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Racism's sinister word games: What a white-supremacist talking point tells us about modern politics

How a neo-Confederate's bizarre self-justification helps explain the remarkable persistence of American racism

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(Credit: Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

In a striking recent [video interview](#), a Guardian reporter presses Pat Godwin, president of Selma, Alabama's United Daughters of the Confederacy, on the question of whether viewers are right to assume Godwin's expressed views are racist. Godwin replies, "Well, you have to define 'racist' to me. What is a racist?" Godwin's subsequent comments demonstrate that her question is mainly rhetorical, a gesture meant to indicate that "racist" is too subjective a term to carry any weight, ever. For Godwin,

“The word ‘racist’ is, like I say so many times, is like beauty; beauty is in the eye...the eyes of the beholder. Well, if someone is defining racist or racism, it all depends on who’s defining it, because it’s their opinion. It’s their opinion. I’m a racist in the sense that I’m white, I was born white, I’m proud to be white, I believe in my race, I want to see it perpetuated, I want it to survive on this planet. I defend, protect, and preserve my white race.”

When the reporter turns to one of Godwin’s associates and asks him, “Are you racist as well?” he fires back programmatically: “Define racism.”

Though the reporter has already given a working definition, and Godwin a mini-dissertation on defining racism, the gentleman is quick to ape Godwin’s rhetorical strategy — to invalidate any charges of racism by challenging any definition of the word itself.

As an English professor, I’m particularly sensitive to this kind of rhetorical tactic. I advise students to make a habit of finding more specific language for grand abstractions like “true love,” “the soul” and “finding yourself,” because each of these notions is so boundlessly vague that it means nothing without clarification. The solution, usually, is to historicize, to ground the abstract concept in some historical context so that we know the “true love” you’re writing about is, say, the transcendence of social circumstances that prohibit a relationship between lovers in a time and place of arranged marriages and family feuds.

Similarly, I discourage phrases like “in my opinion” or “that’s just your opinion,” because these are often ways of giving up, or of pretending like there are no gradations of value. “In my opinion” too often means “I don’t want to think any further through this challenging question of value,” the sort of question that may not have a single, correct answer, but certainly has degrees of implausible, acceptable and compelling answers.

People don’t typically fight wars or have heated political debates over mere differences of opinion. Rather, whether we’re arguing about racism, a passage from Shakespeare, an abortion policy or conflict in Gaza, the stakes of each argument vary in intensity, but the fundamentals are the same: Both sides of a conflict think they’re right, not just because of “opinion,” but because of differences of value that can be rooted in and explained by a mix of experience, tradition and faith, as well as logic, fact and evidence. We fight harder when the stakes are higher; but even when the stakes are so negligible that we aren’t moved to quibble, we have our reasons for thinking as we do.

Indeed, if you tell me that my favorite dessert, or maybe even my favorite song, is lousy, I may be content to drop the issue and say you’re “entitled to your opinion”; but choosing to attribute our differences in taste to your opinion doesn’t negate the fact that I have specific reasons to think that, on this matter, I’m right and you’re wrong. If, instead of dessert or music, we were talking about a disagreement over abortion or the death penalty, I doubt we’d be so conciliatory.

Thus, the neo-Confederate challenge to “define racism” is so effective because it forces the average person—that is, the person for whom whether to be racist is not a serious value proposition—to examine a definition that we too often take for granted. (“Why do I like cake so much? I don’t know; I just...it tastes good!”) And because racism is a complicated notion, whatever equivocation or uncertainty that arises naturally when we think it through can appear, to the neo-Confederate, like a weakness of position.

Accordingly, when Pat Godwin says “define racism,” she isn’t looking for a solid, widely agreed upon definition; she’s hoping for uncertainty and equivocation. And once she gets an on-the-spot, sound-bite definition that’s nevertheless serviceable—the reporter says a “racist is usually somebody who discriminates on the basis of skin color”—Godwin and her associate both question the definition, almost in unison, before Godwin launches into her own personal take. (“The way I look at it ...”) Getting to this point in the discussion—“the way I look at it”—was always Godwin’s goal, not just in urging the reporter to define racism, but in telling him right from the beginning “you have to define racist *to me*” (emphasis mine).

