

## New Horizons for Long Island: Undoing Institutional Racism And Overcoming Regional Inequities

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We know from the recently completed Human Genome Project that 99.9 percent of the basic human genetic material is the same in everyone, regardless of so-called race differences. Nevertheless, even today, we are burdened with the erroneous heritage of scientists and intellectuals of the 18th Century who pronounced that race determined the status and potential of every human being. And that Caucasians, Europeans with white skin, were superior in every way, and Negroids, Africans with dark or black skin, were inferior in every way. These differences were irreversible and innate. Moreover, it was believed that the people of African descent comprised a sub-species, and were not really human like whites, or like brown and yellow people. This construct of a racial hierarchy claimed scientific justification but was based on pseudo-science. This concept of race was actually created and perpetuated for social, economic and political reasons, especially to justify slavery. Unfortunately, this racial construct did not receive serious scrutiny by any significant segment of the scientific community until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. This system of racializing is the foundation of the story of racism in America today.

I would wager that someone is asking: Why must she bring this up? The next thing she'll do is talk about slavery, and who wants to hear about that? Well, I am going to say a few sentences about slavery, a few more about white privilege, and then I will explain why bringing up this history is so important.

In a nutshell, slavery was the institutionalization of racism in America. It was a system that encompassed every aspect of life for blacks and whites. It determined who would be educated and who would not. Where blacks could live. What work blacks could do. Where blacks could travel. But also, it determined what life was like for whites. It set in motion a long line of privileges for whites; privileges that became part of the fabric of America. In fact, whites didn't even have to think about these differences. And white privilege is still central to institutional racism.

As the contemporary white writer, Peggy McIntosh at Wellesley College, has said in her published writings about white privilege, she had been taught that racism put others at a disadvantage, "...but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage." She goes on to say, "...I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious." Her list of 26 unearned assets includes the ability to rent or purchase housing in any area that she can afford. As most of you know, this is something that is still not guaranteed for African Americans on Long Island today, for a host of reasons, including racial steering and related practices of some people in the real estate industry. This has been repeatedly documented by the

Long Island Housing Services and is attested to in countless personal experiences of African Americans.

Professor McIntosh has the following comments on racism and other forms of oppression, “They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth...” “To redesign social systems”, she adds, “we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo...”

What Professor McIntosh is talking about here is institutional racism. Institutional racism in the US shapes systems and structures in ways that bring advantage to whites and disadvantage to African Americans and other people of color. Institutional racism can thrive even in the absence of overt bigotry. We can track institutional racism by looking at inequalities of access and outcome compared by race and by looking at discrimination and segregation.

So back to the question of why revisit this history. Although, slavery no longer exists in the US, the systems of institutional racism that began with slavery have changed in important ways and are still significantly influencing who receives a good education, where blacks can live, employment opportunities, etc. As I talk about the results of the first year of ERASE Racism, in just a moment, I will detail specific examples of current manifestations of institutional racism. But first let me say that looking at history is much more than an intellectual exercise. Our understanding of what racism is and how it works will shape what actions we take to address the problem of racism. A shorthand definition is that racism equals race prejudice plus power. If racism is not just “individual acts of meanness” but “invisible systems” then our approach to the problem is not just to target men in white sheets but, for example, to change school districting and funding patterns that almost guarantee an inferior public school education for African American children, regardless of family income. And simultaneously, we target the practices of realtors that perpetuate racially segregated housing patterns.

This is not a new analysis. However, why is it that it has been so difficult to undo institutional racism? Let me tell a story that may help clarify this dilemma. The commonly known “Kerner Commission Report”, released in 1968, which reflected the results of a series of federally commissioned studies following the 1960s urban “riots”, stated that “White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II.” Unfortunately, however, as stated in *Institutional Racism in America*, edited by Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt, “... the Report too quickly leaves this truth...It is the immediate conditions giving rise to civil disorders which the report stresses, not the *causes behind the conditions*.” Later, the authors offer a broader critique that discusses the “false response

and social illusions” that hamper real change. “The first illusion is that the condition of the black population is steadily improving and that it will continue to improve without drastic changes in our approach to the problem. The second myth is that poverty and racism are best fought *within* the black community.”

