

# **SYMPOSIUM: ASSESSING THE LEGACY OF THE CONSERVATIVE INTERVENTION IN RACE SCHOLARSHIP**

## ***Two Commentaries on the Following Publications***

**DINESH D'SOUZA.** *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society.* New York: Free Press, 1995, 724 pages, ISBN: 0-684-8524-4, \$30.00.

**STEPHAN THERNSTROM AND ABIGAIL THERNSTROM.** *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997, 704 pages, ISBN 0-684-84497-4, \$32.50.

## ***The Culturing of the American Mind***

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Scroll back ten years. In 1994, trumpeting their “Contract with America” and its call for welfare reductions and prison expansion, Republicans gained control of Congress for the first time in over a generation. The “Contract” did not mention race, but its themes provoked racially disparate responses. Blacks and Latinos voted roughly as they had in 1992, but Whites shifted from 50–50 Republican/Democratic to 58% Republican, and White men shifted from 51% to 62% Republican (Newman 1994). In 1995 Dinesh D’Souza, a thirty-four-year-old, Bombay-born, Dartmouth-educated Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, published *The End of Racism*, a critique of liberal positions on race, especially affirmative action and welfare. Also in 1995, the Supreme Court sharply restricted permissible forms of economic affirmative action in its *Adarand Constructors v. Peña* decision. In 1996, Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,

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ending the sixty-year-old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and transferring responsibility for welfare to the states, with certain restrictions. In 1997, two veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, Harvard history professor Stephan Thernstrom and his wife, Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Abigail Thernstrom, published *America in Black and White*, another manifesto against racial preferences and welfare.

Clearly, in these years national discourse, national elections, judicial decisions, and national policies all moved significantly against then still-prevailing civil rights and welfare orthodoxies. Politically, White men who voted increasingly Republican formed the core of that movement, but some “persons of color” like D’Souza and erstwhile Democratic civil rights activists like the Thernstroms added legitimating voices. The *Du Bois Review* editors have asked me to reflect on how these developments appear now, especially the arguments of *The End of Racism* and *America in Black and White*.

Doing so in spring 2004 presents an inescapable analogy. At the start of the Iraq war, conservative leaders voiced not just rage at terrorists, but also excitement over a promising mission of emancipation. Today, as conflicts, casualties, and instability persist, even many Republicans are dispirited, feeling that they won the war, but are losing the cause in Iraq. Similarly, the authors of these works wrote expansively (both books exceed 700 pages) because they were fueled not just by anger at liberal views, but also by excited confidence that their visions would work better. Though their views have never been fully adopted, public policies have moved in their directions. Yet today, while anger persists, few from any perspective write about race in America with such brio. Because, despite real progress, so many racial problems seem intractable, it is easy to show that positions we disagree with have not worked—but it is hard for all sides to mount compelling evidence that what they favor will work.

Perhaps as a result, and despite the brief flurry of arguments over reparations, few recommendations for addressing Black-White disparities are today commanding widespread attention, much less agreement. The civil rights issues that dominate current discourse are different: the rights of gays and lesbians, including same sex marriage; the rights of those suspected of terrorism, especially Islamic believers and persons of Arabic descent; and the place in America of the post-1965 immigrants, largely Latino and, to a lesser degree, South and East Asian.

But debates over all those issues, as well as discussion of Blacks and Whites in America, are strongly flavored by an element to which these books ardently contributed: the belief that these matters are fundamentally about “culture.” That belief is like the claim that wine is good for your blood pressure. It is not exactly wrong, but if you focus on it too single-mindedly, you are not likely to see or think clearly.

Conservative foundations provided ample research funds to these authors, so their books contain lots of facts and arguments, many of genuine interest. But their basic analyses of race in America can be summed up in four points:

- (1) Up until the end of Jim Crow, African Americans suffered greatly and unjustly from racial discrimination in myriad forms. (Actually D’Souza stressed how Jim Crow sheltered many Blacks from the most virulent White racists, but he still thought it was wrong [pp. 169–170]. The Thernstroms, to highlight later progress but still to their credit, laid out its horrors memorably [pp. 25–50]).

- (2) Nonetheless, the authors agreed, African Americans began making material progress even under Jim Crow. With the end of *de jure* segregation, this progress largely continued—accompanied by a sharp decline in White racism (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 69–96, 138–142; D’Souza 1995, pp. 239, 253–254).
- (3) Yet in the mid-1990s ugly racial disparities still persisted, in poverty, in unemployment, in infant mortality, in educational testing, in arrest and incarceration rates. Educational and housing segregation by race remained severe and in some areas growing, and many tests showed ongoing racial discrimination in employment, loans, housing, and retail markets (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 19, 213–223, 242–246, 340–342, 359–360, 398, 444–445; D’Souza 1995, pp. 6–7, 245–287).
- (4) Those patterns were, however, not traceable to White racism, the bugaboo of “liberal antiracism.” They primarily stemmed from, in D’Souza’s phrase, “cultural dysfunctionalities in the black community”—from the decline of the Black two-parent family, and from inner-city societies marred by violence, drugs, and a disdain for law and for academic achievement that many excused or glorified, especially Black civil rights leaders who stirred senses of racial grievance. In light of Black cultural pathologies, much racial discrimination was rational and practiced by Blacks (D’Souza 1995, pp. 476–524, 529, 532; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 265–285, 359, 384, 445, 506–512).

