The Dark Matter: Race and Racism in the 21st Century

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Abstract
Race and racism may be termed the ‘dark matter’ of the modern epoch. Race was invented along with the modern era. It was central to the liftoff of capitalism, a big bang itself. The dark matter then – the darker peoples of that time – was not complete: in fact they were not invisible as ‘matter’, as something that mattered. They were invisible as people. Empire, slavery, augmented state power, and the dialectic of enlightenment as well, can all be seen as racial dynamics in which absolutism’s grasping and violent claws tore at these ‘others’, seeking to dominate their bodies and their lands. Today the ‘dark matter’ persists in the form of disregard from above. An institutionalized forgetting of the meaning of race (‘colorblindness’) disguises this coercion and violence, these assaults, this war. Race and racism also continue from below, as matters of resistance and as frameworks for alternative identities and collectivities.

Keywords
abolition, absolutism, genocide, Obama, race, racism, resistance, slavery

Introduction
Race and racism may be termed the ‘dark matter’ of the modern epoch. ‘Dark matter’, as you know, makes up much of the universe. Invisible, it possesses mass and gravitational attraction (what gravity is, however, is still up for debate; that’s another story).

This rhetorical device begins with a crude analogy, but it suggests a lot of detailed comparisons. Race was invented along with the modern era; this was a historic swing that itself took several centuries to accomplish. It involved the lift-off of capitalism, a big bang of sorts: primitive accumulation, worldwide European seaborne empire, the Westphalian state system, conquest and settlement, the African slave trade, and the advent of enlightenment culture. The invisibility of the dark matter then – the darker peoples of that time – was not complete: in fact they were not invisible at all as ‘matter’, as something that mattered. They were invisible as people. ‘The turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blacksins’, as Marx (1967: 351) puts it.

I won’t go much into the comparisons here. Empire, slavery, augmented state power, and the dialectic of enlightenment as well, can all be seen as racial dynamics, in which absolutism’s
grasping and violent claws tore at the ‘others’, seeking to dominate their bodies and their lands. What absolutist rule did not destroy it attempted to use for its own purposes.

Systems of rule and exploitation have advanced a great deal since the bad old days of maximum depredation that characterized the ‘way of death’ (Miller, 1988) in Africa or the ‘entombment of mines of the aboriginal populations’ (Marx again). That rapacity launched the modern world. Today, race and racism retain their predatory characteristics, their disregard for most of mankind. They continue from above as an ongoing war against the weak, the ‘dark matter’ of the world, who are still more ‘matter’ than people. An institutionalized forgetting of the provenance and meaning of race (‘colorblindness’) dismisses and disguises this war, this coercion and violence.

Race and racism also work from below, as matters of resistance (racism continues as something to be resisted), and as frameworks for alternative identities and collectivities. Though there has been endless suffering, the subaltern social strata, the ‘dark matter’, has proved itself in resistance (in many ways, not all) to rule by the racial regime. The (partial) autonomy of people of color, combined with their sheer numbers and their continuing indispensability to the regime – as labor, citizens/denizens/migrants, as ‘multitude’, and even as ‘bare life’ – suggests that they can never be effectively ruled again as they were in the past. Still a significant degree of absolutism endures, much of it organized along racial lines. ‘Deathscapes’ anybody? ‘Bare life’? (Mbembe, 2003; Agamben, 1998). As Judith Butler (2007) notes: ‘We have become accustomed to recent years to the argument that modern constitutions retain a sovereign function and that a tacit totalitarianism functions as one limiting principle within constitutional democracies.’

To provide a credible theoretical account of race and racism is always a challenge. To do so in the 21st century, a period that is putatively ‘post-civil rights’, post-apartheid, and ‘colorblind’, is to run political and intellectual risks. My comments here are necessarily provisional, work-in-progress. In these few pages I cannot hope to offer anything definitive or comprehensive. Where race is concerned, we are in a notably contradictory age: the ‘post-civil rights’ period, the age of Obama, is also the age of neoliberalism, itself a political-economic phenomenon whose racial dimensions go largely unrecognized. Here I confine myself to situating the present in the longue durée of racial history that is, I believe, largely contiguous with the modern world-system’s history.

