

# THE STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP

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## Symbolic Racism: The Making of a Scholarly Myth

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It is troubling that on one of the most serious issues of our time, relations between the races, much of what passes for education today is wrong, seriously flawed, or, in some cases, plainly dishonest. Where the delineation of fine distinctions was once a mark of serious academic discourse, such is no longer the case in the treatment of race relations, especially in the social sciences.

The reason for this loss of intellectual rigor is easy enough to see. The social sciences have committed themselves to a theoretical framework which has lost touch with social reality, and rather than abandon the framework have attempted, in true Kuhnian fashion, to shore it up with *post hoc* and increasingly suspect hypotheses. The theoretical orthodoxy, formulated in the sixties, is that the difficulties black Americans face are the result of white racial prejudice, which in the form of discriminatory actions hinders the rise of blacks to equal status. Following this logic the social sciences set themselves the task of enlisting the aid of various agencies of the American government to expose and root out racism. But, alas, after twenty-five years of strenuous legal, social, and psychological efforts, black communities still suffer glaring difficulties.

Perhaps a reevaluation of the original formulation is in order. Maybe white attitudes, absent overt discrimination, are not critical to the success or failure of blacks. Could it be that the problem was misdiagnosed at the outset, or has changed in the interim, and the original remedies are now ineffective or counterproductive? Unfortunately, social scientists have in the main resisted such a reevaluation and have concluded, rather, that the efforts to eradicate bias have simply not been adequate to the task. Racial bias is now seen as far more intractable than originally thought.

Many in fact claim that racial hostility is on the increase, and point to an apparent resurgence of overt racial hostility in our society, citing widely reported new stories involving incidents of racial assault in our cities, and disturbing reports of such assaults on college campuses. The support for Bernard Goetz is cited as evidence of a thinly veiled racism in the guise of concern with unsafe streets and subways. Even apparently fictionalized accounts, as in the Tawana Brawley case, are granted wide coverage and considerable credence. Major arguments in the courts over the death penalty, affirmative action, and zoning restrictions are often given as evidence of a continuing racial hostility. Almost every ill within the black community, including crime and drug abuse, illegitimacy and infant mortality, marital instability and poverty is attributed, at

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least in part, to racism of various stripes and the discrimination it breeds. In many intellectual circles, including the editorial pages of major newspapers, the charge that America is a racist society is often thrown out as a self-evident truth, and is rarely challenged. But is the charge true?

Since the answer to this question shapes a host of important policy considerations and, depending on how it is answered, often produces diametrically opposed prescriptions, it is vital that we get it right. The answer, needless to say, has profound implications about the nature of American society, and speaks to the integrity of its most cherished institutions. It is not a charge to be taken lightly.

Reliance on anecdotal evidence such as that given above is, considering the stakes, unsatisfactory. Anecdotal evidence is, of course, suspect on several grounds. Apparent increases in racial assaults may merely reflect more conscientious reporting by victims and bystanders. Or they may reflect changed perceptions as to what is and what is not a "racial" incident. Indeed, the assumption of racial hostility, taken as a given on so many campuses, predisposes perceptions in predictable ways. As Thomas Short has argued, students and faculty with passionate causes can find racial overtones in some rather innocuous incidents;<sup>1</sup> of course, when passions are great no thoughtless slight or sophomoric indiscretion can be taken as innocuous. And if the cause is sufficiently compelling, then the fabrication of incidents (as it seems occurred at Columbia in the spring of 1987) can be excused. It is clear, in any case, that a more objective view of what is going on is required than that obtained by newspaper reporters or *ad hoc* campus committees set up to investigate and find remedies for a purported rise in racial animosity.

Social science research ought to provide some perspective here, especially social psychology, which, more than any other field, has emphasized the study of prejudice and its causes. A casual perusal of standard social psychology texts, however, gives one pause. On the one hand, we find that on most objective measures there has been a steady decline in racial prejudice since the fifties, and that "redneck" racism has all but disappeared. On the other hand, the texts almost unanimously report that a more subtle "symbolic racism" has arisen to take the place of the older discredited type. For instance, Donelson R. Forsythe argues that

although opinion polls show that blatant expressions of racism are dwindling, white hostility is still evidenced on a number of social issues. Many whites, for example, enthusiastically endorse principles of racial and sexual equality, but do not support programs needed to implement those principles. Hence, although they claim to bear no grudge against blacks, many whites oppose busing, government assistance programs, and racial hiring quotas.<sup>2</sup>