Having established what she takes to be the irrecoverable instability of the term “racist,” Godwin goes on, disingenuously, to appropriate the term “racist” as a term she can identify with. The comment “I’m a racist in the sense that I’m white” aligns being racist with something absolutely benign and widely experienced—the simple fact of being born white—before Godwin slips gradually from a definition of racist as merely being white to a definition more in line with white supremacy, one that also means “defending[ing], protect[ing], and preserv[ing] [her] white race.” I say that Godwin’s identification as a racist in this moment is disingenuous because she fully understands that “racist” is a pejorative term. If she didn’t, both her and her associate wouldn’t have needed to disarm the term in the first place before coyly identifying with it.

That’s why this interview is so telling, not just for the racial mentality of Godwin and the neo-Confederates, but for the right’s racial discourse more broadly. Complaints about “reverse racism,” and pushback against the assertions of the academic left that minority or subjugated groups can’t be racist as such, are often ways of claiming the legacy of white racism as a benign cultural history deserving of its own protections. This is exactly what Godwin is doing when she flippantly identifies as a racist because she’s proud of being born white. She’s trying to convince us that racism is really just white heritage (whatever that would look like), while something more akin to what conservatives call “reverse-racism” is the persecution of whites and white heritage. Hence, “define racism *for me*” means just that: give me a definition that affirms *my* worldview, because if not, I’ve got my own definition.

It’s important we understand such rhetorical tactics not simply as forms of racism, but as part of an important history that parallels, and lives symbiotically off of, the history of racism: the history *of denying the existence of* racism. Whether it’s borrowing the multiculturalist language of discrimination in accusations of “reverse-racism,” or expropriating the term “racist” as a symbol of white pride, the perpetrators subject themselves to a double-bind: They respect the idea of race-based discrimination when they themselves feel embattled or diminished as whites, but deny the same when the victims of discrimination are minorities.

“Define racism” is not an easy prompt with an easy answer, but we do have answers much better developed than Godwin’s opinion-based approach to the question. If we historicize racism, rather than treating it as abstraction or opinion, we find that racism in the U.S. is not just discrimination in general, but a history of a dominant class of European whites subjecting minorities by means of things like the theft of land, the destruction of native populations, slavery, internment, Jim Crow, voting restrictions, restrictions on access to education and home ownership, and hurtful or defamatory portrayals in entertainment and media.

Minorities can be discriminatory or bigoted against whites, but “racism” gains value as a term through its specificity. Racism is not about general bigotry or discrimination (notice we already have words for those general kinds of human behavior), but the history of systematic forms of discrimination perpetrated by whites. Conservatives vested in notions of “reverse-racism” hate this qualification because they confuse the two-way logic of “discrimination” with the specific historical purchase of “racism” as its own term. But we use “racism” in this specific way because the repeated, race-based subjugation of minorities by whites in U.S. history is a specific phenomenon that merits a name. Attempts to muddle the meanings and associations of that name—“racism”—are so often attempts to minimize that history, to make it disappear by attacking the name we’ve given it.

Those on the left (Bill Maher comes to mind) are fond of saying “[the new racism is denying racism](#).” I don’t mean to split hairs in pointing out that denying racism is just more of the *same old* racism. In those periods of U.S. history when slavery was common, or when white-only restaurants were common, we didn’t refer to these forms of discriminatory violence and humiliation as “racist.” It was just running a plantation; it was minstrelsy; it was “this is not the neighborhood for you” — “[This is not the fraternity for you](#)” — it was “separate but equal”; it was lynch mobs and vigilante “justice.” It was business as usual. It *is* business as usual, until you give it a name.

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