

Race As a Distraction

The President and the press are making a mistake assuming that race is a distraction from the real problems such as the economy, healthcare, education, and housing. According to them, the recent racialized episode in Cambridge has overshadowed Obama's ability to overhaul the nation's health care system. Over a few beers, he was perhaps hoping to turn the page on race talk and refocus on the real issues.

But all the "real" problems involve a serious racial aspect. Notably, if we had affordable housing in areas rich with opportunity, it would be less likely that non-whites would be concentrated in impoverished communities of color, where their education, employment and health care systems are compromised.

Although the recession has diminished the racial gap in unemployment, whites experiencing job loss for the first time, especially older males, are just beginning to feel its effects on their ability to maintain their homes, their insurance, and their level of living. Communities of color have experienced this diminishment of life opportunities since their contact with whites. Under current conditions, black and Hispanic unemployment could reach as high as 18.2% and 13.1% respectively, in comparison to approximately 9% for whites, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Because barriers to opportunity are real, we must resist the notion that we now live in a "post-racial" society. Rather, we can look at communities of color as "canaries in the coal mine," a metaphor applied by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres. These communities are the first to detect that there is toxicity in the air that harms all, although they are the hardest hit by it. The housing crisis, for example, originated in communities of color, through practices such as predatory lending, but has now spread to all sectors of society.

After the Great Depression the "New Deal" announced new opportunities for those who were hard-hit. But nonwhites were largely excluded from taking advantage of those opportunities. For example, the "universal" program of social security benefited white males the most, and explicitly excluded coverage for domestic and agricultural workers. Similarly, the opportunity to purchase homes offered by the G.I. Bill only trickled down to a small percentage of nonwhites, impairing their ability to build up intergenerational equity.

To recover from our current recession we must not make the same mistakes. Universal policies that are race-neutral will not address the multiple barriers that confront communities of color. *Fair* recovery, on the other hand, seeks to enhance opportunity for all, including older white males, while reducing the disparities between historically marginalized groups. The concept known as "targeted universalism" encourages policies that acknowledge that the nation's "real" issues are always racialized, as well as universalized.

Unfortunately, our federal system often insulates itself from these types of democratizing demands by viewing them as less than crucial to social cohesion. As a result, whole areas of potential conflict remain non-racial.

But this is not the time to avoid race or view it as a distraction. Nor is it the time to tinker with opportunity barriers. Rather it is the time to transform American institutions to provide affordable housing, excellent education, economic growth and accessible health care for all Americans, including marginalized communities. The result would not only equalize life chances, it would also reduce racial resentment and increase social cohesion.

By Marguerite Hattouni Spencer

Senior Researcher

Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University