

Commentary: Systemic racism? What about the sexual revolution?

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(RNS)—This weekend in Charlottesville, Va., not far from where I live, two statues of Confederate generals—one of Robert E. Lee and the other of Stonewall Jackson—were taken down after being erected, not following the Civil War as some might assume, but in the 20th century, during the era of Jim Crow.

Just four years ago, the park where Lee was honored had been the site of a Unite the Right rally that claimed the lives of one counter-protester and two state police officers. That event was a horrible tragedy with repercussions of its own. But even before these events, generations of citizens lived daily with these monuments to men who had fought to enslave and abuse their ancestors.

The weekend before, my own community marked the 60th anniversary of the closing of the public pools, because the city preferred to have no children swim rather than to allow Black children to swim, too. Later, the pools were filled in with cement. One of those concrete graves sits moldering in the park to this day, another kind of monument to human cruelty.

Such monuments are everywhere and come in many forms: a statue of a revered segregationist outside the government halls that today are supposed to protect all citizens; a slave block standing in a town square; a school's or employer's requirement to wear hair in a way it will not go; the job that never was obtained because of an interview that never was granted

because of the name on the application; a lesser family home accepted because the chance for a better one was denied by redlining.

The long effects of law

Laws may be history, but their effects are very present. This is what people mean when they talk about systemic or structural racism. Systemic racism, simply defined recently by the Aspen Institute, is a “system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity.”

Systemic racism doesn’t refer to individual racist or bigoted attitudes that anyone—of any color—may or may not have. Rather, systemic racism refers to how a culture shaped by racist laws, policies and attitudes affects *everyone* in that culture.

Culture cultivates, after all.

Some people resist the existence of systemic racism, because it’s a concept popularized by critical race theory, an academic framework with links to Marxist theories, postulating “race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies.”

But one need not embrace critical race theory—I certainly don’t—in order to recognize systemic racism exists and has ongoing ripple effects that can’t always be identified or contained. Just as you don’t have to be a feminist to acknowledge sexism exists, or be a postmodernist to understand the power of stories, or be an environmentalist to put your trash in a can instead of on the side of the road, you don’t have to support critical race theory to see the lingering effects of racial injustice today.

From revolution to system

If you still don't believe in systemic racism, let's talk about the sexual revolution.

The sexual revolution that started in the 1960s—spread through popular culture, enacted by the masses and codified in law—is now as pervasive and inescapable as the pop-up ads on our computer screens. Almost no home, family or person has been unaffected by it.

Not long after the sexual revolution began, *Time Magazine*, in a 1964 cover story, called it “a revolution of mores and an erosion of morals,” likening the shift to “a big machine (that) works on its subjects continuously, day and night.”

From innumerable screens and stages, posters and pages, it flashes the larger-than-life-sized images of sex. From countless racks and shelves, it pushes the books that a few years ago were considered pornography. From myriad loudspeakers, it broadcasts the words and rhythms of pop-music erotica. And constantly, over the intellectual Muzak, comes the message sex will save you and libido make you free.

In other words, the revolution became—and continues to be—*systemic*. Today, any *individual* striving to resist the lure of sexual sin not only has his or her own temptations and weaknesses to contend with, but also an entire social, cultural and legal *system*, too.

Now, anyone wishing to avoid partaking in any fruits of the sexual revolution would have to opt out of television, newspaper, magazines, movies, sports, shopping malls and highways that allow billboards—and this list hardly is exhaustive.

While not perfectly analogous, systemic racism operates in a similar

way—except systemic racism has existed in our country, not for a few generations, but for a few centuries. Just like the sexual revolution, systemic racism developed a society that advanced certain values and beliefs through laws, language, imagery, ideas, cultural artifacts, values and beliefs, all of which have been passed along through the generations in ways both implicit and explicit.

One's as bad as the other

It's perplexing to me that the same conservative Christian community of which I am a part—the one that decries the deleterious and nearly inescapable effects of a sexual revolution built into our national laws, culture and institutions—can deny the racist systems upon which our nation was founded and built cannot be equally pervasive and damaging. Even if the most egregious racist laws have been overturned, that doesn't mean their effects are erased.

Ideas that take root in a culture—whether intentional or inadvertent, conscious or unconscious, incidental or systemic—have an uncontainable influence. This is, in fact, the very premise of the culture wars that have been fought by evangelicals for decades, which show no signs of letting up.

I was formed by and came of age in those culture wars. When I learned years ago what abortion is—what it does to an unborn child and to the woman carrying that child—a fire was lit in me. Abortion wounds and kills, just as the sexual revolution that birthed abortion-on-demand wounds and kills.

Racism wounds and kills, too. All assaults against bearers of God's image do.

These are not just individual sins, but are entrenched and engrained in our culture. They are systemic. If sexual sin can reshape a culture in our

attitudes, laws, policies, values and beliefs in ways we can't always see or recognize, so can the sin of racism. And I'm begging my brothers and sisters in my conservative evangelical camp to stop pretending otherwise.

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