



The Kinship of Strangers

Leonce Gaiter on the neo-con myth of a color-blind society

POSTED 01.12.98

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"Can we fulfill the promise of America by embracing all our citizens of all races?" That was the challenge Clinton issued to begin what he termed a national dialogue on race. [PBS Online](#) has transcripts from the speech which was delivered at the University of California at San Diego on June 14, 1997, or you can visit the White House [One America Site](#).

IS AMERICA COLOR-BLIND? Does racism in the USA still exist? A quick survey of our prisons and executive boardrooms suggests an obvious answer, but then again, the debate over racial issues in this country has never had much of a flair for the obvious. While Clinton's recently enacted "dialogue on race" has garnered a good deal of coverage lately, two major race books published in the last year -- *America in Black and White* by Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom and Jim Sleeper's *Liberal Racism* -- have inspired the most sustained commentary. Amid what has been mostly a chorus of hosannas, both books continue our country's long tradition of wishing away its racial divide, cloaking a general contempt for affirmative action and diversity under an "optimistic" view of the American majority's effortless progress toward the goal of color-blindness. Though the attention lavished on the books, and even the occasional assaults on them, may impart the feeling of a brand new reading of race exploding on the scene, their arguments have been fomenting for a while, especially in academia. Alongside the growth of popular 80s neo-conservatism, certain scholars working in the fields of sociology and biology were planting the seeds for much of today's rhetoric with controversial tracts on kinship structure and racism.

Last seen arguing affirmative action policy with the President in a splashy *New York Times* cover photo, Abigail Thernstrom is a high roller at various conservative think tanks. She and her husband, Stephen Thernstrom, a Harvard history professor, suggest in their massive tome that racism is no longer a significant factor in American life. The ideal of color-blindness, pursued since before the civil rights movement, is now at hand. Our souls are rested, at last -- except that the Thernstroms follow a strange timeline for the civil rights struggle. "Racist beliefs... lost all claim to intellectual respectability by the 1950s," the Thernstroms write in one representative passage, "and that changed racial climate opened doors. For instance... [h]ad the visionary Branch

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Rickey believed Dodger fans were unreconstructed racists, he would not have put Jackie Robinson on the field." The Thernstroms neatly ignore two salient facts here: first, that the genetic inferiority of African-Americans is still considered an acceptable subject for intellectual debate; and second, that when Robinson used to take the field, he was showered with color-blind spittle while fans screamed "nigger" at him. Whether or not you ignore the price a black man paid for the open door depends on which end of the spittle you happen to be on.

In a similar show of idealization and revisionism, Sleeper writes: "When Rosa Parks quietly refused to give up her seat on that segregated public bus in Montgomery in 1955, she expressed a desire to embrace and redeem society, not to rebuff it as inherently racist..." Sleeper is indulging in the popular myth that Rosa Parks' act of defiance was actually just another aspect of the service she performed daily for white Americans. But Rosa Parks did not refuse to give up that seat to serve white people. Her feet hurt. She was tired, and probably pissed. Sleeper contorts her action to suit his illusion of self-sacrificing black men and women, and more importantly, white Americans who deserve to be sacrificed *for*. Both Sleeper and the Thernstroms speak rhapsodically about the silent majority of color-blind Americans, but their own vantage point should probably be understood as "blind to the colored."

Where did such a surprising consensus about our "color-blind" society come from? To answer that question, we need to take a few steps back and revisit one of the founding texts of racial revisionism, Pierre L. van den Berghe's perverse and fascinating 1981 treatise on the sociobiology of race and ethnicity, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*. Van den Berghe, a prize-winning sociologist at the University of Washington, not only exemplifies the neo-con take in a book first published in the toddlerhood of the movement -- but also, strangely, puts forth a

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In 1899 Rudyard Kipling wrote "The White Man's Burden": "Take up the White Man's burden--/The savage wars of peace--/Fill full the mouth of Famine / And bid the sickness cease; / And when your goal is nearest / The end for others sought, / Watch Sloth and heathen Folly / Bring all your hope to nought...." The poem appears in the current issue of Primary Documents that has assembled historical texts concerning the theme of white racial benevolence -- and malevolence -- during the Spanish-American War.

convincing sociobiological argument against it. A truly color-blind society, van den Berghe argues, is not only "optimistic" -- it may not even be possible at all.

"My basic argument is quite simple: ethnic and racial sentiments are extensions of kinship sentiments," van den Berghe writes. "Ethnocentrism and racism are thus extended forms of nepotism -- the propensity to favor kin over nonkin."

Van den Berghe explains that a true ethnic group is a kinship group, but that industrial societies have extended that definition to encompass non-related groups that function on the basis of kinship, even without biological relatedness. Obviously, he points out, 50 million Frenchmen and 100 million Japanese can claim only "highly diluted" levels of biological kinship, ditto 25 million Afro-Americans who sometimes call each other "brother" and "sister." But all of these groups, according to van den Berghe, function to some degree on the basis of "mythic" kinship.

Van den Berghe, however, goes on to qualify this stance, noting that "The myth [of kinship for such broad groups] has to be rooted in historical reality to be accepted." Thus, extended ethnic groups exclude "...groups perceived as being of different genetic origin, despite their acquisition of dominant group culture and language: Koreans in Japan, Afro-Americans in the United States, Jews in Europe..."

