

AFTERWORD
Thoughts for a Pragmatic Theory of Race/Racism
[Prepublication version]

[Published in *Race & Ideology: Language, Symbolism, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Arthur K. Spears, Wayne State University Press (1999, pp. 225-229)]

Arthur K. Spears

The chapters in this volume cover a large territory. After spreading out, it would be well to narrow our focus, orienting our thinking to the main implications of the foregoing pages. As I stated in the introduction, it is my belief that thinking on race/racism should focus on fundamental, liberation-oriented questions in order to build a pragmatic theory of race/racism. Answering fundamental questions allows us to establish the range of possible liberation strategies. Much of the huge, recent production of writings on race/racism has been excellent, but nearly all of it is narrow and specialized in terms of basic questions such as, Where do we go from here, people of color, whites, and ex-whites (see the Introduction on the abolition of whiteness) in seeking greater freedom for realizing our potential?

The idea of America, the American Dream if you will, has always been that one can make it here--gain financial security and success and all the things they entail. I have always thought that anyone with a good education, ambition, good interpersonal skills, and a will to set goals and plan can become rich in the U.S., or attain other forms of success. But, of course, one of the central American ideas is that success is measured financially. The problem, though, is that gaining all of these qualities is a tall order. Where will the average American get a good college education (or even high school education, for that matter)? Without an educational system that by some stretch of the imagination provides equal educational opportunity, most students in the U.S. and especially those of color will not have access to an educational

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foundation for functioning successfully out in the world. The horror of large city public schools systems simply must be seen firsthand to be understood. Classroom practice simply must be observed to understand how the public schools' primary accomplishment is to dull the intellect, diminish self-esteem, and destroy any sense of order and progress, the few excellent public schools notwithstanding. Most of the very bad behavior of public schools students is merely an acting out of their hatred for an institution that despises and degrades them, a hatred that they do not know how to name and channel into something positive. Teaching in a large city public college, I meet many charming, and as I often discover, brilliant students in whom the public educational system has managed to instill irresponsibility and an embrace of ignorance. For several years, I was somewhat irritated by students' asking me what their grade was at different points during the course. They had all their grades and the simple grade calculation presented in the syllabus (25% for this, 25% for that, etc.). I found out that they simply did not know how to calculate their grade--and weren't interested in learning how. In a word, the basics one needs for success, or what we might term financial, psychological, and occupational comfort, are off limits to probably most Americans, and certainly most people of color. So, it will not do to state as the sociologist Orlando Patterson has ("The News Hour with Jim Lehrer," 11/13/1997, Channel 13 [Public Broadcasting System], New York City) that the skills problem is greater than the race problem. This is a misanalysis of the situation. Racism greatly hinders access to skills, and this is more the case as we descend the social scale to the poorer strata.

The fundamentals we can draw from the preceding pages are several. First, racial categorization and racism play a fundamental role in U.S. society: they prop up the entire system

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of social stratification and exploitation of working whites and people of color, with ethnicity as a secondary hierarchizing principle. Note that one's blackness in the U.S. is more determinative of how one will be touched by policemen than one's Ethiopianness, Cape Verdeanness, African Americanness, or Haitianness. The Ku Klux Klan does not inquire into *multiracial* matters and ethnic particulars before proceeding with lawn decoration and the suspension of "strange and bitter fruit." American discourse on ethnicity has not even provided us with a useful term for distinguishing the long-term resident, Anglophone black population from others. (Haitians, Ethiopians, etc. are *all* African Americans, as descendants of Africans.) Racism is the foundation of ruling elite power. Thus, the power sector of U.S. society will not allow for the elimination of racism without a suitable replacement. Only a replacement of the current power sector with another would eliminate this obstacle to racial progress.

Much indeed has been made of the progress of African Americans since World War II and the significant growth of the black middle class. The claim in the Introduction is that the condition of possibility for post-WW II civil rights progress was *realpolitik*, the capitalist-socialist struggle embodied in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War struggle for hearts and minds, but, above all, resources. Many statistical presentations indicate that the black condition has improved relative to that of whites. Even if we assume that such statistics speak the truth, the "facts" they reveal are superficial from a holistic, social system perspective.

