

# PROBLEMS OF RACISM IN THE USA

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**Abstract:** The article deals with problems of racism in the United States of America. The author mentions the famous speech of Dr. Martin Luther King and discusses some of the forms of modern racism. There are still a lot of differences in various spheres of life among different races, mainly black and white, and although America has got a black president and the life there has changed in some ways, the struggle for equality and against racial discrimination has not finished yet.

**Key words:** racism, minorities, Civil Rights Movement, discrimination, affirmative action

## Introduction

It has been fifty years since Martin Luther delivered his famous speech, which became known as “I have a dream“, at a meeting of nearly 250,000 people, both black and white, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. On a hot August day 1963, these people and millions of Americans watching their televisions all over the country could listen to his emotive words: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out these truths that all the men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. 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.“ (In: O’Callaghan, 1990:113)

Racism has always been an integral part of the American society. Its roots can be traced back to the slavery period when millions of people, mainly from Africa, were brought to the New World to work on plantations. Racism survived even after the abolition of slavery and it was openly expressed during the era of segregation when black and white people could not use the same public transport, attend the same schools, go to the same restaurants, etc . The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, led by Martin Luther King, contributed to the abolition of segregation, and it officially made African Americans equal citizens of the USA. However, it did not end racism in practice. Even today the members of racial minorities experience discrimination on daily basis. It is difficult to define modern racism and prove its existence since it is less visible and usually not as openly expressed as it was during the slavery and segregation periods. Racism in the contemporary American society may not be so apparent, but it still has an enormous influence on many people’s lives. It can be seen in housing, employment, sports, media, and many other aspects of modern life.

The USA as a multicultural and multiethnic society must ensure peaceful coexistence of all their citizens regardless their colour, race or religion. However, despite the Civil Rights Movement and various attempts of different governments to guarantee equal opportunities to all people of the United States, the social status of black Americans has improved very little in the past years. African-American thinker and activist C.L.R. James points out that “The Negro question in the United States is No.1 minority problem in the modern world. It is No. 1 because if this cannot be solved, then there is no possibility of the solution of any minority problem anywhere.“ (James, 1993:201) Similarly, Chang-Lin Tien emphasizes that “...as much as America would like to believe otherwise, racial discrimination remains a fact of life. Whether we preside over major universities or wash dishes, people of color confront discrimination.“ (In: Takaki, 2002:246)

### *Contemporary problems of racial minorities in the USA*

Many Americans hoped that the election of President Barack Obama would bring the long-awaited change and improvement in racial problems. Obama became the 44th (and lately also the 45th) President of the United States, yet the first African-American head of state. Being a son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, he also had to face racism since he was a child. In his speech dedicated to racial problems he said:

I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together – unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes: that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren (In: Cohen, Greenberg, 2009: 210).

What then are the most poignant racial problems the American society faces today? According to Alexon, there are three types of racism that can be distinguished in the contemporary USA: individual, institutional and cultural. Hostile behaviour or ignorance manifested in contacts with the members of “inferior” racial group are a typical feature of the individual racism. Institutional racism can be observed in police practices, inadequate housing, education programmes, and unequal job opportunities. Cultural racism is based on the belief that the culture of majority group is more valuable than the culture of minorities. This kind of prejudice includes religion, language or art of minorities which are considered subcultures of a lower importance. (Alexon, 1998)

Goodman and Marx consider prejudice the most influential element of the racist thinking. They classify two theories of prejudice: frustration-aggression theory and projection theory. According to the frustration-aggression theory, people deprived economically and socially blame less powerful groups for being the causes of their problems and they turn their hatred against them. Projection theory is based on attributing one’s own personal features, usually negative, to the members of other ethnic groups. (Goodman, Marx, 1978)

Everybody can experience one of these types of prejudice under certain life conditions, and Adorno came to the conclusion that prejudiced people “were highly conventional, and also tended to be superstitious and anti-intellectual, they admired toughness and power, were uneasy about sex, and believed that the most important thing for children to learn was to obey their parents.” (In: Goodman, Marx, 1978:302) Prejudice is usually inherited from parents to their children who take opinions of their mother and father as truthful and unchangeable. This may be one of the reasons why racial discrimination has survived from generation to generation.

