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Gingrich in the land of racism and religiosity

The former House Speaker is a master of using language he thinks supporters want to hear but did he hear them?

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Gingrich's southern roots enabled him to appeal to the racism and religiosity of South Carolina [GALLO/GETTY]

I lived there for almost a decade, so I'm familiar with the challenge of covering politics in the US South. The challenge stems from that region's peculiar social phenomenon: double consciousness.

Basically, seeing shouldn't always be believing. During the GOP primaries in South Carolina, I smiled to myself when I read reporting that was awed by churches that look like shacks, trios of wooden crosses mounted on roadsides and highway billboards admonishing drivers that they must be born again. I was reminded of HL Mencken, ever the cosmopolitan aesthete, failing to comprehend the pentecostal essence of public life there. And like Mencken, the reporting I read was factual, credible and sometimes funny, but often unable to see through the veil of culture to concrete truth.

Like the US as a whole, the land is soaked with religiosity and racism, but unlike the rest of the country, the land has been soaking in them for about 400 years. The result is that religion and racism are completely natural features in the landscape of public affairs - and that to notice would be like noticing the air you breathe and the water you drink, and doing that is to stand outside of the normal patterns of political life.

As such, they are like a thick mist lingering over a salt marsh obscuring the journalist's view, so that they can't see why a millionaire such as Newt Gingrich can crush a millionaire such as Mitt Romney, even though they are, politically and ideologically, pretty much the same dude.

The best explanation is the simplest: the former House Speaker from Georgia was on his home turf. He is master of the Southern language, a complex vernacular rooted in centuries of saying what you don't really mean and meaning what you're not really saying - or a combination thereof that was perfected in order to maintain power over black slaves who vastly outnumbered their white masters. Gingrich assumed of his GOP wingers a kind of shared culture of bigotry. He didn't have to explain what he is; instead he could spend this time attacking everything his opponents were not. He redirected the ever-present anxieties of his supporters toward straw men whom he theatrically set aflame for his and his audience's pleasure.

And yet, in this deepest of economic nadirs in eight decades, even racists worry about where their next paycheck comes from. Among the salient facts that emerged after Gingrich's victory (41 per cent to Romney's 27) is that four-fifths of voters said they were concerned about the economy, according to the Associated Press.

Some of these voters roared when Gingrich dressed down Juan Williams, a respected black journalist, for asking whether his comment about President Obama's being a "food-stamp president" was "racially insensitive"; some of these voters booed CNN's John King for asking Gingrich about his second wife's allegations that he once demanded an open marriage. How can voters applaud a culture warrior like Gingrich and yet be nearly statistically unanimous in their concern over the Great Recession, a hugely important issue that Gingrich is uniquely qualified to mishandle? "Cognitive dissonance" is one way of describing it. Another is double consciousness.

The inestimable WEB Du Bois coined the phrase in an essay written years after Reconstruction had given way to Jim Crow apartheid. He was trying to understand the psychological trauma wrought by centuries of chattel slavery and white violence. The result, he wrote, is a two-ness, a sense of self that is not of the self but a self that comes "through the eyes of others". Blacks are "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings". They are American and not American, and African-American history is "the history of this strife - this

longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self". Du Bois expressed an enlightened hope that African Americans might one day move forward as a people into what these days we'd call self-actualisation.

I don't mean to compare Du Bois and African-Americans to Gingrich and his supporters. Far from it. Yet doubleness, an unreconciled striving, sheds at least some light on why some white Southern voters are so often smitten by the likes of Gingrich, while at the same time expressing deep-seated anxiety about their economic self-interests - and it explains why journalists, many of them dispatched by editors in the Northeast, often can't see through the haze of race-baiting and Bible-thumping to what's really happening.

Self-actualisation, after all, isn't built on bigotry and faith, but on concrete things, such as jobs, health care and education. From economic security springs forth individual freedom, not the other way around. Meanwhile, South Carolina has a jobless rate of nearly ten per cent. Of those on food stamps, 15 per cent are white. Of those on the poverty line, 30 per cent are children. The state is ranked tenth of those with the most foreclosures.

What does Gingrich have to offer?

Tirades on the poor work habits of poor children, the immorality of food stamps and the evils of the media. In terms of policy, Gingrich has said he believes that jobs will magically appear if only the Federal Reserve would focus completely on keeping inflation low, even though that very policy has yielded little since 2009.

Yet even in the South, this land of racism and religiosity, there's only so far a guy like Gingrich can go using the rhetoric of tribalism. Eventually, a serious candidate for president must stop saying what he is not and start saying what he is, and in doing so, he must clearly outline what he will do to address the basic human needs that we all have, whether we're racist or not.

That might be impossible for Gingrich. A zero-sum game has been the foundation of his career. Only when someone loses does he win. In short, Gingrich has no core. His self is truly a self that comes through the eyes of others. While Du Bois believed African-Americans' "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" would metamorphose into a proud new American humanity, Gingrich's two souls and two thoughts don't synthesise, so much as self-destruct.

Eventually, voters, even the racist ones whom liberals love to hate, will stop allowing Gingrich to assume a shared culture, because a shared culture only gets you so far when you're sick, out of work or struggling to build a better future for your children. After all, many a Southerner said he hated the New Deal until they realised the New Deal's social programs would yank the South out of feudalism and into modernity.

Gingrich told his supporters what he thought they wanted to hear, but he wasn't hearing what they were really saying. The economy. It's bad. We need help. He believes in rhetoric alone instead of the substance that rhetoric is supposed to reflect. Such is the irony of the South's peculiar form of double consciousness. Even a master of the language can become its slave.