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The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama

Gerald Early

I think it can be said, and I think that most liberals would finally have to agree, that the presence of the Negro here is precisely what has allowed white people to say they were free; and it is what has allowed them to assume they were rich.

—James Baldwin, “Liberalism and the Negro” (1964)

I had to move without movin’.

—Trueblood, from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952)¹

A Rasmussen poll published in Fall 2010 reveals that only 36 percent of Americans think the relationship between blacks and whites is getting better. This number is down from 62 percent who, in July 2009, reported feeling that race relations are improving. That was the same month in which Cambridge, Massachusetts, police arrested Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, and at a news conference following the arrest, President Barack Obama criticized the police. He acknowledged that he did not know the full situation, “not having been there and not seeing the facts,” but nonetheless he said that the police had “acted stupidly.” He continued: “[T]here’s a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That’s just a fact.” For some people, this was just a half-fact, forcefully but inartfully expressed at that.

Obama’s response here may have been the beginning of a fracture along racial lines about pre-

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cisely what Obama represents in “post-racial America.” For the man who, as Joe Klein put it for *Time* magazine in 2006, “transcends the racial divide so effortlessly,”² there was nothing post-racial in the president’s analysis of the Gates affair. For blacks, Obama spoke the pure and simple truth: blacks and Latinos are stopped – harassed, really – much more by the police than whites. Young black and Latino males in particular live in a virtual police and penal state, where they are under constant suspicion. Consider the killing of Oscar Grant by a BART police officer on January 1, 2009, in Oakland, California. Grant is just one example of the many unarmed blacks who have been assaulted or killed by the police. (On November 5, 2010, the officer was sentenced to two years in prison; many blacks in Oakland, feeling the sentence far too lenient, responded with protest demonstrations.) And to think that a black professor at Harvard would be arrested on the grounds of his own home! That he would be asked to produce identification and prove that he lived there! For blacks, Obama was right to side with “the brother,” despite not knowing the facts of the case. He was right to be skeptical of cops and the so-called justice bureaucracy they represent.³

Many whites, on the other hand – conservatives in many instances, but not exclusively or even mainly so – were appalled. How could the president adopt a stance on a case whose details were largely unknown to him? Why, indeed, was he even commenting on a case that involved local law enforcement? It was in no way a federal matter, and therefore the president, rightly, should have made no comment. To these white Americans, Obama’s response seemed as crazy as if Bill Clinton had commented on O. J. Simpson’s arrest in 1995 for the murder

of his wife. As defined by federalism, presidents should not talk about matters of state law enforcement unless some urgent federal interest compels it. Moreover, many whites were uncomfortable about the president’s rush to judgment of the Cambridge police. After all, it is true that blacks and Latinos are stopped disproportionately by the police, but it is also true that they commit a hugely disproportionate share of violent crime in America – the other half of the fact that Obama’s initial response seemed to elide. (Blacks and Latinos, for instance, committed 89 percent of all murders in New York City between 2003 and 2009.⁴ Eighty-eight percent of the victims were also blacks and Latinos, which is why, from the perspective of blacks and Latinos, so little is being done about crime in urban minority communities.⁵)

Blacks are generally proud that Obama openly took their side in this matter, that he understood, articulated, and, more important, legitimated their position. Many whites, however, were surprised that the president took any side at all, that he did not see the necessity as president to transcend such a matter. This was not Little Rock or Selma. The Cambridge police officer was not Bull Connor. (Indeed, the Cambridge Police Department is highly diverse, and its officers are given sensitivity training.) Henry Louis Gates is not an uneducated, unemployed black victim of the inner city but rather a man of considerable intellectual, financial, and institutional resources who can well take care of himself in his disputes with the city of Cambridge. The problem with African Americans (and their liberal left enablers and comrades), as many whites see it, is that they are constantly seeking to relive the days of grand martyrdom from the civil rights movement, recasting every racial disparity and every racial incident as a

sign that nothing has changed. Blacks feel that they must be forever vigilant lest things, in fact, do change for the worse. Yes, the Gates arrest and Obama's reaction may have marked the beginning of the end of the fragile racial unity and hope that Obama's presidency had inspired in many Americans. Put another way, it may have been the end of the beginning of a stage in America's relationship with its new president as we have come to know and understand him; it may have set in motion the work of unraveling a bit of the mystery of his political art and his extraordinarily packed persona.

Is Obama as emblem of post-racial America nothing more than the hopeful repository of all our racial desires? Is he the brave new world of American politics? Is he the representative, the embodiment of a new wave of post-American, minority-centered nationalism that will free us at last from a hegemonic white nationalist past? Is he the hero, the last grand martyr of a final American civil rights campaign? Is he the philosopher-king whose subjects are unworthy of him, a man who, as White House advisor Valerie Jarrett put it, "has never really been challenged intellectually"?⁶ Is he an abject failure, the affirmative action kid in over his head? Is he the confidence man in his ultimate masquerade, the king of bullshitters, the Ellisonian Rinehart, fooling both whites and blacks? Is he simply the confused, contradictory illusion of our collective – both black and white – racial hysteria and misperceptions? Who can say? What can be said is that for a time, Obama brought together, or possessed the promise of bringing together, what the late historian John Hope Franklin called "the two worlds of race."⁷ He brought together the privileged majority and the aggrieved minority in a new way:

instead of each complaining about how the other is dependent on it, each cooperated to achieve a common goal, electing Obama as a way to restart or redefine American history. Many hoped that Obama could permanently unify the two worlds of race: this was the prospect they found so exciting about his candidacy. Obama the bridge, the mixed-race messiah, Obama the blended beneficence. Alas, it is questionable if he can unify us. In the end, the two worlds of race demand that we be on either one side or the other.