Besides discrimination, one of the biggest problems of an African-American community is inadequate housing. Majority of blacks living in the cities still reside in ghettos. Čupka (2013:30) claims that according to the recent survey of Reuters Agency as many as forty per cent of white Americans live among people of the same race, which means in white communities while about one-quarter of non-white Americans live in modern ghettos, which means with people of their own ethnicity. The biggest problems in attitudes towards another race arise among Hispanics and blacks. Thirty-seven per cent of Hispanics regard these relations as problematic, while only sixteen per cent of white population think that there are big problems between the black and white people.

Although certain improvements in the life of the black community have been recorded recently, their living standards remain inadequate. Wilson points out that while during the Civil Rights Movement the main goal was the elimination of segregation and voting discrimination, blacks in the contemporary society must face many other problems such as “the sharp rise in unemployment, the substantial decline of blacks in the labor force, the

steady drop in the black-white family income ratio, the consistent increase in the percentage of blacks on the welfare rolls, the remarkable growth of single-parent households, and the persistent problems of black crime and black victims of crime.“ (In: Takaki, 2002:207) Wilson believes that the Civil Rights Movement changed mainly the position of the middle-class blacks, while the poorest African Americans living in ghettos profited very little from its achievement. As Martin Luther King remarked: “What good is it to be allowed to eat in a restaurant if you can’t afford a hamburger?” (In: Takaki, 2002:208)

African-American feminist writer Audre Lorde believes that black women are in an even worse position than the rest of the black community since they have to deal with many different forms of intolerance. Lorde herself had experienced various kinds of discrimination, not only because of her skin colour, but because of her gender and sexual orientation. Being black, woman and lesbian, she finds it more difficult to avoid discrimination by the mainstream society. Lorde points out that black women have to struggle with more difficulties than black men: “As a group, women of Color are the lowest paid wage earners in America. We are the primary targets of abortion and sterilization abuse, here and abroad.“ (In: Bode, 1992:294) Furthermore, black women are often victims of rape and domestic violence, which represents another example of sexist treatment and unequal position of African-American women in society.

Another serious problem afflicting the black community is high criminality. Wilson thinks that the significant increase in crime in the recent years has been caused by various reasons, such as poverty, racism, violent television programmes, disorderly society, weak state, corrupt police, or imperfect welfare system. Homicide, one of the most serious crimes, has sharply increased mainly among young black males. It has been noted especially in the inner-city areas, where drugs and guns are easily available. (In: Takaki, 2002) Currie adds that black youths are not only the perpetrators of crimes, but also their most frequent victims and not only homicide, but also violent attacks are very frequent crimes committed by young black males from the poor neighbourhoods. According to a study of the University of Philadelphia Medical School, between 1987 and 1990 nearly forty per cent of young black males from the inner-city Philadelphia were victims of a violent attack due to which they had to be hospitalized for emergency treatment. (In: Takaki, 2002)

Currie further explains that apart from homicide, drug use and HIV infection are other most common causes of deaths of young African Americans. The highest death rate among the black population is notable among black men between 25 and 34. „Almost half of the deaths were due to homicide, accidents, suicide, drugs, HIV, and “legal intervention“ – being killed by the authorities – accounted for most of the rest.“ (In: Takaki, 2002:239) Concerning the mentioned “legal intervention“, till now there are cases which are very disputable. One of the last that brought about a lot of protests and discussions happened last year and finished just a few weeks ago. Media all over the world informed their readers and viewers about the shocking release of George Zimmerman, a 29-year-old mixed race Hispanic who had shot a 17-year-old African-American high school student Martin Trayvon. The fatal shooting took place on a February night 2012 in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman was the neighbourhood watch coordinator for the gated community where Martin was temporarily staying and where shooting took place. The community was dealing with an increase in burglaries that is why they started a neighbourhood watch programme. Following an earlier call from Zimmerman, the police arrived and found out that Martin did not have any weapons on him. After being questioned for several hours, Zimmerman was released and the police chief said there was no evidence to refute Zimmerman’s claim of having acted in selfdefence. As news of the case spread, thousands of protestors across the country called for Zimmerman’s arrest and full investigation. After a few weeks, he was charged with second-degree murder by a special prosecutor. His trial finally began in June 2013 and a month later he was released because the

jurors claimed they did not have enough evidence to convict the former neighbourhood watch volunteer in the killing of the boy. This verdict immediately led to a lot of protests in the whole country. Despite President Obama's own heritage as the son of a white woman and a black man, he has spoken only sparingly about race. But shortly after Mr. Zimmerman's acquittal, he made a telling foray into that charged world by trying to explain the reality of life for African Americans, and particularly young black men, in America today. In his emotive reaction to this event, the president, who had his own experience with racism and discrimination when he was young, said that Trayvon could have been his son or could have been him 35 years ago. (In: Čupka, 2013:20)

### *Affirmative action*

As has been mentioned, mainly the black community must face many difficulties. People living in ghettos are usually in debts, and they receive lower education due to the insufficient number of schools. Moreover, since many industrial factories have moved to the suburban areas, it is more difficult for black people to find a job in the central city. Therefore, a bad economic situation resulting from unemployment remains a bitter fact of their lives.

