

Deliberations on the End of Racism

*Dinesh D'Souza, Walter E. Williams, Michael Meyers,
Harry V. Jaffa, and Michael Burlingame*

Racial division remains *the* American dilemma, one particularly pronounced in the arena of education. The California Civil Rights Initiative and a series of recent court decisions may signal a shift away from the nostrum of preference based on membership in underrepresented groups. Still, gaping racial disparities defy us by their intractability. In *The End of Racism* and in the introduction to the debate in these pages, Dinesh D'Souza contends that racism had a historical beginning, that it is nurtured by cultural dysfunction, and, therefore, that it may have a definable end. The argument is seductive, but its appeal has not been universal, so, *Academic Questions* has assembled four scholars who weigh the pros and cons, while providing a spectrum of responses. Mr. D'Souza is allowed a last word.

Relativism, Racism, and a Dysfunctional Culture

Dinesh D'Souza: John M. Olin Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

The affirmative action dilemma in the United States arises out of a conflict between two important social goals: equality of rights for individuals and equality of results for groups. The first, which Martin Luther King, Jr., articulated when he called for us to be judged by our character rather than skin color, is probably the most widely shared tenet of the American political creed. But if we wish to live in a pluralistic and inclusive nation, we will have to strive to avoid a social system in which some groups are durably ensconced at the top while others remain at the bottom; we cannot be indifferent to concerns about equality of group results.

Yet, equality of rights for persons and equality of outcomes for groups are in conflict. An example from the University of California at Berkeley illustrates the point. I asked an admissions officer there to estimate the chances of acceptance for a black or Hispanic student with a high school grade average of A-minus and a Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score of 1,200 out of

1,600. He said they were virtually 100 percent; the student would be guaranteed admission. I then asked him what were the acceptance odds for a student with the same grades, test scores, and extracurricular background who happened to be white or Asian. He said they would be about 5 percent.

So Berkeley, like most other universities, has established some racial preference in its admissions policies. Some conservatives have charged that Berkeley is getting rid of merit in its application process, but this is not strictly true. Berkeley is considering merit, but within a given racial group. Berkeley admits the best white applicants, the best Hispanic applicants, and so on. But there seems to be no direct competition across racial lines; each applicant competes, in a sense, by running in his or her own ethnic lane.

Thus we can dismiss as mere formality—or more precisely, as prevarication—the claims of university catalogs that the schools in question are not discriminating on race, national origin, and other factors. In fact, these universities routinely employ racial discrimination against individuals to boost the enrollment of underrepresented groups. The effect is to penalize individuals from higher-scoring groups, such as whites and Asians, and to reward individuals from lower-scoring groups, such as Hispanics and blacks.

Why do universities like Berkeley act in this manner? The public pretense is that university officials are deploying affirmative action remedies to fight racial discrimination. But the main obstacle to higher rates of black enrollment at Berkeley is not bigots in the admissions office; it is the merit principle. University officials know that, if they were to admit students solely on the basis of high school grades and standardized test scores, Hispanics would be scarce and blacks would be extremely rare on the campus. Studies have shown that, under a strictly meritocratic admissions policy, the student body at the Berkeley campus would be more than 90 percent white and Asian (a majority Asian). Black enrollment would be down in the 1 to 2 percent range. These ratios generate such intense liberal embarrassment that the pressure becomes irresistible to manipulate the admissions standards to produce a result more hospitable to group equality.

Since Berkeley is a state university accountable to a diverse California population, concerns about group inclusion may be overstated, but they are perfectly appropriate. University officials have articulated a doctrine of proportional representation, in which they seek a student body whose racial breakdown resembles that of the surrounding society. Proportional representation is also the foundation of American civil rights law; companies that fail to approximate the ethnic ratios of their ambient populations are, according to the Civil Rights Act of 1991, presumed guilty of illegal discrimination.

The effects of proportional representation are now evident throughout higher education. Both in student admissions and faculty hiring, universities have institutionalized the practice of combating historical discrimination by practicing it. Blacks from middle-class and affluent families are routinely

granted preference at the expense of poor whites with stronger academic credentials. Hispanics, who have historically been classified as white in this country, now get preferential treatment at the expense of Asians, who are themselves a minority, who have suffered both de facto and de jure discrimination, and who have played no part in America's history of racial oppression. It is difficult to understand how these consequences of affirmative action help to promote social justice.

