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THE NEW POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF RACE

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The New Political Linguistics of Race*

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Introduction

"Political language," wrote George Orwell, "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." One of the memorable features of 1984 will be the political language that passed for an analysis of Presidential elections. Professors and pundits were particularly resourceful in their use of political language: The only group to vote solidly Democratic was held responsible for the Party's failure. The Democratic Party's overwhelming defeat was attributed to its enormous success with black people[1]. This political feat was made plausible by the simple expedient of linguistic reclassifcation. Black people ceased to be a cultural or "interest group" in 1984. They became, instead, a "special interest."

Inverting the political principle that rewards friends and punishes enemies, Democratic Party politicans devoted their energies to crafting defensive statements showing that the Party had not been captured by people of color. The Fairness Commission, the only concession granted by the Democratic Convention to the Rainbow Coalition, was immediately deemphasized and blacks were counseled to "lay low" on creating it. Talk about the future Democratic Party Chairman centered on white males-- preferably from the South. And when one of the candidates for the position, former Governor Terry Sanford of North Carolina, addressed the DNC in January, high on his list of priorities was ending "the dominance of

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[1]There is a controversy over the extent to which Jewish-Americans voted for Mondale in 1984. Arthur Hertzberg argues they voted heavily for him (1985). For an alternative interpretation see, Elliot Abrams, 1984.

special interests" in the Party (Raines, 1985).

Political language may, in certain instances, give wind the appearance of solidity. But sometimes it creates unintentional difficulties. Democratic Party political linguists are currently confronted with a serious problem: How do they tell their most loyal constituency to "lay low" without sounding either racist or neo-conservative, not to mention ungrateful? A new political language is necessary.

That new political language is in its formative stages. Snatches of it can be heard in the academy, where social science theorizing on matters of race is experiencing a radical paradigmatic shift. Quite suddenly, statistics that once refered to racial discrimination are now interpreted as indications of individual problems experienced by black people. High rates of unemployment and low rates of educational achievement used to be analyzed with structural variables. They are increasingly understood as manifestations of personal failure. Political strategies emphasizing community building and multi-racial pluralism are being replaced by solutions for individual difficulties. Black people are told to straighten out themselves, to work on their problems privately and not blame their troubles on group status. This shift in thinking is widespread, coming from divergent and sometimes unlikely sources. It is no longer the exclusive expression of conservatives and right-wingers. The proponents currently include prominent former liberals like Nathan Glazer and radical sociologists like Christopher Jencks.

The paradigmatic shift is reflected in two recent developments. One is that blacks have been renamed a "special interest" instead of an

2

interest group. The changed classification signals the end of pluralist theory pertaining to multi-racial politics. It also denies black people the political legitimacy necessary for pressing their group interests in the Democratic Party. The other development is that affirmative action has been reclassified "reverse discrimination." This name change reflects a shift in the analytic lenses used by sociologists of race relations. The sources of racial inequality have been relocated from institutions in the white community to pathologies among blacks. Given the new framework, if racial inequality is to be challenged success- fully, the impetus for change must come from the black, rather than the white side of the color line.

In combination, these two developments provide the framework for a new political language of racial politics. The new language is intel- lectual legerdemain, with craft. It communicates two seemingly contrad- ictory messages in one language: The black community is told its salient issues are low priority items. The language used to say it, however, enables the speaker to sound neither racist nor conservative. Democratic Party spokespeople are therefore able to keep a straight face when they tell their most loyal constituency to lay low, lay off, or take a back seat to party defectors. Thus, at the very moment when black people are positioned to demand their share of center stage in American politics, sociologists and political scientists are helping to develop a rationale for keeping them backstage, or in the wings.

This essay explores the intellectual activities that contribute to the new political language. It focuses on two questions: 1) How and why black people became a special interest and what difference it makes?

3

2) What is the sociological analysis that reclassifies affirmative action as "reverse discrimination"? Together, these two activities provide the formula for minimizing priority items on the black political agenda with a language that sounds neither racist nor neo-conservative.

From An "Interest Group" to A "Special Interest"

One of the few assumptions American sociologists of race relations have shared is that racial inequality would be seriously undermined if the barriers to black political participation were removed. So long as black people could not vote, or would not, sociologists focused on organizing the black community. The assumption was that blacks needed to be organized to vote in the South; and in the North, the black community had to be more cohesive if it was to take advantage of the vote.

