

America's Apartheid Is Not Black and White

"See, in America we have this thing about 'people of color.' POC. I think you're one." That was me explaining all things American to a visitor. He was actually from Spain, so he was Spanish, not Hispanic. We were trying to figure out whether he was a POC.

This was not some sort of intellectual Sudoku to pass the time; this POC idea underpins the core strategy of the Democratic Party. The U.S. is poised to become a non-majority nation ("minority white") within [25 years](#), meaning about half of the country will be POC. The Democratic Party believes these POC will vote for their candidates, while the Republican Party withers away cherry picking votes from the dwindling basket of deplorable whites.

My Spanish friend considered himself European. "So I guess I am white, yes?" he offered. His skin was clearly a few shades darker than mine, though he pointed out that was only because my relatives came from the cold part of Europe and he came from the sunny part. But he spoke Spanish. At least in America, my new friend qualified as a POC.

His Seamless order arrived. He said *gracias* to the delivery guy and handed over a one dollar tip. "What do I have in common with him?" the Spaniard asked, "except the rudimentary ability to speak the same language, same as [560 million](#) others?" I rolled my eyes at the delivery guy, a universal gesture of "people don't tip, right?" solidarity.

I noted to my friend as I pulled into traffic, heading back to his hotel, that the Democrats in 2020 would likely have at least a POC vice presidential candidate, one who "looked like him." But the whole POC thing did not sit well. Why, he asked,

do Americans want leaders who physically look like them? “Didn’t it used to be wrong to judge people by the color of their skin?” he said. “Why is it okay to [choose](#) someone because they’re black but racist to choose someone because they aren’t?” I noted that in 2019, a candidate named Richard who graduated from Columbia needed to go around saying “call me Beto” to lighten his whiteness.

Things really got confusing when I explained that a newly arrived Chinese migrant and a 70-year-old Mexican American CEO and people from Trinidad, Ghana, and the Bronx with three different levels of education were all seen as having something inherently in common. And they all had something inherently *not* in common with everyone tainted by various shades of pink.

I mentioned reparations. Until slavery was ended in the United States, human beings were legally considered capital, just like owning stocks and bonds today. But the Spaniard knew enough about history to wonder what reparations would be offered to the thousands of Chinese treated as animals to build the railroads or the 8,000 Irish who died digging the [New Basin Canal](#) or the whole families of Jews living on the Lower East Side of New York who were forced to employ their children to make clothing for uptown “white” stores. Later in the same century, wages were “voluntarily” cut to the bone at factories in Ohio to save jobs that disappeared anyway after the owners had wrung out the last profits.

The more we talked, the more it all seemed to be about labor, low paid or never paid (economically, they exist on a spectrum), rather than the C of the P doing the work. Whatever racial inequality exists today, that doesn’t change the fact that for 90 percent of us, race isn’t a major issue. It was like we were missing the thing behind the thing. Or someone was trying to hide it.

“I think,” my friend said, “Americans spend so much time

worried about race they miss what we Europeans understand in our bones. It is class which divide societies. Look at Britain, once nearly 100 percent white, yet a person had to say just a few words before you knew who worked for who by the accent. Or India, where everyone is a POC as you Americans would say, and where they created a caste system that survived the departure of the white people.”

It does seem silly to think a Caucasian on food stamps in West Virginia has more in common with a Caucasian in Los Angeles producing multimillion-dollar movies than a black person on food stamps in, say, West Virginia again. “No, your Democrats are drawing the lines the wrong way,” said the Spaniard. “It is about money, not melanin.” We had to look up the last word from the Spanish *melanina*.

After driving for a while, we arrived at The Plaza. My Spanish friend paid me for the ride through the Uber app, but with a generous cash tip. Privilege, I guess. I pocketed the \$10.**

As I set off to my other job, the idea of money as a dividing line started to make more sense and the idea of POC started to make less. Color masks the lines that really matter, and those lines are all colored green.

[Since 1980](#), the incomes of the very rich (the 1 percent) have grown faster than the economy, about a 400 percent cumulative increase. The upper middle class (the 9.9 percent) kept pace with the economy. The other 90 percent fell behind. Race? You can be confident that the 1 percent are mostly white; likely the 9.9 percent, too. But the other 90 percent of America is every color. Whether your housing is subsidized via a mortgage tax deduction or Section 8, you’re still depending on the people in charge to allow you a place to live.

The birth lottery determines which of those three bands we’ll sink or swim together in, because there is precious little mobility. In that bottom band, [81 percent](#) face flat or falling

net worths ([40 percent](#) of Americans make below [\\$15](#) an hour) and so aren't going anywhere. Education, once a vehicle, is now mostly a tool for the [preservation](#) of current statuses across generations, to the point that it's worth paying bribes for. Class is sticky.

Money, not so much. Since the 9.9 percent have the most (except for the super wealthy at least), they have the most to lose. At their [peak](#) in the mid-1980s, the managers and technicians in this group held 35 percent of the nation's wealth. Three decades later, that fell 12 percent, [exactly](#) as much as the wealth of the 1 percent rose. A significant redistribution of wealth—upwards—took place following the 2008 market collapse, as bailouts, shorts, repossessions, and new laws helped the top end of the economy at cost to the bottom. What some label hardships are to others business opportunities.

The people at the top are throwing nails off the back of the truck to make sure no one else can catch up with them. There is a strong zero sum element to all this. The goal is to eliminate the [competition](#). They'll have it all when society is down to two classes, the 1 percent and the 99 percent, and at that point we'll all be effectively the same color. The CEO of JP Morgan [called](#) it a bifurcated economy. Historians will recognize it as feudalism.

You'd think someone would sound a global climate change-level alarm about all this. Instead we divide people into [tribes](#) and make them afraid of each other by forcing competition for limited resources like health care. [Identity politics](#) sharpens the lines, recognizing increasingly smaller separations, like adding letters to LGBTQQIAAP.

Failed Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, herself with presidential ambitions, is an example of the loud voices demanding [more division](#). Contrast that with early model Barack Obama at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, who pleaded,

“There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”

The divisions can always be jacked up. “My opponent is a white nationalist!” and so he doesn’t just think you’re lazy, he wants to kill you. Convince average Americans to vote against their own interests by manipulating them into opposing any program that might benefit black and brown equally or more than themselves. Keep the groups fighting left and right and they’ll never notice the real discrimination is up and down, even as massive economic forces consume all equally. Consumption becomes literal as Americans die from alcohol, drugs, and suicide in record [numbers](#).

Meanwhile, no one has caught on to the fact that identity politics is a marketing tool for votes, fruit flavored vape to bring in the kiddies. Keep that in mind as you listen to the opening cries of the 2020 election. Listen for what’s missing in the speeches about inequality and injustice. Whichever candidate admits that we’ve created an apartheid of dollars for all deserves your support.

***The author doesn’t really drive for Uber but his conversation with the Spaniard was real.*

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