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Otherring Obama: How Whiteness is Used to Undermine Authority

by David S. Owen

INTRODUCTION

The election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency in 2008 was undoubtedly a truly historic moment. The election of a self-identified black man to the highest political office in the nation was symbolic of a degree of progress the U.S. has made towards racial justice. However, there has been considerable disagreement in public discourse about how substantive a change this Obama presidency reflects. Some have claimed (and did so immediately after the election) that the Obama presidency signals the end of racial oppression in the U.S. Others have argued that while the Obama presidency is significant, it does not indicate that the system of racial oppression has dissolved over night. This debate was sharpened in the summer of 2009 by the public discourse concerning health care reform. To many, that discourse often devolved from rational policy critique to racist attacks of Obama. And, in fact, the topic of racism broke into explicit discourse during this period, culminating with former President Jimmy Carter accusing many of the president's critics with racism. Much of the debate around whether or not the critics of health care reform were behaving in a racist manner turned on the question of intent: Did they, or did they not, intend to send a racist message? I will argue in this paper that this question misses the point. The system of racial oppression, which was not dissolved on election night in 2008, is maintained and reproduced by behavior that echoes and carries forward racist imagery, representations, and symbols of the past in the guise of structures of whiteness. While there were clearly explicitly racist actions taken by the health care reform critics, much of the harm and effectiveness of the racially oppressive behavior is found in what ostensibly looks like non-racial behavior. Such behavior appears to be non-racial because it presumes the norm of whiteness. These debates provide a constructive case study for understanding how people of color can be marginalized and devalued - even when they have achieved very high accomplishments.



THE FRAME OF RACIAL OPPRESSION

In many ways, Congressman Joe Wilson's shouting of "You lie!" to Obama during his address to a joint session of Congress on health care reform in September 2009 is emblematic of the conservative response to the Obama presidency. While many U.S. citizens have rightfully celebrated Obama's victory as an historical moment in the uneven history of racial justice, there are those on the right who have actively resisted his presidency, as if they are in denial. During the summer of 2009, the debate over health care reform - one of the central promises Obama campaigned on--took a new turn as legislators returned to their home districts and held so-called town hall meetings to discuss with their constituents the various proposals regarding health care. Many of these meetings were belligerently dominated by members of conservative groups, who framed the issues and provided talking points to those on the right who attended the meetings.¹ Although intended to appear to be a grassroots protest, this was a highly coordinated strategy funded by corporate interests. These town hall meetings became increasingly raucous, with participants shouting down their legislators and often expressing vehement opposition to Obama's health care reform proposals. The culmination of this first wave of corporate backed protests was Joe Wilson's yelling "You lie!" to the President during an address to congress.

Such an action in another national or political context might seem mundane and ordinary, but in the U.S. this was a serious breach of accepted decorum. Before this, the accepted means of expressing disapproval during a presidential address was to simply sit quietly, neither clapping, booing, or shouting remarks of any kind. Indeed, Wilson was reprimanded by the House of Representatives a week later.

The racial dimension of this political debate over health care reform was unmasked a week later when former President Jimmy Carter said that Wilson's action was based on racism—an observation made by many non-mainstream commentators and blog authors before this, but by none who commanded such authority. However one might evaluate Carter's claim, his remarks had the significance of making race explicit in this debate. The reaction, of course, was to immediately and vociferously assert innocence and to deny any racial or racist intent whatsoever. Those on the right who were being charged with racism defended their behavior on the grounds that they were not motivated by racism and certainly did not intend their actions as racist actions. Rather, they said, they were simply voicing their disapproval with the President's policies. Many on the left, however, were unconvinced and saw a clear pattern of racial animosity underlying the critiques of the President.

¹ For example, a group called Conservatives for Patients' Rights, which took credit for disrupting these town hall meetings.



The debate between, on the one hand, those who argued that the town hall disruptions and Wilson's outburst are motivated by an underlying racist dismissal of Obama, and on the other hand, those who argued that they were not motivated by racism and were strictly policy based objections, raged for only a month or two, with neither side I think clearly winning the public perception. In many ways this is a familiar debate about whether a racial remark or racially discriminatory action is *really* racist (Blum 2002). However, this debate about the *realness* of the racism in such cases is misguided because it places too much emphasis on the conscious or unconscious motivations of the agents. The assumption that is made when the discourse proceeds along this predictable path is that the social, cultural, political, and economic reality of racism is predicated upon the intentions of independent moral agents. In other words, that the best account of the racial reality is grounded in an individualist analysis of the social order. Furthermore, this assumption is typically unstated and presumed to be obviously true. However, as many have argued before, the proper analysis of racism is a systemic one, that is, one that explains racial harms in terms of systemic oppression. (Crenshaw et al. 1995) This is especially true in the post-civil rights era in the U.S. (after 1965 or so), where overt expressions of racial hostility and animosity are publicly discouraged and generally deemed unacceptable (at least in public, or in racially mixed company).

