

The Post-Racial Society Recedes Further

by Lorna Salzman (April 2015)

When I was growing up (I was born in 1935), there were very few minorities (none in my public school at all and none that I recall in high school) and very little crime of any kind, or at least not enough serious crime (outside of gangster violence) to make the newspapers (there was no TV). One reason may have been the fact that most people were not well off. My family had no worries when I walked through a long stretch of deserted woods and streams between Douglaston and Little Neck in Queens in order to go to the Little Neck movie by myself. I remember being shocked in 1948, when I graduated from public school (an all-white school) and went on a trip with my parents to see Williamsburg, Virginia, the reconstructed colonial town. We went to the railroad station and I needed to use the bathroom, and was stunned and puzzled to see two doors: White and Colored. I hesitated of course, without understanding the significance of this, but went into the white one (where I removed my new watch, a graduation gift, and then left it behind on the sink when I came out so it was stolen).

I never heard anything, even a hint, of any kind of anti-black attitudes in my family. My mother occasionally made snide remarks about the Catholic Church (not about Catholics) though they did have Italian-American friends. We never went to synagogue. None of our family on either side was religious or observant in any way. We had a Christmas tree at Christmas. I hung out mostly with Catholics, occasionally attended mass with them and Wednesday night church socials called "confraternity", and had no awareness of religion. The only things I knew about Judaism I learned in summer camp, where we were forced to sit through services on Friday night and Saturday morning. Two of my campmates, already atheists at the age of 13, tried to plead illness to get out of the services. I learned lots of Hebrew and Israeli songs by rote and even a few Jewish prayers in Hebrew.

The fifties were the golden age of this country because it was recovering from the war, because there was more economic equality and because you didn't see people flaunting wealth if they had it. Housing, furniture, clothing and food were all affordable though very simple compared to today. No malls, no supermarkets, just local grocers and butchers. In 1952, when I entered college, a tiny handful of girls actually wore cashmere sweaters and cultured pearls. Luxury for me was wearing Yardley's lavender toilet water or using lavender soap. Eating out

was mostly at the Horn and Hardart automat and the slightly up-scale Child's. Chicken Every Sunday was literally true; few could afford it more often.

Now, over sixty years later, we are beset by extreme economic inequality, injustice, crime, social unrest, vehement assertion of one's racial or ethnic identity, with memories less of the horrendous World War II and the holocaust (is this taught in school today?) than of ethnic and religious conflict abroad, drugs, gangs, socially irresponsible behavior and language, a void in what used to be innate civility towards everyone in public, a disdain for following any social protocols or rules that are perceived as "oppressive" or violating one's "safe space", anti-intellectualism, contempt for learning, especially about history, socially crippling Identity Politics, and trunkfuls of psychobabble advice columns and beard-stroking analyses by self-styled experts and consultants on ethics, most of whom learned everything they know about human behavior starting with the 1920s leftist social studies philosophy that dismissed evolution and any talk of genetic influences on human behavior and society. The notion of one's spoken word being trustworthy, as a matter of honor, has completely disappeared. All that remains of that are a few dialogues in Verdi operas, where one's word is taken as truth and honesty without question. No signed contracts with witnesses needed.

Now we have fast-forwarded to the consumer/industrial/globalized age, where mass media, TV and internet blogs are the judge and jury of what is good, desirable and right, with regard not only to behavior but to food, dress, sex, pet training, the workplace and family relationships. Ethics guides for the perplexed abound. People tremble over the prospect of having to make decisions on their own over such trivial things as missing thank-you notes or whether to let unpleasant guests lodge at their home. Add on to this the morphing of humanity's natural humaneness and compassion for those in need into the liberal multicultural, "original sin" mode in which people living today are asked to tolerate obscenities, anti-social behavior and even violence in the name of tolerance and mutual understanding, even to the point of suggesting extant humans are guilty of slavery that was initiated by Africans and Arabs, insisting that we living today owe reparations to blacks for what was done to their ancestors four hundred years ago. All of this has stifled the quite reasonable notion that we should promote equality and social justice for their own sake regardless of past transgressions.