This notion of biological exclusion, then, raises some questions about the neo-cons' racial paradigm. If racism is really in our genes, then what are we going to do about it as a society? How does it work if I as a black man, must compete with equally qualified whites for the approbation of white bosses who are predisposed to favor those most like them? (Many studies pitting equally qualified blacks and whites

against each other confirm this trend.) Should better qualified blacks be the only ones with an "equal" shot? Should black excellence be the only worthy match for white mediocrity?

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In an Atlantic Monthly interview with Jim Sleeper, the author of *Liberal Racism* describes the "noble" origins of his interest in race politics: "In 1977... I put a new Harvard doctorate in my back pocket, packed up a van, and left Cambridge for central Brooklyn, where I spent five years in a kind of 'down and out in Paris and London' life, writing for inner-city weeklies and engaging in some political activism."

There are a great many biological tendencies, like the male's biological urge to impregnate as many females as possible, that we've labeled culturally or socially unacceptable. Thus far, van den Berghe's argument seems to be leading to the inevitable conclusion that nepotism based on appearances -- our tendency toward racial prejudice -- is another of those predispositions against which we will have to take active measures.

But that isn't the case. "Active measures" would necessarily entail state intervention of some kind, some active reaching for, and valuing for its own sake, the diversity that neo-cons vigorously oppose. But to justify that opposition, van den Berghe is forced to jump through some complicated intellectual hoops. In chapters attacking affirmative action, van den Berghe works hard to exempt white America from the propensity he ascribes to all other human beings. He states, "The label 'white' in the United States does not correspond to a well-defined ethnic or racial group with a high degree of social organization or even self-consciousness, except regionally in the south." Therefore, the logic runs, whites are incapable of displaying inherent prejudice against any other ethnic group -- except in the South.

He disregards white America's national familial references, like "Uncle Sam" and "Founding Fathers," and ignores the way traditional American values like freedom and opportunity were largely extended to whites alone. He also suggests that the South's racist patterns were not manifested in less virulent forms in the rest of the country. What van den Berghe fails to take into account is the rise of Northern urban ghettos, a testament to the power of white racial prejudice on a national scale. And to suggest that the

"brother" moniker among Afro-Americans is significant evidence of an informal kinship group, but that white America's familial references are not, is downright flim-flamish.

The sense of a world turned on its head runs powerfully through van den Berghe's writing. Like *Liberal Racism* and *America in Black and White*, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* argues that events surrounding the civil rights movement actually engendered or re-activated white racism, almost as if it had barely existed prior to the '60s or was on the verge of a quiet death -- quiet to whites, perhaps, but a raucous din to the black families enduring taunts and death threats and beatings as they integrated schools and neighborhoods.

Like Sleeper and the Thernstroms, van den Berghe lost patience with the civil rights movement when it stopped being about white people. He writes: "The universalistic civil rights movement became a particularist black movement, the ideological thrust of which was an attempt to transform blackness from a stigma to a badge of pride and, thereby, to change the position of Afro-Americans from that of a pariah racial group to that of an ethnic group."

When the civil rights movement stopped being about white people, it stopped being good -- this is the lesson that van den Berghe, Sleeper and the Thernstroms all seem intent on establishing. When the movement no longer favored the group they consider deserving of favor, it lost its appeal. When it stopped being about black people fulfilling their historic role of serving white people -- this time cleaning their moral toilets instead of their porcelain ones -- it lost all validity. This type of revisionist history may be the most dangerous element in the new conversation on race, because it threatens the remarkable consensus that exists now in the public imagination: the belief that the civil rights movement was an honorable struggle, fought in good faith for a valiant cause. Take

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In one of FEED's earliest essays, "Prophet Motive," from May of 1995, Brent Edwards explains the backlash against Cornel West: "Is Cornel West 'the pre-eminent African American intellectual of his generation,' the 'black John Dewey,' as he's been called, or is he 'a thousand miles wide and two inches deep,' as Reed taunts? ... Wieseltier and Reed really want to throw up that old storm wall between high and low, between black popular culture and academic theory."

that underlying consensus away and the whole house of cards falls down.

There seems to be a desperate need among white neo-cons to envision themselves fair and pure, while simultaneously maintaining the racial status quo. The neo-cons might yet reach their constitutional idyll if and when they are willing to accept the need to train the inherent prejudicial propensities out of all Americans. An excellent start would be to enshrine the idea of cultural "diversity" in the popular mind. Though still popular as a political slogan, lately the notion is much maligned, and thwarted, in certain intellectual and legislative circles. This will have to change if the deeply human predisposition toward favoring one's own is ever to have an adequate counter-weight.

Our biology may never allow us to achieve the self-aggrandizing fantasy of "color-blindness," but our will can make us reinterpret the colors we do see. The man or woman who was once a biological threat will become a cultural asset -- a new point of view, a different lens through which to view the world. Surely there is also a biological drive towards the widening of perspectives, the need to experience new things. (Without such a drive, we might never have made it out of the African savanna.)

And yet the neo-cons' empty gestures towards the value of diversity suggests that true diversity will never become a reality. These white pioneers say they want something, but will do nothing to get it. They've made it clear they won't lift a finger. Perhaps that's because they know they've already got exactly what they want.

Their only goal now, it seems, is to make sure no one takes it from them.

Illustration by Elisha Cooper

Share your thoughts on the notion of color-blindness in the Feed Loop.