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*Think Piece
Ray Nagin, White Rage and the
Manufacturing of 'Reverse' Racism
by Tim Wise*

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If you're looking to understand why discussions between blacks and whites about racism are often so difficult in this country, you need only know this: when the subject is race and racism, whites and blacks are often not talking about the same thing. To white folks, racism is seen mostly as individual and interpersonal – as with the uttering of a prejudicial remark or bigoted slur. For blacks, it is that too, but typically more: namely, it is the pattern and practice of policies and social institutions, which have the effect of perpetuating deeply embedded structural inequalities between people on the basis of race. To blacks, and most folks of color, racism is systemic. To whites, it is purely personal.

These differences in perception make sense, of course. After all, whites have not been the targets of systemic racism in this country, so it is much easier for us to view the matter in personal terms. If we have ever been targeted for our race, it has been only on that individual, albeit regrettable, level. But for people of color, racism has long been experienced as an institutional phenomenon. It is the experience of systematized discrimination in housing, employment, schools or the justice system. It is the knowledge that one's entire group is under suspicion, at risk of being treated negatively because of stereotypes held by persons with the power to act on the basis of those beliefs (and the incentive to do so, as a way to retain their own disproportionate share of that power and authority).

The differences in white and black perceptions of the issue were on full display recently, when whites accused New Orleans' Mayor Ray Nagin of racism for saying that New Orleans should be and would be a "chocolate city" again, after blacks dislocated by Katrina had a chance to return. To one commentator after the other – most of them white, but a few blacks as well – the remark was by definition racist, since it seemed to imply that whites weren't wanted, or at least not if it meant changing the demographics of the city from mostly African American (which it was before the storm) to mostly white, which it is now, pending the return

of black folks. To prove how racist the comment was, critics offered an analogy. What would we call it, they asked, if a white politician announced that their town would or should be a "vanilla" city, meaning that it was going to retain its white majority? Since we would most certainly call such a remark racist in the case of the white pol, consistency requires that we call Nagin's remark racist as well.

Seems logical enough, only it's not. And the reason it's not goes to the very heart of what racism is and what it isn't – and the way in which the different perceptions between whites and blacks on the matter continue to thwart rational conversations on the subject.

Before dealing with the white politician/vanilla city analogy, let's quickly examine a few simple reasons why Nagin's remarks fail the test of racism. First, there is nothing to suggest that his comment about New Orleans retaining its black majority portended a dislike of whites, let alone plans to keep them out. In fact, if we simply examine Nagin's own personal history – which has been obscured by many on the right since Katrina who have tried to charge him with being a liberal black Democrat – we would immediately recognize the absurdity of the charge. Nagin owes his political career not to New Orleans' blacks, but New Orleans' white folks. It was whites who voted for him, at a rate of nearly ninety percent, while blacks only supported him at a rate of forty-two percent, preferring instead the city's chief of police (which itself says something: black folks in a city with a history of police brutality preferring the cop to this guy). Nagin has always been, in the eyes of most black New Orleanians, pretty vanilla: he was a corporate vice-president, a supporter of President Bush, and a lifelong Republican prior to changing parties right before the Mayoral race.

Secondly, given the ways in which displaced blacks especially have been struggling to return – getting the run-around with insurance payments, or dealing with landlords seeking to evict them (or jacking up rents to a point where they can't afford to return) – one can safely intuit that all Nagin was doing was trying to reassure folks that they were wanted back and wouldn't be prevented from re-entering the city.

And finally, Nagin's remarks were less about demography per se, than an attempt to speak to the cultural heritage of the town, and the desire to retain the African and Afro-Caribbean flavor of one of the world's most celebrated cities. Fact is, culturally speaking, New Orleans is what New Orleans is, because of the chocolate to which Nagin referred. True enough, many others have contributed to the unique gumbo that is New Orleans, but can anyone seriously doubt that the predominant flavor in that gumbo has been that inspired by the city's black community? If so, then you've never lived there or spent much time in the city (and no, pissing on the street during Mardi Gras or drinking a badly-made Hurricane at Pat O'Brian's doesn't count). If the city loses its black cultural core (which is not out of the question if the black majority doesn't or is unable to return), then indeed New Orleans itself will cease to exist, as we know it. That is surely what Nagin was saying, and it is simply impossible to think that mentioning the black cultural core of the city and demanding that it will and should be retained is racist: doing so fits no definition of racism anywhere, in any dictionary, on the planet.

