

A Study of the Racial Issue in the U.S.A from the Cultural and Historical Perspective

Yu Zhixue

Foreign Languages School, Chifeng University, Chifeng, China

Keywords: Racial Issue, the U.S.A, Mainstream Culture, Subculture, Ideology

Abstract: The racial issue in the United States has always been a highlighting focus. Some people think that American racial discrimination has been eradicated, and the racial issue between blacks and whites is completely settled with the improvement of blacks' social position. Is the fact like what people expect? The paper is designed to explore the roots of racial issue in the US from whites' mainstream culture and blacks' subculture, as well as their different ideologies, in attempt to expose the fact that only when American whites and blacks cultural barriers are overcome can the two cultures coexist equally, but it has a very long way to go.

1. Introduction

Although in recent years people pay more attention to American economic future because of American economic slowdown, its racial issue has never been neglected by American people, even by the people all over the world, especially Barack Obama was elected and served for two terms of presidency of the United States, which aroused the world's concern about American politics, economy as well as culture. Currently, a number of African Americans have been accepted by whites, and some have been given a preferential treatment. Obama's election impresses the world that American racial discrimination has been eradicated, and racial issue between blacks and whites is completely settled. The question, however, is raised whether a black American's election illustrates the realization of racial equality in the United States. Does such a big issue, rooting deeply in American society, easily gain solution through a black's ascension to the White House? In reality, racism is still very much alive and racial disparities persist in just about every measurable form, and they won't simply melt away just because the nation has a black president. It is admitted that the conflict between whites and blacks has not been as sharp as before. And blacks' social status in America does have been improved a lot. However, we should not focus our attention on the surface, but take a deep look at the causes of conflict between blacks and whites in the United States. The paper is designed to explore the roots of racial issue in the US historically and culturally to see if the problem has been really solved in contemporary American society.

2. The Historical Setting for the Racial Inequality

Since the foundation of the New World, American has always been plagued with a major societal dilemma—the dilemma between blacks and whites. There is a scholar who compares the racial problem in America as a mother who has two sons, but the mother does not raise those two sons in an equitable manner. She gives the preferential treatment to one (White) while scorning the other (Black). Why the mother is so partial?

Blacks and whites in the US have been the source of racial issue since the early 1600s. It was at that time that the black people began to be sold as slaves in human trade market from Africa to the south of America. They were forced to labor all day like horses and mules. As these slaves resembled monkeys, with dark skin color, bushy hair and broad-shaped noses, they were considered as in-born "inferior". To eliminate feeling of guilt, slave owners viewed them as their property instead of human beings. In order to keep their property, they did not allow slaves to be independent and strong, and forbid them to read and write, for if they could read and write, they could read about other slave revolts and united to fight for their freedom. Consequently, slaves

were taught from childhood that they were nothing, that they would always be nothing. Black people, it was also believed, were naturally not as intelligent as white people, and dirty by nature. Therefore, it was unnecessary to try to educate them and give them nice houses. This attitude gradually developed into a fix belief that whites were dominant by nature, while blacks were born inferiorly.

The extremely bad conditions created strong feelings of hatred and hostility in blacks toward whites. They also caused fear and hostility in whites toward blacks. The blacks tried to escape the white people's control and mistreatment, while whites made great efforts to oppress blacks and protect the privileges that they had enjoyed. "Justice could not exist without equality, and equality could not exist with the fix belief of racial inferior(Li Zuowen, 2006)". Conflict between the two races continued and even increased as the belief became more widespread.

Blacks have never stopped their struggle for social equality and civil rights. In many places throughout the country, there were sporadic demonstrations against discriminatory legislation and attempts to get civil right through boycott. In 1941, Philip Randolph, editor of *The Messenger* and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized 100,000 people to march on Washington to protest segregation in the government and discriminatory hiring practices in the defense industries. During the 1950s, organizations such as the NAACP(The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Legal Defense Fund began to challenge the continued existence of segregated schools. On December 5, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks protested the discrimination by refusing to give her seat to a Caucasian(the White) in a bus. The protests against desegregation culminated on the great March on Washington in August 1963, on which Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous speech—"I Have a Dream". (Barbara Roche Rico, 1995) For these reasons, many laws and amendments were made to protect blacks' civil rights, but the progress to equality was slow and the high price paid for small gains. Although blacks had "freedom" in legal sense, most of them still do not have equal status in American society, and conditions of blacks are still worse than white Americans. Racial discrimination was hardly eradicated not because of insufficiency of political protection, but because of rooted cultural difference of the two racial groups.

3. Cultural Analysis of the Racial Issue in US

White American (often used interchangeably with "Caucasian American") is an umbrella term officially employed by the United States Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget and other U.S. government for the classification of white Europeans and other ethnic groups like American Indians, Puerto Ricans and African Americans etc. Whites are regarded as the socially and demographically dominant racial group. Therefore, White American culture is the largest proportion of American culture. From their earliest presence in North America, White Americans have contributed literature, art, agricultural skills, foods, clothing styles, music, and language to American culture and formed the mainstream culture of the United States. By comparison, African American culture in the United States refers to the cultural contributions of African ethnic groups to the culture of the United States. The distinct identity of African American culture is rooted in the historical experience of the African slaves, thus the culture retains humble identity as blacks' subculture even though it also plays an influential part in American culture as a whole.