As stated in the Introduction, ruling elites are mainly interested in maintaining ruling elite power, not white power or any ethnically-based power specifically. Mexican elites in California after the Mexican-American War intermarried with and otherwise joined the new

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American conquerors, as did Canadian French elites after the British conquest of Canada. U.S. elites themselves have accepted new additions, and not under conditions of conquest: The American power sector has gone from being predominantly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant to one of a more broadly defined whiteness, as various ethnic groups have assimilated into whiteness (the Irish, Eastern Europeans, Jews, etc.)

One could read the putative progress of blacks as indicating that they will eventually join the power sector of American society in significant numbers. Their doing so, however, would profoundly disturb the racial order. Another basic mechanism for maintaining control qua social stratification, something other than racial hierarchy, would have to be put in place before blacks could ascend in important numbers to the ruling elite. Highly influential and often wealthy blacks, the Colin Powells, Ron Browns, Vernon Jordans, Bill Cosbys, and Oprah Winfreys, are isolates; and, thus, in the full sense they are tokens. Taken together, such individuals do not create a collective thrust capable of changing the *structural* position of blacks.

What such individuals do reveal is the biggest story in the history of race in the U.S., one that has gone virtually unreported. This brings up the second point: the U.S. is experiencing a shift from a two-way, black-white racial system to a three-way one, composed of blacks, whites, and a third, in-between group of medium and lighter-range skin colors, including Asians and Hispanics (symbolically conceived of as lighter-skinned people of color—a false view, but one rigidly enforced by media discourses and images). Three-way systems, such as are found throughout most of Latin America, are notable for their category leakage: racial status is based on phenotype (physical appearance) and consequently can change more easily on the level of the

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individual and intergenerationally. It is not based on lineage, and thus is not fixed, as lineage is. Three-way systems also allow for a broader range of factors to be used in assigning racial status, including social and economic ones. They allow, in other words, for more whitening based on wealth and prestige. Stated differently, there is a greater leak of relatively darker-skinned persons out of lower-status racial categories into higher ones. The possibility of "honorary" lightening or whitening makes struggle to improve the condition of one's race less compelling; cooptation becomes more attractive when it can facilitate color promotion also.

The officialization or cultural and media recognition given to in-between groups in the middle color ranges reinforces distinct identities in those groups, thereby making cross-group, and consequently, cross-class political mobilization more difficult. (There is a strong color-class correlation.) Three-way systems also have the effect of reinforcing the desire of people of color to lighten their offspring: if families become lighter but still remain black, there is less incentive to lighten than if lightening increases racial rank in ways certified by hegemonic institutions, whether formally or informally. There is already significant color-stratification in communities of color, and the move toward a three-way system grants it ever more recognition, primarily in the media, as exemplified by the greatly expanded media discourse of multiracial persons. Another way of expressing this fundamental shift in the U.S. is by saying that the U.S. is changing from a racist order with discrete categories into a colorist one allowing seepage, both, of course, structured by white supremacy.

The leakage in a colorist, three-way racial system allows for some black, elite isolates who are "honorary" whites, but the transitional stage that the U.S. is in allows only almost

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"honorary" white status.. Thus, O.J. Simpson, a black man acquitted and convicted of murdering his white ex-wife, in separate trials, was never a full honorary white because there were still possible situations that could strip his ostensible honorary whiteness from him. His alleged murder of his white ex-wife, whatever else it may have been, was also treason against the racial order and exposed him as a nonbearer, in reality, of rich, white, male privilege. It is quite conceivable that if he had been truly white and rich enough, he could have "beat the rap," whether actually guilty or not.

Promotion to whiteness (e.g., of the Irish and Jews), in the context of a diminishing white population (in the U.S. and worldwide) has played itself out, based as it is on European ancestry. (Basically, all European-descent Americans are now white, in other words, members of the highest ranking racial or subracial group.) Besides, shifting to a leaky, colorist, three-way racial system fixes the problem of white population decline permanently (see the Introduction), it would seem, while satisfying a basic regime maintenance imperative--the maintenance of a white-supremacist racial order.

Racism, with its relatively unleaky, fixed categories, will not be the problem of the twenty-first century and the third millennium. "Colorstruction" will be.