The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica
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The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ann.sagepub.com/content/634/1/190

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>> Version of Record - Mar 11, 2011

What is This?
It has become accepted dogma among whites in the United States that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans. In this article, the authors counter this myth by describing how the ideology of color-blind racism works to defend and justify the contemporary racial order. The authors illustrate three basic frames of this ideology, namely, abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. The authors then examine research that has empirically shown the effects of color-blind racism on whites’ reactions to Hurricane Katrina, among whites who have adopted children of color, and in America’s elite law schools. Finally, the authors examine how the election of Barack Obama is not an example of America becoming a “post-racial” country but reflects color-blind racism. The authors argue that the Obama phenomenon as a cultural symbol and his political stance and persona on race are compatible with color-blind racism. The authors conclude with the prognosis that, under the Obama administration, the tentacles of color-blind racism will reach even deeper into the crevices of the American polity.

Keywords: racism; color-blind racism; Obama; post-racial; ideology

To see what is in front of one’s nose needs constant struggle.

—George Orwell, *In Front of Your Nose* (1946/1968)

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DOI: 10.1177/0002716210389702
A mythology that emerged in post–civil rights America has become accepted dogma among whites with the election of Barack Obama: the idea that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans (D’Souza 1995). Journalists (Dowd 2009; B. Shapiro 2009), political advisors (Ifill 2009), some people of color (W. Reed and Louis 2009), and most whites (CBS 2009) have deemed the election of our first black president proof positive that we have entered a “post-racial” era. However, whites and people of color remain mostly separate and disturbingly unequal (Daniels 2008; Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Massey 2007; Western 2006). Since whites believe race has “declined in significance” (Wilson 1978), they account for this seeming contradiction—America as post-racial yet minorities lagging well behind whites—as the result of the cultural deficiencies of people of color (Bobo and Charles 2009; Hunt 2007). Many conservative people of color (e.g., Steele 2006; Patterson 2004, 2006; McWhorter 2001) as well as many liberals such as comedian Bill Cosby (Cosby and Poussaint 2007) and actor Will Smith also embrace this view (W. Smith 2008).

In contrast, Bonilla-Silva (2001), among others (R. C. Smith 1995; Brooks 1996), argues that the existing racial inequality in the United States is the product of a new racial regime, which he has labeled the “new racism.” We agree with Feagin (2006) that racial oppression is still systemic in America, affecting all people, networks, and institutions. However, the main racial practices of this regime are quite different from those typical of Jim Crow. Today, discrimination is mostly subtle, apparently nonracial, and institutionalized (see also R. C. Smith 1995). Not surprisingly, the ideological anchor of this new regime, which Bonilla-Silva has labeled “color-blind racism,” is as slippery as the practices it supports (see Caditz 1976 for an early work that captured this ideological transition). Whereas Jim Crow racism explained minorities’ social standing as the outcome of their imputed biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, the ideology rationalizes the status of minorities as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their alleged cultural deficiencies (Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Lipsitz 2006). Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending racial oppression in the past, color-blind racism provides the ideological armor for the “new racism” regime (Sullivan 2006).

Although survey research shows a decline in overt or Jim Crow–style prejudice among whites since the 1960s, there is broad consensus in the academic community that racial prejudice continues to plague America (Yancy 2008; Picca and Feagin 2007). Nevertheless, unlike the prejudice of yesteryear, it is expressed in covert, subtle, or symbolic fashion (Hill 2008; Myers 2005; Bush 2004). Various terms have been used to refer to this new kind of prejudice, such as “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997), “symbolic racism” (Tarman and Sears 2005), and “aversive racism” (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004). The concept of color-blind racism is related to these concepts but differs substantively and theoretically from them. Substantively, the examination of the ideology has uncovered the existence of frames, stylistic components, and racial stories that, given their reliance on surveys, most survey researchers have not addressed. Theoretically, color-blind racism is not regarded as “prejudice” grounded in individual-level or
affective dispositions but rather as the collective expression of whites’ racial dominance (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Thus, in our view, actors’ attitudes are fundamentally connected to their location in the racial order (Prager 1982; Bonilla-Silva 2001), whether they are expressed with animosity or not. Our main concern is examining the various ways color-blind racism composes an ideology whites use to explain, rationalize, and defend their racial interests.

