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Meghan Burke Discussing Her New Book "Colorblind Racism", January 24, 2019

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Meghan Burke, January 24, 2019

WGLT: An Illinois Wesleyan University Sociology Professor says, “Fighting against racism requires more than simply ignoring race.” Meghan Burke’s latest book *Colorblind Racism* argues that the well-intentioned trend of color-blindness or disregarding the importance of an individual’s race does not, in fact, lead to racial equality. GLT’s John Norton caught up with Burke to discuss how color-blind racism manifests itself in American society.

Meghan Burke: The way I like to talk about colorblind racism is that it reflects a belief that racism is a thing of the past and that any way that we might understand what is clearly demonstrated perpetual, persistent racial inequality in the United States is either explained by individual merits or lack thereof, or what I always say, we imagine to be true of our own or each other’s cultures. So the color-blind aspect is in an unwillingness to really grapple with the ongoing realities of racism, and that itself can become racist because it helps us to continue to participate in those systems that perpetuate racial inequality.

John Norton: Well, you hint today individualism—that is key to this, right? I mean-

Burke: -oh, absolutely!

Norton: -this country is built on rugged individualism...

Burke: Mm-hmm...

Norton: ...and everybody looks at themselves, at least, white people historically, is if “I work hard enough, I can do anything...

Burke: That’s right.

Norton: ...within reason.” How does that factor into color-blind racism?

Burke: I think it factors in in a number of ways. The first is that, and I think this is really important for us to recognize, that is a cherished ideal. It would be a beautiful society where the only thing that mattered, really, was our own merit, our own talent, our own hard work. I think that’s part of the reason that that is so important to us culturally as Americans. I think for many white folks it’s easy for us to assume that that is, indeed, all that is going on in shaping our successes or our lack thereof. What we’re less able to see for a whole variety of reasons are the ongoing realities of racial privileges and the ways that a long history of overt and covert racism has shaped society in a way where individualism is simply not the only way that we can understand how and why we still have segregated communities, how and why there are persistent disparities in just about every measure of social outcomes in the United States. So it’s – I think it’s an important ideal for us and we don’t wanna let that go, in a way, but when we take that as

the only sort of common sense way to understand how and why we still have these very real problems, we get stuck, and color-blind racism, I think, reflects that way of thinking.

Norton: Was it the Civil Rights movement itself that went – we went from covert – or overt to covert racism?

Burke: Yeah, that's often seen as a turning point in the way that we tend to talk and think about race in the United States and in some ways that's very understandable. I mean, it was the collective work of decades of – of struggles in the Civil Rights movement that helps us to eradicate some of the formal, perfectly legal du jour forms of racism, for example, that made it perfectly legal to discriminate in housing and public spaces and all of those kinds of things. So the Civil Rights movement, the Freedom Movement – as it was often known at the time – was crucial in eradicating some of that availability...for us to perpetuate formal overt racism. I think what we have done is assumed that that was all that was necessary and that that might alone kind of get us back to our level playing field, and we know, of course, that's simply not the case.

Norton: There were overt forms of racism before the Civil Rights movement but you argue in your book that there were definitely covert, or color-blind racism itself, even as it was undefined at the time, *way* before the Civil Rights movement as well, right?

Burke: That's right. And I think that that's sometimes what our scholarship and our discourse around it has also missed. So color-blind racism is sometimes referred to as the new racism but there were examples of colorblind racism being used in the 1800s and certainly for much of the 1900s, even up to the Civil Rights movement.

Norton: Can you give an example from the 1800s?

Burke: Yeah, absolutely! So this isn't exactly the 1800s but an example I often use with my students is our 1924 Immigration Act where we actually went to census data from the 1800s and made a law that said that we were going to restrict immigration to the United States based on a flat percentage, 2% of any of the immigrants that were in the country in the 1880 census. That looks fair on the surface, right?

Norton: Well, that's 40 year difference.

Burke: Well, exactly. And I think that what we – what makes that color-blind racism is that by the 1920s there was such extreme anxiety about certain groups of immigrants, in particular, Asians and those from Southern and eastern Europe. In the 1880 census, we had far higher number of western and northern European immigrants and so what that did, by allowing and allegedly even percentage of immigrants in a “color-blind fashion”, was really help us to institutionalize racial preferences for immigrants from northern and western Europe.

