

#1 Why do racist incidents come as a surprise to many Americans?

Transcript

April Haynes From the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*, the podcast where professional historians answer your questions about the past. I'm April Haynes, Associate Chair and Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Emily Tran And I'm Emily Tran, a graduate student in the department. We're your hosts. Every episode, we bring a question submitted by an audience member to a historian here at UW-Madison, and we ask them to share their response. Today, our question centers on the issue of race relations in the 20th century, and it comes from Judge Daniel C. Moreno, who is a member of the Board of Visitors.

April Haynes The question is:

So many people seem surprised when racism became such a big part of politics in the past five years, because they assumed race relations had gotten better over time. Why do racist ideas and incidents come as a surprise, and what does history have to do with them?

Emily Tran To answer Judge Moreno's question, April sat down with Professor Paige Glotzer.

Paige Glotzer I have a pretty long title. I'm Paige Glotzer, Assistant Professor and John W. and Jeanne M. Rowe Chair in the History of American Politics, Institutions, and Political Economy at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

April Haynes So Professor Glotzer, has there been a sudden spike in racism in the United States since 2014, 2016, or 2017?

Paige Glotzer That's a great question. I do think that part of this answer really depends on how people think about history. I think there's a general sense that over time, things have been getting better, that there is a steady notion of progress. One reason why recent discussions about racism potentially are surprising to some people, though maybe not all, is that, in fact, when we look at history, there isn't a steady notion of progress. And that might inform how we can actually understand what's taking place today.

So when I think about how there isn't a steady notion of progress about race and race relations in American history, I actually think about something that *is* happening in the present, which is something called the racial wealth gap, in which we can actually look at vast inequality between especially African Americans and many white Americans. This comes to the fore in many different ways such as accumulated savings or access to homeownership. And actually, that is a gap that has been widening recently. So the racial wealth gap actually used to be smaller than it is now.

I think that's just one way of illustrating how we're not moving in a straight line of progress. So when we revisit this question of what is happening in the United States with conversations of race

and racism, we should keep in mind that we're actually dealing with something that's a little more complicated and doesn't always just get better.

That being said, in the past couple of years, there actually has been a spike by some measures in incidents of hate crimes, in incidents of racial violence, usually targeted against African Americans, though also many other groups, including immigrants, and including Muslim immigrants. So why might that be happening? And how can we put that in a historical context?

For many years, especially since the Civil Rights Act of the 1960s, there has been a kind of notion that legislatively, many of the most thorny and sort of demonstrable issues of racism such as Jim Crow segregation, were legislated away. And yet now, it seems like people are able to talk very explicitly about, about— well, in terms of hate. People who would potentially identify as white supremacist, political candidates who seek the support of white supremacists, are more openly talking in terms perhaps not heard in the mainstream since prior to the 1960s.

Does that mean that racism had actually gone away? I don't think so. And the racial wealth gap may be one way of getting at that. But I think that if we ask, “Well, what are the experiences of everyday Americans who face racism?” we can see that in fact, many issues of inequality have been there all along, percolating all along, such as issues of encountering police, segregation in schools, job discrimination, and lack of access to things like credit, and uneven mobility.

So, these are all issues where legislation has not solved the problem. And racism continues not only to exist but shape the power dynamics that essentially shape people's lives. So in the last couple of years, while discussion may have been more explicitly racist than perhaps people are familiar with, I would say that these issues have actually steadily been there all along, constantly shifting and changing, but always there.

April Haynes Thanks, Professor Glotzer. I'm curious to know more about the history of the racial wealth gap. How far back does it go? And how did it start?

Paige Glotzer There are different versions of this answer. And as a historian, there's always the question of how far do we want to go back in looking at these roots. I'll identify a couple of places that go back actually before the 20th century, because I think the legacies of certain things that happened in the 19th century help us understand the racial wealth gap.

The first of these is what happened when enslavement ended after the Civil War. To understand essentially that story, it's important to look at the different laws created, especially by white Southerners, to try and actually recreate the conditions of slavery by any other name. Some of these included making it very difficult for newly emancipated African Americans to own property, to accumulate any type of money, to put money in a bank, or to get decent jobs.

In fact, there were a series of laws passed called Black Codes, in which former enslavers or slave owners try to actually channel African Americans into very low-paying jobs, where they would have no say at all about their labor conditions. So, this created the conditions of essentially massive inequality, that even though you had the end of slavery, you still had a lot of labor exploitation and a lot of discrimination that stopped African Americans from having equal opportunities.