Even for groups who are intended as beneficiaries, the effect of affirmative action is mixed. Some students graduate from prestigious schools like Berkeley and are better off; but over the past decade more than 50 percent of blacks have dropped out, some for financial reasons surely, but many because they were outmatched in the extremely demanding atmosphere of Berkeley. Yet, these are students whose level of preparation suggests that, at another California campus, they would be evenly matched against their peers and would graduate in comparable numbers. These minority students are worse off as a consequence of the "ratcheting up" effect of affirmative action.

The Rise of Cultural Relativism

Where does the concept of proportional representation come from? It developed over the past generation as the logical and common sense expression of cultural relativism. By cultural relativism, I mean the doctrine that all cultures are considered equal; no culture is regarded as superior or inferior to any other. Cultural relativism means that the standards for evaluating a culture come from within that culture; no culture may legitimately impose its norms or standards on another. As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo puts it, all cultures are equally legitimate and "no one of them is higher or lower, greater or lesser than any other."

Cultural relativism is the hidden rudder for the movement that we know as multiculturalism. Advocates of multiculturalism in our schools and universities present their approach as a mere alternative to "monoculturalism." What is wrong, they ask, with students' studying other cultures and employing diverse perspectives in thinking about issues? Indeed, if multiculturalism represented nothing more than an upsurge of interest in other cultures, it would be uncontroversial. Who can possibly be against studying the *Analects* of Confucius or the writings of Al Farabi and Ibn Sinha?

The debate about multiculturalism, however, is not about whether to study other cultures but about how to study the West and other cultures. In this sense, the multicultural debate is a civil conflict within the American academy of contrasting approaches to learning about the world. As the name suggests, multiculturalism is based on a doctrine of culture. There are many cultures, and they are all presumed to be equally worthy of recognition and respect. Multiculturalism is based on a denial of Western cultural superiority.

Yet, the doctrine that all cultures are equal does not square with our everyday observation of the world. Most of the developed world today is white and European. Asian countries are progressing rapidly, Latin and South American countries are gaining more slowly, while much of southern Africa remains mired in economic and political chaos. This pattern is repeated within the United States: on many important measures of academic and economic performance—from the SAT to the firefighters' test to rates of small business formation—whites and Asians come out on top, Hispanics fall in the middle, and blacks do least well.

Given their commitment to cultural equality, advocates of multiculturalism attribute these differences entirely to externally imposed factors, such as an uninterrupted history of racist oppression. This explains the double standard of multiculturalism that routinely highlights the sins of Western civilization while downplaying or even celebrating the comparable depredations of minority and non-Western cultures. This is not to protest the moral legitimacy of the multicultural assault against slavery. Yet, slavery was historically a universal practice; it is the abolition of slavery that is distinctively Western. Ironically, multiculturalism has come to suppress systematically the liberal tradition of the West that produced the abolition of slavery, the liberation of women, and other advances in civilization, even as it camouflages the illiberal traditions of non-Western cultures.

These classroom abuses are being increasingly exposed and recognized for what they are. Western civilization is proving more attractive than non-Western cultures, even to people who are not part of the Western cultures. The deservedly neglected figures of third world cultures who are now being forced into the academic canon cannot survive comparison with the greatest thinkers and creative minds of the West. In the long term, Shakespeare will survive Stanley Fish, one of today's leading literary deconstructionists. Multiculturalists can achieve little more than to persuade affirmative action students that the reason they are having trouble reading *The Canterbury Tales* is not that they are inadequately prepared but that Chaucer was a European white male. Such illusions are immediately harmful for minority students; far more damaging to the long-term health of institutions of higher education are the consequences of cultural relativism in undermining traditional standards of merit and achievement.