The Thernstroms and D’Souza disagreed in part on how to address these “cultural dysfunctionalities.” They concurred that “destructive” social policies like welfare should be replaced by programs providing stronger incentives to work; that educational standards should be more demanding, that illegitimacy, teen-age pregnancy, and crime should be more severely discouraged; and above all, that public affirmative action programs should be ended (D’Souza 1995, pp. 525–537; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 255–257, 283–285, 384–385, 537–541). But D’Souza favored amending the 1964 Civil Rights Act to let private institutions employ any and all racial preferences, believing they would provide ethnically constructed channels of opportunity. The Thernstroms wanted to maintain that law and to interpret it as banning all racial preferences in governmental programs and in private markets.

These differences were captured in the contrasts between their summary tests for public policies. D’Souza urged us to judge every measure by “the degree to which it expands opportunity while at the same time fostering productive and responsible behavior on the part of citizens,” a standard which he saw as consistent with, for example, allowing Black employers to favor Blacks in hiring (D’Souza 1995, pp. 537, 544–545). The Thernstroms’ “rule of thumb” was instead “that which brings the races together is good; that which divides us is bad,” and they saw all racial preferences as divisive (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 539, 543–545).

But the larger message shared by the two books was clear. The time to decry White racism had ended. It was time to focus on destructive behavior in Black and Latino communities traceable to their flawed cultures. Both their concluding guidelines really aimed at improving what they perceived as Black and Latino cultural values. D’Souza sought to expand opportunity, but only in ways that would foster “productive and responsible behavior.” The Thernstroms wished to bring “the races together,” but since they saw Whites as no longer racist, that really meant getting

Blacks and Latinos to relinquish their irrational anger, misguided demands for racial preferences, and alienating misconduct. By and large, American policies have since pursued these cultural aims.

The Clinton years saw the “end of welfare as we know it” not only via the ending of AFDC, but also by the 1996 Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which made even most permanent resident aliens ineligible for welfare benefits. Both measures sought to prompt D’Souza’s “productive and responsible” conduct. The second Bush administration has tried to toughen educational standards through its “No Child Left Behind” Act, combating perceived anti-academic values. And though strong *amicus* support from the military and private corporations helped persuade the United States Supreme Court not to end affirmative action in the 2003 *Bollinger* decisions, those rulings along with the earlier *Adarand* decision indicated that many existing affirmative action practices were no longer acceptable (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 [2003]; *Adarand Constructors v. Peña*, 525 U.S. 200 [1995]). Judicial critics of affirmative action programs made clear that they saw them as sources of divisive racial tensions and unjust senses of racial entitlement.

Attuned to the zeitgeist as these books were, reviewers at the time still noted glaring weaknesses in them. D’Souza’s contention that “cultural relativism” formed the root of “liberal antiracism” presumed that if we believe that it is hard to judge the comparative worth of whole cultures, then we must expect persons in all cultural groups to succeed in all activities at the same rates (D’Souza 1995, p. 529). But to say that we cannot evaluate which of two different cultures is on balance morally superior is not to say that participants in those cultures will perform identically in all regards: the cultures are, after all, supposed to value different activities and goals. The very real egalitarian aspirations of the civil rights movements and its latter-day proponents therefore cannot logically be traced to “cultural relativism.” Christianity and, yes, Marxism did more.

The Thernstroms claimed that Blacks made more material progress in the 1940s and 1950s, prior to the civil rights era and especially before affirmative action, and that this progress was due to causes that continued thereafter. Their own evidence refuted both contentions. Economic progress in the earlier decades was high in percentage terms due to an incredibly low starting point. In absolute terms it did not compare to later eras. Much of the progress came when southern Blacks moved from subsistence agricultural work to northern industrial and commercial jobs during W.W. II and the post-war boom. There they received lower wages than Whites, but more than they had in the South. Much also came from Blacks gaining public sector jobs as Jim Crow fell (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, pp. 79–81, 178, 187, 233–235, 550n34, 560n61). But the move from subsistence agriculture to industrial and commercial jobs could not sustain Black progress once virtually all Blacks, north and south, had left the agricultural sector. And, with the support of both the Thernstroms and D’Souza, recent Republican administrations have cut back the sorts of public sector jobs that have since supported Black economic advances—along with affirmative action, which D’Souza openly and the Thernstroms grudgingly recognized as contributing to the growth of the Black middle class (D’Souza 1995, p. 239; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997, p. 538).

Still, with all their flaws, there can be no doubt that these books expressed and reinforced the dominant American political mood in the mid-1990s. In 2004 that mood has not radically altered, but it has dampened. To be sure, many insist that the 1996 welfare laws have promoted work and reduced poverty, and that racial discrimination in markets is declining (O’Neill and Hill, 2003; Turner et al., 2002). But

others contend that the new welfare system has sustained racial economic disparities and done little to alleviate poverty (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2002; Lindsey 2003). No one denies that Blacks and Latinos are still more than twice as likely to be poor than Whites, that White median family worth is still more than seven times that of Blacks and Latinos, and that patterns of school and residential segregation remain stark, declining in some respects, but increasing in others (Iceland et al., 2002, pp. 3–4; Orfield and Lee, 2004, pp. 2–3).