Concerning other minorities, such as Hispanics, Asians, native Americans, Muslims, and Jews, they have to face poverty and various forms of discrimination as well. Especially Hispanic Americans, or Chicanos, represent the fastest growing and largest ethnic minority in the United States. Although many of them enter this country with a vision of better living conditions, they have to struggle against the same problems as the black people – insufficient education, unemployment, low income and poverty.

One of the solutions to eliminate discrimination in all spheres of the public life is the affirmative action. According to Brunner, this term was used for the first time by President John Kennedy and later developed by President Lyndon Johnson. Affirmative action is a national policy aimed at ensuring the same opportunities for minorities and other disadvantaged groups. It guarantees them “the same opportunities for promotions, salary increases, career advancement, school admissions, scholarships, and financial aid that had been the nearly exclusive province of whites.” (Brunner, 2009)

Nevertheless, many Americans oppose the affirmative action because they think that this doctrine may restrict the chances of whites. Brunner claims that “to conservatives, the system was a zero-sum game that opened the door for jobs, promotions, or education of minorities while it shut the door on whites.” (Brunner, 2009) As a result, affirmative action can help blacks and other minorities to find equal positions in employment and education, but on the other hand, it may create a sense of injustice in white citizens who can feel disadvantaged on the account of this policy. Tien claims that neither the affirmative action nor any other statutory orders would ensure equal opportunity and the same treatment of all races in the United States. He believes that these “group privileges” will only strengthen racial intolerance and mutual hostility. To support racial tolerance, it is necessary to change people's thinking. It can be achieved mainly through education. Tien explains that it is essential to establish interracial schools because “diversity benefits all students. It is critical to academic excellence. Only by giving students opportunities to interact and learn about one another will we prepare America's leaders for success in today's global village.” (In: Takaki, 2002:247) Discussions and interaction between various racial and ethnic groups would eradicate the social barriers that restrain acceptance and tolerance among people of different races.

There are still considerable differences also within the black community. While middle and upper-class blacks have made a noticeable improvement, lower-class blacks, especially black women, must still fight against the difficulties similar to those they experienced during the segregation period. It is necessary to find solutions to these problems since they have a huge impact on the relationship between blacks and whites. That the mutual

relationship and attitudes can be improved and changed can be proved by many examples of very popular sportsmen and sportswomen, actors, singers and politicians who are adored by both black and white people.

## Conclusion

Thousands of Americans gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on Wednesday, 28 August 2013 again. They celebrated the 50th anniversary of the unforgettable King's speech. The ceremony was steeped in historical symbolism. President Obama paid tribute to a civil rights leader, who half a century earlier, imagined a world in which people would "not be judged by the colour of their skin but the content of their character." He said that those who argued little has changed since the 1960s dishonoured the courage and sacrifice of those who had lost their lives in the civil rights struggle.

Martin Luther King III, just 5 when his father spoke at the Mall, spoke of a dream not yet realised in full. He said there was no time for nostalgia because the task had not been fulfilled and the way had not been finished yet. (In: Čupka, 2013:20)

In the last half-century, black unemployment has remained almost twice as high as white employment with "Latino unemployment close behind", Obama told the crowd. "The gap in wealth between races has not lessened, it's grown." (In: Čupka, 2013:20)

What then is America like today concerning co-living of blacks and whites? Has it come closer to the dream of the legendary preacher? Are different races equal? This was one of the questions asked by the workers of Pew Research Center in Washington in their survey of public opinion which they had carried out a few weeks before the anniversary. Only 45 per cent of white respondents replied that in the previous 50 years the USA had made a considerable shift in the fulfilment of King's dream. (In: Čupka, 2013:29)

We live in a world full of problems and paraphrasing Robert Frost's words from his popular poem "Stopping by woods on a snowy evening" – we still have miles to go before we sleep. Not only in the USA but everywhere on this earth.

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