In the Fall 2010 Rasmussen poll mentioned above, 27 percent of all respondents reported feeling that race relations are getting worse. Thirty-nine percent of whites think race relations are getting better compared to only 13 percent of blacks. The low percentage among blacks seems especially remarkable given we now have an African American president – or, more accurately, a president of American and African parentage whose ascent to the highest political office in the realm was meant to signal a remarkable coming of racial age in the United States, the proof of a new American exceptionalism. (Obama's story could only have happened here. What are the chances of a person from a historically despised and persecuted minority being elected leader of some other nation?) Indeed, the poll numbers show a disparity of sorts in black opinion: while few blacks think race relations are getting better, 59 percent of blacks think the United States is moving in the right direction, more than twice the percentage of whites who share that view (27 percent). These numbers invite several observations. First, the era of good racial feelings that Obama ushered in at the beginning of his term in 2009 has, at least for now,

ended, particularly as determined by African Americans themselves. In other words, African Americans generally are now both optimistic about Obama's policies but increasingly pessimistic about his fate as president, insofar as that fate is somehow contingent on the belief that he represents a giant step forward in race relations. But for many African Americans, a step forward in race relations directly depends on white America's belief in Obama's policies.

Second, as of Fall 2010, whites are giving up on Obama, while African Americans, by a large margin, are remaining steadfast in their loyalty, although there is a significant gap among blacks between their overall approval rating for Obama, ranging between 85 and 91 percent, and their support of his policies. The latter is still a solid, healthy majority but is nowhere near his overall approval rating among blacks. (The president's approval rating among whites, as of Fall 2010, is 38 percent. In the 2010 midterm elections, 90 percent of black voters voted for the Democratic Party, in support of President Obama's policies, whereas only 37 percent of whites voted Democratic.) This consistent support from blacks is not simply because Obama, too, is black. Electing just any black person president would not necessarily have warmed the cockles of the hearts of most blacks. In fact, one can imagine some blacks being elected president who would have been vehemently opposed by most blacks. (Consider someone along the lines of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or political activist and businessman Ward Connerly or some other outspoken opponent of affirmative action, someone who believes in a color-blind America or espouses the view that racism is no longer a factor in American life.) Blacks remain loyal to Obama because he is

black *and* is pursuing policies that seem, contrarily, to place limits on American power abroad (or recognize the limits and abuses of that power) while at the same time expanding the reach of the federal government at home. Obama is not a quintessential liberal; he is a quintessential *black* liberal. Most blacks are comfortable with the way that he seems to represent the decline of an official American exceptionalism – an ideology born of the belief that America is blessed by providence to be the foremost power in white Western hegemony – and the concurrent rise of domestic federal power as an unabashed bulwark against markets and private wealth, against the provinces of white power and privilege. Since the days of slavery, blacks have sought protection from the federal government (frequently not receiving it), they have been skeptical of the old version of American exceptionalism, and they have despaired at being at the mercy of local or state power.

Third, blacks feel that moving the country in what they think is the right direction is jeopardizing the overall relationship between blacks and whites; however, they likely feel that this is a necessary price for seeing Obama succeed where change is needed. As much as blacks may feel that broad acceptance of Obama's policies and leadership among whites would be a major step forward in race relations, there is uncertainty about how strong the black support of Obama would remain if his approval numbers were high among whites. Many blacks still have the sneaking suspicion that any black leader or any leader who happens to be black, as in Obama's case, and who is making whites extraordinarily happy is probably doing it at the expense of blacks, selling them out or kowtowing to the white folk. In other words, blacks expect Oba-

ma to govern as a black or minority president, voicing a black or minority perspective, a black or minority consciousness, and redefining what it means to be an American. If whites oppose him, according to the view of many blacks, it is because many or most whites cannot abide having the minority perspective as the representative or standard interpretation of American experience.

What blacks and whites do have in common is a belief that race relations are somehow reflected as progress; either they are getting better or worse, improving or deteriorating. When race relations are framed in a larger narrative of progress, then some millennial aim or goal emerges: a moment to be reached when race relations or race itself shall be no more. For whites, this time could perhaps be when blacks no longer view themselves as a distinct grievance group, when they fit in, at last, no longer requiring special cheerleading and enabling, no longer making claims of exceptionalism as Americans because of their historical status as slaves. For blacks, perhaps it is when they have percentage representation in every profession and occupation, in every social and economic category, that is at least the equal of their percentage in the population; when their representation in negative categories, such as incarceration or single-parent households, aligns with their percentage in the population; when they cease to be a population defined by their pathologies, which they feel are not their fault. This moment will be the end of racism, and thus the end of race relations, which for blacks are just a calibration of the extent to which racism affects their lives at any given moment, as there would be no distortion in black American life.