The essay proceeds through a series of brief and interconnected topical vignettes: In the next section, ‘We Come from the Abyss’, I discuss the world-historical origins of race and racism in the absolutist regimes of the past. In ‘The Abyss Is Still Here’, I point to the substantial continuities of the racial present with those regimes. That theme continues in ‘Deathscapes’ and Development’, where I also introduce the notion, drawn from Myrdal, of ‘circular and cumulative development’. In ‘The Race Concept over the Longue Durée’ I explore the vicissitudes of the race-concept itself. Next, in ‘Accumulation by Dispossession’ and ‘The World-Historical Shitpile of Race’, I apply David Harvey’s account of neoliberalism to the racial present. In ‘Yet That’s Not the Whole Story’ and ‘A Crisis of Race and Racism’ I address the contrariness and instability of race and racism in the present. I say something brief about ‘Obama’, who is a topic too central to be ignored; the President’s merits as well as his deficiencies encapsulate the contradictions of race and racism today. In ‘Reframing the Discussion’ I return to the dark matter where the paper begins.

**We Come from the Abyss**

We can begin with an understanding that racism is a living relic of absolutism. Consider Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s valuable definition; she characterizes racism as ‘… the state-sanctioned or
extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (Gilmore, 2007: 28).

Using ‘premature death’ as a biostatistical variable, we can venture some crude figures: *Indigenous deaths* in the Americas in the first century of European rule totaled c. 42 million/80% of the total (lowest credible estimate). Deaths directly attributable to the Atlantic slave trade look like this: 8–10 million in Africa (some through war and raiding, most through forced marches and in coastal internment); 10–12 million in the ‘middle passage’; and 5 million in Jamaican ‘seasoning’ camps alone. The estimated Brazilian slave death rate before age 35 is c. 80% for 200+ years! At a world scale the abyss is almost impossible to contemplate. If we continue the point into the 20th century, we can see that ‘merely’ the post-Second World War wars of national liberation took the lives – and this is a very crude estimate – of c. 80 million souls.¹

**The Abyss Is Still Here**

We come from the abyss – and the abyss has a sort of a racially-stratified character. But the abyss is also still here. Here I will mention just a few dimensions of the ongoing modern world (racial) system, which as I argue is not all that modern: the absolutist residue recurs once again.

*Greed kills:* A neglected lesson of the so-called War on Terror is that the world’s North, if only for its own security (but for a lot of other reasons as well), has not terminated its ceaseless exploitation of the global South. It cannot; this is its lifeblood. The consumerism of ‘McWorld’ is built on a planetary sweatshop. The world’s poor are largely peasants and superexploited workers, the dark-skinned sharecroppers and field hands of a global corporate plantation.

*Climate change is a global racism issue:* The world’s South is far more vulnerable to global warming. The hottest and poorest countries on the planet are being hit first and hardest by rising temperatures. Environmental racism is now about much more than dumping of toxic substances: it’s about drought, famine, forced migration, corporate agriculture and mining … These are supremely familiar historical events.

*Colonialism is not over:* The European colonial powers could not sustain their empires after the Second World War, a fact they sometimes had to be taught the hard way, through armed revolutions. But they had learned by the 1960s that indirect rule works better than explicit empire anyway. Setting up spheres of influence throughout the now ‘independent’ global South allowed for a level of pillage and depredation unimaginable during the bad old days of overt colonialism. After the Second World War, the US became the chief neocolonialist power (Nkrumah, 1966).

**‘Deathscapes’ and Development**

‘Deathscape’ is the term used by Achille Mbembe to describe the ‘postcolony’.² We could also apply it to Gaza, to North Philadelphia (where I worked for many years), or to the Western Region Detention Facility at San Diego. The latter is one of an extensive archipelago of immigrant prisons where constitutional rights (and human rights) are below minimal. Circa 50,000 people are presently detained in the US on strictly immigration violations. The overall US prison population is now in the 2.7 million range.