So how do we understand and evaluate the cases of the town hall protestors and Joe Wilson? The central question is *not* whether the speech or behavior was motivated by racism, but instead is this: does the speech or behavior maintain and reproduce the system of racial oppression? The reason for this is that the system of racial oppression itself causes a greater degree of harm than do individual acts of racial animosity. While individual acts of racial prejudice and hatred are deeply harmful, they do not produce the systematic effects that result from oppression. Marilyn Frye describes oppression as follows:

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. (4)

She goes on to analyze oppression through the metaphor of a birdcage. Examined individually, each wire of the cage does not appear to be a significant impediment to action, yet the thin wires work together in a systematic way to limit the movements of the bird. Essentially, the harm of oppression is that it unjustly benefits one group and disadvantages another group. Racial oppression functions via social structures that organize intersubjective interactions, cultural representations that shape our conceptual frameworks, economic structures that distribute opportunities and wealth, and political structures that determine access to power. The structures, or patterns, that are the media of the system of racial oppression are constituted and



maintained in social practices and behaviors of individuals. As Giddens has argued, structures should be understood historically, as always already undergoing a dynamic process of constitution (1984). On this view, structures and social practices (patterned individual acts) are mutually constitutive. The conceptual frameworks, assumptions, laws, policies, institutional rules, etc. that make up racialized social structures are constituted and maintained by social practices, and conversely, social practices are determined by the rules embedded in social structures. Thus, social structures and social practices are mutually constitutive. When analyzing race, this account of historically dynamic nature of the social system explains how structures of racial oppression persist over time. Racial assumptions, conceptual frameworks, practices, and so on of the past have shaped the social and cultural milieu in which we live and act today.

WHITENESS AND ANTI-OBAMA PROTESTS

I have argued that to properly assess the racial impact of the anti-Obama protests of the summer of 2009 we must examine not their racial motivation or intent, but the degree to which they contribute to the reproduction of the system of racial oppression. But how do such actions reproduce racial oppression? I argue that in the post-civil rights era in the U.S. the system of racial oppression functions primarily through the norming and privileging of the interests, needs, and values of whites. This norming and privileging of the interests, needs, and values of whites is what I define as whiteness. (Owen 2007)

The original meaning of whiteness had to do with picking out a particular racial identity, with the purpose of distinguishing one racialized group, whites, from another, blacks. (Allen 1994) From its inception, whiteness has been marked as the more valued racial identity relative to any other racial identity. Thus, it has always represented the dominant conception of what counts as important, worthy, and right. In the post-civil rights era, overt expressions of racial discrimination have receded from public view, and the general belief is that racial discrimination is no longer justifiable.² This receding from view of overt racially discriminatory behavior is often misinterpreted as a significant reduction in racial oppression. A brief look at both anecdotal and empirical data, however, shows that despite a certain degree of formal progress being made, the constraining forces of racial oppression remain significant. (See, e.g., Feagin, et al., 1994, and Brown, et al., 2003) A growing consensus has developed in recent decades that place whiteness at the center of the contemporary functioning of racial oppression. Whiteness, not merely as an identity, but also as a set of normative, legal, and institutional rules for behavior and practice, and also as a set of cultural representations that privilege images and metaphors of whiteness. The

² See Kinder and Sanders 1996. However, as Kinder and Sanders show, there is a substantial gap between what people profess to believe and their willingness to act on those beliefs.



upshot is that whiteness is that set of social, cultural, economic, political structures that situate the interests, needs, and values of whites in the privileged social location. Whiteness operates behind the backs of whites in such a way that most whites see neither its existence nor how it functions—it is largely invisible. Yet whiteness systematically shapes all aspects of the social world, providing whites with unrecognized (to them) advantages and benefits, and persons of color with recognized (to them) disadvantages and burdens.

How can this account of whiteness inform us about the summer 2009 protests against Obama? As I have said, I think the case of Representative Joe Wilson shouting “You lie!” during a presidential address to Congress is exemplary of these protests, so I will focus on this one action as representative of a shared set of behaviors exhibited during that summer. Wilson’s outburst was unprecedented in recent history. Etiquette and decorum dictates that the President is treated with the utmost respect during addresses to Congress. Typically, the most expressive form of disapproval with what the President says during such addresses is to sit quietly. But Wilson’s outburst violated these norms, and it was defended—both by him and others—as justified on the grounds that he was speaking the truth. What is important here is not whether Wilson had truth on his side, but the degree to which his action “othered” Obama.

