

Chapter 3: Racism After the Civil Rights Movement

Summary:

DiAngelo opens the chapter up discussing how forms of oppression are deeply rooted, can adapt to challenges, and are not easily defeated just with the passage of laws or other milestone moments. Racism is no exception. Even though nobody claims to be a racist, or the fact that Barack Obama was elected president, racism still exists.

The first example of racism's modern adaptation is color-blind racism. The general premise of color-blind racism is "if we pretend not to notice race, then there can be no racism" (41). The origin of this concept came from the civil rights movement of the 60's. Prior to the movement white people were more open and vocal about their racial prejudices and society treated Black Americans with open hostility, but violence toward Black Americans never had been televised for a national audience. After those images surfaced, nobody wanted to be associated with racial violence and those who commit it. So when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in '63, people latched onto a specific line: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." From this line, DiAngelo states, color blindness was "promoted as the remedy for racism, with white people insisting that they didn't see race or, if they did, that it had no meaning to them" (41).

Though the intention of not seeing color may come from a well-meaning place, the color-blind approach whites take to society doesn't take into account the perspective of a person of color. DiAngelo shares a story of her co-trainer, a Black man, addressing a white participant at a racial bias workshop who said she did not see color. The man asks how she will see racism if she does not see color. In order to understand and challenge racism, she needed to acknowledge he was Black and she was white. By denying his race she was also denying the reality of his world. Thus by being color-blind she refuses to see the reality he and other people of color go through in our society, and she stays within an unchallenged world view. The implication DiAngelo makes from this is that by staying in an unchallenged state of mind where you don't consider the perspective of a person of color it will be so much harder for you to examine the unconscious racial biases (aka implicit bias) you carry. That, and you are denying the reality that people of color face in America.

Which now brings us to the second modern adaptation of racism: aversive racism. This is racism that allows people to maintain a positive self-image of themselves, like statements such as "I have a (lot of) friend(s) of color!" or "I judge people by their character, not skin color" (43). It also manifests itself as racially coded language, like when people use the descriptors of

“urban,” “diverse,” “underprivileged,” or the trope of good versus bad neighborhoods and schools. It also includes explaining away racism and inequality to something other than racism, such as “people of color don’t apply to work here, so that’s why our diversity isn’t robust” (43-44).

Basically, aversive racism happens when there is “deep racial disdain that surfaces in daily discourse but not being able to admit it because the disdain conflicts with our self-image and professed beliefs” (45). DiAngelo states these conversations ultimately work to keep white people in a superior position while treating people of color as inferior. She shares one common example to show how this works: when you move to a new area and white people will say to stay away from specific neighborhoods while not openly saying why to stay away from those neighborhoods.

The last example of racism’s modern adaptation is cultural racism: the overabundance of messages transmitted in social settings that communicate it’s better to be white than a person of color. Most of this occurs in backstage (all-white company) and can include racially charged jokes or stories that reinforce negative stereotypes. These backstage episodes contain roles for everyone present: a protagonist who initiates the racist act, a cheerleader who encourages it with laughter or agreement, silent spectators, and a rare dissenter who objects. The dissenter then gets hit with peer pressure about how it’s just a joke and to lighten up. In contrast, there are front-stage settings where company is mixed race. Even in these settings white people will display a range of racially conscious behaviors such as acting overly nice, avoiding contact altogether by crossing a street or avoiding a bar/restaurant, mimicking Black language and mannerisms, code words, and even some occasional violence. DiAngelo emphasizes how this form of racism is dangerous because it promotes people to be silent as there are social penalties for speaking out against racism within our friend circles.

Analysis and Commentary:

More commentary than analysis in this one, let’s see how it goes...

I imagine everyone reading this under the age of 50 (at least!) is so familiar with the phrase “I don’t see color” that we wear it like a badge of honor. Like “look at me, I don’t see color! I’m so not racist!” and then we get to go about our day knowing we’re so clean and fresh. I think a lot of us wanted it to be that easy because then the problems of our society would be in the past and the weight of that legacy wouldn’t be on our shoulders.

But then Donald Trump got elected, and it became very clear that this color-blind perspective was a joke because clearly there were people who see color and don't like it.

However, you can also see color and use it to understand that our society does not treat everyone equal. For example, reading/hearing the accounts and testimony of people of color who have lived and survived oppression in our society and also believing them too. If we continue walking around saying we don't see color we're ignoring that there are different realities for people of color. The ability to not see color is a privileged one because we're choosing not to see the barriers and violence committed against people of color. The ability to be color blind is privileged because people of color are not able to walk around this country as if their race didn't matter.

As for aversive racism, this is everywhere, and that's bad because we've heard it so much in our lives from childhood to present that it probably doesn't even consciously register anymore whenever you hear it. Worse, it's been so common that you've likely participated in it plenty of times without thinking much of it. For me it definitely has come up in conversations about neighborhoods, like we're so caught up in some notion of safety when it really boils down to cultural ignorance built on stereotypes and lore so in the process we perpetuate racist ideas.

When I think of examples of aversive racism from my past I feel that a lot of it has overlapped with cultural racism. While we don't announce our racial prejudices in our social circles, we do talk in racially coded language that effectively reveals our prejudices just the same. I look back at the roles I've held in these situations (protagonist, cheerleader, bystander, and probably not even objector) and feel disgusted about my participation in this. It makes me wonder if I had done this to feel accepted into a group, to be some kind of center of attention. And in these moments how conscious was I really? Like, did I feel any kind of internal conflict, or did I just chalk it up to it just being a joke not knowing that jokes create the prejudices we have.

This chapter is one of those chapters that doesn't ask you to reflect as it doesn't provide good reflection questions like the previous chapter did (echoing Jackson's argument about how White Fragility doesn't really require white folks to do deeper work). It's important to be self-reflective in order to understand our role in keeping racism alive. It's also important to reflect because growth will never come without reflection. There is a level of guilt, shame, and disgust I feel toward myself, yet from reflection I know that is not who I am now. And it's with that conviction I must not let these forms of racism slide when I see it in others—there's a duty to speaking up, even if there's social penalties against yourself, or you risk making the other person upset. Also from reflection I can understand I was product of a racist society, so that takes some of the heaviness off my shoulders, but it does not absolve me either. What we do in

the future will define us, so be sure to keep your eyes and ears open to do your part in ending the cycle. Don't let the opportunity pass you by.