Rethinking the Language of Race and Racism[*]

Michael Omi[†]

> I am convinced that the category "race" is so laden with contradictions
> that it no longer works in the way it used to, at least within the context of
> radical theories and practices. . . . That "race" no longer works as a focus
> of resistance organizing does not mean that racism has become obsolete
> and that we should discard it as a concept.
>
> Angela Y. Davis[1]

The members of the Asian Law Journal are to be commended for
organizing a symposium to interrogate the connections between emergent
critical theories of race and the strategies and practices of social justice
lawyering. Both legal scholars and activists have bemoaned the widening
gap between theory and practice, called for a rethinking of the traditional
civil rights paradigm, and wondered how to seize the "moral high ground"
with respect to contemporary political debates about racial inequality. To
contribute to this broader dialogue, I want to offer some brief observations
about the conceptual language of race, racism, and anti-racism, and discern
its meaning for the task at hand.

In January of 2000, Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown was asked by *San
Francisco Chronicle* political columnists Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross
about his downtown revitalization plans. The following dialogue ensued:

> *Matier & Ross*: Some people say you're just trying to bring 10,000 white
> people into the downtown with all these high-priced live-work lofts.
>
> *Brown*: How do you know what color they are going to be?
>
> *Matier & Ross*: Come on, who do you think lives in these lofts?
>
> *Brown*: Well, that's kind of a stigmatization of nonwhite people. There
> are African Americans, Chinese, Filipinos and there are white people –
> and by the way, race is just kind of silly anyway because 99 percent of
> our DNA is the same.
>
> *Matier & Ross*: Maybe, but race is still a part of politics – especially local
> politics.
>
> *Brown*: It's a fact that is often manipulated and used. Yes, there is a

---

    1. Angela Y. Davis, *Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking 'Race' Politics*, *in*
MAPPING MULTICULTURALISM, 43-44 (Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield eds., 1996).

tradition and a history of racism and disadvantage and oppression. But
having said all that, when do you move on? And when do you try and
pull it all together?[2]

When, indeed. I think that Mayor Brown's comments illustrate an
emerging hegemonic understanding of race and racism in the post-civil
rights era. A new "common sense" understanding about the meaning of
race in social and political life has been ascending – one that has dire
implications for contesting persistent forms of racial inequality.

The first theme of the new racial "common sense" posits that since
there is no biological reality to the concept of race, it is therefore bereft of
any social meaning. While biology-based arguments regarding race
continue to surface,[3] such notions have been roundly discredited in the
sciences. This has led to the popular argument that race should not matter
since "races" do not really exist. For over a year, the American
Anthropological Association, in response to the President's Initiative on
Race, engaged in a vigorous debate regarding whether the concept of race
retains any meaning at all as an analytic category when biological
definitions have been so thoroughly discredited.[4] Having been challenged
as a "scientific" category, race is now regarded as a questionable social
category, a myth that perpetuates forms of false (racial) consciousness.

The second theme of the emergent racial "common sense" is the
incessant call to "get beyond race" to "get over it." The use of the "race
card" in politics, as well as in the courtroom, has been widely criticized
from positions across the political spectrum. Some on the political right,
like Dinesh D'Souza, have proclaimed the "end of racism," while
condoning forms of "rational discrimination."[5] Progressives such as Todd
Gitlin, bemoaning the weakness of the American left, have accused
identity based-social movements of "essentializing" race, and subverting
the advancement of a universal political subject and unified political
movement.[6] Race is seen as a smokescreen, an apparition that detracts our
collective attention from focusing on the "real" issues of class-based
economic inequality or political disempowerment.

We now exist in a period where *everybody* (with the exception of self-
proclaimed white supremacists) claims to be "anti-racist." That said,
contemporary discourse is littered with confused and contradictory
meanings regarding race and racism. Many whites, and some people of
color, believe that the goals of the civil rights movement have been
achieved, that racial discrimination is a thing of the past, and that we are
now a truly "color-blind" society. Given this transformed political

2. Phillip Matier and Andrew Ross, *Long March: Oakland's Philosopher/Pothole Filler Moving Swiftly*, S.F. CHRON., Jan. 10, 2000, at A17.

3. *See, e.g.,* J. PHILIPPE RUSHTON, RACE, EVOLUTION, AND BEHAVIOR: A LIFE HISTORY PERSPECTIVE (1995).