How should we understand the range of policing, carceral practices, and racial profiling involved in – or required for – the maintenance of the post-civil rights/post-imperial system? Some have argued that war is the appropriate framework and indeed I have used that term above. I would prefer to invoke a few other concepts, however.
One of these is ‘development’. From Gunnar Myrdal’s work I draw the idea of ‘cumulative and circular development’. This appears in An American Dilemma in early form, but later operates as a master concept in Myrdal’s arguments against global inequality and what was then termed ‘underdevelopment’ on a world scale.

Bringing in the ‘cumulative and circular’ idea allows us to account both for the reiteration of practices of racial oppression and of anti-racist resistance. That’s the ‘circular’ part. We can furnish endless examples of reiterative racial practices: in immigration/xenophobia, racial ‘science’, recursive stereotypes about the racialized ‘other’s’ laziness, criminality, and so on. Imperialism too has reiterative dimensions, as does the struggle against it. For example the post-Second World War national liberation movements recapitulated many organizational and ideological features of the 19th-century revolutions against European colonialism in the Americas (Haiti, Gran Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere). They were broadly parallel ‘racial projects’.

The anti-racist/abolitionist dimension of these 19th-century struggles reappeared in the 20th-century linkage between national liberation in the periphery and black liberation in the metropoles.

With the ‘cumulative’ idea I want to highlight the convergence of various racial projects that had earlier been distinct substantively or geographically. ‘Profiling’ is an instance of substantive convergence I want to stress. It was originally an aggressive racist style of policing; it now exceeds the criminological context in which it was originally first developed and extends to the racist gaze more generally. Race serves as a multi-use political technology for organizing and explaining any form of social conflict, both in social science and in everyday life/commonsense. John Solomos and Les Back point out that racism is ‘a scavenger ideology, which gains its power from its ability to pick out and utilize ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts’ (Solomos and Back, 1996: 18–19; see also Fredrickson, 2003: 8). This interpellative adaptability – to scavenge for ressentiment, xenophobia, religious dogma, or a host of other proclivities or projections – is a highly developed, indeed central, component of racism. In other words, the ready availability of race as an ‘explanation’ for deviance from some attributed norm becomes more intelligible when we recognize both the ease with which racial distinctions are made – their ‘opticality’ – and when we simultaneously admit the breadth and depth of racial awareness in much of the modern world.

Geographically too there has always been a convergence of ‘styles’ of racial oppression. Cooper and Stoler (1997) point out how cultures of coercion that were developed in imperial peripheries were imported back to the UK, France, and other European imperial metropoles. Nikhil Singh (2012) notes that today US efforts to police the globe parallel US efforts to police the ghettos and barrios. ‘National security’ doctrines give way to ‘human security’ doctrines as networking, contracting, and training (by the US, Israel, Brazil, and others) cooperate and learn from each other (Amar, 2013). State terror remains available (the ‘iron fist’) but softer forms of power (the ‘velvet glove’) are preferable in ‘reformed’ racist polities.

In the same way, insurgent groups converge on strategies that target similar oppressive regimes, whether or not they exhibit similar racist features. The ‘Bloody Sunday’ marchers in 1973 in Northern Ireland sang ‘We Shall Overcome’. Consider the parallels between the Arab Spring and Occupy: both collective actions drew more ‘class-’ and ‘youth-’ oriented than explicitly anti-racist, but they teach taught and learned from each other; they both drew-drew on recent anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions in extensive ways.

The Race Concept over the Longue Durée
From the social to the biological and back again … reiteration once again. When the colonial encounter happened and the African slave trade began, the race concept didn’t yet exist. Some precursors can be identified. These are chiefly the distinctions between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarous’ peoples, which go back at least to the Greeks (Hannaford, 1996), and the quasi-biological stigmatization of Jews and Muslims by the Inquisition under the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre*: possession or lack of pure – that is, Christian – blood. In a more general way, however, categorization of peoples was not primarily corporeally-based, not attached to the body, not ‘biopolitical’ (Foucault via Stoler, 1995), in the premodern world. It was more like what we would today call cultural or ethnic: religious, linguistic, territorial.

