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What about Race after Obama: Individualism, Multiculturalism, or Assimilationism?

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ABSTRACT: I argue that we do not get an adequate picture of society from liberal conceptions of race and racism. What this analysis does, then, is call for a synthesis of historical, social, and cultural insights to inform and enrich the philosophical conception of race and racism.¹

The Election of Barack Obama as President of the United States has led to a discussion about whether the U.S. has become a “post-racial” society. In a recent lecture drawing heavily from a forthcoming article in the DuBois Review; “Just Do It: Notes on Politics and Race at the Dawn of the Obama Presidency,” sociologist Howard Winant suggests that Obama’s election offers no challenge to the structural racism reflected, for instance, in racial disparities in healthcare or African American and Latino economic inequality (Winant 2009). In other words, Winant insists it is not enough to focus on the attitudes of whites, social evidence about the way the structure of society impacts nonwhites is also important.

In addition, Obama’s election may not have resulted in a “post racial” society, but Winant observes that he models a way to inhabit racial identity more consciously (Winant 2009). His comments imply that although it is true that Barack Obama’s election may require us to re-describe race (and racism), what is more important, is that it does not necessarily follow that a re-description will take the culture any closer to an accurate or true representation of that reality. Winant’s remarks, in fact, address the larger issue of whether we get an adequate picture of society from liberal conceptions of race and racism. In short, he suggests that if the United States is to become a "post-racial" society what is needed is a profound understanding of race and racism.

Again and again there have been calls for us to deepen our understanding of race and racism. In 1997, to promote dialogue about the country’s race problem, President Bill Clinton made an effort to start a national conversation about race by appointing an advisory board. In 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama urged citizens to move beyond treating race only as a spectacle. He encouraged us to address race without anger, shame, guilt, or defensiveness (Obama 2008: para.49). A couple of months ago Attorney General Eric Holder (Carter 2009: A23) in a speech

¹ I would like to thank the Philosophy Department at San Diego Mesa College and the African American Studies Department at The Ohio State University for inviting me to present versions of this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Diana Paul and Daniela Macneil-Gutierrez for their comments.
before Justice Department employees, called citizens of the United States "a nation of cowards" because we do not talk about race.

Additionally, it is a matter of deep controversy in liberal democracies like Canada, Brazil, Britain, Australia, and France how they should interpret racial identity and accommodate the existence of racial groups. The notion that the world is made up of different races, and the pernicious problems associated with categorizing individuals as members of racial groups are global rather than local. For instance, to the north, blacks have been concerned with the failure of Nova Scotia to recognize their significant contribution to the economic development of their society (Saney 2002:7). To the south, in Peru, dark-skinned people of mixed race heritage complain of discrimination whilst Peruvian Presidential Candidate, Issac Humala, insists, “a Peruvian 'copper race,' the Incan descendants, should have supremacy in a region stolen away by lighter-skinned [Spanish] outsiders" (Reel 2006a: A10). At the same time, black athletes in Europe have been the subjects of racial abuse from soccer fans who throw banana peels on the playing filed and imitate monkey noises during the game (Bell 2006: C18). In Australia, white youths went on a rampage, attacking beach goers they assumed were of Arab descent (Corder 2005: All). In Darfur, there are continuing reports of ethnic cleansing as African and Arab tribes clash (Docherty, 2007). So, too, countries as varied as India, China, Malaysia are now debating using Affirmative Action in college admissions to overcome racial and ethnic bias (McMurtrie 2004: A38).

Although the racialization of individuals has been coterminous with a saga of ruthless racial oppression, often the constituents of disadvantaged racial groups see their racial identity as something precious that should be valued and preserved. Sociologist Steve Martinot (2003: 13) calls racialization “the way race is produced and bestowed on a people by institutional social action and not simply as a condition found in people as their racial category. Racialization means that race is something people do rather than what they are.” For many, the opportunity to identify with others in terms of a common racial heritage is a source of pride. Nevertheless, promoting racial identity through, for example, multiculturalism, contradicts the traditional liberal individualist model of civil society.