This was not seen as an easy task. Because of the slave legacy, black people were said to lack appropriate political skills and it was assumed that communities were disorganized. In the words of Gunnar Myrdal, the black community was a "pathological form" of an American community (Myrdal,1944). Part of the "pathology" was that people did not act collectively. Black people viewed their troubles in privatized, personal terms, like the blues. They did not see how their problems were rooted in public issues like politics. Sociological thinking counseled black people to act as a group, like the Jewish immigrants had done. Blacks could not act like individuals if inequality was to be eliminated. The black community had to organize group leverage. It had to become an interest group not a disorganized mass of personal prob-

lems.

This perspective contained a pluralist theory of politics[2]. Black people were encouraged to organize themselves on the basis of common interests. Organizing in black communities was expected to create internal strength, people would learn organizational skills, how to be leaders. According to the theory, when blacks became organized, it would be possible for them to establish alliances between communities--black and white--on the basis of equality. Coalitions could be created and people would therefore become members of more than one group. Multiple group membership would provide the experience of cross-cutting or overlapping loyalties. That in turn would reduce the possibility for primordial bonds like race to assert themselves as the exclusive basis for political action. For the theory to work, however, black people had to be transformed. They had to cease being a "pathological" form of community and become an "interest group."

As an interest group, blacks played a strategic role in the pluralist theory. They were to vote as a group and be loyal allies to their political friends. They would contribute to coalition building in the Democratic Party. Blacks were not, however, supposed to push hard on issues pertaining exclusively to their own special interests. That would be divisive and might undercut the possibility for solidarity. The expectation was that if blacks accepted this strategy, they would be part of a powerful mosaic of interest groups that eventually could act on behalf of the "special" interests of specific constituencies.

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[2]For an extensive, thorough-going account of pluralism, see Lustig, 1984.

5

The pluralist strategy was based on a number of assumptions. Meta-phorically speaking, it assumed that team players, those who played by the rules, would eventually get their turn on the playing field. It assumed that patient groups, the ones who maintained a low political profile and subordinated their selfish special interests to the larger interests would be rewarded for these virtues. Politically speaking, the strategy assumed that if blacks put claims growing out of their historical injustices on the backburner, white, Euro-Americans would be willing to maintain alliances with them. In combination, pluralist theory and strategy enabled liberal Democrats to tell blacks to quiet down without using the language of racism or reaction.

The 1984 election changed all that. According to exit polling by ABC, Reagan won every category of white males, except Jews (Balz, 1984). He won rich and poor, "yuppie" and blue collar, North and South, young and old. And generally speaking, he won them by overwhelming margins. Among white males aged 18 to 24 and 40 to 49, he won 70 percent of the vote. He received 67 percent of the vote among those aged 25 to 39. He got 73 percent of the Protestant white males; 62 percent of Catholic white males and 79 percent of the white men calling themselves "born again." He won white male hourly workers with 58 percent, salaried white males with 71 percent and self-employed white males with 73 percent. Reagan almost got a majority (49 percent) among unemployed white males and a huge 74 percent of the yuppie men. The Democratic Party was no longer a multi-racial coalition of interest groups; it was the party of color. The Republicans effectively became the party of white Americans.

What happened in 1984 to cause this transformation? Did black people violate some rules by taking over the organization or did the Democratic Party break its own rules by "pandering" to the special interests of blacks thereby driving-out whites?

The commonly accepted explanation for Reagan's success among white people is that the Democratic Party paid too much attention to blacks. "The problem is not only among whites," wrote one political scientist; "the Democratic Party has, in effect, made blacks the nation's designated minority" (Popkin, 1984). According to the press and prominent Party spokespeople, the lesson is clear: if the Democrats appeal primarily to blacks, and other "special interests," they will never win the support of white males.

This explanation assumes that the Democratic Party Presidential candidate tilted heavily in the direction of black people. Walter Mondale, however, promised black people nothing concrete despite making specific promises to other Party constituencies. Throughout his campaign Mondale kept both Rev. Jackson and the black community at arm's length. The most disturbing aspect of the 1984 election, then, was not that the Democrats appealed to the "special interests" of blacks and lost; but that they did not, and lost anyway.

