

https://dspace.org/

To forgive and to forget: racial memory in South Africa and the US

Evans, Ivan

1999-06-11T10:21:47Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7796

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

1999

EVANS

To forgive and to forget: racial memory in South Africa and the US

Ivan Evans (Sociology, University of California San Diego

HW S 116

Conference on "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Commissioning the Past", held at The University of The Witswatersrand. Johannesburg, 11-14 June 1999.

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CIRCULATE WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION.

To forgive and to forget: racial memory in South Africa and the US

Ivan Evans (Sociology, University of California San Diego

The unravelling of the racial orders in the US and South Africa the in post-WW II era should be understood in light of a central difference: whereas the South African state played the leading role in elaborating and vigorously safeguarding the racial order, history denied such a forthright role to the American state. Despite strong similarities between the two racial orders, South Africa deservedly stands apart: few racial orders, after all, owe their political development and rapid industrial modernization so directly to the high levels of racial partisanship that marked the state in South Africa. If South Africa is distinguished by the explicitness of the state's commitment to racial supremacy well into the 20th century, the defining characteristic of the US racial order in this century was its "Great Dilemma", Gunnar Myrdals' famous description of the persistence of racial segregation despite the nation's foundational commitment to egalitarianism.[1] Unable to commit itself fully to either pole of this dilemma, racial partisanship in the US bore none of that mixture of optimism, bravado and a certain sense of history that marked the state in South Africa. Although it flourished throughout all reaches of society, frequently with the active support of the various levels of the state in the South as well as the North, racial domination relied to a much greater degree on the racist permissiveness of civil society. In contrast to the jungle of laws, regulations and administrative orders which governed South Africa's racial order, racial domination in the US was frequently nurtured in shadowy and ambiguous form, vulnerable to legal and political challenge: "custom", though highly effective, merely posed as law; residential segregation seemingly arose through the dynamics of ethnic succession--a theme generic to 20th century US history; bankers concocted illegal strategies to withold housing loans; the administration of justice was rigged; and extra-legal terror and intimidation achieved what law enforcement in South Africa openly accomplished.

The result of this camouflaged and relatively less systemtic scale of intervention in the US has rendered it easy for Americans to diminish and ultimately to forget about the country's

[1] Gunnar Myrdal. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Harper and Row, 1962 [1944]).

racial past. South Africans easily conceive of their racial order as a systemic structure of racial domination in which the *state* played a fundamental and vanguardist role. White Americans--whenever a spectacular riot of court verdict prompts a high-pitched consideration of the issue--are likley to portray the racial issue as a problem of "prejudice" and "discrimination" lodged in *civil society*. This basic contrast between the two racial orders, this essay contends, sets the context for any understanding not only the demise of formal segregation in the two countries, but also of the techniques for dealing with the legacy of race.

A brief note: TRC's and racial domination

Two qualifications should precede the analysis that follows. First, this essay compares the TRC with a non-event--America's failure to generate anything that resembles a TRC--but says nothing about a number of other countries such as Chile, Honduras, and El Salvador where TRC-like bodies *were* established. Moreover, as with the US, countries such as Cambodia (where citizens want nothing to do with truth commissions), Japan and both Germanies also made the transition from their compromised pasts *without* seeking to "recommission the past".[2] Why, then, the comparison with the US? This essay is not expressly concerned with issues of brutality and repression, which may be readily discerned in all of the above countries. Instead, it is concerned with racial domination and racial memory, and especially with the virtual absence of collective racial memory in post-60s America. The bulk of the essay therefore explores why the US state has not even considered a TRC despite centuries of racial domination--whereas, in contrast, it recently agreed to pay $20, 000 to each of the Japanese families interned during WW II.[3]

Secondly, the essay remains agnostic about the likely success of reconciliation through TRC-like bodies. Comparative evidence seems unclear on this point[4] and and the jury on South Africa's own Commission is still out. The essay merely considers why the US did not embark on a similar project of national reconciliation at any point in its history, but especially in the 1960s, when conditions for it to do were most favourable.

Racial domination and the TRC

Apartheid's tombstone sports an exact date of expiry. Precisely because race served as the organising principle of state, market and society in South Africa, democracy required the formal and comprehensive destruction of this principle. This goal was achieved in 1994,

---

[2] Derek Summerfield, "South Africa: does a truth commission promote social reconciliation?", *British medical Journey*, 315/7120 (November 29, 1997).

[3] The issue of War-related reparations to Japanese Americans is compared to the "racial reparations" movement in Oliver and Shapiro, 188-190.

[4] A spate of essays on this topic offers mixed reviews, most of which tend towards either agnostism or pessimism. For example, see: Summerfield, "South Africa"; Beth S. Lyon, "Between Nuremberg and amnesia: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa," *Monthly Review*, 49/4 (September 1997); Mike Kaye, "The role of truth commissions in the search for justice, reconciliation and democratiSouth Africation: the South Africalvadorean and Honduran cases", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29/3 (October 1997);

marked by the democratic election of an ANC-led government and the installation of Nelson Mandela as president. It is not possible to so precisely record the demise of segregation in the US. "The '60s" serves as the best dating method: by convention, the decade marks the turning point in America's protracted encounter with race, the burial place of the Great Dilemma. It was, in other words, a protracted death, one not too unlike the lengthy demise of apartheid in South Africa. Prefigured by a notorious announcement by Piet Koornhoff (the Minister of Black Administration and Development who declared in 1979 that "Apartheid is Dead"), apartheid's last gasps scortched the nation for another fifteen years before the electoral coup de grace of 1994 finally yielded the elusive corpse. The difference between the US and South Africa on this score is captured by the fly-by of military jets which apartheid's military brass arranged at Mandela's presidential inauguration. In America, ceremonial confirmation of segregation's demise registered at a lower level, limited to President LB Johnson signing civil rights legislation flanked by the most prominent leaders of the civil rights movement. South Africans disagree about the performance of their young democracy, but not about the demise of the racist regime. More than three decades after the civil rights agenda was formally chieved in the late 1960s, Americans continue to debate whether racial domination has been eliminated or merely more effectively disguised.

So stark and immense was racial domination in South Africa that solutions inevitably focused on the thoroughgoing democratisation of the state. By the 1980s, the antiapartheid movement's implacable contentions that apartheid could not be "reformed" and that nothing less than than a one-person one-vote solution would be acceptable, remained firmly in place. These demands contained two important claims: about the relationship of state and civil society and about the immorality of the NP regime.

Firstly, the ANC's strategy of refusing to accept nothing less than negotiate the definitive end of racial domination assumed that the achievement of a black majority regime served as a precondition for the transformation of civil society. Through the process of transforming the racial order into a democratic state, new rules would emerge to decide the scope and pace at which the myriad legacies and material limitations of apartheid would be overcome and the daily life of the black majority improved. The effect of this expectation was to firmly focus attention on the radical transformation of the *state* as the means towards the democratisation of civil society.

