

To Be Assimilated or To Fight Against?--Reflections on the Racial Problem of the United States

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Abstract: racial problem has always been a central and complex issue in the United States. It is so pervasive that everyone is participant of it to some extent, even including the non-whites, as is pointed out in the book *White by Law--The legal Construction of Race*. On the other hand, racial discrimination has been fought against ever since its existence. The rebel forces not only include the minorities but also the white people. Will America be a more liberal or conservative society? This is really a controversial issue.

Key word: racism, pervasive, fight against

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I. INTRODUCTION

White by Law--The legal Construction of Race written by Ian Haney Lopez examines a series of cases from the first part of this century in which state and federal courts sought to determine, and thereby partially defined, who is white enough to naturalize as a citizen. From the prerequisite cases listed and analyzed by the author, an easy conclusion can be drawn that law constructs race. Apart from that, the author devotes a separate chapter to answer how law does so. In chapter five of this book, the author summarizes the answer to this question as: law is both a system of behavioral control and an ideology; and legal actors are in some senses both conscious and unwitting participants in the legal construction of race; even non-whites are complicitous in their own oppression.

What strikes me most in this book is the involvement of nonwhites in the legal construction of race in the United States. The non-whites even despise their own culture and identity. The legal system was actually made together by the whites and nonwhites and racial oppression in the country become a legitimate and natural thing. At this point, it suggests that racism is really pervasive in the United States and it is pathetic for the non-Whites to be involved in the construction.

II. THE REBELLION OF NON-WHITES AGAINST RACISM

To the extent that racism is part of America's shared culture which is pervasive to the whole society, the author holds that everyone is a racist and may attach negative feeling to non-whites, including the non-whites themselves. But on further thinking, it is clear that non-whites are not always passively acquiescent to racism and even complicitous to the construction of racism in American history. Ever since the existence of racism in the United States, there is anti-racism movements by the minorities, with the non-whites as the major part. One example and paradox I want to cite here is the Asian Americans in the 1960s. In the period, with the rise of civil rights movement, Asian American movement arose to protest anti-Asian racism. Asian Americans even forged a solidarity under the influence and with help of African Americans. By performing blackness, some Asian Americans activists advocated and emphasized power and self-determination over assimilation. They viewed racial oppression as a systemic, rather than aberrant, feature of American society.² Ironically, the Asian Americans' movement towards anti-assimilation happened at a time when assimilation became possible in the backdrop of cold war. From the beginning of large-scale migrations to the United States in the mid-1800s to the beginning of World War II, they faced legal barriers to assimilation and they are perceived as yellow perils and

¹Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law--The Legal Construction of Race*, New York University Press, 2006, pXXI

²Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Los Angeles, 1934-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 58-85.

perpetual aliens. However, in the the cold war era, considering that racism stained the image of American democracy, the U.S. officials hoped to win “the hearts and minds” of people around the world and turned Chinese Americans as culture diplomats for propaganda.³ The U.S. response to cold war imperatives opened the possibility for assimilation and Asian Americans came to be known as model minorities.⁴ However, at the moment when assimilation seemed possible for the first time for Asian Americans, some left-wing Chinese Americans calling themselves Red Guard Party adopted antipathy toward assimilation by learning from African Americans’ Black Panther Party. The Red Guard Party sought to build and strengthen Chinatown’s community institutions rather than to insert Chinese Americans into mainstream programs.⁵ Their purpose was to build Asian American power and culture autonomous of white approval rather than being assimilated to the white society.

III. THE INVOLVEMENT OF WHITES AGAINST RACISM

Those Asian Americans showed that non-Whites may stand against assimilation. On the other hand, Whites may consciously organizing white people stand against racism. On the eve of the 2008 presidential election, a volunteer grassroots organization of self-described white anti-racists convened a multi-racial day of dialogue in Los Angeles to prepare to counter individual and institutional white supremacy regardless of the outcome of the election then.⁶ This Ballot Box and Beyond event received much media coverage and is the culmination of five years work by the Alliance of White Anti-Racist Everywhere-Los Angeles(AWARE-LA) to mobilize white people to work toward the abolition of the white supremacist system.⁷ For a long time, Whites are unconscious of identity and it is generally agreed that there is no such a thing as a white anti-racist. They are generally considered the active constructors of racism in the United States. However small, the Ballot Box and Beyond event interrupted a media that framed white people as either the impediment to or the source of racial justice in the United States. Though the whiteness studies started just from the 1990s, Ian Haney Lopez considers a self-destructive White race-consciousness key to racial justice.⁸

IV. CONCLUSION

Racism is really a complex and deep-rooted issue in the United States. Professor Zi Zhongyun from Chinese Social Science Academy in her book *Ten Lectures on the United States* summarized the history of the United States as correcting the past mistakes and injustice and moves towards a more democratic and just society. But looking at the American society today, it is easy to see that nativism is on the rise, especially after the election of Donald Trump. Which direction will America move towards? With competing forces wrestling and fighting against each other, to use Bob Dylan’s famous lyric, perhaps “the answer is blow in thwind.

³Ellen Wu, “America’s Chinese: Anti-Communism, Citizenship, and Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War”, *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol.77, No3, p391-392.

⁴Daryl J. Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guard, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness”, 1969-1972, *American Quarterly*, Volume 57, Number 4, December 2005, p1083-1085.

⁵Ibid, p1084.

⁶The Ballot Box and Beyond: (im)possibilities of White Antiracist Organizing, *American Quarterly*, Volume 62, June 2010, p233.

⁷Ibid, p233.

⁸Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law--The Legal Construction of Race*, New York University Press, 109.