

Strategic racism benefits only the wealthiest and most powerful

“If racism is a class weapon, then ending racism is in the self-interest of nearly every American.”

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Ian Haney López in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Ian Haney López (Courtesy photo)

*Ian Haney López is a law professor whose work focuses on race and racism. His books *Dog Whistle Politics* and *Merge Left* probe how racism is deployed in electoral politics and how different stories about race and class can help bring us together.*

Could you unpack the term identity politics for us? Where does it come from? Why is it used?

Identity politics can be a substantive term, expressing the idea that people engage with each other partly informed by who they are. But in practice, the term is usually used as a dog whistle. It suggests that some people are elevating their identity above other priorities and that when they do that, they create division in our society.

For this to make sense as a criticism, you have to believe that most people don't have identity concerns and that when we suppress attention to identity, we are

brought together. This idea starts to unravel—and you can see the damage it does—when you recognize that the conversation is taking place within a system of unjust social hierarchies. It implies that people who raise issues of social justice divide us, while those who refuse to talk about existing hierarchies are actually bringing us together. Often when people denounce identity politics as a problem, they are obscuring and thus protecting unjust social arrangements.

But let's take the claim seriously for a moment. Do people engage in identity politics? Yes. But it isn't just some people. Almost all of us, irrespective of our educational level or sense of political sophistication, are reacting to the world around us through unconscious reasoning about who is like us, who threatens us, and who will help us. These are the main political questions people ask, and they are identity questions. Politicians who promote demagoguery in our society understand that they are providing a particular set of responses to these questions, responses that tend to make people fear their neighbors.

One of the challenges for large, complex societies is that people are always asking, Who's with me, and who's against me? People seeking power often purposefully answer these questions by stoking social divisions and antagonisms. This leaves those of us trying to create a society rooted in an ethic of care with a lot of work to do. We have to answer the same identity questions, but in a way that builds social solidarity, a sense of linked fate, a sense of empathy and connection with others.

But a lot of progressives are not answering these questions at all. They are answering a different question, one most people are not asking: How might policy A or policy Z be helpful to me?

What is the role of what you call “strategic racism” in this dynamic?

We are used to thinking about racism in interpersonal terms. More recently we've added the notion of institutional racism. Both are important, but both also imply a racism that has few individual actors. We talk about bigots hurling spittle-laced invective on the one hand and diffuse, even abstract practices on the other. Both are operating, to be sure, but we're missing something important.

We live in a society in which some of the most powerful actors are today, right now, purposefully stoking racial conflict. Who? One of our two main political parties; an entire right-wing propaganda system; and some of the wealthiest, most powerful corporations and family dynasties in the country.

Here's where strategic racism comes in. Why are these powerful forces actively promoting racial conflict? It's not primarily because the people involved are poisoned by racist antipathies. Rather it is because they understand that if the vast majority of Americans fear and fight each other, they then turn their backs on the idea of government as working for us all. Once that happens, powerful elites can more easily rig the economy and hijack government for the sake of concentrated wealth.

Racial dog whistling specifically as a class strategy goes back to 1964, when Barry Goldwater started campaigning against the New Deal by appealing to White southern sensibilities in opposing integration. He opposed the New Deal vision of government working for working families, but he also knew this vision was powerful—so he campaigned instead on racial themes. And that's what the party of big business has done ever since.

The racial demagoguery Goldwater pioneered has slowly but surely consumed the Republican Party itself. Generations of Republican elected officials have found themselves confronted by candidates more demagogic, more extreme, more racist, more hostile to democracy than themselves. Each generation has seen itself replaced by ever more reactionary forces—until we get to Donald Trump in 2015, who essentially annihilated the establishment Republican field because he was so extreme.

Who are the current actors in this arena?

The Kochs and Americans for Prosperity, funded by about 400 wealthy families. The Mercers, who funded Steve Bannon and Breitbart. Richard Mellon Scaife's family foundation. I recently read about a Mellon heir who's the largest new donor to the Republican Party: here's an heir to a Gilded Era fortune who is now spending millions to support a political party that strategically promotes racial conflict and division and fear.

I like Theodore Roosevelt's phrase: "malefactors of great wealth." It's not great wealth itself that threatens us—the Roosevelts themselves were a family of dynastic wealth. Rather, it's *malefactors* of great wealth, and we have plenty of them.

Along with this movement of strategic racism, has racism also become more prevalent among Americans generally?

That's trickier to answer. Here's the most important thing about public opinion and racism. This is not a country of bigots. The vast majority of people who vote Republican are not self-consciously racist or committed to the idea of White supremacy.

The reality is more disturbing and also more hopeful. It is more disturbing because almost all of us harbor deeply internalized racist stereotypes that demean Black and Brown people and unconsciously elevate White people.

What's more hopeful is that we also have split minds on race. We consciously embrace egalitarian norms that say we should not judge others by the color of their skin, that race hatred is wrong and immoral. Thus politicians strategically use language to push people to react to their unconscious racial fears while assuring them that they are acting in concordance with their conscious commitments to rejecting racism. That is what dog whistle politics does: it pushes people to react in racist ways while telling them they are not racist.

What is an effective response to this kind of political messaging?

