



Daily Commentary

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## Motive and Opportunity: Power, Prejudice, and the Uniqueness of White Racism

By Tim Wise

“Why don’t you ever talk about *black racism*?” Of all the comments I receive in the course of my work, this is the most common. Conservative white folks, tired of hearing about the vagaries of institutional racist inequity—which tends to elevate us relative to people of color—offer this rejoinder in what they consider the ultimate response to antiracist commentary. Forgetting for a moment their favorite mantra for the black and brown (namely, how they need to stop focusing on whites and take “personal responsibility” for their lives), these dearest of my pale-skinned brethren turn with a quickness to focusing on the “other,” personal responsibility be damned. Oh well, consistency was never our strong point.

For many of my colleagues in the civil rights and antiracist community, the answer to the above-mentioned challenge is a no-brainer. Perhaps you’ve heard it before: the argument that only whites can be racist, because racism is a power relationship, and only whites have institutional power—at least in the United States.

Frankly, I’ve never quite bought into this notion, at least not in the strictest sense of the term. For while it is true that racism is a systemic framework of oppression and privilege, to which only the dominant group has access, it is also, as an “ism,” an attitudinal mindset of racial supremacy to which anyone can adhere. Yet, having said that, I do think the power aspect of racism should be most prominent in discussions of the subject, and that the white racism that has the backing of said power should be the principal area of antiracist concern.

But even that simple notion proves too much for some. The idea that white racism should be seen as different from the “racism” of people of color is one many find hard to defend. After all, they say, prejudice is prejudice, and should be equally condemned.

Having long tried to explain with the help of quantitative data why white racism is different, more problematic, and ultimately *the* racism issue, I was much relieved a few months ago, when a news event in my home town developed that made clear—far better than I had been able to do—why we must give priority to the racism of the pale and privileged, over and above the possible racism of those of color.

You probably didn’t hear about it on the news, as it was considered barely noteworthy, even in the town where it happened. I refer to the recent decision by a surgeon at Nashville’s St. Thomas Hospital to abide by the bizarre wishes of a patient’s husband: namely that no black man be allowed to assist in her heart surgery; one without which she would have died. Previous doctors having refused to honor the racist request—made because the husband didn’t want a black man to see his wife naked—the man continued searching until he found someone to accede to his wishes.

Though the doctor has announced his regret for collaborating with the exclusion of a black doctor from the O.R., the lead surgeon touched off a firestorm of controversy when word got out of his decision.

In the local media, the story was framed in one of two ways: either as proof of how some are still so racist they would put their own loved ones at risk to satisfy their bigotry; or alternately as a classic catch-22 faced by the doctor. After all, if he refused, the husband might—as he had previously—head out the door in search of a doctor who would cooperate, all to the detriment of his ailing spouse. Thus, some said, the surgeon’s choice was ultimately a compassionate act, intended to protect the life of the patient: a woman who apparently did not share her husband’s prejudices, but seemed intimidated by his volatility on the subject.

Putting aside the ethicality of the doctor’s decision, this incident illustrates a number of important points. Of course there are still demented bigots like the husband in this story, but for most of us that is hardly news. And yes, the doctor faced a professional dilemma, though one could imagine a scenario in which the physician, concerned for the woman’s life, would tell the racist husband that he would go along with the request, and then proceed to use whomever was available. After all, the husband wasn’t going to be in the O.R., and he was making an illegal request anyway. So lie to the husband, save the woman’s life, and uphold professional ethics by refusing to collaborate with discrimination as well: it’s a choice the doctor could have made, and given a chance to do it all again probably *would* have made. But it too is not the point, so far as I’m concerned.

So what exactly is the point? Well, I would say there are a few worthy of consideration:

First, the incident indicates that racism on the part of whites, even when fairly disempowered in economic terms (and this family was low-to-moderate income at best), can often carry enough weight to be enforceable, by institutions and powerful individuals. Though the doctor was appalled at the request made of him, as he no doubt would have been had it come from a black man asking to keep whites out of the O.R., the fact remains that his ultimate acceptance of the demand stands in contrast to what he likely would have done had the man been black, seeking to keep white folks like himself from being involved in the procedure. No black person, no matter how bigoted or financially powerful could have made such an absurd demand and expected to have his or her wishes carried out. Whites are not likely to ever go along with requests to limit our own freedoms and opportunities.