Now, that was a long time ago. So why does that matter for today's racial wealth gap? That created a divergence in opportunity that only compounded over time with the rise of Jim Crow.

So, with the rise of Jim Crow, some of those Black Codes were essentially formalized in laws all over the country, making it, again, really difficult to accumulate wealth in the same ways that whites could, who were not restricted by this legislation.

I work on the history of housing segregation. And for me, there's actually one particular moment in the Jim Crow era, where you can really see the contours of today's racial wealth gap solidifying and that legislation has never been able to fully correct for. That happened during the Great Depression, and it was with something called redlining.

Redlining was one of the first *federal* housing policies in the United States. So, we're going from state and local laws, which informed Jim Crow, to something that was national. Redlining happened when the federal government tried to help certain homeowners during the Great Depression who are having trouble getting mortgages or potentially paying their mortgages. So, the federal government created maps of cities across the country, and they created criteria by which an area's property would have value.

Now, one of the main criteria was the race of people who live there. So, what they did was they actually solidified a notion that African Americans had property that was worth less than property owned by white people.

In the United States, housing is one of the main vehicles of wealth. So, if race was determining property value, that meant that, by federal legislation, African Americans would have less wealth in their homes—even if they managed to own homes—than other groups. That was then something that was passed down generationally. Wealth is passed down generationally. And again, property value made a big difference.

So even when do you had the landmark Civil Rights Act of the 1960s, and then you also had an end to many types of housing discrimination that were made illegal in the late 1960s, you still had these notions of value *completely* tied up with race. Housing also then impacts where you go to school, what types of jobs you can get, it impacts many different things. And so, you have essentially this web of inequality that could not be, again, legislated away.

Now, the Civil Rights Act did create a lot of different protections that actually helped to reduce the racial wealth gap temporarily. But some of those have actually been undone, such as voting protections recently. So, along with the Great Recession, you're starting to see that wealth gap increase again for the first time in several decades.

April Haynes That's a really powerful story and a really important one.

I'm thinking about the remark that you made earlier about how sometimes, we had legislative maneuvers that seemed to be addressing and even do temporarily address a serious structural issue. And then spikes in violence actually reveal that there are underlying attitudinal changes that haven't occurred, actually.

So, can you tell us a little bit about that history going all the way back to the origins of this wealth gap? Was violence used to help produce inequalities in wealth? Or was it always policy?

Paige Glotzer Violence has been one of the main drivers of enforcing different types of what are called structural inequalities. This may be policy, but it may be something like how laws are enforced, it might be about where people could live, it could be potentially where schools would be sited, or what businesses people could operate and where. So, violence has actually been an inseparable part of the American essentially racial experience.

Generally, racial violence is one of the main drivers of disempowering people, especially African Americans. If we go back to Reconstruction and some of the Black Codes that I mentioned earlier, one of the ways they were enforced was through the threat of lynching: so, the idea that if an African American potentially tried to exercise political power, or tried to advance somehow socially, that they were in violation of some type of social norm, and they would potentially be met with violence, potentially death. And so, the Black Codes and violence went hand in hand in trying to again recreate a social order that existed before the Civil War.

And I think it's really important to highlight, since we're talking about the wealth gap, the economic imperatives of lynching. Perhaps the most vivid images of lynching are of hangings. But lynching actually took forms of collective violence against African American wealth and African Americans who were successful.

I think if we look at one of the major examples that's actually been in the media recently with the *Watchmen* TV show is the burning of Tulsa in the early 1920s, where a very, very prosperous Black business district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was targeted systematically for destruction, and it included help from federal authorities from local police in a way that was essentially enacting violence against Black wealth.

So, lynching was not necessarily an *ad hoc* mob action against one little incident here or there. But it was actually, over time, a pattern of directed violence against Black prosperity that then worked in concert with various laws. And in fact, throughout much of the early 20th century, it would be common to find lawmakers being part of the Ku Klux Klan: sheriffs, mayors, congresspeople. And so, they're really intertwined.

April Haynes One thing I was thinking about when you were talking about the sort of recent history and the context of the late 20th and early 21st century was part of this story about this recent spike is that it's in part embedded in a backlash against the Obama presidency. And I just wonder if you can speak to other periods in history where we can measure spikes in racist or hate crime events after political change, like the one that we saw in 2008.

