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Session Notes

The Dilemma of Race: Why We Should Care Less about Discrimination and More about Inequality

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I traveled to witness the inauguration of Barack Obama. There I saw someone wearing a T-shirt featuring Martin Luther King Jr. as “The dream” and Obama as “the reality,” which made me think about where we are and where we’ve been.

Have we finally realized the dream? Obama’s election was not possible four or six years ago—indeed, Obama should not have believed he could have won. People told him he couldn’t win because of many reasons, including historical ones.

Obama’s election was remarkable. Racism still exists, but racism did not win the election. Many people, including scholars, still refuse to believe it could occur.

My family was forced to move north because my uncle challenged the racial hierarchy by simply wearing a new suit. My grandfather couldn’t attend his wife’s funeral because he was black and she was white. She could be buried only in the white cemetery while my grandfather watched from the street.

I decided to campaign for Obama back in my community of Cleveland. The campaign office I worked in was full of energy; we were getting ready to put Ohio on the right side of history. The campaign was extremely organized and effective in talking to people more than once.

When the work in my community was finished, I went to work in the next city, where I was told not to go as a child. This city was white, working-class, and people of color could not enter.

The residents belonged to the opposing party, but I was surprised to find that they were nice. They made some interesting remarks about Obama. One woman whispered in my ear, “Don’t tell my neighbors, but I am going to vote for Obama.” That was when I knew Obama was going to win. That woman knew Obama was going to help her working class community.

Racism no longer controlled that society, though the dream was still far from realized. I wondered how far we had left to go.

I went to another town, one that had not yet been mobilized. There the Obama office was desolate, and materials were not distributed. This was a town where segregation and inequality still persisted. People swore that no one had visited their homes. There were people who wanted to vote but couldn’t get to the polls.

I realized that segregation and inequality in Cleveland and other big cities is manifested by housing patterns. Segregation and inequality was the barrier to Martin Luther King’s dream. Segregation could persist and be maintained.

We don’t think of race as a matter of inequality. In my book *African American Intimacy: The Racial Gap in Marriage*, I include a number of statistics:

- African Americans are the least likely of all demographic groups to be married and the most likely to be divorced.
- Fewer African Americans stay married and they spend less time married.
- Ten percent of white women are projected to remain unmarried.
- Thirty percent of African American women are projected to remain unmarried.
- This marriage gap exists in every class.
- African Americans are the most segregated group.
- Asian Americans are more likely to intermarry; African Americans less likely.

The decline of marriage is due to the underclass status of African Americans. It can be sustained only as a consequence of segregation. The pool of African American men who can marry is smaller because of incarceration and drug wars.

The decline of marriage undermines the quality of the family. A couple is more likely to nurture a child if they are married.

The marriage gap in the African American community is a measure of how far we have left to go in realizing the dream. There was vivid imagery of Martin Luther King all over Washington during the inauguration. King was seen as the image of the realization of the brotherhood.

But King, when he spoke at Stanford in April 1967, talked about poverty rather than brotherhood. He talked about rich and poor and the racial divide. Conversations about race were conversations about class. I worry that we are forgetting that King fought for equality.

So what do we do now? We narrow the socioeconomic disparities between races. And we undo the economic disparities that continue to make race matter.