The existence of a bewildering assortment of liberal theories precludes my using “liberalism.” Instead I use the term “liberal tradition” to suggest that despite their variety liberal political theories adhere to a set of core assumptions. The liberal tradition is individualist, egalitarian, and universalist. It is individualist in that it acknowledges the moral primacy of the individual. It is egalitarian since all individuals are supposed to share the same moral status. And it is universalist because it recognizes “the moral unity of the human species” and renders subidentities, like race and ethnicity of secondary importance. Any detailed accounting of this tradition is far beyond the scope of this summary. I simply want to convey the core of a family of isms that respond to race and racism. The central question is: what role—if any—is there for racial identity or racial consciousness in liberal democracies?
Can philosophical liberalism be reinterpreted to accommodate race?

In my view we do not get an adequate picture of society from liberal conceptions of race and racism. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994: 55) integrate definitions of race into a short form that targets its salient features. "Race," they argue, "is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies . . . racial formation is a sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed." Hence, "there can be no timeless and absolute standard for what constitutes racism [or race], for social structures change and discourses are subject to rearticulation" (1994: 71; see also Martinott 2003; 13; Outlaw 1996: 5). As a result, I argue that whether racial identities are compatible with liberal democratic ideals depends on how one defines race, racism, and the ideals in question. What this paper does, then, is to remind us that we have an enduring responsibility to critically examine society—philosophical analysis should not lose sight of the "real world."

Consider, philosopher Gerald Doppelt’s (Inquiry 2009: 128) critical examination of a key claim that John Rawls makes in his major works. John Rawls is a powerful advocate of the liberal perspective and is considered by many to be the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century. Doppelt focuses on Rawls’ claim that justice requires "equality in the social bases of self-respect." He “challenges Rawls’ assumption that self-respect is a primary social good, like liberties and income, which can be distributed among persons as a function of the basic structure of society” (2009: 128). Doppelt’s aim is not to reject the Rawlsian view that self-respect is a distributional good, but rather to reconstruct it. He observes that the basic structure of society produces situations, like race, gender, and class inequality in which people appreciate their self-worth through participation in many different and complex contexts making it difficult to create a one-dimensional social distribution of self-respect.

Doppelt (2009: 128) argues that his revision of Rawls "rest[s] on the idea that justice demands equality in the proper or reasonable social bases of self-respect." He insists that the Rawlsian ideal of justice leaves intact the structural roots of racial injustice. He says, “Self-respect depends on how persons see their own worth and that of others and whether or not, in the culture as a whole, these judgments are reasonable and fair ... his [Rawls] political liberalism ignores ideals of persons implicit in the cultural worlds of modern economic relations and family life.”

Along the same lines, philosopher Derrick Darby (2009: 80; Berteaux 2010) in Race, Rights, and Recognition is concerned with what the experiences and personhood of blacks mean for liberal persocial or ontological rights. He observes that because inequality and injustice have existed right alongside persocial rights, taking U.S, racial history seriously requires that we rethink the source and value of moral rights. Rethinking the source and value of moral rights will afford us a way of seeing into the situations of those who have been excluded from the realm of moral rights holders. Right-holder standing, he argues, is a product of “social practices that recognize,
maintain, and enforce certain ways of acting and being treated” (2009: 102). According to Darby there are “no rights that exist prior to and independent of some form of social recognition” (2009: 74).

Of course, many political philosophers, conversant in the liberal tradition, would take issue with Darby’s attempt to ground moral rights in social recognition. Nonetheless, Darby (2009: 29,149) claims it is possible to find within the tradition, among theorists like Thomas Hill Green, Bernard Bosanquet, David George Ritchie, and others, the basis for rejecting the notion that all rights are presocial and negative.