Just as we can not logically imagine the black-bashes-white equivalent of *The Bell Curve* being published, being reviewed respectfully by mainstream media sources, or becoming a best-seller (since the majority won't buy a book claiming they are genetic defectives), it is hard, if not impossible to imagine people of color demanding the exclusion of whites from any setting, and actually getting their wishes fulfilled. Such is the nature of potent racism, versus its impotent counterpart, and such is the difference between the racism of the majority, and that of everyone else.

Secondly, and more importantly, is what this incident says about the importance of institutional racism and inequity in making individual racism meaningful and harmful in real world terms. Simply put, the doctor in this case went along with the demand to exclude blacks from the operating room because he could. Given the history of discrimination in access to the medical profession, including medical schools, and the barriers to professional practice faced by too many people of color, there exists today a limited number of such professionals from which to draw. As such, excluding them from a particular hospital or procedure is hardly a huge burden for the institution in question.

Now imagine what would happen if the situation were reversed, and a racist black man had demanded the exclusion of whites from the O.R. Even if there were a doctor willing to agree to such conditions, it would be virtually impossible for him or her to follow through, because whites—having received the opportunities needed to enter the medical profession in large numbers—are hard to work around. “No whites” policies would result in a lot of empty operating rooms, whereas “No blacks” policies require only a small administrative headache at best, so few and far between are such professionals in the first place.

In other words, institutional racism is akin to the gasoline, allowing the otherwise stationary combustion

engine of individual racism to function: the former gives the latter life, and the ability to impact others in a meaningful and detrimental way. Without the power to enforce one's racism, or expect it to be enforced or enforceable by others, that racism is largely sterile.

Much the same would be true in other realms of life, beyond medical and hospital settings. Blacks who wish to avoid whites in their neighborhoods will typically find themselves limited to the poorest, most crowded areas of town—places whites long ago abandoned—since finding Caucasian-free zones in more prosperous suburbs can be a tough task. Whites can more or less live wherever we wish. If we are not to be found in a particular census tract you can bet it's because we've chosen to be absent, or merely can't afford it because of the vagaries of the class system. Such cannot be said for why blacks are often absent from more affluent areas, however. Money or no money, good credit or bad, millions face discriminatory barriers in residential opportunity every year.

Once again, even if people of color despise whites and seek to avoid us, their ability to do so will be directly constrained by the larger opportunity structure that has skewed power and resources in our direction. Whites seeking to avoid blacks and Latinos on the other hand, can do so readily, with the help of mortgage discrimination, redlining, zoning laws and so-called “market forces” pricing many blacks out of the better housing markets (even though we only got into those markets because of government subsidies and preferences, both private and public).

It reminds me of something a New Orleans-area skinhead said about ten years ago to a reporter, when trying to explain why black racism against whites was the “real problem” that needed attention. He noted that “thanks to black racism,” whites wouldn't feel safe, standing on a street corner in the inner-city for six hours at a time, so certain would they be to become the victims of violent crime.

And perhaps he was right. Though black-on-white violence is fairly rare (only 0.45% of the white population will be victimized violently by a black person this year), black racism against whites, to the extent we can call it that, probably does limit the ability of whites to stand around in certain black neighborhoods for six hours at a time. But seeing as how there aren't a whole bunch of us fighting for that particular privilege, its absence hardly indicates a general state of disadvantage suffered by us white folks. That such an example of disadvantage was the best this “angry white man” could come up with, is all the proof one should need that indeed, white racism—though perhaps not the only kind out there—is certainly of a different nature, both quantitatively and qualitatively than that of others. And ultimately, it is the kind of racism that should preoccupy persons concerned with slaying the beast for good.