4. *See, e.g.,* ANTHROPOLOGY NEWSL. (The Am. Anthro. Ass'n, Arlington, Va.), Oct. 1997, Dec. 1997, Feb. 1998, Mar. 1998, May 1998, Sept. 1998.

5. *See* DINESH D'SOUZA, THE END OF RACISM: PRINCIPLES FOR A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY (1995).

6. *See* TODD GITLIN, THE TWILIGHT OF COMMON DREAMS: WHY AMERICA IS WRACKED BY CULTURE WARS (1995).

landscape, race-conscious remedies, policies, and practices – such as affirmative action, minority set-asides, redistricting strategies – are increasingly critiqued, contested, and dismantled. Recently, U.S. District Court Judge William Orrick rejected the San Francisco Unified School District's "diversity index" for assigning children to schools because it included race as one of four factors.[7] Any hints of race consciousness are now suspiciously viewed as racist and impermissible in a good, just, and supposedly color-blind society.

The new racial "common sense" did not emerge full-blown, but has developed since the late-1970s with the rise of neoconservative thought. Well-supported through a network of foundations and think tanks, neoconservatives have profoundly re-articulated the language of race and racism of the civil rights period, widely disseminated their views through varied media outlets, and dramatically influenced both state and private-sector policies and practices.[8] Neoconservative discourse has emphasized *de jure* discrimination, individual rights, and "colorblind" remedies. Racial inequalities are not seen as a structured social reality. The more radical elements of the civil rights vision are contained. Neoconservatives have captured the moral high ground with respect to race, and no sustained credible challenge has yet to emerge.

Indeed, I believe that in the present political moment we are witnessing the relative exhaustion of the traditional civil rights paradigm. In many institutional arenas, formal legal equality has been significantly achieved. Substantive racial inequality, however, remains, and in many cases, has deepened. There is a pressing need to both challenge the current appropriation of civil rights discourse in the guise of "colorblindness," and – at the same time – to rethink the capacity of state and other institutions to deal with persistent forms of racial inequality. In developing a truly effective anti-racist strategy and practice, we need to be attentive to how we deploy specific concepts of race and racism.

Let me briefly survey three topics in this regard: the issue of racial classification, the notion of racism as hate, and the question of addressing conflicts between communities of color.

I. RACIAL CLASSIFICATION

Alan Jenkins insightfully observes that there is a significant political movement to ban the collection of racial demographic information.[9] Examples abound. Former California Governor Pete Wilson, toward the end of his term, ordered state agencies to stop maintaining statistical data on minority and female participation in state contracting.[10] Certain states and local governments underreport hate crimes or otherwise do not

---

7. *See SFUSD Assignment Plan Omits Race*, ASIAN WEEK, Jan. 13, 2000, at 14.
8. *See* JEAN STEFANCIC AND RICHARD DELGADO, NO MERCY: HOW CONSERVATIVE THINK TANKS AND FOUNDATIONS CHANGED AMERICA'S SOCIAL AGENDA (1996).
9. *See* Alan Jenkins, *See No Evil*, THE NATION, June 28, 1999, at 15-19.
10. *Id.* at 15.

cooperate with the voluntary provisions of the Hate Crimes Statistics Act.[11] Prior to his fall from grace, Newt Gingrich supported a multiracial category on the Census as a way to point out the indeterminacy of all racial categories, and therefore argue for their abolition.[12]

Such moves are consistent with a political agenda that seeks to "get beyond" race by refusing to recognize its social reality. The state policies that utilize racial categories are roundly criticized for promoting color consciousness and subverting the ideology and practice of colorblindness. James Glassman of the American Enterprise Institute complains, "The tyranny of government racial policies forces us to define ourselves as white, black, Hispanic or Asian. The purpose may be benign (to track the progress of minorities) but the effect is vicious (to reinforce strict racial identity, the way segregationists did)."[13] Racial classification, in this line of reasoning, is linked to the virulent practices of Jim Crow.