The causes why the subculture is hardly integrated into American dominant culture have become the big concern by many psychologists, sociologists and cultural researchers. Many of them proposed some cultural theories in attempts to analyze the issue from different perspectives.

3.1 Colonialism Theory

Racial issue or racism in America, therefore, is considered by some cultural analysts as the consequence of colonialism. (Elaine Baldwin, Brian Longhurst ,2005) Many influential conceptions of racial disparities have their origin in the colonial context. Colonialism is the extension of a nation's sovereignty over territory beyond its borders by the establishment of either settler or exploitation colonies in which indigenous populations are directly ruled, displaced, or exterminated.

Colonizing nations generally dominate the resources, labor, and markets of the colonial territory, and may also impose socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic structures on the indigenous population. It is essentially a system of direct political, economic, and cultural intervention and hegemony by a powerful country in a weaker one. Though the word colonialism is often used interchangeably with imperialism, the latter is sometimes used more broadly as it covers control exercised informally as well as formal military control or economic leverage. The term colonialism may also be used to refer to an ideology or a set of beliefs used to legitimize or promote this system. Colonialism was often based on the ethnocentric belief that the morals and values of the colonizer were superior to those of the colonized; some observers link such beliefs to racism and pseudo-scientific theories dating from the 18th to the 19th centuries. In the western world, this led to a form of proto-social Darwinism that placed white people at the top of the animal kingdom, "naturally" in charge of dominating non-European aboriginal populations.

Colonialism may be one of the factors that caused racial discrimination in the US, but Colonialism Theory cannot explicitly explain why American racial issue is unable to be solved even in today when more and more blacks have climbed into top places.

3.2 Material Base-superstructure Model

Many sociologists began to study American racial issue from economic element. Let us explore this matter from this point of view to see if economy can help eradicate racial disparities in the US. The historical settings of blacks and whites in the US do not provide equal economic opportunity for blacks and whites. The blacks came to America as slaves and servants. By contrast, the whites came to America as freedom fighters. Since the first settlement of blacks and whites in America, the two races have been in unresolved contradiction. The black people have never gained equal economic position to whites nor have they even shared the political power in this country. (As for this point, I would like to explain that although president-elect Obama took charge of the supreme power in the United States, he impossibly just represented the interests of African Americans. But rather, he surely considered the benefits of all Americans because he was president of the United States of America, rather than president of blacks). Only when the cultures and consciousness of the two races are completely accepted by each other can the racial issue be settled from the roots. That certainly needs an extremely long run to reach. According to Marx's theories, it is economic relationships that underpin inequality, for material base of a society determines the broad character of its superstructure. In all known societies (save the early state of primitive communism), there has always been the basic and fundamental contradiction that some members of society have owned and controlled the means of production". (Elaine Baldwin, Brian Longhurst ,2005) As explorers of the New World, white Europeans became the owners of the means of production as well as the owners of the labor—black slaves. The differences of material base led to the opposition of superstructures: the two races gradually formed their own racial identities, religious tradition and cultural ideologies, with the mainstream culture of whites and subculture of blacks. It is these factors that make American racial conflict incompatible. Ideological causes, therefore, are expected to be explored in the following paragraphs so as to find the truth.

3.3 The Theory of Ideology

It is generally considered that colonialism and economic base construct the reasons for racial discrimination in the US. "Since the roots have been found and African Americans have got the relatively equal treatment with whites in politics and economy", many people pointed out, why nowadays the issue has not been thoroughly solved yet? To answer the question, a concept is supposed to be made clearly—ideology. An ideology is a set of beliefs and ideas, which can be thought of as a comprehensive vision, as a way of looking at things, as in common sense and several philosophical tendencies, or a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society.

Firstly, ideologies, as a weapon, provide whites ruling class with explanation of legitimate inequality between whites and blacks. Ideologies are systems of abstract thought applied to public matters; therefore, ideology is an instrument which helps ruling class to effectively control its

people's minds. It is more powerful than any other ruling means (military and police). The ruled class unconsciously accepts the control from legitimate authority and allows such inequalities, disadvantages and injustice, as the cultural power is institutionalized and given moral grounding. On the other hand, white Americans do not give up their established racial privileges and share their power with blacks. Therefore, the cultural exclusiveness is formed among white Americans, and many attempts are made to maintain their cultural independence.

