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TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

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TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

(Review)

Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other

By John A. Powell

Indiana University Press, 2012

Books that deal with the issue of racism in the United States of America are not uncommon, but I have never read anything so comprehensive and so far-reaching as John A. Powell's *Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other*. The author, director of the Haas Diversity Research Center at the University of California-Berkeley, dissects the ongoing *racialization* process of contemporary America. He defines racialization as a set of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that mirror and perpetuate a race-based society. Racing involves both assigning and depriving people of their racial identity.

The author makes use of history, psychology – including the more recent psychology based on neural science, and spirituality in order to drive his message across. Here I shall summarize the major contentions of the author's monumental work. In arguing for the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), federal judge Robert Carter already pointed out sharply: "Segregation is not the real evil. It was the symptom. The real evil is white supremacy" (p. 150). The maintenance of White supremacy is aided by the courts' *color-blindness* approach, the requirement that intent of discrimination be proven, their false universalism, and their overlooking of the impact of unconscious racism which guarantees the continuation of unearned privilege. A White needs not to be a bigot to benefit from racial privilege (p. 78). Negative racial associations are embedded socially and culturally. What we feel and believe consciously may contradict what we experience unconsciously. The GI Bill race-neutral approach became an affirmative action program for White men, closely controlled by Southern Congressmen (pp. 15, 230, 232).

It is wrong to assume that only non-Whites possess racial category or identity. Color blindness is mostly a disguise for Whiteness hiding behind the invisible norm of its power. It also denies the positive aspects of racial identification, including its rich cultural traditions. Language neutrality by the courts and other legal fictions actually imply that racial justice will hurt innocent Whites. It is this nation's history that has caused Whites and Blacks to be differently situated, so affirmative action proponents must treat them differently, not color-blindly. Not much progress in creating a true democracy will be made until we recognize that our major problem is

race, not the economy. In *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987), strong evidence of systemic discrimination was dismissed for lack of proof of individual racist behavior. The Supreme Court should not focus merely on discrimination by individual “victims” or perpetrators (p. 78).

The multiplication of Jim Crow laws in the South after Reconstruction was greatly facilitated by the Supreme Court’s decision, five years after the 14th Amendment, to allow the States to decide to whom they would grant the basic immunities and privileges of citizenship. The Civil Rights movement succeeded in opening up public space, but power and privilege moved to private space. This is what happened with the suburban growth. Since Goldwater and Nixon, the Republican Party’s *Southern Strategy* got rid of explicit racism, but replaced it by disguised anti-Black and anti-civil rights policies (pp. 142-149).

Some argue that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency is proof that racism in America is a thing of the past. Not so! Prosecutors in Georgia have sought the death penalty 70% of the time for African Americans when both victim and defendant were Black, but only 15% for Whites under the same conditions. In Alabama, 34% of the African American men have been permanently disenfranchised by criminal records, including a felony. In New York City, during 2011, young Black men between the ages of 18 and 24 were stopped to the tune of 168,126 times, more than the entire city population of Black men. Only a few of these stops produced any evidence of unlawful activity (p. 128).

There are two areas of racialization that must be exposed:

(1) Processes, practices, and inter-institutional arrangements that keep on handing out racialized outcomes due to the fact that groups are differently situated; and

(2) Structural racialization, which carries an ambivalence that unconsciously affects meaning and practices, and an implicit bias often influenced by the unconscious. Most racists are not engaged in a conscious thought process. In our society, sameness/difference is based on White supremacy. The color-blind approach only reproduces domination in deeper, subtler levels. Yet, we have Justice Anthony Scalia saying that unconscious racism is “ineradicable” (pp. 21-23, 128).

Therefore, strategies to end racism must be both targeted and universal. A targeted strategy weighs the needs of both the dominant and the marginalized groups. For example, when offering housing opportunity for both low-income Whites and non-Whites, we must look into the different constraints of each group. Targeted universalism pays attention to the reality of how different groups are situated vis-à-vis the institutions/resources of society (p. 24).

Furthermore, the issue of racism should not be restricted to a

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discussion of race because it would leave untouched both the existing racial hierarchies and the socially-constructed forces that keep them in place. There must be an awareness that race is a social construction. America is torn apart racially not because of blood or color, but because it is mutually and continually defining and arranging society by how it includes and excludes the racial other. The primary function of social boundaries is to create racial identities and to regulate and place racial identities in a racialized space (p. 128).

