

"Affirming Affirmative Action: Rejecting the "New" Racism," presented at the 74th Annual Convention of the **Association for the Study of African American Life and History**, Dayton Marriott (1989)

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This morning I would like to share with you an analytical discussion of the "New" racism, both as it emerges in higher education and as it is reflected in the university curriculum. As a preliminary point, let us consider the difference between "Old" and "New" racism.

"Old" racism was manifested in a direct and personalized prejudice of white Americans against persons of color. Persons of color are literally pre-judged -- that is, they are judged *before* relevant evidence about their abilities, interests, etc. is available to those who would judge -- by and large the white Americans. On this point, as on many to follow, we must therefore dissent from the statement of Allan Bloom in his popular but, I think, very wrong-headed book, *Closing of the American Mind* (1987). We recall that he defined "prejudices, strong prejudices," in that book as "visions about the way things are" (p. 43). No, prejudices are not, as Bloom would have us believe, "the road to knowledge," but are instead *obstacles* to knowledge, impediments which interfere with our ability to assess evidence, and therefore point away from the truth.

When we think of "Old" racism we think of such public figures as Strom Thurmond and George Wallace. But the "Old" racism was not limited to prejudiced individuals -- it had its foundation in the profound segregation of American institutions. We must recall that American industry was segregated; American education was segregated; and American government was segregated, including of course the armed forces. And this profound segregation continued into the second half of the Twentieth Century.

"New" racism represents a more subtle and even depersonalized prejudice against persons of color. It is still *prejudice*. This "New" racism represents an increasing intolerance towards cultural and ethnic diversity. Ours is a multicultural and multinational society, one with great diversity.

This is the racism of the "liberal" American -- the person who supported Walter Mondale or Michael Dukakis against the acknowledged "excesses" of the Reaganites as well as against the alleged "excesses" of Jesse Jackson. This is the racism of persons who would stay awake at night worrying about their racism, or others' racism -- and would oppose Affirmative Action because it seems to be based on racial or ethnic distinctions.

In particular, we will focus on the attacks on Affirmative Action, and discuss strategies to combat these attacks.

The "New" racism preserves institutional racism while masking (but not eliminating) the individual displays of prejudice which gave the "Old" racism its vulgarity. Let me offer an example of this "New" racism: again we turn to Allan Bloom. He states, and I quote "'They stick together' was a phrase often used in the past by the prejudiced about this or that distinctive group, but it has become true, by and large, of the black students" (p. 92). Bloom is brazenly

acknowledging that this racist characterization *was* used in a prejudicial fashion in the *past*, but is *not* racist any longer -- at least when he himself wishes to use it in exactly the same fashion.

Thus racism is intellectually masked, and can be more easily incorporated into the university curriculum.

The continuity of institutional racism in the face of the vagaries of individual racism focuses our attention on the *systemic foundation* of racism. Let us make some ideological reflections on that foundation. General cultural values such as "equal opportunity" -- whether economic, residential or educational -- serve to *legitimate* a social system, but do not necessarily provide guides to action in that system. Particularistic values such as "Looking out for Number One," "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," etc. are guides to action, but do not by themselves serve to legitimate a social system.

The point has frequently been made that the United States is neither a homogeneous society nor one that is self-confident about its historical heritage. This is a deeply divided country -- one whose divisions are obvious to outsiders, and one whose divisions are also profoundly experienced by its citizens. In a society such as ours, rended by schisms, legitimation also necessitates principles such as the "Invisible Hand" to mediate between general and particular.

The schism between general and particularistic values also focuses attention on the systemic foundations of practices and their ideologies. This raises a question:

Is there an institution that fulfills the following requirements:

- (a) it is foundational for American society,
- (b) it espouses the general values of equality, and the mediating principles such as the "Invisible Hand," for purposes of legitimation, and
- (c) it must nonetheless maintain systemic inequality?

There is one institution which is foundational, professes equality (of the marketplace) as well as lauds the workings of the "Invisible Hand" and which, according to the researches of Michael Reich (1981) and others, must maintain a divided and unequal labor force in order to reduce labor costs and raise profit levels -- i.e. the business corporation.

The university, by contrast, is *not* a foundational institution, and is in many respects even dependent upon the business corporation. But the university is a major institution of ideological dissemination.

The university's subordination to the corporation, in conjunction with its ideological role mean that curricular content will come to incorporate the prevalent racist doctrines.

Let us pause at this point to consider a possible objection to our argument. We trace the current attack on Affirmative Action in American academia to the university's dependence on the business corporation. But, it might be objected, the largest American corporations and their lobby, the National Association of Manufacturers, are not the principal critics of Affirmative Action today. This objection deserves our careful attention.

First of all, it is true that the most vociferous critics of Affirmative Action are found among the middle-sized and smaller enterprises and their lobby, the Chamber of Commerce, rather than among the largest corporations. It has even been suggested by a retired official involved in the development of Affirmative Action that a "deal was struck between big business and government" to institute Affirmative Action during the Nixon administration (Hammerman, 1988, p. 134).