What these authors refer to as “white racism” and similarly what Professor McIntosh and other contemporary writers call “white privilege” is at the root of our collective false starts and less than successful efforts to address racism. All too often we unwittingly skirt two facts. First, racism is fundamentally a structural and systemic problem, and second, the silences and denial surrounding white privilege block our efforts to make real headway in addressing institutional racism. Essentially, as a society, we have tried to make improvements in what institutional racism produces, i.e. the levels of inequities, discrimination and segregation without really undoing the structures, policies and practices that are central to perpetuating institutional racism, especially as it impacts white privilege. We have often gone to black communities to “fix” them but failed to see that challenging white privilege could make significant headway in our effort to bring about change. What is not said and sometimes what is not even consciously thought out by whites goes something like this. Okay, let’s improve the schools for the blacks, but that isn’t going to have any impact on my school district, is it? Okay let’s help blacks have better housing options, but that doesn’t mean they have to live in my community, does it? Okay lets have better economic opportunities for blacks, but that doesn’t mean that I have to alter the way I hire staff through a word-of-mouth system among a small circle of white colleagues, does it?

If the action plans of ERASE Racism are going to genuinely address institutional racism, we must ground ERASE Racism in our historical context. Our historical context needs to account for the true ramification of 246 years of slavery, a mere 12 years of reprieve during reconstruction, another 87 years of de jure or legalized discrimination and segregation, which included a 43-year period, up until 1920, where thousands of African Americans were lynched (especially in the South) and strong de facto segregation in the North. For the last 38 years, since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, some gains have been made. The presence of a black middle class suggests to some that individuals can “escape” institutional racism with hard work. But the vast majority of blacks continue to suffer under de facto discrimination and segregation. Even those of us who have supposedly “made it”, are reminded daily that institutional racism is in full bloom here on Long Island. As African Americans, we can’t escape institutional racism. All Americans of all races must work to undo it.

So what do we hope to accomplish with this ERASE Racism initiative? We want the perpetuation of institutional racism to not only be illegal but unthinkable here on Long Island. We want an informed and self-conscious public that understands how institutional racism works and why dismantling it has eluded us as a nation. We want to start with some local victories. That’s what we are trying to do with the creation of Action Plans from the Study-Action Groups we have been organizing. Pulling together dozens of knowledgeable people on a single issue, moving issue by issue, we collaboratively identify the manifestations of racism within each issue area. We research

and design solutions and then, hopefully, by helping organizations do what they do best, we change the status quo. Maybe it's a new law, a new policy, or some new practices.

### **Highlights of outcomes from study-action groups**

So, with that said, let me tell you about the outcomes from an exciting collaborative process to undo institutional racism that has already involved hundreds of people on Long Island.

During the past year, ERASE Racism staff has engaged hundreds of Long Island leaders from the nonprofit, business, government, academic, advocacy, religious and philanthropic communities in individual conversations and round-table, strategic planning discussions with a goal of creating a concrete action agenda to address institutional racism on Long Island. We call these groups Study-Action groups. We employ a systematic approach to gathering insights from diverse constituencies and documenting our conclusions utilizing the findings from local and national research. As a catalyst for change, our action plans encourage and assist a variety of organizations in carrying out this collective agenda to undo institutional racism with every organization undertaking the strategies for which they are best suited.

#### Housing

Thirty-five people participated in the Housing Study-Action Group meeting, some of whom participated in follow-up conference calls. A list of participants is in your conference folder. Represented are not only housing activists, but business people, academics, religious leaders and more. There are four problem statements that summarize our findings of manifestations of institutional racism in the housing arena.

#1 Land Use planning and municipal codes, policies and enforcement practices often create and perpetuate racially segregated housing patterns. Examples of this include: (1) private and public affordable housing (especially rental housing for low-income families and other social-purpose housing) is excluded from many predominately white neighborhoods and sited in the few predominately black neighborhoods, (2) laws and regulations affecting housing and community conditions are enforced with different rigor depending on the racial make-up of the community, and likewise, (3) municipal services affecting the livability of communities are unequally provided.

#2 Some practices of realtors, housing developers, and landlords, notably “racial steering”, “blockbusting”, selective advertising, and removing housing from the market based on the race of the applicant, ensure that African Americans (and other people of color to differing degrees) are afforded a limited number of communities in which to live. Fair housing laws are not sufficiently enforced to stop these practices.

#3 People of color are often denied conventional mortgage loans, charged additional fees and/or steered into higher mortgage lending rates, by some mortgage companies, when purchasing and refinancing their homes.

#4 “There-goes-the-neighborhood” mentality and discomfort with racial diversity fuel behaviors by Long Islanders (some subtle and some hostile) that perpetuate racially segregated housing patterns and make black and other people of color feel unwelcome. Frequently, citizens and civic and political leaders either remain silent or perpetuate racial myths and misinformation that create fear and intolerance of racial differences.