Since these books appeared, the most large-scale public program for dealing with the “cultural dysfunctionalities” of inner city populations has been the prison expansion urged in the “Contract with America.” It has given the United States an incarceration rate vastly higher than any other Western industrial nation, with a prison population that is nearly half Black, even though African Americans form only 12% of the U.S. population (Bobo and Johnson, 2004, p. 12). Today many conservatives still advocate welfare reductions, prison expansion, and bans on affirmative action. But in light of these persistent racial disparities, most do not exhibit their former assurance that these policies are going to make a dent in American racial dilemmas any time soon.

One thing, however, has not dimmed: many, perhaps most analysts, still explain America’s racial difficulties and design racial solutions by focusing overwhelmingly on “culture.” And not just racial difficulties: the issue of whether our institutions should make marriage available to same-sex as well as heterosexual couples is presented as a question of cultural values more than institutionalized privileges. Debates over threats posed by radical Islamic adherents and their claims to civil liberties are portrayed as clashes of cultural values, not institutionalized protections. And Samuel P. Huntington has just published a new work contending that recent immigrants, and Mexican immigrants particularly, pose threats to the “Anglo-Protestant culture” that is America’s greatest resource, via arguments longer on speculation than concrete institutional impact (Huntington 2004, p. xviii). Today on a host of political topics, cultural analyses dominate diagnoses and prescriptions, in ways that were not nearly so prevalent before conservatives claimed that Black and Latino cultural values, not oppressive institutionalized practices and unequal resources, lay behind America’s racial difficulties.

It is time to ask anew: are America’s problems, including its racial problems, really so overwhelmingly about getting our cultural minds right? After hundreds of years in which American elites structured a whole range of economic, political, educational, and social institutions as vast systems of racial hierarchy, is it really likely that there are no significant surviving structural contributors to racial inequalities? In fact, what we ought to expect is for the U.S. to have structures of racial hierarchy so deeply entrenched that they are extraordinarily difficult to transform—creating the temptation not to try to do so and to focus on other targets instead.

That is exactly what we do find. This case is well made in, among other places, *Whitewashing Race*, the 2003 book by political scientist Michael K. Brown and a team of social scientists and lawyers that takes the Thernstroms as its chief target. Brown and his crew provide fresh analyses and evidence on how an array of real estate, labor, credit market, criminal justice, and educational structures work to “accumulate” White advantages and “disaccumulate” resources for non-Whites, even in the absence of conscious racist sentiments. Cultural values are part of these stories, but they are far from the whole story. Instead, works like these make a strong case that treating non-White cultures as the core problem often serves to distract attention from more potent sources of current racial inequalities. They also suggest that if structural

conditions really change, the disaffected values they breed in some are also likely to diminish.

From a similar perspective, Philip Klinkner and I argued in 1999 against the sorts of policy tests that the Thernstroms and D'Souza had advanced. We contended instead that we should adopt an overarching guide that focused on whether particular policies, institutions, and systemic practices were likely to "perpetuate or even intensify the racial inequalities government has done so much to create in this country," or were more likely to lessen them (Klinkner with Smith, 1999, p. 347). Though this guideline does not dismiss all concern for cultural values, it points more directly to whether sharp differences in material circumstances are being reduced or not. It does so not from a commitment to "cultural relativism" or even a conviction that White racism is rampant. It rather stems from awareness that American governments have always extended material assistance in many forms to all the groups and economic sectors that have flourished in American history, and from the belief that there is no reason not to do so for long-excluded groups who are not yet flourishing. If policy analysts today weaned themselves of the preoccupation with "cultural dys-functionalities" bequeathed us by writers like D'Souza and the Thernstroms and looked harder for ways to make material improvements in the conditions of life for all, I suspect that American material conditions, institutional structures, and cultural values would all benefit.

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## Malign Neglect

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It has now been nearly a decade since the American right had its would-be Myrdalian moment with the publication of Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995), soon followed by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White* (1997). Replete with invocations of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944[1996]), an impeccably conservative network of financial and Institutional backers (among them, the John M. Olin, Smith Richardson, and Lynde and Harry Bradley foundations, as well as the American Enterprise and Manhattan institutes), and well-orchestrated, pre-and post-release buzz, these hefty books (each 500-plus pages of heavily foot-noted text) were clearly not to be read as just any ordinary contribution to the proverbial free market of ideas. These books were written as interventions, in what at the time was an increasingly heated, ideologically polarized battle in the nation's culture wars. Like Myrdal's, their aim was to change the way Americans think about race—albeit much less in the spirit of Myrdal than of Charles Murray, who was said to have made the end of welfare possible with his similarly credentialed and publicized *Losing Ground* (1984). These were as much acts of provocation as scholarship, meant to challenge conventional liberal wisdom by revealing the true nature of the “problem” behind the enduring American racial divide.