In this article, we first outline and illustrate the basic frames of color-blind racism. Second, we examine recent research that substantiates and expands knowledge about this racial ideology. Third, we argue that in many ways the Obama phenomenon reflects and enhances color-blind racism. We conclude with a discussion of the future implications of this ideology for the well-being of our nation.

The Ideology of Color-Blind Racism

In this section we discuss one of the three component parts of color-blind racism: frames. We use systematic interview data to illustrate how the frames function to create apparently nonracial explanations of race events. The data come from two similarly structured projects. The first is the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students, based on a convenience sample of 627 college students (including 451 white students) surveyed at a large midwestern university (MU henceforth), a large southern university, and a medium-size West Coast university. The second data source is the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS), a probabilistic survey of 323 white and 67 black Detroit metropolitan area residents.

Color-blind frames

The frames of any dominant racial ideology are set paths for interpreting information and operate as cognitive culs-de-sac because, after people invoke them, they explain racial phenomena in a predictable manner—as if they were getting on a one-way street without exits. Dominant racial frames are not “false consciousness” but rather unacknowledged, contextual standpoints that provide the intellectual (and moral) building blocks whites use to explain racial matters. The central frames of color-blind racism are abstract liberalism, cultural racism, minimization of racism, and naturalization; we illustrate the first three here (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Abstract liberalism. This frame incorporates tenets associated with political and economic liberalism in an abstract and de-contextualized manner. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear “reasonable” and even “moral” while opposing all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality. For instance, by using the tenets of the free market ideology in the abstract, they can oppose affirmative action as a violation of the norm of equal opportunity. The following example illustrates how whites use this frame. Jim, a 30-year-old computer software salesman from a privileged background, explained his opposition to affirmative action:
I think it's unfair top to bottom on everybody and the whole process. Often, you know, discrimination itself is a bad word, right? But you discriminate every day. You wanna buy a beer at the store and there are six kinds [of] beers you can get from Natural Light to Sam Adams, right? And you look at the price and you look at the kind of beer, and you . . . it's a choice. . . . And it's the same thing about getting into school or getting into some place. . . . I don't think [MU] has a lot of racism in the admissions process. . . . So why not just pick people that are going to do well at [MU], pick people by their merit? I think we should stop the whole idea of choosing people based on their color.

Since Jim assumes that hiring decisions are like market choices (choosing between competing brands of beer), he embraces a laissez-faire position on hiring. The problem with Jim's view is that labor market discrimination is alive and well (Holtzer 2009), and most jobs are obtained through informal networks (Royster 2003). Jim's abstract position is further cushioned by his belief that although blacks “perceive or feel” that there is a lot of discrimination, he does not see much out there. Therefore, by upholding a strict laissez-faire view on hiring and, at the same time, ignoring the significant impact of discrimination in the labor market, Jim can safely voice his opposition to affirmative action in an apparently race-neutral way. This frame allows whites to be unconcerned about school and residential segregation, oppose almost any kind of government intervention to ameliorate the effects of past and contemporary discrimination, and prefer whites as partners/friends.

Cultural racism. Pierre Andre Taguieff (2001) has argued that modern racial ideology does not portray minorities as inferior biological beings. Instead, it biologizes their presumed cultural practices (i.e., presents them as fixed features) and uses that as the rationale for justifying racial inequality. The newness of this frame resides in the centrality it has acquired in whites’ contemporary justifications of minorities’ standing. The essence of the frame, as William Ryan (1976) pointed out a long time ago, is “blaming the victim”—arguing that minorities’ standing is the product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values. An example of how whites use this frame comes from Kim, a student at MU. In response to the question, “Many whites explain the status of blacks in this country as a result of blacks lacking motivation, not having the proper work ethic, or being lazy. . . . What do you think?” Kim said,

Yeah, I totally agree with that. I don’t think, you know, they’re all like that, but, I mean, it’s just that if it wasn’t that way, why would there be so many blacks living in the projects? . . . If they worked hard, they could make it just as high as anyone else could. You know, I just think that’s just, you know, they’re raised that way and they see that their parents are so they assume that’s the way it should be.

