

The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions

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Why are so many people afraid of the concepts *post-racial* and *post-ethnic*? Both are often brushed aside amid a competition over who can declare the most resoundingly that racism is still a vital problem in the United States, and that the physical marks of descent remain highly determinative of an individual's destiny. One pundit after another proclaims sanctimoniously that all one must do is look at the color of the prison population, or at the 2009 arrest of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his own home, and one will see that all this talk about a post-racial America is nonsense.¹

Yet almost none of the people who have sympathetically used the terms *post-ethnic* and *post-racial* have advanced the claims now being refuted with such ease; rarely have they used the terms in a manner that could leave one wondering, what were those prophets of post-ethnicity and post-raciality smoking when they started talking in such terms? The gap between what is being refuted and what is being affirmed is a discursive Grand Canyon.

What is being affirmed? I tried to summarize it in an essay for the journal *Callaloo* in 2008. I suggested that the election of Barack Obama as president – that historic event of the election of a black president of the United States – made it easier to contemplate “a possible future” that might be called post-ethnic or post-racial:

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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.²

Almost no one calls into question the desirability of such a future. Few will deny that the election of a black man as president is a step in that direction. But virtually every journalist and academic savant who gets press attention in relation to post-raciality wants to talk only about whether that future has arrived. This scenario is true of even ambitious and thoughtful scholars, such as historian Thomas J. Sugrue, whose recent book, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*, will convince anyone still in doubt that racism continues to be a problem for black people in the United States.³ Once that becomes the question – usually understood as, “Are we beyond racism or not?” – there is no room for discussion other than to exclaim, “Of course not!”

Questions so easily answered are not the ones most deserving of our attention. Might the rush to deny what almost nobody affirms betray an eagerness to avoid more challenging issues, including those explored by people who have popularized the terms *post-ethnic* and *post-racial*?

These concepts were generated to sharpen our vision of what a society long accustomed to invidiously ascribing and enforcing ethnoracial distinctions might look like if those abhorrent protocols could be weakened. This decidedly historical undertaking is quite different from a debate about “color blindness” in the abstract. The post-ethnic/post-

racial analytic project acknowledges the reality of an ethnoracially intensive past; it tries to assess and understand the diminution of that intensity in a variety of contexts. The point has been to confront and examine the contingency of ethnorace in America – past, present, and future – while registering the effects of descent-related experiences that survive the loosening of attributed or chosen connections between an individual and his or her community of descent. Given this trajectory, the post-ethnic–post-racial project inevitably has focused on the problematic character of the concept of race; on the historicity of group formation and deformation; on boundary-crossings; and on the internal diversity of the descent communities that is obscured by the five gross categories of the ethnoracial pentagon (white, black, yellow, brown, and red). So, too, has this project promoted direct and honest confrontation with economic inequalities that are historically specific but are too often dealt with only through the proxy of ethnorace.

The term *post-ethnic* is broader and deeper than *post-racial*. The former recognizes that at issue is all identity by natal community, including that which is experienced by or ascribed to population groups to which the problematic term *race* is rarely applied. These matters affect the status of Latinos, Arabs, Jews, and other immigrant-based populations not generally counted as “races.” A post-ethnic social order would encourage individuals to devote as much – or as little – of their energies as they wished to their community of descent. It would discourage public and private agencies from implicitly telling citizens that the most important thing about them is their descent community. Hence, to be post-ethnic is not to be anti-ethnic, or

David A.
Hollinger

even color-blind, but rather to reject the idea that descent so determines destiny as to render suspect trans-descent programs that seek to diminish inequality.⁴

Politically, a post-ethnic perspective actively encourages strategic enclaving; what this perspective opposes is the assumption that people are deeply obligated in the nature of things to make common cause with others of the same skin color, morphological traits, and kinship system. Post-ethnicity considered as a goal is a choice-maximizing ideal that encourages cultural and political dynamics responsive to individual perceptions and ambitions. Post-ethnicity as a condition – now largely in effect for Americans of European ancestry, who can decide just how Irish or Polish they want to be – is the experience of being able to really choose. Political scientist Robert Putnam is right to describe as “post-ethnic” his sense that “it seems important to encourage permeable, syncretic, ‘hyphenated’ identities . . . that enable previously separate ethnic groups to see themselves, in part, as members of a shared group with a shared identity.”⁵

