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Disempowering Racial Oppression

Pedro Caban
pcaban@albany.edu

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"Disempowering Racial Oppression, Discontinuing Chief Illiniwek and Other Forms of Racial 'Entertainment'."

I teach courses on Race and the U.S. Empire. My courses focus on the institutions and politics of racial oppression and resistance by racialized communities.

As I thought about today's forum, I reflected on how the racist incidents on this campus, including the university's opposition to retiring Chief Illiniwek, are the legacies of a history of U.S. racial oppression.

I am struck by two very different discourses on racism that have been used to explain American racial dynamics.

One discourse promotes the idea that racism is an individual pathology. Through therapeutic education this malady can be alleviated. In this view, larger societal institutions—including universities—are neutral; they do not perpetuate racism. Educational institutions in particular nurture the belief that socially maladjusted individuals are solely responsible for perpetrating racist acts. While university administrators across the country deplore racist acts as violations of core values, they fail to comprehend how racism is embodied in the liberal institutions they represent.

The other discourse, which I would like to expand here, is that racism is not a pathology, it is not an exception, but is intrinsic to the very founding and functioning of US society. The key institutions of this country, including the university, are implicated in this history of racial oppression. As my colleague David Roediger has noted previously, the public land grant universities established by the Morrell Act of 1862 were allocated lands that were originally usurped from Native Americans.

The fact is that racial oppression is at the core of this nation's origins; racism is not an aberration of the American psyche. Racism was constitutive of US society as we know it, and served as the ideology on which a male-centric white supremacist social order was imposed and sustained in this country.

The belief that Anglo Saxons had a divine mission—a Manifest Destiny—to spread their civilization and values is still dear to U.S. political leaders. George Bush's religiously inflected pronouncements that military occupation of Iraq is part of a beneficent American campaign to spread freedom and democracy in the Middle East is but the most recent dangerous manifestation of Manifest Destiny.

The notion that a providentially blessed people have a moral imperative to civilize humanity presupposes that the victims of this supposed beneficence are in need or desire this intervention. Portrayed as dependent on Anglo Saxons for their salvation, racialized people are caricatured as devoid of capabilities, not worthy of respect and ultimately as lacking humanity.

The Founding Fathers, all Anglo Saxon males of privilege, conceived an imperial project of national unification and territorial expansion based on the fundamental belief that non-white people and women were a genetically inferior species of humanity whose place in the American social order and polity would be determined by these white men.

A dual logic of selective inclusion and exclusion based on race and gender guided the thinking of U.S. leaders. People of color would be included to the extent that their labor and resources were necessary to build a vast Anglo Saxon empire, but these racialized communities would be excluded from the benefits of this new liberal, materially rich, republican polity-- deprived of citizenship, denied economic justice and relegated to political insignificance, people of color were expected to passively acquiesce to their subordination. The denial of U.S. citizenship was a key legal device not only to exclude nonwhite men and all women from effective political engagement, but it became a marker to designate a people's inferior status in a highly racialized and gendered society.

Concretely this meant that Black men and women were destined to a life of chattel slavery. In the cruel calculus of the slave owning masters the function of unfree Black labor was to create wealth for them and to reproduce a cheap, inexhaustible supply of enslaved labor. African Americans were denied citizenship well into the 19th century.

Native Americans were caricatured as a people who were incapable of salvation, a convenient designation given that they were judged to be an obstacle to expansion of slave-based plantation economies. Moreover, Native Americans were an impediment to the spread of white settler communities and capitalist agriculture in the West. Consequently their fate was one of either continuous displacement or extermination. The small numbers of Native Americans that survived the state-sanctioned genocide were incarcerated in reservations. They were eventually granted a second class U.S. citizenship in the 1920s.

Asians were imported as expendable labor; once they were of no value to building the empire's infrastructure they were expelled, excluded from white society. Restrictive and manifestly racist laws prohibited Asian immigration to the U.S. They too were denied citizenship and relegated to a precarious existence in a racially hostile world.

Mexico and its people were inconvenient impediments that threatened to interrupt the relentless, bellicose westward expansion of the young U.S. nation. President Polk, in a game plan adopted by George Bush, fabricated a rationale for war against Mexico in 1848. A defeated Mexico was forced to cede half of its national territory to the U.S. Those Mexicans remaining in the conquered territories were deprived of citizenship, dispossessed of their land and riches, and subjected in far too many instances to a campaign of terror by Anglo vigilantes and militias. Mexicans were transformed into despised strangers in their own land.

Puerto Ricans and Filipinos were victims of the first extraterritorial war of colonial conquest in U.S. history. Ceded in 1898 by a humiliated Spanish government to the U.S., the people of Puerto Rico and the Philippines were stripped of their sovereignty and converted into colonial subjects. Filipinos never obtained U.S. citizenship, and Puerto Ricans were granted a statutory citizenship—a citizenship of ambiguous constitutional standing—the same type of second-class citizenship conferred on Native Americans.

In the Philippines, the U.S. waged a war of destruction and terror against a people's popular resistance to colonial subjugation. U.S. atrocities committed against the people of the sovereign Republic of the Philippines, including widespread use of torture and indiscriminate killing of civilians, have their contemporary bloody parallels in Iraq.

