

Why the US needs more open debate about its failures on race

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington must be the beginning of the discussion of race, not the end. Bassam Gergi discusses why the depoliticisation of race in the US is problematic and only open debate can lead to progress.



As Barack Obama – the first African-American President - took the podium at the fifty-year anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington one was struck by the magnitude of the historical moment. Half a century earlier Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, Jim Lewis and hundreds of thousands of other peaceful protesters had descended on the national mall to demand concessions from those in power. Now those in power were traveling to the mall to pay homage to the sweat and sacrifice of those early civil rights pioneers. On both a symbolic and intellectual level the ceremony underscored the significant progress that has been achieved in the fight for racial justice in the United States.

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This progress, which was hard won by the civil rights movement and subsequent efforts, made the election of Barack Obama, among other achievements, possible. To deny the progress therefore would be a discredit to those who fought so hard for the gains that have been made. Yet the celebration of progress in the march towards racial justice must not be the end of the discussion. Nor must it limit the discussion of the types of effort needed to achieve further progress. As most Americans acknowledge, there is still much work that is left undone.

A poll that was released at the end of August 2013 by the [Pew Research Center](#) concluded, “while progress has been palpable on some fronts, Dr. King’s goal remains elusive on others.” The poll found that although blacks and whites generally agree that the two races get along well fewer than one in three black Americans and not even half of whites say the United States has made “a lot” of progress toward achieving racial equality.

The limits of racial progress identified in Pew’s survey are reflected in the contemporary profile of black America. The weight of evidence that the gap in economic outcomes between black and white has remained almost static over the past fifty-years can be at times overwhelming. According to the [Census Bureau](#), the black poverty rate in 1959 was 55.1 percent just over three times the white rate. Although the percentage of black households in poverty has dropped considerably since then it still remains nearly triple the white rate. Similarly, in 2011, the [median income](#) for black households was about fifty-nine percent of the median income for white households. This represents only a slight improvement from the fifty-five percent rate in 1967. Perhaps one of the most startling studies was conducted by a Princeton University sociologist [Devah Pager](#), who found that a black job applicant with no criminal history got a callback or job offer about as often as a white applicant with a felony conviction.

In short, America has far more to do if it seeks to realize Dr. King’s dream of an equal and just society.

Prior to the blowback from the Zimmerman Trial in summer 2013 there had been a terrible monotony in America’s dialogue about race. While a majority of Americans are willing to acknowledge at least some of the failings in our march towards achieving racial equality, there has been an extremely limited discussion about just how America can begin to rectify the situation. In part this is because the structure of the public debate about race is aimed to conceal rather than to elevate these issues.

When examples of prejudice or enduring inequality rise to surface of the public debate the initial reaction is often to downplay the significance. To dismiss those who perpetuate prejudice as bigots, critically endangered by the sweeping tide of history. In other cases, to discount the structural barriers to equality as the weakened remnants of an outworn order.

As a result, Americans are inoculated against what sense of injustice they might have. Many fail to recognize the privilege and oppression that exists in their lives and social interactions with others.

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They also fail to view the defining political issues of our time through any racial lens. In effect, race has become depoliticized.

This depoliticization of race is partially a side effect of the progress that has already been achieved by the civil rights generation. Because America has made progress, there is an assumption that further progress towards racial equality is inevitable. In a similar vein, there are some Americans who view the ascension of a black family to the White House as a reflection of a new racial enlightenment; in their imagined ideal, blacks and whites are now equal. Or in its most extreme form, some whites now believe – according to a [study conducted](#) by researchers from Tufts University's three years into Obama's first term - that progress toward racial equality is linked to a new inequality at their expense.

The downplaying of enduring racial inequality serves to inoculate this group of Americans against what sense of injustice they might have. In their frame, there is no need to address an issue that they have convinced themselves has already been resolved. There is reason to believe therefore that even a more vigorous national discussion about the enduring impact of race on economic and social outcomes is unlikely to spur these people to action.

The emphasis instead should be on those Americans who acknowledge that racial inequalities persist but who are convinced that future progress will “roll in on the wheels of inevitability.” For if the public discussion of race continues to downplay or dismiss enduring inequalities then those Americans who believe that change is inevitable are unlikely to realize that even fifty-years of progress can be rolled back if a society is not careful.

The past year has witnessed high moments of symbolic progress for racial equality, such as the reelection of Barack Obama and the fifty-year anniversary of the March on Washington. However, there have also been a series of major setbacks, led by the Supreme Court Decision to undo much of the Voting Rights Act and then by a series of incidents which exposed the depth of racial prejudice, such as the murder of Trayvon Martin and most recently the furore over the selection of an Indian-American Miss USA.

What is more, examining the lack of progress in areas of income, home ownership, health and employment, and incarceration rates between black and white America over the past fifty-years exposes that progress is not at all inevitable. Prejudice is a rotten, lasting product that has seeped into the core of American institutions. To make further progress towards racial equality will require more sacrifice and a modern coalition of activists and reformers as steadfast as those that came before.

Thus while a celebration of progress to mark the fifty-year anniversary of the March on Washington was reasonable, it must be the beginning of the discussion of race not the end. America is a nation that is still healing and still needs work. The walls of institutionalized inequality must be weakened at the grassroots before they will topple. To do so requires an awakened public that is fully aware

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of the extent of the work that is yet undone.

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