The reality is that, without some form of racial record-keeping, we are unable to empirically observe institutional patterns of racial inequality with respect to income, wealth, residential segregation, health care, and other important indicators of well-being and life chances. Without some form of racial categorization, for example, we would not be able to discern the extent of police profiling of black and Latino motorists.[14]

While rejecting biological notions of race, we need to vigorously assert the importance of social constructs of race in individual and institutional life. This does not mean that we can have an accurate, precise, or "scientific" form of racial classification. Racial categories dramatically change over time; they are the result of distinct political claims for recognition, and they result from a complex negotiation between the state and group/individual identities.[15] They cannot, however, simply be dispensed with. In a racially stratified society, social concepts of race matter. This means that aggrieved communities need to lobby for specific racial categories as a policy issue.

II. RACISM AS "HATE"

Like the concept of race, the term "racism" is also under critical scrutiny regarding its overall meaning, conceptual validity, and analytic power. It is frequently suggested that the term itself is subject to so many varied meanings as to render the concept greatly limited in utility. Anything from individual acts of prejudice to systemic, institutional forms of discrimination potentially fall under the rubric of "racism." John

---

11. *Id.*

12. According to Gingrich, "America is too big and diverse to categorize each and every one of us into four rigid racial categories . . . It is time for the government to stop perpetuating racial divisiveness." *See Testimony in Federal Measures of Race and Ethnicity and the Implications for the 2000 Census,* 105th Cong. 662 (1997) (testimony of Newt Gingrich).

13. *See* Jenkins, *supra* note 9, at 15.

14. *See* Jodi Wilgoren, *Police Profiling Debate Hinges on Issue of Experience vs. Bias,* N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 9, 1999, at B1.

15. *See* Michael Omi, *Racial Identity and the State: The Dilemmas of Classification,* 15 LAW & INEQ. J. 7 (1997).

Bunzel, former member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and current senior research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, argued in 1998 that the President's Advisory Board on Race should call for a halt to the use of terms such as "racism" and "racist" since they are "wielded as accusations and smear words" that breed "bitterness and polarization."[16]

The problems of conceptual inflation and its political consequences are of real concern. But I am worried that the term "racism" in popular political discourse is increasingly being subject to conceptual *de*flation. That is, what is considered racist is being narrowly defined in ways that obscure rather than reveal the pervasiveness of racialized power in our social order. David Theo Goldberg makes the point that, in the last decade or so, racism has been popularly conceived of as *hate*.[17] The category of "hate crimes" has been introduced in many states as a specific offense with enhanced sentencing consequences, and many colleges and universities have instituted "hate speech" codes to regulate expression and behavior both inside and outside of the classroom. Dramatic acts of racial violence are given considerable play in the mass media, and are the subject of extensive condemnation by political elites.

The reduction of racism to hate, however, both conceptually and politically limits our understanding of racism and the ways we can challenge it. Racism has been silently transformed in the popular consciousness into acts that are abnormal, unusual, and irrational — "crimes of passion." Missing from all this are the ideologies and practices in a variety of sites in our society that reproduce racial inequality and domination.

Seen from this perspective, expressions of "hate" are an easy target for mobilizing popular opposition. Goldberg argues that it is much more difficult to criminalize or otherwise regulate racist expressions of power, not least because relations of power are so normalized and constitute "common threads of the fabric of our social formation."[18]

We need to expand our understanding of racism as power, and think about its meaning for our activism. Part of the challenge is to create a more precise language and conceptual terminology to examine specific aspects of racialized power, and how they are experienced by, and affect the overall life chances of individuals and social groups. Racism is expressed differently at distinct levels and sites of social activity over historical time, and we need to be attentive to its shifting meaning in different contexts. Rather than imagining a single monolithic racism, we need to envision multiple forms of racism and their meaning for anti-racist activity.

III. INTERRACIAL JUSTICE

The dramatic influx of Asian and Latino immigrants has inspired a

---

16.   John H. Bunzel, *Words That Smear, Like "Racism," Provoke Polarization*, S.F. EXAMINER, July 26, 1998, at D7.

17.   *See* DAVID THEO GOLDBERG, *Hate, or Power?*, *in* RACIAL SUBJECTS: WRITING ON RACE IN AMERICA 17 (1997).

18.   *Id.* at 23.

fundamental reconsideration of the dominant black/white paradigm of race in the United States. But many multicultural narratives simply treat different groups of color vis-à-vis a core white culture, thus reproducing a binary racial model. Groups of color are rarely, if ever, treated as dynamic referents for each other. In the current period, indifference, hostility, and/or open conflict mark the prevailing form of multiculturalism experienced by groups of color. We need to urgently consider relations between communities of color and their meaning for anti-racist activity.