But suppose race relations have nothing to do with progress, secular or provi-

dential. Suppose race relations do not get better or worse in a linear or statistical way but simply respond and adjust to the economic and technological features of any particular point in time. Suppose race relations have nothing to do with the will of either whites or blacks but rather react to the spasms of their nervous systems, to their co-constructed mythologies of reality. Suppose the relationship between blacks and whites is fixed as a continuous exercise in social experimentation, in which the power between the two sometimes pulsates in unexpected rhythm but never really changes. Suppose we have it completely backward. Suppose because it is whites who are the decided minority in the world that they will always be special. Suppose it is blacks who are the inadvertent enablers in the special status given to whites, who are themselves invested even against their will in this status as a form of chiliastic order in the world. Suppose one day leftist whites, who hate the idea of progress, particularly as embodied in the idea of economic growth, which they find to be an utterly destructive concept, can no longer square this view with racial progress, which in fact greatly depends on economic growth, as noted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and other policy intellectuals in the 1960s when *Dædalus* published the first of two special issues on "The Negro American." (Whites, on the whole, are willing to make concessions to blacks when the overall economic pie is getting larger. In this way, blacks make progress relative to their status in the past but never make any real gains in relation to whites. Therefore, there is no progress: things change without changing.)

We are trapped, however, in seeing race relations as a yardstick of progress. (Jeffrey B. Ferguson has a brilliant take on this in his essay in this volume.) How else could we account for all the wealthy

black movie stars (Will Smith, Samuel L. Jackson, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, Denzel Washington, and the rest) and athletes (Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Serena and Venus Williams, Tiger Woods) who have such huge crossover appeal? Today, blacks direct mainstream Hollywood movies, appear in mainstream advertising, are celebrated authors and public intellectuals; they lead major white institutions, and they are doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. Booker T. Washington preached racial progress as he sought funds from wealthy whites to support Tuskegee Institute at the turn of the twentieth century. W.E.B. Du Bois had once believed in it when he was involved with the NAACP. The movers and shakers of the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s – Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke – all believed in progress and patronage. Thurgood Marshall believed in it, as did Benjamin Mays and A. Philip Randolph and the late Dorothy Height. Martin Luther King, Jr., based his popular vision on assumptions of it. And one can believe in it only if there is irrefutable evidence that progress is actually occurring.

John Hope Franklin, in a tough-minded way, acknowledged progress in his *Dædalus* essay from 1965, featured in the first of the two issues on “The Negro American.” “By the middle of the eighteenth century,” Franklin wrote, “laws governing Negroes denied to them certain basic rights that were conceded to others. They were permitted no independence of thought, no opportunity to improve their minds or their talents or to worship freely, no right to marry and enjoy the conventional family relationships, no right to own or dispose of property, and no protection against miscarriages of justice or cruel and unreasonable punishments.”⁸ This was the origin of the two worlds of race. By 1965, with-

out question, things were better for blacks – much better. After all, they were no longer chattels! And Franklin’s beginning only underscored how far blacks had come by the 1950s and 1960s: civil rights commissions, civil rights laws, the beginning of the end of Jim Crow, and the promise of integration and equality. But the broad historical outline that Franklin’s essay provides showed how deeply entrenched the notion of two races was in structuring American reality and its historical self-understanding, how much both custom and convenience supported it, and how much power and pride were determined to maintain it.

Black nationalists, such as Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X, and black Marxists, as Du Bois became, never accepted the idea of racial progress. Nothing got better in any real sense as far as they were concerned. This view is not without its justifications. Blacks were at the bottom of the American social, political, and economic ladders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they remain there today. They are at the bottom of standardized test scores, at the bottom of accumulated or acquired wealth, at the bottom in life expectancy, at the bottom in marriage rates, at the top in single-mother birth rates, at the top in incarceration rates, and at the top for unemployment and high school dropout rates.⁹

What race relations so profoundly reflect in America is the complex nature of our social dynamic: how in this country, as Ralph Ellison brilliantly encapsulated in *Invisible Man*, one can move without moving. Many African American cynics ask, what has changed, except the façade that masks the great American racial leviathan, whose belly still contains the two worlds of race? What they may not appreciate is that for African Americans

to move without moving is, in a sense, a finely wrought art, a virtuosic pose of existentialism. Blacks have made their conditions into an attitude. The difficult craft of post-racial racialism requires buying into a belief that everything has changed in modern attitudes about race (why not let your daughter or son marry one and bring a bit of diversity into the family?) while at the same time recognizing that the problems that stigmatize black people and make them distinct in the body politic are as intractable now as ever. The dance of post-racial racialism is to move without moving. It is precisely what Obama is trying to do as president, don't you think? He is trying to be a black president without being a black president.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article headlined "The Alien in the White House," columnist Dorothy Rabinowitz wrote:

A great part of America now understands that this president's sense of identification lies elsewhere, and is in profound ways unlike theirs. He is hard put to sound convincingly like the leader of the nation, because he is, at heart and by instinct, the voice mainly of his ideological class. He is the alien in the White House, a matter having nothing to do with delusions about his birthplace cherished by the demented fringe.¹⁰

When Obama, during the 2008 campaign, jokingly referred to the fact that he does not look like the presidents on our currency, he was more right than he knew. According to his critics, he is far more different from them than he ever let on. Rabinowitz took special umbrage at Obama's returning a bust of Churchill that was given by Tony Blair as a gift. "The new administration had apparently found no place in our national house of many rooms for the British leader who lives on so vividly in the American

mind," she wrote. "Churchill, face of our shared wartime struggle, dauntless rallier of his nation who continues, so remarkably, to speak to ours. For a president to whom such associations are alien, ridding the White House of Churchill would, of course, have raised no second thoughts." Conservative commentator and writer Dinesh D'Souza, in his right-wing psychobiography *The Roots of Obama's Rage*, offers this interpretation of the return of the bust:

