

RESPONSE TO A “WHITE DISCOURSE ON WHITE RACISM”*

by
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I would prefer not to respond to the “White Discourse on White Racism,” but I am constrained to do so. I do not wish to address the question because I am confirmed in my opinion that America does not need a discourse on race. Rather, America needs to transcend the discourse on race. Nevertheless, I am constrained by a circumstance which imposes on my conscience. For the, or at least an, apparent source of the reflections in this essay is a statement which originated with me. As a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights from 1987 through 1992, I initiated and ultimately participated in authoring the statement from which the epigraph to this essay was drawn. Insofar as the author takes that epigraph to announce the theme of the essay, he largely if not completely misunderstood the point of that announcement in 1991.

“Focusing attention” on rising racial and ethnic tensions ought to eventuate in a renewed resolve to remove race and ethnicity as points of moral reference in our society. Many, however, believe that race/ethnicity constitutes the unique point of moral reference, even on the side of the “angels.” This has occurred, I believe, on account of profound and gradual reorientations in our understanding of education that must no longer be allowed to go unchallenged. The theme of this response, accordingly, is that every effort to root education in the confirmation or elaboration of fundamental racial or ethnic beginnings directly contradicts the true purpose and character of education. In a word, we have lost touch with the true etymological bearing of our usage, *education*, and substituted tacitly the etymological meaning of the French usage, *formation*. Where the former seeks a “leading forth” toward thoughts unthought, the latter treats the soul as filled with so many blank place holders waiting to be filled in by constructivist projects (the model of which remains Rousseau’s *Emile*).

The thought that education ought to liberate folk from their former prejudices does not spring newly to our minds. It is an old conception, prefigured in Socrates’ notion of the *periagoge* or “conversion” that real learning brings. The foundation of this conception arises precisely from the understanding that education is not the filling up of an emptiness but the correcting of systemic errors or prejudices imbibed effortlessly and on faith. Thus, our “upbringing” is the *precondition* of our education. As we begin to discover the shortcomings of our “upbringing,” in the light of genuine or natural human possibility, we turn toward those efforts that are designed to supply a more accurate foundation for judging courses of action and relationship. We arrive in this manner to the insight of the Declaration of Independence, for example—namely, that no one is by nature the ruler/master of another, no one by nature superior or inferior—and we consequently abandon all such prejudices derived from our upbringing.

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I believe that this healthy approach to education was heedlessly abandoned under the pressure of a cultural relativism which gained its greatest accession of strength in the context of a multiculturalism movement which seeks to attribute human potential, and therefore value, to social groups in direct contradistinction from individuals. On the theory that groups "have something to say to us" we find ourselves evaluating individuals in light of the "message" that we expect groups to deliver. Thus, American Blacks speak to us not as humans but as American Blacks or, still more perversely currently, as African-Americans. Whatever they may say must be heard through this lens (which the term *political correctness* seems all too mild to describe). Because the message of any individual American Black is framed thus, so too is the auditor's hearing framed; that is, the auditor does not need to think himself or herself addressed in his or her humanity by another human being. Rather, the auditor receives the message of any given American Black as a kind of testimony about African Americanism, which testimony may have nothing to do with the auditor's human potential to the precise extent the auditor is not himself or herself an African-American.

Putting aside this awkward and rather stupid usage, let us come to the point. The idea of a "White discourse on White racism" is just another version of a "White discourse on White superiority." For it matters little what the specific claim of racial purity/difference is. The claimant ultimately seeks to privilege his individual concerns through group identity. In that light, the understanding he or she offers is by definition superior to any other. It cannot be simply one of an infinite number of equivalent understandings, for in that case there would be no moral or rational basis for inculcating one view in preference to another. That is, our burdened White male could just as easily find grace by participating in a "Black discourse on Black racism," or any of the other infinite range of possible turns of the expression, if his situation did not impose upon him this particular "White discourse," as the *only* effective mode of expression. What is the "only" effective mode of expression is necessarily the "best" in the context.

While it is easy to discern a logical fallacy in this approach, one may still see that it arises naturally from the present state of discourse. For if all social discourse is a form of power relationship, and only those subject to oppressive power can correctly express the nature of the oppression, so, too, must it be the case that those locked with the oppressed in a fatal and reciprocal embrace of oppression must have a unique and characteristic voice. Since the oppressor by definition cannot speak with the voice of the other, then it must follow that the oppressor must speak with (*and for*) an oppressor's voice.

The evolution of bilingual education in the United States provides unique testimony to the process I have described. Without entering into details and avoiding contested points, it may readily be asserted that the development of bilingual education has progressed from a program aimed at facilitating competence in English to a program aimed at cultural preservation. Now, the ideas that led to the notion that specific efforts of cultural preservation were required were precisely such ideas as those I have adduced above. Furthermore, it is clear that such ideas must ultimately call forth a response on behalf of other cultures (including so-called majority culture) insofar as the ideas themselves admit of no principle by which to distinguish according this treatment to some cultures but not to others.

In this light, it is fair to say that a "White discourse on White racism" can eventuate in no positive results for non-Whites in the United States, apart from the putative advantages associated with any regime of noblesse oblige. For the record, it must also be insisted that the essay is curiously nonhistorical in its assertion of the total absence of works by Whites discussing the phenomenon of racism in the United States. To avoid descending into a war of footnotes, I would submit that the extensive work of historian Eugene Genovese is sufficient testimony of the converse. There are many more.

