

COLORBLIND

The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and
the Retreat from Racial Equity

Tim Wise



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Preface

“There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”

With these words, delivered as part of his first speech to a national audience, then-Illinois state senator Barack Obama elicited uproarious applause from those assembled in Boston for the 2004 Democratic National Convention. As political theater goes, it was nearly perfect, not only for dyed-in-the-wool party faithful, but for a nation largely unfamiliar with the young U.S. Senate candidate. In the span of approximately a half-hour, Obama straddled the line between liberal platitudes and moderate-to-conservative bombast, calling for studious adherence to civil liberties in the midst of the so-called “war on terror,” but also insisting that the United States had enemies that must be found, pursued “and defeated.” On the domestic front, this ideological ecumenism continued, with Obama calling for substantial public investments in

health care and education, apropos for most any liberal politician, and then turning rightward, emphasizing the importance of self-reliance and personal responsibility in the face of hardship. To that end, he called for parents to turn off the television and, in what seemed like a broadside directed specifically at the African American community, admonished black folks to reject the oft lamented (but according to scholarly research, over-claimed) mentality that to be “black with a book” is to be guilty of “acting white.” In short, there was something in the speech for most everyone.

Although Obama said little during his keynote that evening about race or racism, he stood before the nation (and the world) as a living embodiment of America’s longstanding racial drama. As he discussed his ancestry—his Kenyan father and Kansas-born mother—he seemed to suggest that his very presence on the stage was symbolic of something larger than himself, and surely larger than Senator John Kerry, whom he had come to praise that night as the Party’s candidate for president. Indeed, Obama made a point of claiming that “in no other country on Earth” was his story “even possible.” Presumably, there was something uniquely good, and uniquely multicultural, about the United States. Despite our long night of the soul when it comes to race, and the legacy of white supremacy from which the country was only beginning to emerge at the time of Obama’s birth, the young and charismatic orator assured us, we were well on our way to the Promised Land. His own life story was proof of it.

To the commentators who make up what we might call the *cognitariat* of American politics, Obama was a blessing on two fronts: first, a political figure with a polish and youthful vitality unseen since John F. Kennedy; and second, a man of color who

despite his racial identity seemed at home in the center of the political spectrum, largely unconnected to civil rights and antiracist movements, and unthreatening to whites who had long ago turned off to identifiably black political struggles and leaders. He quickly became the darling of the chattering class: a bunch that was mostly white, well educated (and thus taken with his Harvard Law pedigree), and politically center-left, much like this new upstart from Chicago.

Though most predicted a bright future for Obama, few could have expected the trajectory his life would take within four short years. It is, after all, one thing to have your book rise to the top of the best-seller list, or even to win a Grammy Award (as Obama did, for the audio version of his autobiography), but it is quite another to become president of the United States. Yet he managed to do just that—beating Senator John McCain even before completing his own first term in the U.S. Senate—to become the nation's first black president.

Obama won the White House with a combination of deft political strategy and the enthusiasm of millions of young people, energized by his persona and by his relative generational proximity to them. Obama was the candidate of college students, recent graduates and those between 30 and 45. Senator McCain was “your grandfather’s” candidate: the former POW, a fighter from an older era (both chronologically and in terms of disposition). In an age defined by media imagery, Obama’s win should have come as no surprise. Yet right up until the end, there was doubt about his ability to prevail. Yes, he was the far better spoken candidate. Yes, he had the more detailed policy positions. Yes, he had lots of money—more than his opponent—and some of the best political

minds behind him. Yes, he was running against a party that had given the nation George W. Bush, whose policies, by 2008, were fiercely unpopular. And yes, he had all those young people. But still, there was the question of race.

Put simply, how could a nation founded as a white settler colony built with the forced labor of enslaved Africans—and where whites were still the majority of voters—elect a man of color less than two generations after the fall of formal apartheid? For some, the answer was simple: *It couldn't*. Whites might say they were going to support Obama, but in the end, they would pull the lever for McCain. That was the conventional wisdom for many, polls notwithstanding. But despite the naysayers, the senator trudged on, picking up unexpected levels of support even in traditionally conservative states, leaving the pundits to scratch their heads and ask if there had been some political realignment about which they had been theretofore unaware. Could it be that white Americans had finally overcome their biases, such that they might now elect a black president? And not just any black president, but one with the middle name *Hussein*?