In at least one respect they succeeded, as is evident in retrospect even more than at the time. For together these two books lay out in fulsome detail what is surely *a* if not *the* central problem confronting the struggle for racial equality in our time. However, the “problem” I refer to is not, as the authors would have it, Black rage, Black racism, White liberal guilt, government-mandated racial “preferences,” and a culturally pathological, coddled, Black “underclass.” The problem I refer to is the broader development in American politics and public discourse that undergirds this fundamentally regressive formulation of the race problem and that is manifest in these two occasionally conflicting, but in important ways mutually reinforcing works: the late twentieth-century coming to fruition of a new racial conservatism and its deepening entrenchment in twenty-first century public policy. Although hardly alone and hardly novel in articulating certain of their core arguments, these books are nevertheless important benchmarks in the longer process of political mobilization and ideological transformation through which this post civil rights racial conservatism—based on ideas not long ago considered radically reactionary—has become normalized within what now passes for “mainstream” public debate. For even as they do the ideological work of elaborating a conservative narrative of moral decline, liberal failure, and rising Black pathology, these books build on the analytic and political strategies first anticipated in the doctrine of benign neglect.

Published while controversy over Charles Murray's and Richard Herrnstein's notorious, neo-eugenicist *The Bell Curve* (1994) was still raging, *The End of Racism* and *America in Black and White* were interventions in an already deeply polarized racial debate. And yet, they were also part of an extended period of internal conflict among conservatives—conflict that nevertheless helped to clarify not so much a

consensus as the broad outlines of an emerging racial orthodoxy and a reconstituted racial narrative on the right. Murray, his stature as favorite son momentarily called into question, was marginalized as a racial thinker, but remained just inside the radical fringe: dropped by the Manhattan Institute as he drifted into eugenicism, he was readily embraced by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) as a star resident fellow. Still, many on the right thought that Murray had crossed the line with his argument about the genetic basis of class and racial inequality, and were openly critical when the book came out.<sup>1</sup> But for all the discomfort it caused conservatives who feared being painted with the brush of closet racism, Murray's book proved useful in extending the boundaries of what *would* pass as more reasonable, respectable, racial doctrine on the right. Much as he had when he first called for abolishing welfare, Murray had set the standard for what constituted right-wing intellectual extremism on race.

This proved especially fortuitous for D'Souza, who used his (respectful) disagreement with Murray's genetic argument to picture himself as a moderate in a racial debate anchored by "liberal antiracists" on one side, and biological determinists on the other extreme. It was the former, to be sure, who were the real targets of *The End of Racism*, a sweeping attack on the idea that White racism—now or ever—is chiefly responsible for what he insistently calls "Black failure." But thanks to Murray, D'Souza could effectively (or try to anyway) re-center the debate. His argument, a more calculatedly polemical version of themes developed over the course of the 1980s and 1990s by conservative economist Thomas Sowell (see, e.g. Sowell 1981, 1994), can be summarized as follows: that historically racism was the effect, not the cause, of Black cultural inferiority; that Black cultural inferiority (indulged, excused, and made worse by government intervention) and not racism was the cause of contemporary racial inequality; and that the looming crisis of Black "civilizational" disintegration called for a combination of massive deregulation and Booker T. Washington-style "cultural reconstruction" in response. In his attack on the liberal antiracist "orthodoxy," D'Souza also went several steps further than most conservatives had been willing to go to date: not just busing and affirmative action, he argued, but the whole legislative and judicial apparatus of the Civil Rights Movement was suspect, premised as it was on the wrongheaded doctrine of "cultural relativism" that all cultures were created equal.

D'Souza's pretense of scholarly moderation notwithstanding, the book provoked some passionate objections on the right—most notably by prominent Black conservatives Glenn Loury and Robert Woodson, who resigned from the AEI board of advisors in protest, citing its degrading descriptions of African American culture as well as its historical whitewash of slavery (a civilizing influence that left future generations better off than they would have been in Africa) and Jim Crow (a paternalistic effort by decent Southern gentlemen to protect Blacks from racial violence). In comparison to the reaction to Murray, however, protest on the right was far more contained. D'Souza, while hardly considered a moderate, was not considered to be coming from the radical extreme.

It was with D'Souza as one of their (unidentified) foils that the Thernstroms would subsequently present themselves as voices of nonideological moderation negotiating the territory between a "see-no-evil" right (p. 534), and the more nefarious and ubiquitous doom and gloom left. In reality the Thernstroms were presenting a different, "softer" face of racial conservatism that was equally radical in its implications if not its tone. Their argument, packaged as a comprehensive historical and statistical survey of the changing status of African Americans since Jim Crow, departed from D'Souza's in significant ways. For one thing, it implicitly rejected his claim



about the historical insignificance of racism by acknowledging the violence and racial hatred that once ordered the segregated South. From there, it placed far greater emphasis on the “up from Jim Crow” story of racial progress, and shied away from the relentless language of cultural inferiority and failure D’Souza used at every turn. While aiming just as much invective at the post-1965 civil rights “establishment,” it generally refrained from criticizing the early movement, and embraced its integrationist goals. And while every bit as combative, the Thernstroms avoided D’Souza’s snide innuendo in favor of a more ostensibly neutral, reportorial tone.

