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OPINION | UPWARD MOBILITY

# Michelle Obama Is Racially Insensitive?

She and Pete Buttigieg come under attack from progressives for expressing common-sense views.



By

Jason L. Riley

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Former first lady Michelle Obama speaks in Chicago, Oct. 29. PHOTO: ASHLEE REZIN GARCIA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the 1990s, before I had a family of my own, I volunteered in a mentoring program and was paired with a high-school freshman from Harlem whose parents were divorced. We would meet up on weekends to see a movie, visit a museum, or sometimes just grab a meal and chat about how things were going. His mother, a West Indian immigrant, told me that she had signed her son up for the program because she wanted him to have more male role models in his life.

I thought about that experience after Pete Buttigieg came under attack last month for saying, in 2011, that low-income minorities need more positive role models. The Democratic presidential candidate's remarks were denounced as racist, and he eventually walked them back out of political expediency. Michelle Obama came in for similar treatment at an event in Chicago recently, when she said that while she "can't make people not afraid of black people," blacks can address racism through how they lead their lives. "Maybe if I show up every day as a human, a good human, doing wonderful things, loving my family, loving our kids, taking care of things that I care about—maybe, just maybe that work will pick away at the scabs of our discrimination. Maybe that will slowly unravel it."

Like Mr. Buttigieg, Mrs. Obama was chided by fellow liberals for focusing on black behavior. Among today's progressives, suggesting that anything other than white racism is responsible for racial disparities is verboten. But there was a time when blacks were expected—by whites and blacks alike—to adhere to certain social norms to facilitate upward mobility, and the

existence of racism was no excuse for not doing so.

Mrs. Obama made her remarks during a conversation with Isabel Wilkerson, who wrote “The Warmth of Other Suns,” a book about the millions of mostly rural blacks who migrated from the South in the first half of the 20th century and settled in Northern cities like Chicago. As Ms. Wilkerson wrote, black newspapers at the time, such as the Chicago Defender, and civil rights organizations like the Urban League “ran periodic lists of ‘do’s and don’ts’ ” that advised the new arrivals on how to behave properly. “Don’t use vile language in public places.” “Don’t appear on the street with old dust caps, dirty aprons and ragged clothes.” “Don’t loaf. Get a job at once.” “Do not keep your children out of school.” In a 1917 editorial, the Chicago Defender wrote, “It is our duty . . . to guide the hand of a less experienced one, especially when one misstep weakens our chance for climbing.”

Today, such talk is derided by many on the left, but a focus on self-regard and self-respect was once seen as essential to economic progress, and the results speak for themselves. Census data show that in the 1940s and ’50s black poverty rates plummeted, black incomes grew at a faster rate than white incomes, and the racial gap in years of schooling narrowed from four years to less than two. It’s worth noting that all of this was achieved prior to passage of the landmark civil-rights bills of the 1960s that so often receive exclusive credit for black advancement. And as more blacks became more educated, they qualified for better jobs. Which helps explain why in the decades before affirmative action policies were implemented in the 1970s, blacks were already entering middle-class professions at unprecedented rates.

None of this is meant to romanticize black life in America under Jim Crow or to diminish the importance of passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which made this country more just. The point is to remember what was achieved by blacks at a time when racism was far more prevalent than it is now. The underdevelopment of human capital, not white racism, is the far bigger barrier to black progress. Lashing out at Pete Buttigieg and Michelle Obama for saying the kinds of things that are said in every black church on any given Sunday may give progressives emotional release, but it does nothing for the black underclass and only makes it more difficult to have honest conversations about inequality.

The irony is that liberals today are trying to help blacks by accommodating the kinds of aberrant behavior that a previous generation of black leaders understood to be counterproductive. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who want a moratorium on charter schools, have both vowed to legalize marijuana through executive action if elected, citing the disparate impact of drug laws on minority communities. But is that what underprivileged blacks really need—less access to charter schools and more access to weed? That’s not helping blacks. It’s giving up on them.

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