The ‘otherness’ of peripheral subjects varied by empire, of course. To the pioneering Portuguese and Spanish, Africans were not so strange, since the Iberian peninsula had been ruled by Africans – Maghrebines mostly, but there were sub-Saharan (black) Africans around too – for more than half a millennium. The *reconquista* was still a recent event when the European seaborne empires were first launched – notably by Portugal and then Spain, more than a century before the British and the French (Thornton, 1998).

Still, the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere were as unknown a population to the Portuguese and Spanish as they were to the British, French, and Dutch. Hence the famous debate between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 Valladolid, and a century later António Vieira’s profound defense of the indigenous peoples, and to some extent of the enslaved Africans of Brazil (on las Casas and Vieira see Todorov, 1985; Cohen, 1998, Blackburn, 1997).

The Brits, French, and Dutch were late-comers, but not as benighted about Africa and Africans as, say, Winthrop Jordan would have us believe. In large measure they learned from the Portuguese: not only about who the natives and blacks were but about how to traffic them and how to exploit them.

The race concept arose out of the social and political need to dominate enslaved and conquered people, and conversely out of the social and political imperative for resistance against those practices. Because the occupying powers had to be able to distinguish native from settler, enslaved from ‘free,’ they gravitated toward ‘optical’ or phenomic criteria to organize their regimes. For the same reason the occupied and enslaved peoples of African descent and of the Americas – those who survived the slaughters of the European empires – had also to employ these optical frameworks of social classification. So race developed as a highly practical political technology of oppression and resistance. Of course this was in practice a complex process, not so bilaterally a matter of ‘us and them’; there were enslaved Europeans, African and indigenous slave-traders, ethnic differences among Africans, and so on. But the general point holds: between free and slave, between native and settler, between oppressor and oppressed, a ‘colorline’ arose, not all at once, but over the early years of empire and Atlantic slavery. Social, not biological, construction.

In turn and over a longer time period, biological concepts of race developed out of the sociopolitical distinction of race. These were the products of enlightenment: they reified and essentialized what had previously been sociopolitical categories. In a broad sense, the biologizing of race may be understood as rationalization, both in the commonsense meaning of that term and in the Weberian sense of modernization and legitimation. Consider the underlying logics of ‘enlightened’ racial discourse – the *mission civilisatrice*, the white man’s burden, or manifest destiny – from this standpoint: ‘It’s just common sense: these practices may seem unjust, but when you look deeper you will discover that they are uplifting and domesticating. Such obviously primitive and backward people cannot be afforded full human status; they are more
'natural', more driven by desire than reason, less inclined to work, less cultivated ...', and so on. These attributions remain common today, especially on the right, and also in 'commonsense'. From the Weberian standpoint the stages of legitimation proceed from lower to higher, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. The ‘lower orders’ are naturally lower. Slavery and empire were more modern, more developed, more rational systems of authority than were the ‘primitive’ societies which empire supplanted or subordinated. Evolutionary doctrine, both before and after Darwin (notably in the view of Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin and the founder of eugenics), further naturalized the previously sociopolitical phenomenon of race: not only ‘social Darwinism’ but the mere presence of a worked-out and admirable theory of the evolution of species tended to hierarchize the human race along the lines of biologically attributable differences. Thus what had begun as a social distinction of political convenience was transformed into a natural condition: something eternal, perhaps tragic, but ineluctable.

Not until the turn of the 20th century did there emerge any serious effort to reinterpret race as social and political. By that time the biologization of race was taken for granted, immured in both science and commonsense. Racial identity and difference had long been linked to the putatively rational and hierarchical order of the planet, where empire and racial ‘caste’ were established social conventions. Indeed race and class had now tacitly merged in the national doctrines of the ‘advanced’ countries, and on the world stage as well. Race in particular was seen as absolute and permanent, as evidenced by the rise of eugenics.