As for the analogy with a white leader demanding the retention of a vanilla majority in his town, the two scenarios are not even remotely similar, precisely because of how racism has operated, historically, and today, to determine who lives where and who doesn't. For a white politician to demand that his or her city was going to remain, in effect, white, would be quite different, and far worse than what Nagin said. After all, when cities, suburbs or towns are overwhelmingly white, there are reasons (both historic and contemporary) having to do with discrimination and unequal access for people of color. Restrictive covenants, redlining by banks, racially-restrictive homesteading rights, and even policies prohibiting people of color from living in an area altogether – four things that whites have never experienced anywhere in this nation (as whites) – were commonly deployed against black and brown folks throughout our history. James Loewen's newest book, *Sundown Towns*, tells the story of hundreds of these efforts in communities across the nation, and makes clear that vanilla suburbs and towns have become so deliberately.

On the other hand, chocolate cities have not developed because whites have been barred or even discouraged from entry (indeed, cities often bend over backwards to encourage whites to move to the cities in the name of economic revival), but rather, because whites long ago fled in order to get away from black people. In fact, this white flight was directly subsidized by the government, which spent billions of dollars on highway construction (which helped whites get from work in the cities to homes in the 'burbs) and low-cost loans, essentially available only to whites in those newly developing residential spaces. The blackness of the cities increased as a direct result of the institutionally racist policies of the government, in concert with private sector discrimination, which kept folks of color locked in crowded urban spaces, even as whites could come and go as they pleased.

So for a politician to suggest that a previously brown city should remain majority "chocolate" is merely to demand that those who had always been willing to stay and make the town their home, should be able to remain there and not be run off in the name of gentrification, commercial development or urban renewal. It is to demand the eradication of barriers for those blacks who otherwise might have a hard time returning, not to call for the erection of barriers to whites – barriers that have never existed in the first place, and which there would be no power to impose in any event (quite unlike the barriers that have been set up to block access for the black and brown). In short, to call for a vanilla majority is to call for the perpetuation of obstacles to persons of color, while to call for a chocolate majority in a place such as New Orleans is to call merely for the continuation of access and the opportunity for black folks to live there. Is that too much to ask?

Funny how Nagin's comments simply calling for the retention of a chocolate New Orleans bring down calls of racism upon his head, while the very real and active planning of the city's white elite – people like Joe Cannizaro and Jimmy Reiss – to actually change it to a majority white town, elicits no attention or condemnation whatsoever from white folks. In other words, talking about blacks being able to come back and make up the majority is racist, while actually engaging in ethnic cleansing – by demolishing black neighborhoods like the lower ninth ward, the Treme, or New Orleans East as many want to do – is seen as legitimate economic development policy.

It's also interesting that whites chose the "chocolate city" part of Nagin's speech, delivered on MLK day, as the portion deserving condemnation as racist, rather than the next part – the part in which Nagin said that Katrina was God's wrath, brought on by the sinful ways of black folks, what with their crime rates, out-of-wedlock childbirths and general wickedness. In other words, if Nagin casts aspersions upon blacks as a group – truth be told, the textbook definition of racism – whites have no problem with that. Hell, most whites agree with those kinds of anti-black views, according to polling and survey data. But if Nagin suggests that those same blacks – including, presumably the "wicked" ones – be allowed to come back and live in New Orleans, thereby maintaining a black majority, that becomes the problem for whites, for reasons that are as self-evident as they are (and will remain) undiscussed.

Until white folks get as upset about racism actually limiting the life choices and chances of people of color, as we do about black folks hurting our feelings, it's unlikely things will get much better. In the end, it's hard to take seriously those who fume against this so-called reverse racism, so petty is the complaint, and so thin the ivory skin of those who issue it.

Keep track of Tim Wise's lecture schedule and new commentaries, at www.timwise.org

Check out Tim's books, [White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son](#), and [Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White](#) at a bookstore near you, or online at Amazon.com.