Paige Glotzer That's a great question. And I think there are a couple of different processes at work there. But I do think that, again, returning to Reconstruction, because I think, of all the different periods, there's a lot of parallels between Reconstruction and today. In fact, I think certain scholars and commentators have called the period we're living in now the Second Reconstruction.

One of the reasons why is that, right after the Civil War, there was actually unprecedented opportunity for Black political power, formal Black political power. So, for the very first time in American history, in the 1860s, you actually had Black congressmen, senators, mayors. That was

actually one of the reasons for that backlash, if you will, that I've discussed in terms of white Southerners, though not exclusively white Southerners. Jim Crow was also in northern and western phenomenon, it just looked a little different. But that's important to emphasize.

But part of the violence and part of the cracking down of Reconstruction that I mentioned, was because of fear of what Black political power would mean for the white status quo. So, this idea of a social order being potentially disrupted, that needed to be restored through violence, and through essentially any attempt to disempower African Americans who are primarily the ones voting in people who are now serving in office for the first time.

So, to bring that to a parallel to Obama. Obama is very much considered the end the racism by certain white people saying, "Now there's a Black president, therefore racism is solved. We did it," regardless of looking at potentially the huge difficulties Obama faced it getting elected, which were very much racially inflected. For instance, President Trump, before he was president, leading a drive to search for Obama's birth certificate. Those types of opposition are racially specific, meaning that a white candidate, even if they had potentially endorsed all the same policies as Obama, would not have faced those particular forms of criticism or opposition. So, I think that's something to keep in mind.

But I do think that if we're going to look at backlash, one thing that we're seeing is the end of something called colorblindness. After the 1960s, it became less acceptable in mainstream politics to talk explicitly about racial disparity. Some of the most ardent racists, such as Wallace—George Wallace—would actually formally shore up their political position by talking about how white people were superior to Black people, including stopping small Black children from going to school.

As that became less politically acceptable, different forms of talking about race and racism—and different forms of racism, I should say—took what was called a colorblind approach to discourse. So, for instance, people started talking not about how Black people affected property values, but about where are the good schools?

That doesn't mean that those older currents went away. But I think that colorblindness came to dominate mainstream politics in such a way that it masked the extent to which racism continued to function in a *huge* way up to Obama's presidency, and then after Obama's presidency. One potential product of the Obama presidency is that it showed the cracks in sort of how far colorblindness could go as being a mask for talks of racism.

So, what we have now after Obama is, I think, a constituency of Americans who feel much more emboldened to be much more explicit about white supremacist views. But an interesting legacy of colorblindness is people still find it offensive to be called a racist. So, it's become an insult rather than characterization of what people are doing.

April Haynes I wonder if we were to broaden out this conversation, because you originally sort of began with the acknowledgement that a lot of the racial conflict has, in fact, involved people who are non-Black people of color, so, immigrant communities. How do their experience fit into the racial wealth gap?

Paige Glotzer The racial wealth gap doesn't just affect African Americans. It's important to see the way that the racial wealth gap affects actually a whole range of different groups, albeit differently.

One way that we can see this is with people who identify as Latinx, who also face barriers to accumulating and passing on wealth that has its own history that's intertwined with anti-Black racism, but also comes from a bit of a separate history relating to immigration policy, related to questions of border patrol, and are geographically sometimes a bit different.

So, if you look at the numbers, by far African Americans have essentially lost out the most in the racial wealth gap, but the Latinos wealth gap is still substantial. And I should also note these things cut across gender lines as well. Because there are different layers and different types of discrimination that work together, this means that even though we're talking about racial groups, if you look at say, African American *women*, or Latinx *women*, you're going to even see a bigger gap versus white people of any gender than you would if you, say, look at African Americans as a whole, or people who identified Latinos as a whole.

That indicates that the racial wealth gap is about so many more factors than simply owning a house. But we can also look at how wealth is tied into so many opportunities in daily life that not everyone gets equally.

April Haynes I also wonder if you could speak a little bit to the question of how political economy and class affect white expressions of racism. So, there's part of this narrative that it's working class white people who embody American racism. Can you speak to the history of that idea? And do you have any evidence that that is or is not the case?

Paige Glotzer There is a class history here and a history of geography that changes the narrative that folks who most support white supremacists or who are white supremacist themselves are potentially poor white people in rural areas. That's simply not what the numbers show. And I think that that's a good reason to think about how housing segregation may have also created our current political landscape.

Access to the suburbs in the 20th century has been one of the main drivers of wealth, but there is also a way in which access to the suburbs depends on maintaining segregation. And whether or not suburbanites will potentially know that history, I think there are different ways in which race matters in how suburbs are still successful. I mentioned schools, for instance. Tax bases is another one.

