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Opposing Racism and Human Bondage in the United States

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"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

– Nelson Mandela, "Long Walk to Freedom"

Since George Floyd's killing, leaders and institutions across the United States have been outdoing one another with sweeping statements against racism and white supremacy. Some are sincere and offer useful suggestions. Many are simply opportunist chants of political correctness lacking commitment.

As often the case, I hesitate to join the cicada symphony. Instead, I humbly offer some observations and ideas. First, a disclosure: the branches of my family tree that I know experienced slavery are not African American, but rather Slavic and Jewish. The word slave, in fact, derives from Slav. Millions were used for slave labor from Roman times down to the Ottoman Empire and, most recently, by Nazi Germany.

Recent events underscore that racial inequality remains a fact of life in the United States. In spite of this, some commentators, including black leaders, have noted that important changes have occurred since the [Civil Rights movement](#) gained momentum in the 1950s. As the young Alice Walker wrote in her first published essay, the movement transformed blacks' self-image and expectations.

What good was the civil rights movement? If it had just given this country Dr. King, a leader of conscience for once in our lifetime, it would have been enough. If it had just taken black eyes off white television stories, it would have been enough. If it had fed one starving child, it would have been enough. – Alice Walker, 1967

In the past, racial discrimination meant lynching, torched neighborhoods, and segregated schools. Today, we're talking incidents of [police abusing power](#) and statistics showing systemic disadvantage. Still not good. Still not acceptable. But better than before.

Until the Enlightenment-period ideas that all men are born with God-given, natural freedom and have voting rights became conventions, slavery was widely practiced and seen as normal across the world. African American scholar Thomas Sowell points out that England and the United States actually were among the countries that took the lead in banning slavery, which continues to be practiced in [many countries](#) as others look on.

It would be hard to believe that, in two or three generations, modern egalitarian principles could erase primal instincts of tribalism, and racism, that have driven human behavior for thousands of years. The process of sorting and mixing is hard-wired into human reproduction and evolution – causing inevitable friction, pain, and unequal justice. In modern democracies, inequality resulting from racial identity still requires constant vigilance and management. There are no easy solutions.

That said, here are a couple practices that might help reduce American racism:

More mixed marriages. Racism diminishes when people from different backgrounds work together, live in the same neighborhoods, socialize and worship together, and form families.

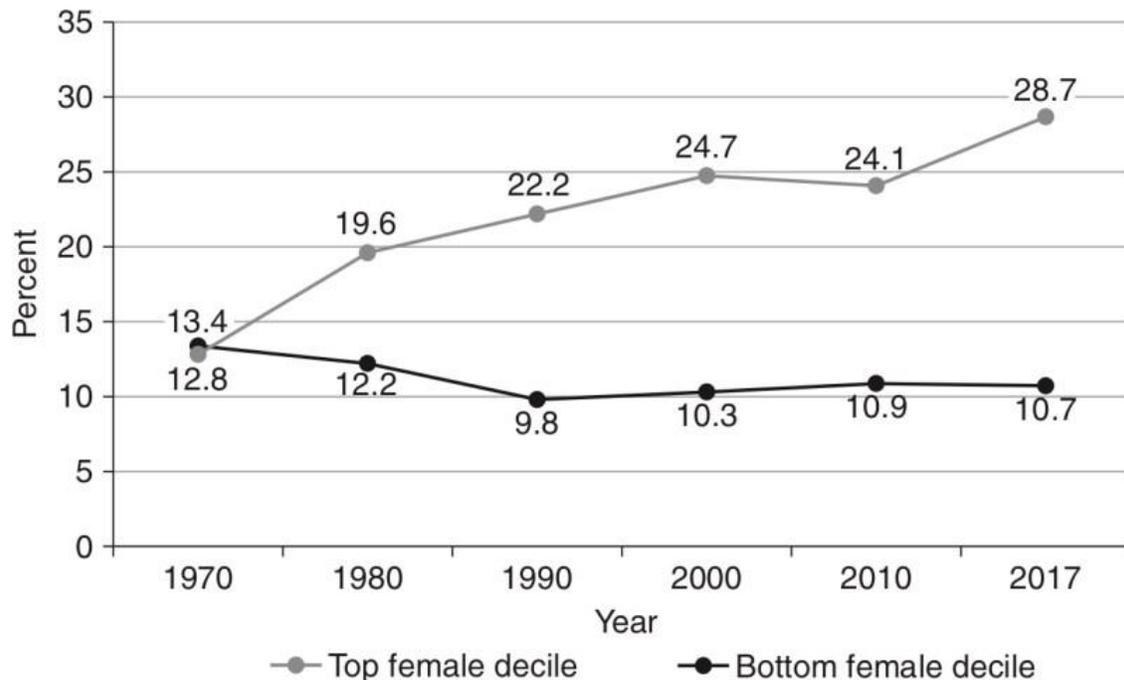
Inter-marriage has increased steadily since 1967 when the Supreme Court in [Loving v. Virginia](#) ruled that marriage across racial lines was legal throughout the country. By 2015, one-in-six newlyweds (17%) were married to a person of a different race or ethnicity, a more than fivefold increase from 3% in 1967. This trend will likely continue. [A growing percentage of Americans support inter-marriage](#). Only about 10 percent say they oppose it.