Secondly, this perspective was governed by a clear understanding of the state's utter moral bankruptcy. Throughout the negotiations process, the ANC refused to become complicit in NP strategies that diluted but did not terminate racial domination. Its reasons for doing so did not arise only from the strategic assessment that its popular support amongt the majority of South Africans enabled it to adopt a hardline position in its negotiations with the NP. Instead, its refusal to bear political responsibility for solutions that stopped short of ending racial domination was also powerfully informed by a moral assessment of NP rule as a form of calculated evil conducted through the secular means of the modern rational state. The ANC's demand for the unambiguous cessation of NP rule therefore rested on both political and moral grounds: the former buttressed its claim to legitimacy as

a political movement, the latter illuminated its status as a morally superior alternative to a culture of institutionalised brutality, deviousness and deceit. Moreover, the ANC's insistence that it would not seek vengeance for decades of NP mis-rule further burnished its claim claims to moral superiority, a status which Nelson Mandela seemed to both symbolise and exemplify in his conduct at home and abroad.

By itself, neither the ANC's popular political support nor its claims to moral superiority would have emboldened it to apppoint the TRC. The two elements almost certainly required each other. Without demonstrative evidence of the ANC's own moral integrity, the appointment of a TRC would have been perceived as a duplicitous sham and an opportunity to pillory officials of the old regime. Nevertheless, the decision to empower the TRC to investigate allegations of ANC abuses in the exile years entailed a distinct element of risk that threatened to perforate the movement's status as the injured party. It is thus unlikely that the ANC would have proceeded with a TRC if it had not enjoyed the majority support that it did, and it proceeded to do so for two reasons: not only would revelations of its own sins of commission be almost certainly dwarfed by those of the apartheid regime, but--committed as they were in the name of the black majority--these transgressions would be pardoned by that same majority.

Ultimately, the importance and authority of the TRC derived from its status as a creature of the state. Without the sanction and aura of the universal state, a "truth and reconciliation" initiated by any private association in civil society would have been self-defeating by fiat, unable to overcome the very fissions in society that required "reconciliation" in the first place. Only the state, in its guise as the universal agent of society, could muster both the resources and, more importantly, the requisite legitimacy to interrogate the sordid past and legitimate the nettlesome business of establishing the criteria by which some would be pardoned and others prosecuted. By effectively placing the state in the hands of the ANC, the electoral outcome of 1994 positioned the ANC to deploy its claim to moral superiority and to proffer the state as the forum through which the nation would be "healed". The ANC decision to submit its own practices before the Commission did much to undermine claims that the Commission was a partisan body that functioned according to a double standard.

In one sense, the emergence of the state as a moral agent of reconciliation departed from South Africa's historical record. Formerly overbearing and violently authoritarian, the state after 1994 sought to integrate the business of administration with the conversion of the state into a poignant site of interogation, moral reprimand, confession and conviction. On this score, therefore, the work of the TRC represented an arresting volte face in South Africa's pattern of state formation in the post WW II era. It graphically underscored not only the political transformation of the state, epitimised in the elections of 1994, but, , also the new state's support of governance conducted along reassuringly novel democratic precepts such as openness, public accountability and compassion.

In another sense, however, the work of the TRC also represents a continuity within South African historiography--viz. the vanguard role which the state has played in the making of

the racial order. The sheer appointment of a TRC that targeted cadres of the ancien regime flowed from this vanguard role. Much of the work of apartheid was conducted outside of the law and out of sight. For the TRC, this meant that the sheer exposure of numberless accounts of furtive misdeeds was a vital event in itself and a necessary precondition of the commission's work of "reconciliation". At the same time, the plenitude of vicious police state tactics merely reflected the brutality of the overall state. No feats of excavation were required to reveal the racial partisanship and authoritarianism of the apartheid state. The signature of the apartheid state, indeed, was its public commitment to racial domination. This was not a racial state "by default", as may be said of the state in the US in the post-WW II.[5] The internal organisation of the South African state was structured along racial lines; oppressive measures received parliamentary approval; and an inflated bureaucracy was established to hammer "enforced ethnicity" into place, frequently at the point of the bayonet. Not only did the internal organisational structure of the state reflect this mania for systematic racialisation. Civil society was likewise hacked into racial and ethnic encalves, and the full weight of the state was brought to bear on the need to police these artificial divisions. Confronted with opposition at home and abroad, the NP state unsuccessfully sought to preserve racial domination by judiciously diluting the vigor of its grip over society. Under the intensifying glare of the world, it found itself hostage to police state tactics invented from the early 60s onwards. Terror and violent repression became its swansong. The result was the extraordinarily public nature of the life and death of Apartheid.

By harnessing the power of the state to expose the institutional and extra-legal atrocities of apartheid, the TRC continued the South African tradition of "statism"--the ingrained culture of state formation in South Africa. This comment is not intended as a criticism: as previously noted, the very legitimacy of any TRC depends on the aura of non-partisanship that only a democratic state can bestow. The pertinence of the observation arises from the light it sheds on the contrast between "deracialisation" in South Africa and the US.

Precisely why the democratic government installed in 1994 resolved to appoint a TRC is not entirely clear because the appointment of a TRC was neither inevitable nor indispensable for democracy.[6] What is clear, however, is that the work of a TRC depends on the ability to identify culprits; such a search only makes sense in contexts where the *state* bears an undeniable responsibility for orchestrating a n oppressive onslaught on its citizenry, or segments of the citizenry. These two conditions--the availability of identifiable perpetrators and the manifest guilt of the state--establish an important basis for contrasting the demise of formal segregation in South Africa and the US. For whereas the apartheid state and its footsoldiers were indubitably responsible for gross violations of human rights, matters were understood to be considerably more ambiguous in the US in the 1960s, when segregation was finally formally outlawed.

Racial domination and "historical guilt" in the US

---

[5] For a consideration of the conditions whioch certify the US state as a "racial state", see Chapter 5 of Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*.

[6] See essays presented at this conference.

Myrdal's conclusion that US race relations constituted America's "Great Dilemma" was more the work of scholarly analysis than an accurate reflection of the national conscience on the matter. Myrdal published *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* in 1944, well after the violently racist vitriol of the Reconstruction years had subsided into the system of segregation that would characterise the first half of the 20th century, but also well before the political order was shaken and transformed by the civil rights victories of the 1960s. Myrdal's work may have espoused the regret and guilt that liberals felt in the middle of the 20th century, but it by no means served as an aggregate summation of white opinion on the question of race. In the Northern states, white liberalism was overshadowed by a combination of outright "prejudice", state-supported segregationist measures and indifference to the racial question. The South, although noticeably less violent and ideologically rigid than it was at the turn of the century, remained a bastion of white supremacy. By the end of WW II, racial terror no longer played the public role that it had in earlier decades.[7] Instead, the Democratic Party in the South welded racial domination to intangible but powerful claims about "custom" and "the southern way of life", elevating these to centrestage to justify the racially structured system of exploitation and segregation.[8] The civil rights victories have been described as "nothing less than a revolution in American life" precisely because differing versions of the same national creed--white supremacy--were accepted with complacency in the North and defended with passion in the south.

It is important to foreground the deracialisation movement of the 60s in the vitality of racial domination throughout the US. For, as I argue below, the issue has a direct bearing on both the denial which informs contemporary racial discourse and the mean-spirited attack on institutions which most contemporatry white Americans view as disporportionately advantaging African-Americans.[9] There is a slight irony in the contrasting insurgent postures of the ANC and the civil rights movement. The ANC, having presented itself as a political movement bent on state power, championed the moral crusade of "reconciliation" conducted by the TRC. The civil rights movement, whose pronounced moral discourse framed "reconciliation" as a vital pillar and goal of its strategy, would ultimately fail to radically transform the racial character of state power in the US. As a number of writers have noted, it is little wonder that the contemporary generation of African-American youth evince an increasingly jaded outlook on the civil rights movement. For a generation exposed to the racial exclusiveness of the post-modern economy and white refusals to concede the continuing scale and depth of racism in the US, legacies of reconciliation and moral rectitude ring hollow. Marginalised in the post-modern economy and increasingly disconnected from state power, cultural politics and "the politics of identity"--punctuated by sporiadic popular outburts against the more

---

[7] W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. (University of Illinois Press, 1993), 33.

