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ENGL IV

3rd May 2018

Institutionalized Racism at the end of the 20th Century

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a prolific Nigerian author, wrote her book *Americanah* on the topic of race in America: “We’re all prejudiced,” she says, addressing claims that black people can be just as racist as white people, “*but racism is about the power of a group and in America it’s white folks who have that power.* [...] White folks don’t get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don’t give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don’t stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don’t choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don’t tell white kids that they’re not smart enough to be doctors.” (Adichie) [Emphasis mine] As of 2018, white families hold ninety percent of the national wealth while Latino and black families *combined* hold less than five percent. This is directly caused by institutionalized racism. Oxford Dictionary defines institutional racism as: “Racial discrimination that has become established as normal behavior within a society or organization” (Oxford). Institutionalized or systematic racism is a very controversial issue; in fact, many people believe that it does not exist at all. Mike Pence, the Vice President of the United States said that there is “too much of this talk of institutional bias or racism in law enforcement” during a debate in 2016 (Glew). It is dangerous for someone in a position of this power to hold these opinions as they are among the few with any authority to make a change. Dave Nappi from the Thought Catalogue argues that institutionalized racism and white privilege simply do not exist. He says that because there are laws in place preventing federal discrimination and hate crimes, these things cannot happen.

Institutionalized racism has impacted American culture as a system of oppression and discrimination by preventing people of color from having the same opportunities as their white counterparts.

This all begins with history, not only of race, but also of all of America. Slavery began in the U.S. in 1619 in Virginia when African slaves were brought here to work and build up an economic system that set the foundation for this country, as we know it today. African slaves were bought, sold, and traded into America to provide cheap and easily manageable labor. In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which helped even further solidify the demand for slaves, primarily in the South because of a growing demand for cotton products. It is estimated that seven million slaves were transported to America in the 18th century alone, leaving Africa devoid of many strong people. This strengthened America, specifically financially, while Africa became a struggling land filled with broken homes and damaged families.

Slavery was finally abolished in 1865, freeing almost four million slaves. This brutal, heartbreaking history set the foundation for race relations even today. Many of these issues reached a peak in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. For example, there was a popular “white only” park in Georgia established in 1911. In 1963, when the city could no longer legally enforce segregation, this changed. The owners of the park, angry that it may be reintegrated, sued the city. Later that same year, black citizens filed a lawsuit, saying that it was a violation of the 14th amendment. The next year, the city resigned as a trustee, preserving the segregation. Black residents were forced to take this to the Supreme Court where, in 1966, it was ruled that the segregation was not legal. Instead of reintegrating the park, the city just closed it all together.

It was Ronald Reagan who pioneered the idea of ‘reverse discrimination’, which came to in the 1970s as a backlash against affirmative action in public schools. Affirmative action is defined as: “an action or policy favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in relation to employment or education” (Affirmative). Many white Americans came to believe that civil rights programs and policies had overreached their original intent and white people had become the victims of racial discrimination, when in reality, the true intention was only to begin reversing the systematic racism that was so deeply

ingrained in their society. In this situation, and in many still today, people are reluctant to acknowledge the history. Many people believe that the intentional inclusion of more people of color (or women) in school admissions or in school curriculums is an act of reverse racism; that by choosing a black author over a white author because of their race, white people are being discriminated against. This could not be further from the truth. In reality, publishers have (and some continue to) intentionally not published authors of color. Schools have intentionally not admitted students of color. Systematic racism cannot be fixed if nothing is done to right the tremendous wrongs that white people have done.

Another example of white people attempting to erase and ignore the history of discrimination in this country is their treatment of AIM, or the American Indian Movement. This is an organization made by and for American Indians to serve and protect them. This organization became official in the 1980s, causing riots and uproar because they demanded compensation for the horrific acts that white settlers had committed. This continues today with the oppression of indigenous people. Their culture has been mocked, used as party themes, props, and sports team names. Recently, there was a controversy about the Dakota access pipeline. The project, proposed in 2014, was designed to transport almost six hundred thousand barrels of oil a day from North Dakota to Illinois. Native Americans were at the core of the opposition to this because the pipeline would travel underneath the Missouri River, which is the water source for The Standing Rock Sioux, a tribe comprised of approximately ten thousand people with a reservation in the central part of North and South Dakota. Builders of the pipeline said that they have safeguarded against disaster, but the truth is, even the safest pipelines can leak. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration reported more than three thousand incidents of leaks of oil and gas pipelines in the last eight years alone. Even the smallest spill could damage the tribe's water supply. The Standing Rock Sioux also argues that the pipeline would run through a sacred burial ground, but this has been ignored. The pushing aside of indigenous people in American society has been so ingrained that when their lives are literally at stake, they are ignored.