The Liberal Metamorphosis

Martin Luther King, Jr. himself predicted that equality of rights for individuals would lead, within a reasonably short period of time, to equality of results for groups—to privilege and property widely distributed. Over the past few decades, we have discovered that this premise is false. Merit, no less than the old racism, produces inequality—not just inequality between individuals

but inequality among groups. This realization sparked the liberal metamorphosis from an attack on racism to an attack on merit, with many civil rights organizations and intellectuals, such as black legal scholar Derrick Bell and white political scientist Andrew Hacker, turning their guns on traditional standards as a camouflaged form of racism. Academic and occupational tests, they argue, merely measure family income and social privilege, and moreover they are racially biased against blacks and other minorities. As Bell contends, "Terms like merit and best qualified are infinitely manipulable" and serve as an excuse for white racial nepotism. Stanley Fish argues that tests like the SAT measure little more than "accidents of birth, social position . . . the opportunities to take vacations or tennis lessons."

Yet, put aside the verbal section of the SAT, which conceivably includes terms like "sonnet" and "sonata" that are more familiar to young people who grow up in the suburbs, and concentrate only on the math section. Would anyone with a straight face maintain that equations are racially biased or that algebra is rigged against African Americans? Yet, data from the College Board, which administers the SAT, show that year after year the racial gaps apparent on the verbal section of the test are equaled or exceeded on the math section. Moreover, scores of independent studies have shown that the SAT predicts college performance equally well for all groups—indeed, to the degree that there is a difference, the SAT is slightly "biased" in favor of blacks.

This is the heart of America's race problem, which today is less a race problem than a black problem. The hard fact is that blacks are basically uncompetitive with other groups on many important measures of academic achievement and economic potential, so that equality of rights typically produces scandalous inequality of results. The liberal explanation is that black underperformance is the product of white racism, now expressed in increasingly subtle and exotic institutional forms.

A Dysfunctional Culture

Yet there is an alternative theory. According to this view, group differences of academic achievement, economic performance, and social stability can be attributed to differences in culture. For instance, studies by psychologist James Flynn and sociologist Sanford Dornbusch show that little separates the IQ test scores of whites and Asian Americans at an early age. Yet, Asians on average do better on tests of academic performance in later years. The reason: Asian American students study harder. Such cultural factors as intact families and an orientation toward hard work and deferred gratification undoubtedly contribute to greater academic diligence among Asian American youngsters.

African Americans in this country are held back by aspects of black culture

that developed as adaptations to historical circumstances, including racial opposition, but that have become outdated and dysfunctional today. Among these cultural traits are a reflexive racial paranoia that blames racism for every problem, even those that are intensely personal; a heavy reliance on government, both for jobs and welfare; a neglect of entrepreneurship; a hostility to homework and academic success, which are viewed as "acting white"; the valorization of the outlaw or "bad Negro," whose incivility and irresponsibility are viewed as forms of courageous resistance to white oppression; and the normalization of illegitimacy and single-parent families.

These problems are not caused by contemporary white racism. A generation ago racism was far more overt and pervasive. Consequently, an explanation of the alarming rise in black crime and illegitimacy must consider the effects of changes in cultural attitudes and behavior (as well as changes in public policy, which may be related).

Some critics have pointed out that the African American cultural problems documented in *The End of Racism* are really American problems, and to some degree this is true. The illegitimacy rate for whites today, for example, is not far from the black rate that Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote about in his famous report on the black family in the 1960s, leading my colleague Charles Murray to warn of a "coming white underclass." The glamorization of violence and promiscuity pervades all of American popular culture today.

Yet, even controlling for socioeconomic status, blacks are far more likely to bear children out of wedlock than are other groups. Similarly, although crime rates for young people have risen nationwide, young black males are several times more likely to be arrested and convicted of burglary, rape, or homicide than are their white counterparts.

Relying on Government

Now there is much in African American culture that is both distinctively black and distinctively admirable; the black middle class has produced many notable leaders in education, religion, and the professions and is generally beset by many fewer problems than are poor blacks. Yet there are some problems that the two groups share. One is a high degree of reliance on government. There is a historical reason for this. While whites in America have historically viewed the government as the enemy of rights, for African Americans the federal government has been a deliverer and guarantor of rights. It was the federal government that abolished slavery, abolished Jim Crow and segregation, and that was employer of last resort (and in many cases first resort) for many blacks for much of this century.