Both Doppelt and Darby call for a synthesis of complex historical, social, and cultural insights that inform and enrich the philosophical notion of race. Ultimately they remind us that philosophical analysis should begin with the world as it is, not our pre-conceived or constructed structures for it.

In the three sections that follow my strategy is to explore examples suggesting that philosophical theories devised to reconcile liberal democracies to definitions of race fail to draw on a comprehensive or accurate picture of the social environment leaving vital issues unaddressed. Hence, I am suspicious of both individualist liberalism and the stand that racial groups pose no problem in a liberal democracy.

What Special Problem Does the Existence of Racial Groups Pose for Liberal Individualism?

Individualism and multiculturalism are contrasting paradigms that guide and influence the way theorists perceive, understand, and interpret the world. The individualist framework is committed to the liberty of individuals and conceives of society as fundamentally composed of individuals who are rational, self-creating, and capable of knowing what is in their best interest. According to philosopher Michael Sandel (1996: 12) “This is the conception that finds its expression in the ideal of the state as a neutral framework ... it is precisely because we are freely choosing, independent selves that we need a neutral framework, a framework of rights that refuses to choose among competing values' and ends.” Of course, since, in the liberal tradition, no person or way of life is intrinsically better than any other, Sandel acknowledges that this view cannot account for our political and moral obligations. And that suggests the state can devolve into anarchy and egotism. So the concerns of society come into play in the politics and governance of the community as a whole.

On the other hand, the multiculturalists’ framework develops from an awareness of the importance of the social group or cultural community. They stress the social factors that shape the individual. Individuals, multiculturalist insist, are seen, characterized, and defined as members of social groups and as a result, self-determination is exercised from within a social group. While every individual is unique

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2 Philosopher Lucius Outlaw (1996: 174) writes, “A theory of society that sets itself the task of understanding, scripting, and producing revolutionary social transformation while disregarding... basic ‘social facts’ is, in my judgment, seriously deficient.”
and has the capacity or potential of deciding for herself how she will live her life, and formulating for herself an authentic identity, philosopher Charles Taylor (Gutman 1994: 39) argues that acknowledging this capacity or potential entails identifying and celebrating difference.

Although today many Americans understand [self-defined or self-imposed] racial, ethnic or national identity as sources of legitimate political claims, philosopher Chandran Kukathas (1992: 107) insists that liberal democracies need not abandon their individualist language to accommodate cultural communities. It isn’t only that attributing irreducible moral claims to minority cultures challenges the individualist foundations of the liberal tradition, but the liberal tradition’s individualist philosophy is a key to overcoming problems that are associated with the existence and interaction of cultural minorities. Since cultural communities are in essence composed of individuals and liberal theory is individualist, Kukathas claims that if you recognize the individual you recognize the group. The cultural community has a value, but not apart from its benefit to the individual. In the case of racial oppression, society can legitimate the claims of groups that have been injured and compensate individuals for their injuries without attributing irreducible moral claims to group rights to racial communities. Thus, institutional mechanisms are all that is necessary to resolve the claims of oppressed “racial” groups.3

According to Kukathas (1992: 116-117), cultural minorities are aggregates or voluntary associations of individuals. They are unstable entities, a product of conflict, disagreement, and bounded by legal, political, and environmental constraints. While individuals find themselves to be members of communities that shape their conduct it is also a fact that loyalty, agreements, consensus, and affiliations change. Cultural communities are mutable historical formations that are constantly evolving—they are not enduring and that is why the liberal tradition focuses on the individual. Human and legal rights, for example, are entitlements of individuals, not groups.

According to Kukathas, the conflict associated with accommodating group identities centers around the fact that public recognition of equality has come to require two forms of respect - respect for the individual and respect for the group. The problem is that the demand for recognition as individuals and as a member of a group can pull in different directions. As a result, Kukathas says he “…tries to play down the concern for group rights by describing cultural communities as having their legitimate basis in individual freedom of association” (1992: 119).

