



# One Year Later and the Myth of a Post-Racial Society

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# ONE YEAR LATER AND THE MYTH OF A POST-RACIAL SOCIETY

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Many commentators, both conservative and liberal, have celebrated the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, claiming the election signified America has truly become a “post-racial” society. It is not just Lou Dobbs who argues the United States in the “21st century [is a] post-partisan, post-racial society.” This view is consistent with beliefs the majority of White Americans have held for well over a decade: that African Americans have achieved, or will soon achieve, racial equality in the United States despite substantial evidence to the contrary. Indeed, this view is consistent with opinions found in the *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and elsewhere—attitudes that even the tragic events following the Katrina disaster had nothing to do with race.

A year after the election, it is more difficult to make claims the country has entered a new, post-racial era. The U.S. Secret Service has stated the seriousness of the threats to the president, many racist in nature, has escalated and is very worrisome. Often using the vilest of anti-Black stereotypes, the type of racist attacks on the president highlighted during the campaign continue unabated a year after Obama’s election. Fox News has aired discussions of a “coming civil war” during which the guests make it clear the war would in part be a race war. We have “tea partiers” openly wearing guns to rallies against the president. The realization that racial disadvantage, particularly for minority poor people, is not likely to be remedied during this presidential term is slowly tempering the euphoria that exploded in some quarters with the election of Barack Obama.

This issue of *The Du Bois Review* contributes to the substantial social science evidence that the racial order—while evolving—continues to shape American life, society, and politics. If anything, this particular incarnation of the racial order reveals poor Blacks are even more disadvantaged than in the recent past. This issue begins with my co-editor’s review of two books tackling the central question of crime,

punishment, and race in the United States. The mass incarceration of African Americans at extraordinary levels is one of the most horrifying examples of the continuation of an oppressive racial order in the United States. Unfortunately, Lawrence Bobo reports Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day* is an unworthy contribution to the field: unworthy because the author has a past history of making important contributions to the study of urban poverty, and this book not only sheds no light, but may actually do more harm than good. Fortunately, Bobo reports that Todd Clear's *Imprisoning Communities* is a strong contribution to the field, arguing the war on drugs is a war on young Blacks with terrifying consequences not just for Black communities, but also for all Americans. Clear, Bobo states, does propose a way out of the destructive morass that America's current approach to race, crime, and punishment lands us in. As is often the case, the question is whether Americans can overcome their racial animus in order to take the *rational* steps necessary to benefit the entire nation.

Claude Steele also argues in his interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. that the crippling academic achievement gap between Black and White Americans can be closed if the nation has the sufficient will to end the decades-old practice of imposing negative stereotypes on Black children. Steele goes into detail about how his celebrated and well-established theory of stereotype-threat works in real life. This rollicking interview not only delves deep into the research of one of the most distinguished scholars of our time, but also covers a wide range of subjects centered on the intersection of race, scholarship, politics, and American society.

Renowned social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew argues that it took "a perfect storm" to lead to the overwhelming margins of victory President Obama garnered a year ago. With steely precision, Pettigrew meticulously demonstrates how the president's election did *not* signify the advent of a post-racial society. Pettigrew reports a substantial number of racial "bigots" ended up voting for then candidate Obama. Even still, there was substantial resistance to Obama from Southern Whites as well as elderly Whites. Indeed, a key aspect of Obama's victory was the changed composition of the electorate. Not only were White Americans represented in the electorate at the lowest percentage ever, but there was a massive mobilization of the Black community, and the president won by large margins in every non-White group. His victory was also facilitated by substantial support from young Americans. The president's victory suggests the electoral calculus may be changing for national elections, but not that the nation has entered a post-racial era.

Marin Kilson's critique of Robert Putnam's recent work on diversity and civic engagement reflects another aspect of the continued racialization of American society. Kilson pointedly attacks the theoretical and historical foundations for Putnam's claim that increased racial diversity in American communities leads to a worrying decline in American civic engagement; on the contrary, Kilson makes a convincing argument, much like Steele and Clear, that American institutions are perfectly capable of addressing the race-based deformities in American democracy. Strong social movements based on a vibrant and robust Black civil society was and is necessary to force the nation's civic and state institutions to vigorously—and, as Kilson argues, often successfully—attack racism.

In a sobering analysis, Christopher Bonastia demonstrates how White resistance to desegregation in Prince Edward, Virginia between 1959–1964 not only permanently damaged the educational attainment of a generation of Black children, but also was one source of a language that eventually became a model for conservative neoliberal rhetoric—a rhetoric that continues to provide a "justification" for continued racial domination and disadvantage in the name of "efficiency." A strong com-

plement to Bonastia's article on how racial domination operated in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer's effort to provide a theoretical grounding for understanding racial domination. They convincingly argue for a synthesis of structuralist and constructivist accounts of racial domination. Their article concludes on a pointed normative note when they argue, "Like a recessive tumor, twenty-first century racism has disguised itself, calling itself by other names and cloaking itself behind seemingly 'race-neutral' laws, policies, practices, and language. As students of society—and as citizens of a world that grows more racially diverse every year—we must work to render apparent this pervasive, corrosive, and dehumanizing form of domination that infects the health of our society."

George Wilson and Krysia Mossakowski document some of the mechanisms which contribute to a continuing racialized workplace. Even Black and Latino managers face marginalization within the workplace, leading to greater levels of job insecurity than their White counterparts. For some Black managers, a fatalist disposition also contributes to feelings of job insecurity.

Moon-Kie Jung provides a critique of existing theories of immigration and assimilation that purport to explain the current generation's experience of immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Jung not only makes important critiques highlighting how the lack of understanding of the evolving racial order undermines the arguments and analysis in most contemporary studies of immigration from these regions, but also demonstrates the need to theorize the political nature of both racial domination and movements of oppositional resistance through the lens of a "politics of national belonging." Jung clearly shows how the implicit assumption of many contemporary researchers to act *as if* this country has entered a post-racial era renders much of that research fatally flawed.

Nicholas M. Young, Binod Sundararajan, Mary Liz, and Paul Stewart conclude our issue with a network analysis demonstrating how militant anti-slavery leader Harriet Tubman used existing contacts and forged new ones to build the Underground Railroad. Their novel approach highlights the claim that network analysis can be fruitfully applied to the study of historical events. Their article also demonstrates the historical legacy of a deep structural racism that still shapes civil society and the politics of this nation.

Indeed, much work must be done in all domains before one can honestly claim we live in a post-racial society.

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