Kay Deaux and Lawrence S. Wrightsman make a similar point:

Although it may be less socially acceptable to show blatant racism than it once was, those underlying attitudes can be expressed on issues that are relevant to ethnic groups such as

affirmative action and law and order. Symbolic Racism, from this perspective, is a “blend of antiblack affect and . . . traditional moral values embedded in the Protestant ethic.” (Kinder and Sears, 1981, p. 416). . . . Individuals who hold such deep-seated attitudes are likely to oppose issues that promise equality for the races not because their personal self interest is at stake (as in the case of parents of school-aged children who would be affected by desegregation) but rather because of more general racist attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

This latter assertion is repeated and explained by David J. Schneider, who argues that “opposition to busing and minority job quotas is often as strong among people who are retired or have no children as among people who will be directly affected by these policies.”<sup>4</sup> With credit to Schneider, he does warn the reader that there may be other reasons why people oppose these policies. He does not explain or develop those reasons, however, and concludes: “Opposition to busing and other pro-equality policies may be based on many factors, although racism in either its overt or its disguised form is likely to be one of the important ones.”<sup>5</sup>

Similar conclusions are given in the textbooks of widely published and respected authors.<sup>6</sup> I believe this view is a fair representation of the outlook of mainstream social psychology, and undoubtedly of a large number of the other social sciences. It certainly appears to be what is being taught in the nation’s classrooms, at least where conventional textbooks are used. Such views appear to have widespread institutional support; a major research study on symbolic racism received the 1978 Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize from The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues.<sup>7</sup>

Closer examination of this study by David R. Kinder and David O. Sears should help us gain a firmer grasp on just what is meant by “symbolic racism.” The study was based on an analysis of attitudes in the Los Angeles area in 1969 and 1973. The 1973 respondents were scored as giving evidence of racism if they agreed that “It is wrong to set up quotas to admit black students to college who don’t meet the usual standards,” even though 73 percent of the respondents agreed with that statement. The reader should be reminded that in 1973 the Supreme Court had yet to rule in the *Bakke* case whether such quotas were, in fact, legal. And while 86 percent of the respondents opposed busing, this item was also counted as evidence of racism. Believing that busing harms the education of elementary school children was also counted as racist even though 62 percent of the respondents thought that way. And how did the authors know that these sort of responses are indicative of racism, i.e., how did they measure the validity of the questionnaire? They did so by showing that there was a correlation between respondents’ answers and their votes in the 1969 and 1973 Los Angeles mayoral election, which happened to pit a black liberal against a white conservative. In other words, people who opposed busing and hiring quotas (though not necessarily affirmative action — at the time the two were still understood as distinct) were characterized as racist because they voted for a conservative candidate who seemed more representative of their own views.

Other attempts to establish the reality of this sort of racism have been equally inventive. Indeed one of the original reports on this issue found no significant correlation between such symbolic racism and old-fashioned “redneck” racism.<sup>8</sup> The main correlate appeared to be conservative or Protestant ethic political values. Paul M. Sniderman and Philip E. Tetlock report on more recent studies which do, in fact, indicate a correlation between the new and the old racism.<sup>9</sup> But, of course, this only suggests that those who openly express hostility to blacks tend to dislike programs purported to aid them, and not that opposition to such programs implies hostility to blacks.

The spirit and the logic of this sort of research is clear. On their results, Kinders and Sears comment:

Our samples resemble the rest of the white public in this respect. Despite Jensenism, few thought blacks less intelligent than whites (15% in 1969; 16% in 1973); despite controversy over “forced busing” for school integration, almost no one supported separate schools for blacks (8% and 10%, respectively). *Consequently*, the major political impact of racism must be carried by other forms of prejudice.<sup>10</sup> [emphasis added]

But, of course, without the hidden premise that Americans must be racist, what follows the “consequently” doesn’t follow at all, i.e., is a *non sequitur*. Clearly, saving the paradigm has a high priority here.