From the liberal individualist point of view the fundamental freedom that all members of a liberal democracy enjoy is freedom of association (Kukathas 1992: 116-117). This liberal model of civil society is rooted in a voluntarist paradigm of the individual as chooser. Kukathas acknowledges that there may be limits on the rights of individuals to join a cultural community, that some individuals are seen as members of a

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3 As an illustration the Equal Opportunity Act of 1972 and the Equal Opportunity Commission generated the legal machinery for many non whites to sue companies, schools, and universities for thousands of dollars.
cultural community on account of birth rather than deliberate choice. Accordingly, he argues, cultural communities are not truly products of freedom of affiliation.\(^4\)

Although he acknowledges the importance, and complexity of the social group Kukathas’ dependence on the liberal value of freedom of affiliation or association endorses a picture of “race” that is problematic. Sociologists Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann (1998: 23-24) observe that notions of race have power and force in American life. They maintain that race is an imposed “identifier” constructed by others. Race is an identifier based on perceived physical differences, creating a typology or hierarchy of differences, reflecting power relations and imputing “inherent” or “naturally intrinsic” differences of worth. What makes race significant is its use as a category of power that includes some people and excludes others. Given Cornell and Hartmann’s description, it seems that race and the ideal of freedom of association pull in opposite directions. While Kukathas holds that “racialized” individuals are not free in any strong sense of the word, Cornell and Hartmann intimate that they are not free in any sense of the word, since they are deprived of freedom of association. Race matters and it matters quite independently of individual choice and desire, precisely because choice and individual desire are not fully recognized or addressed.

In his sober analysis of the liberal tradition, philosopher Dwight Furrow observes that liberals have made a habit of conceptualizing solutions to human problems in terms of impartial rules and procedures. While a focus on impartial rules and procedures demands that we accord each person equal treatment this may result in not being sensitive to the unique needs of others. Furrow insists that the rationality of impartial procedures is a poor substitute for care, compassion, and empathy (Furrow 2009: 134).

An up-to-date illustration of these critical issues has been on display in France for the last four years. The French refuse to distinguish between racial, ethnic, and national identities. There are no French-Algerians, French-Moroccans, or Afro-French; liberal democratic France promotes individual rights and liberties (Murline, 2005:35-37). Although they maintain that they have established a colorblind society, in October of 2005, young Arab and African men sparked riots that spread across the country. Their plea for jobs, education, and decent housing echoed the cries historically raised by oppressed minorities.

In 2008 Steven Erlanger (2008: A6) reported that the riots continue sporadically and France’s President Nicolas Sarkozy “who was interior minister three years ago [and] called the rioters, ‘rabble’ and ‘scum,’ has put three women from immigrant backgrounds in his government.” The idea, according to Erlanger (2008: A6), is to have immigrants who understand immigrants promote assistance for the poor and working class minorities living in France’s ghettos. In addition France is testing an affirmative-action program in one of its elite universities (Abdollah 2005; A11). They are also

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\(^4\) Of course, one could argue that freedom of affiliation is a major factor in, if not the foundation for, self-actualization and development. Without the freedom of association/affiliation one’s options for education, family life, health, residence, expression, and career are adversely affected.
concerned about “racial” and ethnic profiling by the police. Although profiling is illegal in France, a recent study concluded that “Paris police stop young Arab and black men for identity checks far more often than they stop young whites” (2009: A6). Indeed, it seems the continuing unrest has pushed the French to confront the importance of “racial” identity and implement procedures and policies that are sensitive to the unique needs of specific others. Individualist France has come to acknowledge that a person harmed in relation to society’s normative standards, as a member of a despised group, can suffer on account of a shared negative identity. And this harm might necessitate that society recognize via group rights, the vulnerability of the individual as a member of a social group.

Multiculturalism: What Special Problems Does the Existence of Racial Groups Pose?

