Dog Whistle Politics

Dog Whistling—During the New Deal, the Democratic Party fused a coalition of the white working class, in the South and North, as well as blacks and liberals outside the South. The equality gains of blacks during the civil rights movement—or more precisely, the anxiety it produced in some whites—created an opportunity to drive a wedge through the New Deal coalition, and the GOP seized it.

That same sea change in race had made open appeals to white dominance impossible, so politicians adapted by shifting to dog whistles: terms like "inner-city crime" and "silent majority" that on their surface were silent about race but just underneath coursed with racial imagery. Rather than ending, racism in American politics went underground—and then went national. Lyndon Johnson in 1964 is the last Democrat to win a majority of the white vote; when Richard Nixon won re-election in 1972 with 70% of the white vote, including that of many union members, the New Deal coalition truly was shattered.

Early dog whistling largely demonized blacks as criminals and welfare cheats; more recently, this has expanded to include Latinos as illegal aliens and Muslims as terrorists. At the same time, racial dog whistles form part of a larger culture war that includes attacks on sexual orientation and women.

Demonizing Government—Notwithstanding the energy dog whistle politicians pour into scapegoating vulnerable groups, stimulating hatred is not their main aim. Instead, their principal goal is to exploit dog whistle politics to trash good government and to win support for policies that overwhelmingly empower the very rich. Dog whistling stokes rage against despised groups, and then directs this anger at government, alleging that government favors minorities over the silent majority. The right then offers a set of anti-government "solutions" that cut taxes for the richest, slash support for programs that build a prosperous working class, and rewrite the rules to favor corporations.

Bipartisan Whistling—Republican politicians pioneered dog whistling and have come to master it with help from conservative media organs and think tanks like Fox News and the American Enterprise Institute. With Bill Clinton, Democrats followed suit, and though this is still predominantly a GOP strategy, both parties now have a history of pitching coded messages to racially fearful voters.

The Problem is Whiteness—The people most easily misled subscribe to "whiteness," the sense that fair or dark features connote something foundational about individual and group character and capacity. Sometimes people identify with whiteness consciously, but more often they do so as a matter of routine racism. White people can fall victim to this conceit, but so can more well-off and more fair-featured people of color.

Demography is Not Going to Save Us—Many react to our country's changing racial demographics by becoming more, not less, racially fearful and politically conservative. Meanwhile, significant segments of the Hispanic and Asian American communities are susceptible to dog whistle appeals. Dog whistling must be actively defeated.

The Racisms Underpinning Dog Whistle Politics

Racism Takes Many Forms—The right routinely pretends that racism must be malicious. While the brutal murders in Charleston, South Carolina, tragically remind us there is still much hate-filled racism in society, most racism today takes other guises. Insisting that racism must always wear hooded robes or brandish tattooed swastikas ultimately serves the right's political interests, because this definition implies that racism is largely past, and it obscures how the right constantly exploits racial panic.

Coded Racism—Terms like welfare queen, thug, illegal alien, Muslim terrorist, the poor, decent folks, the silent majority, middle class, heartland—these are all "dog whistles," words that are silent about race on one level, but that on another trigger strong racial associations. They are examples of coded racism: terms that do not expressly reference race and so seem race-neutral, but that incite powerful racial reactions.

Routine Racism—Racism shapes our everyday understanding of the world, even for people who mean well, and even among people of color. Much of our thinking is done by our unconscious minds. But while we are programmed to perceive group differences, we are *not* hardwired to think in terms of race. The routine power of racial stereotypes over our unconscious minds reflects not nature, but the culture and built environment in the United States. Dog whistle politics aims to manipulate decent folks who reject hate-filled racism, and yet remain trapped by routine racism.

Strategic Racism—This is the most important form of racism driving dog whistle politics. Strategic racism is the decision to stoke the racial fears and hatreds of others for ulterior ends. The strategy behind dog whistle politics is to carefully craft coded terms that spark racial anxiety and engender anger toward government, while simultaneously hiding the racism from both opponents and supporters.

Recognizing that politicians, think tanks, and media organs are pursuing strategic racism gets us beyond whether dog whistlers are personally bigots. That question is irrelevant to the crucial point that for demagogues, racism is a tool, a weapon. The focus on strategic racism also helps us see how racism hurts *everyone,* whites included. The strategy behind dog whistling is to divide and conquer, to the detriment of the whole society.

Colorblindness—The right's version of colorblindness claims that racism exists when race is expressly mentioned, whether by a bigot or indeed by anyone. This makes colorblindness a handy shield for defending dog whistle politics, because coded race-baiting makes no explicit reference to race. It's also an effective weapon against the critics of dog whistling, for the second we allege racism, we can be assailed for playing the race card by talking about race. Thus the right constantly punches race into the conversation through loaded language, parries any charge of racism by insisting they said nothing about race, and then punches back by calling their critics the real racists.

Fighting Back

Class AND Race—The insight that racism is used to divide workers too often has been taken to imply that, since it's workers being splintered, the "real" issue is class, and therefore the fight against racism should wait. This class-not-race approach leaves white workers vulnerable to continued racial manipulation. It also alienates workers of color who have very real racial grievances. The solution is to stress class AND race:

> **Whites concerned about pocketbook issues** need to be shown that when they listen to racial appeals they jeopardize their economic lives—their work conditions and wages, their pensions, the education and future of their children.

> **People of color focused foremost on racial justice** need to be shown that bringing in class creates room for transforming whites from opponents into allies in the effort to combat racism—necessary allies, because racial politics drives the largest contemporary calamities besetting minority communities, from mass incarceration to urban disinvestment to mass deportation.