One thing that is not effective is condemning White racism. When voters nod in agreement with dog whistles, for the most part they believe that what they are hearing is common sense, not bigotry. So it backfires to say, "Actually, no, that's racist, and so is anyone who supports this nonsense." They believe themselves not to be racist and greatly resent being labeled racist. Perversely, the very effort to condemn dog whistle politics often makes it more effective.

To see why, look at how both sides—those who promote dog whistling and those who condemn it—frame racial conflict. Both say that racism pits White people against people of color and that everyone has to choose a side. The dog whistlers are saying: You had better stand with White people, or you are going to lose your country. But progressives often structure their response in the same form: Yes, we're locked into racial conflict, and you had better stand with communities of color, or else you are unjust and immoral. Everybody is constantly reinforcing the same story.

We've got to break out of that story. We need to recognize that we are not locked into racial conflict but that instead our fates are linked. This is not merely a narrative strategy or a rhetorical shift. We need a new understanding of racism. At root, racism is a strategy of division wielded by the powerful few. It succeeds by

promoting conflict. Powerful interests are, right now, promoting this conflict because it profits them. That's why racial conflict is so bad today, 60 years after the civil rights movement made it clear to all that racism against Black people was a gross immorality.

How do you tell the story of the harm racism does to White people?

This story is very easy to tell. It deeply resonates with things that people already know but haven't previously connected. Almost all Americans know two things about our society: that the economy is rigged for the rich and that we are racially divided.

These two things are inseparably linked because for the last 60 years, economic elites have been pushing us to fight each other while they laugh all the way to the bank. This class war strategy amounts to divide and conquer: turn people against each other so they won't notice the real threat in their lives. Get them arguing about the crumbs while someone else eats all of the cookies. The more we've concentrated on walling out certain people or building prisons or disinvesting from government programs that might help supposedly undeserving minorities, the more we've handed the government and the economy to the very rich—and the worse things have gotten.

The most convincing political story available right now is that the very wealthy and politically powerful are profiting by pushing the rest of us into interracial conflict. Simply saying that to people resonates; they get it. That story is capable of building a supermajority of Americans who are committed to genuine cross-racial solidarity while also being committed to a New Deal-style politics that believes that the government should appropriately tax the very wealthy and regulate the marketplace to create routes of upward mobility for all of us.

It's more convincing than a progressive story that emphasizes racial justice for communities of color but implicitly blames White communities. It's more convincing than a different progressive story that insists on a colorblind universalism, one that says let's focus on economic issues or health care or education, but let's not talk about race because that divides us. And, most importantly, it is more convincing than a story of racial fear.

How does the American narrative of upward mobility and the American dream play into this? Do you find that it gets in the way of people being willing to blame the rich?

It can, but this story is actually a story about mobility, possibility, and hard work—and it's a story that says none of us succeeds on our own. Yes, we succeed through hard work. Yes, we work hard because we want to create opportunity and a better life for ourselves and our children. But the ability to strive and to thrive depends upon a government that regulates the marketplace, prevents fraud, and prevents monopolies. It ensures safe workplaces and basic infrastructure; it ensures access to clean water, affordable energy, and shelter.

This story says that upward mobility requires the government to work for all of us. My Berkeley colleague Emmanuel Saez and others have shown that upward mobility has largely evaporated in the United States. There's greater economic mobility in most other industrialized democracies. Today in the United States, the surest route to upward economic mobility is to marry into a family of great wealth. That betrays the American dream.

The recovery of the American dream requires that we recognize that our fates are linked—and that when we provide the conditions in which others can thrive, then and only then can our own families thrive.

Do you find that higher-income White people are unsure where they belong in the narrative? Can they stand in solidarity against the elites? Are they themselves the elites?

This is a story in which almost all people can see themselves, if not in terms of racial injustice or economic stress, then certainly in terms of a commitment to living in a democratic society that protects people's rights and protects the environment.

Since the January 6 Capitol insurrection, I've been getting phone calls from people who are part of the one percent or even the 1/10th of one percent. They are saying to me: we've got to protect democracy, and we've got to avert climate collapse. Both of these things require social solidarity. Both require standing up to a political party that now promotes racial demagoguery and systematic assaults on democracy.

How did you get interested in the question of political messaging?

I'd been focused on race and racism since I was in graduate school. For the first couple of decades, I took for granted that racism was a conflict between White people and people of color. From within that mindset, I came to the conclusion that

racism is thus a permanent feature of our society.

I saw, in my own life, how this story about racism generated a politics of despair, frustration, and even rage—because it was a politics that did not believe change was possible. That was fine within academia but not in the real world. In academia I could document the perniciousness of racism and issue denunciations, but in my heart I didn't think they would make a difference.

More than a decade ago, I came to see I was wrong. As I studied mass incarceration and systematic state violence, as I probed the question of what produced it and why it was so difficult to end, I realized that racism had become normal American politics. But behind that politics there was a class war that the rich were winning. This was not only an intellectual epiphany for me, it was also a sharp jolt to my sense of the possible. If racism is a class weapon, then ending racism is in the self-interest of nearly every American.

That's when I began to search for language that could translate these insights to regular folks, who could use them to help free themselves, to help create the sort of society that they deserve. It's the only way we're going to build enough political support to stop government violence against communities of color, to engage instead in repair, and to create a government that provides the health care and affordable housing, the education and environmental protection, and all the other policies we need to create a society and planet that thrive.

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