We have stressed the schisms that rend American society. This includes American industry as well. There is a great difference between "big business," which can pass on whatever expenses are involved in Affirmative Action as a *price maker*, and the small business that must absorb these costs as a *price taker*. Indeed the monopolistic position of big business both maintains, and is maintained by such regulations.

Secondly, the business corporation can take advantage of the schism between general and particularistic values, as it sees fit. It can acquiesce to the "particularities" of Affirmative Action insofar as this is profitable for securing federal contracts, and can also promote general values of "color blindness" insofar as this may prove profitable for maintaining the divisions -- racial and gender divisions -- which already fragment the labor force.

Thus we conclude that the business corporation is a foundational institution which professes equality and yet maintains inequality.

The "New" racism as it emerges in the university curriculum takes the characteristic form of an attack on Affirmative Action, charging that Affirmative Action is reverse discrimination, that it fosters race hatred, etc. Allan Bloom goes so far in his *Closing of the American Mind* as to charge that "Affirmative Action [...] is the source of what [he] fears is a long-term deterioration of the relations between the races in America" (pp. 96-97). These attacks on Affirmative Action have been intensified in 1989, in this (continuing) era of Reaganism. Even though they are powerfully promoted, however, they can and must be combated. We believe this can be accomplished, and will indicate how in a four part argument. We focus on discrimination in higher education against African Americans.

1. First, racial discrimination in higher education is real. For instance, my colleague Professor Thomas Sav has recently published some evidence that bears on this topic. During the years 1980-1986, African American ACT scores in Ohio were higher than the national average; during this same period in Ohio the enrollment of African American students in public higher education deteriorated to a greater extent than the national average (*Dayton Daily News*, March 31, 1989). Whether this is "merely" a state-wide problem, or, as I'm more inclined to believe, symptomatic of a wider problem, it is clear that racial discrimination in higher education is real.

2. Second, racial discrimination is pervasive: African American candidates at any level of academia (i.e. students, faculty, staff, contractors) and at every decision point confront either the "Old" racism or, more likely, "old-boy networking." The latter is not crude personalized racism, but in effect discriminates against African American candidates, hence is a version of "New" racism.

3. Third, this denial of equal opportunity can only be combated by striving at each level and at every decision point to ensure that qualified African Americans are included in the pool of

candidates. But this is precisely Affirmative Action.

A key question at this point revolves around the meaning of the term "striving." Can Affirmative Action consist of *voluntary* striving? I'd like to mention in this regard a study which Sandra Burt published in the Canadian journal *Industrial Relations* (1986) entitled "Voluntary Affirmative Action: Does It Work?" Basically, she concludes that it doesn't; Canadian decision-makers lack an awareness and understanding of Affirmative Action, and there is little voluntary compliance. If Affirmative Action cannot be voluntary, must it consist of striving to fill quotas? This is one of the most misleading issues raised by the enemies of Affirmative Action. Affirmative Action, as practiced in the United States, has consisted of the striving to meet goals which were set by the institution itself -- goals which moreover might not be reached -- if the institution has made a good-faith effort to meet them.

Thus the term "striving" means making a *good faith effort* to undo discrimination. Hence, Affirmative Action can be characterized as the struggle against discrimination at every step of the decision process. The economist Robert Samuelson has given the following account of some of the specific activities that may make up this struggle (*Washington Post*, July 11, 1984):

- Overhauling of personnel policies,
- Broadening of recruitment,
- Abandoning tests unrelated to qualifications,
- Making promotions less informal,
- Public posting of new openings,
- Strengthening of formal evaluations,
- Ensuring objective criteria, and
- Plugging minorities into informal information networks.

4. Nathan Glazer, author of *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975) and no advocate of Affirmative Action, has suggested in a recent restatement of his position that "opposition to affirmative action is often founded on a liberal vision as devoted to equality as that of its proponents" ("The Affirmative Action Stalemate," *Public Interest*, Vol. 90, 1988, p. 111). We deeply disagree with this statement. We would like to express our disagreement as clearly as possible. That brings us to the fourth part of our argument -- contrary to the allegations of those who would attack Affirmative Action -- this is not a struggle between *like-minded bigots*, some favoring persons of color, others favoring whites. Instead, it a struggle between *unlike-minded people*, some favoring equal opportunity at both general and particular levels, others favoring whites.

This four-part argument, I believe, constitutes a defense of Affirmative Action, which can at the same time (a) provide broad democratic content for the university curriculum as a topic of classroom discussion, and (b) provide a guide to action in each university's broad democratic struggle.

Overall, this argument involves the recognition on the part of white students, faculty, etc. that

they have benefited from -- even though they may not have been personally responsible for -- the "New" racism. This is a consequence of the limited higher educational resources which are available in a state such as Ohio, where public institutions do not have a genuine 'open admissions' policy.

It also involves their recognition that the system as a whole -- including the set of general cultural values -- has been harmed by the "New" racism and the attacks on Affirmative Action. This realization can sensitize them to the need for a multicultural curriculum and the value of a united struggle against racism in all its forms.

Above all, however, this argument involves the recognition that higher educational resources must be made available to all Americans as a matter of right; it is scarcity which permits racism to 'work' in the misallocation of all aspects of higher educational resources; the adequacy of these resources will ensure that no group will be denied higher education.

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