

What Would We Do Without the Word 'Racism'?

The term became pervasive only after discrimination was banned and blacks made significant progress.

By

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If the country had a National Language Commission, and I were appointed commissioner, the first word I would put in cold storage—filed permanently away beside the N-word, the C-word, the K-word and other prohibited words—would be “racism.” In our day the word has been used imprecisely, promiscuously, perniciously and well beyond abundantly. If you are politically on the left, racism is what you accuse people of who don’t agree with you. If you are on the right, you can accuse them, I suppose, of socialism, but it doesn’t carry anything like the same resonance in moral opprobrium or self-awarded virtue as does racism.

The racist, if we can use the dictionary definition, believes that all members of a race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, which distinguish it as superior or inferior to other races. The true racist of course feels his own race is superior, and thereby he hasn’t any difficulty in discriminating or otherwise ill-treating members of other races, sometimes through government policy—as formerly under apartheid in South Africa or during the strict segregation once pervasive in the American South—or sometimes through ugly personal actions.

I am old enough to remember Jim Crow racism in action. When I lived in Arkansas in the early 1960s, there were still “colored” and white drinking fountains, separate bus and movie seating, and obvious differences in the quality of school buildings and other facilities available to blacks, and most people made no bones about it. Blacks were suppressed, oppressed and made to feel inferior in nearly every way that local governments could devise. The word racism wasn’t much in vogue in that place, or anywhere else, at that time. Most people who could rightly be called racist would not know what you were talking about if you accused them of racism.

Only now—long after the successful efforts of Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins Sr., Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin and others, now that formally racist laws and social arrangements are defunct and significant progress has been made by blacks—has the word racism become part of everyday speech, the accusation of racism slung about with easy abandon.

Without the word racism Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton would be out of business, Cory Booker could not construct a sentence, Ta-Nehisi Coates would have to write musical comedy, and the so-called Squad of congresswomen would have to argue for the strength of their actual policies, which might not be so easy. Among the race-mongers in the current day no one is safe. Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi, while not flat-out called racists, have recently had racism imputed to them, and by members of their own political party, which must have stung.

I can think of no more devastating insult than being called a racist. In a mere six letters the word suggests one is tyrannical, vicious, stupid and cruel. I should rather be called a coward, a cheat, a liar or anything else you happen to have in your personal arsenal of invective. The others allow for the possibility of redemption; racism, short of death, does not.

The power of the word racism—always cocked, aimed and ready to fire—makes it impossible to say anything, outside the most obeisant praise, about black culture, black politicians, black entertainers or black anything. The entire subject is out of bounds to anyone who isn't black, and many black intellectuals and writers are themselves in peril if they step outside the racial party line. This can't be healthy, for blacks or for the country at large.

Matters are made worse when the charge of racism is ratcheted up to the national level, and the U.S. is casually called a racist country. By 2065 it will be 200 years since America abolished slavery; by then it is doubtful if ours will still be a dominantly white country, if we are even now. Not the best time, one would think, to be talking about reparations.

Racists there may well still be in America, small dreary white supremacist groups, individuals who for their own personal reasons need to look down upon blacks to be able to look up to themselves. But can there be any doubt that the vast majority of white Americans think of their black countrymen as fully their equals, are genuinely saddened by watching black mothers weeping on local television after learning that their children have been killed in gang shootings, and have no wish to see blacks in any way degraded?

The best solution, perhaps, is for black Americans to cease thinking of themselves as victims and to recognize that the real racists in this country are those who insist blacks are permanent victims and always will be so in what they claim is an irretrievably, hopelessly racist America. Forgoing easy recourse to the word racism, in a small but not insignificant way, might be a step toward eliminating racism itself.

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