In this historical and theoretical context the critique of racial biology must be recognized as a very impressive intellectual achievement. Its provenance, as Du Bois (2007 [1935]) certainly makes clear, lies in abolitionism, first in the Haitian revolution but most spectacularly in the US Civil War and its aftermath, in which black people not only overthrew the system of slavery but called into question (as the Haitians had also done; cf. James, 1989 [1938]) the viability of the imperial order itself. The achievements of black people in and after the War (Hahn, 2005) led directly to the first scientific refutations of biologic racism, carried out by such people as George Washington Williams, Kelly Miller, Anna Julia Cooper, William Monroe Trotter, and Du Bois himself. It was black social scientists, then, who first launched the drive to reinterpret – or re-reinterpret – race as a social construct. These people were largely ignored; they were fully vindicated only after the fall of eugenics during and after the Second World War and the dawn of the civil rights era. But their arguments were presented again – independently reinvented or in some sense derived from the earlier black scholars’ work – by the Chicago sociologists in the 1920s (Park, Frazier, Johnson, Cox). The return of the sociopolitical concept of race is an inconvenient truth.

**Accumulation by Dispossession**

David Harvey’s (2003) concept reworks Marx’s idea of ‘primitive accumulation’ and brings the coercive basis of race rule forward into our age of neoliberalism. Here again is the continuity of absolutism. Primitive accumulation, extra-economic coercion – boy, Marx was right about that! Maybe he didn’t go far enough: ‘the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins’ was pretty good, but Marx, along with Weber and Durkheim, still tended to valorize capitalist depredation as a necessary way-station in the historical march forward of civilization: towards collective self-rule (in Marx’s case),” toward more deeply legitimate authority (in Weber’s case), and toward a more ‘organic’ and inclusive solidarity (in Durkheim’s case).

Maybe Marx didn’t fully comprehend slavery as the first transnational business, or the most central one anyway. Maybe he didn’t fully grasp radical pragmatist notions of politics in the way
that DuBois did in *Black Reconstruction*, or C.L.R. James did with his concept of ‘self-activity’ (James et al. 2005 [1958]), or in earlier form in *The Black Jacobins* … Those works are centered on some notions of race-based (and of course class-based) self-emancipation, what Robin Kelley might call ‘freedom dreams’. They converge with Deweyan notions of ‘situating creativity’ and ‘self-reflective action’, if those terms can be properly racialized and fully politicized as well.

Wherever we locate Marx on the path to those concepts, we must recognize that he still did a pretty good job at recognizing that the accumulation of capital is *always* violent, *always* coercive, and that the racial dimension is at least involved. After all, ‘labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin when in the black skin it is branded’ (Marx, 1967: 329).

**The World-Historical Shitpile of Race**

Structural racism – an odious stinkpile of shit left over from the past and still being augmented in the present – has been accumulated by ‘slavery unwilling to die’, by empire, and indeed by the entire racialized modern world system. The immense *waste* (Feagin et al., 2001, drawing on Bataille) of human life and labor by these historically entrenched social structures and practices still confronts us today, in the aftermath of the post-Second World War racial ‘break’. Our anti-racist accomplishments have reduced the size of the pile; we have lessened the stink. But a massive amount of waste still remains. So much racial waste is left over from the practice of racial domination in the early days of empire and conquest, to the present combination of police state and liberalism! Indeed it often seems that this enormous and odious waste pinions the social system under an immovable burden. How often have despair and hopelessness overcome those who bore this sorrow? How often have slave and native, peon and *maquiladora*, servant and ghetto-dweller, felt just plain ‘sick and tired’ (Nappy Roots, 2003), encumbered by this deadening inertia composed of a racial injustice that could seemingly never be budged? How often, too, have whites felt weighed down by the waste, the guilt and self-destruction built into racism and the ‘psychological wage’?

Yet racial politics is always unstable and contradictory. Racial despotism can never be fully stabilized or consolidated. Thus at key historical moments, perhaps rare but also inevitable, the sheer weight of racial oppression – *qua* social structure – becomes insupportable. The built-up rage and inequity, the irrationality and inutility, and the explosive force of dreams denied, are mobilized politically in ways that would have seemed almost unimaginable earlier.