In shouting during Obama’s address, Wilson enacted a form of disrespect that was not deracialized. Wilson’s action symbolically situated Obama as outside of what normal decorum demanded; the message being that Obama does not deserve such respect. To be sure, Wilson would have denied such an interpretation, and I doubt that he had this intention in mind. Nonetheless, the racialized import of his action was to reproduce the historically embedded norm in the U.S. that blacks are not deserving of white respect. It does not matter whether he or anyone else was aware of this meaning of his action—its appearance as quite normal for a white man to treat a black man with disrespect is what generates the power of whiteness in this case. Whiteness functions as the underlying structure that guides and shapes social interaction. When it is historically expected that blacks do not deserve the respect of whites, actions consistent with this are taken to be not only normal, but also as fully justified.

Moreover, the functional power of Wilson’s action is also located in the apparently racially neutral mode of its expression. There is nothing overt in Wilson’s exclamation that implies any racial intention whatsoever. His exclamation appears to be patently color-blind. Yet, its color-blindness is only superficial. Wilson’s action was always already shaped by race because race cannot be removed from social interactions by a mere act of individual will. Simply denying its overt expression fails to demonstrate that the expression has no racial import. The racial import in this case is found in the reproduction of the norms of whiteness—and doing so in a way that appears to have nothing to do about race.

One political group called “I Want Your Money” produced a TV advertisement responding to the charges made by President Carter and many others that the vehement objections to Obama’s policy proposals were racist. In this ad, a variety of individuals appear on screen to declare “I guess I’m a racist,” and it is explained that if



opposing Obama's health care proposal was racist, then many Americans are racist. (I Guess I'm a Racist 2009) Of course, this is intended as a satirical critique of the charges of racism leveled against Wilson and others, yet it is appallingly cavalier in the willingness (ironically) of the ad's actors to accept the label of racist. Being a racist is not like being tall, or like being redheaded. It is a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that profoundly harm others. Only those who have been fully co-opted by whiteness can comfortably make such an ironic claim. The subtext of the advertisement must be read as follows: My statement that I am a racist is absurd (and hence clearly false) since I am beyond any doubt NOT a racist—just look at me! Here we see whiteness operating once more to underwrite the presumed innocence of the people in the advertisement (most of whom are white, but a few of whom are black). The advertisement symbolically communicates the assertion that all of the people represented in the ad are "normal" and not marginal or harboring any racial resentment. This very assertion, which is communicated subtextually, presupposes whiteness, for only if those making the assertion are secure in their central and dominant social location can they play ironically with the claim of being racist. It is yet another way to dismiss as particular, interested, and thus not of serious concern, any claims that racism is operative in the social world.

The othering of Obama through whiteness is also present in recent attacks on him as an academic. (Stripling 2010) In this critique, Obama is belittled as being too academic and (hence) an inadequate leader and man of action. Charles J. Ogletree argues that "the "professor" label [is] a thinly veiled attack on Obama's race...[it is] dangerously close to labeling him "uppity". (Stripling 2010) The effect is to situate Obama as an Other, as someone who does not have legitimate claim to presidential authority. It is another way of saying—here is someone who has usurped power, he doesn't really have a right to that power because he is incompetent to exercise it. This subtextual message echoes explicit debates that date back to the founding of the United States over the capacity for self-determination of African Americans. It has long been argued by some that blacks simply do not possess the capacity to be effectively self-governing. (Graber 2006, 46-58) The professor critique when aimed at Obama is yet another way of positioning him outside of the white center, which is implicitly assumed to be capable of self-governance. There is an irony here, however, in the association of academic with someone unfit for political leadership in the fact that the vast majority of college faculty in the United States have historically been, and continue to be, white. But this doesn't undermine the association, for the charge of being academic is clearly intended to convey the incapacity to act in the "real" world. It is yet another instance of the invisibility of whiteness that the irony of the charge against Obama of being an academic is simply not recognized.



CONCLUSION

The reaction on the right to the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency has many facets, but the one that is most prominent and dangerous is the often subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways that the right's public critique others Obama. This othering occurs via the medium of a racialized discourse of whiteness, where that discourse itself often appears to be deracialized. Obama is effectively othered by situating him in a non-racialized way outside of whiteness. When decorum is violated and he is shouted down during a formal presidential address to Congress, the symbolic import of this action implies that he is not worthy of the respect due the president. In other words, it suggests that Obama does not hold presidential authority *legitimately*. This is made even more explicit in the radically misinformed "birther" movement, which insists that Obama is in fact not a citizen of the United States and thus not legally eligible to be president. But "birthers" and other overtly racist attacks on Obama are easily marginalized as irrational. The implicit locating of Obama on the margins (if not entirely outside of) whiteness by ostensibly non-racial actions, I argue, has a much more profound effect. For the implicit presupposing of whiteness in this way reproduces that whiteness and the structures of racial oppression it constitutes. Whiteness functions almost always in the background, as an unseen instrument for the privileging of whites and the marginalization and exploitation of people of color.

While many herald the election of Obama to the U.S. presidency to mark the start of a post-racial era, the othering of Obama with the presumptions of whiteness shows that we are not entering a post-racial era, but an era in which racial oppression functions in ever more subtle and invidious ways.

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