



THE EVIL AND UGLINESS OF RACISM: VIOLENCE, DISADVANTAGE AND STRUGGLE

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Of all the evil and violent psychological and social disorders that can infect a people and that have affected the history and lives of the peoples of the world, few rival racism in its destructive impact. Indeed, the horrid history of racism in this country began with its founding: the Holocaust of genocide and dispossession against Native Americans, the Holocaust of enslavement against Africans, violent dispossession and subjugation of Mexicans, and the brutal labor exploitation and oppression of Asians.

To understand and appreciate the violent and destructive character of racism, we must distinguish it from racial prejudice with which it is commonly confused. Racial prejudice is hatred and hostility toward a people based on biological differences which are seen as signs of defectiveness. Racism, on the other hand, is the turning of that hatred and hostility into public policy and socially sanctioned practice.

Not liking someone because they appear physically different is racial prejudice and certainly irrational. But using those differences to oppress, exploit, abuse and kill, and to justify this violence and establish it as a legal and social norm is racism. Anyone can hate or be hostile against others who appear physically different, but racism is rooted in the social system itself, enshrined in law and public policy and sanctioned by society – openly and covertly, actively and passively.

Thus, *racism is a system of denial, deformation and destruction of a people's history, humanity and human rights, based exclusively or primarily on the false concept of race.* To say “race” is a false concept is not to deny our peoplehood or the peoplehood of other peoples. We are an African people. But race is not about peoplehood. Race is a socio-biological concept, constructed by Europe to

assign human worth and social status using Whites as the exemplary model. In other words, the closer you are to Whites, the higher your human worth and social status. Likewise, the more different you are from Whites, the lower your human worth and the lower your social status. This helps explain the lower human worth and social status which Black people have been assigned in this society.

Racism expresses itself in three basic ways, as: 1) *imposition*; 2) *ideology*; and 3) *institutional arrangements*. Racism begins as *imposition*, an act of massive violence and continues this violence in various forms. This becomes its defining feature, distinguishing it from mere prejudice. The violence is acts of dominance which involve various kinds of destruction from invasion, conquest and occupation to enslavement and dispossession, ethnic cleansing, genocide and holocaust. This is followed by acts of continued violence to maintain White control and dominance including, for African Americans, after extended enslavement, massacres, lynching, Klan and other vigilante violence, police violence, and other forms of systemic violence, including deprivation of the necessities of life.

Racist violence is personified in the brutal lynching of Emmett Till and countless others; the assassination of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King; the police killings of Oscar Grant, Margaret Mitchell, Devin Brown and numerous others, the vicious beating of Rodney King and sodomizing with a plunger and brutalizing Abner Louima; and the vigilante dragging to death of James Byrd. It is expressed in the sacking and burning of Rosewood and Black districts of Tulsa and Memphis and the taking of hundreds of lives in the process. And it is expressed in the savage and deadening impact of psychic violence, breaking the spirit and emptying

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brains, cultivating self-hatred and the compulsion to self-mutilate and to make oneself acceptable to one's oppressor.

Racism also involves an *ideology* of justification for its violence and domination. Whites are presented as superior, even salvational. And Black people and other people of color are defined and described in such a way that they are stripped of their humanity and human rights; designated as inferior and unworthy of a life of dignity and decency, indeed cursed by God as sons and daughters of Ham, forever destined to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for others. Moreover, racism defines crime as racial rather than social; and once crime is racialized as Black, then Black people are criminalized as a race, justifying their different treatment by legislatures, courts, presidents, police and private citizens.

But racism could not last without *institutional arrangements* to preserve and promote the imposition and the ideology of racism. The schools and universities, the courts, legislatures, police departments, intelligence services and corporations are structured for White dominance and Black disadvantage. Whether it is seeking employment, a loan for a house, a license for business, a grant for community action or entrance in critical social space of wealth and power, African Americans are at a structured disadvantage.

This institutional disadvantaging and disabling is demonstrated in the Black Codes, the *Dred Scott* and *Plessy* decisions; suppression and political trials and imprisonment of activists of the 60s and other periods; medical experiments on Tuskegee men and others; harsher penalties and sentencing; higher interest rates; employer preferences for other-than-Black workers; redlining; restrictive covenants; repeated and selective prosecution of

Black politicians; gerrymandering and the elimination of Black districts; voter suppression; differential wages and wealth; and discrimination and denials in employment, housing, health care, and virtually every other area of life.

Certainly, the resistance to the President in Congress and in the streets by the Tea Party has a racial, even racist aspect to it, in spite of denials, conveniently camouflaged as "concern for the country," as if President Obama's very election reversed the normal and natural order of White supremacy. Also, there is the natural and human-made disaster of Katrina, aggravated by criminal governmental neglect, the fatally-slow response, the unsupported right to return, the farmed-out reconstruction, and the planned racial transformation of New Orleans into a White "high-end" residential and tourist town. Being both Black and poor put Black people low on the race and class list of established-order consideration and assistance.

"Where do go from here?" we always ask. And the answer is unavoidably the same: *the struggle must continue and intensify*. This means recognizing we are our own liberators; that the struggle for a just and good society requires dedication, discipline and sacrifice. Indeed, we must patiently, constantly and courageously pursue the *education, mobilization and organization* of our people, engage in *confrontation* with injustice on every level and seek simultaneously real and radical *transformation* of ourselves and society. And in all of this, we must realize that this struggle is a long, difficult and demanding one, and therefore, as Amilcar Cabral taught, we must "mask no difficulties, tell no lies and claim no easy victories."

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