Norton: And I can think of a housing incident where both covert and overt were being used around the same time, right? Housing covenants and neighborhood associations or

neighborhoods that didn't allow people of color especially black people into the neighborhood on the argument that it lowered property values, right? So it wasn't a color argument.

Burke: [chuckles]...yes, that's a great example. So when we say, 'well, it's not that I'm racist. It's just that I wanna protect my property values', or 'it's not that I'm racist, I'm just fearful of X, Y or Z'. That is allowing us to use what is sort of a classic line of color-blind racism which is to take at anything but race, anything but racism...path, to trying to understand, or explain or as I often say, explain away the realities of racism, either past or present. ”

Norton: Dr. Meghan Burke, Associate Professor of Sociology at Illinois Wesleyan University our guest here at GLT Sound Ideas. We're talking about her new book *Color-blind Racism*. I'm Jon Norton.

You heavily reference Eduardo Bonilla-Silva...

Burke: That's right.

Norton: ...in your book. His 2000 book, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*.

Burke: That's an academic title for ya...[giggles]

Norton: Okay, well, he identified four central frames for identifying color-blind racism that you outlined in here as well. Can you briefly explain those four frames and why they're important?

Burke: Yeah, I'll start with why they're important. I think they are important because there are ways that we have learned to interpret racial phenomena in the United States and they reflect very common kinds of discourse. So the way that we talk and think about race in the United States and so think about the extent to which you hear these show up in our understandings of race and the way the people talk about it. The first is what is called naturalization and what that tends to do is to say, well, it's only natural. This tends to happen most often with segregation and so, we say that it's only natural that, let's say, Asian immigrants wanna live near other Asian immigrants, and that's why we have a Chinatown. Now, it's true that immigrant communities do form important networks to help acclimate newcomers and to share resources and to maintain cultural identity and all of that kind of thing but what that even misses is the realities of extreme racism against Asians, past and present, certainly in the past, that made it so that that was the only option. So it ignores segregation. Another is called abstract liberalism, and it's just as we were talking about. It's that strong belief that we already have of a fair and equal society and an even playing field and on that basis says that it really must just then be the fault or the credit of the individual that may explain individual success or failures.

Norton: Okay...

Burke: The third is what I think most strongly echoes overt forms of racism from the past but it still tends to do so in a color-blind way and that is called cultural racism. So that's a saying, you know, again using the example of Asians that you know, Asian culture somehow just inherently values and teaches their kids to value education and hard work. It says that, you know, whites often do the same and it uses really tired, pretty racist tropes about black Americans for example to explain relative lack of attainment in education and employment, just about every measure. So it blames culture or credits culture without again seeing the realities of structural institutional racism and ongoing bias. The fourth does what they all do but it does so a little bit more directly. It's the minimization of racism and so that let's us say, well it's not race, it's social class, or you know, it's not racism, we simply have preference for this type of admissions criteria, or whatever it might be in an institutional setting and so it does so directly; says I'm not a racist. The past is the past – those kinds of things.

Norton: When I ask you about a couple of other institutions where, especially color-blind racism still exists, and one that surprised me was healthcare. How does colorblind racism manifest itself in healthcare?

Burke: Yeah—I mean, I think, you know, on- you've always got these two ends of it. One is unevenness in availability to seek quality care and to receive it. So, do you have a job that carries the benefits that allow you to access health... so there is that structural institutional side of things. There's also, of course, plenty of well-meaning medical practitioners who still carry assumptions about even things like pain tolerance. There has been studies that indicate that doctors and nurses and other health professionals may assume that black folks have a higher pain threshold and so maybe less likely to trust their own narratives about their bodies and the pain that they are experiencing. It can often carry with it assumptions about behaviors that may signal healthy or unhealthy behaviors and willingness to be able to provide certain kinds of care and response to that. And so it really is pervasive and that's a depressing thing to recognize but that's exactly the point, is we have to be able to sit with those uncomfortable truths in order to move forward.

Norton: Policing as an institution has certainly gotten a lot of attention in the last 4 or 5 years, especially, whether you wanna call it color-blind racism or just blatant racism-

Burke: Sure...

Norton: -Was the killing of Michal Brown in 2014 at Ferguson – was that a turning point as far as education, as far as awareness may be for white people?