Nevertheless, *America in Black and White* echoes and complements D’Souza in its overall ideological thrust. By emphasizing the vast progress to be seen in things like the growth of a substantial Black middle class, rising rates of Black suburbanization, and improving White racial attitudes (as reported in opinion polls), the Thernstroms aimed to persuade readers that White racism was no longer a significant barrier to racial equality, and that what little remained was perpetuated by Black behavior and cultural deviance and especially by the liberal, race conscious, social policies put into place after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By then turning to the “bad news” statistics on crime, poverty, and other signs of social pathology, they aimed to persuade readers that the barriers to further progress were internal, caused by the behavioral choices of the poor, the unemployed, the criminal, and the unschooled—and encouraged by guilt-ridden liberals and self-serving Black separatists. Equally important, they constructed a historical narrative that, while certainly less overtly incendiary, reinforced D’Souza’s overarching laissez-faire thrust. According to their account of the rise from Jim Crow, racial progress had far less to do with civil rights activism and legislation—or any other form of political organizing or government intervention, for that matter—than with such seemingly spontaneous factors as the economic growth, great African American migrations, and enlightened White racial attitudes spurred by World War II. Indeed, according to the Thernstroms, only with the onset of more explicitly race conscious policies in the late 1960s did progress toward racial equality stop, Black pathologies deepen, and Black/White animosity heat up. The late 1960s may have been a time, one could conclude from the Thernstroms’ narrative and in the words of a one-time neoconservative fellow traveler, “when the issue of race could benefit from a period of benign neglect.”<sup>2</sup>

That quote, of course, is taken not from D’Souza or the Thernstroms, but from the infamous internal memorandum from White House domestic policy advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan to President Richard M. Nixon, written in early 1970 and soon thereafter leaked to the press. In fact, neither book acknowledges the memo or the policy turn it stands for—doing so would complicate the story they tell of an untrammelled, radical turn to race-conscious social engineering, orchestrated by an all-powerful civil rights establishment. And yet, in what was actually a series of leaked memoranda that would make the term a permanent part of the American political vocabulary, Moynihan had laid out a set of observations and recommendations that were very much in line with a central concern animating these books—recapturing the race issue for the political right.<sup>3</sup>

The nine-page memo, dated January 16, 1970, greeted the president with a good news/bad news scenario that could very well serve as a brief précis of the Thernstroms’ later statistical survey. Moynihan opened with a glowing report on the “extraordinary progress” of the American Negro since 1960, citing statistics (subsequently criticized as highly exaggerated) on gains in jobs, income, and education suggesting that Blacks were rapidly breaking through to the middle class and closing the gap with Whites. The good news was then tempered by the bad: female-headed

families, “social pathology,” anti-White hatred—all associated with a group then commonly referred to as the “urban black lower class”—were on the rise, “matched and probably enhanced by a virulent form of anti-white feeling among portions of the large and prospering black middle class.” Acknowledging that the administration had political problems in its relationship with Blacks, the memo refrained from comment on actual policy measures, and instead concluded with four recommendations: a meeting of administration officials, more research on crime, greater efforts to reach out to the “silent black [working class] majority,” and, fatefully, “a period of ‘benign neglect,’—in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.” The race issue “has been too much talked about,” Moynihan wrote, and “too much taken over to hysterics, paranoids, and boodlers on all sides.” He also urged the administration to pay more attention to Indians, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans, while avoiding “provocations” from the Black Panthers, who had been “transformed” by the recent Chicago police raid “into culture heroes for the white—and black—middle classes.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Moynihan and his subsequent defenders insisted that the offending passage had been taken out of context, the broader direction of administration policy and political strategy told critics that the “benign neglect” memo should be read as a rationale for racial retreat—a sophisticated formula for accommodating, and benefiting from, a White racial backlash that was very much in line with Nixon’s concurrent efforts to delay school desegregation, dilute the 1965 Voting Rights Act, win over White Democratic votes with the “Southern Strategy,” and win a Supreme Court appointment for his overtly anti-civil rights, segregationist nominee Harrold Carswell. Moreover, additional Moynihan memos, written earlier and leaked as controversy swirled, brought out the darker, more alarmist and rhetorically melodramatic vision of the “Negro problem” that had been tempered by the optimistic picture of progress in the “benign neglect” memo. The biggest threat to Black progress, he noted in those memos, was the Negro urban lower class, a class of “low income, marginally employed, poorly educated, disorganized slum dwellers” that “terrorizes and plunders the stable elements of the Negro community” and “causes nearby whites (that is to say, working class whites, the liberals are all in the suburbs) to fear Negroes and to seek by various ways to avoid and constrain them.” Telling Nixon that “the Negro lower class must be dissolved” by creating “a stable working class,” Moynihan professed little confidence that government policy could bring such a transformation about. Better, he noted, “to de-escalate the rhetoric of crisis” about issues such as “crime, de facto segregation, low educational achievement—which Government has relatively little power to influence in the present state of knowledge and available resources.” In the meantime, the administration could seek to restore confidence in the role of a wide range of nongovernmental institutions—the family, the church, civic groups—to restore a sense of social order in the ghetto and nationwide.<sup>5</sup>

While the additional memos only confirmed the suspicions of critics who saw them as recipes for policy retreat, they were actually more telling as strategies for gaining control of the race issue—in part, by toning it down, but more important by framing it as a matter of Black social pathology and alienation rather than White racism. And here, as Moynihan was well aware, the administration was contending not only with electoral rivals, but also with the powerful, deeply pessimistic formulation of the Kerner Commission Report (1968) that White racism remained the driving force behind America’s racial crisis, and its threatened polarization into “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” In “de-escalating” or, more accurately, redirecting “the language of crisis,” Moynihan sought to dethrone a

reigning civil rights orthodoxy that he and other burgeoning neoconservative thinkers had come to identify as itself a menace to social order.

