku Klux Klan: Organized in Tennessee in 1866, to terrorize former slaves who voted and held political offices during Reconstruction. The organization was revived in the 1910s and 1920s, and stressed white, Anglo-Saxon, fundamentalist Protestant supremacy. The Klan revived a third time to fight the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the South. From: Ron Field, Civil Rights in America 1865-1980, 2002, p.29.

⁴¹ Dinesh D'Souza, Op. Cit, p.175.

⁴² Ibid., p.177.

1950, blacks made considerable progress in schooling, income, and life expectancy.

Thanks to the landmark legislative and Court decisions of the civil rights era, *Brown v Board of Education*,⁴³ the Civil Rights Act of 1964,⁴⁴ the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Legislation of 1968, black Americans began to compete with whites for jobs and university admissions.

Racism is a complex problem in American society. In fact, for white people, America doesn't have a race problem, but a black problem. The early 1960's witnessed a high degree of confidence that the race problem would be solved. Moreover, most whites believed oppression ended when many laws were passed with the civil rights movement, by establishing equality of opportunity in schools, housing and the workplace.

Black people have made considerable progress after the civil rights movement; they finally gained their rights for political and social equality with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Legislation of 1968.⁴⁵ Black Americans had the right to buy homes, to go to schools and to vote on the same basis as whites.

The civil rights movement was a series of protests aimed at recognizing the basic rights for blacks; a great number of civil rights activists emerged giving birth to many organizations among them the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People),⁴⁶ the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference),⁴⁷ the

⁴³ *Board v Board of Education*: a law case in 1954 which was held after a school for white children in Topeka, Kansas, refused to accept a black girl called Linda Brown. The case led to a decision of the US Supreme Court that made segregation in public schools illegal. The decision ended the idea of separate but equal schools for whites and African Americans, and encouraged the civil rights movement. From: Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, 2005, p.59.

⁴⁴ Civil Rights Act of 1964 : It was signed into law by President Lyndon B Johnson, and entitled all persons to equal access to restaurants, bars, theaters, hotels, gasoline stations, and similar establishments serving the public. The legislation also barred discrimination in the hiring practices, and wages of medium size and large firms. From E. Patterson, *We the People*, 2008, p.175.

⁴⁵ Dinesh D'Souza, *OP. Cit.*, p.166.

⁴⁶ NAACP : an American organization that supports the rights of African Americans. It was formed in 1909 and played an important part in the civil rights movement. One of its greatest achievements was to bring a legal case which led to the US Supreme Court's decision in 1954 against desegregation in schools. Its main office is in Baltimore, Maryland, and it had more than

SNCC ((Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee),⁴⁸ and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality).⁴⁹

White people in America are convinced that the Civil Rights movement achieved its antiracist objectives and recognized the basic rights of blacks; however, blacks still believe that racism remains the central problem as it is deeply rooted in the American psyche and in American institutions.⁵⁰

3- The problem of Racism in the US after the Civil Rights Movement

Racism has dramatically declined in America; yet, we cannot assert that it is no longer a serious problem nowadays. Black people have made considerable progress since the 1960's; however, they are still regarded as inferior citizens, or second-class ones.⁵¹

As laws concerning racism and discrimination became instituted and asserted, African Americans continue to believe that America is a racist society where racism is in constant rise within the American nation. Many acts of racial discrimination are still apparent in American streets; for example, taxi drivers refuse to pick up African Americans by fear of being robbed, assaulted or murdered. This does not mean that all taxi drivers are racist, but this job remains the riskiest within American society.⁵²

Nearly fifty years after the eloquent speech made by Martin Luther King on racist violence, nobody would have thought that an African American man would be elected as the President of the US.

500,000 members in 2003. From: Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, 2005, p.316.

⁴⁷ SCLC: A group committed to work for nonviolent change. Dr King was its president, and Ella Baker its executive director. It also worked to register voters, and organize sit-ins. From: Sheila Hardy, Extraordinary People of the Civil Rights Movement, 2007, p.45.

⁴⁸ SNCC: An independent organization, emphasizing on voter registration and « Freedom Schools ». From: Ibid, p.46.

⁴⁹ CORE: a US organization that supports equal rights for African Americans by peaceful actions. It was established in 1942 in Chicago by James Farmer. It became well known in the 1960's for encouraging African Americans to vote and for leading freedom riders into the southern states. From: Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, 2005, p.99.

⁵⁰ Dinesh D'Souza, Op. Cit., p.245.

⁵¹ Marie Christine Pauwels, Civilisation des Etats Unis, 2013, p.160.

⁵² Dinesh D'Souza, OP. Cit, p.245.