So, there's essentially, amongst many suburbanites, an anti-urban basis where many suburbanites say, "I don't want to support poor people with my taxes." Political candidates, especially over the last 30 years, have tried to equate cities with minorities. And where you see that constituency that most believes that and then votes according to that rhetoric is suburbanites.

In addition, I think that the suburbs, the American suburbs, have this aspirational quality that also is really important for understanding why certain candidates may be appealing. Suburbs seem to represent upward mobility, meaning that someone who lives in the suburbs may fully believe that they are there by their own effort. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and any success that they've had has not been due to federal policy or anything, even though if they look around, they're going to see a very segregated space.

That set of factors—of emphasizing individual success, of being anti-tax and public services, of essentially seeing how racial segregation has somehow led to seemingly a nice space—are all

indicators that potentially candidates who espouse rhetoric of small government, for instance, or racist policies, for instance, may be more appealing. That's not to put a blanket statement on suburbanites being racist or suburbanites all being white. But I do think that there is a longer history there of moving to the suburbs and living in the suburbs as indicators that perhaps people who are willing to embrace more conservative rhetoric, especially since the 1970s

April Haynes So, how did we get this idea that it's really the rural white poor who are the icons of American racism? How far back do you think that goes? What's the history there?

Paige Glotzer I think there might be multiple origin points to that. But there is a long history of wealthy politicians trying to essentially split people across class lines by talking about race.

I think that you see a concerted effort amongst certain wealthier politicians and also wealthier donors to try and paint rural America as potentially backwards, because they're not necessarily a constituency that's going to hold a lot of power. There are moments in American history where this has been politically expedient to write off the organizing capacity of rural Americans or the progressive tendencies of certain rural Americans. And I think those all come at moments of political realignment and rupture.

So, for instance, Wisconsin—including rural Wisconsin—was at the forefront of the Progressive Era. However, after deindustrialization happened, it was easier for—in the 1960s, 1970s, it was much easier for politicians to, rather than try to be held accountable for changing economic conditions in rural America, to try and play up issues of race and racism. But then, essentially, that got written into a narrative where rural Americans are poor and racist.

What I think you see instead in a lot of rural America is a *huge* multiplicity of political values. I don't think that organizational capacity has gone away. I think that it's actually quite important to see progressive political organizing, union organizing, anti-racist organizing that goes on throughout the country, far away from cities. Those are voices that are potentially going to be important counterpoints, not only to this narrative, but to the political future of rural America itself.

April Haynes One thing that struck me about your answer was the word *backwards* and just in light of the original question that started the whole conversation, the idea that things have been moving forward over time. And suddenly there's an eruption of violence or explicit hate speech, and this is a surprise.

I guess I just wonder, who does it surprise if there's this group that has been thought of as constantly holding steady as the racist other? There's this kind of group in this narrative that isn't moving forward, that's always there as the kind of symbolic repository of racist attitudes, and that's rural or poor white people. And then there's everybody else who apparently is surprised when there are flare-ups. So, I guess I just want to talk about the temporal quality of this.

Paige Glotzer Yeah, it does seem to flatten the many lived experiences Americans have. I think that's a great moment to think, “Well, perhaps we should pause and see: is that something that's actually— does it hold water?” And I mean, I think the answer is “no.”

It's almost like a fiction to think that we can potentially flatten large chunks of the American public into particular political boxes. I don't think it's easy to place people in particular political boxes, regardless of race, or gender, or geography.

But this question of *who*. Who might hold certain views? Who might we expect to hold certain views? Why are people surprised? Who is surprised? These are all very important questions to ask, I think in a self-reflective way. Because if a person truly is surprised, perhaps they might need to sit with the discomfort that comes from the idea that some of their fellow Americans would actually think this is business as usual. Not surprising. So, why perhaps, is there such a disconnect between different segments of the population, that we actually get these hugely different views over racism or racial discourse being surprising to people.

In some of the places that I studied my research (segregated suburbs), regardless of the political views of suburbanites, a white suburbanite in some of these places, they potentially feel disconnected from some of the issues that maybe an African American a mile away would feel.

In the case of Baltimore, which is the city that I do a lot of my research on, this is actually a problem for trying to organize people for change. So, one thing to perhaps consider is, if people are truly surprised by what seems like a sudden outburst of racism, how can they potentially talk to other people or think about the experiences of people who may live very close to them, who would actually be different enough to say, “No, I've experienced racism my whole life,” or “This is something that I've heard people say to me, you know, just on the streets.”

