



BlackEconomics.org

“Science Will Obliterate Racism”

The United States and much of the world are affected adversely by race and racism. But race is an artificial construct that has little meaning when viewed through a science lens. Phenotypes are real, but they are very much determined by the interaction of chemical biological processes in human bodies, which are much more alike than they are different. Scientists are learning rapidly about these marginal differences in peoples of the world, and they will soon master manipulation of the chemical biological and genetic processes that make us different on the surface. More than anything else, mastery of melanin production and associated proteins in the body will make it possible in the not-too-distant future to determine skin pigmentation before or after birth. We are talking designer bodies and babies.

When we reach this point, what will race mean? If it is construed to mean skin color, then a switch can be flipped literally to alter that color—lighter or darker skin pigment is likely to become a choice variable for humans. In this environment, it may be possible to experience a reversal of the premium that is currently assigned to light skin if too many dark-skinned agents opt for light skin. This assumes that there is no inherent difference in the basic characteristics of dark- versus light-skinned agents, and that dark-skinned agents become rare.

If you are not light-skinned, and if you fear that racism will continue against those of dark skin into the future, then would you opt to take on light skin if that opportunity arose? Under these circumstances, you could enjoy the social, academic, and economic benefits of being light-skinned. Clearly, in today’s context, it could mean the difference between living below or above the poverty line. We believe that many dark-skinned Black Americans would choose light skin if they had an option simply based on the fact that so many Black Americans choose to wear “straight hair” or some variant thereof as opposed to wearing their natural curly or wooly hair—particularly Black females. The important point is that in the not-too-distant future light skin is likely to become a real option for those who want it. What will you do when this occurs?

This is not likely to be the only major change in our society that results from scientific and technological change. Given that these changes are on the horizon, should this inform our decisions about using our energy today to fight racism directly—speaking out, marching, boycotting, and writing about the subject? Would we be better served by using our energy to accelerate the scientific and technological changes that will disrupt current racist practices? Of course, a key consideration is that there are so few Black American scientists in the biology and genetics sciences who can help us decide exactly how to proceed on these issues.

Yes, there is the question of why Black America must adapt to avoid racism? Should White America be held harmless in this affair? Aren’t both sides responsible for solving racism? While

these questions are valid, the reality is that White America possesses the power to impose racism today, and we are left to decide whether it is in Black America's best interest to take voluntary action to respond to that power and avoid the related pain. This situation is akin to Black Americans' voluntary decision to respond to White America's aversion to our curly and wooly hair by straightening it.

The takeaway point is that, once we find it as easy to change skin pigmentation as it is to change our hair color, then, maybe, we will realize that racism based on skin pigmentation is asinine. Hopefully, such a realization will bring racism based on skin pigmentation to an abrupt end. Admittedly, we will then have to turn our attention to addressing "isms" that are based on other factors.

It is not always easy to see the big picture and to look into the future. But here is a case where the science is staring us in the face. Therefore, we would be well advised to consider forthcoming scientific and technological changes that might advantage us and seek to exploit them. At the same time, we must be careful to consider the implications (second- and third-order effects) of all known available choices to ensure that we make decisions that are both favorable in the short- and long-run. In this case, it is good to know that science has the potential to undo racism today that is based on skin pigmentation—or at least to make such racism much less meaningful.

BB Robinson

3/31/15

###-###