One can, perhaps, forgive a social scientist in 1973 for seeing opposition to elementary school busing or hiring quotas as evidence of racial hostility. One is somewhat less understanding of those who continued to make the claim in 1981. By the late 1980s it is not understandable at all. By now it should be clear that a commitment to values associated with the Protestant ethic, by itself, cannot be equated with racial prejudice; such a claim is, at face value, ridiculous. Such an equation today is no more than a rhetorical device to undermine the holders of contrary, but legitimate, views with a patently offensive *ad hominem* attack on their decency.

Reading through this research one is reminded of Alice’s encounter with Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*: “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’”<sup>11</sup> The meaning of “racism” has gone through a rather remarkable transformation at the hands of the social psychologists. Racism used to mean, and still means to most people, a belief in the innate biological inferiority of a group, and on the basis of that purported inferiority, a willingness to deny basic rights and privileges to the members of that group. Racism in these texts now takes the form of opposition to, or dissatisfaction with, those programs or governmental policies favored by liberals that are presumed to help blacks. It hardly needs mentioning that those policies and programs were in large measure conceived and supported by social scientists. Because many Americans, perhaps a majority, disagree with the social scientist’s prescription for helping blacks, the social psychologist has concluded that most Americans wish blacks harm, i.e., are racist. The sheer presumption of this is

mind-boggling, and reveals more, of course, about the biases of social psychologists than it does about those of the Americans they study.

While this research has not gone unchallenged, few have been prepared to expose the obvious political bias at its base. A rare exception is a critical review of the symbolic racism literature by Sniderman and Tetlock. Their analysis is thorough and altogether on point, and effectively demolishes—the word is not used lightly—the fundamental premises of the symbolic racism researchers. I believe a fair reading of that critique should lay to rest any further claim to the scientific legitimacy of “symbolic racism.” It is of course too soon to know if my view is widely shared. Recent reading in the literature, however, leaves me less than sanguine.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the obvious bias in the research, it is worth quoting Sniderman and Tetlock at length;

Symbolic racism scales are intended to identify people who dislike blacks and are conservative. One can imagine, correspondingly, a symbolic Marxism scale to identify people who dislike business and are liberal. We asked, in our original paper, how the social science community would react to conservative researchers who operationalized their concept of symbolic Marxism with items that focused on support for the civil liberties of American communists or on opposition to aid to right-wing governments. Such a research undertaking would be scandalous. And the scandal would not be mitigated by insisting that one's item selection procedure was grounded in definitional choices. Nor would the scandal be mitigated by invoking the existence of a positive relation between left-wing political orientation (liberalism) and support for the constitutional rights of American communists. Thus the symbolic Marxism scale would be a clear-cut example of what C. Wright Mill (1940) called “motive-mongering”—in this case, the use of social science research methods to cast aspersions on political viewpoints with which the researchers disagree.

We are not suggesting that symbolic racism researchers deliberately set out to engage in such motive-mongering. But we do want to state emphatically that their approach lends itself to such abuse. What is objectionable is partly what has been done, especially the labeling of particular policy positions as racist by definition.<sup>13</sup>

And of course the scandal is only aggravated by the fact that such research was blessed and legitimated by prestigious awards and widespread (and uncritical) reporting in standard texts. But there it is, and is all the more troubling in that this episode cannot possibly be attributed to a benign absentmindedness among social psychologists. I mean no insult at all to Sniderman and Tetlock, who alone have exposed the emperor in all his nakedness by asserting that just about any reasonably disinterested reading of this literature would have produced conclusions similar to theirs.

Let me hasten to add, so as not to misrepresent the views of Sniderman and Tetlock, that while they dispute the validity of the symbolic racism hypothesis, they most emphatically do not deny the prevalence of racism. In fact, they suggest that a major weakness in the symbolic racism research is a tendency to downplay the existence of real and “flagrant race prejudice” which they believe is very much in evidence, though they agree that it has declined since World War II. In other words, while they reject the symbolic racism defense of the

prevailing orthodoxy (that racial animosity is the root cause of black problems), they do not reject the prevailing orthodoxy itself. (As we shall see, they mount a rather extraordinary rear-guard action themselves.)

The belief in deep-seated racial intolerance and the harm it causes has become an article of faith for most social scientists which must be defended at almost any cost.