The Democrats did not lose white votes because they pandered to special interests. Nor can the loss be attributed entirely to Reagan's charisma and popularity among white people. Contrary to popular wisdom, 1984 was not the beginning of a shift in voting patterns among whites. It was, rather, the culmination of changes that began more than 50 years ago when blacks first exercised the franchise. White people started

leaving the Democratic Party as early as 1932. At that time an ugly

dynamic developed which took a while to recognize. That dynamic was

unmistakeable by 1984.

The solid South voted solidly Democratic only until black people

began to vote[3]. When that occured in 1932, southern white voters began

to vote Republican. As blacks became part of the New Deal coalition in

1936, civil rights became a troublesome issue for the Democrats and they

were seriously divided over it. Independent electors appeared on the

ballot in several southern states for the first time since the Civil

War. Southern congressional delegations were even willing to form coal-

itions with northern Republicans in order to defeat civil rights propo-

sals.

Demographic shifts occured around World War II which caused addi-

tional problems for the interest group theory of politics as it per-

tained to black people. Concentrated in electoral strongholds of the

Democratic Party, blacks became a force with which to be reckoned by the

War's end. In 1948, Democrats could not take the organized, voting

black community for granted. Henry Wallace's Progressive Party appeared

to be siphoning black votes and Dewey was running strongly against Tru-

man. Unless the Party demonstrated commitment to civil rights, blacks

might not vote for Truman. The Democrats responded by inserting a

strong civil rights plank into the Party's platform.

Violating the spirit of pluralist, interest group politics, south-

ern white Democrats did not act like team players. The so-called Dix-

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[3]The following three paragraphs are based on Piven and Cloward, 1979.

8

iecrats left the Party. While Truman managed to win without them, the South was no longer solidly Democratic. Four deep south states voted Republican. Four years later, Stevenson attempted to appease southern voters. Despite being successful in bringing Dixiecrats back into the fold, he did not, however, prevent additional southern states from defecting. A pattern was emerging: Instead of becoming a coalition of multi-racial interests, the organized participation of black people in the Democratic Party was having the opposite effect. Southern white people were leaving the Party.

This pattern was recognized in 1956 by Samuel Lubell. He saw a growing rift in the Party between southern whites and northern blacks. Lubell's analysis was less than optimistic. In his estimation, the Party might not survive unless it made serious organizational changes. Despite Lubell's warning, northern sociological theorizing continued to promote the pluralist strategy for interest group politics. Sociologists like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in their monograph, Beyond the Melting Pot, argued that ethnically identified people needed to press their group interests to advance themselves. In their estimation, black people were weakened because they could not muster enough political group leverage. Presumably this weakness would be overcome if black people participated in the Democratic Party. That way they would eventually succeed the earlier ethnic groups in positions of party leadership.

Black people apparently took the pluralist theory seriously. One analysis of election results between 1952 and 1972 (Axelrod, 1978) suggests that the proportion of blacks voting for Democratic presidential

9

candidates increased from 23 percent in 1952 to 47 percent in 1972. The proportion of the votes of black people which have been cast for the Democratic Party, their "loyalty", is high and increasing. In 1952 black people's "loyalty" to the Democratic Party was 38 percent greater than that of the population as a whole. By 1972 it had exceeded the loyalty of the population as a whole by 49 percent.

Lubell's fears for the Democratic Party were being realized in this period. While black people became increasingly loyal and turned out in higher proportions, white people were moving in another direction. The proportion of union members voting for Democratic Party presidential candidates decreased from 66 percent in 1952 to 58 percent in 1972. Fewer Catholic Americans were also voting Democratic. The proportions decreased from 76 percent in 1952 to 65 percent in 1972. Northern white Americans were also increasingly less loyal to the Democratic Party. The loyalty of union members in 1952 was 14 percent greater than that of the population as a whole. In 1972 it had dropped to 8 percent. The loyalty of Catholic Americans had dropped from 12 percent greater than the voting population in 1952 to 6 percent in 1972. The inclusion of black people into the Democratic Party clearly did not enlarge the coalition. An increase in the loyalty of black people was correlated with a decrease in the loyalty of northern Euro-Americans.

