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Keep Race Relevant: Modifying Methods of Advocacy

Race discourse and examination are integral facets of America's seemingly post-racial condition. Numerous academic disciplines and activist groups seek to use their understanding of previous structures of oppression to advise against societal practices that may reproduce oppression in a new guise. However, such notable efforts to avoid transformations of hegemonic systems that prevailed in the twentieth century often fail or are met with resistance today because advocates employ old techniques to combat current issues. For instance, the turn of the century featured the flourishing of social diversity, boasted a prosperous technology industry, and resurfaced liberal ideals in politics and society. Many passionate individuals committed to racial reform do not adapt their advocacy methods to suit the features of the century and thus face a challenge in their social justice efforts. The unique facets of the twenty-first century necessitate an adapted understanding of race that seeks to maintain race's relevance in the modern era. In order to analyze modern racial systems, activists must acknowledge that the aforementioned characteristics of the century demand a modified understanding of race and racial practices, because race functions much differently today than in the past. Such an awareness is based upon underlying principles of earlier advocacy efforts but incorporates the distinct culture of twenty-first century America. Many distinguished authors and race scholars analyze race's

influence and advocate for the importance of racial awareness in the contemporary United States. This paper analyzes the work of Alan G. Johnson, Omi and Winant, and the contributing authors of the “Critical Resistance Incite! Statement” in order to argue that the features of the century and the resulting societal perspectives require that a modified examination and advocacy of race be in practice today.

The social diversity of the twenty-first century, evidenced by the “melting pot” theory, necessitate an intersectional viewpoint when analyzing the modern complexity of race and racial practices. At the turn of the century, the “melting pot” theory became prominent due to increased immigration, incorporation of people of color in globalization efforts and entertainment, and a general openness for inclusion of the “outsider.” The product of “melting pot” America is a multicultural society that represents diversity in all regards, including sexuality, gender, class, and religion. The diversity of individuals in the current age requires an intersectional mindset in analyzing race because a person in a melting-pot society never fits solely into one social category; they are a combination of classifications and their racial oppression must be interpreted accordingly. The authors of the “Critical Resistance Incite! Statement” encourage intersectional frames of reference when examining racial violence within the criminal justice sector. The documents states that “...movements that address state violence...often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence” (Incite! Statement 141) and that “...women of color, who suffer disproportionately from state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalized within these movements” (Incite! Statement 141). The statement essentially argues that efforts to eradicate state violence must coexist with efforts to eradicate gender violence. Race exists in relation to prejudices in other social categories and defines biases

within the criminal justice sector that prevail in the twenty-first century. Women of color are a prime example of a group subjugated in society due to a lack of intersectional approaches in analyzing the oppression they face. Diversity in the twenty-first century includes the diversity of gender in addition to class, sexuality, etc., all of which must be integrated into modern racial analyses. The relevance of race today depends upon both the acknowledgement of overlapping structures of domination and the development of "...holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression" (Incite! Statement 141). Diversity urges an adapted, intersectional understanding of race so that strategies for addressing racial issues can be inclusive and relevant.

The twenty-first century as a "technology era" makes it simple for dominant groups to maintain hegemony by subtly extracting compliance from oppressed groups, an irony that demands an evaluation of race within the realm of contemporary media. In the case of White dominance over people of color, present-day society does not allow for use of explicit intimidation and force to marginalize people of color. Instead, as Omi and Winant describe in their essay titled "Racial Formation in the United States", systems of dominance are maintained by "coercion and consent" (67), a method by which the ruling group, Whites, manage to subordinate people of color while simultaneously incorporating people of color's benefits into social and political discourse. The dominant group does this indirectly by maintaining a "popular system of ideas and practice" (67) called "common sense" (67) that deludes inferior groups into giving an unknowing consent to be dominated. In twenty-first century America, "common sense" is easy to spread through technology so it is no surprise that dominant groups use "...education, the media, religion..." (67) to achieve the "...consolidation of rule" (67). For example, such a