Roger Brown, who is perhaps, with good reason, the most respected of social psychologists, does not refer to the symbolic racism literature in his text *Social Psychology* (New York: Free Press, 1986), but even he has difficulty with the idea that prejudice and discrimination may be less important than hitherto was the case. He devotes considerable attention to two studies that found that people disregard their attitudes toward gender when judging individual men and women.<sup>14</sup> While not directly related to race, it does suggest that one can hold beliefs about groups and still judge people on individual merit. Brown concludes:

In two experiments Anne Locksley has found that contemporary university students who had beliefs about groups (or stereotypes) did not rely on them when given individual information, and those results suggest that decision-making theory is correct rather than social psychology concerning the use of stereotypes. That cannot generally be so, however, because it would deny the existence of discrimination by race, sex or nationality. The most likely resolution of the problem is that contemporary university students are very alert to identify any occasion for discrimination and recognize the Locksley experiment as such occasions; since those same students oppose discrimination of any kind they produce results in which group beliefs or base rates are disregarded. That amounts to a claim that Locksley's experiments are only representative of a special segment of the population operating in a special situation.<sup>15</sup>

I do not think Kuhn could have invented a better example than Brown of a serious and honest scientist attempting to save a paradigm in the face of evidential anomalies.

Nowhere in these textbooks is the work of well-respected and well-known scientists with contrary views mentioned. Nowhere to be found, not even in the pages of Sniderman and Tetlock, are references to Thomas Sowell, Charles Murray, Nathan Glazer, Walter Williams, or William Julius Wilson, to name but a few who have questioned current policies. Criticism of the prevailing orthodoxy is simply never discussed. It is as if the intellectual debate on the virtues of the welfare state that has dominated informed opinion over the last decade never took place.

The world view, unwritten but hardly suppressed, which undergirds such ideas has been aptly called by Thomas Sowell "the civil rights vision."<sup>16</sup> In that vision the world is composed of chauvinistic groups of individuals who look with scorn and contempt at those less successful than themselves and contrive, in subtle ways, to keep those groups down. It is a world of victims and oppressors in which the victims can hardly be expected to achieve their due without

vigorous government action. That members of the oppressor groups oppose such action is to be expected and offers further evidence for the soundness of the vision. Is it any wonder that those who promulgate such a view find themselves at odds with the majority of Americans?

Many, perhaps most, social psychologists are encumbered with the intellectual baggage they acquired during the sixties, when a large number of them received their professional training. The prevailing view, perhaps understandable at the time, was that any attempt to attribute the difficulties of blacks to some shortcoming in the black community was tantamount to deny the effects of racial discrimination, in effect, "blaming the victim," to use the title of William Ryan's popular book (New York: Vintage, 1976). Daniel Patrick Moynihan discovered the costs of even suggesting that black family instability may have something to do with those difficulties.<sup>17</sup> The wisdom of the time was that those who failed to see that blacks were in trouble because of white racial hostility were blinded by their own racism.

With the passage of laws making racial discrimination illegal, it was expected that blacks would quickly move into the mainstream of American life, provided that the government took pains to eliminate the underlying bias requiring the laws in the first place. A basic assumption of the time was that racial prejudice could, in a variety of ways, hinder black progress. Children taught by biased teachers would fail to learn. Workers hired by biased employers would fail to advance. Biased police and biased juries would harass and condemn blacks unfairly and demoralize blacks who themselves had to be convinced of their own intrinsic worth after centuries of degradation. Black Americans must not be expected to adopt white styles and white attitudes, for to do so would be to denigrate the virtue of black styles and black attitudes. The prevailing wisdom required that if there was to be any hope for avoiding the sort of biracial America warned of by the Kerner Commission, white racial bias had to be admitted and expunged from every area of life. The truth of these assertions was taken as self-evident; the evidence that was forthcoming was modest, at best, and in any case seen as gratuitous. (The contradictions inherent in the program were rarely noticed, as in the demands for a respect for black linguistic styles and also for fully integrated education.)

For whatever reason, there has been remarkable progress over the last quarter century, but it has been limited. Educated blacks and blacks in stable families have done very well indeed, but their progress has been mirrored in a growing underclass of poorly educated blacks and a growing instability in black families. In many ways black communities seem worse off than ever, especially in light of measures of crime and illegitimacy, and extraordinary rates of educational failure in the inner cities.