We must have universal goals and outcomes, not just universal concepts, processes, and strategies. To believe that race-blind universal policies focused on a single area such as poverty will disproportionately benefit the marginalized group is a mistaken assumption. Poor Blacks and poor Whites are not similarly situated. Prior discrimination in housing, education, and health care must be considered. A racial caste system might be invisible in our courts, but it is still powerful in our psyches and social structures. The problem of race is not that it is socially constructed, but how it has been constructed. As Alfred North Whitehead remarked: “What people believe to be true is true in its consequences (pp. 15, 54, 135).

We also need to overcome our enslavement to absolutes, especially to absolute truth defined by quantitative analysis, a legacy of the Enlightenment. Reason and identity are not transcendental, but must be viewed in their historical context (p. 168). There is a difference between scientific truth (based on objective criteria and classification) and experiential truth, which is multiplicitous and relative. Truth is also subjective, and race is an inter-subjective phenomenon which acts in collective ways, not just through individual will. Race is not biology or phenotype, but a social and cultural location the effects of which can be passed on for generations. Because race and the self are socially constructed, the self maintains its attachment to Whiteness, even if there is not such a thing as “White culture.” The question of Whiteness is ultimately a question of “humanness” (pp. 51, 155, 158, 233).

Powell insists that we must address how the common concept of race functions in order to dominate. He offers these practical approaches to end racialization in America:

- (1) Move beyond Black and White and also beyond human and non-human
- (2) Dethrone Whiteness as the universal norm
- (3) Reduce metropolitan segregation
- (4) Insist on looking at environmental concerns and the need for workable developmental practices in society; and

We also need to overcome our enslavement to absolutes, especially to absolute truth defined by quantitative analysis, a legacy of the Enlightenment.

(5) End the awarding of privilege (accepting what is not the result of good work, what has not been earned), which is distributed and mediated through structures, language, power and institutions. White privilege is written into our relationships, our language and our judicial system. In fact, privilege is an illegitimate benefit that injures others.

In America, race is also a top-down process set up by the more powerful group, namely, the white elites. These play a central role in the creation of effective boundaries, despite the rhetoric of poor whites having an alliance with poor blacks. The 21st century sense of loss by Whites has been essentially a loss to the elites and corporations, not to the advancement of blacks (p. 140). Consequently, we also need to distinguish between public and private space; our social domains include public, private, non-public/non-private and the corporate domain. Most of our media space is corporate, not public nor really private, although the 2010 United Citizens decision of the Supreme Court made it much easier for corporations to claim to be private “persons.” The recent economic recession has highlighted the fact that corporate greed has bred a social/structural imbalance which threatens true democracy at every turn.

Powell also believes that, in our efforts to end the racialization of America and create a true democracy, we must resort to our best spiritual fountains. The struggle for social justice must be based on a spirituality that recognizes the divine in the other, and the secular must not be separated from the spiritual (p. 200). However, Powell could have grounded his sense of spirituality much better had he availed himself of the intensely spiritual movement which, since the late 1960s, has been addressing the plight of the poor and the marginalized. I am referring to Liberation Theology, which draws its inspiration and strength from the Gospels and the example of Jesus of Nazareth and has led millions of Christians to take a “preferential option for the poor.”

In summarizing, the author asserts that we must:

- (1) Deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness and multiple nature of the self
- (2) Come to realize how mutable and illusory the qualities of race are
- (3) Account for the pervasiveness of implicit bias and unconscious racial anxiety
- (4) Note the mistaken/questionable tenets of the Enlightenment and of modernity about nature, the self, and the universal categories; and

The 21st century sense of loss by Whites has been essentially a loss to the elites and corporations, not to the advancement of blacks.

(5) Use all the preceding to change our government systems to achieve true democracy

Powell's work is a "must read" for all who care about the future of American democracy. It is solidly put together, making a most convincing argument for Americans to, once and for all, take the divisive reality of racism seriously and engage in a fruitful debate to end it. The recent presidential campaign once again exposed the ugly face of racism in America. Efforts to end racism will not be accomplished until we recognize how it makes the claim of democracy nothing but a sham.

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