Literary scholar David Mastey gets it exactly right when he observes that “a post-ethnic policy” of “affiliation by revocable consent” was reflected in Columbia University graduate Barack Obama’s decision to become a community organizer among the black poor of Chicago, in that young man’s later decision to leave that community to attend Harvard Law School, and in the decision of many of his black friends in Chicago to accept his departure from their community to pursue a law degree at Harvard.⁶ When sociologist Jonathan Rieder describes Martin Luther King, Jr., as “a post-ethnic man,” he implies nothing to the effect that King thought he was living a color-blind life, but rather that King had the capacity to “articulate his complex sense

of self by drawing from a rich repertoire of rhetorics and identities,” unconfined by such narrow and singular roles as “ethereal integrationist” or “vernacular black man.”⁷

Yet when a basic idea is widely accepted while the words that ostensibly embody the idea are resisted, one wonders if the words can possibly be right. *Post-racial* and *post-ethnic* may be inadequate to take on the tasks some of us have assigned to them. One of the interesting challenges of our historical moment is to find a vocabulary adequate for the meanings many of us are struggling to get “out there” in public discourse. Some of the terms that are literally accurate are even more awkward: post-ethnoracially-intensive, post-pentagonal, post-identitarian, post-ascriptive, post-primordial, and post-descent-defined all convey part of the action, but none is viable. To be sure, there are so many posts these days – postmodern, post-Marxist, postcolonial, postfeminist, post-structural – that one must bring a certain skepticism to the whole enterprise of “posting” things. There is no doubt this popular practice reflects a lack of invention. What keeps the practice of posting alive with regard to ethnicity and race, however, is a determination to keep track of the past, to register its legacy without denying the reality of change. The *post-* is designed to flag this meaning. Ironically, it is this sensitivity to the legacy of the past that users of the terms *post-racial* and *post-ethnic* are routinely accused of lacking.

When I first pushed the term *post-ethnic* in essays of 1992 and 1993, I was looking for an alternative to *cosmopolitanism*, which seemed too abstract, too ahistorical, and too encumbered with ambiguous ideological associations.⁸ The term *post-ethnic* appealed to me then – and still does – because it implies a strong hold-

over from the past, but a refinement of that legacy in relation to new opportunities and constraints. So, too, with *post-racial*. On the closely related notion of post-blackness the writer Touré remarks, “Post-blackness sees blackness not as a dogmatic code worshipping at the altar of the hood and the struggle but as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses.”⁹ A similar dynamic is invoked under the flag of “post-Jewishness” as defined, for example, by the organizers of a highly successful exhibition of post-Jewish art at the Spertus Jewish Museum in Chicago in 2008. “The post-Jewish generation,” in the words of the Spertus catalogue, “focuses on self-definition and on balancing lived experience and heritage in intellectual and daily practice,” fostering “an internal, highly personal consciousness as to how one connects with Jewishness today.”¹⁰

In this essay, I focus on two highly diversifying demographic trends that continue to inspire post-ethnic/post-racial writers, and that get short shrift in the competition to show just how bad racism still is. One is the extent and character of cross-group marriage, cohabitation, and reproduction. The second is the extent and character of recent immigration, especially of dark-skinned peoples.

The role of “race mixing,” as it is often called, in blurring the lines between the standardized ethnoracial groups is now widely acknowledged. It was even registered in the Census Bureau’s decision to include in the 2000 Census the option to identify with more than one ethnoracial group. Yet critics of the post-racial concept almost never address this reality, despite its ever-growing salience. The Pew Research Center recently studied the 3.8 million marriages that took place in the United States during 2008 and found record levels of out-marriage for every ma-

ior demographic group. Thirty-one percent of Asian Americans who married in that year took a non-Asian spouse, while 26 percent of Hispanics took a non-Hispanic spouse and 16 percent of black Americans took a non-black spouse. Nine percent of whites took a non-white spouse.¹¹

Black out-marriage thus remains rare in comparison to the statistics for out-marriage among Hispanic Americans, American Indians, and the various groups of Asian Americans. Nonetheless, the black case demands all the more attention because of the long and deep opposition to black-white marriages, which has lasted well beyond 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court finally eliminated laws prohibiting such marriages in the dozen states where they still existed. The current trend is unmistakable, especially for males. The Pew study found 22 percent of the black men who married in 2008 were married to non-black women, up from 15.7 percent in 2000 and 7.9 percent in 1980. Only 9 percent of black women acquired non-black husbands in 2008, which is consistent with earlier surveys showing that black men marry non-black women much more frequently than black women marry non-black men.¹²

Yet marriage statistics do not measure the full extent of the blurring of color lines. Sociologists Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters argue convincingly that these statistics underestimate the rates of ethnoracially mixed families, especially when black people are involved. “Low levels of black marriage and higher levels of black-white cohabitation than of black-white marriage,” they explain, “radically complicate the interpretation of intermarriage rates.”¹³