Some 20 documents have been identified that support and detail the existence of these housing problems. In a few instances we believe that additional investigation is warranted. For example, additional testing is needed to identify the specific realtors and mortgage lenders on Long Island engaging in the illegal practices. Attitude polling or focus groups could be helpful in devising strategies to address the “there-goes-the-neighborhood” mentality.

The worksheet that we use in this process elicits additional information designed to help us understand what is perpetuating a particular form of institutional racism, and what, where and who are the levers for change.

We then look at the existing strategies, assess their adequacy and brainstorm new steps to bring about change. Our initial inquiry did not identify many existing activities addressing these problems. One notable exception is fair housing and lending testing. Unfortunately, the resources available to support this work are paltry, and this fact is in itself a manifestation of institutional racism at work. Also, the enforcement activities are far below adequate. Another current activity is housing production. The scale of current housing production, for example by some of the non-profit developers that provide housing to people regardless of race, is small in comparison to the need. And even there, neighborhood placement is more limited than we would like. Broadly speaking, these two strategies need to be augmented, but it will require more creative solutions to make significant progress in both instances. More money but also different funding mechanisms will be explored. And agencies responsible for enforcement must hear strong public support for prioritizing this activity and must also be held accountable to standards of aggressive enforcement. Currently, the only regional, independent fair housing agency, the Long Island Housing Services, is trying to shoulder the burden with insufficient financial support.

Four new strategies include: (a) buying existing predatory loans before people default under the burden of high costs, (b) organizing a constituency for change (which is not really new on Long Island but remains small in scale in proportion to the need; in some instances these organizing efforts are in early stages of development), (c) specific education efforts that help people navigate housing and finance decisions, and (d) helping people to be educated citizens concerning planning and municipal codes.

In addition, enacting new policies that have been tried elsewhere, such as inclusionary zoning laws, fair-share policies, creating multi-use zoning codes and a host of actions to increase the stock of affordable rental housing are other components of the action plan. Spotlighting success stories is another strategy. We need to make the general public aware of these problems, and seek allies anywhere we can find them, e.g. socially conscious businesses, realtors, landlords and lenders need to be engaged in the process of finding and implementing solutions. There are a lot of myths and misinformation that need to be addressed. Some of that can happen in undoing racism training and others through media or public relations efforts.

Underlying all of these recommendations, however, is the need to approach these interconnected problems in a systematic and comprehensive way. Piecemeal efforts have meant that everyone fights the same battle over again each time change is pursued. The new Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing is an example of an attempt to create a big tent to strengthen arguments, identify strategies and encourage change. But more needs to be done, and all efforts need to make sure they are really addressing access issues and not just affordability issues. In some instances, advocacy for state-level mandates are in order. And at the Federal-level, the approach to fair housing, for example, shows a preference for education and outreach rather than investigating complaints and prosecuting offenders. This must be challenged. In other instances new regulatory mechanisms must be put in place. For example, realtors sometimes have mortgage lenders co-housed in their office, and at present, the state licensing requirements do not deal with issues like racial steering. There is no enforcement mechanism.

And finally, how do we encourage and support leadership from local governments in ensuring access to housing for all Long Islanders? It was reported during our discussion that local municipalities have been known (unofficially) to turn down federal dollars because they didn't really want to deal with the challenges of affordable housing, accessible to all regardless of race. Would well-run public housing authorities in every community increase the production of housing and ensure that housing remained affordable? These and other controversial suggestions, such as reviewing the housing appraisal system, would certainly require a well-thought out coordinated approach. Plus, any effort to combat the "there-goes-the-neighborhood" mentality is going to require significant insight into the fears and self-interest of ordinary Long Islanders; including addressing white privilege. Paraphrasing John Powell's comment from a recent conversation, we will need to find ways for people to engage in an heroic act without living an heroic life. We need to make the strategies in our action plan ones that ordinary people can understand and embrace.

#### Public school education

Fifty people participated in the Public School Education Study-Action Group and some participated in follow-up conference calls. There are three problem statements that summarize our findings of manifestations of institutional racism in public school education.

#1 Public school districting patterns, funding patterns and funding levels are not designed to ensure satisfactory student achievement for all students regardless of race. Other external factors impacting student achievement include lack of transportation and other access and support barriers that limit enrichment experiences for children from educational and cultural resources outside of school, such as libraries and museums.

#2 Staff hiring, training and development policies and practices, as well as teaching methods do not support a learning environment that ensures satisfactory student achievement for all students regardless of race. Standards and expectations of students and staff may vary based on race.

#3 In severely segregated schools that have a student population whose families are disproportionately poor, people of color face barriers in facilitating effective community and parent involvement and support, especially given the history of personal and political disempowerment. Schools must create opportunities that fit the abilities, interests and availability of parents in varying situations.

