

Tseng, T. & Yoo, D. (1998, March/April). [The Changing Face of America: How do we Describe our Altered Racial Landscape?](#) *Sojourners*, 27 (2), 26-29.

OVERVIEW

The black-white paradigm, helpful as it may be in describing power inequity, no longer—if it ever did—reflects social reality.

The above sentiment expressed by authors Timothy Tseng and David Yoo relays the fact of a truly multicultural United States in the 21st century.

Over the past 30 years, the huge migration of (especially) Asians and Latinos has added greatly to the rich diversity of this country. As a result, the way our country addresses the issues of race and ethnicity is now dramatically challenged.

Statistics explain well the "changing face of America." In 1980, 3.5 million Asians were living in the U.S. By 1998, the number had risen to more than 9.75 million. As of 1970, 9.07 million Latinos resided in the U.S. By 1998, there were 22.75 million.

These "new immigrants are made up of both poor, refugee, migrant workers as well as young, well educated, well-to-do professionals." This dichotomy is both good and bad, according to Tseng and Yoo, primarily because such facts can be misused for political purposes:

While negative stereotypes of "job-stealing immigrants" and the "welfare mom" are employed regularly to justify immigration restrictions...positive images are also used to undermine policies designed to rectify ongoing racial discrimination (such as affirmative action) and undercut the moral sway for the call for racial justice.

Along with this development, the authors note that other factors may also be involved in changing our understandings of race. They add:

The growing acceptance and rate of interracial or interethnic marriages portends a very different kind of understanding of race relations in the future.

Along somewhat similar lines, Tseng and Yoo explain the other issue at

hand as they note, "Scholars of race are concluding that racial identity is much more plastic" than previously imagined:

It is a socially constructed and politically determined means of marking differences and creating inequality that has little basis in biology, culture, or behavior traits.

While this all may be true to some extent, it still raises serious questions about whether our society should be truly "color blind." If we should be a color blind society, should our public policies therefore be color blind? And should our organizations also be integrated instead of defined by ethnicity?

Unfortunately, the authors contend, this "ideal" is limited because, "It cannot adequately address the consequences of ongoing racial discrimination even if racial distinctions do not exist biologically." In addition, "It cannot compensate for the years of Euro-American accrual of privilege and power at the expense of 'Third World' people."

In other words, while race may be a man-made issue, it remains an issue that must be dealt with and not ignored. America still holds onto a corporate racism, whether it wishes to or not, by the very fact that there is such a strong desire by so many to deny it exists. It has been one of the few yet unresolved issues for the most powerful nation on earth, and those of us in America tend to tire of questions with only difficult answers. Thus, the society is faced with a complete misunderstanding of the situation:

The confusion lies in the conscious or subconscious desire to reduce American racism to an epiphenomenon or a dependent social variable.

Some simply ignore the corporate aspect of racism and declare it only to be a "set of individual attitudes." Also, there is confusion over and a blending of race and ethnicity. This has led to generalizations of a "structural assimilation of (all) immigrants" to American society over time...whether they are a "racial minority" or not. Unfortunately, while such a paradigm may have worked well for European immigrants to the U.S., it cannot be used as "the model for other groups," because race and ethnicity are different.

Also, it cannot be considered a valid argument that discussion of race

takes away from discussion of the real injustice of economic disparity. Many argue that talking about racial justice is divisive, while working for economic justice brings unity. In fact, some would substitute class-based policies for race-based policies because they appear to be color blind and thus more fair.

Tseng and Yoo note that this is one of the primary reasons why Asian Americans are usually not considered a group that faces racial discrimination. Their "general educational and economic attainment" are "almost always presented so favorably (though not accurately)," that they are usually not considered for study in the link between racial discrimination and economic well being. Still, argue the authors,

This ignores the fact that even wealthy and educated people of color are discriminated against.

There is no easy solution to the problem of racism in America. The problem is not merely one involving blacks and whites; instead, it is a problem of multicultural racism. It must be dealt with as such.

The authors note that 30 years ago, the "easy" concept of "Integrate, don't segregate," was the "touchstone of Protestant activism." Today, we cannot be so simplistic in our approach to discussion of race and ethnicity. Those committed to racial justice should resist the temptation to gloss over the differences and inequalities caused by a fallen world and society.

"White privilege" must be recognized as real, having an impact on all in our society. At the same time, we must "reject extreme forms of identity politics." This only causes greater disunity.

Finally, and primarily, support and take part in organizations that stress racial partnership while respecting the presence of "ethnically based" groups."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What does the term, "multicultural" bring to mind for you? Why? How do you think our increasingly multicultural society impacts African-American minorities in particular?
- What are some of the most prevalent stereotypes of immigrants in our culture? How are they true? How are they false?

- How would you define race? How would you define ethnicity? Do you agree race is "a socially constructed and politically determined means of marking differences," and not based in "biology, culture, or behavioral traits?" Why or why not?
- Is there such a thing as Euro-American or white privilege? If so, describe what it is like.
- Should we be "color blind," or should we readily acknowledge differences in race and ethnicity? Should organizations work toward integration? What are the benefits of ethnic-specific groups? What are the drawbacks?

IMPLICATIONS

- Discussion about the issues of race and racism can no longer be simply centered around the black/white paradigm; issues must be broadened to include the many cultures of United States.
- It may not acceptable to propose a color blind approach to racial identity, because this assumption suggests that individuals must assimilate to the Euro-American lifestyle.
- "White privilege" must be acknowledged to discuss race and/or policies necessitated by racial inequalities and imbalance in American society.

Doug Messer cCYS