tactic is employed by White news reporters that speak about the necessity of racial classification. At first glance, such a claim might be applauded because it seems as if the dominant group is providing coverage on the issues of minority groups by stressing the importance of race. However, upon closer analysis, it becomes evident that even a seemingly progressive declaration on the importance of racial classification is tinged with White superiority. In Chapter Two of his book Privilege, Power, and Difference, Allan G. Johnson argues that racial classification has historically existed to benefit Whites by designating people of color as “Not White”, thereby taking away their power. He explains that, according to Adrian Piper, Native Americans and Blacks were classified differently in the 19th century, because one kind of classification was advantageous to Whites and another was not. Johnson argues that such disparities are about “...preserving White power and wealth” (19) and that Whites tend to neglect disparities so long the outcome is a “...continuation of [White] privilege” (19). Even though racial classification ideas from Whites may be received as humble and revolutionary by people of color because it demonstrates an awareness of racial issues, it is ultimately detrimental to the social standing of people of color. Since the prevalence of racial classification ultimately benefits Whites, it is clear how Whites advocating for racial classification on global media are not in the interests of people of color. Instead, Whites use “common sense” like the media to normalize their seemingly liberal racial perspectives and derive consent from people of color. When analyzing race’s function within ruling systems, it is crucial to understand the role technology plays in the subtle deception of the oppressed.

The “culture of liberalism” in the twenty-first century has a tendency to create claims of reverse discrimination because racism is not as explicit as it was in the past, an unfortunate social

situation which necessitates an analysis of race that defines the different forms of racism. Social liberalism has enjoyed many successes in the century through gay marriage legalization, a wider acceptance of third wave feminism, and the various attempts at social justice reform in politics and society as a whole. In addition, a marking feature of the century is the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States. Such supposedly social and racial victories give the impression that racism no longer exists in America. Many individuals, amidst the trumpets of the Pride Parade and the international media coverage of America's first Black president, overlook the implicit discrimination in microaggressions and dominant systems that still exist in the underbelly of American society. Individuals may then argue that reverse discrimination is prevalent, meaning that society now favors the originally oppressed groups and discriminates against the dominant groups. Reverse discrimination claims, however, are meaningless because indirect racism still exists and the oppressed are still fighting for their representation and rights in every walk of life. To combat such claims, activists must understand the difference between "White" and "Black" racism. Omi and Winant compare the two forms of racism in a historical paradigm when they state that "Thus black supremacy may be an instance of racism, just as its advocacy may be offensive, but it can hardly constitute the threat that white supremacy has represented in the U.S., nor can it be so easily absorbed and rearticulated in the dominant hegemonic discourse on race as white supremacy can" (Omi and Winant, 74). The authors argue that since Blacks have been historically oppressed and prejudices against them can be related to dominance structures perpetuated by Whites, their racism is not as "threatening" as White racism. Therefore, reverse discrimination claims are essentially meaningless if they are

formulated from any illusion of Black superiority. It is imperative for advocates to interpret race in a time where race seems irrelevant and adapt their advocacy efforts accordingly.

Furthermore, Omi and Winant go so far as to suggest that reverse discrimination claims neutralize racial issues and are components of “structural racism” (Omi and Winant, 75) that are “...all the more brazen because on the ideological or signification level, it adheres to a principle of ‘treating everyone alike;’” (Omi and Winant, 75). It also manages to consolidate power with the dominant group. A key part of studying race in the twenty-first century’s culture of liberalism is to not treat all individuals the same way, and to understand that dominant groups may try to in order to maintain their privilege. Therefore, if race is to remain relevant and empowering in a society that has a propensity to do the opposite, it is essential to modify social justice efforts so that they can both combat reverse discrimination claims and incorporate a deeper understanding of how racism functions today.

The complexity of race is a product of its evolution over the centuries. The way race functioned in the last century is not the way it functions today. The current century features social diversity that demands intersectionality, media that can be used to consolidate racial dominance, and a social liberalism that strives to make race irrelevant. Therefore, if society is to conduct racial reform, it must broaden its definitions of race, study the ways in which media is used as a platform for subtle discrimination, and analyze race’s social implications. Racial reform is imperative to the future of the nation, and advocates must shift their methods to better tackle the nuances of the era. They must also be aware that racial transformations and classifications will continue to evolve, subjugate, and influence the function of hegemonic systems. Race will continue to affect future centuries, and for this very reason, those that believe

in social justice can work to make certain that race's evolution will be one of embracing difference, not punishing it. In essence, an adapted understanding of race is crucial in the twenty-first century so race can continue to matter in America. Race needs to matter because it demonstrates to society time and time again that "[they] are, both individually and collectively, stuck in a kind of paralysis that perpetuates the trouble and its human consequences" (Allan G. Johnson, vii). Society can hope that one day racial recognition and reaction will lead to human progress, not perpetual stagnation.

Works Cited

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3. Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 2nd ed. New York, London: Routledge, n.d. Print.