Obama probably remembers Churchill as an imperialist who soldiered for the empire in India and Africa. Churchill was opposed to India's independence movement. . . . Even as late as 1954, when President Eisenhower raised with Churchill the idea of granting self-government to all remaining British colonies in Africa, Churchill responded that he was "skeptical about universal suffrage for the Hottentots." In the 1950s, Churchill was prime minister during Britain's Fight against the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, the native country of Obama's father.¹¹

D'Souza's view makes some sense. Obama's father was Kenyan. If the bust of Churchill was meant to symbolize some special relationship between America and Britain, returning the bust may have been meant to symbolize another sort of special relationship between former colonies and Britain. But why should anyone think returning the bust was necessarily an "alien" act, unless one assumes that the way whites see history is the only legitimate way to see it. Are whites somehow insulted that Obama, in returning the bust, was saying that Churchill was a white hero, if, indeed, that was what he was trying to say? They might respond by saying that the presidency is bigger than the race or religion of the occupant. In fact, the office has nothing to do with the race, religion, or gender of the occu-

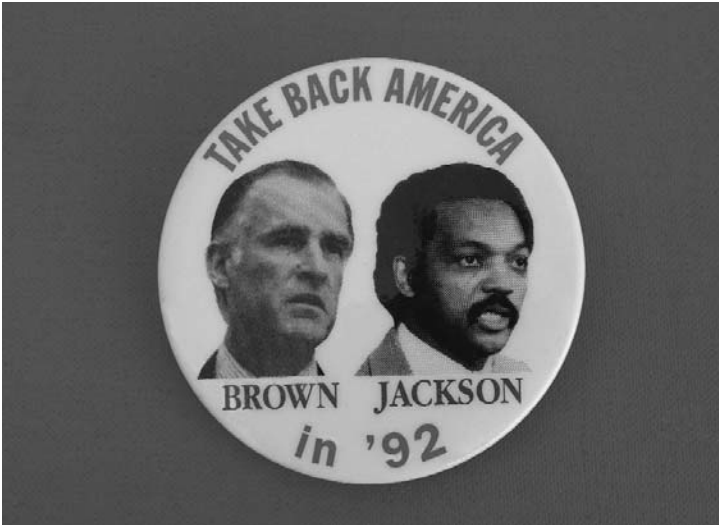
pant, and the election should not be seen as “correcting” or “repudiating” the so-called whiteness of the office. But if that is the case, what then is Obama’s difference supposed to mean? Or put another way, what difference is racial difference supposed to make?

Was it the expectation of whites, both those who supported Obama in 2008 and those who did not, that he would serve as president in a way that would be indistinguishable from a white serving in the office? Would this outcome have been their ideal of the post-racial? Blacks, by and large, probably had no problem with Obama returning the bust, as it was most likely their expectation – certainly their hope – that he would serve as an active agent of their interests, avenger of their injuries and insults, restorer of their place of respect in the world. (This was probably the hope of the white Left, too, whose watchword, after all, is *transformative*, which so many have called the Obama presidency.) Is this black Americans’ idea of post-racial, when a black person would not be expected to be indistinguishable from his white predecessors but, in fact, would be expected to be very different, the deconstructive counterpoint, the legitimization of black reality meant to expose the fact that there is a “white” way of governing and, naturally, a “non-white” way? What many whites looked for in Obama was a Sidney Poitier character from the 1950s; many blacks wanted the hero of a 1970s blaxploitation film. Shelby Steele, in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed from October 28, 2010, warned against electing a redeemer rather than a steward because redeemers, by their very nature and mission, must be transformative. Stewards, conversely, simply wish to guard the values and principles, the institutions and wealth, of the republic. Perhaps. But that is probably too simple an explana-

tion of how blacks and whites see democracy. And was there not a time, during the post-World War II development of the American studies discipline, when Americans understood themselves historically as a redeemer nation?¹²

In a recent *Washington Post* article, columnist Eugene Robinson attempted to answer the question, “What’s Behind the Tea Party’s Ire?” The party, “overwhelmingly white and lavishly funded,” is more upset about Obama’s race than his policies, according to Robinson. He describes the rhetoric frequently used at Tea Party rallies and by Tea Party-endorsed candidates – calls for “taking the country back” and “returning the American government to the American people” – as implicitly racist. It disturbs him that many in the Tea Party see Obama as an elitist, “when he grew up in modest circumstances – his mother was on food stamps for a time – and paid for his fancy-pants education with student loans.”¹³ If anyone fits the bill as an elitist, Robinson suggests, it is George W. Bush, on the basis of his privileged background. Bush seems to have wrecked the budget with deficit spending before Obama entered the office, yet despite being widely unpopular, he does not seem to be blamed for these sins as Obama has been.¹⁴

Some of these same concerns and misgivings about the Tea Party are made (more compellingly) by historian Clarence E. Walker in his essay for this issue of *Dædalus*. But it is hard to judge precisely how racist the Tea Party may be. First, the environmental movement, the climate change movement, the animal rights movement, and the anti-war movement (its latest incarnation being in opposition to Iraq) all have an overwhelmingly white public face (at their public demonstrations, for example).



This political button shows how the Left has also embraced the rhetoric of “taking back the country.” It features Jerry Brown, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, and Jesse Jackson, whom Brown said he would select as his vice presidential running mate if he was nominated.

