

Comments on Racism, misconceptions of racism and Ferguson

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There is a question that is not being asked: how can a country which elected Barack Obama as its President still behave as it does in Ferguson?

It would be a possible explanation that the popular theory of racism simply does not cover what is happening in Ferguson which is why the question is not asked. Let us present an alternative view:

1. Previous conceptions of racism were not so much explanations as platforms for coalitions. Liberals explained racism as a matter of i) poor education, ii) bad psychology iii) inherited prejudice. This pattern of explanation put the cure with liberal education and 'attitude change'. It also allowed an easy platform for a coalition of whites and Blacks against racism. However such explanations begin to not only wear thin but shed no light on current events.

2. A better view is to look not on racism as a direct outcome but to see it more in the nature of the result of a vector of forces. Part of the 'pay' for poor working and middle class whites has been the 'white privilege'. No matter how bad their life is it is far better than that of the average Black person. This tranquiliser for the poor can be traced back in history and is evidenced in the early chapters of Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations. There Adam Smith proclaims that the poorest English workman was infinitely better off than the richest African king¹. This entirely implausible claim (at the time the life of an English worker was in fact worse than that of a Caribbean slave – there were for example restrictions on how long one could work a slave but none on how long one could work an English child) ²was made on the basis that it should make the poor English worker feel better about his condition.

3. If we now take into account world economic developments where the living standards and more importantly the future expectations (for their children) of the middle and working classes have collapsed while the wealth of Asians is being flaunted in their face. This creates a tension. But now we can even see how the election of Obama actually feeds into this. Members of the Black elite do not affect the daily life of the White working and middle classes. Their sense of privilege is not affected by a Black President when every day they can have their superiority affirmed in relation the Black people on the street and in their workplace. In fact the election of a Black President enforces the need to remind the Blacks on the street that 'nothing has changed' as far the working and middle classes are concerned.

4. The old unthinking coalition of liberal Whites and Blacks is over. If anything it is rich and powerful Whites that are supporting Black opportunity at a senior level (think Citibank, Microsoft, McDonalds et al) . Well off White middle class people never needed a 'tranquiliser' and having accustomed themselves with dealing with talented Asians have no issues with dealing with talented African Americans.

5. A key conclusion is as follows: African Americans and all those of goodwill seeking to deal with the events at Ferguson in particular and racism in American society in general will adopt the wrong policies if they base their actions on serious misconception about working class and middle class racism.

Notes

1. Adam Smith 'Wealth of Nations' end of Chapter1. "Compared, indeed, with the more extravagant luxury of the great, his accommodation must no doubt appear extremely simple and easy; and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of an

European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute masters of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages’.

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3300/3300-h/3300-h.htm#link2HCH0001>)

It is also to be understood that at an international level there is an equal racial ordering where the White colonialists establishes a racial hierarchy that plays a similar role in pacifying and controlling disparate groups. South African apartheid is a most clear example of this with its hierarchy of white, Asian , coloured and black.

2. Eric Williams ‘Capitalism & Slavery’ Chapel Hill 1944

(<https://ia700508.us.archive.org/7/items/capitalismandsla033027mbp/capitalismandsla033027mbp.pdf>)