

The Prison-House of Color

Aragorn!

2004

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“The history of thought is the history of its models”

— Fredric Jameson

The image that the term “a person of color” brings to mind speaks to the bias of the interpreter. White racists see the person of color as the target of their bias, the center of their mythology, and the point that they must counter. The liberal left sees the person of color as the racialized product of decades of government works, as the producer of quality popular culture, as statistics, and as the noble worker of the land. The radical left see the person of color as the revolutionary subject that must be made aware of their historic task. But what does the ‘person of color’ see themselves as? Are we the angry objects of a thousand protest pictures or do we embody the cruelty of immigration and domestic policy? Are we an amalgam of all of these perspectives or are we an identity yet-to-be-determined? Finally, and above all else, are we defined by the color of our skin?

Let us address the last point first. Is the racist reality of our society a *visual* reality or is it a social, economic, and political reality? Is race a real biological, inherent, and melanin related phenomena or is it a cultural fact? The term ‘Person of Color’ answers both of these questions along biological lines. A person of color then is an object of politics but a subject of science. This results in a cottage industry of scientific research about diabetes, obesity, and other economic realities in the service of creating public policy about housing, school breakfast programs and Medicare. The term, then, prioritizes an external and perceived (color, biology, public policy) definition over a cultural or political one.

As a counter-point, white people have an entirely political understanding of their own identity. They easily accept that Italians and Irish people were not white and became white as they accepted certain conventions, mores, and economic realities. ‘White’ has been an increasingly economicized identity as more and more ‘people of color’ (or who were of color) have been accepted into positions of power. Racism by the capitalist white has become as much a struggle against the perception of there being any other economic reality possible as against people of color as outsiders to our economic reality. The fight against Affirmative Action has been as much about resisting the role of the State to positively affect people’s lives (e.g. a fight against Socialism) as it has been about depriving people of color of opportunity. That is why there has been comparatively little outcry at the replacement of Affirmative Action by scholarships, favoritism, and student narratives. The real struggle was as political as it was racial.

In Charles W. Mills important essay “But What Are You Really?” The Metaphysics of Race’ this question is addressed from an angle. Instead of challenging terminology, Charles concerns himself with building a position of racial constructivism where both the reality and unreality of race can be understood. This unfolds into a description of a series of ‘Racial Transgressives’ with a specific set of characteristics to be evaluated; Bodily Appearance, Ancestry, Self-Awareness of Ancestry, Public Awareness of Ancestry, Culture, Experience, and Subjective Identification. Detailing Mills’s ‘Transgressives’ is beyond the scope of this essay, but by conceiving of a new way to quantify the experience of race, Mills goes a long way toward highlighting what is incomplete about our understanding.

Sociology may provide us final insights as to why the term ‘people of color’ continues to have purchase. To quote Randall Collins “Social order is seen as being founded on organized coercion. There is an ideological realm of belief (religion, law), and an underlying world of struggles over

power; ideas and morals are not prior to interaction but are socially created, and serve the interests of parties to the conflict.” While the term ‘people of color’ may itself be an inadequate self-description of real living people (and their experiences) it is a socially created term that has come into vogue in a political atmosphere. It has largely replaced the term ‘minority’ to convey a more ‘politically correct’ image of a portion of the population that, to the extent that it has had one political agenda, has become politically ineffective. While spectacular racism continues to grab headlines, the transformation of the ‘welfare’ state towards a ‘pay to play’ state falls further and further in the page count of our local papers. Which begs the question, what population has been best served by the linguistic transformation of minorities into people of color? Has that transformation been a cause or a symptom of the failure of the political changes of the seventies to have staying power?

As a racial transgressive whose experience is not reflected in the amount of melanin in my skin these issues have continued to trouble and fascinate me. I have been particularly engaged with the way that the left deals with the issue of identity for its own gain and in our name. I strongly distrust calls for the universality of our experience and then our response. Every call for ‘people of color’s’ action against this or that public policy or state-crafted indignity sounds like another phrasing of the same old failed politics of the state. I do not hear this language used to actually demonstrate a diversity of approaches to common problems, but how common problems should be addressed by a diversity of people. The problems of ‘my people’ never make it through this powerful message.

Which brings me to the assertion that the term people of color, or person of color, is inadequate in its purpose to unify me with other people. It is inadequate because of its determinism. It continues to be a political assertion of unity-of-purpose without regard to the political consequences of what identity-as-color entail. It fails because it generalizes the wrong aspect of the ‘minority’ experience. If I am going to join under any flag it will have to embrace the multitude of ways that people have been transformed into aberrations and outsiders, and not just the biological ones.

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“Being at one is god-like and good, but human, too human, the mania Which insists there is only the One, one country, one truth and one way.”

— Friedrich Hölderlin, 1799

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