Although not all whites were as crude as this student, most subscribed to this belief either by overt racist comments or in a so-called “compassionate conservative” manner.

Minimization of racism. Whites do not believe that minorities’ social standing today is the product of discrimination. Instead, they believe it is due to “their
culture,” “class,” “legacies from slavery,” “the culture of segregation,” “lack of social capital,” “poverty,” and so forth. In other words, it is anything but racism. Sandra, a retail saleswoman in her early 40s, provides an example of how whites use this frame when she explained her view on discrimination:

I think if you are looking for discrimination, I think it’s there to be found. But if you make the best of any situation, and if you don’t use it as an excuse. I think sometimes it’s an excuse because people felt they deserved a job, whatever! I think if things didn’t go their way I know a lot of people have a tendency to use prejudice or racism as whatever, as an excuse. I think in some ways, yes, there is [sic] people who are prejudiced. It’s not only blacks, it’s about Spanish, or women. In a lot of ways there [is] a lot of reverse discrimination. It’s just what you wanna make of it.

Since most whites, such as Sandra, believe discrimination has all but disappeared, they regard minorities’ claims of discrimination as excuses or as minorities playing the infamous “race card.”

Research on Color-Blind Racism

Current research substantiates Bonilla-Silva’s claims (2003, 2006) about color-blind racism’s centrality to racial stratification in the United States. It demonstrates its broad impact in the population as well as in institutions. In this section, we discuss efforts to quantify color-blind racism, examine color-blind racism among individuals and institutions, and change color-blind racist attitudes.

Quantitative measures of color-blind racism

In addition to qualitative studies, recent research on color-blind racism has employed quantitative measures. These range from simple questions about beliefs in equal opportunity to a multidimensional scale, the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), which Neville et al. (2000) developed. Using more than eleven hundred observations in five studies, Neville et al. (2000) identified several major cognitive dimensions of color-blind racism, including denial of white privilege, lack of awareness of the implications of institutional racism, rejection of social policies such as affirmative action, and denial of pervasive racial discrimination in the United States. Neville et al. (2000) also distinguished color-blind racism, a distorted view of race relations, from racial prejudice, negative stereotypes of racial minorities. Although conceptually different, the CoBRAS measure of color-blind racism was positively correlated with many measures of racial prejudice. Other studies have found that the CoBRAS measure of color-blind racism was positively correlated with white fear of other races (Spanierman and Heppner 2004).

Individual-level analyses

Evidence of color-blind racism was found in several sociological analyses of individuals’ reactions to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Sweeney (2006) studied
responses to an article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that expressed black rapper Kanye West’s contention that the media coverage of New Orleans after Katrina was racially biased. Sweeney found that most of the comments blamed the disproportionately black hurricane victims for making the “choice” not to heed warnings and leave the city. Many also blamed the victims as “whiners” who expected government handouts instead of helping themselves. Their answers implied that racism was not an issue. Another study analyzed the attitudes of Houstonians to the influx of black evacuees following Katrina. Using data from the 2006 and 2008 Houston Area Surveys, Shelton and Coleman (2009) found that antagonistic attitudes toward black Katrina migrants to Houston were greater among respondents who professed a belief that America had attained “equal opportunity for all” and adhered to individualistic explanations for existing racial inequalities, both central to the abstract liberal frame of color-blind racism.

Research also suggests that color-blind racism is evident even among whites most likely to have transcended race: white parents who have adopted children of color. This is the major finding of Carla Goar (2009) in her study of parents in interracial adoptive families who participated in three “adoption camps.” The purpose of the camps was to provide support for the interracial families and to “celebrate race” to positively influence the racial identity of the children. Goar found, however, that many of the adoptive parents evinced a color-blind ideology by de-emphasizing the importance of race and emphasizing instead their unique individual characteristics (“We are special parents”) and those of their children and minimizing the challenges of raising children of different races in a racially stratified country.