One of the most distinctive and revealing yet rarely cited of the relevant studies calculates the percentage of families

who had a mixed race marriage within their extended kinship network. Demographer Joshua Goldstein found that among U.S. Census-identified whites, by the year 2000 about 22 percent of white Americans had within their kinship network of ten marriages over three generations at least one white–non-white marriage; in that same year, nearly 50 percent of Census-identified black Americans had a black–non-black marriage in their kinship system. The percentage for Asian Americans with Asian–non-Asian families was 84 percent. These figures rose dramatically from earlier Censuses. In 1960, only about 2 percent of Census-identified whites and 9 percent of Census-identified blacks had in their kinship network a single marriage across the color line. As late as 1990, these figures were only 9 percent for Census-identified whites and 28 percent for Census-identified blacks.¹⁴ Goldstein's statistics suggest that acceptance of cross-boundary marriage and reproduction, already registered in popular culture and opinion polls, will continue to increase. Our social psychologists tell us that hostility to mixed race couplings, like opposition to same-sex relationships, diminishes with intimate familiarity: when someone in your own family is in one of these traditionally stigmatized relationships, the stigma loses some of its power.

The significance of the increase in cross-group families can be exaggerated. Occasionally someone will be bold enough to predict the end of standardized communities of descent within the next two or three generations. But the fact that this surely extravagant prediction is more often ridiculed than seriously advanced is another example of the complacent refutation of a claim rarely made. We need an honest discussion of the blending of ethnoracial lines that is

empirically visible in the composition of families within the United States.¹⁵

A second demographic trend that has engaged post-racial/post-ethnic writers is the diversification of American society by immigration during the past several decades. This development, too, is widely acknowledged, but its significance for our inherited intellectual and institutional apparatus for dealing with diversity remains to be fully recognized. Increased immigration from Asia and Latin America was not anticipated by the Congress of the United States when it enacted the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. But Latin American immigrants, once they began to arrive in unexpected numbers, were at least more familiar to empowered Anglos than were the previously rare immigrants from Asia. The more striking and category-disrupting change was the many millions of new Americans emigrating from China, India, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. These immigrants and their descendants have not only greatly diversified the society; in their diversity they have made a mockery of the pan-ethnic concept of "Asian American." Was an immigrant from Syria, Anatolia, or Iran an Asian American?

The character and extent of the post-1965 immigration was apparent even in the 1980s, but as late as 1998 President Clinton's "Initiative on Race," *One America in the 21st Century*, the only presidential commission to deal with race since the Kerner Commission of thirty years before, resoundingly reinforced the "old religion." The report systematically denied that there were salient differences between African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans. It willfully obscured the differences in language, culture, and economic position within the Asian American group. It

offered fifty-three specific recommendations for multicultural programs and anti-discrimination remedies, not a single one of which dealt with the historically unique situation of the black Americans whose lives had been affected by centuries of legally sanctioned slavery, violently enforced discrimination, and cataclysmically inadequate educational opportunities.¹⁶

One America in the 21st Century massively denied the diversity of American life while ostensibly celebrating it. Central to this failure was a determination to treat all immigrant-based populations from Asia and Latin America as comparable to the descendants of American slavery and Jim Crow. Dissenters from this old religion have been rare among established politicians, though in 2010, Senator James Webb of Virginia wrote that all “diversity programs” should be terminated for immigrant-based populations and yet be preserved for “those African-Americans still in need” of government-directed assistance.¹⁷

The relative success by standard indicators of many specific immigrant groups from different parts of Asia is too often overlooked rather than analyzed in relation to the dynamics of racism, inequality, and incorporation into a society of predominantly European origins. The great majority of adult immigrants from Korea are college graduates, and a substantial segment of immigrants from several other Asian countries are highly skilled and literate in English when they arrive. This is not the case with most immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries that provide so much of the low-skilled labor force in the United States. According to the most recent study, 34 percent of foreign-born Hispanics of all ages who reside in the United States have had no education beyond the eighth grade.¹⁸

The juxtaposition of the pre-immigration social circumstances of migrants from Latin America with those of migrants from several East and South Asian countries reminds us that attention to particular histories, especially to the educational and economic backgrounds of immigrants, presents us with a radically different picture of diversity than the one we inherited from the civil rights era. Do Hispanic Americans have a claim on special treatment? Perhaps they do, but the most plausible justification for such treatment would surely be an economic one, pivoting on the fact that the United States persistently encourages, and indeed demands, an underclass of workers who will do low-skilled work for relatively low wages and who are not likely to join labor unions. Our system, however, deals with the Hispanic population as an ethnoracial group. We use ethnorace as a proxy for economic inequality, designing programs targeted at an ethnoracially defined population when the most salient property of that population is instead its economic status. Support for affirmative action for Hispanics has waned in the context of the theoretical and practical obstacles to creating a politically viable justification for it.¹⁹