As with African Americans in general, a disproportionate number of mixed-race couples with a black partner end up living in [poorer neighborhoods](#). It's hard to pin down why. Do economic or cultural factors increase the odds that lower-

income people may consider marrying someone of another color? Do mixed-race couples simply still have fewer choices of jobs and housing?

Seeing more black-white couples with higher income levels would be a welcome development. Unfortunately, in today's capitalist economies, individuals with the highest levels of wealth and income increasingly tend to marry people similarly well-off – particularly women selecting men. This development does not help groups with histories of low income and wealth move up the economic ladder.

Percentage of U.S. Men Age 20 to 35 in the Top Male Decile of Labor Earnings Who Married Women Age 20 to 35 in the Top & Bottom Female Deciles by Labor Earnings, 1970 - 2017



Less obsession by political leaders, academia and the media with classifying people as white, black or other colors. Slavery was embedded in the U.S. Constitution. Following its instructions, the first U.S. Census in 1790 divided residents into categories of white males and females, other free persons, and slaves. Though the color of slaves was not specified, they were assumed to be dark skinned and of African descent. Ironically, enumeration of slaves gave their owners' states more representation in Congress -- though at the discounted rate of 3/5 of a free person.

More recently, the government's practice of classifying Americans by color has facilitated affirmative action and other policies intended to fight ingrained racism. In the long run, however, government racial classification tends to perpetuate racism and apartheid. It sends a constant message that skin color is of primary importance. While some of this type of research is necessary to ensure fairness and equity, too much can reinforce racial stereotypes and drive people farther apart, particularly if taken to imply one group of should receive more government benefits or hold higher rank than another in similar economic circumstances. Too much emphasis on racial classification enrages people who think they are left out. Americans of all skin colors can opt out of the racial classification regime by simply declining to answer survey questions about skin color or race.

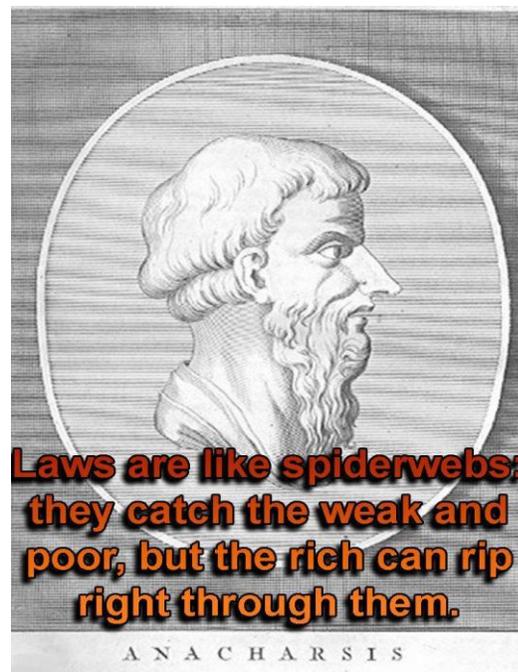
In recent years, in large part driven by politics, almost all research on poverty has looked through lenses of race and gender, rather than focusing on poor people per se. Now some are realizing that poor and [working class](#) people may have more economic and political interests in common than differences related to race.

[Rev. William Barber](#), leader of the [Poor People's Campaign](#), wisely points out that, in raw numbers, many more white Americans are poor than black. We are constantly told that a much higher percentage of blacks are poor than whites. He explains that stoking racial tensions is a standard tactic to deflect attention away from improving the lives of people across the economic bottom.