[8] in *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequlity* (Wesleyan, 1988). George Frederickson notes that Southern segregation was formidably organised but lacked the coherence and rigour that distinguished Apartheid (p. 228).

[9] Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Uequal* . (Scribners, 1992), 13.

blatant manifestations of institutionalised racism such as the LA riots of 1994--are the more resonant forums for this post-civil rights movement generation. The turn away from institutional politics introduces a theme that is central to the rest of this essay, viz. the discursive centrality that "civil society" plays both in understandings of US racial history in the post-WW II era.

The argument that follows rests on two inter-related claims. *Firstly*, in seeking to broaden democracy by restoring full citizenship rights to African-Americans, the civil rights movement echoed the fallacy that the US was characterised by an essentially liberal tradition that merely need to be perfected. In this fallacy, US political history is essentially liberal and that racism is an unusually lengthy departure from this tradition. In contrast, a growing group of writers have recently argued that US history has sported not one but *many* political traditions, all of which have been equally formative of the political culture of the nation.[10] Nevertheless, the civil rights movement fuelled one of the most potent creeds of US political discourse: viz. that the coupling of individualism and democratic opportunity account for the country's unique republican tradition of respect for the rights of all. Champions of this view certainly conceded that racism, ethnic prejudice and sexism fill the American landscape, but general portray such illiberal tendencies as "expressions of ignorance and prejudice, destined to marginality by their lack of critical defences".[11] This recasting of US history was the animating logic of the assimilation theory, the dominant model for understanding the race and ethnicity in 20th century America.[12]

One of the lessons which assimilation theory explicitly upheld was the claim that race is largely indistinguishable from ethnicity.[13] In assimilation theory, racial domination is portrayed--and "normalised"--as a particularly difficult case of ethnic exclusion, but one that would eventually succumb to the overpowering historical process of assimilation into "the American mainstream": there is more than a suggestion that racial domination is little more than an American rite of passage, the price which ethnics pay for admission into American citizenship. By establishing a false symmetry between the African American experience and the "prejudice" that white ethnics encountered, assimilation theory robs "race" of its claims to historical uniqueness, detaching it from roots that have been singularly violent and selective. Depending on the historical sensibilities of different champions of the approach, the approach mutes or denies the formative impress of chattel slavery; the modernisation of slavery into a system that coupled sharecropping to a pervasive culture of racial violence which included the terrorisation and lynching of thousands of African Americans in the South; the persistent ghettoisation and labour market marginalisation of African Americans migrants to the North and their reception there by white riots that left dozens dead in the first half of this century; and the continuing cultural demonisation of African Americans as a racial Other in the otherwise virtuous circle of American society. Only by either ignoring these systemic historical continuities or

---

[10] Saxton; Allen; Lowe; Lipsitz.
[11] Rogers M. Smith, Beyond Tocqueville", 549
[12] Good critical overview of this well-known approach may be found in Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. (Routledge, 1994), Chapter 1.
[13] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 18.

consigning most of them to the unexplored box of "the past" is assimilation theory able to posit African Americans as *sui generis* citizens. Civil rights victories, the approach concludes, finally expunged the defect of racism from the liberal tradition. Having gained full civil and political rights, African Americans lost their special moral claims on the state.[14]

Notwithstanding its steady erosion in academia, assimilation discourse continues to exert a powerful effect on contemporary political and cultural discourse. The assertion that the civil rights movement has lanced the racial carbuncle, if not actually removed the detritus of the malaise, discourages contemporary Americans from grasping the full dimensions of whiteness and its attendant priviliges by engaging the past. In the popular mind, contemporary social problems bear only the remotest possible connection to the oppressive past. History, a perspective with a decreasing purchase on American politics and contemporary identities, is grasped as a sort of a corrupting trough from which all manner of "special interest groups" expediently turn to fuel their pet peeves. Attempts to reclaim the past, whether in the form of scholarly exposés about the multiple traditions of America's political and cultural history or by activists who assert the right of women and other minorities, are damned as divisive evidence of a "culture of complaint" spawned by the civil rights victories of the 1960s.[15] American popular culture acknowledges (even as it distorts by romanticising) the role of white ethnicity in the 20th century, locating its origins in the immigration waves of the last quarter of the 19th cenury. In contrast, *racial* history in the popular mind begins firmly in the 1960s, the decade of "equalisation".[16] The paucity of racial remembrance all but closes off a full appreciation of the systemic transmission and historical mutability of racial domination.

White disinclinations to concede the historical claims of African Americans were not fuelled only by the canonical notions about "assimmilation". The *second* claim advanced below centres around the role of state intervention in this process--specifically, on a growing white resentment against the democratisation of the state's role in regulating the social sphere. The "politics of resentment" that emerged in the post-60s era and congealed in the Reagan era are closely linked to the interventionist programs initiated by President FD Roosevelt. Numerous observers have pointed out that the US developed a system of social welfare late in its history relative to other advanced industrial states and that New Deal policies were not as comprehensive as those in other advanced capitalist democracies.[17] Nevertehless, FDR's legislative program of the 1930s faced rising opposition, barely surviving legal challenges and opposition from fellow Democrats and oppositional Republicans alike. It is instructive to contrast these early challenges to the

---

[14] Ibid.

[15] "Culture of complaint", *Time Magazine*, 16 September 1996, 24.

[16] . The roots of this perspective--inherently chauvinist and racist insofar as its appreciates "the politics of identity" within the white population but maligns it amongst Others--may be located as far back as the 1960s in the mutual insistence by liberals assimilationist theorists such as DP Moynihan and Nathan Glazer and conservatives such as XXXX

[17] Discussed in Theda Skocpol. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. (University Press, 1992).

vitriolic attacks on "big governmment" and "social spending" launched in the Reagan years and sustained thereafter by a Republican-controlled Congress with the support of President Clinton. In *The Color of Welfare*, for example, Jill Quadagno notes that the Social Security Act of 1934 was not only popular with Congress in the 1930s but also enjoyed strong popular support for three decades thereafter, buoyed by the unprecedented growth of the mass production/mass consumption Fordist economy in the post-WW II era. She also notes that evidence of the effectiveness of "big government" is extensive for this period: for example, poverty amongst those 60 years and older dropped steeply amongst those 60 years and older from 1940 to 1960.[18] Most liberal democracies shared in this post-War boom, which had much to do with the state's expanding social profile until at least the mid-1960s.