In the early 1980s, the black power movement gained momentum. This movement parallels the Black Lives Matter movement happening today. The modern Black Lives Matter movement primarily targets police brutality, which has been an issue for many years. 1992 saw The Los Angeles Riots, started by the Los Angeles Police. The whole controversy was started when police beat Rodney King and they were found not guilty. Racial tensions in Los Angeles had been steadily increasing since the previous decade with the LAPD aggressively chasing after drug users and crime in lower income neighborhoods. In 1988, the Chief of police's "Operation Hammer" drug raids left dozens homeless in South LA after almost one hundred officers tore apart apartment buildings. Thirty years later, police brutality is still a major issue that many white Americans refuse to address.

Additionally, capitalism has further impacted and underdeveloped black America. "Race is a relationship between accumulation and dispossession and without that, a structural change in the economic system, [...] and discrimination [...] [will] continue and perhaps worsen." In 2012, the average household income for a black family had reached a mere fifty four percent of white incomes. There is a very apparent socioeconomic gap between black families and white families. "Contributing to these disparities is the fact that because of nondiscrimination policies and unionization, blacks are more likely to hold jobs in the public sector. They therefore suffer disproportionately from the decline in the public sector brought about by the universal downsizing of government. [...] *Capitalism is preserved and reproduced on the backs of the black community.* [...] Mass incarceration provides profit through the transfer of payments to private corporations for building prisons and supplying prison services, as well and the exploitation of prison labor" (Marable). [Emphasis Mine]

America now has major problems with mass incarceration. Primarily due to racial profiling and stereotyping, black men have become targets for police brutality and the judicial system supports this. Black and Latino people made up fifty eight percent of all prisoners in 2008, even though that racial demographic only makes up twenty five percent of the US population. Those who benefit from mass

incarceration are mostly white men. The way the judicial system is *supposed* to work is when a crime is committed the offender goes to jail for a reasonable amount of time, learning their lesson. Many Americans today see the prison system like this. In actuality, this is not necessarily how it works, primarily due to of racial profiling. One in every fifteen African-American men and one in every thirty-six Latino men are incarcerated, compared to one in every one hundred and six white men. “Incarceration is no longer used to rehabilitate or reconstruct criminals, but to demoralize and capitalize off of vulnerable prisoners” (The Institutional). The War on Drugs, started by former president Richard Nixon, used racial profiling. He made it a priority to lower drug crimes in America by cracking down on drug users and distributors. In reality, this became a way to arrest African-Americans for petty drug crimes, while white people were not as frequently arrested for committing the exact same crimes. Still today, black people are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana use than white people even though usage is equal between the two races. Before this “War on Drugs”, prisons were ninety-five percent white men. After the war on drugs, those same prisons were ninety-five percent black men. This was based on an intentional crackdown of inner cities and neighborhoods with significant minority groups. There are currently more African-American men that cannot vote in America today than there were in 1870 when the 15th amendment was passed, granting them the right to vote because even small misdemeanors can often take away this right.

Furthermore, institutionalized racism and capitalism’s impact on this has significantly affected the school system. “Good” schools, or schools with money, are predominantly white. They’re placed in wealthy neighborhoods that have mostly white residents. Those kids get the best education because their schools have more money. Those schools have more money because they can hire teachers who are more educated meaning the students have better test scores, which increases funding. This means they get into better colleges, which means they get better jobs, and they can send their kids to better schools... and the cycle continues. Large minority groups typically live in lower income neighborhoods (the reason for

which will be discussed below). This means the schools are not as “good” because the teachers are not as highly educated because they do not have the funding to hire better educators because the test scores aren’t as high. The students at those schools have a significantly harder time getting into good colleges which means they have a harder time getting a good job so their kids have to go to the lower income school and again, the cycle continues.