Secondly, inequality between whites and blacks can be profoundly analyzed from the perspective of habitus. "people's perceptions, thoughts, tastes and so forth are shaped by their habitus". (Elaine Baldwin, Brian Longhurst ,2005) Both whites and blacks have marked their identities from the beginning, and they will maintain boundaries between themselves and the other race, which is described as the process of "distinction". For this reason, we should stress that culture is deceptive. As a person, to a very large extent we do not choose our identity. We receive the cultural identity which has been handed down to us from previous generations ...we adhere to groups, whether clubs or political or religious organizations, and we adopt the identifying images of social groups, whether in hair-style or clothing, so as to confirm our social identity. Although blacks with "inferior" identity have been struggling for equality and civil rights, trying to get rid of the distinction, their cultural heritage is hardly changed suddenly, at least not now. Only when the two racial groups are accepted each other in beliefs and customs can their racial discrimination disappear completely. Equality is fulfilled.

Thirdly, the gap between whites' mainstream culture and blacks' subculture is hardly bridged. Some people may argue that inferior racial group makes efforts to change their identity to conform to superior one, and whites have already accepted them whether in politics or in economics. Obama's election is one example, which illustrates that the white Americans, in the context of mainstream culture, would rather elect a black as their president. Under the background of serious financial crisis and terrible national image, American people make very clear what is the most important for them. However, their cultural identity can hardly be changed no matter how desperately they try, because of cultural unconsciousness. Such cultural unconsciousness make American blacks to a large extent keep their own common features even though the cultural unconsciousness may also help them learn whites' cultural characteristics and entirely come into mainstream culture in the future; while white people also have the cultural unconsciousness of their identity and hold the Unconscious Stereotypes and Prejudice against Blacks It is largely possible that the two racial groups be mixed together someday, because culture is dynamic, and cultural mixture is an inevitable trend in the development of American future. However, the paper's focuses is not the future, but the present time, when an African American was elected as American president, as politics is as deceptive as culture. Many people are apt to be deceived by the phenomenon, readily in the belief that the racial disparity does not exist in American society. The fact is that African American culture will develop separately from mainstream American culture for a relatively long term because of the persistence of the above-mentioned cultural identities, as well as African Americans' unconscious desire to maintain their own traditions. Consequently, African American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct cultural body.

4. The Truth of the blacks' social position

The black's social position has not been truly changed even some efforts have been taken. In some people's eyes, the racial discrimination from history has finally been erased after generations of struggling for equality. Many others also see that poverty and education levels for blacks have been improved in the past two decades, and many black Americans have occupied the important position in politics, economy and culture and the forth. In effect, blacks' condition can hardly be improved from bottom to top simply. Racial disparities persist in about every measurable form, especially, in American daily life. They are impossibly melted away. As what we have mentioned above, historical and economic elements triggered serious racial problem in America, for which, however, it is culture that should take the responsibility. The blacks' rights have been protected

politically as well as economically since hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately, nowadays, there are far more black Americans still live in poverty than whites. Black adults are less likely than whites to have college degrees and more likely to be in prison. Blacks are less likely than whites to have health insurance on average. American police are unfair to whites and blacks in the course of law enforcement. Statistically, 74.7% white drivers exceed the speed limit and only 17.5% blacks when driving, but 79.2% of the drivers who are stopped and checked are blacks.(Xiao Yaoke, Chen Lufang, 2017) In 2015, a white supremacist killed nine blacks at a church in south Carolina, which further arouse the indignation of black people.(People's Daily,2017)

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the process of struggling for racial equality is actually the one that the black subculture gradually comes into and equally coexists with white mainstream culture. This process definitely has a long way to go, for the two groups impossibly erase their identities soon. In order to realize the coexistence of the two different cultures, both whites and blacks should make joint efforts. For whites, they should change their cognitive pattern and consciousness, realizing that black cultures have contributed a great deal to the whole American culture, eradicating their identities traces inherited from traditions, taking black Americans as their full brothers rather than stepbrothers. For blacks, they should also alter their consciousness, breaking the originally ideological framework that they were born inferior and unequal, demolishing the fixed view of legitimate inequality. As far as I am concerned, the racial issue can be solved in the future as long as American blacks and whites equally coexist in society with their cultural characteristics, which actually need a long way to go.

References

- [1] Elaine Baldwin, Brian Longhurst, *Introducing Cultural Studies*, Peking University Press, Beijing, 2005.
- [2] Barbara Roche Rico, Sandra Mano, *American Mosaic, Multicultural Readings in Content*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston in US, 1995.
- [3] Charles Vert Willie, *Race, Ethnicity, and Socioeconomic Status*, General Hall, Inc. New York, 1983.
- [4] Spickard Paul, *Almost all aliens :immigration, race, and colonialism in American history and identity*, New York : Routledge, 2007.
- [5] Xiao Yaoke, Chen Lufang, The status quo and controversy of racial profiling in the United States, *Journal of Shandong University of Technology (social Science)*, 2017(7).
- [6] Lei Zhenyang, Pei Shengyu, How do you view the ethnic policies and relations of western countries such as the United States, *Journal of Minzu University of China*, 2013(6).
- [7] Li Zuowen, *Graduate English*, Beijing Science and Technology Press, Beijing, 2006.
- [8] The Violent Events Reflect American Racial Issue again, Edition 3, August 14th, 2017.