So, I think that disconnect is what leads to surprise. And I think it takes a certain type of proactive effort on surprised people to maybe see how there are actually different experiences that have been out there all along.

April Haynes Can you think any historical sources that you've uncovered in your own research in which people who experience racism in a continuous way have tried to communicate that to a white public?

Paige Glotzer Unfortunately, it seems like a constant uphill battle for, essentially, groups—whether they are groups that are perhaps well known, like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], or even say, the Congressional Black Caucus—let's go with really well-known and groups that are even part of the political establishment.

The act of constantly having to explain and re-explain and justify why racism exists and why it's a problem takes up a lot of air in a conversation. And I think that it actually inspires certain anxieties amongst activists in those organizations that, maybe, this isn't the best way to build solidarity.

If, for decades and decades or even centuries, people have been trying to share their own experiences about racism for a more privileged or powerful audience, and they're still getting surprise—I think there's something there where people aren't listening or not caring or perhaps are able to turn the other way, because it doesn't affect them as white Americans, perhaps in the same way.

I think this is what leads to really different kinds of wonderfully robust Black intellectual history of different attitudes about how to organize and an anti-racist way with white allies, or try to say, “You

know what? We know what's going on, we understand our lived experiences. Perhaps there are alternate forms of political organizing we need to do because people may not care.”

I think this is actually exactly at the heart of why you see a huge range of political strategies that community organizers, major groups, and politicians and political activists have tried to use to potentially make change.

April Haynes Can you think of any sources in your that listeners interested in this subject could consult?

Paige Glotzer Yes, there's actually a couple of sets of documents that I've studied. For instance, one's called restrictive covenants. These are a set of legal restrictions that can be attached to the deed of a house. So, any property owner is bound by the rules set in the covenant.

Now, even if people have heard of restrictive covenants, sometimes the actual language of racial restrictions is shocking to people in how explicit and thorough it could be. So, the idea that housing segregation exists doesn't surprise people, but when they see the actual wording that was used in order to do the segregating, that can be a shock.

That language was then picked up by city governments, by federal governments, by realtors. Even though it seems like a shocking anomaly, actually, this explicit language is very much what informs all sorts of other developments in housing segregation, even when you can't necessarily see the same language as clearly right there in a document.

And that's actually one of the ways in my research that I connect what housing developers have done throughout the late 19th and early 20th century to federal housing policy in the 1940s. I actually argue that the legacy of those policies is still very much alive and well, because that very language that was set out by developers in restrictive covenants in the 1890s is actually still something you find traces of in legislation today, in homeowners agreements today, and also in assessors who assign value to property. You still see it.

I think that that shock value becomes, again, surprise, if we're going to use that term, at just how pervasive and how enduring housing segregation can be.

April Haynes Wow, thanks so much for sharing your knowledge with us. Professor Glotzer, I understand that you have a new book coming out soon. Can you tell us a little bit about that book?

Paige Glotzer I can. It's called *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing*. It's going to actually be published this spring, potentially around May. And in it, I trace how suburban housing developers experimented with segregation in ways that then became enduring federal policies. I look at the people, the money and the geography that gave us a segregated American landscape.

April Haynes Great. I want to ask you one final question. Why do you love history?

Paige Glotzer I think history provides the best possible toolset for understanding the present. I love looking around and going, “Why are things the way they are?” Oftentimes, by digging deep into history—actually, sometimes not even so deep, just by scratching the *surface* of history—we can not

only get a better understanding of why things are the way they are, but we potentially can get ideas about how to change things.

April Haynes Great. Thanks so much.

Paige Glotzer Thank you.

Michael D. Hi, I'm Michael DeLeers. I'm a junior history major at UW-Madison. I love history because I feel it's very present.

Reed T. I'm Reed Trueblood. I'm an undergraduate here at UW-Madison. I'm a senior. And I love history because I like understanding why people acted the way they did, and learning about the social and historical context for people's actions.

Katie K. My name is Katie. I'm an undergrad at UW-Madison. And I love history because it helps to show about a time that I was not alive, and helps to inform me about so many things I wouldn't have known otherwise and learn about people of different cultures and things like that.

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We want to hear from you! Send us your feedback and, of course, your questions. What would *you* ask a historian? Our email address is outreach@history.wisc.edu. Until next time, thanks for listening.