The theory of multi-racial, interest group politics was not working in the 1970s. What began in 1932 as a relatively small scale, regional loss of white loyalty was a problem of massive proportions by the late 1970s. The Democrats were losing more than votes, however; their very theory of politics was also being abandoned.

10

Personalizing the Political

The theory barely survived the 1960s. Until then, northern, liberal Democrats could attribute the problems of black people to structural issues like political exclusion, racial discrimination, and insufficient organization. When blacks organized themselves to challenge the structural sources of their problems in the "deep North", however, liberal, Euro-American intellectuals began to abandon the pluralist theory of interest group politics. Professor Moynihan, turned Presidential Advisor Moynihan, counseled Richard Nixon to follow a policy he called "benign neglect." And by the middle 1970's, Professor Glazer in a book entitled Affirmative Discrimination, reversed the analytic stance of his earlier volume by arguing that Americans must ignore the ethnic or racial membership of individuals and only take into consideration people's personal attributes. This is the same Professor Glazer, who with Professor Moynihan only a decade earlier, had argued that ethnics had to push their group interests to succeed politically.

The political tune changed completely when some black organizations presumed to speak in the name of their constituency and proposed that the government intervene on behalf of group criteria in matters like employment and education. Liberal Democrats not only opposed so-called affirmative action policies, they changed the terms of discourse as well. Without much intellectual transition, unemployment, incarceration, and educational achievement rates became indications of personal problems experienced by individual black people. Liberal thought had come full circle: A modern version of Myrdal's "pathological" black community was being invoked.

11

What happened to change the political discourse so suddenly? Were black people unsuccessful as an interest group? Was there something wrong with theory?

What occured between the 1930s and 1970s was a change in the distribution of power within the Democratic Party. At issue fundamentally was less a matter of "interests" than of privilege. When black people acted as an effective interest group in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they reduced the resources previously available exclusively to Irish, Italian, and Jewish interest groups in the Democratic Party and with that, the bases of historical privilege. So long as blacks were excluded or acted as individuals, competition between ethnic groups was minimized. Not surprisingly, it was these groups who demanded that their special interests continue to be honored when blacks insisted on being included.

Apparently the pluralist theory of politics was not intended to include a redistribution of privilege between groups. Thus, like good politicans, interest group theorists changed their terms. An entire category of political participants was reclassified so that black people would not have to be recognized as an interest group.

As the 1980s arrived, the Democrats had neither the white votes nor a viable theory for multi-racial coalition. When blacks acted like an interest group, white Democrats in the North and the South, conservative and liberal, would not tolerate it. Some groups would vote against their own economic interests rather than vote for a Party that included black people as equal partners. Reagan's success among white voters in 1984 was simply the culmination of this long three-decade process.

Until the 1984 presidential election, liberal Democrats could tell blacks to be patient and to subordinate their priorities to others' without sounding like conservatives or racists. The sociological analysis had a pluralist tone in which waiting one's turn made strategic sense. After white voters completely defected from these politics in 1984, however, pluralist theory sounds like empty rhetoric. Liberal Democrats are therefore faced with a serious problem: How do they make a convincing argument that blacks should "lay low," stay in the Democratic Party and not alienate white voters when it is no longer possible to invoke the theory of pluralism?

They must be able to argue that racism was not the reason why whites left the Democratic Party, that they were driven out by blacks. This position is plausible when blacks are accused of acting on behalf of narrow special interests instead of conducting themselves like an interest group. The contention is enhanced if, in addition, a case is made that whites left because affirmative action was the special interest pursued by blacks. This argument is strengthened considerably, however, if it can be shown that the affirmative action programs pursued by blacks cannot succeed <u>because of problems endemic to the black community</u>. Were this proposition demonstrated, it could be said that affirmative action programs are self-defeating for two reasons: They do not work because they fail to address "pathologies" in the black community; and they are counter-productive because they alienate white Americans. The argument against affirmative action, then, is an important one. It provides Democratic Party spokespeople with grounds for counseling patience when pluralist theory no longer works.

There is, however, a hitch: It is difficult to maintain the
appearance of liberalism while opposing programs intented to eliminate
the remnants of racial inequality. Moreover, the argument certainly
smacks of making black people responsible for their own location in the
racial hierarchy. Without this assumption, it is not obvious why affir-
mative action programs are self-defeating. Thus, American liberals are
called upon to show how their opposition to affirmative action is con-
sistent with their commitment to racial equality, not an easy task.