The present realities have caused many to reexamine some of their earlier premises, but many social scientists have yet to do so. In what I think is a classic example of dissonance resolution, the profession has clung to its original for-

mulation by redefining the evil. Racism is still the culprit, but all the efforts of the past two decades have succeeded only in driving it underground, i.e., it has become "symbolic" racism. Very few seem willing to entertain the argument so well articulated by Sowell and others that white racism and black problems may, today, be only tangentially related. The obvious success of Asian-Americans and blacks of Caribbean descent is, of course, nowhere mentioned.

Even those who challenge the notion of symbolic racism have difficulty breaking out of the assumption of group chauvinism. In a critique of the Kinder and Sears study, Lawrence Bobo argues that opposition to busing and hiring quotas can be more reasonably attributed to realistic conflict of interest rather than to deep-seated racial hostility, but he stresses that the major difficulty still lies in the attitudes of whites. (Interestingly, Bobo's study received an honorable mention in the Allport Intergroup Relations Prize Competition in 1982.) Quoting his conclusions:

The present research has demonstrated that whites are in part responding to busing as a threat to their social world, a world of near ubiquitous residential segregation and, as a result, school segregation. . . . Residential segregation . . . coupled with economic inequalities, is the crucial feature of the real social relations between blacks and whites, and at the heart of why whites respond to blacks' demands for change as if they stood to lose something valuable.<sup>18</sup>

Whether or not this conclusion is necessary, given the evidence reported by Bobo, cannot detain us here. (Other interpretations are certainly reasonable.) What is clear, however, is that this formulation does not challenge the prevailing orthodoxy, and continues to locate the difficulty in the attitudes of whites. Whites oppose programs of change not out of a crude racism or a "symbolic racism," but rather out of a crude chauvinism or class antagonism. Bobo, of course, overlooks the possibility that the threat to many people may not be to their pocketbooks or lifestyles, but to their logic and their prudence, or their sense of justice and fair play. The possibility that one might oppose hiring and admissions quotas because one believes they are wrong or that they undermine crucially important social institutions is never entertained.

So committed is the social scientific community to its original vision that even the exposure of the fraudulence of the symbolic racism hypothesis serves only to broaden the search for alternative defenses.

The truly frightening implication of this commitment is revealed in the following extraordinary passage from the Sniderman and Tetlock critique:

Symbolic racism researchers also may have been too optimistic in their analysis of values. Race is the American dilemma, as it seems to us, in part because assuring equality with blacks . . . may still be more fundamentally grounded in the American ethos itself.

Symbolic racism researchers have pointed to the importance of such traditional values as self-reliance and the work ethic. But these values come into importance, on a symbolic racism analysis, only insofar as they are allied or conjoined with racial prejudice. But there is another, more sobering possibility: values such as individualism may undercut support for



efforts to achieve racial equality, even when these values have nothing whatever to do with racism. For example, suppose a woman opposes government assistance for blacks. Then she confronts a request for assistance for women similar to that requested for blacks. If she opposes assistance for women, just as she opposes it for blacks, should she be described as a racist?

There are many Americans like this hypothetical woman. They oppose government assistance for blacks, not out of aversion to blacks, but rather out of a set of normative beliefs defining the propriety both of asking for, and providing, public assistance. And these normative beliefs, a growing volume of research suggests, tap values central in the American ethos, especially individualism. [citations omitted]

Just how does this analysis suggest that a symbolic racism analysis may be overoptimistic? Quite simply, even supposing prejudice were to disappear completely, there would in all probability remain substantial popular opposition to government efforts to achieve racial equality. From this perspective, the American dilemma may involve a deep paradox; resistance to efforts to achieve racial equality may be rooted in a commitment to a distinctly American conception of equality.<sup>19</sup>

I do not believe this passage can be fathomed without making a distinction between “equality of opportunity,” which was the premise of the original formulation of affirmative action, and “equality of result,” which is the premise of the program of preferential treatment through racial hiring and admissions quotas. Most Americans have clearly shown their agreement with the former and a general distaste for the latter. What is “distinct” about the “American conception of equality” appears to be that it is embedded in the values of individualism, self-reliance, and the work ethic. Social scientists tend to prefer the alternative type of equality, that which is enforced by government action. The authors seem to be saying that so long as Americans are committed to the former, they will be opposed to the latter conception of equality.

