

Workforce Diversity Network

Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Postethnic Future

By David A. Hollinger

The focus of media depictions of Barack Obama as a "post-racial," "post-black" or "postethnic" candidate is usually limited to two aspects of his presidential campaign. First is his self-presentation with minimal references to his color. Unlike Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton, whose presidential candidacies were more directed at the



significance of the color line, Obama has never offered himself as the candidate of a particular ethnoracial group. Second, the press calls attention to the willingness of millions of white voters to respond to Obama. Some of his greatest margins in primary elections and caucuses were in heavily white states like Idaho and Montana. He even won huge numbers of white voters in some states of the old Confederacy, notably in the primary elections he won in Virginia and North Carolina.

But there is much more to it.

The Obama candidacy has become a far-reaching challenge to identity politics, and that challenge will only deepen if Obama is elected President. At the center of that

challenge is a gradually spreading uncertainty about the significance of color lines, especially the significance of blackness itself. Blackness is the pivotal concept in the intellectual and administrative apparatus used in the United States for dealing with ethnoracial distinctions. Doubts about its basic meaning, boundaries, and social role affected ideas about whiteness, and all other color-coded identities. These uncertainties make it easier to contemplate a possible future in which the ethnoracial categories central to identity politics would be more matters of choice than ascription; in which mobilization by ethnoracial groups would be more a strategic option than a presumed destiny attendant upon mere membership in a group; and in which economic inequalities would be confronted head-on, instead of through the medium of ethnorace.

To denote that possible future, I prefer the term "postethnic" to "post-racial." The former recognizes that at issue is all identity by natal community, including as experienced by, or ascribed to, population groups to whom the problematic term "race" is rarely applied. The reconceptualization affects the status of Latinos and other immigrant-based populations not generally counted as "races." A postethnic social order would encourage individuals to devote as much — or as little — of their energies as they wished to their community of descent, and would discourage public and private agencies from implicitly telling every citizen that the most important thing about them was their descent community. Hence to be postethnic is not to be anti-ethnic, nor even color-blind, but to reject the idea that descent is destiny.

Obama's mixed ancestry generates some of the new uncertainty about blackness. The white part of his genetic inheritance is not socially hidden, as it often is for "light-skinned blacks" who descend from black women sexually exploited by white

slaveholders and other white males. Rather, Obama's white ancestry is right there in the open, visible in the form of the white woman who, as a single mother, raised Obama after his black father left the family to return to his native Kenya. Press accounts of Obama's life, as well as Obama's own autobiographical writings, render Obama's whiteness hard to miss. No public figure, not even Tiger Woods, has done as much as Obama to make Americans of every education level and social surroundings aware of color-mixing in general and that most of the "black" population of the United States, in particular, is partially white. The "one-drop rule" which denies that color is a two-way street is far from dead, but not since the era of its legal and social consolidation in the early 1920s has the ordinance of this rule been so subject to challenge.

But even more important to the new instability in the meaning of blackness in American life is the fact that Obama's black ancestry is *immigrant* rather than US-born. The knowledge that Obama's black father came to the United States from Kenya may have done more than anything else to make Americans in general aware of the distinction within the black population of the United States between those who, like Obama's wife, Michelle, are the descendants of men and women who were enslaved in the United States and lived through the Jim Crow era, and those like Obama himself who are the descendants of immigrants from Africa or from the Caribbean.

To understand why the immigrant-originating blackness of Obama is so significant, we need to view it in relation to other happenings. That well over one-third of African-Americans doubt that the black population of the United States is any longer a single people was revealed in a November 2007 report by the Pew Research Center. Although the gap in values between middle-class and poorer African-Americans was the

focus of the study, black immigrants and their children are especially likely to be identified as middle class. A study by the Princeton University sociologist Douglas S. Massey and his collaborators shows that black immigrants and their children are overrepresented by several hundred percent among the black freshmen at Ivy League colleges. Such statistics are common at many other institutions, including Queens College of the City University of New York, a public university whose campus is located near a large population of African-Americans. Many studies tell us that black immigrants and their children do better educationally and economically than do the descendants of American slavery and Jim Crow.