Racism remains formidable, entrenched as a structuring feature of both US and global society and politics. Indeed it often seems impossible to overcome.

**Yet That’s Not the Whole Story**

We are so used to losing! We can’t see that the racial system is in crisis both in the US and globally. Large-scale demographic and political shifts have overtaken the modern world (racial) system, undermining and rearticulating it. During and after the Second World War a tremendous racial ‘break’ occurred, a seismic shift that swept much of the world (Winant, 2001). The US was but one national ‘case’ of this rupture, which was experienced very profoundly: racial transformations occurred that were unparalleled since at least the changes brought about by the US Civil War. Omi and I (1994) – and many, many others – have proposed that the terrain of racial politics was tremendously broadened and deepened after the War. The increased importance of race in larger political life not only grounded the modern civil rights movement but shaped a whole range of ‘new social movements’ that we take for granted today as central axes of
political conflict. In earlier stages of US history it had not been so evident that “the personal is political” – at least not since the end of Reconstruction. From the explicit racial despotism of the Jim Crow era to the ‘racial democracy’ (of course still very partial and truncated) of the present period …: that is a big leap, people.

Of course there in the modern world there were always black movements, always movements for racial justice and racial freedom. The experience of injustice, concrete grievances, lived oppression, and resistance, both large and small, always exists. It can be articulated or not, politicized or not. These movements, these demands, were largely excluded from mainstream politics before the rise of the civil rights movement after the War. Indeed, after the Second World War, in a huge ‘break’ that was racially framed in crucial ways, this ‘politicization of the social’ swept over the world. It ignited (or reigned) major democratic upsurges. This included the explicitly anti-racist movements: the modern civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movement, and the anti-colonial movement (India, Algeria, Vietnam, etc.). It also included parallel, and more-or-less allied, movements like ‘second-wave’ feminism, LGBTQ (née gay liberation) movements, and others.

In short, the world-historical upheaval of the Second World War and its aftermath were racial upheavals in significant ways racial upheavals: the periphery against the center, the colored ‘others’ against ‘The Lords of Human Kind’ (Kiernan, 1995). These movements produced:

- Demographic, economic, political, and cultural shifts across the planet
- The destruction of the old European empires
- The coming and going of the Cold War
- The rise of the ‘new social movements’, led by the black movement in the US

And this is only the start of what could be a much bigger list.

**A Crisis of Race and Racism?**

‘[C]risis’, Gramsci famously wrote, ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass’ (Gramsci, 1971: 276). Using the Gramscian formula, I suggest that there is such a crisis of race and racism. On the one hand, the old verities of established racism and white supremacy have been officially discredited, not only in the US but fairly comprehensively around the world. While on the other hand, racially-informed action and social organization, racial identity and race consciousness, continue unchecked in nearly every aspect of social life! On the one hand, the state (many states around the world) now claims to be colorblind, non-racialist, racially democratic, etc.; while on the other hand, in almost every case, those same states need race to rule. Consider in the US alone: race and electoral politics, race and social control, race and legal order … Why don’t our heads explode under the pressures of such cognitive dissonance? Why doesn’t manifest racial contradiction provoke as much uncertainty and confusion in public life and political activity as it does in everyday experience? Are we just supposed to pretend that none of this is happening? Can anyone really sustain the view that they are operating in a nonracial, ‘colorblind’ society?

The ‘colorblind’ claim is that one should not ‘notice’ race. For if one ‘sees’ race, one wouldn’t be ‘blind’ to it, after all. But what happens to race-consciousness under the pressure (now rather intense in the US, anyway) to be ‘colorblind’? Quite clearly, racial awareness does not dry up like a raisin in the sun. Not only does it continue as a matter of course in everyday life, but in
intellectual, artistic and scientific (both social and natural) life race continues to command attention.

‘Colorblind’ ideologies of race today serve to impede the recognition of racial difference or racial inequality based on claims that race is an archaic concept, that racial inclusion is already an accomplished fact, and so on. Just so, persistent race-consciousness highlights racial differences and particularities. ‘Noticing’ race can be linked to despotic or democratic motives, framed either in defense of coercion, privilege, and undeserved advantage, or invoked to support inclusion, human rights, and social justice (Carbado and Harris, 2008; see also Brown et al., 2003).