David Harvey and others have demonstrated that the anti-statist discourse which became hegemonic in western capitalist democracies was a response to the structural exhaustion of the Fordist mass production/consumption model.[19] In the US, however, the politicisation of the state's presence in society was exacerbated by the unfortunate coincidence of two historic developments in the 1960s: the passage of the civil rights legislation just as the Fordist economy began to slow down. This, while anti-statist attacks on the "security state" also emerged in other advanced democracies in this period, the intense racialisation of the debate coloured this development in the US. The inescapable conclusion that Jill Quadagno makes is that white voters in the US supported, and were prepared to pay for "big government" programs as longs as the benefits returned to them and began to withdraw their support once civil rights legislation extended these to non-whites. In doing so, whites correctly interpreted America's brief history of social welfarism: social welfare programs were indeed established primarily for whites. The New Deal was portrayed in the 1930s and 40s as a race-neutral program of government intervention. However, numerous writers, most recently the cultural historian George Lipsitz, have demonstrated that the New Deal was a deal primarily for whites, particularly for white economic elites. This was no less true in the North than in the South, where FDR permitted pro-segregationists in his party to use their dominance over virtually all key federal committees to deflect New Deal dollars away from the most destitute and vulnerable groups to industrialists, big farmers and racist state programs in the South.[20] Although this also meant that the benefits of the New Deal were withheld from the poorest whites in the South, those who suffered most were impoverished sharecroppers, the vast majority of whom were black. Indeed, two pivotal pieces of legislation, the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act, were framed to expressly exclude farm and domestic workers from coverage.[21] This meant that protections and benefits that even the poorest white workers could routinely use to buttress or improve their social position were denied to the majority of black workers and their families.

---

[18] Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. (Oxford University Press, 1994)

[19] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Basil Blackwell, 1989). Chapter 9.

[20]

[21] Piven and Cloward, *Poor Peoples' Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. (Pantheon Books, 1977).

The racialisation of social benefits was a pervasive feature of New Deal programs. For example, racist "criteria" on the applications forms of the Federal Housing Agency enabled state bureaucrats and private bankers to deny virtually all loan applications from minority communities, thereby making federal resources available to even less qualified white applicants. A vitally important study by Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1997) has recently dissected the racial consequences of real estate politics. Deflecting the overwhelming attention that social scientists pay to sheer income as a primary determinant of class position, Oliver and Shapiro ground class formation in the post-WW II era in "asset accumulation" and the multiplier effects that home ownership in particular has on class mobility. Their study demonstrates that the racialised home ownership patterns fuelled by Federal Housing Agency (FHA) programs continue to play a central role in promoting white middle class mobility while severely hindering asset accumulation and, relatedly, educational and income mobility mongst blacks. By the time civil rights legislation was signed, huge and, to date, intractable racial differentials were set in place.[22]

These outcomes cannot be abstracted from the housing and urban renewal programs which municipal and federal governments established from the 1950s onwards under the aegis of race-neutral urban programs. These may be grouped under two broad headings.[23] Firstly, a combination of tax deductions, federal mortgage guarantees and highway constructions designs converged with racist local real estate strategies to channel white homebuyers out of the inner city areas towards the affluent suburbs of what soon be called post-industrial cities. At the same time, the suburbanisation of white homeowners matched the suburbanisation of industry and the Supported by the Federal Housing Agency, 10 million middle- and upper-income private houses mushroomed in the suburbs be tween 1937 and 1968. Secondly, the state simultaneously financed the construction of a paltry 800,000 low income public housing, empowering municipalities to decide whether and where to locate public housing. The results were predictable then; today they are everywhere conspicuous: by the 1960s, low income public housing was sited in ways that entrenched traditional patterns of residential segregation, trapping African American communities in deteriorating inner city areas, where deindustrialisation and the emergence of the information economy had already begun to whittle away at employment opportunities for blue collar communities.[24]

Trade unions were important players in this racialised racial feeding frenzy which was conducted silently in accordance with ostensibly race-neutral New Deal programs. Moreover, social benefits did not only fall to whites by the default of racialised state

---

[22] Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth. A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. (Routledge, 1997).

[23] This discussion is taken from Loic Wacquant, "The new urban color line: the state and the fate of the ghetto in PostFordist America", in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. (Blackwell, 1994)

[24] As examples the numerous studies that document these trends, see William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, Loic Wacquant, "The new urban color line" and Douglas Massey, *Americasn Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. (Harvard University Press, 1993).

programs. For example, numerous unions, George Lipsitz writes, "negotiated contract provisions giving private medical insurance, pensions, and job security largely to the white workers who formed the overwhelming majority of the unionised labor force in mass production industries, rather than fighting for full employment, medical care, and old age pensions for all, or even for an end to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices by employers and institutions"[25]--a catalogue that does not include "obvious" customs such as the racial covenants used to exclude blacks from white residential areas. Collectively, these racialised advantages implanted a gulf between the material fortunes of white and black Americans. Lipsitz refers to the net effect of racialised social programs and the racist ploys they stoked in civil society as "the possessive investment in whiteness"--that is, the conversion of whiteness into an effective income-generating asset in an ostensibly race-neutral era.[26]

A central feature of the possessive investment in whiteness, therefore, was the extensive complicity of the state in restructuring the racial order. The majority of white Americans, however, fail to acknowledge the scale of the state's involvement in engineering racial domination and the massive legacies this has entailed. Already true in the 1960s, the highpoint of racial contrition, this failure would congeal into a widespread denial of the state's extensive culpability in American's recent racial past.

A potent brew of extraordinary and well-known events--the civil rights movement; its articulation with student protests against American involvement in the Vietnam conflict; the conflict between the federal government and segregationist southern states; the assassination of JF Kennedy and then of Martin Luther King--were required to bring most Americans to the brink of acknowledging the scale of its racial past. But not even waves of sporadic rioting in a number of cities between 1966 and 1968 succeeded in wresting from Congress a determined legislative attack on "racial discrimination", let alone the resources to redress centuries of racial domination. At the same time, the years of insurgent mass movements clearly altered the priorities of the state, with race and poverty emerging as central themes in national politics. Amidst mounting social chaos, President LB Johnson declared an "war on poverty" in 1964 and followed up in 1968 with an equally ambitious vision of the "Great Society" free of material want and racial discrimination. These were the highwater years of racial reform in the US, illuminating both the extent and the limits of white's preparedness to aggressively reverse the legacy of race. Although race was frequently ensconced within a broader vision of national and international reform (by way of the international fight against Communism), the issue also enjoyed independent consideration.

By 1968, segregation was in firm retreat, beaten back by a combination of the structural modernisation of the southern economy, the two major development these changes

---

[25] George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Temple UP, 1998: 5).

[26] The importance of these latter benefits would become clear with the attack which Reaganite policies launched on "social welfare" for the poor under the aegis of "privatiSouth Africation" while increasing corporate welfare for the wealthy

encouraged--massive grassroots resistance and the capitulation of economic elites in the South--and desegregationist legislation spearheaded by the two Johnson administrations. A host of social measures and programs were set in place to improve the immediate living conditions of the poor: the desegregation of schools was begun; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in voting , all public accommodations, schools, employment, and public facilities, while the Voting Rights Act a year later abolished rigged devices such as literacy tests which white Southernes had been used to disenfrachise blacks; the Economic Opportunity Act sought to widen employment opportunities in "underpriviliged areas" and created an Office of Economic Opportunity to coordinate the "war on poverty"; the Civil rights Act of 1968 opened 80% of the nation's housing units, including privately owned homes, to buyers or renters without discrimination; a Food Stamp Act placed the distribution of food on a permanent basis; an Urban Mass Transportation Act authorised federal loans to states to develop urban transportation systems; and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided funds to aid primary and secondary schools in areas where at least 3% of the children were classified as "needy".[27]

