

## **“The Economics of the ‘N’ Word: It’s Deeper Than That”**

Let’s venture an opening volley: “All of the whoopla about the ‘N’ word is vacuous—at least from an economic perspective.”

The great 18<sup>th</sup> century British economist Adam Smith used economic agents as the basic building block of the economy. In a rational and material world, each individual should make decisions that are in their best interest. It really is all about taking actions that meet your needs and the needs of those about whom you care.

Black Americans’ preoccupation with the “N” word, in my opinion, does not reflect rational behavior. We expend an inordinate amount of time discussing, listening, and watching media focused on the word. Couldn’t we spend that time more effectively?

The time we spend on the “N” word ultimately serves the economic well-being of others. When we read about it in a newspaper, magazine, or book, we are placing money into the pockets of others. When we listen to it on the radio and watch it on television, we place money in the pockets of others. When we blow up media personalities because they use the word, then we make them more notorious/popular and place more money in their pockets.

Money from the pockets of Black Americans into that of others is a practice that has kept much of Black America poor. Why should we continue to follow this practice and impoverish ourselves?

Granted, “words make people.” And, yes, it is the thought that sparks the word. Therefore, it is important that Black Americans be aware that pernicious thoughts dwell in the minds of others in our society. But, since when has our society advocated thought control? To the extent that the society permits advertising, then the society does permit, and even celebrates, mind control. Given this reality, there are much more pernicious going ons that Black Americans should be concerned about. The bottom line is that we should be concerned about any process in our society/economy that has the potential to hamper or constrain our well-being—specifically, our economic well-being.

There are numerous mind-related phenomena, beyond advertising, that have an effect on economic outcomes for Black Americans. For many years now, I have argued that adverse media images of Black Americans cause non-Blacks to think negatively about us and to build up an aversion to conducting economic transactions with us on a “fair” basis and that “justify,” in others’ minds, a willingness to exploit Black Americans economically.

But it goes deeper than that. There are so many basic phenomena that are deeply ingrained in Western world culture that are anti-Black that should be attended to. Quoting from footnote 2 of Chapter One of *Black Americans and the Media: An Economic Perspective* (see <http://blackeconomics.org/page3.html>):

The English language is fraught with cases where that which is black or brown is associated with the unwanted: White is pure and clean, while black is dirty; in food, white is associated with “angel,” while black or brown is associated with “devil”; a white horse is gallant and a symbol of triumph, while a dark (black) horse has little chance of winning; and the ideal or joyous day of Christmas occurs when it is “white” with snow, while an adverse economic outcome, as in a stock market crash, is known as a black day—viz. the “Black Monday” that saw the stock market tumble on October 19, 1987.

Taking it one step further, the Western world has taken an essential element of life, food, and made it a metaphor for blackness as undesirable. We take rich and wholesome products that are brown in color and make them white—even though the transformation is harmful to our physical well-being. Why is white sugar preferred to brown sugar? Why is white flour and white bread preferred to brown or whole wheat bread? Why is white rice preferred to brown rice?

It is interesting to note that technology is evolving to dispel myths and to reveal the favorable properties of brown foods over the white foods. Could it be that “brownness” signals “goodness?”

So if Black Americans are concerned about thought control, we need to dig deeper than the “N” word and explore a basic tenet of the Western world to oppose all things brown and to, wherever possible, make them white.

The evidence shows, however, that when it comes to essential well-being, brownness often reflects basic goodness. We must recognize our basic goodness and cherish and celebrate it.

We can start by being rational economic agents, taking action to improve our own well-being at every turn; including discontinuing the practice of foolishly transferring wealth from our pockets and into the pockets of others. In a word, let’s discontinue our preoccupation with the “N” word and focus our energies on more subtle, yet more pernicious, elements in our world.

by

B. B. Robinson, Ph.D.