John Oliver: 'The model minority myth is a tool of white supremacy and a trap'

The Last Week Tonight host breaks down the problematic history of "Asian American" and the caustic toll of the "model minority" myth

John Oliver on Asian Americans and the "model minority" myth: "There is no nice racism, there is no silver lining to it, and there is no working your way out of it."

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John Oliver tackled the complicated history of the umbrella term "Asian American" on Sunday's Last Week Tonight, and outlined the caustic toll of the model minority myth, a stereotype "as persistent as it is problematic."

The HBO host first dug into the history and context of the term "Asian American", an extremely diverse group which comprises 7% of the US population with heritage from over 20 different countries.

The term was coined by student-activists in California in the late 1960s to demand an ethnic studies curriculum alongside black, Latino, and Native American students. "For those activists, the term Asian American was an attempt to unite a massively diffuse community in solidarity," Oliver explained. "It was a political term, a radical redefinition at the time, but it's since become a common shorthand that can unfortunately end up being used in a way that's far too reductive and superficial."

One of the main risks of such superficiality is that it obscures vast disparities between subgroups. "Using the term Asian Americans to represent a political coalition made

sense, and still does, to some extent," said Oliver. "But a coalition is not a monolith," especially when it comes to migration history and experience.

Oliver broke down the history of Asian American migration to the US into three main categories. First, migrants in the 1860s onwards, particularly Chinese railroad workers, who faced hostility and suspicion that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act banning specifically Chinese immigrants. "The experience of Chinese immigrants unfortunately set the template for the different groups that followed," Oliver explained, "because waves of Japanese, Korean, South Asian and Filipino Americans later came over as agricultural workers, with those in charge often pitting the groups against each other with unequal wages and treatment.

"Each group that came faced the common experience of racial hostility, violence, and laws denying them the possibility of becoming citizens or owning land," most famously the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans during the second world war.

The two other main groups are those who arrived after the 1965 Immigration Act, which prioritized educated and skilled workers like doctors and engineers, and refugees from US geopolitical conflicts. Between 1975 and 2010, the US took in over a million refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, "which wasn't so much generous as it was a direct result of people seeking refuge from wars America waged in the region," Oliver explained. "Basically, we bombed the shit out of their countries to thwart the spread of communism, sometimes in secret wars to fulfill Henry Kissinger's napalm kink, and then when once we took those refugees in, we didn't really do much to set them up for success."

That's 150-plus years of divergent migration experiences, "and yet groups that have, in some ways, so little in common often have been unified, unfortunately, through the common experience of bigotry", said Oliver.

That bigotry has often pitted Asian Americans against other minority groups, and thus "a prevailing narrative most people hear regarding Asian Americans is one of conflicts between them and other communities of color," said Oliver, such as media fascination with tensions between Korean and black residents during the LA riots in 1992. And while those tensions are real, it's "a narrative that fits a much larger pattern in which white America has actively pitted Asian Americans against other communities," leading to the model minority myth.

That stereotype, which flattens Asian Americans into quiet, hardworking, "ideal" immigrant caricatures, emerged half a century ago as some Asian Americans, strategically typecast themselves to strengthen their demands for equality in the US. "As immigration law began selecting the skilled and educated Asian immigrants, the credentials of those new arrivals seemed to conform to the stereotype," said Oliver, "which then took on a life of its own, especially in the Civil Rights era as whites, unnerved by Black Americans' radical challenges to the system, held up Japanese and Chinese Americans and their success as evidence that they claimed disproved systemic racism.

"Very basically, America prioritized wealthy, more educated Asian immigrants, then turned to Black people who'd been subjugated for centuries and said, 'See? They're educated and successful. Why aren't you?'," Oliver quipped.

"A central premise of the model minority myth is that the key to overcoming American racism is simply strong values and hard work, with the implication being that groups that haven't succeeded simply haven't tried hard enough," Oliver continued. "And putting aside how offensive that is, the truth is that whether or not you're successful, living a life defined by a racist fantasy just isn't good for you." Suicide is the leading cause of death for Asian Americans between the ages of 15 and 24, he added; only 8% of Asian Americans sought help for mental health, according to a 2016 Pulitzer Center report, compared to 18% of the population at large.

"That is not just the result of cultural stigmas around mental health," Oliver said. "It's also what happens when you're consistently told to quietly and happily accept discrimination because your version is the nice racism."

"But there is no nice racism, there is no silver lining to it, and there is no working your way out of it," he concluded. "You are still perpetually treated like a foreigner, still asked where you're really from, and Asian Americans always seem to be just one geopolitical crisis away from becoming the targets of violence yet again," from Japanese internment camps to attacks on South Asians following 9/11 to more recent racial violence during the pandemic.

In sum, said Oliver, "the model minority myth is a tool of white supremacy and a trap".