Other work also suggests that the ideology of color-blindness is increasingly affecting even those who are at or near the bottom of the economic and social hierarchies in the United States: blacks and Latinos. Using data from a telephone survey of 1,005 respondents, Public Opinion on the Courts in the United States, 2000, Kalscheur (2009) studied differences between whites, blacks, and Latinos in their assessments of equal opportunity in the United States and perceptions of equality in the U.S. justice system. Kalscheur found that Latinos were as likely as non-Hispanic whites to profess a color-blind view, regardless of social class and gender. More than three-fourths of Latinos in the survey agreed with the statement that the United States provides equal opportunity to blacks. This evidence lends credence to the notion that Latinos have adopted anti-black beliefs to distance themselves from blacks in the U.S. racial hierarchy (McClain et al. 2006). What is more, more than three-fourths of Latinos in the survey also agreed that Latinos had equal opportunity to get ahead in life. This may reflect Twine and Gallagher’s (2008) contention that many Latinos identify as “white” as well as Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) claim about some Latinos becoming white and others “honorary whites.”

Other research reveals that many blacks subscribe to color-blind racism, although fewer blacks than whites endorse its major frames (Kalscheur 2009). Neville et al. (2005) studied 211 self-identified black American college students
in the Midwest and West Coast. The black students who exhibited color-blind attitudes were more likely to blame blacks for racial inequalities, believe in a hierarchical system of inferior and superior social groups, have internalized racial stereotypes about blacks, and prefer to associate with white rather than black friends. This evidence substantiates Bonilla-Silva’s (2006, 2009) suggestions that the elite segments of the black community are more likely to subscribe to color-blind racism and exhibit anti-black views. Neville et al. (2005) contend that these color-blind racist perspectives of blacks represent a “false consciousness” that contributes to their own oppression by preventing them from supporting structural change.

**Institutional analyses**

Other research shows increasing evidence that color-blind racism permeates American social institutions. Below we describe studies that highlight this development in two arenas: professional education and sports.

Educational institutions have significant power to maintain racial hierarchies by limiting individual social mobility. Akom (2004) documents color-blind racism in the educational system of one of America’s most politically liberal communities, Berkeley, California. Akom argues that the students of Berkeley High School are conspicuously racially stratified and attributes this racial inequality to abstract liberalism, particularly the prevailing ideology of meritocracy, which assigns pejorative stereotypes to black and Latino students, blaming these students for their own failures. This appears to create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the students conform to a spoiled or stigmatized identity (Goffman 1963; Lewis 2003).

In addition to limiting social mobility, color-blind racism in higher education, especially professional schools, influences the attitudes and, hence, the services provided by the professionals who graduate from these schools. Wendy Moore (2008) demonstrates this phenomenon in her study of color-blind racism at two elite American law schools. In these law schools, the frame of abstract liberalism—ignoring America’s racial history and contemporary discrimination—dominated the discourse, including law school curricula, professorial and textbook interpretations of the law, and advocacy of race-blind admissions. Consistent with color-blind racism, white students used a narrative of cultural deficiency when referring to students of color and attributed their imagined underperformance (they speculate on this without data) to a pathological background. School administrators also minimized incidents of explicit racism. Furthermore, professors used sarcastic humor when addressing race matters, thereby diminishing the seriousness of the subject and the potential empathy of white students. This evidence of color-blind racism has disturbing implications given that elite American law schools are the wellspring of our federal judiciary (Schleef 2006).