Small wonder that interracial collegiality and pluralistic societies are still more dreams than reality. In many ways similar to the Muslim refusal to assimilate in the secular west, American blacks have consistently preferred to focus on their own history, identity and cultural preferences, most of which are known but rarely shared by white America. Black authors' books are put in separate sections in book stores. Separatist black studies

departments are now the norm in most American universities...which only enhances the belief that black history and culture were and always will be separate, i.e. not authentically American. While many white film and stage directors routinely cast blacks, black TV and movies rarely if ever include whites. Like the Muslim religion, in which all Muslims are united in the "Umma" rather than being distinguished by geographic or ethnic origin or place of residence, black culture is still defined as black, not as American. Some blacks grumble about the "appropriation" of jazz by white musicians, forgetting that all creative artists appropriate the language of what came before them or what is found elsewhere, while simultaneously embellishing it...and passing theirs on to be "appropriated" by the future.

"African" is the modifier that makes the word American acceptable. Black separatism hit home when I read this quote from a Huffington Post article on Kwanzaa by Michael Twitty dated December 26, in which he talks about blacks "owning" their history and culture.

....(we should) celebrate self-determination by owning our history, our narrative and our culture as a people, not a color.... We can celebrate cooperative economics by committing to #IBuyBlack as a tacit acknowledgement that no culture in a multiethnic society will prosper unless it is, in part, financially self-sustaining.

Does this mean that white Protestant Anglo-Saxons "own American history"? Do the British "own" Shakespeare? Do the Germans "own" Beethoven? Should whites "buy white"? Should Jews "buy Jewish"? The last I looked, American history, which includes the Revolution and the civil war, two world wars plus smaller ones, slavery, women's suffrage, unionizing, civil and gay rights and environmentalism, was "owned" by all Americans. And what about slavery? If blacks "own" this part of history, should it be eliminated from books by white authors and from general public dialogue? Does black-owned history include the Africans and Arabs who sold other Africans into slavery to whites? (We rarely hear about them because perhaps that might ease the white man's burden a bit.) And does skin color unite all blacks as a "people," regardless of their economic status, profession or political beliefs? If it was not skin color that defined slavery and then later on discrimination, what did? This concept of "owning" a culture is a secular but distressing fundamentalism, based not on religion but race...even as the concept of race is rejected and discredited as being "socially constructed." It is Identity Politics that in an earlier time led to Hitler's Aryanism and its ugly assertion of a superior "folk culture" that prized a purity of "racial" origin and ended up nearly destroying Western Europe.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a creative artist specifically creating a work depicting black relations, community and society. All works of art should be judged on their

artistic merits, regardless of subject matter. This is as true of Yiddish theater or Irish theater (or of John Adams' opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*) as it is of black. But the time is long over for cultural separatism. The use of the term African-American should be retired, if only because it really only applies to the few blacks with one parent born in Africa (like Pres. Obama). One is reminded of a scene from the film *Days of Darkness* by the great French-Canadian film director Denys Arcand. The miserably depressed antagonist, who works for a huge faceless inflexible bureaucracy, remarks about his black colleague that "*il travaille comme un negre*" (the French word used by them means slave). His supervisor brings him up on charges of racism. But at the hearing, the black worker points to his arm and says: "Mais je suis negre" (But I am black).

Is it too late to lay the ground for the post-racial society...which recent violent events have led some liberals to say it will never happen? No one denies the role of racial prejudice in the recent police killings of blacks. But to jump from these several tragic events to the assumption that the USA is a racist-ridden society is not just over-reaction but plain wrong. No country in the world has the record we do of implementing equality. But this equality should not be a RACIAL equality. It should be pure equality of INDIVIDUALS. There is no such thing as group equality. It is up to minorities to understand and support this concept. Once they do, they will understand that the brutal acts of a few white policemen are no more indicative of white society than black drug dealers are of black society.

Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brower hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on *National Audubon's American Birds* magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of "