Also salient as a backdrop for this strategy of racial “de-escalation” was the administration’s growing obsession with containing the looming “revolt” of the alternately labeled “blue collar,” “white ethnic,” “white lower middle class,” so-called “silent majority.” These, of course, were the “forgotten Americans” Nixon had courted in his 1968 “law and order” campaign. But in the secret administration task force formed in response to a surge of media coverage, officials—including Moynihan—focused less on their fear of the “disorganized slum dwellers” than of being squeezed out by comparatively more rapid (also exaggerated) Black economic gains. Reformulating the race issue, in this context, was a way of recognizing and defusing the political threat of lost White privilege.

My point in bringing up Moynihan’s “benign neglect” memo is not to endow him with more powers of prescience than he is already credited with. It is, rather, to underscore the importance of the analytic and rhetorical shift from White racism to Black pathology in the political rise of post civil rights racial conservatism. I mean also to locate it within the longer, continuously contested post-civil-rights political realignment that underlies the far more malignant politics of neglect envisioned in these books by D’Souza and the Thernstroms. The Nixon Administration, after all, initiated or let stand most of the policies they targeted for attack.

Ultimately, though, these books were as much projects of ideological as of political realignment, and in this they were very much part of the mobilization of ideas, ideology, and institutions that helped to spark and has in turn been sustained by the rise of the conservative right. Although drawing on older currents of post-New Deal conservative organizing, that mobilization was the product of a powerful alliance between conservative capital and neoconservative intellectuals forged in the early 1970s, and based on a combination of shared commitment, strategy, and sensibility. The commitment was (and remains) to a framework of conservative principles and policy strategies that—while not necessarily internally consistent or even universally shared within the movement—conservatives have used to change the direction of political economy and public policy. Thus, alongside the principles of liberal individualism, anti-government noninterventionism, and capitalist free enterprise, conservatives have nevertheless proved willing to use the power of the state in the name of preserving, restoring, or spreading core “American” values. The strategy—itsself stirred by the conviction that these principles were under threat from a vast, collectivist liberal intelligentsia—was to build a conservative “counterintelligentsia” through generous endowment of rival foundations, think tanks, academic beachheads, public interest law firms, advocacy organizations and, especially, “books, books, and more books” to do battle with the liberal establishment (Simon 1978, pp. 228–231). And the shared sensibility was that of an embattled, marginalized minority among the political and cultural elite, which was nevertheless attuned to the sentiments of the nation’s “silent majority.” As denizens of its think tanks, D’Souza and the Thernstroms benefited from the movement’s financial largesse. But they also tapped into the stores of cultural capital sustained by its counterrevolutionary zeal. Meantime, in identifying the civil rights establishment as a threat to liberal individualism and from there to free enterprise, D’Souza and the Thernstroms were doing crucial, movement-building work.

It is in the course of that larger political and ideological project that post-civil rights racial conservatism adopted two especially pernicious and deceptive strategies,

here employed by D'Souza and the Thernstroms, that help to explain the success with which it has insinuated itself into public discourse as an expression of a sensible ideological mainstream.

One is its formal acceptance of certain core, minimalistically defined precepts of post World War II racial liberalism even as it seeks to undermine the legitimacy of a more broadly conceived liberal project of racial justice and egalitarianism. Thus, the new racial conservatism rejects biological racism, overt, hate-mongering racial prejudice, and Jim Crow segregation—D'Souza and the Thernstroms take care to distance themselves from race-baiting White supremacists such as David Duke as well as from the neo-eugenicism of Murray and Herrnstein—while promulgating a theory of African American cultural inferiority that treats high rates of crime, single motherhood, welfare “dependency,” and underachievement as pathological cultural propensities with no basis in social conditions or anything other than innate group character flaws. D'Souza is far more forthright—and obnoxious—in trotting out age-old ideas about Black cultural (which he refers to as “civilizational”) inferiority and in treating it as a historical fact dating back to Africa. Indeed, the “fact” of Black “civilizational” inferiority—then and now—is central to D'Souza's core argument about the nature, origins, and, though he would surely disagree with this characterization, the legitimacy of racism. Racism, he argues, originated not in an irrational and indelible hatred of the “other,” but in the historical encounter of rational, enlightened, civilizationally superior Western Europeans with their obviously inferior, dark-skinned, colonial subjects. “It is impossible, even for scholars hostile to the West, to deny the civilizational gap,” he writes, in an unexamined, not to mention dangerous, equation of might with cultural superiority (p. 54). A similarly vast civilizational gap—embodied in, but not confined to, the Black “underclass”—plagues contemporary African Americans, he later argues, and it explains both enduring racial inequality and what remnants of racism exist in American society.