Color-blind racism also operates in another of America’s most powerful institutions: sports. Upon superficial examination, sports would seem to be the most racially inclusive arena of American society. White fans have embraced black athletes as celebrities, wearing their sports jerseys and purchasing their sports
memorabilia. On the surface, this hero worship would seem to suggest a breakdown of racial prejudice. However, close inspection of the celebrity-media-audience dynamic reveals the undeniable, covert presence of racism behind these seemingly benign behaviors. For example, whites attribute the outstanding athletic performance of black athletes to their “superior” natural physical skills (Rada and Wulfemeyer 2005). While whites may consider this as evidence of their own race neutrality, this stand renders invisible the actual work of black athletes and contrasts with the attributions of mental acumen, leadership ability, moral character, and hard work they attribute to white athletes (Coakley 2006; Collins 2005).

Buffington and Fraley (2008) found evidence of this brawn-versus-brain racial dichotomy in their study of media coverage and college students’ racial attributions to participants in the 2000 NCAA men’s basketball championships. The researchers found that physical skills were much more likely to be assigned to blacks than to whites. Even though blacks were also more likely to be mentioned as leaders, interestingly, their leadership skills were attributed to their superior physical skills, not intelligence or leadership skills per se. These findings fit quite well with the naturalization frame of color-blind racism (see Bonilla-Silva [2006] for a full discussion of the naturalization frame).

**Implications for change**

What can change racial attitudes in this age of new racism? Richeson and Nussbaum (2003) explored whether color-blind (ignoring race and ethnic differences) or multicultural (celebrating racial and ethnic differences) ideologies were more likely to change pro-white bias. In a controlled experimental design, fifty-two white undergraduates at Dartmouth were exposed to messages advocating color-blind or multicultural ideological approaches to reducing interethnic tensions. The researchers employed as their dependent variable the IAT assessment of automatic racial attitudes (see Greenwald et al. [1998] for more information regarding the IAT assessment). Richeson and Nussbaum found that pro-white bias was greater for participants exposed to color-blind ideology than for those exposed to multicultural ideology.

McClelland and Linnander (2006) used longitudinal data to assess the role of contact and information in producing change in color-blind racism. Survey data were collected in five waves from 1990 to 2002 for a panel of white students from two small, private, predominantly liberal arts colleges on the East Coast. The researchers found both contact and exposure to information about race to predict reappraisals of the discrimination that blacks face and the values of affirmative action. White students who had black friends on campus, attended extracurricular race-related programming, took courses in Africana studies, and engaged in informal discussions in racially diverse groups were more likely to reappraise their notions of color-blindness. They also found that parental education was positively related to reappraisals of racial group structures. McClelland and Linnander speculate that the privileged class positions of these students obviated any threat.
they might have otherwise felt from the potential “redistributive” effects of affirmative action. Many of these findings fit quite well with Bonilla-Silva’s characterizations of “racial progressives” (see 2006, 131–49).

The work on color-blind racism taken together reveals how pervasive this ideology has become in America. But how can color-blind racism be central in a nation that just elected a black man as its president?

Color-Blind Racism and Obamerica

There are two central ways in which the election of Barack Obama as president relates to color-blind racism. First, Obama has become a cultural symbol compatible with color-blind racism. Second, Obama’s own political stand on race and the way he has positioned himself are in line with color-blind racism.

Obama’s color-blind success

The secret to Obama’s rise to the nation’s highest office lies in his symbolic appeal to both racial minorities and whites. Symbols are, in the words of Geertz (1973, 45), “sources of illumination” that orient people to their cultural systems of meanings. Hence, as Geertz (1973) and Turner (1967) have demonstrated, cultural symbols can have immense power to instigate and guide action. But as Turner (1974) points out, cultural symbols can be “multivocal” and thus interpreted quite differently by different people. Obama reveals his awareness of his multivocal appeal in The Audacity of Hope (2006, 11): “I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.”