No one makes this point to discredit or criticize these movements. Why not, if lack of diversity is a serious shortcoming in a political movement? Tea Party rallies generally have gone to great lengths to include black conservative speakers, such as Angela McGlowan and Alfonzo Rachel, and the movement has endorsed non-white candidates comprising African Americans, Indian Americans, and Hispanic Americans.¹⁵ Second, both the Left and the Right have used the phrase “taking back the country.” For example, the Left used it in the political button pictured above, featuring Jerry Brown, who was running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, and Jesse Jackson, whom Brown said he would select as his vice presidential running mate if he was nominated.¹⁶

The Washington Post recently revealed that only 5 percent of signs at a Tea Party rally mentioned either Obama’s race or religion.¹⁷ Whether Obama is an elitist is hard to say and, frankly, is irrelevant

to his abilities as a politician. But being an elitist – or some sort of social-status hound or cultural snob – is not at all contingent on the modesty of one’s background. A parvenu, which Obama and other highly educated black folk such as myself happen to be, can be the worst sort of snob, intensely elitist.¹⁸ It is arguable whether racism in the Tea Party movement even matters very much to black people’s interests. Black editorial writer Jason Riley, of *The Wall Street Journal*, made a point of criticizing the NAACP for issuing a report condemning the racism of the Tea Party; he called the report misguided and extraneous to the real issues and concerns facing black people in the United States.¹⁹

My point is not that Robinson’s column is superficial and poorly argued (hardly a novel or trenchant observation to make of an op-ed). I am not even trying to argue that the Tea Party movement isn’t racist. A book like political scientist Robert C. Smith’s *Conservatism and Rac-*

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ism, and Why in America They Are the Same (2010) makes a provocative and sometimes compelling argument about the persistent historical connection between conservatism and its justification of white privilege or the status quo of white dominance. Rather, I am interested in how Robinson's column reveals two significant anxieties that many African Americans feel. The first anxiety derives from the fact that Barack Obama is, without question, the most criticized black man in the United States now, not a surprising fate given he is president. He is probably the most criticized black man in the history of the United States because, once again, being the president he is the most visible and most powerful black man in history. Blacks, on the whole, have always felt uncomfortable, if not outright defensive, whenever a black person is stridently and caustically criticized, especially when it is a black man and especially when criticized by whites. African Americans frequently fluctuate between defensive militancy and special pleading in response to criticism because, throughout their history, they have been unjustly, sometimes savagely and opportunistically, criticized by whites. The group may feel that attacks on Obama are onslaughts to the manhood virtue of the race itself, and manhood remains a sensitive and potent issue for blacks, who still generally feel that their men are more at risk than their women. As Obama is the first black president, and as blacks who overwhelmingly supported him are highly invested in his success, they are strongly inclined to be piqued by attacks, while also proud of his ability to withstand the attacks, proud of his being in the arena where such attacks are made. This is the tension of what I call post-racial racialism: blacks want Obama (or any prominent black person of achievement) to

receive special treatment because he is black, and they expect such achievement to be lionized not merely as exemplary but as heroic; on the other hand, they do not want the achievement of any prominent black to be diminished or dismissed, somehow qualified or patronized, because of race or any special consideration given to it. So the brutal give-and-take of partisan politics, which blacks know well enough, in this instance makes them uneasy. And they are not unjustified in their distrust of white motives: many blacks still remember the Republican Party's Nixonian Southern strategy of the late 1960s through the 1980s, making a coded appeal as it did to whites as whites; many still remember the successful Willie Horton ad campaign that George H.W. Bush used against Michael Dukakis in 1988; many remember the racist affirmative action ads Jesse Helms used against black challenger Harvey Gantt in North Carolina. Some will say that blacks cannot take the pressure of being in the political arena and overreact to criticism of Obama, that they are overly sensitive to whites' good or bad intentions. (Beating Hillary Clinton and John McCain, two highly experienced white politicians, in the arena of political debate and exchange was probably what made blacks feel most proud of Obama.) Others feel that the whites who do not like Obama use their harsh criticism of him to take racist potshots at the group as a whole through him. Besides, many blacks feel that they should defend Obama as vigorously as most conservatives defended Bush. If your opponents consider ideological loyalty a virtue for their side, why is it not a virtue for you as well?

The second anxiety is related to the group of whites with whom African Americans generally align themselves politically. This group usually comprises

educated, highly cultured, middle- and upper-class liberal whites – those who, back in the days of slavery and after, would have been referred to as “de quality.” Historically, blacks have had little truck with lower-class whites or with white ethnics (except Jews). This political alignment is one reason why whites who hate Obama call him elitist, because they feel that the group of whites who back him are, by and large, elitist; they also feel that whites who support Obama treat blacks as favored pets while disdain other whites who are not supporters. After all, these liberal, educated whites took to Obama largely because they felt they were dealing with one of their own: someone who went to their schools, read their kind of books, had their kind of habits, spoke their language. Obama impressed even upper-class conservatives such as David Brooks, Christopher Buckley, and Peggy Noonan for the same reasons. He is a black who did not, through his habits or inclinations, overly remind them that he is black: rather like the educated, deracinated “mulatto” colonial, in some respects. Lower-class whites have always been jealous of this alignment as a violation of white racial solidarity and because the blacks seemed to be rising at their expense.

One of the most remarkable racist allegories of this situation I describe is the series of Frankenstein movies made by Universal Studios in the 1930s and early 1940s. Doctor Frankenstein and his colleagues all represent the upper-class whites – scientific, rational, liberal, seeking new knowledge and wanting to overturn the old ways. The violent monster is the African American, the botched experiment of breathing new life into a dead people, of resurrecting them through science and rationality. Through the sheer will of a liberal

vision, Frankenstein thought that he could create a being equal to those around him, that he could fabricate or engineer an equal being from the bits and pieces of bodies. The villagers are the lower-class whites – superstitious, fearful, and jealous of the monster, resentful of the better-off whites who scorn them as backward simpletons. And in virtually every Frankenstein movie, the villagers, with their torches, shotguns, and pitchforks, destroy Frankenstein and his monster.