The Thernstroms are considerably more circumspect in their use of cultural explanations. And yet, after dismissing all explanations that cite socioeconomic and discriminatory factors behind racial disparities in poverty, crime, and test scores, they consistently turn to “underclass” behavior and culture—along with misguided government policies—as their fallback position. Like D'Souza, they routinely use cultural indicators to explain why such “incidents described as racist” as the infamous Charles Stuart case “are often less clear-cut” (p. 502). In that case, of a “handsome [White] man” who murdered his pregnant wife in a predominantly African American Boston neighborhood, the police were justified in launching a weeks-long hunt for the mythical Black assailant Stuart accused of the crime. Aside from the high neighborhood homicide rate, after all, there was “the message of much rap music—that young black males are filled with justifiable, murderous rage” (p. 502).

The new racial conservatism also positions itself within the postwar liberal tradition by acknowledging the legitimate role of government intervention in dismantling legalized Jim Crow. But it is singularly devoted to attacking and ultimately eliminating all other, and all subsequent, forms of government provision—including civil rights enforcement and certain aspects of bedrock civil rights legislation as well as affirmative action—as misguided government interference to enforce racial egalitarianism. Here again, D'Souza goes further than the Thernstroms in his attack on liberal government policy: following the logic of libertarian law professor Richard A. Epstein, he would repeal the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or at least those aspects of it that ban discrimination in the private sector, as unnecessary and overreaching government interference with such higher constitutional principles as freedom of contract and the individual right to discriminate. But the Thernstroms are very much on

the same page as D'Souza in their animus against any and all "race conscious" social policies—from affirmative action (which they insistently, misleadingly refer to as "racial preference") to measures to enforce school desegregation, anti-discrimination, and voting rights—as disastrous attempts to legislate "equal results" rather than strictly construed equal rights.

In declaring its opposition to race-conscious civil rights policy, the new racial conservatism thus wraps itself in a strict constructionist version of the liberal "color blind" integrationism that informed the struggle against Jim Crow racism, only to turn it against policies that would meet that goal by taking racial disadvantage into account. Such policies are not only violations of liberal principle, in this reading; they are themselves based on the racist assumption that, as the Thernstroms put it in criticizing Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 Howard University speech, "blacks were too crippled to be judged on their individual merit" (p. 172). In similar fashion, racial conservatives acknowledge and abhor the persistence of isolated instances of contemporary racial discrimination while basically declaring racism to be a relic of the Jim Crow past—and more indirect, systemic forms of discrimination a figment of the paranoid Black imagination or, worse, a tired excuse for the failures Blacks have brought upon themselves. Indeed, D'Souza and the Thernstroms go to great lengths to deny, dismiss, or explain away episodic instances as well as scholarly evidence of contemporary racism. For example, where the Thernstroms blithely dismiss the findings of labor market discrimination reported in the generally well-regarded audit studies conducted by the Urban Institute, D'Souza literally rationalizes them, as examples of "rational discrimination" based on the "logic of predictive evaluation": like women, "who may get pregnant and leave," Blacks are justifiably categorized as high risk and thus less desirable hires because of the common knowledge that they are less skilled or otherwise unreliable employees (p. 278). D'Souza and the Thernstroms also draw from a similar pool of exemplary figures to demonstrate the degree to which Americans (with the exception, of course, of civil rights liberals) have transcended their racial past: Colin Powell, Douglas Wilder, Vernon Jordan—none of whom has exactly shed his racial identity—and, in a stretch that would be infuriating were it not so pathetic, Strom Thurmond, whose support for Clarence Thomas and appointment of a Black staffer appear in both of these books as evidence of the former Dixiecrat's late-found racial enlightenment.

In fact, despite its apparent embrace of a society based on strictly constructed "color-blind" principles, the new racial conservatism justifies the kind of racial profiling that often goes under the name of "statistical" discrimination as a rational response to such presumably well-known sociological "facts" as high Black crime rates and low Black test scores. Meantime, it justifies its own claims of Black cultural inferiority on sensationalized racial stereotypes. Thus, and most important in this regard, the new racial conservatism uses its minimalistic embrace of values associated with civil rights era racial progressivism to mask the extreme and fundamentally regressive nature of its own political agenda—to establish a nominally "color-blind" social policy based on the decidedly un-progressive principles of government deregulation, economic *laissez faire*, and an unabashed belief in what D'Souza routinely refers to as the "civilizational" superiority of White, Western, capitalist, and for the most part American culture.

Along the same lines a second, related strategy of the new racial conservatism is its appropriation of the language and iconography of the mid-century civil rights struggle for its own political purposes, and particularly in its effort to demonize the post-1965 civil rights establishment. Thus, California's misleadingly packaged anti-affirmative action "civil rights initiative" (Proposition 209) was launched by "old-fashioned lib-

erals committed to the color-blind policies the civil rights movement had once stood for," the Thernstroms write approvingly (p. 455). D'Souza writes of the post-1965 movement as a "repudiation of King's concept of strict non-discrimination or color-blindness" (p. 206)—utterly ignoring King's earlier calls for "compensatory" measures that would take the legacy of racism into account (King 1964).