Burke: You know, I haven't looked at that empirically, but I – I think, again anecdotally, in the way I am hearing conversations begin to shift and change around me as I'm sure you have as well, I do think it has been. I mean I think for communities of color it was nothing new. There does come a breaking point and we have seen movements throughout history that respond to that kind of breaking point. The killing of Emmet Till, of course, is a great example of that as well

that launched the Civil Rights movement. So I do think that there is a rising awareness among – for – as you say, and I think this correct to many white folks to really have to look hard at the realities of bias and discrimination and the way that that manifests in life or death situations, like use of force among police officers. And so I think that the conversation in some ways is beginning to change but I still think that we lack some of the tools to really meaningfully handle that because we've so heavily socialized these color-blind ways of thinking and talking about race.

Norton: This is GLT Sound Ideas. I'm Jon Norton with Dr. Meghan Burke, Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of Sociology. We talked about rugged individualism and we talked about structural racism and how they intersect, so to speak. But your research showed that, especially, may be the last few years... black people, especially – you know may be 3/4ths if I'm getting the number right- believe that there is structural racism and that it's still a problem but even white people, like over 50% of white people now are thinking there is a problem. Yet when you boil it down, even black people still cling to the rugged individualism that if something goes wrong, may be because they didn't work hard enough...

Burke: Right.

Norton: ...or – right. Could you expand on that a little bit?

Burke: Yeah. And -

Norton: -'cause they don't go together.

Burke: That's right. And it's such complicated territory but I think that on a basic level, it simply reflects the fact that we share a culture, that we share a society, that we by and large consume the same media, that even as partisanly divided as we are today, that both major political parties still draw on the same kind of discourse, and so we all learn to internalize that blame. We all also *must* still put forth our best foot. So it's not as though an emphasis on structural and institutional racism means that individuals don't have to work hard and don't have to utilize their talent and don't have to do everything possible -- that in a way becomes all the more important actually for those who are constrained by systems of racism, and so there is a strong effort among really all communities but particularly within marginalized communities to teach each other that, and at the same time, to internalize that as the only answer because it is what is so predominant in our culture.

Norton: Mm-hmm...

Burke: And so, I think that it's actually less of a contradiction than it might sound. It just – it just indicates that we're in the same culture, we're in the same society, and yet we're up against different constraints.

Norton: If I'm a white person, what is the argument that even though I benefit from racism, I need to change the system, other than a moral argument, right, other than a religious argument? Is there an economic argument that white people should care that white privilege is a thing in our country?

Burke: Well, absolutely! I mean, I think that in some ways it echoes the idea that a rising tide raises all ships. I know that it is a little bit of a tired trope and it doesn't work perfectly but, you know, if we were to really struggle for a society that was really fair for all and that really attended to the very real problems at the margins, then that's only gonna further help everyone.

Norton: How do you get someone who, as I kind of said earlier, how do you get someone who just doesn't care that race still matters because they're in the majority and it doesn't really, to them, affect them?

Burke: You know... that's – that's a great question and in some ways I am spoiled. When I work with students, I have, you know... the shortest amount of time I have is three full days to work with students and – and most often I have 15 weeks in a semester... you know, I write books about this that I get to spend years on and - and – and hoping that someone will - will take the time to pick it up and read it, you know. I think in passing conversations, it's a little bit more challenging and I think you also signal what has also been called racial apathy, which is related but somewhat different. So apathy says 'I don't care', 'This doesn't affect me', but I think that's giving to be a harder and harder position to hold, as movements do the good work of helping us recognize the realities of ongoing racism and bias, seeing it as a life or death matter as the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has – has done in movements long before it also have, you know. I – I think we have to be able to recognize people's shared humanity and the common goals that I think many of us have across the political spectrum and to speak to people's best selves and the person that they want to need to be, to have good careers, to forge meaningful relationships in their families and their communities, and so, I actually remain pretty hopeful, but, this is what makes society complicated is – is that that's never gonna be uniform.

WGLT: That's Meghan Burke, Professor of Sociology at Illinois Wesleyan University speaking with GLT's Jon Norton about her new book *Colorblind Racism*. There's a community event planned related to the book at the Normal Public Library on April 1st. It's co-sponsored by Not In Our Town and the Black Lives Matter book club.