The results of the election are now history. President Obama, though he received fewer than half of all white votes cast, did manage to obtain more white votes than any Democrat in the previous forty-plus years. But what that outcome says and doesn't say about white racial bias is less clear. Indeed, in my last book, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*, I document the extent of ongoing racial discrimination in the United States, and the significant degree to which white Americans, by their own admission, continue to adhere to a number of fundamentally racist views about African Americans

and other people of color. Therein, I suggest that Obama's election, far from serving as evidence that racism had been defeated, might signal a mere shape-shifting of racism, from Racism 1.0 to Racism 2.0, an insidious upgrade that allows millions of whites to cling to racist stereotypes about people of color generally, while nonetheless carving out exceptions for those who, like Obama, make us comfortable by seeming so "different" from what we view as a much less desirable norm.

In *Colorblind*, I examine more closely the consequences of the Obama victory, in terms of its likely long-term effects on the nation's racial discourse. Where *Between Barack and a Hard Place* sought to explore what the election said, and didn't say, about racism in America, *Colorblind* examines the impact of the Obama victory on our ability as a nation to tackle—or even openly discuss—matters of race and racism.

Principally, I seek to explore what is perhaps the most disturbing dilemma of the current political moment as regards matters of race. On the one hand, it was candidate Obama's use of the *rhetoric of racial transcendence* that made his victory possible, by assuaging white fears that he would focus on racial injustice, or seek to remedy the same, were he elected president. But on the other hand, it is that same avoidance of race issues that has now made it more difficult than ever to address ongoing racial bias, and has hamstrung the president's ability to push back against some of the opposition to his agenda, even when that opposition is framed in blatantly racist ways. Furthermore, because the rhetoric of racial transcendence requires a similarly race-neutral policy agenda to match it, Obama has eschewed any direct focus on narrowing racial gaps in income, wealth, education, housing or health care, in favor of a

“universal” approach that purports to help all in need. While such efforts may disproportionately benefit persons of color—if simply because they are disproportionately among those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy—they are presented to the masses as the product of colorblind public policy.

This combination of race-neutral rhetoric and colorblind public policy comprise what I call *post-racial liberalism*. Post-racial liberalism is a form of left-of-center politics, which has had its adherents dating back at least forty years, and which emerged after the civil rights revolution had largely accomplished its immediate goals with the passage of legal protections against discrimination in employment and public accommodations (1964), voting (1965) and housing (1968). In the wake of those legislative victories, and following several years of violent uprisings in urban centers thanks to frustration at the slow pace of change—especially with regard to economic opportunity—some of the nation’s scholars and public intellectuals began to turn against race-specific remedies for lingering racial inequities. Beginning in the late 1970s with sociologist William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race* and extending through to the Obama campaign for the presidency, post-racial liberalism has advocated a de-emphasis of racial discrimination and race-based remedies for inequality, in favor of class-based or “universal” programs of uplift: from job creation policies to better education funding to health care reform.

In *Colorblind*, I explore the rise of post-racial liberalism, culminating in the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008. Obama’s victory, dependent as it was on a rhetoric of racial transcendence and a public policy agenda of colorblind universalism, can be seen as the ultimate triumph for the post-racial approach.

In chapter one, we'll examine the way in which Obama represents and extends the tradition of post-racial liberalism, in terms of his rhetoric and public policy stance. Then in chapter two, we'll explore the potential consequences of post-racial liberalism for the cause of racial justice and the reasons why post-racial liberalism is problematic, few of which have been explored publicly since Obama's election.

First, post-racial liberalism is inadequate for remedying persistent racial inequities. Because those inequities are themselves too often the result of racial discrimination and race-specific injuries perpetrated by whites against people of color—and not, as post-racial liberalism insists, the result of race-neutral economic or cultural factors—applying “universal” solutions to said inequities will likely fail to fully ameliorate them. Even the pragmatic case made for colorblind universalism—namely, that it is the only approach that can garner white support for progressive social policy—is of dubious validity. Because of a steady drumbeat of racially coded conservative propaganda concerning government programs for those in need, even universal public policy approaches (with regard to education, health care or job creation) will likely be seen as disproportionately benefiting people of color. This in turn will trigger white racial resentment, which is regularly manipulated by reactionary commentators and politicians seeking to derail the Obama presidency. Hence, to ignore race and push a race-blind rhetoric and policy approach will only allow the right to manipulate racial angers unmolested and unchecked. In other words, the notion that liberals' post-racial approach will allow for the building of political support for progressive policies rests on a naïve understanding of how the public *perceives* social policy, even

when it is presented in terms that are colorblind. To the extent that much of the white public envisions such efforts as universal health care, job creation or increased educational funding as efforts intended to help people of color, post-racial liberalism will fail, even on its own terms.

