

GHOSTS OF JIM CROW

ENDING RACISM IN POST-RACIAL AMERICA

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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IN POST-RACIAL
AMERICA

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When America inaugurated its first African-American president in 2009, many wondered if the country had finally become a “post-racial” society. Was this the dawning of a new era in which the United States, a nation nearly severed in half by slavery, and whose racial fault lines are arguably among its most enduring traits, would at last move beyond race with the election of Barack Hussein Obama II?

In *Ghosts of Jim Crow*, F. Michael Higginbotham convincingly argues that, despite racial progress, America remains far from that imagined utopia. Indeed, the shadows of Jim Crow-era laws and attitudes continue to perpetuate insidious, systemic prejudice and racism in the 21st century. Higginbotham’s extensive research demonstrates how laws and actions have been used to maintain a racial paradigm of hierarchy and separation—both historically, in the era of lynch mobs and overt segregation, and today—politically, economically, educationally and socially.

Using history as a roadmap, Higginbotham arrives at a provocative solution for ridding the nation of Jim Crow’s ghosts, suggesting that legal reform can successfully create a post-racial America, but only if it inspires whites and blacks to significantly alter behaviors and attitudes of race-based superiority and victimization. He argues that the United States will never achieve its full potential until Americans make the societal and personal changes necessary for a truly post-racial era.

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Preface

SUMMARY

The preface of *Ghosts of Jim Crow* opens with a discussion of Professor Higginbotham's early life experiences growing up in the United States. Higginbotham discusses how his parents raised him in racially diverse surroundings, and raised him to view all forms of discrimination as morally and ethically wrong and impermissible. Higginbotham recounts how, as he came of age and his parents moved from the Pittsburgh area to the suburbs of Cleveland and Los Angeles, he experienced racial prejudice first hand, including misguided educational placements by teachers and incidents of racial profiling by law enforcement.

The introductory section starts with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States on November 4, 2008. The introduction then describes the experiences of an Obama campaign worker in Pennsylvania during the 2008 election campaign; when the worker knocked on one door, the woman who answered let the campaign worker know that they were "voting for the nigger." This example, along with the introduction as a whole, touches on an important point – that while much progress has been made since the days of Jim Crow, there is much work that still urgently needs to be done.

Introduction

KEY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- The continuing value and necessity of facilitating a conversation on race within the United States
- The prevalence of racial discrimination in America's past, and its continued prevalence in today's society despite the racial progress that has been made over the past six decades
- How racial discrimination negatively affects those who are victimized by it on a daily basis
- The tracing of America's racial history from the days of slavery until the 21st Century, and how some of the negative side effects of past racially-biased policies still affect us today
- The continued benefits of racial diversity and inclusion within American society

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you agree or disagree with the statement, "Racial prejudice is not created by law and cannot be changed by law"?
- Do you agree or disagree with the idea that America has entered a post-racial period where race is no longer a significant factor in opportunities afforded or hardships endured?
- What are the causes of the current and alarmingly wide racial disparities in various aspects of American society, including employment, education, and the criminal justice system?
- Do you agree or disagree with Eric Holder's statement that America is a "nation of cowards" when it comes to discussing issues of race?

Part I

SUMMARY

Part I discusses the historical origins of racial classification and division within America, and is appropriately named “Creating the Paradigm”. In Part I, Higginbotham examines how a racial model of hierarchy and separation was formulated and reinforced through laws, policies, and practices.

The first chapter within Part I, “Constructing Racial Categories,” traces how the establishment of slavery in colonial America led to the creation of two separate and unequal racial societies, with distinct laws, rights, and privileges. The chapter describes how this racial categorization of whites as superior to blacks and other racial groups – designed to justify and maintain slavery – continued into the formation of the United States and onward into the Civil War.

The following chapter, “Maintaining White Dominance after Reconstruction,” describes how the end of slavery did not result in the end of the pre-existing racial dynamic in the South and elsewhere. Instead, the end of Reconstruction allowed the pre-Civil War society of racial categorization to evolve into a complex system of Jim Crow laws and customs explicitly designed to maintain white superiority at the expense of African-Americans.