Consequently, King's dream became a reality realizing the dream of millions of African Americans who were still suffering from injustice.⁵³

However, inequalities and prejudice still persist in American society, threatening civil rights gains made by the black population. Almost 58 percent live in New York; although the black community has made great advances, it is largely hit by unemployment and violent crimes.⁵⁴ The poverty rate among black people reaches 24 percent; this constitutes the double of all other Americans.

It is said that between 1965 and 2014, black families earned 59 percent of what white households earned. Moreover, the salary for African Americans doing the same job was often less than a white person doing the same job by about 20 percent.⁵⁵

The African American community makes up about 12 percent of the national population (about 40 million). Yet, they represent about 42 percent of people who are arrested for weapons possession, 43 percent of those arrested for rape, 55 percent of those jailed for committing a murder, and 61 percent of those arrested for robbery.⁵⁶

We cannot measure racism in the US; therefore, we cannot answer the question of how much racism does exist in the US. However, we can show and prove that racial discrimination still exists in areas of job hiring, mortgage lending, and criminal justice. For example, in mortgage lending, a survey made in 1993 showed that the Boston Federal Reserve Study had revealed that 38 percent of blacks and 27 percent of Hispanics were refused loans, as compared with only 17 percent of whites.⁵⁷

The black population in the US is more likely to be imprisoned than the white one, according to surveys made all along the twentieth century. Indeed, young African Americans are more convicted of murders than whites. The events that took place in *Ferguson in 2014, have proved that racial injustice is still a defining factor of American life.⁵⁸

Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on August 9th, 2014, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St Louis. The shooting had caused

⁵³ Jean Eric Branaa, *American Civilization*, 2015, p.160.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Dinesh D'Souza, *OP. Cit.*, p.260.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.276.

⁵⁸ Jean Eric Branaa, *OP. Cit.*, p.161.

protests especially after the jury had decided not to indict the police officer.¹

In a country where American people hated slavery, racial segregation and discrimination in all its forms, would an African American President be the right person to eradicate all these social ills threatening the stability of its citizens and to defend black people's rights and other minorities?

4- The Obama presidency and its impact on the problem of Racism in the US

Barack Obama was a politician who was considered as a civil rights activist in the African American tradition, extending back to the time of abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, to early 20th century civil rights leaders, and to 20th century organizations like the NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC. As a consequence, Barack Obama symbolized the long struggle for equality in American society.²

With the election of Obama, the US entered a new era of post-racialism in America. It cannot be denied that a feeling of post-racial fulfillment was spreading throughout the US during the 2008 presidential election. When Americans cast their votes for an African American man, this has simply proved that the US had moved beyond race, and had overcome its racist past of discrimination against black people.

Obama's message of hope meant to provide a less racial future. However, many social problems like poverty, segregation, and incarceration rates continued to plague American society. Obama had won the Democratic primaries because he had opposed the Iraq war; in addition, he proved to be a great campaigner, and an eloquent speaker.

Conservatives knew that the US had moved beyond race divisions. Indeed, racial slavery was abolished, and Jim Crow segregation was ended by the civil rights movement. Old measures such as busing³ or Affirmative Action⁴ are no longer necessary. They saw in

¹ Ibid., p.330.

² Charles P. Henry, *The Obama Phenomenon*, 2011, p.52.

³ Busing: the system of transporting children in buses from their homes to schools in a different area, in order to achieve a greater mixture of races in schools. Usually African American children travel to schools in white areas. This began in 1954 and was approved by the US Supreme Court in 1971. From: *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, 2005, p. 64.

⁴ Affirmative Action: a US government policy requiring that minority groups and women should be favoured when people are being chosen for jobs or entry to college. Americans are divided about this practice and often say it is reverse

in the election of Obama an opportunity to confirm that the US is now becoming a post-racial nation. Race for them has become politically irrelevant. President Obama did not talk much about race and minimized the impact of race on his election.

When President Obama had taken office, America was not so much divided by race as it was divided about race.¹ We can give the example of George Zimmerman, a white policeman, who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager from Florida. The policeman was acquitted of all charges.

The killing of Trayvon Martin had had a profound impact on President Barack Obama. He had declared:

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me thirty five years ago. And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here. I think it's important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.²

Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn't mean we're in a post-racial society. It doesn't mean that racism is eliminated... And so we have to be vigilant and we have to work on these issues, and that along this long, difficult journey, we're becoming a more perfect union, not a perfect union, but a more perfect union.³

Obama's election had not produced a more perfect union. In fact, America's first African American president faced the most important problem in the US: racism. During his campaign, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiments had created a race between "real" Americans and terrorists.⁴

discrimination. It has existed since the 1960's but the Supreme Court has since decided against strict quotas and forcing affirmative action on private businesses. Ibid, p.5.