For conservatives and neo-conservatives this is not a problem. The
idea that the black community is responsible for its social location is
perfectly consistent with their free market assumptions. Thus, they
have always opposed government programs designed to make up for past
injustices to black people[4]. Given the assumptions liberals bring with
them, however, opposition to affirmative action must be made on dif-
ferent grounds. They have to walk an ideological tight rope: their
rejection of civil rights legislation has to be done without free market
assumptions or biological explanations for inequality. A new political
language is needed. The intellectual scaffolding for it has been emerg-
ing in the American academy for years.

Minimizing the Significance of Race

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[4] The most prominent proponent of this neo-conservative position is
Thomas Sowell. A black economist, Sowell has written two books (Ethnic
America and Markets and Minorities) in which he argues that programs
aimed at eliminating discrimination actually end up creating more of it.
In his estimation, the previous victims of racial and ethnic discrimina-
tion are now the favored recipients of undeserved "reverse discrimina-
tion."

The new political language essentially trivializes the significance of racism in American life. Using either hypothetical "models," anecdotal data, assertion, or dubious theorizing, people who speak this language discount and minimize the explanatory power of race as a variable that accounts for the socio-economic location of Afro-Americans. This is a real "accomplishment" for social scientists. It enables them to oppose affirmative action, and other priority items on the black political agenda, without sounding racist or neo-conservative. The "analysis" allows them to tell black Americans to be patient and lay low without invoking the logic of pluralism.

Trivializing the centrality of racism is a complicated project involving a four legged argument: Recipients of discrimination are held responsible for their social situation; data are constructed and manipulated theoretically; racism is minimalized conceptually; and history is either ignored or convienently reconstructed. Used separately or in combination, these formulations provide new ways for Americans to oppose affirmative action and remain committed to equal rights. Together they create a political language in which equal rights legislation is equated with "reverse discrimination."

The remainder of this essay explores the four components to this political language. It focuses,in part, on essays by neo-liberal and formerly liberal commentators like Nathan Glazer, Charles Murray, and Glenn Loury. Not surprisingly, each of these writers gives voice to an element of the new talk. The emerging discourse allows them to oppose affirmative action and espouse equal rights without sounding inconsistent. None of them, however, combines all four pieces of the new

language in one statement. Ironically, that accomplishment is reserved for a self-proclaimed radical sociologist: Christopher Jencks.

Jencks achieves this claim to fame under the thick disguise of sociological analysis. It is contained in a New York Review of Books series analyzing Thomas Sowell's neo-conservative attack on affirmative action (March 3 and 17, 1983). While Jencks engages Sowell in numerous intellectual skirmishes throughout the series, the encounter will be remembered for something else: Jencks is more critical of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act than he is of Thomas Sowell. His major attack is leveled at affirmative action programs, not Friedmanesque economics come to race relations. Despite his reluctance to call for de facto repeal of Title VII, Jencks does argue for a case by case reexamination of hiring quotas for minorities in specific firms. "Such a reexamina-tion," he writes, "should try to ensure that these quotas lead to color-blind hiring rather than reverse discrimination" (emphasis added). In this simple declaration, Jencks endorses the neo-conservative claim that affirmative action is reverse discrimination and he wraps supply-side calls for deregulation in the language of "colorblind hiring." After a lengthy discussion of racial discrimination and affirmative action, Jencks' political conclusion is that black people should be wary of a warranted backlash on "reverse discrimination." Instead of pushing, he contends they should be patient.[5] Jencks' "analysis" is the fullest

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[5] "In today's political environment," he concludes in the last sen-tence of the series, "the only argument that will persuade minorities not to seek protection from competition is prudential: certain short-term benefits, especially those that derive from reverse discrimination, may cost blacks more than the benefits are worth." As Jencks formulates it, the issue is not how to defend affirmative action, or to make it more effective. Instead, the problem is how to convince minorities to

16

articulation of the new political language to date. Thus, it organizes the less comprehensive expressions of his more conservative fellow ideological linguists.