And yet, even more than a way to justify their own revanchism, this frozen-in-time vision of a moral and principled movement serves as a foil for the utterly cynical, and, for the Thernstroms especially, angry caricature of subsequent civil rights activism. Scattered references to "well-intentioned race conscious policies" notwithstanding, their account of the fateful turn away from the color-blind standard reads like something taken directly from the pages of Tom Wolfe, replaying the familiar demonology of White "radical chic" mau-mauers and Black power extremists as the unholy alliance behind the shift. "The intelligentsia was sympathetic," they write about the outbreak of violence in Watts just after Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965; "black violence was authentic, even chic" (p. 149). From there, it is a rapid decline to racial preferences, Black separatism, and racial engineering in White working-class neighborhoods far removed from the comfortable dwellings of the cultural elite. Where the Thernstroms see the winds of fashion and emerging political correctness, D'Souza adds more craven motives to the mix. In a passage hard to beat for its mix of racial and ethnic allusions, he writes of the "Machiavellian scheme" hatched by well-heeled "civil rights establishment" attorney Guy Saperstein to pull off a "well-executed racial shakedown" in the 1994 class action claim of discrimination against the Denny's restaurant chain, concluding that "the moneychangers have entered the temple of civil rights" (p. 234).

Demonstrably wrong though it may be, this distorted, demonized portrait of the civil rights establishment positions racial conservatives as keepers of the mythologized, and yet for many, culturally compelling, "race neutral" civil rights flame. At the same time, and more important in light of their underlying political aims, it allies racial conservatives with the also mythologized, but culturally potent, "white ethnic" working class. The Thernstroms themselves appeal to what in other contexts they might call "victimology" in rationalizing the virulent protests against busing in Boston principally as efforts not to resist racial integration, but to protect the tradition of neighborhood schools against the prospect of "having their children used in a social experiment dreamed up by suburban liberals living in white communities where the racial mix was not even an issue" (p. 333).

Racial conservatives would also claim a kind of moral high ground of objective—which is not to say value-free—social science in their similarly demonized picture of "orthodox" (read, liberal) racial thought. In this picture, liberal social scientists are so ideologically (and financially, if D'Souza is to be believed) invested in the "two societies" orthodoxy of the Kerner Commission Report that they actively resist the empirical facts. "The good news" of Black progress, according to the Thernstroms, "has been greeted with a measure of outrage that perhaps we should have expected" (p. 10)—as if they were the first or the only social scientists to report on the emergence of a Black middle class. So, too, do they picture themselves (and fellow conservatives) as the lone keepers of a "race neutral" analytic framework—conveniently ignoring the huge body of literature often associated with William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), but in fact part of a much older debate within "liberal orthodox" social science over the salience of race *vs.* class. (For a more extended discussion, see O'Connor 2001.) But the real work of deceptive demonization belongs to D'Souza, who in painting all, including Myrdal, with the broad brush of "cultural relativism" is trotting out an old McCarthy-era

red-baiting tactic. D'Souza also completely misses—or deliberately misconstrues—the historical commitment of racially progressive social science to subject such “truths” as his own claims about Black civilizational inferiority to the scrutiny of empirical inquiry and democratic values.

I am hardly alone in pointing out that the work of D'Souza and the Thernstroms, like the new racial conservatism it articulates, is based on an edifice of distortion and deception. And indeed to the extent that their work is couched in the seemingly neutral conventions of social scientific and historical analysis, it is important for scholars to point out those distortions and deceptions. And yet, such criticism has not stopped racial conservatives, in the years since these books were published, from mobilizing their ideas behind a racial strategy of malign neglect. It is that mobilization that remains the bigger, unanswered challenge for scholarship that aims to advance racial democracy.

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## NOTES

1. As reported in a feature article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, among the conservative political luminaries who scrambled to distance themselves from *The Bell Curve* were Henry Hyde, Phil Gramm, William Kristol, Linda Chavez, and Newt Gingrich—who pronounced the book “completely wrong.” Jonathan Tilove, “In the shadow of the ‘Bell Curve’: Book’s arguments about race and intelligence split the GOP,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 5, 1995, 1C.
2. The words are Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s, delivered in a January 16, 1970 memorandum to President Richard M. Nixon that Moynihan later professed to regret. The original memo, with Nixon’s notations, is in the Daniel P. Moynihan Papers, Box 255, Folder 1, Library of Congress. It was also widely reproduced in the press.
3. Moynihan reported that he had borrowed the term from the British Earl of Durham, who wrote in 1839 that Canada had proved capable of self-government after years of British “benign neglect.” Peter Kihss, “‘Benign Neglect’ on Race is Proposed by Moynihan,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1970, 1.
4. Moynihan to Nixon, January 16, 1970, Daniel Patrick Moynihan Papers, Box 255, Folder 1, Library of Congress.
5. E.W. Kenworthy, “69 Moynihan memo to president urged jobs for negroes,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1970, 30.

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