These studies demonstrate that educational and employment opportunities can be available to black people, even in the context of continued white racism. *This reality calls into question the credibility of blackness as our default standard for identifying the worst cases of inequality, and for serving as the focal point of remedies.* Slavery ended in the British Caribbean three decades before it ended in the United States, and black Caribbeans experienced a better postemancipation educational system than did most black people in the United States. Perhaps the force keeping so many black Americans down is operative not so much in the eye of the empowered white beholder as in that legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, in the form of diminished socioeconomic capacity to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities?

To proceed down the theoretical and policy roads offered by this idea is not to doubt the power of white racism, but to locate more precisely its harmful effects. Our colleges and universities and our remedies for employment discrimination have generally assumed that white prejudice — a legacy, indeed, of slavery and Jim Crow — is the

problem. That black people face prejudice today is beyond doubt, and numerous studies show that darker-skinned black people are more likely to be mistreated than those with lighter skin. But skin color does not tell the whole story. If it did, the immigrant non-immigrant distinction within the black population would not have shown itself to have such striking consequences.

The African-American descendants of slavery and Jim Crow are the only population group in the United States with a multicentury legacy of group-specific enslavement and institutionalized debasement, including hypo-descent racialization ("one drop of blood" makes a person black) and antimiscegenation laws (black-white marriages were against the law in most states with large black populations until 1967), carried out under constitutional authority. Neither Obama nor any other African-American of immigrant background is a member of this population group. The success of Obama in becoming the presidential nominee of one of the nation's two major political parties is, like the success of other black immigrants in other domains, an indication that something other than color-prejudice in the eye of empowered white people is at the root of structural inequality in the United States.

To be sure, many immigrants from the Caribbean have slave ancestors, too, and slavery also has a history in Africa itself. Other groups have been mistreated in other ways, in this country and in the countries of origin of many immigrants. But the segment of the African diaspora enslaved under American constitutional authority has a unique history, awareness of which was vital in creating the political will in the 1960s and early 1970s to deploy federal power against racism, in general, and to produce the concept of affirmative action, in particular.

The differences in history and circumstances among various descent groups were largely ignored during the era when our conceptual and administrative apparatus for dealing with inequality was put in place. As John D. Skrentny, a sociologist at the University of California at San Diego, has shown — in his important 2002 book, *The Minority Rights Revolution* — conflating Asian-Americans, Latinos, and American Indians with African-Americans was a largely unconscious step driven by the unexamined assumption that those groups were "like blacks"; that is, they were functionally indistinguishable from the Americans who experienced slavery and Jim Crow. Such conflation was officially perpetuated as late as 1998, when President Clinton's Initiative on Race, *One America in the 21st Century: Forging a New Future*, systematically and willfully obscured those differences. That was done by burying statistics that disproved the all-minorities-are-alike myth, and by fashioning more than 50 recommendations to combat racism, not a single one of which spoke to the unique claims of black people.

If we are now going to recognize that even some *black* people — people like Obama — are not "like blacks," how can Mexican-Americans and Cambodian-Americans be "like blacks"? Can the latter be eligible for entitlements that were assigned largely on the basis of a "black model" that suddenly seems not to apply even to all black people? If black people with immigrant backgrounds are less appropriate targets of affirmative-action and "diversity" programs than other black people, a huge issue can no longer be avoided: What claims for special treatment can be made for nonblack populations with an immigrant base? Can the genie of the immigrant/nonimmigrant distinction be put back in the bottle, or are we to generate new, group-specific theoretical justifications for each

group? That prospect is an intimidating one, trapping us by our habit of defining disadvantaged groups ethnoracially.

Employers and educators are asked to treat the Latino population as an ethnoracial group, yet the strongest claim that many of its members have for special protections and benefits is specific to economic conditions. The history of mistreatment of Latinos by Anglos is well documented, but the instances most comparable to antiblack racism predate the migration of the bulk of today's Latino population. One need not deny the reality of prejudicial treatment of Latinos to recognize another reality as more salient: immigration policies and practices that actively encourage the formation of a low-skilled, poorly educated population of immigrant labor from Mexico and other Latin American nations. As the recent debates over immigration confirm, the United States positively demands an underclass of workers and finds it convenient to obtain most of them from nearby Mexico.