In this fevered vision, no one is admirable; no one has the moral high ground, although the monster, in its way, represents a form of innocence, pathos: the upper and lower classes are flawed, either arrogant in their intelligence or mob-like in their ignorance, and the monster is deformed. A twisted reading of the Obama presidency – and some white conservatives are reading it in just this way – makes it out to be a modern Frankenstein story, the hubris of the modern Prometheus – the hubris of liberalism. Perhaps it is a hubris to answer the hubris the Left saw in the conservative policies of Bush, the hubris the Left sees in the American empire – what might be called the hubris of neoliberalism.

I know that in the life styles of any number of groups in the nation, there are many things which Negroes would certainly reject, not because they hold them in contempt, but because they do not satisfy our way of doing things and our feeling about things.

–Ralph Ellison, from a transcript of the American Academy conference on “The Negro American,” May 14 – 15, 1965

This is why I say that in order for the Negro to become an American citizen, all American citizens will be forced to

undergo a change, and all American institutions will be forced to undergo a change too.

–James Baldwin, “Liberalism and the Negro” (1964)

The Negroes are asking for unequal treatment.

–Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Memorandum for the Secretary (1964)²⁰

In 1964, *Commentary* magazine sponsored a roundtable on “Liberalism and the Negro,” moderated by Norman Podhoretz and including panelists James Baldwin, Sidney Hook, Gunnar Myrdal, and Nathan Glazer. Podhoretz, then-editor of the magazine, put it as well as anyone when he described the crisis in liberalism thus:

For the traditional liberal mentality conceives of society as being made up not of competing economic classes and ethnic groups, but rather of competing *individuals* who confront a neutral body of laws and a neutral institutional complex. . . . [T]he newer school of liberal thought on race relations maintains that the Negro community *as a whole* has been crippled by three hundred years of slavery and persecution and that the simple removal of legal and other barriers to the advancement of individual Negroes can therefore only result in what is derisively called “tokenism.” This school of thought insists that radical measures are now needed to overcome the Negro’s inherited disabilities.²¹

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ conferences on “The Negro American” in 1964 and 1965, as well as the resulting issues of *Dædalus* that published the conference papers and partial transcripts, reveal that nearly everyone was wrestling with this tension in liberalism,

this ideological division in dealing with African Americans, their status, and their claims for justice. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a key figure at the American Academy conferences and author of what would prove to be one of the most important and controversial documents about the status of blacks in the United States, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), was torn about the best way forward. Without some strong federal intervention to change hiring practices, the black male, who was the primary focus of Moynihan’s report, would never become the breadwinner and figure of stability that he needed to be if the black family was to cease being dysfunctional.

On the one hand, the idea of making race a permanent category in American politics by introducing preferential treatment for blacks was not simply distasteful but contrary to American ideology and the preferred aim of getting rid of racism by getting rid of race itself. Ultimately, liberalism essentially chose affirmative action under President Nixon and his Philadelphia Plan in 1969, and what emerged was the political fixture of racial categories in a scheme of preferred treatment, designed largely to stop the violent black rebellions in major American cities that had become commonplace by 1964 and horrendous by 1965 when the Watts section of Los Angeles exploded in racial violence that at times resembled out-and-out warfare. Instead of lasting only ten or twenty years – a kind of domestic Marshall Plan, as early advocates like Bayard Rustin and Whitney Young wanted – affirmative action has now lasted forty years and, despite challenges and changes, shows no sign of being abandoned as a policy position of blacks, white liberals, and the Left. Affirmative action is bolstered by a philosophy called multiculturalism, which

involves radicalizing the concept of pluralism and tolerance as the active destruction of all marginalization; by the slogan of diversity (a form of bureaucratic bean-counting for proper representation); and by a network of government-enforced or government-encouraged forms of solidarity. As a result, affirmative action as a remediation policy has widened its reach to include virtually anyone in the United States who is not an able-bodied, heterosexual white man. For some, this “inclusion industry” has hurt blacks, as the idea of preferential treatment was originally conceived to address the specific needs that arose from the historical fact – popularized by liberal historians and sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s – that blacks had been slaves in the United States, a unique form of political oppression and social ostracism. They had been placed in a position of government-approved powerlessness and total abjection and thus had been incomparably damaged as a people by that institution. According to this view, blacks were the only true caste victims in America. They were also the only people in this mythical land of the immigrant who came here against their will. (There are some exceptions to this, such as immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean.) They therefore required a remedy that was beyond the normal avenues of redress others could obtain through constitutional means or the regular political process, with its built-in mechanisms for reform.

On the other hand, some have argued that affirmative action would never have endured as a policy had its client list not been widened in order to garner more political support. The country on the whole was not very interested in helping blacks overcome a socially imposed and politically managed inferiority status unless others who felt they had equally legitimate claims were also helped. In other

words, blacks needed “victim allies” in order for the policy to be accepted. Yet some argue that including these allies has caused the policy not to work very well for blacks, or at least not work as originally intended.