I am concerned about another aspect of this work, one that is much more impressionistic. It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that one who publicly declares himself a "White racist" acts effectively to declare himself important, powerful, and highly respected. Since the entire discussion of this essay is predicated on the claim of the pervasiveness and powerfulness of White racism (the standard setters and decision makers), I do not think that I exaggerate the character of the personal claim the author seeks to make. Let's consider one passage:

We Whites, however, experience ourselves as non-racialized individuals. . . We do not experience ourselves as defined by our skin color. We especially do not experience ourselves as defined by another race's actions and attitudes toward us because of our skin color. As Stanfield . . . asserts, Whites do not "even...notice they are white."

Now this is patently incorrect, historically speaking. Benjamin Franklin testifies most eloquently to that fact when, in 1789, writing for the Society of Political Inquiry in the *American Magazine*, he proposed policies of immigration with specific reference to the propriety of preserving a fair complexion among the people. But this is still more importantly a revealing self-portrait of the author. The "We whites" phrase speaks volumes about the very claim that is being made. There is more.

The claim that "We whites" hardly notice our race is further belied in the overgeneralization that "people of color" can hardly think of themselves in any terms but of race: "they come to *see* [italics added] themselves as defined by that group." Note, then, that "We whites" are non-racialized, while *those* "people of color" lack such intellectual facility! The citation of DuBois at this point will hardly sustain the incredible claim being made, besides the fact that DuBois's personal testimony does not constitute a scientific principle. What the author really means by *seeing* is *accepting*. But it is false to insist that non-Whites "accept" to be defined by others. If the author contests this reading, if he insists that *seeing* and *accepting* are not synonyms, then surely it must follow that non-Whites, American Blacks in particular, arrive at their separate self-consciousnesses in a far more complicated manner than is suited to a "White discourse on White racism." Indeed, it is altogether likely that they see themselves as human!

One may think that I have pinioned the author on what should be charitably treated as a merely polemical exaggeration. I insist, however, that the orientation revealed in these passages is precisely the ground upon which the elaborate attack on individualism stands. There, too, the author maintains that whites have the advantage—namely, the capacity to be individuals—while non-Whites have the hind end—the inability to be individuals. But notice, yet again, that this fabled inability requires "conceding" total "white dominance" in everything. Grant the author his case about Whites; grant the

author his socialist critique of capitalism; grant all of his explicit argument. How, now, shall you also grant the absolutely necessary tacit argument, that within the groups of non-Whites the outsider White dominance remains so powerful that none of the dynamics of group interaction can arise? Individualism, remember, arises only in the context of the opposed interests of groups and persons. Is there no within group socialization among non-Whites? Do not some persons experience socialization as constraint, thus giving rise to all the motive that individualism as a human phenomenon requires? I believe the answers are clear and that it equally clearly follows that the argument of Scheurich's essay can be sustained only by means of denying fundamental human qualities in non-Whites. I take this very seriously.

Let's return to the beginning. Does it really matter that some—or, for that matter, even all—Whites are racists? Judging on foundations that admit differences of human potential into the calculation, surely one must reason not only about the "victim's" power to resist racism but also about the "tyrant's" power to impose it. For certainly persons of at best modest powers and only limited resources may blow their racist souls up as large as the fabled frog only to shatter themselves by their efforts. Thus, more needs to be added. They who have real talents, real claims to be able to impose on others may seriously challenge others to think what a menace they might pose. The contemporary academic world, on the other hand, is simply filled with people with talents too modest to pose a serious challenge to anyone.

The rising racial and ethnic tensions in our society constitute a great moral dilemma, one which shall be well considered and responded to only to the extent that it attracts the concerted attentions of people who can recognize in their co-citizenship the determinative ground of an effective response to the dilemma. This was the point of mine and the Commission's lament in 1991. It is a mystery to me how something so simple and clear can be made so completely nonsensical. The facts were apparent: not only had we experienced an alarming rise in racial incidents since the mid-1980s, but the most palpable evidence appeared first on university campuses. As I indicated in 1988 and afterwards, the campuses that were most embroiled were not the "Redneck Us" of a retrograde region of the country but rather our elite institutions, those from which so much had been hoped a scant twenty years earlier.

Something was wrong in our expectations of racial progress, in our approach to the goal of racial harmony, or in both. The commission continues its inquiry into this vexing question. Accordingly there is no result to report at this writing. Nevertheless, early hearings, much reading, and wide travel do confirm me in certain hunches. The most important of these is that our campuses are not at war because of intransigent White racism; rather, they are at war because we have succeeded in communicating to our young in this country that they have nothing in common that approaches in importance and value the differences they have. What we witness today is their acting out the emotional consequences of the conviction that their differences constitute the *summum* of their humanity. When they demand that we teach them "who they are," they are only repeating what we have told them they most need. When they assume that such lessons will focus on the superficialities of color and ethnicity, they reflect faith that our conduct in policy and in sermon is well-founded. In short, we have undermined the erstwhile

truth of the dignity of the person and substituted the solidarity of the group as the determinative moral code for our time.

There are other elements of our present conduct that contribute to rising racial and ethnic tensions in the country. But the important fact to emphasize—the fact the Commission on Civil Rights meant to emphasize—was that it is our *present conduct* and not our ancient practices that is most in question.