A New Identity—Progress requires much more than emphasizing shared interests. The right understands that it's not just bank balances but people's sense of self, their ability to feel proud and respected, that motivates them—and so they manipulate anxieties around eroding social position. To respond successfully, labor must work to build pride in a new and inclusive identity resistant to divide-and-conquer tactics—an identity of people for each other, not fearful of each other.

Building a Movement—The need to lift up a new sense of belonging implies the need for unions to participate in something bigger than labor actions. Unions should see themselves as key drivers of a new social movement with roots in the workplace that aims to give all Americans a reinvigorated and inclusive sense of common identity and shared purpose.

Good Government—The most important single goal unifying any new movement should be the demand that government serve people rather than the powerful. If government continues to be for the rich, then on every issue—from wages to workplace conditions, from schools to infrastructure—workers will be fighting over crumbs.

The focus on dog whistle politics simultaneously addresses race and class, because in the United States, these are inseparably intertwined. **No progress can be made in terms of economic justice or racial justice without focusing on economic and racial justice together.**

About the Author

Ian Haney López is a leading thinker on racism's evolution since the civil rights movement. His most recent book, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, exposes how politicians exploit racial pandering to gin up support for policies that ultimately favor the very rich. Haney López is a senior fellow at Demos and the director of thē Racial Politics Project at the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. He holds an endowed chair as the Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at the University of California, Berkeley, where he teaches in the areas of race and constitutional law.

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DOG WHISTLE POLITICS

HOW **CODED RACIAL APPEALS** HAVE
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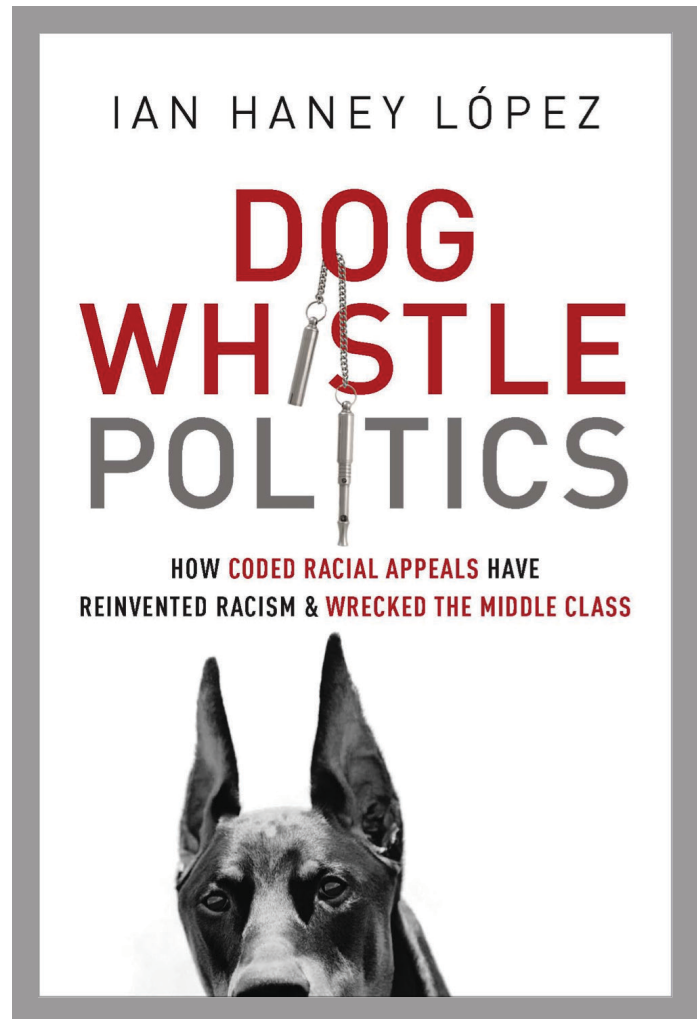
RACE AND ECONOMIC JEOPARDY FOR ALL:
A Framing Paper for Defeating Dog Whistle Politics

A literal dog whistle cannot be heard by human ears; as a metaphor, it describes coded messages that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites.

For the last several decades the fundamental pattern in American politics has been a dog whistle competition with both parties appealing to the racially anxious while largely favoring the very rich.
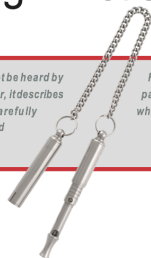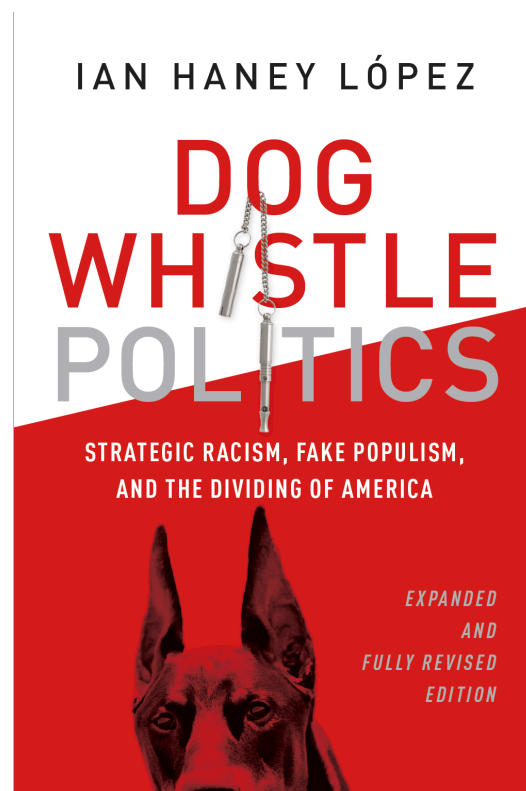
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AND THE DIVIDING OF AMERICA**

*EXPANDED
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FULLY REVISED
EDITION*

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