CHAPTER 17

Racial Hegemony, Globalization, Social Justice, and Anti-Hegemonic Movements

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There is a stereotype of who can be intelligent and competent, who can have power. In Brazil it is rich, white men who represent the face of power.

—(Benedita da Silva, Afro-Brazilian Senator)¹

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1996, a small, and all but ignored, article written by Jullie Ellison (1996) appeared in the University of Chicago-published journal, Critical Inquiry, entitled “A Short History of Liberal Guilt.” In this article, Ellison explicitly argues that the Black Civil Rights movement was successful in that it appealed to white guilt. Continuing her argument, she attributes the conservative reaction as essentially rejection of such guilt and the appeal to white fears. Dr. Ellison concludes with the idea that this accounts not only for the wholesale abandonment of the civil rights agenda by white ethnics, but also the appeal to white masculinities resulted in conservative victories at the national, state, and municipal levels.

Such arguments, while appealing, fail to grasps the magnitude of the Civil Rights movement and the reactionary conservative response. Although some of what Ellison wrote appears to be accurate, clearly there is much more happening. The Civil Rights movement was more than about guilt and victimization, but radical and significant calls for redistributive measures, elimination of the racial divide, and social justice. Anything short of these goals presents a rather limited view of the Civil Rights agendas (Edsall and Edsall 1991).

Now there may be some who would suggest that guilt and a passion for justice are intricately interwoven, as suggested by Myrdal (1996). I wonder if indeed this is the case. Obviously, guilt may be a byproduct of one’s advantage that indeed springs from recognition of another’s disadvantage. But guilt alone is insufficient to account for the racial state, its rearticulation, or how future social justice responses should be crafted (Omi and Winant 1994). What is needed is a critical reflective process that recognizes that (1) wrongs have been done, (2) these wrongs have been institutionalized and made part of the national experience, (3) benefits have resulted, and (4) hence remedies are forthcoming. I believe to confound these four distinct notions with some vague idea of guilt produces not only compassion fatigue, apologetic inertia, and misplaced sympathies but also denial and obfuscation. The process produces little more than another variant of psychological reductionism with its attendant and vague notions of guilt and victim-hood. It is, as I see it, not about someone feeling guilty, but a process which reverses the structural inequities that produce liabilities for generations.

Failure to understand that race, racialization, and racism are part of “systemic” processes associated with a particular racial order is to continually confound symptoms with systems. Systemic racism includes the complex array of anti-Black practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resources inequalities along racial lines, and the white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. (Feagin 2000: 6)

Thus, concludes Feagin, by systemic we mean the “core racist beliefs” that dominate the institutional structures of a given society. It should be understood that Feagin makes specific reference to white racism (aimed against blacks) and argues that it need not be so restrictive. Failure to understand the systemic processes associated with the racial state—to include racial hegemonies, social/racial justice projects, and what Omi and Winant refer to as re-articulation—means that we will continue to be blind. As the racial state has transformed, so has racism. In the past, racism, backed by law and institutional norms, was mostly overt. That is to say it was quite obvious, apparent, and openly expressive. During America’s history, such obvious acts of racism have included segregation and

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2 A new breed of racial apologists has argued that white flight is essentially their response to the civil rights agenda and has resulted in “the decline in social connectedness began just after the successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s” (Putnam 2000: 41).

3 Or even worse we spin our wheels constructing what may be called psychological knee-jerk programs that go under a variety of labels associated with diversity and multicultural programs. Hence we are left with sympathy, rather than empathy. Even empathy, understanding the situation of another, absent any specific link to issues of societal responsibility, societal gain (at the expense of another), and the structural components that replicate these wrongs (institutional/systemic racism), means that when the moment has passed, when consciences have been placated, or when the cost exceeds the level of guilt the movement toward redress is stunted, halted, or reversed.

4 Arguments, which merely want someone to feel my pain, to sympathize with my situation, to understand my plight, produce little else but guilt. I cannot eat guilt, my children cannot go to school on guilt, and the future does not look any brighter because one feels guilt, remorse, or sadness. No, whether or not Germans like the Jews or feel guilty because of the genocide, whether or not the Russians feel guilty for their complicity in the annihilation of another generation of Chechyns, whether the British feel guilty for the centuries-long denial of human dignity to the Irish, or whether we in the United States recognize the same indignity that Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and others have had to endure is not the central issue. What is critical is not guilt, but redress, not psychological bandaids, but structural adjustments, which produce remedies, allow for redress, and repair the damage—as a matter of justice, and not guilt.

5 Indeed as suggested by Allen (2004), racial and political mistrust is part of this rearticulation process.