The history of discrimination against Hispanic Americans includes school segregation and exclusion from juries in several states prior to sixty years ago. But unlike immigrants from Mexico, those from East Asia and South Asia were not even able to achieve naturalized citizenship in 1952, and we cannot remind ourselves often enough that Asian Americans of Japanese ancestry were taken from their homes and thrown into internment camps less than a generation ago. (Indeed, Japanese internment occurred in my own lifetime and within a few miles of where I now live in California.) The different trajectories of Mexican Americans, on

David A.
Hollinger

the one hand, and of an array of Asian Americans, on the other, should refute the idea that the operative force is racism in the eye of the empowered white beholder. In the twenty-first century, we do not have to claim that empowered whites have emancipated themselves from racism in order to confront the fact that the power of this racism to damage its victims now varies enormously according to the economic and educational circumstances of those victims.

This truth has been shown to apply to black people, too, on account of another dimension of the immigrant transformation of American society. President Obama's status as the son of an African immigrant has heightened public awareness of the migration of black-skinned people from Africa and the Caribbean, but public discussion of immigration still takes little account of the magnitude of this migration. The federal government's statistics show that between 2000 and 2008, 636,938 immigrants from African countries obtained permanent legal resident status. During the entire decade of the 1980s, only 141,990 did so. People from Africa accounted for only 1.7 percent of immigrants obtaining such status during the 1970s, but now account for about 7 percent of the total. African countries, taken together, produce more legally permanent immigrants than does India, China, or Russia. The even larger migration from the Caribbean includes many individuals who, whatever their status in their nations of origin, are black by the American one-drop rule. More than one million immigrants from Caribbean countries obtained permanent legal residence in the United States during the 1990s.²⁰

That the first black president is of immigrant stock is an emblem not only for the sheer magnitude of this migration, but also for the fact that black immi-

grants and their children have managed to overcome the barriers created by anti-black racism to a greater extent than non-immigrant blacks. Study after study by our social scientists and journalists document the gaps in economic position and educational attainments between the immigrant-based and non-immigrant-based black populations.²¹ These studies imply that blackness itself is not enough to explain the enduringly weak class position of the bulk of American black people. There is good reason to believe that the educational and economic circumstances of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean provide an advantage. As with immigrants from Asia and Latin America, the specific social character of the newcomers exercises great influence over their destiny in the United States. History makes a huge difference.

The more we recognize the historical particularity of the circumstances surrounding the various descent communities in the United States and of the individuals within them, the more difficult it is to avoid a conclusion that I have already argued for in the pages of *Daedalus*. If the problem of the twentieth century was, as W.E.B. Du Bois declared, the problem of the color line, the problem of the twenty-first century appears to be one of solidarity.²² With precisely whom does one try to affiliate, and for what purposes? This is the problem of solidarity, and it looms larger or smaller depending on the extent to which willed affiliation becomes a possibility. Ethnoracial mixing and massive immigration have changed the United States, which continues to operate with an increasingly anachronistic ethnoracial system that assumes each group is an enduring, clearly bounded, color-coded entity.

The more that we come to see the color-coded "races" as artifacts, as con-

tingent results of human action rather than primordial causes of it, the less prominently the color line factors among other social distinctions that may or may not be the basis for the assigning or choosing of affiliations. The less fixed ethnoracial categories and their socially prescribed meanings become, the more opportunities people have to ask what is meant by “we” and to choose their affiliations rather than accept roles assigned by empowered

elites. This move from the problem of color to the problem of solidarity can be described as a “post-racial” or “post-ethnic” step, but the step is worth making even if those terms do not accompany it. The very question, “With whom should one affiliate and for what purposes?” is precisely the sort of challenging question that is pushed aside when folks rush to answer the easy question, “Are we beyond racism?”