Describing the contemporary black problem as largely a cultural problem is a tough message because nobody likes to hear that his culture is in any way less than perfect. Yet, it is also a hopeful message, because if cultural deficien-

cies are recognized and confronted, they can be corrected. Unfortunately, I have found among many prominent intellectuals, both liberal and conservative, a ferocious aversion to acknowledging cultural breakdown in the black community. All criticism of black culture is dismissed as a form of racism or "racialism" or a callous way of "blaming the victim."

Now, no one is to blame for being a victim. Yet if as a reaction to being victimized, a group develops patterns of behavior that perpetuate poverty, dependency, and violence, then continuing to inveigh against the historical oppressor cannot offer the victim group much relief. Indeed, if white racism were to disappear overnight, many of the most serious problems plaguing the black community would remain. Regarding pathologies like illegitimacy and violent crime, the victim may be in the best position to address the problem, even though he was not entirely responsible for causing it. This does not absolve society of a responsibility to help, but in a free society the tentacles of government do not reach far enough to reform socialization practices. Blacks, then, must take primary responsibility even for cultural traits they did not freely choose but that were to some extent imposed on them.

Toward a Race-Neutral Public Policy

Mainstream black intellectuals and civil rights activists are not inclined to see matters this way; they are committed to a philosophy in which black problems are the fault of white oppression. Similarly, many white liberals refuse to support social policies that treat blacks as fully responsible citizens because they view black failures as the product of socially imposed deprivation.

This brings us to the ultimate irony: cultural relativism, once an effective weapon against the old racism, has now become the main obstacle to improving the civilizational standards of African Americans. Committed to a doctrine of cultural parity, relativism refuses to recognize the cultural dysfunctions in the black community. The black anthropologist Elijah Anderson identifies two cultures in the inner city: a besieged culture of decency, characterized by people who work hard, maintain steady jobs, and keep their families together, and a hegemonic culture of incivility, promiscuity, and violence. Cultural relativism prevents many political and intellectual leaders from saying that one is better than the other.

Racism need not always be with us; it had a historical beginning and it may have a historical end. But to achieve a society of true racial harmony in the United States, we need to adopt a new strategy, very different from the one that served so well in the civil rights era. We need, in my view, a twofold strategy: first, a public policy that is strictly race neutral; second, a program of cultural restoration. The University of California regents took an admirable step recently by outlawing racial preferences. In a democratic society, citizens

have a right to be treated equally under the law. This requires that they be treated as individuals, not members of groups.

Yet, color-blindness cannot succeed unless it is accompanied by a vigorous program of cultural restoration, so that blacks will become competitive with other groups on a wide range of measures of social achievement. Only then can African Americans dispel suspicions of inferiority, win the earned respect of other citizens, and gain full access to the fruits of the American dream.

Justice in the Process, Not in the Results

Walter E. Williams: John M. Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics and chairman of the economics department at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

The *End of Racism* is a book with considerable information and analysis of the many injustices done in the name of racial equality; however, the excerpt presented in these pages leaves room for additional opportunities in addressing affirmative action issues.

D'Souza contends that the concept of proportional representation, having taken on a seemingly axiomatic status in discussions of racial equality, is an outgrowth of cultural relativism. I disagree. The origins of proportional representation as a norm are far simpler and have their roots in a false vision of justice. That vision holds that equality of results is a measure of justice. The results people use to determine and measure the presence or absence of justice are statistics on educational attainment, occupational and income status, life expectancy, and other socioeconomic data. Seeing significant statistical differences in racial group comparisons, people conclude that these differences would not exist, and surely not stubbornly persist, without racial injustice.

Justice cannot be determined by results. Justice can only be evaluated by examining process. Consider a scenario where three people play a regular game of poker. The typical evening's outcome finds individual A winning 75 percent of the time, and individuals B and C winning only 15 and 10 percent of the time, respectively. Knowing only the game's result, nothing unambiguous can be said about whether there has been "poker justice." Individual A's disproportionate winnings are consistent with his being either an astute player, a clever cheater, or just plain lucky. The only way to determine whether there has been poker justice is to ask *process* questions such as: Did the players play voluntarily? Were the poker rules neutral and unbiasedly applied? Was the game played without cheating? If affirmative answers can be given to those questions, the process was just. There was poker justice irrespective of the poker results.