For multiculturalists, like philosopher Will Kymlicka (1995:80-89), the world’s history of colonialism, race slavery, and racial oppression has produced a complicated and heinous situation that challenges the ability of societies to be free of racial animus by drawing solely upon impartial liberal individualist ideals. Kymlicka complicates the individualist paradigm by emphasizing that “who I am” is related to “how I am recognized by others,” Cultural membership influences self-identity. Self-identity and self-esteem are, at least in part, socially constructed by producto. While the members of liberal democratic societies are individuals, their imputed racial or ethnic membership may affect how they are identified regardless of their ambitions, desires, motivations, or achievements.

Kymlicka reinterprets the liberal individualist thesis: ethnic, national, or immigrant identity should be the basis for moral claims and political demands. He holds that liberal democracies should give equal moral weight to interests and claims made by disadvantaged minorities. Only then would equal recognition bring about equal respect. Cultural membership shapes identity and affects self-determination, precisely because socially imputed categorization into group “memberships” by society at large influences self-determination. In short, he argues that the existence of a cultural community as a context of choice is necessary if not sufficient for the members of ethnic minorities to live a meaningful life (Kymlicka 1995: 75-76).

Since my interests concern race and the liberal tradition, and Kymlicka (1995:23) claims that he is not talking about racial groups, for many my keen desire to scrutinize Kymlicka’s position might seem misplaced. However, I think his analysis does speak to the relationship between racial identity and liberal ideals. Once one replaces what Kymlicka considers to be the false biological definition of group identity with a socio-historical conception, the boundaries between groups appear to blur and overlap. Hence, the line that divides racial and ethnic minorities or racial and national minorities is not always clear. For example, the African American community has been defined as a colonized group - the product of national oppression (Omi and Winant: 36-38). Ethnic groups have defined themselves in racial terms. One time racial groups, such as the Irish, have become ethnic groups (Ignatiev 1995:38). Thus it seems that racial, ethnic,
and national groups do not always form discrete categories. Second, racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups often are seen, characterized, and defined in racial terms. Native Americans, a national minority according to Kymlicka, define themselves and are defined by the federal government in terms of ancestry or blood. Historically they have been characterized in terms of their body type and skin color. Third, national, ethnic, and immigrant groups have not escaped racial oppression by the dominant community. They have been classified and enslaved as racial groups. Hence, much of what Kymlicka says about national, ethnic, and immigrant groups is applicable in the case of racial minorities and vice versa. My concern is what this means for Kymlicka’s thesis.

Consider Canada, for example. The French are the subordinate culture in Canada; however, a multiracial, multiethnic society, has an official policy of multiculturalism. Its social pluralism led to a 1963 Royal Commission on Biculturalism and Bilingualism that made both English and French official languages. Since Quebeckers are concerned with the survival of their French culture, there are language laws that regulate who can send their children to English-language schools. According to these laws, Francophones and immigrants must send their children to French-language schools, while Canadian Anglophones can send their children to English-language schools (Charles Taylor 1994; 52-55). The point is that for Quebeckers their cultural identity provides them with meaningful options; it is the basis of freedom and dignity.

Nonetheless, a variety of arguments can be advanced to challenge existing definitions of racial and cultural identities as a sound normative base for public recognition and public policy. For example, the roles associated with racial identity or consciousness, “necessarily impose limits - restrictions on what one can do, be, or become” (Wasserstrom 1979: 20). To take a recent case in point, President Barack Obama (2008: para. 9) observed that, “At various stages in the [primary] campaign some commentators deemed me either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough.’” I took him to mean that if he appeared “too black” he would alienate white voters. On the other hand, if he appeared to be “not black enough” he might push away black voters. As a result, Obama is defined by his race.