¹ Jonathan Chait, Audacity, 2017, p.6.

² E.J. Dionne, Joy Ann Reid, We are the Change we Seek, 2017, p.235.

³ Ibid., p.241.

⁴ Retrieved at : <https://journals.openedition.org>rrca>, by Marya Mendible, The Politics of Race and Class in the Age of Obama, 27/09/2010.

Obama's election came at a time of apprehensions concerning race, immigration, and America's status in a post 9/11 world. Obama's presidency had been hijacked by race: his election provoked a racist backlash. In 2009, two out of three Americans or 61 percent of people surveyed said that Blacks have now achieved racial equality; 21.5 percent believe that they will soon achieve it.¹

One question comes to our minds: What was Obama's dream for America? Was it the American dream? Or was it Martin Luther King's dream? Obama's presidency represented a generational upheaval that completed the protests occurring in the 1960's.² Obama's proponents, as well as his opponents, spent years believing he had failed; however, they were convinced that he had brought about a revolution or a post-racial society.

Barack Obama's election and his presidency changed the significance of American democracy, and his victory signaled the emergence of a post-racial America, fulfilling the civil rights movement greatest ambitions. A Black President would lead a coalition of African American, Latino, Asian Americans and Native American voters to determine a new vision of American citizenship.

One of the greatest achievements of the civil rights movement was the struggle for racial justice. The problem of racial discrimination has been diminished but by no means eradicated from American society. Obama's election was a huge progress; however, President Obama avoided confronting the American race question, making it a central paradox within the political culture of the US. Therefore, we can say that President Obama had contributed to improve race relations in the US, not from the decisions or policies he followed, but by the simple fact that he was a black man, becoming the first African American President of the US.³

In the 2008 Presidential election, a large number of white voters had supported Barack Obama. He did not win a majority of the white electorate, but a large number indeed. This is what made this election so particular. It was a proof of the diminution of white racial prejudice that led a black president to the White House.⁴

During Obama's presidency, a lot of black people emerged in local and national politics for decades. As the number of black

¹ Ibid.

² Jonathan Chait, *OP. Cit.*, p.237.

³ Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line, Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*, 2011, p. 277.

⁴ Ibid., p.250.

immigrants in the US was in steady increase, a great number of black officials have been elected in both local and national levels, among them Caribbean, Haitian, and Jamaican candidates winning electoral offices across the nation.¹

Barack Obama entered the White House as a living symbol, breaking a color line that stood for 220 years. When he took office, racism represented an unprecedented issue in American history. He had the duty to rule the world's most powerful nation; but eight years later, Obama's racial legacy remains an unsolved matter.

Obama's presidency didn't provide racial harmony within American society. Rather, blacks and whites believe race relations have deteriorated. Tensions over shootings of African Americans caused protests in several cities. Obama has been too slow to react, and should have been more firm in denouncing police killings of African Americans in Ferguson, Missouri, and elsewhere.

To conclude, we might say that Obama was considered as the hero of the African American community. His election was the realization of the dream of generations of African Americans. It took America more than two centuries to elect a black President: and it will take many years to come to end with the racial problem in the US. His presidency was the culmination of the civil rights movement initiated in the 1960's. He presented a new vision of America; moreover, history will reveal how Obama will leave a big impact on American democracy.

Conclusion

Black people's fight over two centuries, has helped develop the principles of equality of opportunity in the US, not just for themselves, but for other groups. Black success and social acceptance are directly related to the rebuilding of the African American community. Their struggle would finally eradicate racism by ending this social dilemma within American society.

It is clear that neither the civil rights movement nor the Black power movements of the twentieth century had succeeded in achieving racial equality in the US. From the Civil War until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, Americans have had many opportunities to bring about racial equality; however, the problem of racism remains deeply rooted in American society.

The black community will endure and will continue to claim social justice. President Obama has tried to transcend race; however,

¹ Christina M. Greer, *Black Ethnics*, 2013, p.141.

racism persists in America because this country was constituted by a system of racial hierarchy since its foundation. African Americans have a duty to challenge US society and live up to its highest ideals, that's why they continue to struggle for racial equality.

Obama's election was a historical moment with a great meaning, but was not a proof of automatic or systemic change. No election can eradicate racism, but it is easier today to see that racism, once a barrier is now like a hurdle. His election was a triumph because it united all Americans over one goal: the promise of equality.

Half a century after the civil rights movement, black Americans' objective is to achieve full acceptance in every aspect of life. History will decide about the importance, success, or failure of the Obama presidency; on the whole, his election did not and cannot resolve the problem of racism in the US.

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