Obama has become a symbol with especially different meanings for people of color and whites. For non-whites, Obama became a symbol of their possibilities in what they hoped would become a more egalitarian America (Hunt and Wilson 2009). For blacks, the possibility of having a black president became a symbol of their historical aspirations as a people, of “a dream deferred, now realized” (Howell 2008, 187). For older generations of blacks desperate to see racial equality before they die, and for many post-Reagan generation blacks and minorities who have seen very little racial progress in their lifetimes, Obama became the new messiah of the civil rights movement (Bonilla-Silva and Ray 2009). In contrast, the symbolic meaning of Obama to whites was compatible with their belief that America was indeed a color-blind nation. Obama quickly became for whites an Oprah- or Tiger Woods–like figure, a black person who has “transcended” his blackness to become a national hero. Thus, for whites and other supporters around the globe, Obama also represented “possibilities,” the American promise of the Horatio Alger myth that “no matter how humble the beginnings, or how tattered the overcoat, once washed up on America’s shores anyone can attain anything” (Howell 2008, 187).
Obama, the consummate politician, fostered these multivocal interpretations with his “own American story”:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. . . . I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. (Obama 2008b)

Similarly, he said in his election-night victory speech,

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. (Obama 2008a)

Obama’s popularity also lies in his adoption of a post-racial (racially transcendent) persona and politics (Kamiya 2009; see Bonilla-Silva forthcoming). He has distanced himself from most leaders of the civil rights movement, from his reverend, from his church, and from anything or anyone who made him look “too black” or “too political.” Obama’s campaign even retooled Michelle Obama to make her seem less black, less strong, and more white-lady-like for the white electorate. For his white supporters, Obama was the first “black” leader they felt comfortable supporting because he did not talk about racism; because he kept reminding them he is half-white; because he was so “articulate” or—in Senator Biden’s words, later echoed by Karl Rove—Obama was “the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy” (CNN 2007). Furthermore, unlike black leaders such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, he did not make them feel guilty about the state of racial affairs in the country. Instead, Obama preached unity. As he said in the speech that catapulted him into the national spotlight, his keynote address to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America” (Obama 2004).

Finally, and most important, having a black man “in charge” symbolizes to both blacks and whites monumental change. For blacks, the symbolism of a black man’s election has generated unprecedented optimism about the future of race relations in the United States. In a Pew survey shortly after the election, 75 percent of blacks expressed the belief that Obama’s election would make race relations in the United States better (Pew 2008). And a more recent CBS/New York Times poll found, for the first time in CBS polling history, that the majority of blacks (59 percent) and 65 percent of whites characterized the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States as “good” (CBS 2009). Nevertheless, evidence of racial prejudice in preelection and postelection surveys (Associated Press 2008; Campus Compare 2008) reveals that Obama’s appeal to whites is not indicative of post-racialism. Noted survey researchers Tom Pettigrew (2009) and Vincent
Hutchings (2009) found that Obama’s white voters were just slightly less prejudiced than McCain’s white voters. The problem is that with the misconstrued symbolism of Obama’s election, racism recedes even deeper beneath our individual as well as national consciousness. After all, now many whites can state proudly, “I voted for Obama, so I cannot be racist.”

Obama’s color-blind racist ideology

On March 4, 2007, at a commemoration of the Selma Voting Rights March, then-senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama (2007) likened the civil rights marchers to Moses, who challenged the “powers who said that some are atop and others are at the bottom.” He credited this “Moses generation” with taking us “90 percent of the way” to equality. Acknowledging a still-existing “health care gap,” “achievement gap” in the face of unequal school resources, “empathy gap” as reflected by the government’s lack of response to New Orleans after Katrina, and “hope gap” as reflected in disproportionately black low-wage jobs, he challenged the present “Joshua generation” to take us the remaining 10 percent of the way. Said Obama, “Take off your bedroom slippers. Put on your marching shoes. Go do some politics. Change this country.” But Obama was not calling for the Joshua generation to socially protest for their rights. Rather, he beseeched them to elect a responsible government and, in the same breath, “to ask what we can do for ourselves.” “The civil rights movement wasn’t just a fight against the oppressor; it was also a fight against the oppressor in each of us.”

Obama’s Selma speech was spiced with color-blind racist ideology, and this color-blind spiciness becomes more apparent when Obama addresses wider (and whiter) audiences. Obama minimized contemporary racism in his tribute to the sacrifices of Selma’s civil rights marchers. The depth of racial inequalities of health, achievement, and justice in this country clearly indicates that we have much further to go than 10 percent. In addition, Obama framed the problems of the black poor in the speech as cultural pathology—“black blame” (Price 2009).