So too, in January of 2009 Norimitsu Onishi (2009: Al) reported that Japan’s “crowning of Hiromu Nonaka as its top leader would have been as significant as America’s election of its first black president.” Mr. Nonaka is a descendent of a minority known as the Buraku. In Japan there are approximately 2.5 million Burakumin. Although the Burakumin have no physically distinguishing features from other Japanese, they are nonetheless “identified” as another race (Oliner and Gay 1997: 163). Historically, the Burakumin were discriminated against because of the type of work they did—dealing with the remains of dead animals, a Buddhist anathema. Presently, they do not work in these traditional occupations, but the stigma remains. Therefore, Burakumin identity is not solely a product of the work they performed within their respective communities;
rather, it results from a history of interaction between the dominant Japanese community in Japan and an ostracized minority (Oliner and Gay: 163).

I draw on this example because the racial identity imposed on the Burakumin has been confining, oppressive, and based on ideological distortions of their nature. Although the Japanese began affirmative action policies for the Buraku some years ago many of the Burakumin have fought legislation, registries, and ordinances that, while helpful in fighting discrimination, might also identify them as Burakumin, a term which they prefer not to have applied to them. In short, socially constructed racial identities, which reflect inequalities of power and social groupings, can entail affronts to dignity and self-esteem. Hence, to attain respect, many Burakumin have found it reasonable and necessary to reject their imposed racial identity and develop another sense of themselves (Oliner and Gay: 163). Indeed, sociologists Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1997:33-45) argue that focusing on and exploring the meaning of socially significant terms without delving into the structure of society can mask relations of power. Consider that group rights provide Native American tribes with the means of protecting their historic cultures and identities. However, these special rights have done little to change the place, identity, and power of Native Americans in American (or Canadian) social and political life as a whole (Berteaux 1999: 82).

Although multiculturalists seek to acknowledge and accommodate group identity and difference, where people identify themselves and others as belonging to different races there may be violations of liberal ideals, resulting in inequality, subordination, and racism. Consequently, acknowledging and accommodating racial identity through group rights may not rescue the liberal tradition. Given that established racial identity is not necessarily a sound basis for recognition and respect, it is possible that a liberal democracy should reject any desire of its members to identify in terms of a common racial identity or racial consciousness. I turn to this key question.

Assimilation, The Third Position: Is This a Problem for Diversity?

According to philosopher Richard Wasserstrom (1979:17), “In creating and tolerating a society in which race matters, we must recognize that we have created a vastly more complex concept of race, which includes what might be called ethnicity as well as a set of attitudes, traditions, beliefs, etc., which the society has made part of what it means to be a race.” Focusing on this complexity raises crucial questions for liberal social theorists. Racial identity has historically been an important factor for democracies to deal with because of the adverse repercussions on many people as well as its contradiction to the very principles that democracies purport of honor. Do the issues that Kukathas and Kymlicka leave unattended imply that there may be no role for race in a liberal democracy?

Wasserstrom (1979:14-17) defines three rival ideals of a nonracist society: assimilation, diversity, and tolerance. He also claims that there are three realms in which racism affects society. The first is the political realm of equal political and civil
rights. The second is the realm of equal educational and employment opportunities and promotion. The third is the realm of personal relationships; for example, love, sex, marriage, and private association. The critical question is: Which ideal (assimilation, diversity, or tolerance) is the best for all three realms in which racism affects society? In the realm of political and civil rights, the three ideals agree that race should not matter. In the realm of educational and employment opportunities they also agree that race should not matter. A nonracist society is clearly a society in which there is no racial discrimination at the level of major political and economic institutions—all the ideals agree on this. Thus, this leaves the third realm of personal relationships, involving most fundamentally, freedom of association as the primary site of controversy between the rival liberal ideals (Wasserstrom 1979:14). What would be the effect in the third realm of adopting each of these ideals? Which idea should a liberal democratic society embrace?

Wasserstrom (1979:17) outlines at least three problems with anti-assimilationist ideals (diversity and tolerance). First, anti-assimilationist ideals would sustain unequal relationships of power. Given that historically the recognition of “difference” has led to the concentration of power in the hands of whites, then it seems that a nonracist society would not promote ideals that acknowledge or accommodate difference.