But everyone knows that. Where is the paradox *vis-à-vis* the “American dilemma” of race relations? There is simply no way to make sense of the Sniderman and Tetlock passage without introducing the hidden assumption that unless there is government action, blacks cannot achieve racial equality by virtue of self-reliance and the work ethic. Why blacks should be incapable of achieving equality, absent prejudice and legal discrimination, is unclear. Are we to suppose that their past victimization at the hands of whites has been so complete that they cannot rise above it, or that black cultural values are incompatible with the values embodied in the Protestant ethic? Or is something more pessimistic being suggested? If this is intended to win support for the welfare state and other redistributionist schemes, it is misguided, to say the least.

In any case we are brought to a sorry pass indeed when we would rather salvage our vision than cure what ails us. Perhaps the time has come to jettison the vision?

Doing so allows for an altogether different understanding of the current circumstances, and one that is far more consistent with the available evidence. In this view, the strenuous efforts to reduce racial sentiment have, for the most

part, succeeded and further efforts to reduce racial hostility will, at best, have little effect on the life chances of most blacks. And, in any case, the legal restraints on discriminatory behavior which have been put in place make the success or failure of blacks today only modestly affected by white attitudes toward them.

Most evidence suggests that a substantial majority of white Americans have no animus against blacks, and believe that, if given a level playing field, they can make it on their own, and in that regard are no different from anyone else. They also seem to recognize that given the conditions in the inner cities it is extremely difficult for black children to develop the self-reliance and faith in the work ethic which they believe is crucial to success. More and more, however, Americans seem to be rejecting the argument that their own racism creates the difficulties of the inner cities. *More and more, they seem to place the responsibility for those conditions on the very governmental policies that were supposed to make things better and have only, or so it seems, made things worse.* As poll after poll indicates, they reject the civil rights version of equality in favor of their own "distinctly American conception" based on individualism, self-reliance, and the work ethic. That is what the evidence suggests, and what some social psychologists have tried to obscure with their fraudulent assertion of symbolic racism.<sup>20</sup>

This view denies, categorically, that disagreement with the government policies for racial hiring quotas, income redistribution, busing, etc., is, in itself, evidence of racial bias. To the contrary, it may be, perhaps usually is, evidence of profound disagreement with the ways in which the problems within black communities can best be addressed and with the wisdom of current governmental interventions and remedies. That such views are more conservative, socially and politically, than those of most social scientists goes without saying. This cannot justify their being systematically misconstrued or evaluated on any basis other than their intellectual merit.

The treatment of prejudice and racism in the field of social psychology has its parallel in other areas. William Beer has demonstrated a reluctance on the part of sociologists to examine the impact of affirmative action programs, as if to do so were to allow the possibility that such policies might be unproductive, or worse, counterproductive. Beer offers one possible reason for this reluctance:

Sociology forged a close alliance with welfare state liberalism and the government rewarded us with grants as they funded projects based on our analysis. (See Gouldner 1970, pp. 345-51) It may be that because of the Faustian agreement, our profession has been reluctant to question affirmative action, one of the most precious legacies of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." This may also have led editors, referees and funding agencies to be biased against such research, but more probably explains why most sociologists have simply not been interested in doing it.<sup>20</sup>

If such is the case, then one of the worst consequences of the sixties may be

that, in their abandonment of the canon of objectivity, social scientists have lost their authority as meaningful critics of governmental policy, and have instead become sycophantic supporters of the status quo. In fact, many of the most meaningful critiques of recent bureaucratic (and judicial) failures in dealing with poverty and race relations have come from outside academic social science (Thomas Sowell and Charles Murray come immediately to mind), while social scientists and welfare state bureaucrats have engaged, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, in a mutually aggrandizing *folie à deux*. Or so it may appear to future scholars.

If the question of racism and all it implies about American society were merely an argument among befuddled academics, we could all smile and move on to more interesting things. But unfortunately social science formulations have a tendency to insinuate themselves into public attitudes, government policies, and the receptive minds of students in social science classes. As such, the promulgation of this view poses some genuine threats to society, especially if, as I believe, it is basically flawed and fundamentally incorrect. Let me mention very briefly five of the possible dangerous outcomes of its spread.

The most obvious danger arises from the fact that public policies based on invalid assumptions are likely to be misguided. They waste political energy and an increasingly limited supply of public funds.