Oxford Dictionary defines privilege as: “A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.” All white people have an inherent privilege. *All white people benefit from racism*. For example, if a white person and a black person are interviewing for a job and the interviewer is racist, they will choose the white person, not necessarily because they are more qualified, but because they are white. The white person benefits from the interviewer’s racism, regardless of intent. “White privilege is a transparent preference for whiteness that saturates our society”. (On racism) The ‘perks’ of white privilege could be: “Flesh” or “nude” colored bandages, clothing, etc. generally matches a light skin tone. In a hotel, the complimentary shampoo generally works for the texture of white people’s hair. In a grocery store, shampoos and conditioners made for white people’s hair texture are in the aisle labeled ‘hair care’ and not in a separate section for ‘ethnic products’. These may seem like minor grievances, but they add up to create society that favors white skin.

Additionally, there is a common argument or idea that anyone can achieve the ‘American Dream’. “When the left cries out about ‘institutional racism’, they are referring to people of power and influence who have an unconscious bias against minority groups,” says Josh Park of Merion West. He continues, “[This] argument essentially shifts the focus away from personal choice and responsibility by spreading the idea that non-whites have a limited control over their lives and that the ‘system’ is cheating them. [...] Any abled individual can rise up in society with hard work and responsible decision-making.” (Park) The racism that so deeply permeates our society makes the idea that anyone can just ‘pull up their bootstraps’

and achieve the 'American dream' not only an outdated concept, but also one that is now and truly always has been impossible. Sometimes people do not have the boots to pull up the straps of to begin with.

Others may argue that because racism and discrimination are illegal, they therefore cannot be happening on a systematic or institutional level. Oxford dictionary defines institutional as: to "establish (something, typically a practice or activity) as a convention or norm in an organization or culture." (Institutionalize)

The act of institutionalizing a practice does not need to be legalized or even fully intentional. The institutionalization and discrimination against racial minorities began with the slavery of

African-Americans and the genocide of Native Americans at the birth of America, as we know it. In a video created and produced by Brave New Films, they showed that black sounding names were fifty percent less likely to be called back for a job interview and black drivers were twice as likely to be pulled over, among other things. Some of this is very blatant and intentional racism, and some of it is simply so ingrained in American society that it truly is an unconscious bias, though this does not excuse their actions.

In 1967, after several devastating race riots in Detroit and New Jersey, both of which started after incidents of police brutality against black people, President Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, or the Kerner Commission, to examine the roots of the violence. The report, entitled "The America of Racism," explained the racial divisions that shaped urban America. The draft additionally said that rioting was an understandable political response to racial oppression. The report focused mainly on systematic racism. It made recommendations for massive changes in education, employment, and housing that Johnson knew would never move through Congress. In the end, the report was mostly ignored. The problem today is that politics might be moving in the wrong direction, not unlike what happened in 1968. Structural racism has to be addressed. President Donald Trump said "I think they're trouble. I think they're looking for trouble," when speaking about the Black Lives Matter movement and Black Activism. This, coupled with Vice President Mike Pence's previously stated views

on institutional racism, make for a dangerous presidency. These are the people who have the power to make a difference.

Institutionalized racism has impacted American culture by catering to the white population and preventing people of color from having the same opportunities as their white counterparts. The history of race in America is a dismal thing and it has a lasting impact on how people of color are treated and how white Americans continue to view race. Capitalism has caused the disproportionate wealth of white Americans, not allowing people of color, particularly black people to advance in society. It has stunted the growth of public schools and those educated by them and caused the mass incarceration of people of color. White privilege, though an uncomfortable topic, is one that is of the utmost importance because white Americans have undeniable privilege over people of color.

During the 1960s, America witnessed what could happen when institutional racism is ignored. The steady increase of racially fueled violence that Americans have seen in the past several years has brought our country to a comparable historical turning point—and one that could be just as consequential if we continue to ignore the problem.

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