Groups of color labor under a social system that has been historically structured by white supremacy, and continues in the present to reinforce white privilege.[19] But the hegemonic racial order has not treated all nonwhite groups in a similar manner. Tomás Almaguer, in his study of white supremacy in 19th-century California, notes that different racial/ethnic groups encountered a "differential racialization."[20] Nonwhite groups were envisioned, socially constructed, and positioned in relation to each other by white elites. This has consequences for group position and how political interests get defined.

Groups are positioned in unequal ways in a racially stratified society, and acknowledging the differences in power between groups, whether real or imagined, has deep implications for the possibilities of coalition building. In this regard, I have been profoundly influenced by Eric Yamamoto's concept of "interracial justice."[21] Interracial justice, as he describes it, reflects a commitment to anti-subordination among nonwhite racial groups.[22]

In an earlier essay, Professor Yamamoto recounts the campaign in 1993 among churches within the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ for an Asian American apology to Native Hawaiians and for multi-million dollar reparations.[23] At issue was how other Asian Americans, particularly Japanese and Chinese Americans, have been complicit in the exploitation and oppression of Native Hawaiians. Drawing upon this case, Yamamoto describes the concept of "interracial justice" as one that is attentive to the historical and contemporary differences in power which different groups possess:

It entails a hard acknowledgment of the ways in which racial groups have harmed and continue to harm one another, sometimes through forms of oppression, along with affirmative efforts to redress past harms with continuing effects. More specifically, interracial justice is comprised of two related dimensions. One dimension is conceptual. . . . [I]t involves a

---

19. *See* JOE R. FEAGIN AND HERNÁN VERA, WHITE RACISM (1995); GEORGE LIPSITZ, THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN WHITENESS: HOW WHITE PEOPLE PROFIT FROM IDENTITY POLITICS (1998).

20. TOMÁS ALMAGUER, RACIAL FAULT LINES: THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN CALIFORNIA 4-7 (1994).

21. *See* ERIC K. YAMAMOTO, INTERRACIAL JUSTICE: CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION IN POST-CIVIL RIGHTS AMERICA (1999).

22. *See id.* at 9-10.

23. *See* Eric K. Yamamoto, *Rethinking Alliances: Agency, Responsibility and Interracial Justice*, 3 UCLA ASIAN PAC. AM. L. J. 33 (1995).

recognition of situated racial group power . . . . The second dimension is practical.   It involves messy, shifting, continual and often localized processes of interracial healing.[24]

A focus on conflicts between communities of color should not be read as ignoring or diverting attention away from the prevailing reality of white racism.   But, as George Lipsitz insightfully observes, "inter-ethnic anti-racist activism offers an opportunity for new struggles for social justice as mobile, fluid, and flexible as the new forms of oppression, hierarchy, and exploitation generated by the current global balance of power."[25]

CONCLUDING NOTE

The issues presented here suggest the need to develop a new language of race and racism attentive to the times.   Neoconservatives, as attorney Victor Hwang of the Asian Law Caucus notes, have "taken our words" and have reframed the debate about race in support of "colorblind" remedies, policies, and practices.[26]   While supporting *de jure* desegregation and individual equal opportunity, neoconservatives remain blind to persistent forms of structural inequality that continue to make race matter.   We need to frame a new language – a new way to talk about race – that explicitly confronts the nature of racialized power in our society, and articulates and advances new principles of social justice.   Such a language needs to emphasize the continuing importance of social concepts of race, an expansive definition of what is racist, and the necessity of confronting conflicts between communities of color.   Such a new language cannot simply be supplied by theorists from above, but must emerge from an active engagement and dialogue between critical race theorists and front-line practitioners. I, for one, look forward to this emerging conversation.

---

24.   *Id.* at 34-35.

25.   George Lipsitz, Taking Positions and the War of Position: Why Inter-Ethnic Anti-Racism Matters Now (July 1, 1998) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author).

26.   Victor Hwang, Address at the *Asian Law Journal* Symposium on "Reconstructing Legal Paradigms: Synthesizing the New Racial Theories and Legal Strategies for Social Justice" (Jan. 29, 2000).