A second danger is that, if taken seriously, reports of continued racism may have a demoralizing effect on blacks, especially young men, who have difficulties enough without the added burden of the assumption that the deck is stacked against them. If racism is widespread, they should know about it. But, if it is not, morale is needlessly eroded.

A third, often overlooked danger is that the misperception of white racism on the part of blacks may lead them to seek shelter in a protective chauvinism. If the racism is real and dangerous, such a tack may be unavoidable. But, if the fear is unfounded, the retreat into racial chauvinism is bound to be counterproductive. Thomas Sowell warned that chauvinism breeds counterchauvinism, and I think he is right.

A fourth danger is that in characterizing concern with law and order as somehow racist, we contribute to the chaotic conditions in ghettos by rendering impotent those authorities and politicians who would give orderly neighborhoods a high priority.

Finally, the insistence on the covert racism of most Americans is bound to hinder the assimilation of blacks into the American mainstream, especially if it is seen as creating a schism between the values of whites, most of whom are middle class, and blacks, many of whom are not.

For these and a host of other reasons, I think it is most unfortunate that the assumption of endemic white racism is bandied about with such abandon in intellectual circles, given the very limited and suspect nature of the evidence for that assumption. It cannot have a salutary effect on white public opinion if

whites perceive it to be an unfounded slander, and it cannot help but demoralize blacks trying to better their lot. It has led to failed policies, and may be sowing the seeds of renewed racial discord, which, should it arise, will have very little that is symbolic about it. The unfounded charge of widespread racism is unseemly as a rhetorical flourish, and is recklessly imprudent if given a scientific legitimacy it does not deserve.

The general drift of social science thinking over the years and its comfortable accommodation to left-wing ideology should not surprise us. Guiding figures in the social sciences such as Freud, Skinner, and Marx have in common the view that human beings lack the autonomy to rise, except occasionally, above their unconscious impulses, prior conditioning, or economic circumstances. Human beings are at the mercy of forces they can little understand and, even less, control. How can the average American's claim to fair-mindedness be taken at face value in light of "unconscious" racism, or of "false consciousness," or of racial resentments "traceable to preadult socialization"?<sup>21</sup> The concept of human beings as autonomous decision-makers acting on their conscious values and long-run interests, so critical to a faith in the virtues of democratic capitalism, is rarely defended in the "soft" social sciences of psychology and sociology. No wonder then that human beings in trouble are seen as incapable of helping themselves without the aid of paternalistic government bureaucrats guided by well-meaning, if somewhat condescending, social scientists.

While it would be puerile to imagine that social scientists can break out of their insularity easily, there is reason to be optimistic. I believe there is a growing willingness to recognize the destructive consequences of many fashionable ideas and policies. Too many victims have been offered up to ideological "pyramids of sacrifice"<sup>22</sup> for it to have gone unnoticed. One can hope that in time the social sciences will return to their basic task of refining our understanding of human nature as honestly and as objectively as possible.

## Notes

1. Thomas Short, "A 'New Racism' on Campus?" *Commentary*, 4 August 1986, 46-50.
2. Donelson R. Forsythe, *Social Psychology* (Monterey, Calif. Brooks/Cole, 1987), 203-5.
3. Kay Deaux and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, *Social Psychology*, 5th ed. (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1988), 465.
4. David J. Schneider, *Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1988), 486.
5. Schneider, 487.
6. See, for example, David Myers, *Social Psychology*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987); and David O. Sears et. al, *Social Psychology*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980).
7. Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism Versus Racial Threats to the Good Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40 (1981): 414-31.
8. John B. McConahay and Joseph C. Hough, "Symbolic Racism," *Journal of Social Issues* 3(2) (1976): 23-45.

9. Paul M. Sniderman and Philip E. Tetlock, "Symbolic Racism: Problems of Motive Attribution in Political Analysis," *Journal of Social Issues* 42(2) (1986): 129-50.
10. Kinder and Sears, "Prejudice and Politics," 419-20.
11. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, in *The Annotated Alice* (New York: Bramhall House, 1960), 269.
12. See, for instance, Thomas F. Pettigrew and Joanne Martin, "Shaping the Organizational Context for Black American Inclusion," *Journal of Social Issues* 43(1) (1987): 41-78.
13. Paul M. Sniderman and Philip E. Tetlock, "Reflections on American Racism," *Journal of Social Issues* 42(2) (1986): 173-87.
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