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### What Does Race Have to Do With It?

Making sense of our 'national conversation'

By John Hartigan Jr.

By any measure, this has been a busy year for news stories about race. The most recent, involving the firing of Shirley Sherrod from her post at the U.S. Department of Agriculture over remarks on a videotape that initially appeared racist, followed in the immediate wake of accusations by the NAACP that the Tea Party harbors racists. But the year began with a furor over Sen. Harry M. Reid's comments about President Obama's being a "light skinned" African-American "with no Negro dialect, unless he wants to have one." Another set of controversial comments followed in the aftermath of Rand Paul's victory in Kentucky's Republican Senate primary, when he questioned whether the 1964 Civil Rights Act represented an unwarranted intrusion into the private sector.

Just as summer reached its peak, a new surge of stories hit, centered initially on the release of recordings of the actor Mel Gibson apparently wishing that his ex-girlfriend would be "raped by a pack of niggers," and referring to Latino workers as "wetbacks." That news was paralleled by a stranger tale about the Justice Department's refusal to challenge voter intimidation purportedly committed by two members of the New Black Panther Party, in Philadelphia, in November 2008. And those were just the most attention-grabbing news items. California alone produced stories that easily might have garnered more coverage: the arrest of the Grim Sleeper killer, for example, raised issues of racial profiling via DNA and challenged the bizarre notion that serial killers are always white if most of the other headlines had not played so effectively into broad partisan debates that are wracking the country.

How are we to make sense of, let alone keep up with, all this attention to race? Journalists assigned to just this task are finding it taxing and tricky. Frank Rich, a columnist for *The New York Times*, in little more than a week lurched from concluding that Gibson represented "the last gasps of an American era" to opining, regarding the drama over Sherrod, that "we have been going backward since Election Day 2008."

But how can we be both advancing and regressing in matters of race

as a nation? That confusion reflects the challenges journalists face as they struggle to report on the partisan accusations of racism being hurled between the Tea Party movement and the NAACP.

Since the emergence of the "race beat," in the mid-1950s, and continuing through a new critical attention in the 1980s to possible race-baiting in campaign ads, news editors and journalists clearly regard reporting on race matters as part of their charge. But as the coverage generated by the selectively edited video clip of Sherrod's comments indicates, that interest is easily manipulated. This summer's spate of stories suggests that the work of covering race is being stymied by the complexity of the subject. It is time for academics who study race to step up and help journalists with this difficult task.

Let's start by engaging with the "national conversation on race." After all, it was an academic, the Harvard law professor Lani Guinier, who first proposed holding one in 1995, in the hope that it would at last break "the great taboo" on race. That seemed possible when President Bill Clinton attempted to institutionalize the conversation, in the summer of 1997, with his Initiative on Race. The series of "town meetings" that followed, led by the historian John Hope Franklin, though, drew little media attention partly because they lacked the drama of our current crop of news stories and they were attacked on partisan grounds as being one-sided affairs.

Yet reporters and news commentators retained the concept and use it to this day to frame the way certain stories either follow from others or broadly reflect national interest in racial matters. The conversation now seems to have become an incoherent cacophony of conflicting voices, and academics have a unique opportunity to weigh in on how this particular cultural process operates.

The first insight we can offer is that much of this conversation has little to do directly with race. This is evident in how racial-news items emerge from the torrent of technological developments that are changing how we receive and consume news stories. President Obama suggests as much in blaming our "media culture" for fueling the frenzy that turned Sherrod's powerful story of personal transformation regarding race into a contrary exhibit of apparent reverse racism. Obama was joined in that assessment not only by a number of concerned journalists, but also by Anthony "Van" Jones, who resigned from a White House position over political activities and comments he had made before he joined the administration. Jones sees their common predicament as produced by "the venal

nature of Washington politics in the Internet era." Partisanship is a crucial factor, but the key development here is that these stories are generated by the new technologies of video capture and posting.