For both practical and ethical reasons, government benefits and taxes should be progressively allocated – that is, tilted in favor of the lowest-income families and neighborhoods -- and be blind to racial origin. This way, if more people of one ethnic background end up being poor, that group collectively will receive more public benefits while individuals of all backgrounds will be treated with equanimity.

A free ride is not always a good thing. Conservative scholars assert that ill-designed welfare benefits can hurt recipients by making them dependent and reducing initiative. Sowell and others argue that Great Society welfare programs played an important role in undermining African American family structure and economic progress.

Although economic policies should be applied even-handedly, the institutional legacy of slavery in the United States demands vigorous enforcement of anti-discrimination standards particularly regarding policing, voting, education, housing, unions, and jobs. It's also important that race-blind economic policies be implemented fairly – that assistance and tax breaks are not bottlenecked for some with easy access for others. Better and more transparent mechanisms for community oversight need to be developed. Again, that's easier said than done. [Racism engrained in institutions](#) is difficult to expunge. Lawsuits, enforcement of regulations, and political leadership are critical – albeit imperfect – tools that can help to neutralize the impact of racism.



Not to be forgotten is the underlying problem of American “whiteness.” Many liberals disparaging racist working-class behavior still assume a white identity in a mental framework of white and black. While condemning others for more blatant racist attitudes, the elitist finger pointers quietly maintain an inner sense of whiteness along with the security and superiority it confers.

Published in 1984, James Baldwin’s prophetic “[On Being White and Other Lies](#)” laid bare a fundamental question. Why, Mr. Racist or Ms. Reformer, do you assume you are white? How in heavens did Italians, Irish, Slavs, and Jews get into

the club? It's ironic that many Jewish friends -- and the current U.S. administration for that matter -- proclaim the principle equal rights in America while also supporting Israel's expansion of settlements and its new law classifying non-Jews with lesser rights and privileges as necessary for national security. Reading the [Nuremberg Laws](#) in the Holocaust Museum should caution where this road can lead.



[The Nazis looked to U.S. racial laws in writing theirs](#)

Rev. Barber gets it right. Picking up where Martin Luther King left off 50 years ago, he and his allies work to unify people of all ethnic backgrounds to lift America's growing and multi-colored underclass. He speaks both to people in Louisville's "black" West End and people in "poor white" Eastern Kentucky. He also stresses racial equality and equal justice. African Americans do deserve special attention and protection given the deep injuries resulting from being singled out for slavery. At the same time, all a nation's citizens living through hard times today need to be treated equally and empowered to improve their lives. Identity politics exacerbating racial conflict make it much harder to build political coalitions needed to raise the standard of living for the working class and poor people.

Obsession with race also may distract from noticing early signs of new incarnations of slavery. Like tribalism and the need for security, exploiting other human beings is a basic instinct. Race-based slavery is one type of slavery. Slavery is one of many forms of [economic subjugation](#).

Advancing self-interest is extolled as the basic motivation for modern capitalism alongside the argument that adding up all acts of selfishness automatically creates the greatest good. Even in functional terms, that's a partial truth at best. The many versions of the Golden Rule embedded in moral and religious codes work as antidotes to evils and social instability resulting from primal selfishness. Restraint of self-interest, especially by those with the greatest wealth and power, may be one of the most important traits of lasting societies.



Tom Toles – Washington Post

Too slowly for some, the descendants of slaves, refugees, and immigrants are mixing into the American genetic melting pot. Our future underclass will likely be a blend of past ethnicities with a sprinkling of newcomers. It is now being shaped more by [economic forces further dividing haves and have nots](#) than racial differences.

It's hard to see a healthy future for a country in which almost half of adults make wages too low to pay the rent and raise children or have no work at all. Meanwhile, in the world arena, American economic and military power is waning. The jury remains out on whether democratic capitalism can

meet the challenge of communist-party-run capitalism in [China](#), which both restricts personal freedom and administers ethnic cleansing. For now, China's 1.4 billion residents appear content enough with the trade-off of personal and political rights for a higher standard of living brought by rapid growth.

In the United States and other western countries, slow economic growth and wealth concentration threaten to undercut personal and civic freedoms and economic mobility. Pushed down far enough, a person or group becomes ripe for exploitation. The ancient story of Esau, the starving hunter-gatherer forced to trade his inheritance to his farmer brother who controlled the land, for something to eat remains prophetic. History is filled with stories of [triumphs over slavery](#). Cautionary tales about how people, and nations, enter bondage are harder to discern.



**“Esau Selling his Birthright to Jacob”
Rembrandt van Rijn - c. 1640-1641**

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