Puerto Ricans were dispossessed of their lands, forced to abandon their country in large numbers to work in the farms and factories in the U.S., and by the mid-1930s suffered rates of hunger, malnutrition and disease that surpassed the most impoverished Central American republics. During this period, Puerto Rico was a veritable cornucopia of riches for U.S. sugar corporations, who built their empires of capital through the wholesale pauperization of a subject people. The depravities of colonial oppression and exploitation constitute a hidden chapter in the history of empire building.

White women were relegated to the private domestic sphere, and portrayed as dependent subjects. They were deemed by men as incapable of exercising the requisite reason and logic to participate in the political process. Patriarchy enforced domesticity and docility. The female role was defined as patriotic republican womanhood, with a primary function to biologically propagate a white nation.

The U.S. empire was not built exclusively on the exploitation of racialized people and women; class oppression was also constitutive of this process. Empire building was the corollary of unrelenting U.S. capitalist expansion that consumed humanity and natural resources at a pace and rate without historical precedent. The genius of empire builders was to convince economically exploited, politically marginalized

white male ethnic proletarians that their interests were best served by their Anglo Saxon economic oppressors.

For the white working class, racial oppression by the government was an eminently logical policy to protect them from unfair labor competition from Blacks, Latinos and Asians. Racism taught the white working class that since racialized people lacked the humanity of whites they would happily consent to labor under conditions of virtual servitude. Racial fear and hate masked the reality of class oppression, effectively undermined class solidarity, diffused class conflict and protected the emerging bourgeoisie. Racism as a practice continues to fragment and divide a population that has common objective and material interests.

Despite the relentless onslaught of racist practices to dehumanize them, to enforce their marginality and convince them they are devoid of any capacity to effect progressive change, racialized communities have resolutely struggled to transform the structures that oppress them. An important scholarly task of programs for the study of racialized communities is to recover the hidden histories of these moments of resistance and affirmation. The political indispensability of this research is apparent to all in this gathering. But at this moment, when racist acts abound in this university, resurrecting narratives of racialized people's collective refusal to accept subordination is particularly empowering and instructive.

People of color on this campus regularly confront the subtle daily humiliations of racism. Unfortunately, far too often racist expressions are deliberately cast in order to inflict pain. The frequency of racist incidents on this campus moves in lockstep with the university administration's ineffectual responses to these incidents. Administrators seemingly fail to appreciate how racism poisons the academic environment and how it puts at risk the university's mission. The contradiction between a public discourse of inclusion and the practice of exclusion is glaringly apparent to faculty and students of color. Administrators may fail to comprehend the extent to which a hostile racial climate alienates some of the best and brightest students and faculty of color from our campus. No university in the United States can hope to aspire to the highest echelons of academic excellence if its administration fails to grasp the urgency of responding decisively against the perpetrators of racist incidents, irrespective of how benign they appear. Freedom of speech is not a license for racist practices that undermine the academic environment and pursuit of learning.

Fortunately, student resistance to campus racism is part of the history of the University of Illinois. We see moments of this affirmation every day. The Forum on Racism, Power and Privilege at UIUC, organized by the STOP Coalition on February 1, was only the most recent and dramatic collective anti-racist action. We are convinced that antiracist student activism is not an epiphenomenon and has been institutionalized into an enduring cross cultural/racial movement.

Racism and racial oppression take different forms –from lynching to police profiling, from trivializing a people's culture by reducing its complexity to caricatures, to denying in the classroom that Blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans have a history or any capacity for collective action.

Despite its flaws, the university is unquestionably one of the most vital venues to wage the struggle for racial and gender justice. However, the idea that mere education is the essential corrective for centuries of a deeply embedded racist mentality and practices that permeate the very core of this society is unfortunately, a delusion. What is needed is an educational experience that exposes as myth the notion that racism can be overcome through individual enlightenment.

Given the accelerated growth of the non-white US population, any university that aspires to world-class status must confront the legacy of racism and rethink aspects of its traditional academic mission with the aim of eradicating racist practices on its campus. To be an effective force in dismantling racism the university must ask how through it actions it unwittingly propagates racist practices. At UIUC administrators must acknowledge the institution's duplicity in sanctioning Tacos and Tequila, and the myriad of other racist demonstrations, by its lack of decisive action. Our university's leaders must take principled positions and affirm by their actions that confronting racism on campus is non negotiable. Cautious attorneys trained to think about the costs of litigation should not be empowered to eviscerate an unequivocal antiracist moral response into inconsequence.

Administrators must come to learn that structural racism within the university is not going to be resolved by mere consultations, forums, and tokenism. The University must recruit individuals to positions of academic and administrative leadership who understand the history and practice of racial oppression in the US and they must be empowered to make hard decisions that are necessary to achieve racial equity and inclusion. They cannot be mere apologists for the liberal institution, or serve as agents to socialize Black and Latino youth into accepting the legitimacy of the prevailing order. The recruitment and retention of youth from racialized communities is central for building a racially progressive leadership in the future.

As currently constituted, the University perpetuates racial inequality. In order to break this sad legacy, the university has to acknowledge its culpability and rethink how it uses its power and who is delegated the authority to exercise that power to achieve racial justice. It is imperative for the university to regain the trust of legions of faculty and students of color and restore an academic environment that is conducive to learning and research of unrivalled excellence.