In the final chapter of Part I, “Preventing Black Excellence Between Plessy and Brown,” Higginbotham gives a detailed discussion on how American society as a whole, through legislation and custom, allowed for the solidification of racial separation in almost every significant aspect of American society, including within the federal government, the American economy, the military, and even professional sports. The foundation of this discussion is a thorough examination of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and how the Plessy decision led to the continuation of “separate but equal” within American society – both as official public policy and as a societal custom from the Plessy decision up until the (first) *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, in 1954.

KEY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- The role of slavery and, specifically, the role of racial classifications in establishing and maintaining a racially separate and unequal society in pre-Civil War America
- The historical development of Jim Crow laws, from their roots in pre-Civil War “black codes” and other laws designed to solidify the division between racial groups

Part I

- How racial separation became further entrenched – in the South and nation-wide – as a result of the *Plessy* decision
- The continuation of “separate but equal” within the United States from *Plessy* into the 20th century, through the World War II era, and into the landmark *Brown* ruling

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How long has racial profiling been a part of American law enforcement?
- What approach would you support in order to end slavery? Litigation, legislation, non-violent protest, or violent resistance? Or a combination of these approaches?
- Who was Jim Crow and why were discriminatory laws called “Jim Crow laws?”
- Which decision was the most harmful to racial equality, *The Civil Rights Cases* or *Plessy v. Ferguson*?

Part II

SUMMARY

Part II deals with the continuation of racial inequality and separation within the United States into the 20th and 21st centuries. Part II resumes where Part I concluded, with an examination of racial inequality after the *Brown* decision. The main point of Part II is that racial discrimination and inequality did not end with the first *Brown* ruling, but continued afterward, albeit in different forms.

The first chapter of Part II, “Maintaining Racial Segregation in Schools and Neighborhoods from *Brown* to the 21st Century”, examines the continued desire of some white Americans to separate themselves from black Americans post-*Brown*. Issues such as white flight from urban neighborhoods in the aftermath of housing antidiscrimination laws and the Supreme Court’s failure to prevent de facto segregation in schools in the North after the second *Brown* ruling are discussed in detail. De facto segregation was racial separation that occurred due to choices by whites of where to live, attend school, dine, worship or socialize.

The second chapter in Part II, “Victimizing Blacks in the 21st Century”, discusses the persistence of racial discrimination and inequality in 21st century American society. This chapter explores how racial bias still persists in various aspects of American society, including employment, housing, education, and the criminal justice system.

KEY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- The successes and failures of the *Brown* rulings. In what ways did *Brown* prevent discrimination, and in what ways did *Brown* permit discrimination?
- The “white flight” phenomenon and its negative effects on urban communities and schools in the late 20th century
- How “tracking” in schools helps to maintain racial separation, even in institutions with diverse student bodies
- How the practice of “racial profiling” within law enforcement continues to contribute to inequities in the criminal justice system
- How restrictions on early voting and voter identification contribute to inequities in the political process

Part II

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What responsibility, if any, do blacks bear for current racial inequality?
- Do you support a color-blind approach or a race-conscious approach to eliminating widespread racial disparities?

Part III

SUMMARY

Part III concludes “Ghosts of Jim Crow” by proposing solutions to address racism in modern-day American society. Part III includes discussions on how the dynamic of false perceptions of black inferiority and white superiority can be successfully challenged and defeated, and on how racial integration and equality can be fully realized. In the first chapter of Part III, “Black Empowerment and Self-Help”, Higginbotham explains how black economic, educational, and political empowerment can help lead to greater success in terms of racial equality. In the second chapter of Part III, “Integration and Equality”, Higginbotham discusses various solutions to the inequalities present in today’s society, including legislative efforts to foster more racial integration in education and housing, a sustained effort to address the racial inequalities present in the American justice system, and finally, a recognition and an acknowledgment by all Americans of the continued existence of racism and its harmful effects on American society.

KEY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Solutions to continued racial inequalities in terms of education and economic opportunity, such as affirmative action
- Solutions to continued racial inequalities in the American justice system, including increased federal efforts to end racial profiling and legislative changes to anti-drug laws and sentencing guidelines that have a disparate impact on minorities
- The necessity of all Americans – black and white – to acknowledge and engage in a discussion concerning continued racial inequalities and their negative impact on American society

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What specific suggestions do you have for addressing the current racial paradigm?
- Is affirmative action part of the solution or part of the problem?
- Is the “acting white syndrome” part of the solution or part of the problem?