**Obama**

Is he a mere token, a shill for Wall Street? Or is he Neo, ‘the one’? If neither alternative is plausible, then we are in the realm of everyday 21st-century US politics. This is the territory in which, as Sam Rayburn famously said, ‘There comes a time in the life of every politician when he [sic] must rise above principle.’

Yet Barack Obama has transformed the US presidency in ways we cannot yet fully appreciate. Obama is not simply the first nonwhite (that we know of) to occupy the office. He is the first to have lived in the global South, the first to be a direct descendent of colonized people, the first to have a genuine movement background. Consider: How many community meetings, how many movement meetings did Obama attend before entering electoral politics? For all his limitations, Obama is by far the most progressive, the most ‘left’ person ever to have occupied the White House.

But he is no more powerful than any of his predecessors; he is constrained as they were by the US system of rule, by the US racial regime, by structural racism.

In addition he is constrained by racism as no other US president has ever been. No other president has experienced racism directly:

> Moreover, while my own upbringing hardly typifies the African American experience – and although, largely through luck and circumstance, I now occupy a position that insulates me from most of the bumps and bruises that the average black man must endure – I can recite the usual litany of petty slights that during my forty-five years have been directed my way: security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason. I know what it’s like to have people tell me I can’t do something because of my color, and I know the bitter swirl of swallowed back anger. I know as well that Michelle and I must be continually vigilant against some of the debilitating story lines that our daughters may absorb – from TV and music and friends and the streets – about who the world thinks they are, and what the world imagines they should be. (Obama, 2006: 233)

On the other hand: he has a ‘kill list.’ All presidents kill people, but Obama is the first systematically and publicly to take charge of these egregious and unconstitutional uses of exceptional powers. In this he echoes Carl Schmitt, the Nazi political theorist, whose famous dictum is ‘Sovereign is he who decides on the exception’ (2004 [1922]). The drones, the surveillance, and the numerous right turns of his administration all stand in sharp contradiction not only to his campaign rhetoric, but to the anti-racist legacy of the civil rights movement that arguably put him in office.

Obama has not interceded for blacks against their greatest cumulative loss of wealth in US history, the ‘great recession’ of 2008. He has not explicitly criticized the glaring racial bias in the US carceral system. He has not intervened in conflicts over workers’ rights – particularly in the public sector where many blacks and other people of color are concentrated. Obama himself
largely deploys colorblind racial ideology, although he occasionally critiques it as well. Beneath this ostensibly postracial view the palpable and quite ubiquitous system of racial distinction and inequality remains entrenched. Though modernized and ‘moderated’, structural racism has been fortified, not undermined, by civil rights reform; Obama is not challenging it, at least not directly.

**Reframing the Discussion**

What should we be studying and teaching now? The list of themes I have highlighted here is partial of course, and perhaps impressionistic as well. If the argument I have proposed has any validity, then the ‘dark matter’ of race, which is even more invisible now than it was in the past – in its present ‘post-civil rights’, ‘colorblind’, and even ‘presidential’ forms – continues to exercise its gravitational pull on our politics. It continues to shape what is called (and improperly deprecated as) ‘identity politics’. The ‘dark matter’ takes on new significance as a central feature of neoliberalism, which is enacted today through the deployment of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, ‘states of exception’, state violence, and exclusionary politics – all political practices that rely on racism.

Yet the legacy of centuries of resistance to these depredations, the undeniable achievements of anti-racist and ant-imperialist struggles, the extension of democracy – often tortuous and always incomplete – to peoples of color, also exerts a significant political force. Race-based ‘freedom dreams’ (Kelley again) sustain the hope of democracy, inclusion, equality, and justice in the US and elsewhere.