Second, anti-assimilationist ideals may not provide the space required for individuality, authenticity, or freedom. For instance, if one understands what it means for a woman to be identified as not “feminine” enough by others or for a man to be identified as not “masculine” enough, then it is clear how feminine or masculine identities could be confining to one's identity. Wasserstrom suggests race works in the same way as feminine or masculine identities. The roles associated with racial identity or consciousness, “necessarily impose limits restrictions on what one can do, be, or become” (Wasserstrom 1979:20).

Third, since all role-differentiated living is restrictive Wasserstrom (1979: 20) insists that, “perhaps all strongly role-differentiated societies are objectionable.” Consequently he says, “As such I think they [anti-assimilationist ideals] are prima facie wrong.” In sum, then, Wasserstrom (1979:15; see also Outlaw, 1996: 80) contends that under the assimilationist ideal, racial groups would be absorbed into the majority community. The community as a whole would acknowledge and emphasize a common identity, common memories, traditions, customs, ways of feeling, thinking, and so on. If Wasserstrom is correct, it appears that to overcome racism we must get rid of races.

Is an identity or consciousness that is voluntarily chosen and not associated with exploitation, subordination, and oppression really racial identity or something else? Sociologists Cornell and Hartmann (1998: 23-24) argue that exploitation, subordination, and oppression are experiences that historically have been a part of the social environment that racial groups inhabit. Wherever people see themselves as belonging to racial groups, there have been violations of liberal ideals.
On the other hand, even if a society gets rid of the construct of race, that does not mean exploitation, subordination, and oppression will disappear. Argentina is a case in point. In Argentina all the blacks have disappeared. A 2005 *Washington Post* article touts this as “one of Argentina’s most enduring mysteries” (Reel 2006: A13). Early in the nineteenth century blacks composed close to thirty percent of the population of Argentina’s capital city—Buenos Aires—while near the end of that century, their numbers had decreased precipitously. “Where did all the blacks go?” The article asks. Recent studies suggest that “black Argentines did not vanish; they just faded into the mixed-race population” (Reel 2006b: A13). According to Professor Miriam Gomes, an Afro-Argentine teaching at the University of Buenos Aires, many black Argentines simply deny they are black. “They want to believe they are white,” she says. “Here, if someone has one drop of white blood, they call themselves white” (Reel 2006b:A13). Professor Gomes acknowledges however, that racial prejudice persists in Argentina independently of individual choice and desire, because discrimination based upon unofficial races still persists.

**What Does This Analysis Recommend?**

Whither now in the age of America’s first black President, individualism, multiculturalism, assimilationism, or perhaps a new paradigm? Sociologists S. M. Miller and Anthony J. Savoie (2002: 14-15) argue that the success of an individual person of color does not change the reality of race for every person of color. They insist that disrespect is a complex phenomenon that has economic, political, social, and socio-psychological meaning. Miller and Savoie draw on a National Opinion Research Center survey to show that economic improvement “does not automatically transform a demeaned group to an accepted, fully engaged force in society. The economic gain may be small; the prejudice and exclusion may be deep and pervasive” (2002: 37). So too, since it is the group in power that usually enforces legal rights, and interprets, initiates, maintains, or expand efforts to dismantle oppressive attitudes and beliefs. What this analysis does, then, is remind us that society produces complex situations such as racial inequality that call for a synthesis of historical, social, and cultural insights.

My point is the construct of race, as it appears in the individualist, multiculturalist, and assimilationist paradigms is not a meaningful description of people or reality. These paradigms are themselves having to deal with a construct that is not only scientifically nonexistent but changes over time. Whereas some are convinced that, to overcome race and racism, all liberal democracies need to live up to their ideals, others maintain that liberal ideals and values must be reinterpreted, and still others, that we must get rid of the construct of race (Berteaux 2010). Actually, whether racial identities are compatible with liberal democratic ideals depends on how one defines race, racism, and the ideals in question.
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