But the service institutions obliged to deal with the needs of that population are held accountable on the basis of ethnoracial rather than economic classifications. Colleges and universities are routinely asked to recruit more Latino students and faculty members, and are accused of prejudice if they do not. People who are encouraged to immigrate to this country, legally or illegally, because they are poorly educated, will work for low wages, and are likely to avoid trade unions do have a powerful claim on our resources, but it is an economic, not an ethno-racial claim. In the Latino case, more than any other, ethnorace is widely used as a proxy for dealing with economic inequality. The widely-debated issue of whether Latinos ought to be regarded as a separate "race" would

lose much of its point if the economic circumstances of this immigration-based population were confronted honestly rather than through an ethnoracial proxy.

The Asian-American section of our color-conscious system is even more anachronistic. There are historical reasons for the relatively weak class position of immigrants from Cambodia and the Philippines, but our category of Asian-American conceals the differences between those groups and those who trace their ancestry to Korea, whose adult immigrants to the United States are overwhelmingly college graduates. Institutions eager to assist the poorest immigrants sometimes do so through the hyper-ethnic step of breaking down the Asian category, enabling them to establish programs for Cambodians but not for Japanese. For example, the undergraduate-admissions forms for the University of California system will soon ask Asian and Pacific-Islander applicants to classify themselves in 23 ethnic categories.

These considerations suggest that a historical approach to understanding the dynamics of inequality in American life has much to recommend it. Obama himself pointed in this direction in his epochal speech on race, delivered in March of 2008 in the wake of publicity given to the inflammatory sermons of his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. “Many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow,” Obama declared in a crucial turn in that speech.

Before taking that turn, Obama surprised many people by alluding sympathetically to white workers who, damaged by economic turndowns, tended to blame affirmative action for their problems. Even while describing Obama’s own

childhood pain hearing his white grandmother articulate negative stereotypes about black people, Obama turned the spotlight for a few minutes on whites. Obama offered sympathy and legitimacy to a variety of group-specific complaints without fostering an oppression Olympics, and without indulging the sentimental falsehood that all pains are equal. Hence Obama at once urged Americans to look upon inequality in historical terms, and reached out across the black-white color line, confirming his image as a black politician who did not offer a black-centered message.

Does the analysis sketched here mean that blackness is no longer relevant to the dynamics of mistreatment in the United States, and is no longer an appropriate basis for solidarity? Of course not. Black people have plenty of reasons to look to each other for mutual support, and to form enclaves strategically, while refusing to have their lives confined by color. The central postethnic principle, after all, is affiliation by revocable consent. But attention to skin color alone will not carry the United States very far toward diminishing the inequalities for which the extraordinary overrepresentation of black men in American prisons is a commanding emblem. A new, more realistic way to distribute resources and energies, calculated to diminish even those inequalities that owe much to a history of prejudice and violence, is needed. Whether it can be created remains to be seen. The Obama phenomenon makes a real conversation more possible than ever before.

The United States is still a long way from the cosmopolitan society that I sketched as an ideal 13 years ago in my book *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. I have written this essay in response to many suggestions that I address the Obama phenomenon in the context of my ideas about postethnicity. Today we are closer than before to engaging inequalities that are too often understood in ethnoracial rather than economic

terms. The energies and ideas flourishing around the Obama candidacy may promote a long-overdue breakthrough. Obama's illustration in his own person of the contrast between immigrant and nonimmigrant black people, and of the reality of ethnoracial mixing, presents a compelling invitation to explore the limits of blackness especially, but also of whiteness, and of all color-coded devices for dealing with inequality in the United States. In the long run, the fact that Obama is the son of an immigrant may prove to be almost as important as the fact that he is the son of a black man and a white mother. Even if John McCain is the next president, the Obama campaign's destabilization of color lines will be hard to forget. No matter what happens next, identity politics in the United States will never be the same again.

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