Consider for a moment: What links Sherrod's story to similar media sensations over comments by white men like Don Imus, Trent Lott, and Bill O'Reilly? They each had edited clips of their words posted to and circulated among numerous Web sites, reaching audiences far beyond the immediate ones they assumed they were addressing. Certainly race was the focus of those selective edits, but the larger issue here is that the technologies are redrawing the line between "private" and "public" in American life. The change is most evident in the intense concern over privacy linked to Facebook, but it manifests itself in numerous ways as Americans grapple with the exposure their words and behaviors now may get. The shifting of the line may also reveal just how segregated private life in this country remains, but the ways in which race now becomes news are byproducts of the technological transformation.

We can also point to the fundamental role that core features of American culture play in shaping how we talk about race. In particular, our fixation on certain remarks as potentially revealing of a person's racism is a function of the commitment to individualism in our culture. Belief in individualism, in turn, powerfully inhibits our ability to see race as permeating our social landscape and profoundly skewing life chances. But we cannot grasp this by focusing on race alone; rather, we have to see how an underlying belief in individuals shapes the ways Americans think about a whole range of concerns, such as patriotism and equality. As the Sherrod case underscores, we purvey remarks as the embodiment of an individual's racial sensibilities, perhaps additionally asking if they also reflect the possible breadth and depth of racism in the nation at large. This cultural conditioning around individualism is exactly what makes it difficult for Americans to then recognize broad social and economic factors that profoundly shape the relevance of race. We orient ourselves, instead, toward discussing ideals of equality and fairness primarily in terms of individuals.

The dynamics of the shifting line between public and private, as well as the powerful investment in individualism, point to the underlying role that culture plays in how we talk about race. The notion of a "conversation" is quite apt in this regard, serving as a powerful diagnostic for how culture-bound we remain when it comes to race. Conversations depend on codes of etiquette and decorum that shape our expectations of who can say what and

which kinds of topics are appropriate. The conventions informing those codes are powerful and deeply naturalized. Unless we can begin to think about them consciously as occurs in the most enlightening moments of the "conversation," such as with Imus and Sherrod, when the discussions become about our racial expectations and assumptions about who can say what publicly we will make little progress in talking about race. In that sense, racism is not as much of a problem as are the cultural taboos around talking about race. We are so concerned about transgressing etiquette that we spend little time formulating new ways of talking about race.

But as experts on race, we need to do more than just explain how the "conversation" does and does not work. We also need to learn from it and use it as an opportunity to question or even revamp some of our fundamental assumptions about race. The important lesson from this summer's exchanges, for instance, is that racism is not a sufficient means of explaining why and how race matters. The charges of racism being exchanged between the NAACP and members of the Tea Party movement suggest that we need something more than that key term to guide discussion about the relevance of race in peoples' thoughts, actions, and political positions.

For that matter, we should use this as an opportunity to reassess how we even define race. Given its urgency as a social and political problem, we tend to think of race as a basic reality, a stark, defining condition of existence. But race is composed of many cultural rules and rituals, taboos and licenses to which we give very little thought, but which affect our judgments about whether words or incidents are "racial."

Much current scholarship on race is informed by Howard Winant and Michael Omi's concept of "racial formation," which construes "race as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning." But our "national conversation on race" suggests otherwise: race is not "an irreducible component of collective identities and social structures." Rather, it is one dimension of the underlying cultural dynamics that shape Americans' everyday lives and intense interest in media stories. Explaining the aspects of race that are not reducible to or effectively rendered by the concept of racism should be one of the aims of current and future research on race. Which brings us, once again, to Sherrod.

Her story neatly frames our current situation. In the first airing of

her remarks, people listened to hear if what she was saying was racist or not. But as more of what she said emerged, people heard something rather different: a story about how she had changed in her racial thinking, and how she had come to see race in a different framework. Listening for racism seems to entail an assumption that people's racial beliefs are hard-wired or ideologically determined. Both Sherrod's story and the unfolding history of this national conversation indicate something different: that people also engage in an active, variable process of making sense of when and how race matters in a person's words or deeds. Our conversation is as much about how we make those assessments as it is about race.

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