Race remains the ‘dark matter’, the often invisible substance that in many ways structures the universe of modernity. In contrast to earlier epochs when claims about its permanence and immutability were taken for granted, the very existence of race is often denied today. These denials are in large part the effects of the great – albeit partial and contradictory – waves of racial reform that swept the planet in the late 20th century. Tremendous mobilizations, huge sacrifices, were undertaken by millions of everyday people during recent decades in order to win civil rights, political rights, and human rights, to be at last recognized and included in US society, in South Africa, and indeed across the planet. The concessions and reforms achieved in return for all that effort – meager but not insignificant – were that race would henceforth be disallowed and disavowed, both as a meaningful political category and as a consequential social scientific theme. But despite the best efforts of both political authorities and astronomers (I mean, politicians and social scientists) to render race invisible, it keeps exerting significant sociopolitical ‘gravity’: in the economy, in global politics, and in an increasingly internationally networked culture as well. Meanwhile racial identity continues to shape ‘life-chances’, subjectivity and ‘group position’ (Blumer, 1958), as well as social theory itself. The claim that official and personal avowals of ‘colorblindness’, ‘post-raciality’, ‘racial democracy’, ‘nonracialism,’ and so on, would somehow relegate it to a benighted past now seems rather ridiculous, just on the grounds of immediate perception. Does anyone wish to claim that a mass illusion has broken out? When and where will race ‘end’?

Well, race will not end. The same state that now declares itself ‘colorblind’ cannot dispense with racial policy and racial ideology in its efforts to rule: consider electoral maneuvers, jurisprudence, resource distribution, the making of census categories, collective consumption, criminal ‘justice’, military interventionism, and so on. The same people who in past decades confronted the police dogs and fire hoses, who crossed oceans and deserts to reach Los Angeles or Lisbon or Paris, the same people who resist apartheid rule in Israel/Palestine ... these same people are still stateless, sans papiers, ‘driving while black’. Their bodies are still racialized,
their labor is still required, their identities still confound the state, their rights are still restricted. They still exert an immense gravitational pull.

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Notes

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1. Please accept my disclaimers for not providing sources on these numbers. They are based on extensive digging into the genocide literature. To list writings on this theme would explode the bibliography and give an air of authority that is not really justified. Also, I am not attempting to account for the vast range of genocidal consequences, or indeed other consequences, of the Atlantic slavery complex: for example, demographic or ecological effects, as discussed by Zubiri (1995), Miller (1988), or Vansina (1990). My effort here is to signal the scope of the coercion, violence, and destruction that were visited upon African-descent peoples in the death march toward the modern world.

2. This is a term from Omi’s and my work on racial formation (Omi and Winant: 1994).

3. See Anderson’s (2010) historical sociological account of the vicissitudes of ‘Marx at the Margins’.

4. ‘Some badges of slavery remain today. While the institution has been outlawed, it has remained in the minds and hearts of many white men. Cases which have come to this Court depict a spectacle of slavery unwilling to die’ (Douglas. 1968: 445; see also Feagin, 2000:25).

5. Colorblindness is an abhorrent term, a neologism twice-over. First and most obviously it is rooted in an ophthalamic condition that has no relevance to race, unless we understand race as being ‘about’ skin color, a deep reductionism in the term’s meaning. Second, the term appears in the dissent of Justice John Marshall Harlan in the 1896 Plessy case, where the Justice’s insistence that ‘Our Constitution is Colorblind’ coexists blissfully with a range of support claims for eternal white superiority and supremacy (see Gotanda: 1995).

6. For example the status of the racialized body is a major subject across many of these fields. The resurgence of a new racial biologism (mainly via genomics) is a pressing question in the biological and social sciences. Racial demographics are shifting in many countries, not just in the US, but also globally across both the North–South and West–East axes, posing new political and cultural questions.

7. ‘Organizing remained central to Obama long after his stint on the South Side. In the 13 years between Obama’s return to Chicago from law school and his Senate campaign, he was deeply involved with the city’s constellation of community-organizing groups. He wrote about the subject. He attended organizing seminars. He served on the boards of foundations that support community organizing. He taught Alinsky’s concepts and methods in workshops. When he first ran for office in 1996, he pledged to bring the spirit of community organizing to his job in the state senate’ (Lizza 2007).

References