If the US state had not actually appointed a TRC to explore the past as a means towards reconciliation over the issue of race, these sorts of measures indicate that there were grounds for optimism that the process was proceeding nonetheless. Further evidence may be taken from the report of the 1969 National Advisory [Kerner] Commission on Civil Disorders, appointed by Johnson in part to investigate the grievances underlying the urban riots of the late 1960s. Although it produced a laundry list of "grievances", the basic finding of the Kerner Commission was that white racism and overt hostility towards blacks were the principal reason behind the "civil disorders".[28]

But was the dominant population actually contrite? The success of Johnson's legislative proposals with regard to racial no doubt reflected the distaste which a growing number of whites viewed racism and racial segregation; similarly, the passage of the social welfare measures of the sort indicated above suggests that whites conceded the need for the state to take the lead in redressing the legacies of race. The assassination of ML King in April 1968, and the extraordinary rioting that immediately ensued in 168 cities across the country, redoubled this sense of guilt and apology amongst whites. At the same time, there were ominous signs that this racial contrition was highly contingent and insufficiently thorough to resist the gravitational attraction which "race" exerted on American politics.

Even as they emerged, Johnson's ambitious attempts to prod the nation into far-reaching racial reform encountered three major obstacles. Firstly, an unprecedented coordination across the state's "counter-intelligence" security apparatuses secured the destruction of radical black orgnizations and the liquidation of the most prominent radical young leaders in the Black Power movement. A crisis of legitimacy arose between African American youth and the state as law enforcement authorities succeeded in confining radical black

---

[27] Taken from Ray A. Billington, *Americab History After 1865*. (Littlefied, 1974), 270-272.
[28] Cited in Keith Harries, *Serious Violence: Patterns of Homicide in America* (Charles Thomas Publishers, 1997), 35.

politics to the ghetto areas where radical politics were transformed into a gang culture.[29] The two other obstacles that Johnson's reforms had to contend with were a *widening white hostility* to the radicalisation of the civil rights movement and the *massive fiscal burdens* which Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam imposed on the state. By 1967, the US was spending the then staggering amount of $30 billion on a conflict seemingly without end. Johnson's escalation of the war not only effectively doomed his social programs. It also emboldened a Democrat-controlled Congress in 1968 to refuse a number of items dealing with poverty and open housing on the grounds that such expenses would fuel "deficit spending" and lead to higher taxes--introducing a theme that would escalate to the forefront of the national agenda once the Republicans gained the presidency with the election of Richard Nixon and later, Ronald Reagan.. Nurtured between these two pincers in the turbulent days on the mid- and late-60s, white contrition wilted and dissipated before re-emerging, radically transformed, on the political and economic landscape of a post-industrial America. From the 1970s onwards, "race" steadily lost the public and explicit political role it had played in American politics, losing its mobilising capacity in the process. As the heady days of "the 60s" receded into the past, a new political era marked from below by an emphasis on cultural differentiation and identity politics and, from above, an escalating onslaught on the state's presence in civil society, white Americans in the 1980s embarked on what sometimes seems like a national amnesia about "race". By the 1990s, this denial of "race" was accompanied by a more sinister development. As Henry Giroux notes about this decade, "racism is respectable again".[30]

Begun with "non-violence" in the South in the 1950s, the civil rights movement fuelled an increasingly aggressive and militant politics in the North in the 1960s. Young leaders centred in the SNCC distanced themselves from the non-violence of ML King other civil rightsleaders and the NAACP, and demanded the construction of militant black nationalist movement that should not shirk from violence as a matter of principal. Simultaneously, black students demanded the establishment of "black studies" as a legitimate and normal component of university courses programs both to recover an ignored history and to re-frame future discourse about race. Such demands tested the limits of white tolerance and incensed overwrought college administrators, business leaders, law enforcement officers, politicians and ordinary Americans alike. The "Black Power" movement's flirtation with a highly telegenic militarist demeanor became a scapegoat for the "law and order" movement that emerged from the 1965 in response to three themes: evidence of growing racial conflict marked, in particular, by urban riots in the North; the widening of student revolt against the war against the war in Vietnam; and the upsurge in the national crime rate. Conservatives capitalised on this gordian knot of inflammatory issues and, by electing Nixon president, rode the backlash against the "permissive 60s" into power.

---

[29] Former Black Panther members argue that the elimination of militant leaders led to the deligitimation of law enforcement authorities in the ghetto areas. Young blacks accordingly sought to protect themselves and organised themselves into neighbourhood associations which evolved into competing gangs. "The Fire Next Time" (Blacktop Movies, 1992).

[30] Henry Giroux, "*Pulp Fiction* and the culture of violence". *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 2 (Summer, 1995), 299.

There was to be no "reconciliation". Instead, the path to national amnesia began with the Nixon years as whites sought to undo or evade the constraints which civil rights regulations imposed on them. The attempt to expose state complicity in systematic racial domination, and to involve it in a systematic reversal of the legacies of race, had endured for a few brief and frenzied years in the mid- to late '60s; moreover, the state's security apparatuses had sabotaged Johnson's reform program in this same period. But it was not only state apparatuses which had sought to out-maneuver the reform initiative. Ordinary whites had also sought to circumvent both the spirit and the letter of the civil rights era during the '60s. Violent white resistance to residential segregation emerged in many Northern cities. One example dealing with the 1968 Fair Housing Act will suffice to impart the implacable refusal of whites to submit to residential integration with the active encouragement of the local political machinery.[31] In the 1960s, plaintiffs took recourse to the federal court and charged Chicago's public housing authority with racial discrimination. A federal judge agreed and found the city guilty, issuing an order for the city to construct 700 new units of public housing in white neighbourhoods and to locate 75% of new public housing outside the inner-city ghetto. Rather than comply with the order, the Chicago Housing Authority responded "by ceasing construction on *all* new public housing as a means of evading integration".[32]

Nixon's presidency latched onto this emerging backlash. Under Nixon, desegregation was upheld by the Supreme Court and eroded by the Nixon administration. Nixon's first administration sought to reverse the desegregation of schools (even after the Supreme Court ruled in 1969 that the process should be accomplished "at once" and not merely, as formerly, "with all convenient speed"). While affirming the importance of integration, Nixon also sought to outlaw the bussing of schoolchildren across racially drawn residential boundaries and lent support to white communities in the North to resist the integration of schools and residential areas. This strategy of simultaneously reaffirming integrationist rhetoric while undercutting it in practice was rapidly pursued in all aspects of the state's racial policies. Anti-discrimination provisisons had been tepidly enforced in the Johnson years; under Nixon, they were largely abandoned. Whites, in short, experimented briefly with "reconciliation" through social programs and then rapidly dropped the excercise even before results could be ascertained.

The racial motivations behind these counter-attacks are as clear now as they were then. In what sense, therefore, did they facilitate an "amnesia" about race"? The answer lies in the transformation of racial discourse in the wake of the civil rights victories of the 1960s, a watermark epoch in the transformation of white identities. Because white discourse about race could no longer appeal directly to racial sentiments, the defence of racial privilege was shifted to an alternative terrain marked by a palpable uncertainty and defensiveness un white racial discourse. This process, Winant argues in Du Boisian fashion, is a species of

---

[31] See Gregory Squires, *Chicago : Race, Class, and the Response to Urban Decline*. (Temple University Press, 1987) and *Capital and Community in Black and White*. (University of NY Press, 1994); Douglas Massey *American Apartheid*; George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, Chapter 1.