David A.
Hollinger

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A quick Internet search turns up countless examples of what I am describing; for example: “Whoever came up with the insipid term ‘post-racial’ ought to be forced to sit down and read aloud the vile commentary that pours into any newsroom after it publishes or airs a story on race. . . . That would quickly cure the urge to insist we’ve finally reached that harmonious other side of the rainbow”; Mary Sanchez, *The Kansas City Star*, June 26, 2010, <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/07/26/2109308/post-racial-america-is-an-obvious.html#ixzzovkAxqOaB>.
- ² David A. Hollinger, “Obama, the Instability of Color Lines, and the Promise of a Post-ethnic Future,” *Callaloo* 31 (2008): 1033–1034. This essay is also available in Randall Kennedy and Gerald Early, eds., *Best African American Essays 2010* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2010), 44–51. See also Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000).
- ³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- ⁴ For a rare example of journalistic commentary that demonstrates a nuanced understanding of post-ethnic/post-racial writings, see media scholar Mary Beltran’s posting on *FlowTV*: “As deployed by some conservative commentators, [the concept of post-racial] has implied an end to racial disparities and practices and achievement of the privileges of whiteness by all Americans, [but] other definitions, in contrast, offer no such reassurance to white America or claims that an ideal has been achieved. As defined by Paul Gilroy, post-racial, similar to David Hollinger’s notion of post-ethnicity, refers to a future in which racial notions, racialized hierarchies, and the hegemony of whiteness are in fact upended. Such a definition has far more subversive implications for equality and social power”; Mary Beltran, “What’s at Stake in Claims of Post-racial Media?” *FlowTV*, June 3, 2010, <http://flowtv.org/2010/06/whats-at-stake-in-claims-of-post-racial-media/>.
- ⁵ Robert Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2006): 161, 169.
- ⁶ David Mastey, “Slumming and/as Self-Making in Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40 (2010): 493, 495.
- ⁷ Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008), 9.
- ⁸ The first reference I saw to *post-ethnic* was in Werner Sollors, “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 277. I developed the notion in a number of publications

of the 1990s and 2000s, especially *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995; tenth anniversary expanded edition, New York: Basic Books, 2006).

⁹ Touré, “Visible Young Man,” *The New York Times Book Review*, May 3, 2009.

¹⁰ Staci Boris, ed., *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Press, 2008).

¹¹ For a convenient summary of this study, see Sam Roberts, “Black Women See Fewer Black Men at the Altar,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2010.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters, “Intermarriage Then and Now: Race, Generation, and the Changing Meaning of Marriage,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 275.

¹⁴ This study was reported in “Nation’s Many Faces in Extended First Family,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009. See also Joshua R. Goldstein, “Kinship Networks that Cross Racial Lines: The Exception or the Rule?” *Demography* 36 (1999): 399–407.

¹⁵ For a discerning commentary, see Jennifer Lee, “A Post-Racial America? Multiracial Identification and the Color Line in the 21st Century,” *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 30 (2008): 13–31. See also Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, “Reinventing the Color Line: Immigration and America’s New Ethnic/Racial Divide,” *Social Forces* 86 (2007): 561–586.

¹⁶ Advisory Board for the President’s Initiative on Race, *One America in the 21st Century: The President’s Initiative on Race* (Washington, D.C., 1998).

¹⁷ James Webb, “Diversity and the Myth of White Privilege,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2010. Although this column was organized around the claim that some groups of impecunious white people are no less deserving of government help than some ethnoracial minorities, the most striking turn in the piece, given the prevailing discourse, was Webb’s sharp distinction between black people and other long-standing target groups for diversity programs.

¹⁸ Joseph Berger, “The Latino Lag,” *Education Life*, *The New York Times*, July 25, 2010.

¹⁹ See, for example, Gregory Rodriguez, “Affirmative Action’s Time is Up,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2010. “When affirmative action was established, it was intended to benefit a small percentage of the U.S. population, but as the rationale and scope of the program evolved, so did the number of people it included,” Rodriguez observes, stating truths that the civil rights coalition has rarely wanted to discuss. “Large-scale post-1965 immigration also complicated the equation and ultimately upset the political calculus that made affirmative action politically viable.” Rodriguez is the author of one of the most probing and discerning books ever written about Hispanics in the United States: *Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007). The persistent avoidance by political leaders of the contradiction between affirmative action and immigration policy is the theme of an underappreciated book by the late Hugh Davis Graham, *Collision Course: The Strange Convergence of Affirmative Action and Immigration Policy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁰ See <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR08.shtm>. These tables were first called to my attention by Jennifer Hochschild.

²¹ One of the most widely publicized of these studies showed that among black students at Ivy League colleges, immigrants and the children of immigrants were greatly overrepresented. See Douglas Massey et al., *American Journal of Education* (February 2007).

²² Here I refer to my essay, “From Identity to Solidarity,” *Dædalus* (Fall 2006): 23–31. In that essay, I describe “the problem of solidarity” in some detail, and argue that its character and significance have been largely obscured by the popularity of the concept of “identity.”