

President Donald Trump and Racism

by Michael Curtis



The latest game in Washington, D.C., is answering the question, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is most racist of them all?" Many members of the Democratic Party have contended that the recent tweets of President Donald Trump are "racist comments directed at Members of Congress." Presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke, using different language, has termed Trump a "white supremacist." The President has responded that his tweets were not racist: "I don't have a racist bone in my body," a view agreed to by Dr. Alveda King, niece of the civil rights leader, who remarked, Trump is not a racist. I've had the experience of going head to head with a genuine racist."

The issue is a philosophical as well as a political and partisan one, in the connection with what Erik Erikson termed

an "identity crisis," different ways of looking at oneself. The difficulty in determination of "racism" by President Trump and everyone else is that identity is a subjective perception as well as an observable quality of personal behavior and continuity.

The unconventional British philosopher Michael Oakeshott argued that politics cannot be governed only by general principles, such as human rights; we need to exercise judgement. Certainly this is the case with a term such as "racism." In the not too distant days the dirtiest word in politics, and for some people still is, was the word "fascism." Now it is "racism" that has replaced it in popular usage as the most offensive form of human behavior and political belief. Individuals by either social or political action or perception who hold the belief that one group is superior to others are regarded as people to be sent into the political wilderness, swept by the confused alarms of struggle, enemies not opponents.

The word "racism" of course derives from "race," variously but perhaps best defined as a group of people identified as distinct from other groups because of supposed shared physical or genetic attributes, or who can be classified by identity based on qualities assumed to be essential to the group, such as common history of language and nationality. In addition, modern thought while admitting some physical similarities within groups, regards race as a social construct, based on rules made by society. Biologists who study genetic history have shown that there is little if any significant difference among "races." Whatever definition is accepted, biological essentialist or cultural, race has become associate with theories of racism.

Racism, another term with different meanings, is based on the belief not only that race accounts for differences in character or ability but that a particular group, based on inherited traits, or qualities, and with specific ethical or

cultural exceptions is superior to others. This theory is used by majority groups to justify exercising discrimination and prejudice against others deemed by them to be more inferior, leading to xenophobia, segregation, and hierarchical ranking.

Though the term racism is recent the practice it exemplifies is a historical and universal phenomenon, based on differences in skin color, facial features, hair texture, language, customs, nationality or place of birth. It was the white, blonde Greeks who conquered the Persians, a people of mixed elements, in battles at Marathon 490 B.C. and Salamis 480 B.C. The Aboriginals in Australia, about three per cent of the population, an indigenous people, have long suffered discrimination and racist attitudes, and been the subject of negative stereotypes. During the period of European expansionism, indigenous peoples suffered discrimination and racist attitudes.

This perception of ranking different races in terms of superiority or inferiority is universal, expressed in the writings of European and American thinkers 19th and 20th centuries: in Britain by Houston Chamberlain, in the U.S. by Madison Grant, and in France by Georges Vacher de Lapouge who had a direct influence on Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi racial and eugenic doctrines.

Outlooks of racism grew as the result of various factors including social Darwinism, more research in the field of eugenics, decline in religious belief, colonialism, and increasing immigration from Africa and Asia into Europe. It was also associated in recent years with some controversial intellectual expression. The two most notable examples were by well-known scholars. One was the book *The Bell Curve*, 1994, by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray which held that racial differences existed in intelligence, that human intelligence is very influenced by both inherited and environmental factors, and that this explained the lower scores by African

Americans on U.S. intelligence tests. More direct were statements by James Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA in 2007, that blacks were less intelligent than whites.

In France the surgeon and biologist Alexis Carrel, who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1912 and who worked for the Vichy regime in World War II, advocated in his book *Man, the Unknown*, the elimination of defectives and criminals, inferior stock, by gas chambers. William Shockley who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1956, once said that the major cause of the "American Negroes' intellectual and social deficits is hereditary and racially genetic in origin." Even T. S. Eliot, as well as writing some poems with antisemitic implications, wrote in his book *After Strange Gods*, 1934 that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."

At the extreme, racism can be seen as an important factor in various political decisions: the compromise in the U.S. Constitution with slaves being considered as two-thirds persons for purposes of taxation and representation; and actions such as apartheid in South Africa, European colonization, the Armenian massacre by Turkey, and the Nazi Holocaust.

Racism has been vital in two major episodes in the West; one is the maintenance of slavery, the slave trade, and discrimination against African Americans; the other is overt antisemitism with Jews in many countries seem paradoxically either as inferior subhuman or superhuman. The most extreme manifestation was the Nazi ideology put into practice that Jews are a malady containing germs of destruction of true values, and therefore must be eliminated. They were described in different ways, aggressive by nature, sometimes coming from the desert outside Europe, responsible among other things, for the "Judeo-Bolshevik" and Judeo-Asiatic system, which must be ended. Adolf Hitler on January 30, 1944, the 11th anniversary of

his taking power, said the eternal Jew, this ferment of destruction, must be ended, and if Germany lost the war, the world would celebrate a "second triumphal Purim on the ruins of a devastated Europe."

Racism has persisted though there is broad intellectual agreement that race, though partly based on physical similarities within groups, is not an inherent physical quality founded on blood factors but rather a social construct. It is incorrect to ascribe differences in mind and intelligence to race. Social scientists, such as Ashley Montague, after World War II and the Nazi Holocaust held that a theory of hierarchy of races does not have any scientific foundation. Two factors are important in this view. One is that the concept of "race" is not scientific, and that there are no pure races in the sense of genetically homogeneous populations. The other is caution about making public policy based on a genetic explanation for group differences, especially in traits such as IQ scores.

This point of view was expressed in the UN Convention on racial discrimination of December 21, 1965, enforced on January 4, 1969, that any doctrine of superiority based on racial difference is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination in theory or practice anywhere.

Racism, whether biological or cultural starts with a fundamental mistake that all members of a specific group or "race" have the same characteristics that differentiate it from all others. The true racists believe their group is superior to others. Is Trump guilty of this?

Human beings are born with suspicion of other "tribes." But this does not entail racism or belief that members of different ethnicities should be treated differently. It is disconcerting that the so called U.S. Congressional squad,

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Presley, described themselves as “women of color” instead of by political identity and ideas and policies such as their support of BDS against Israel. To criticize them then becomes a question, not of differences of political views, but of being charged with racism.

Unquestionably, President Trump has used tough, often overheated language, especially in tweeting about Rep. Omar. As a result, critics have labelled him a racist. They should equally consider the rhetoric of Omar, a Muslim born in Somalia, who has proclaimed that Israel should not be allowed to exist as a Jewish state, that it is not a democracy, and is akin to Iran and to apartheid South Africa. By arguing that AIPAC has been and is buying influence in Congress, she is implicitly alluding to the historic antisemitic trope that Jews are running a world conspiracy. She added, “It’s all about the Benjamins, baby.” Those concerned with racism might consider her utterance. “Israel has hypnotized the world. May Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel.”