Some materials have been identified that document the existence of these problems. We are still in the refinement stages of our efforts to sharpen our understanding of the problems and to investigate and prioritize solutions that we wish to pursue.

With regard to districting and funding, a sample of remedies under discussion include: (a) consolidation of school districts, perhaps with a combination of county-wide funding with local governance and local control and (b) changes in distribution of commercial and industrial taxes to spread the benefit beyond the small jurisdiction where the facility is physically located. We are particularly pleased to be working with The Alliance for Quality Education and the New York Civil Liberties Union, which in combination bring expertise in addressing issues related to districting, funding and standards for measuring an adequate education.

Concerning school staffing and teaching, our initial focus is on the interaction between teacher and student. Making sure that teachers are able to teach to the varied abilities and learning styles of the students, e.g. differentiating instruction is a central concern. We also want to investigate mechanisms to ensure that all teachers, regardless of color, understand the impact of institutional racism on them personally and as teachers, as well as on their students. Furthermore, teachers need to have the tools to deliver equitable instruction that is culturally appropriate to all of the students. Perhaps teacher certification could be changed to require a minimum exposure to these issues as part of certification. Additionally, it is advantageous to encourage a dialogue among teachers and other professionals in the field about these issues.

For community-level support and involvement, three ideas have been put forward for consideration: (1) It is the job of the school to offer options for parent involvement that take into consideration the different types of abilities, interests and availability of parents and then to facilitate experiences where the parent is able to successfully engage with the

school. After-school education is one area that can be an entry point for some parents. It is then possible to build on that success to engage the parent in different arenas of the school. (2) Some communities with non-majority populations of people of color may benefit from a proportional representation system for election of school board members in order to allow greater access to a broader cross-section of the community. (3) The full resources of the community should be employed in improving public school education. For example, what are the potential roles of local universities, in support of public school education, beyond student teaching?

### Economic development

The next Study-Action Group, scheduled later in June, will focus on economic development. Historically, regional economic prosperity has bypassed local communities that are predominately African American, resulting in areas of concentrated poverty. Economic development policies, land use planning and municipal codes, and investment decisions of local governments are not improving this situation in any significant way. And neither are the business practices and investment decisions of Long Island businesses. In fact, sometimes actions of government and business actually exacerbate the problem of concentrated poverty by negatively impacting village centers/downtown economies and by creating general mismatches between the location of jobs and the people who need jobs, especially given Long Island's transportation problems. In addition to these community-focused development activities, we will consider the effectiveness of policies and programs that are targeted at the household or individual level, such as support services, employment and training programs, and supports for black entrepreneurs.

### In conclusion

I said in the beginning that ERASE Racism wants to make perpetuating institutional racism to not only be illegal but unthinkable on Long Island. We want an informed and self-conscious public that understands how institutional racism works and why dismantling it has eluded us as a nation. We want every organization and every individual to do what they can do best to undo institutional racism. Perhaps the most important change we hope to achieve is what my friend and colleague Peter Montague from the Environmental Research Foundation calls change in the "climate of opinion." A change in the "climate of opinion" would help to ensure steady gains that are broadly supported. In the short term, there may be some tension between the self-interest of those who have been marginalized and those with some degree of privilege because of their white skin. But in the end, I believe that if we undo institutional racism, our entire society will benefit. There are hidden costs that affect everyone. You will hear more about these hidden costs or, put another way, opportunities for common ground in the presentations of our guests, John Powell and David Rusk.

In closing, the name of this conference is New Horizons for Long Island: Undoing Institutional Racism & Overcoming Regional Inequities. Why New Horizons for Long Island? We could have said new visions or something else that conjured up the image of

a changed future. But sometimes visions appear to be illusive and unattainable; not of this world. Horizon, according to Webster's Dictionary, is "the line in which the sky and the earth or sea seem to meet." It may be "out there" so to speak, but it is visible, it is of this world and it is "real enough" to strive for. I also like the aspect of horizon that suggests boundary and limits because that is the reality of our existence. The problem is not that there are boundaries or limits, but that we accept them as unchangeable. Our observation, our knowledge, our experience should alter our understanding of our horizon, our understanding of what Long Island can be. When we, the people of Long Island, the government officials, business leaders, and the staff and volunteers of large and small institutions of Long Island, firmly embrace the challenge of undoing institutional racism and overcoming regional inequities there will be new horizons for Long Island that all of us can celebrate. Let's see to it that institutional racism is unthinkable on our Island.

Thank you.