Conservatives today are fighting for the alternative liberalism, the original liberalism, if you will, of competing individuals, race-neutral laws and institutions, and an essentially race-neutral public square; they would have race become what religion or any other form of identification is: a private realm, unforced and unenabled by a system of governmental rewards and disincentives. For these conservatives (old-fashioned liberals), the government has no compelling interest in maintaining racial categories or helping people on the basis of race. The biggest mistake America ever made was to recognize race as a way of legitimatizing slavery; continuing to recognize race does not rectify that mistake. The affirmative action liberals retort by saying the government invented and sanctioned race as a legitimate category; it cannot blithely get out of the race business now by declaring that race, in effect, does not exist because we now find race a repugnant idea. In other words, for the affirmative action liberals, the so-called original liberalism never existed except in the American imagination, in America’s fantasy of itself.²²

The two worlds of race have produced two views of liberalism. And within blacks themselves the two worlds have produced two interpretations of America: one that reveals America as it really is, a view shaped by the special knowledge blacks have derived from their condition in America; and another view that denies them a true sense of what America is, shaped by the knowledge *kept from them* based

on their condition. Novelist James Baldwin said in 1964, "I have watched the way most white people in this country live. I have worked in their kitchens and I have served them their brandy, and I know what goes on in white living rooms better than white people know what goes on in mine."²³ Ralph Ellison made this observation in 1965: "There are many parts of this complex American society which Negroes have been kept away from. Even most of our novelists do not give enough of a report of how life is actually lived in the country for a Negro to pick up a novel and get some clues. The constrictions and the exclusiveness very often have gotten into our perception of social complexity."²⁴ The two worlds of race created in blacks a contrary sense of what they knew about the United States and the whites who ran it, blending into a self-aggrandized sense of isolation: both inside and outside at once.

The *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American" grappled with the conflicting views of liberalism in dealing with race as well as liberalism's discontent with its own limitations at reforming a problem that has been at the crux of the American experiment: that is, how to integrate a forced-worker population that once was needed but is socially undesirable now that its original purpose for being here no longer exists; or, how to make the unwanted wanted. I thought that Obama's election as president could be a useful pretext to return to this question or issue – one that has been significantly recast and reformulated since the *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American," now that we have lived for nearly fifty years with racism as a discredited idea, segregation as a thing of the past, and blacks as an officially sanctioned remedial caste. Having a president who is a black man, albeit one with a tangential

or more oblique American experience, calls for a consideration of this new age, the "age of Obama." A desire to explore the role of white liberalism in the context of a growing minority population in the United States – one that will, before mid-century, outnumber whites – also motivated my interest in revisiting "The Negro American" project of 1965. Our moment today is in every way as significant as that moment, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, when America seemed on the edge of a brave new world, poised for redefinition and ready to see itself anew.

The present volume is the humanist companion to the *Dædalus* issue (Spring 2011) that Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo is guest editing and that will more strongly feature the social sciences. The original *Dædalus* issues on "The Negro American" included only one essay by a true humanist, historian John Hope Franklin, a man I greatly admired. His essay is reprinted here, and my essay is meant in some ways, even with its title, to be a thematic continuation, a reimagining and reworking of the intellectual preoccupations in his essay, and a tribute to his work. I feel privileged to have the opportunity to be the guest editor of this issue, as I feel privileged to be in partnership with Bobo, another scholar I admire. I am extremely grateful to the brilliant contributors who wrote wonderfully thoughtful and engaging essays for this volume. I am glad the topic captured their imagination and that they had confidence in my skills as an editor. These are busy people, and I appreciate their taking the time. As Lou Gehrig said, "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-Table Discussion,” *Commentary*, March 1964, 27. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 59; originally published in 1952.
- ² Joe Klein, “Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President,” *Time*, October 23, 2006.
- ³ A 2005 Gallup poll showed that despite the fact that confidence in the police to protect citizens from crime had dropped across all demographics, a huge gulf still remained between blacks and whites: only 32 percent of blacks expressed confidence in the police compared to 57 percent of whites.
- ⁴ “Murder: New York City” (Murder Map), *The New York Times*, November 1, 2010.
- ⁵ The concern about crimes committed against members of the group might be best reflected in the numbers from a 2009 Gallup poll that showed only 42 percent of blacks thought their neighbor would return a lost wallet with whatever money it contained whereas 75 percent of whites thought their neighbor would.
- ⁶ Quoted in David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 274.
- ⁷ See John Hope Franklin, “The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View,” *Dædalus* 94 (4) (Fall 1965), and reprinted in the present volume, pages 28 – 43.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 899; reference is to the 1965 publication.
- ⁹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan feared that integration done too rapidly – a policy that would, in effect, be tantamount to an aggressive affirmative action – would simply exacerbate racial relations by highlighting how blacks lagged far behind whites. For instance, consider this passage from a letter Moynihan wrote in 1963 to Labor Secretary W. Willard Wirtz: “For whatever it is worth, I am persuaded, and find others such as Phil Hauser completely agree, that it would be a serious mistake from the Negro point of view to integrate the Northern school system at this time. The present level of achievement and family support among most Negroes is so far behind that of most white that any *artificial* effort to integrate the schools can only have the effect of consigning almost the entire Negro student body to the bottom of the class, with all the psychic injury that results; Steven R. Weisman, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 60; italics in the original.
- ¹⁰ Dorothy Rabinowitz, “The Alien in the White House,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2010.
- ¹¹ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Roots of Obama’s Rage* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2010), 42. D’Souza fails to acknowledge anywhere in his book that his idea of understanding Obama as a disgruntled postcolonial was first posited by Nigerian writer L. E. Inkenga, in an article she wrote for the conservative website American Thinker; “Obama, the African Colonial,” June 25, 2009. Inkenga offers the same psychobiographical reading of Obama’s autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*.
- ¹² See, for instance, Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). It would have been strange for the first black man to have been elected president, particularly with Obama’s configuration of characteristics and abilities, and not have been seen as a redeemer, as something providential. Literary scholar and social theorist Dana D. Nelson argues that redeemer presidents are hardly new, that “we expect the president to do the work of democracy” and to be “the leader of democracy and its central agent.” In this way, the public has come to believe that its sole political job is electing the “right” president, as if that is all we have to do to maintain democracy. As a “new,” “transformational” candidate, Obama brilliantly exploited this tendency among voters in order to win the office. Nelson’s main argument is that we need to be concerned about the presidency having too much power and sandbagging democracy, as the executive branch is the only one of the three branches of government that is run

and symbolized by an individual. See Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; updated with a new preface, 2010), xiv.