[32] Similar evidence may be gleaned from across the literature on urban politics in the 1960s. This example given here is taken from Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 29.

the "racial dualism" which Du Bois recognised to be hallmark of racialised self identities: viz. the almost schizophrenic tendency, or compulsion, for racialised subjects to view themselves simultaneously from within and from without. Whiteness had been an unreflecting and largely "monolithic" asset prior to the civil rights movement. The insurgent challenges of the 60s splintered this racialised identity, compelling whites to self-consciously navigate between the straits of their racial past and their contemporary embattled position: "On the one hand, whites inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit. But on the other hand, they are subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance by the partial but real successes of the black movement (and affiliated movements)". Thrust onto unfamiliar ground, white identity formation entered into a period of ferment and uncertainty without parallel in US history. In the contemporary period, whiteness continues to be a highly profitable asset; at the same time, white identities are "confused and anxiety-ridden".[33]

Far from embarking on a thorough-going and painful journey of historical interrogation, post-60s white racial politics have dwelled on the implications of what it means to be white[34] and how the "wages of whiteness" may be earned with the least moral qualm. The resultant diversity of racial discourses has served to obscure the historical anchors of whiteness and diminishes a full appreciation of the state's culpability in racialising contemporary inequities. Forearmed with only a faulty appreciation of the historical rootedness of these inequities, white racial politics in the post-'60s have been stoked by "the politics of resentment".[35] In courses dealing with race and ethnicity in the US, many young white college students strongly suspect that these inequities are deeply rooted in "the legacy of slavery", and some are indeed able to almost intuitively plot the lineage from slavery and its explosive denouement, the Civil War, through "segregation in the South" and the denoument of *this* latter system of "race relations" in "the 60s". But this historical perspective is by no means either comprehensive or representative. Even amongst college students, few grasp the immensity of the state's role in the staggering record of lynchings and other forms of physical mutilation in the South. Virtually all students are astonished by the spate of recent historical studies which locate the origins of whiteness in the transition from a vicious system of white indentured labour to racial slavery in the 17th century.[36] Few grasp the formiddable violence that was built into the system of sharecropping. Even fewer appreciate how deeply implicated race was in national presidential politics as late as the 1950s when, for example, Democratic Party

---

[33] Howard Winant, "Behind blue eyes: whiteness and contemporary US race relations", in M. Fine et al. Off White (Routledge, 1997), 40

[34] The recent crop of whiteness studies has been accused of diverting attention from victims of racism to its perpetrators, sometimes in sympathetic fashion, thereby contributing to the continued marginaliSouth Africation of ethnic and racial minorities. For a response, see David Roediger's "Afterword" in his *The Wages of Whiteness* (Verso, 1998).

[35] Cameron McCarthy; Henry Giroux

[36] See Alexandrer South Africaxton, *The Rise and Fall of the Wehite Republic: Race and the making of the American Working Class* (Verso, 1990); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Theodore Allen*, The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control. Vol. *I (Verso, 1994); Noel* Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White: Irish-Americans and African-Americans in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Verso, 1995)

leaders (including JF Kennedy) refused to support federal anti-lynching legislation because they feared the loss of Southern votes, or that the provisions of the vaunted New Deal (such the GI Bill or the FHA) racialised benefits that would play pivotal roles in vaulting white ethnics into "mainstrean, middle-class America" at the express expense of African Americans. Most students are also unaware that segregation was not only the product of "prejudice" amongst racist whites, but was also vigorously enforced through municipal and state legislation. A number of students in a class I taught in 1996 vigorously denied that federal law enforcement authorities and the LAPD would ever have connived in the early 1970s in what basically were quasi-legal death squads to assassinate militant Black panther leaders in Los Angeles. They were outraged at the analogies I drew between security operations in apartheid South Africa and the US.

At the same time, it should be noted that the majority of these students are receptive to such historical revelations. The disbelieving students referred to above, for example were astonished when I presented them with a newspaper cutting from the *Los Angeles Times* in which the city's Police Department admitted to and publically apologised its attacks on peaceful and unarmed Black Panthers. This is important evidence, perhaps, of the enlightening role which copious exposés of the sort documented by the TRC may potentially play. Still, two caveats are in order. Firstly, enlightened college students are by no means representative of white America--a population whose shaky grasp of historical continuity dismayed Alexis de Tocqueville as far back as the 1850s.[37] By all accounts, this historical sense has taken a decided turn for the worse in the late 20th century.[38] Secondly, like other white Americans, white students necessarily grasp "race" in the context of the vexed and camouflaging racial discourse of today. Little wonder, therefore, that even enlightened college-goers contemplate challenges to the benefits of whiteness with that mixture of perturbation, guilt and resentment which has characterised white identity politics in the post-'60s. Class discussions with students elicit an almost palpable resentment that sometimes bursts out into heated denials: "Why should I be blamed for slavery?" "Why should I feel guilty about being white?" These students are already anxious about securing one of the vanishing long-term "career" positions in the post-industrial economy; they are also bombarded (by professors and the media alike) with warnings about the need to calibrate such expectations with the rapidly changing skill requirements of an economy in which "serial employment"[39] is but another name for the routinization of intermittent unemployment. With much on its plate, this generational cohort is sorely tempted to view historical dredgings of the racial past either as irrelevant or potentially harmful to their own individual fortunes--despite abundant evidence that whiteness continues to be highly profitable in the post-industrial economy.[40]

---

[37] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Penguin, 1971), 233.
[38] "The case for educational reform", *New York Times*, 14 September 1997, 8.
[39] "Where have all the jobs gone?", *Time Magazine*, 24 May 1998, 44.
[40] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth*.

The lineage of such resentment begins with the conservative backlash against the "racial dualism" which the civil rights movement foisted onto whites. Indeed, a primary orientation of the conservative backlash has been to wipe away the historical perspective that the civil rights movement dragged onto the centre state of American politics. Obstructed by a new legal and moral culture from returning to past practices, whites' racial dualism has been rendered through a number of discourses whose common coin. Howard Winant writes, is the "*re*articulation, *re*presentation, [and] *re*interpretation of the meaning of race". These discourses latched onto the colour-blind rhetoric of the civil rights movement, contorting unimpeachable creeds such as the commitment to "freedom", "equality" and a "colour-blind society" into weapons for shoring up the threatened privileges of whiteness. Winant usefully catalogs the proliferation of these "race neutral" discourses into four "racial projects", distinguished from one another only by the "explicit...meaning each project attaches to 'whiteness'" [41] Noting that they should be treated as malleable ideal types which share overlapping themes in practice, Winant posits these projects as the discursive vehicles which have simultaneously normalised and mobilised the politics of resentment, belittling (and even banishing) the moral reprimands of the civil rights movement in the process.

The *Far Right racial project* ably captures the extent to which civil rights movement discourse has been conscripted to the crusade to preserve whiteness. Formerly championed by adherents as extreme as the Ku Klux Klan and America's Nazi mob, this project is today spearheaded by respectable, media-friendly neo-fascists such as David Duke, an unrepentant KKK member who was almost elected to the US Senate in 1992 and today is a familiar presence on national TV shows. In place of biologically-grounded claims about racial superiority, however, the Far Right has been rejuvenated by its portrayal of whites as the justifiably aggrieved victims of "assimilationists" and "multiculturalists". The latter are said to now control the US state and use devices such as affirmative action to destabilize hard-working and law-abiding whites. A white racial movement is therefore required to counter the racial hijacking of the state and to ensure that all "racial groups" have "equal rights".

