MARTIN LUTHER KING’S DREAM, OBAMA AND POST RACIAL SOCIETY—CAN WE YET HOPE FOR A NEW NARRATIVE?

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The recent election of Barrack Obama is nothing short of remarkable. Who, just 1 year ago, would have predicted such a significant change in the American political landscape? Historical in its implications, this election brings to mind the prophetic dream of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963. In this dream, so long rehearsed, we longed for a time when a person could be “judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin”. In this dream, we longed for a time when “justice would roll down like a mighty river”. In this dream we all hoped for a time when we would “hue out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope”. Martin Luther King’s August 28, 1963 speech “I have a Dream” galvanized the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans—black and white, Jew and gentile, Christian and atheists. These words have become the bedrock of human rights throughout the world—I wonder how these words resonate in today’s world?

In many ways, King attempted to challenge the dominant racial narrative by offering a counter hegemonic one. In so doing, he articulated a narrative in which character rather than race, hope rather than despair, and vision rather than pathology would guide us into a post-racial society. This challenge yet remains unfulfilled, as we watch with awe as the world continues to change around us.

The election of Barrack Obama represents that hope in the dawn of a new day, in a new era where all will be able to maximize their human potential without fear of discrimination based upon race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or handicap. As missiles continue to bombard the Gaza strip, as riots have erupted in Oakland, as the poor continue to be over-represented in prisons and under-represented in our college class rooms, as more covert forms of racism are identified—the question we must address today is just how far we have come in realizing this dream.
First of all, let me be clear, I supported, worked toward, and voted for Barrack Obama in the recent presidential election. Secondly, I am neither bitter nor blind, I am neither fatalistic nor overly optimistic, and I am neither retrograde or revisionist. I am both observant and mindful of history. With these caveats, I welcomed and celebrated the election of Obama and am deeply appreciative of this historical moment. I find it more than coincidental that no sooner had the dust settled from the electoral screens and even before the actual inauguration—a strange and not so subtle shift can be seen in America’s racial terrain. This shift—what some allude to as a new racial narrative—has already assumed tsunamic proportions—seems destined to distort, transform, or obfuscate the racial landscape. The purpose of this paper will be to explore the contours of this racial narrative, particularly in light of the recent election of Barrack Obama. By way of introduction we have had several racial narratives throughout our history—1) race narratives associated with European Imperialism, 2) race narratives and genetics, 3) race narratives and social science and 4) counter hegemonic racial narratives. In the sections that follow, owing to both time and space limitations, we shall briefly sketch out these narratives. With these as a foundation, we will conclude by outlining the themes and the realities associated with what some are calling a post-racial narrative.

Race Narratives and European Imperialism

One of the marveylous thynges that god useth in the composition of man, is colourew: which doubtlesse can not bee consydered withowte great admiration in beholding one to be white and an other blacke, beinge coloures utterlye contrary. Sum lykewyse to be yelowe whiche is betwene blacke and white: and other of other coloures as it were of dyvers livers.

(Francisco Lopez de Gomara—1555, cited by Jordan, 1968)

Race has been problematic for America since its discovery by Europeans. In 1492, Columbus’s voyage of discovery would affect cultures and peoples throughout the world. This period of discovery was coupled with acts of exploitation, to include expropriation of land and persons, genocide and extermination, subjugation and racism—for

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1 This section draws heavily upon Thomas Gossett (1975).