Secondly, implicit racial biases (which often exist side-by-side with an outwardly non-racist demeanor and persona) frequently influence the way we view and treat others. Being aware of these biases and alert to their possible triggering gives us all a fighting chance at keeping them in check. But colorblindness, by discouraging discussions of racial matters and presuming that the best practice is to ignore the realities of racism, makes it more difficult to challenge those biases, and thus increases the likelihood of discrimination. To the extent a public discourse of colorblindness “trickles down” to our private lives, workplaces, schools and elsewhere, thereby discouraging us from taking race and its consequences into account, we will likely fail to adequately address real and persistent racial bias and fail to ensure true equity of opportunity.

In fact, as I will argue, colorblindness not only fails to remedy discrimination and racial inequity, it can actually make both problems worse. To begin, if the rhetoric of racial transcendence gives the impression—as it does, almost by definition—that the racial injustices of the past are no longer instrumental in determining life chances and outcomes, it will become increasingly likely that persons seeing significant racial stratification in society will rationalize those disparities as owing to some cultural or biological flaw on the part of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In other words, racial bias would become almost *rational* once observers of inequity were deprived of the critical social context needed to understand

the conditions they observe. Whereas a color-conscious approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of racial inequities and how they've been generated, colorblindness encourages placing blame for the conditions of inequity on those who have been the targets of systemic injustice. Ironically, this means that colorblindness, often encouraged as the ultimate non-racist mentality, might have the consequence of giving new life to racist thinking.

Additionally, colorblindness can perpetuate and even deepen systemic racism. Encouraging individuals and institutions to downplay the role of race and racism in the lives of the public will only impede the ability to respond to the needs of that public. For instance, if employers operate on the basis of colorblindness, they will be less likely to consider the way that job applicants of color have been impacted by the opportunity structure; so too admissions officers at colleges and universities. Thus they may perceive applicants of color as less qualified than their white counterparts, based solely on a handful of outward manifestations of merit, which are themselves heavily influenced by that opportunity structure. Whereas color-conscious approaches allow and even encourage institutions to take into consideration the full range of factors that might shape a job or college applicant's on-paper credentials (and thus engage in deliberate efforts to provide opportunity to those who may have less impressive formal resumes but be equally or more qualified), colorblindness makes it unlikely that such considerations would be brought to bear.

In the final analysis, the problem with colorblindness and post-racial liberalism is that they ignore the different ways in which we experience the society around us. If certain people face obstacles not faced by others—such as race-based discrimination—then

universal programs of general uplift cannot possibly serve as the palliative for their condition. Likewise, imagine how absurd it would be to say that universal programs of opportunity were the best solution for persons who were disabled. Since persons with disabilities face obstacles that are directly related to their disability—including presumptions of lesser competence and actual physical constraints in workplaces and elsewhere—to think that economic growth alone, or a jobs bill, or universal health care would suffice to remedy their social disempowerment would be preposterous. So much so that no one would ever offer universal solutions for improving life for the disabled, or an “ability-blind” approach, since to be blind to (dis)ability is to make it impossible to address the very thing that is giving rise to the individual’s mistreatment and lesser opportunity in the first place.

By endorsing colorblind universalism as a solution to persistent inequities, President Obama implies, intentionally or not, that there are no institutional obstacles faced by people of color that could not be weakened or abolished by colorblind policies and programs alone. He also implies that whites and people of color face the same set of obstacles and do so on a relatively even playing field. But these notions are so utterly saturated with falsehood that a man as intelligent as he simply cannot believe them, which then leaves only political calculation as the basis for his position. Sadly, if President Obama is willing to ignore the pain of race-based discrimination and injustice, so as to make whites comfortable—and this, after he has already been elected and the campaign is long over—then the likelihood he will ever speak the truth about these matters, let alone address them, shrinks to nearly zero. In which case there is no option left but for us to correct the record, and

pointedly, before his approach does real damage to the cause of civil rights and racial equity.

In the final chapter, I propose a new paradigm for both public policy considerations and private personal and institutional practice: an approach I call *illuminated individualism*. While conservatives have long pushed for a complete disregarding of group identity in favor of a focus on rugged individualism and personal achievement, and liberals like Obama have promoted a collective national identity under a “one America” motif, herein I suggest a third option. Illuminated individualism seeks to respect the uniqueness of all persons and communities—and thus not to assume that racial identity or country of origin, as in the case of non-citizens seeking to become residents, automatically tells us what we need to know about a person and their background—while yet acknowledging the general truth that to be white, a person of color, indigenous, or an immigrant continues to have meaning in the United States.