The *New Right* is distinguished from the Far Right chiefly by its more sophisticated use of "code words" to inflame and harness the resentment of whites. Whereas the Far Right rejects "colour-blindness" in principle, the New Right accepts this principle but rejects the use of the state resources or state policy as the means to achieve it. Perfectly aware that the absence of state intervention and the diminution of legal restraints on white racism will effectively preserve the racial status quo, New Rightists fasten onto the racial fears and material insecurities of whites--a strategy with potent appeal at a time when many white Americans were reeling from the combined effects of deindustrialisation and economic recession. This thrust accounted for the solid support which New Rightists gave to the the "Reagan revolution", delighted at the Republican Party's attack on such hot-button issues as affirmative action and state intervention in the economy.

---

[41] Winant, "Behind blue eyes", 43. Winant also proposes a fifth "New Abolitionist racial project" to counter the "race neutral" projects discussed below.

The defining feature of the *Neo-conservative racial project* is its explicit denial of racial difference. Neo-conservative discourse is lifted whole from the "one tradition" approach to American history discussed earlier. In this pespective, racism and any acknowledgement racial difference marks a departure from the fundamental values of "universalism and "individualism" said to have shaped American history. For this reason, Neo-conservatives reject the coded race-baiting and subtextuality deployed by New Rightists. For them, the "promise of America" lies in "equality of *opportunity*" and not, as liberals and leftists insisted in the 1960s to justify the extension of New Deal interventionism to African Americans and other minorities, in "equality of *outcome*". Neo-conservatism, it should be noted, emerged as early as the mid-60s when advocates such Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan lambasted Johnson's social policies. They mounted particularly strong attacks on measures such social welfare and Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) on the grounds that these devices would undercut individual initiative and entrench "dependency" on the state.[42]

Collectively, although for somewhat different motivations, these three racial projects escalated the desire of most white Americans to gloss over and ultimately ignore the racial issue. The fourth tendency, viz. *Neo-liberal racial project* departs somewhat from these approaches in precisely this regard but, at the same time, also not completely. The approach explicitly acknowledges America's racial past and the state's historic complicity in the construction of the racial order; moreover, it warns that America will remain an "unfinished democracy" unless its stark racial differentials are eliminated. Ultimately, however, it also rejects race-based solutions, not for principled and ideological reasons as the other approaches do, but for strategic ones. For example, William Julius Wilson, the most prominent advocate of this approach, rests his class-based and "social democratic" solution to contemporary racial domination on the following assessment. Wilson argues that most racial differentials today are accounted for by the dynamics of objective class polarisation: the post-industrial economy disproportionately advantages highly educated labour and renders blue-collar workers redundant. Whites *qua* individuals therefore do not hold responsibility for the resultant racial differentials and such should not be readily accused of "racism". Accordingly, instead of further antagonising whites (a demographic majority with a proven capacity to strike back at the polls) by sticking to faulty affirmative action policies, a progressive social policy should rather enlist white support by incorporating whites as beneficiaries in any social dispensation. For Neo-conservatives therefore, the racial solution lies in a "color-blind, gender neutral regime of individual rights ... combined government activism promoting a high degree of substantive social economic equality".[43]

These four discourses span a wide political spectrum and suggest the enormity of the discursive etiology of today's racial amnesia and the intimidating scale of the effort required to continually jolt, let alone reverse it. Despite sometimes significant differences amongst the discursive trends above, their combined effect has been to greatly suppress the overt exploration of race and the singular role this construct continues to play in the

---

[42] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.
[43] Michale Lind, cited in Winant, "Behind blue eyes", 46.

culture, politics and economy of the US. The material gains and political strategies associated with the civil rights movement are the sounding board against which the dominant trends within America's recent political discourse about race has been formulated. Precisely because racial differentials widened steadily from the 1970s until the boom economy of the mid-'90s[44] and also because African Americans have been more demonised now than at any point in recent memory, this silence has been both exasperating and intimidating. It has been an exasperating epoch for a multitude of reasons, all of which may be traced by a desire amongst most whites to either wilfully forget that African Americans were formally unshackled from racial restraints a mere 30 years ago and that many of the gains they made were all but obliterated by "race neutral" anti-state policies in the 1970s and '80s.

When white Americans "remember" race, it has often been to demonise African Americans The demonization of African Americans as work-shy and "welfare queens" in the Reagan years and thereafter, for example, simply flies in the face of abundant empirical research. Research has repeatedly confirmed that there are no significant differences between black and white work ethics; that the notion of "welfare queens" living off the state is a tragic myth; that disappearing blue collar jobs of a depleted industrial sector, not the sudden collapse of "family values" and "individual responsibility", has transformed once-vibrant, if poor, African American communities into devastated ghettoes; that African American youth are repeatedly passed over in the job market in favour of white applicants; that the relocation to the suburban fringe of industry and better-paying jobs in the hi-tech economy places African American workseekers at a decided geographical disdvantage both because travel costs become onerous and because because African Americans are frequently harrassed simply for moving out of "their" inner-city areas. Equally abundant research, including statistics produced by pro-Reaganite authors, also demonstrate that if the state has all but forgotten about the racial poor, it most certainly did not forget about the white elite or that this stratum would benefit handsomely from concerted state support: it is a consensus by now that the decimation of the welfare state over the past fifteen years or so was matched by the greatest bout of corporate welfare in history and by generous concessions to the property-owning middle class. However, empirical evidence about the *fact* and the *benefits* of such racialised state intervention has not seriously disrupted white antipathy towards African Americans as a group or the tendency to denounce social welfare as a "racial handout".

As economic policy recast the most hapless victims of the industrial era--blue collar workers--into racialised villains, the cultural apparatuses lent powerful support to the process. From "Nigger"-quoting movies such as *Pulp Fiction* to terrifying and breathless accounts of "gangbanging" homicides on the five o'clock news, Americans were fed an unending barrage of images and representations of African Americans as steeped in drugs,

[44] A recent study by profressors Richard B. Freeman and William M. Rogers 3rd reported in the New York Times reports that black unemployment has dropped notably in tandem with the turnabout in the American economy. "Booming Job market draws young black men into fold", *New York Times*, 23 May 1999, pp. 1 and 21.

mayhem and virtually *unrestrained* "wilding" [45] The "war on drugs" provided endless and telegenic fodder for white outrage, notwithstanding such widely available information that most *consumers* of drugs are white or that mandatory federal sentencing guidelines compel judges to imprison crack offenders (most of whom are not white) to sentences three times longer than for the possession of equivalent amounts of cocaine (most of whose users *are* white) Resarch also confirms that the high incarcaration rate for African Americans does not stem from the commission of more crimes by blacks, but from the *arrest policies* of law enforcement agencies. In the Regan era, these policies were driven by the "war on drugs". As Michael Tonry and others have shown, there was nothing inevitable about the way the "war on drugs" was formulated. Policy makers had a variety of strategies to choose from, including targeting the largely (white) consumers of drugs and improving rehabilitation programs. At the decision was taken to focus the "war" on small-time *distributors*, law enforcement authorities warned Regan's personnel that this strategy would have overt racial consequences because most street-corner hustlers were non-white. By 1990, 80% of African American prisoners were in prison for drug-related offences and one out of every four black males between the ages of 18-35 years was in some form of penal supervision: graphic evidence that the "war" on poverty has been superceeded by the (far more costly) "war on drugs".[46] Some researchers have concluded that drug-related arrests were so high in the late 80s and early 90s that the official unemployment figures were artificially boosted in this period.[47]