These frames of color-blind racism were also evident in Obama’s (2006) book The Audacity of Hope. He claimed that although race still matters, “prejudice” is declining. As proof he heralded the growth of the black elite whose members do not “use race as a crutch or point to discrimination as an excuse for failure” (p. 241). He explicitly blamed poor blacks for their own failures, stating that they watch “too much television,” consume “too much . . . poisons,” lack an “emphasis on educational achievement,” and do not have two-parent households (pp. 244–45). He chastised those unwilling to acknowledge how their “values” contributed to their predicament (p. 254). And his structural solution to racial inequalities was an “emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, programs,” which he stated “isn’t just good policy; it’s also good politics” (p. 247).4

Obama’s color-blind racist ideology was also evident in his so-called “race speech” in March 2008 to quiet the uproar over his association with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama characterized Wright as divisive and condemned his
perspective as “a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic” (Obama 2008b). Obama admitted that race was still an issue that the “nation cannot afford to ignore” and acknowledged America’s segregated schools, legalized discrimination, lack of economic opportunity, and the anger these issues foster in the black community. However, he implied that racism is a two-way street in his conciliatory reference to a similar anger among working- and middle-class white Americans who “don’t feel they have been particularly privileged by their race. . . . So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed . . . resentment builds up over time.” Therefore, Obama eschewed the need for structural solutions to racial problems. Instead, he proposed an abstract liberal resolution to racial inequality: “to bind our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family.” He also challenged blacks to step up morally: “It means taking responsibility for our own lives by demanding more from our fathers and spending more time with our children.”

When pressed more specifically about affirmative action as a solution to current racial inequality and the effects of discrimination, Obama hinted at a class-based rather than racially based program. In an April 2008 interview with ABC’s George Stephanopoulos, he stated,

I still believe in affirmative action as a means of overcoming both historic and potentially current discrimination, but I think that it can’t be a quota system and it can’t be something that is simply applied without looking at the whole person, whether that person is black, or white, or Hispanic, male or female. What we want to do is make sure that people who’ve been locked out of opportunity are going to be able to walk through those doors of opportunity in the future. (Quoted in Canellos 2008)

Obama’s minimization of racism and his refusal to tackle solutions to racial inequalities carried over into his presidential press conferences. For example, in Obama’s one-hundred-days press conference, Andre Showell, a black journalist, asked what specific policies Obama had enacted to benefit specifically minority communities. Obama answered,

Well, keep in mind that every step we’re taking is designed to help all people. But folks who are most vulnerable are most likely to be helped because they need the most help. . . . So my general approach is that if the economy is strong, that will lift all boats as long as it is also supported by, for example, strategies around college affordability and job training, tax cuts for working families as opposed to the wealthiest that level the playing field and ensure bottom-up economic growth. And I’m confident that that will help the African American community live out the American dream at the same time that it’s helping communities all across the country. (Quoted in Huffington Post 2009b)

Obama even projected the minimization of racism onto the global stage when he decided not to attend the 2009 UN-sponsored World Conference on Racism
in Geneva. Obama’s reasons for not attending were quite similar to those of his predecessor—he did not want to contend with the dicey issue of reparations for racial injustice or attendees who would accuse Israel of being a racist state (Huffington Post 2009a). He also used the cultural racism frame in his second trip to Africa (specifically, in his visit to Ghana), where he focused on issues of local governance rather than the negative effects of Western imperialism in the region (Karenga 2009).