In other words, we are neither *merely* individuals, nor merely Americans. Race continues to matter. Only by being aware of that meaning and resolving to view individuals and communities as they really are—which requires acknowledging their languages, cultures, traditions, and racialized experiences—can we actually hope to build the kind of democracy that treats all persons fairly and equally. And just as important, only by illuminating our own individual and community uniqueness—including our personal biases—can we hope to check the tendency to disadvantage and exclude, which sadly is still far too common. Illuminated individualism then suggests a number of policy options and practices, at both the public and private level, which I also explore in this concluding chapter.

Although there is certainly much political activity on the right that concerns me, merely critiquing the often overtly racist machinations of reactionaries is insufficient for a political moment such as this. Just as important, those committed to a truly equitable nation must explore the ways in which our responses to right-wing rhetoric and race-baiting have often been ill informed. Indeed, efforts by those on the right to roll back many of the gains that have been hard-fought over the years when it comes to racial equity are only enhanced by post-racial liberalism and the politics of colorblindness. In effect, post-racial liberalism gives aid and comfort to the right-wing enemy, and must be fought directly as the enabling force that it has come to be. If those of us committed to racial justice (and this would include people who consider themselves liberals, progressives, leftists, radicals, and even many so-called moderates) would challenge colorblindness and make the case for color-consciousness and racism-consciousness, we might yet build and strengthen the social movements needed to repel attacks from those who deliberately seek to weaken the freedom struggle.

Although there are many arenas in which racism perpetrated by whites continues to manifest, I have chosen here to focus on four specific areas: employment, housing, education and health care. Previously I have written about racism in the justice system, and I consider this to be a vitally important area for exploration. But in this book I have chosen not to examine racism in the criminal justice system, principally because unlike with the other subjects, there is no significant post-racial liberal approach to resolve the disparities in terms of sentencing, profiling or punishment. Most all folks to the left of the political spectrum, when they address

racism in the justice system, endorse, at least in theory, race-conscious bans on racial profiling, and attention to race-specific disparities in sentencing, particularly regarding drug incarcerations. In other words, there is no real colorblind universal approach to addressing racial disparity in the justice system, as there is with the other areas of consideration. Since this volume seeks to critique a particular school of thought, I have chosen to focus my efforts on those arenas of life where the president and others have put forward a clear articulation of post-racial liberalism and colorblind universalism: jobs, housing, schooling and health. For those interested in the evidence regarding justice system bias, the data in *Between Barack and a Hard Place* is, unfortunately, still pertinent and worth examining.

Because of my use of the term “colorblind” in the title, and the repeated reference to the problems of colorblindness throughout this book, I would be remiss if I didn’t at least reference the work of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, whose concept of “colorblind racism” has been so helpful in shaping the last several years of critical race theory and analysis. In Bonilla-Silva’s work, the term colorblind racism refers to the dominant white racial ideology of the modern era, in which whites, under the guise of being colorblind, refuse to acknowledge the reality of racism and reject any consideration of how their own racial identity provides them with privileges vis-à-vis people of color. By taking a stance amounting to that of a 3-year-old who sticks his fingers in his ears and shouts “la, la, la, la” over and over again to avoid hearing whatever his parents might be saying, many whites evade race as a topic, thereby allowing them to cast as racist anyone who broaches the subject. Colorblind racism supports white perspectives that people of color

are to blame for their own problems in life—after all, if we’re being colorblind we don’t examine the historical structures of white domination that so often determine social position—and thereby deepens white racial hostility to the very people of color about whom whites are technically resolving not to think of in racialized and bigoted ways. This book examines the notion of colorblind racism in a slightly different way than Bonilla-Silva, exploring its operation within the national political discourse and the way in which it stems from a longer tradition of post-racial liberalism dating back decades.

Although *Colorblind* takes aim at a form of modern liberalism, the critique of colorblindness contained herein is meant for anyone, regardless of self-professed political ideology, who believes that paying *less* attention to race and racial identity is the proper response to racial inequity. This includes many liberals, to be sure, but also some who are further to the left and who, because of their focus on economic class, occasionally give short shrift to race and racism as well. So too, persons who would never consider themselves on the left at all, *per se*, but who fervently believe, often with the best of intentions, that colorblindness is a positive paradigm for thought and action. It is my hope that even if, at the end of the day, readers disagree about the political efficacy of colorblind public policy, they will yet re-commit themselves in their private and professional lives to a more color-conscious direction, so as to foster greater equity of opportunity throughout the institutional spaces where we all operate.

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