



REVIEW ARTICLE

A Tale of Two Books: Racism and De Jure Segregation in America

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Introduction

Racism and de facto segregation characterize the contours of post-war urban development in the United States of America¹. This review is an expose of slavery and its vestiges as well as continued crises of American life beyond the euphemisms of gentrification, urban development and public housing. The two eminent writers of these important books, I believe, will impact public policy far beyond the rhetoric and reality of Trumpian era. The two books though partially overlap in substance but significantly differ in scope and nature. Coats' semi-autobiographical essays unravel the violence of slavery and poverty suffered by African Americans. Rothstein deals with objective policy facts and analysis how "governmental policies led to the creation of officially segregated public housing and the demolition of previously integrated neighborhoods" (inside front cover). In other words, it's de jure segregation-not de facto racial divergence or exclusion-that defines the social and moral contours of modern America.

Color, character, and conscience have defined much of American public policy practice and debates. What Gunnar Myrdal called "American Dilemma" is in fact embedded in the latent crisis. At no other time in modern history, issues related to racism, inequality and politics have unhinged democratic politics and social practice. This brief critique of Ta-Nehisi Coats' powerful book *We Were Eight Years in Power* is an important essay on the alienated blackness, a continuity of persistent minority culture. *WWEYP* is a powerful book: a brutally honest memoir, a soul-shattering commentary on the black experience. If you can empathize with this saga of a brilliant but initially poor writer, you cannot unread this book. The backlash against the egalitarian Reconstruction good "Negro Government" was oppressive, racist, and exclusionary. The 1895 constitutional convention simply sought "the restoration of despotic white supremacy" (p. xiv). Recruitment of black soldiers-loyal, brave, and efficient -

¹An abbreviated version of this review will appear in the journal of Poverty and Public Policy as "Toward a World More Humane: The Continued Crisis of the American Character" (2018). The author is deeply indebted to Max Skidmore, Editor-in-Chief, for the permission to use my review of Ta-Nehisi's amazingly well written book.

debunked the whole edifice of slavery. When Barak Hussein Obama became President, "his family and demonstration were a walking advertisement for the ease with which black people could be fully integrated into the unthreatening mainstream of American culture, politics, and myth" (p. xv).

The colorlessness of American myths can't be unhinged from the "whole theory of slavery," which holds that an "entire people carry peonage in their blood" (p. xvi). Having been born and raised in India where caste system defines a pervasive stratification of institutionalized hierarchies, I know the power of 'peonage' within and beyond the structures of injustice and oppression. I see commonalities between racism and 'casteism' though most Indian and American scholars tend to reject this comparison. It's, therefore, not a coincidence that I fully empathize with the author of *WWEYP*. I do so with humility and pride as an Asian-Indian-American-both as a person and writer though my pain pales into insignificance compared to Coats'. "America is an idea, not a race," Mr. Graham said, according to three people familiar with the exchange on Thursday. Diversity was strength, he said, not a weakness. And by the way, the senator added, he himself was a descendant of immigrants who came to the United States from "shithole countries with no skills²."

The anguished senator made a strong statement with no effect. Ta-Nehisi unravels the depths of the American psyche, tradition, and-indeed-foundation. "For African American, war commenced not in 1861, but in 1661, when the Virginia Colony began passing America's first codes, the charter documents of a slave society that rendered blacks a permanent servile class and whites a mass aristocracy. They were also a declaration of war" (p.79). Above all, "slavery was war on the black family" (p. 78). The Moynihans of American public

²https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/us/politics/trump-immigration-congress.html?emc=edit_th_180113&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=72603810 (01/13/2018)

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policy have brazenly blamed the black family for all its tangled pathologies. America invented the modern west with all its contradictions. European society and culture were feudal and aristocratic culminating colonial-imperial power. America's founding fathers sought escape from evil and adopted constitutional democracy to ward off oppressive institutions. Coats' contention is that the Civil War was a "sideshow" — is a chilling truth seldom understood and rarely explained in light of the naked truth:

"The Civil War is a story for white people-acted out by white people, on white people's terms-in which blacks feature strictly as stock characters and props" (p. 76). For realists, the true story of the Civil war illuminates the problem of ostensibly sober minded compromise with powerful, and intractable, evil. For radicals, the wave of white terrorism that followed the war offers lessons on the price of revolutionary change" (p. 82). The Civil Rights movement under the legendary leadership of Martin Luther King heralded a revolution. It's said that a revolution often devours its own children. The consequential outcome today is a White House, which is less than democratic and egalitarian than any time in modern history. America's modernization has thus come full circle.

The author, an enlightened author-correspondent with prestigious *The Atlantic* and recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship has uncanny ability and unmatched intellect to theorize history from the standpoint of truthful, objective, reality. He critiques Bill Cosby's conservatism, analyzes the Obamas' audacity of hope, rationalizes the "legacy of Malcolm X" and exposes the myths of American literature, journalism and policy makers. The critique, as I read, is a subtle but ingenuous commentary on American politics, academics, and the culture that breeds the pernicious chimaeras of diversity, PC, and hope.

On his 1st State of the Union address to the Congress, President Donald Trump, rather sarcastically, quipped: "American are dreamers too!" This was in reference to the democrats' call for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals' (DACA). An American Dream without due recognition of black history, experience, and struggle is a racist nonsense. Richard Rosenstein's book *The Color of Law* reminds how public and social policy determine patterns of segregation. New white tribalism has been unleashed by America's latent inheritance: Rebirth of white supremacy, birtherism, "alt-right", and tea-partiers et al. Calling Donald Trump "America's first white president," Ta-Nehisi observes: "Trump has made the negation of Obama's legacy the foundation of his own" (p. 344). This is

quintessential whiteness. "[T] construct of 'white race' is the idea of not being a nigger" (p. 344). His brilliantly concludes:

"Indeed, the alleged glee with which liberals call put Trump's bigotry is assigned even more power than bigotry itself. Ostensibly assaulted by campus protests, **battered by theories of intersectionality**, throttled by bathroom rights, a blameless white working class did the only thing any reasonable polity might: elect an orcish reality television star who insists on taking his intelligence briefings in picture-book form" (p. 345; emphasis added). In *The Color of Law*, Rothstein empirically brings out the fact that "...de jure segregation began with explicit racial zoning as millions of African Americans moved in a great historical migration from South to the North" (2017; cover). This 'color of law' by design, Coats argues, is quintessential 'whiteness'. The following word amply clarifies his thesis:

"All politics are identity politics-except the politics of white people, the politics of the blood heirloom.... The first white president in American history is also the most dangerous president-and made more dangerous still be the fact that those charged with analyzing him cannot name his essential nature, because they too are implicated in it.... [M] oral high ground is neither biological nor divine. In the global context, perhaps, we American are all white. I see the fight against sexism, racism, poverty, and even war finding their union not in synonymity but in their ultimate goal-a world more humane" (pp. 362-367). I have argued earlier about the prescience of poverty of culture refuting the dogmas of culture of poverty theorists. A more humane world calls for demolition of populist superstitions and institutional narcissism.

Rothstein's analytical discussion of public policies is historically validated by facts and evidence. Specific court cases which created zoning, federal subsidies for builders and funding banks with specific guidelines, tells the tales of "the great American suburbanization of the post-World War II". De jure system of segregation persists at the expense of black lives. The destruction of public education is a consequence of this design. Rothstein is right: "Only by relearning American urban history can we finally pave the way for the nation to remedy its unconstitutional past."

Note: Reviews of "We Were Eight Years in Power": An American Tragedy by Ta-Nehisi Coates. New York: One World Publishing, 2017; Hardback, 367: ISBN 978-0-399-59056-6; and *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein. New York: Liveright Publishing; Hardback, 2017, 345: ISBN 978 1631492853.

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