The "moral panic" which rap music stirred up within "mainstream America" provided yet another front for the cultural demonization of African American youth, particularly young black males. Dumbfounded by the iconography, vernacular and masculinist street posturing of a genre that struck "middle Americans" as incomprehensible, cultural commentators used the media to demonise rap as "the black monster's music", stigmatising and virtually criminalising an entire generation of black males who merely sported trendy "gangsta" attire.[48] Buttressing the racial coding in the popular media was the appearance of a spate of fashionable "academic" texts such as *The Bell Curve* which re-popularised Darwinist notions about the genetic basis of black inferiority by suggesting that social welfare policies were a misiguided waste of public resources because, the authors' data persuaded them, African Americans were likely to have lower IQs than whites.[49] As an indication of racism's new-found confidence in contemporary America, Dinesh D'Souza argued in 1995 that rather than harp on "the legacies of slavery", African

---

[46] Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), Chapters 1 and 2.

[47] Loïc Wacquant, "Penal 'common sense' comes to Europe", *Le Monde Deplomatique*, April 1999, http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1999/04/index.html

[48] Trisha Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary (* University Press of New England, 1994; Tricia Rose, "Rap music and the demonization of young black males", *Today* , 122/2588, (May, 1994).

[49] Richard Herrenstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. (Free Pres, 1994). For a comprehensive discussion of this genre, see Troy Duster, *Backdoor to Eugenics* (Routledge, 1990).

Americans should instead be grateful to whites for releasing them from bondage in the first place![50]

The most striking aspect of all this is the extent to which ordinary Americans have become blasé about the grim outlook of contemporary African Americans. Data about racial differentials are either recieved as further evidence of the inability of African Americans to "improve themselves" or, when they are accepted, are viewed as intermittent reports from a far-off battle zone. There is little popular appreciation of the historical continuities that manifest themsleves in contemporary "race relations" just as there is a refusal to acknowledge that the material largesse and cultural affirmations of whiteness were built into racialised state programs in the recent past amount to a form of affirmative action for whites--or that this form of affirmative action dwarfs the affirmative action benefits that blacks and other minorities have received since the late-1960s. Only spectacular jolts, it seems, are capable of snapping the resultant amnesia about race, and then only briefly. President Clinton's televised "townhall meetings" to discuss racial issues, like the prestigious panel he assembled to keep the discussion going, have disappeared without trace whatsoever from the headlines. The Clintons' sojourn through Africa in 1997 included an apology from Clinton for America's role in the slave trade. That, too, was an inconsequential, and belated, formality. More resilient and consequential are "the politics of resentment" which sometimes pop up unexpectedly. When a TV reporter asked for his opinion about the riots that erupted after the white police were found not guilty for the brutal beating they administered to Rodney King unaware that the onslaught was being recorded, an apoplectic young white man responded: "They riot--we vote! We'll get them at the polls!"[51]

The correct refusal of whites to accept individual blame for the racial past contrasts starkly with the zeal which many many do not hesitate to attach *group* responsibility for acts committed by African American individuals. The racism lies at the core of this hypocrisy is sustained not so much by the absence of an historical perspective about race but by a refusal to concede that whiteness and the cross-generational transfer of its manifest advantages are directly implicated in the continuing subordination of African Americans. To treat the racial past seriously would compel whites to acknowledge the scale of their collective debt to the racial state. The prospects of this occuring remain slight for the forseeable future. Instead, whites remain wedded to notions that "prejudice" and "discriminatory attitudes" are the personal defects of individuals in civil society. Analagously, whites view their own progress as the reward of individual merit. As with other disquieting issues such as pornography and rampant gun-ownership, racist individuals in civil society are viewed as the unfortunate price Americans pay for their vibrant democracy. Perspective on race within the dominant population echo de Tocqueville's anxieties about the "tyranny of public opinion" in egalitarian America.[52]

---

[50] D'Souza, Dinesh, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, (Free Press, 1995), 113.
[51] *Los Angeles Times*
[52] de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

For African Americans, this means that the struggle to improve materially is, as it always has been, also a struggle against their cultural demonization. *All* immigrant ethnic groups have had to contend with the perils of scapegoating and the indignities of marginalisation. At the same time, for the vast majority of its citizens America's 20th century history appears to confirm many stereotypes of the "assimilationism" model, chief of which is that hard individual effort will be rewarded by full inclusion into the nation. It is clear by now that Americans will not willingly abandon the assimilationist model to accomodate the realities of the African American experience. For as long that unwillingness remains dominant, history will remain distorted and the truth obscured. Racial reconciliation did not accompany the formal deracialisation of America because racial inequities were too structurally embedded in whiteness, planted there in part by the racial state itself. Racial reconcilitation appears possible only if whiteness itself is historicised and its poisoned roots acknowleged. As David Roediger, a cultural historian of American racism, has also concluded, racial reconciliation requires a very unlikely thing: the abandonment of whiteness itself.[53]

Conclusion

The transparent enormity of the state's responsibility for South Africa's racial juggernaut forecloses debate about the matter. *Racial domination* here was the organising and preponderant axis of the state, so manifest that it quite literally took the form of names and addresses. Politicians and civil servants could therefore be held directly accountable for official policies and quasi-legal atrocities alike. In contrast, the full extent of racial domination in the US in the post-WW II era has been diminished by the perception that "*racism*" was firstly, an essentially Southern phenomenon and secondly, a matter that simmered in civil society generally against the better instincts of the state. The privatisation of race in this manner diminished the need for a public accounting of the past on the assumption that change would emerge once white individuals abandoned their "prejudices" and acquired better "values". In keeping with the statist tradition of state formation in SA, the democratic state undertook to bare its former soul. In keeping with its own tradition of diminishing the role of the state, in the US the state has generally ignored its compromised past.

It is surprising that SA resolved to establish a TRC because a TRC-like body was not necessary for democracy. In contrast, it is *not* surprising that the US failed to seek reconciliation through a similarly frank interrogation of its past: a TRC would have compelled the nation to concede that racism was a fundamental pillar of its history, as valid and lasting as any other creed in its vaunted republican tradition. Accordingly, it was one thing to plead *mea culpa* for briefly interning innocent Americans during WW II simply because of their Japanese ancestry. But it would have been quite another to concede that the axis of white identities, as well as their material fortunes and political unity, turned in no small measure on the historical subjugation and degradation of fellow

[53] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

Americans for two and half centuries. Would these Americans have been white without the presence of blacks? Does an historical fear of being assimilated to the status of slaves and ex-slaves lie at the core of white identities? How many individual whites, and their families, and their subsequent progeny, would have failed to prosper without a culture of racial violence? How complicit was the state in liquidating not only the bodies of blacks but the very prospects of African American citizenship? Who exactly did what in the course of this sustained racial onslaught? It is not likely that such questions will focus the national mind on the nettlesome past anytime soon.

Could any of this happen in the light of sound historical perspective??