- ¹³ Eugene Robinson, "What's Behind the Tea Party's Ire?" *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2010.
- ¹⁴ Historian and economist Bruce Bartlett did, in fact, blast Bush on these grounds in his book *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). The book was well received by many on the Right.
- ¹⁵ It is pointless to call the black people who are part of the Tea Party "Uncle Toms," as it is impossible to say that they are selling anyone out or that their political stances are self-evidently detrimental to blacks. One can plausibly argue that their involvement with the Right is helpful to blacks as a group, providing them with a voice and influence in other political spheres. Michael Steele's leadership of the Republican National Committee may, in some respects, be as strategically important to African Americans as a group as the Congressional Black Caucus has been. It is equally pointless to call black conservatives opportunists, as anyone actively espousing a political cause or identifying with a political faction can be accused of opportunism. This is particularly true on the Left, as that is the most socially approved political position for a black person to take, the position judged as representing true solidarity.
- ¹⁶ John Hope Franklin notes in his *Dædalus* essay that the phrase "turning back the clock," popularly used by liberal and civil rights groups in opposition to conservative policies or conservative ideology, was used in the 1960s by Southern whites to describe how civil rights legislation would turn back the clock to the era of Reconstruction. See Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race," 917.
- ¹⁷ Amy Gardner, "Few Signs at Tea Party Rally Expressed Racially Charged Anti-Obama Themes," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2010.
- ¹⁸ Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) remains an insightful look at elitism among blacks. It may be that some (perhaps many) in the Tea Party dislike Obama because of his race, but one could make an equally plausible argument that they don't like him because he is an intellectual. His admirers are convinced he is an intellectual and love to promote the idea, as the quotation above from Valerie Jarrett illustrates. Or consider this response from Vice President Joe Biden when he was asked why Obama is perceived as aloof: "I think what it is is he is so brilliant. He is an intellectual"; Lisa DePaulo, "\$#!% Joe Biden Says," *GQ*, December 2010; emphasis in the original. There has always been a large swath of the American public that distrusts and dislikes intellectuals, particularly in leadership positions, thinking them elitist, controlling, and too theoretical for their own or anyone else's good. George W. Bush, who developed the demeanor of the plainspoken, at times thick-tongued anti-intellectual, attended Yale University and Harvard Business School. During his presidency, it was commonly thought he was stupid and dogmatic, although many leftist critics tried to out him as an elitist with C grades playing the role of a good old boy. Karl Rove outed Bush as a voracious reader in his December 26, 2008, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "Bush is a Book Lover." Bush read anywhere from fifty to one hundred books a year while he was president. It seems more likely that both Obama and Bush, whatever the extent of their intellectual interests and skills, have developed personas – images – that they have found useful as politicians. Obama and his brain trust may greatly emphasize his intellect as a way of thwarting doubts about his mental abilities because he is a black man, as a way to redirect the aspirations of young blacks, for whom he could be a role model, away from popular culture, and as a way to make whites feel comfortable voting for him by convincing them they are voting for an "exceptional," not an "ordinary," Negro: voting for him was not an "affirmative action" vote but a "merit" vote. Bush may have downplayed his own intellectual pretensions as a way of reaching a large swath of the conservative Amer-

ican electorate that dislikes and distrusts intellectuals. It is interesting to note that both Bush and Obama are considered arrogant by their political enemies.

¹⁹ Jason Riley, "The NAACP's Unhealthy Tea Party Obsession," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2010.

²⁰ "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14 – 15, 1965," *Dædalus* 95 (1) (Winter 1966): 408. "Liberalism and the Negro," 41. Weisman, *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*, 79.

²¹ "Liberalism and the Negro"; emphasis in the original.

²² In a 1965 memo to presidential aide Harry McPherson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan sums up liberalism's internal conflict thus: "American democracy is founded on the twin ideals of liberty and equality. . . . Liberty has been the American middle-class ideal par excellence. It has enjoyed the utmost social prestige. Not so equality. Men who would carelessly give their lives for Liberty, are appalled by equality." Moynihan points out that equality movements in the United States have met with great opposition, far more than movements for liberty, that is, the right not to be denied civic access. Moynihan continues, in speaking about the anti-colonialism movement, "I sometimes have the feeling that part of the mutual incomprehension that is so evident in the encounter of Americans with that world [the Third World] is that we are talking liberty and they are talking equality." See Weisman, *Daniel Patrick Moynihan*, 103 – 104.

²³ "Liberalism and the Negro," 37 – 38.

²⁴ "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American – May 14 – 15, 1965," 436. During the Academy conference, Ellison reacted unfavorably to some of Nathan Glazer's remarks from the "Liberalism and the Negro" roundtable; see page 408 in the transcript.