Conclusion: Prognosis for Obamerica

Although Jim Crow is all but dead and most Americans vociferously denounce overt acts of racism, people of color remain economically and socially disadvantaged compared with whites (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004). Whites have explained this inequality over the past 30 years by resorting to color-blind racism. This ideology, we argue, is central to understanding the Obama phenomenon. It was the cornerstone of the 43 percent white support he received in the election (Noah 2008) and of how whites explained their support for this black politician. What is more significant, color-blind racism is in many ways central to Obama’s stand on race, his post-racial politics, and his own persona. Accordingly, the blessing of having a black president may become a curse as he can legitimate whites’ color-blind views. The American public has interpreted Barack Obama’s election as president as all but the fulfillment of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream. But for whites, Obama’s blackness is more about style than political substance (Wise 2009); “Obama is the ‘cool’ exceptional black man not likely to rock the American racial boat” (Bonilla-Silva 2009, 1076). He advocates “universal” (class-based) policies in lieu of race-based social policy—a policy stand that will not sufficiently ameliorate racial inequality. He talks about inequality and discrimination but always mentions the need for blacks to be personally accountable. Consequently, Obama’s blackness is becoming whites’ new weapon of choice for singing their color-blind lullaby.

Since whites have the upper hand discursively, the space for challenging racial inequality may be reduced and even diluted. By de-racializing his presidency and sponsoring color-blindness, Obama has maneuvered himself into this narrow “white space” (Street 2009, 120). Even as he has strategically claimed a black insider standing (to attract the black electorate), he has simultaneously distanced himself from the black community by interjecting the cultural frame of blaming poor blacks for their own problems (A. Reed 2008). Blacks are reluctant to challenge Obama’s repudiation of race-based policies out of their strong desire to protect his image and “preserve the historic moment” (Price 2009, 178). And the few blacks who have criticized Obama’s race-neutral policies have incited outrage among other blacks (Holmes 2008). Hence, the unity message of Obama (and white America) goes unchallenged (R. M. Smith and King 2009), and we all, like Pangloss, believe we live in the “best of all possible worlds” (Voltaire 1759/1929).
One clear indication of how the space for talking about race has been diminished is the recent national controversy over the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates. After President Obama made a seemingly “racial” (that is, supportive of blacks’ narrative on this event) comment in a press conference where he said the Cambridge police department “acted stupidly” (ABC News 2009), he was condemned by friends and foes (Political Bulletin 2009; Inside Cover 2009). This forced Obama to recant, claiming that all parties misread and overreacted to the situation (Baker and Cooper 2009). But this was not enough, and he was forced to, in the interest of “unity,” invite all parties to the White House for a “beer summit” to temper the political fallout from his comment (Associated Press 2009). Obama’s resolution to this incident of racial profiling reinforces whites’ views on racism: that it is no longer central; that most racial incidents are misunderstandings with “two sides”; and that if we talk things out, we can settle matters and create “racial harmony.”

Therefore, our prognosis is that, under the Obama administration, the tentacles of color-blind racism will reach deeper into all the crevices of the American polity. Unless people of color awake from the nationalist moment engendered by the election of a black man as president (Bonilla-Silva forthcoming) and return to militant social movements to advance racial justice in this country (Jeffries 2009), the color-blind racist drama will monopolize America. If this happens, Obama’s naive belief in a “United” States of America will simply reinforce the racial order of white privilege. In the words of William Faulkner (misquoted by Obama in his speech “A More Perfect Union,” 2008b), “The past is never dead. In fact, it isn’t even past” (Faulkner 1951).

Notes

1. Bonilla-Silva has used the term “Obamerica” to capture the fact that Obama was elected president without the backing of a social movement. This, he has argued, severely limits the possibility for meaningful change during his presidency.

2. Besides frames, the ideology includes styles and racial stories. Because of space limitations we do not discuss the latter two here. Interested readers should see Bonilla-Silva (2006).

3. This evidence confirms Bonilla-Silva’s claim that, as color-blind racism becomes cemented as the dominant ideology, it dictates the terrain of ideological contestation for all Americans. See Chapters 7 and 8 in Bonilla-Silva (2006).

4. This “cultural racism” was part of his campaign’s appeal to whites. He used it in his criticism of black fathers and in his relentless insistence on “personal responsibility.” Most recently, he used the frame again in his speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the NAACP.

References