Blaming the Victim

Holding the people at society's edges responsible for their own location is crucial for trivializing the impact of racism on American life. Jencks' contribution to this kind of argumentation is evident in his explanation for income discrepancies between black and white males. The data he presents indicate that the discrepancy decreases as educational level increases: While black high school graduates in 1979 earned 74 percent of what their white counterparts earned, black men with B.A.s earned 84 percent of the earnings received by white men with B.A.s. He also suggests that black men with graduate degrees have achieved income parity with whites holding advanced degrees.

How is it, he wonders, that among men without graduate degrees, blacks still earn less than whites? Rejecting traditional radical and liberal explanations, Jencks offers a third account: "The fact that black-white wage differences are greatest among poorly educated black males," he says, "suggests that employers may be reacting more to ghetto culture than to skin color per se. Poorly educated black men behave in all sorts of ways that employers dislike." One is that male black youth are five to ten times more likely than whites to be arrested and

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not seek government aid. The question facing Jencks is, what are the grounds upon which blacks can be talked out of demanding affirmative action. He apparently thinks prudence is a convincing argument.

convicted of serious crimes. And even though Jencks is aware of possible reasons for these statistics, he thinks prudent employers have to assume that black youth are more likely to end up in trouble than whites. The other kind of behavior Jencks thinks employers find objectionable is that black men are more likely than whites to father illegitimate children, to not support them, and to then abandon families if they get married.

If readers hear echoes of theories past in this formulation, their sensitivities are correct: It is a revival of the culture' of poverty thesis.[6] Jencks' formulation clearly implies that black men have developed a culture around being poor and that their situation is largely attributable to the expectations associated with this way of life. Black youth are analyzed, then, within the 1960s framework that explained differences between poor people and their better-off counterparts in terms of the former group's "culture of poverty."

One of the problems with the culture of poverty thesis was that it lent itself to interpretations which held poor people responsible for their own poverty. The updated formulation is no exception. Jencks' explanation for income discrepancies between black and white men blames black men for the financial differences. Interpreting one of the presumed differences between black and white youth, for example, he suggests that "...(I)f young black men approach their work in the same way that they approach contraception, or when that fails, parenthood, employers would have good reason to avoid hiring them for responsible

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[6] Versions of this thesis can be found in Frazier, Glazer, Moynihan, Matza, Miller and Lewis; critical views are contained in Ryan, Clark, Keil, Liebow and Valentine.

jobs."

Glenn Loury harmonizes on the theme. In his estimation, "the bottom stratum of the black community has compelling problems which can no longer be blamed solely on white racism, and which force us to confront fundamental failures in black society" (Loury, 1984:14). The problems he points to repeat Jencks' assessment of the black community. At the top of his list are "social disorganization," "lagging academic performance," "high rates of crime," and "the alarming increase in early unwed pregnancies...." (14) The causes of income discrepancies, then, are obviously located in the behavior of black youth.

And if there is any doubt as to who is held responsible for the situation, the authors of the new political language are explicit. "The puzzle," in Jencks' mind, "is why so many young black men still act in ways that not only make employers reluctant to hire them but make many employers want to fire those they have hired." Nathan Glazer is straight forward: "It is one thing to be asked to fight discrimination against the competent, hard-working, and law-abiding;" he says, "it is quite another to be asked to fight discrimination against the less competent or incompetent and criminally inclined" (Glazer, 1975:67).

The Methodology of Let's Pretend

The second technique for trivializing racism is produced by a methodology of "let's pretend." Concusions are based on hypothetical data that are manipulated theoretically. This sort of reasoning involves maximum use of inference, logical deduction and theoretical

19

speculation.   Direct evidence or "data" are never used to support propositions concerning the impact of racism on blacks.

Christopher Jencks' analysis of black youth, for example, begins with the observation that, regardless of race, what people learn in school is only modestly related to subsequent earnings. Reading Sowell, Jencks is no longer convinced that the explanation for this is that employers pay equally competent blacks less than whites. He is now persuaded that "such evidence is not conclusive" because employers complain as much about the work habits and motivation of black employees as their technical competence. The implications following from this observation are serious. In Jencks' estimation, "If these complaints were well founded, blacks would earn less than whites with comparable skills even in a colorblind world."

Given Jencks' propensity for documentation (his book Inequality contains nearly 100 pages of methodological appendices) one would expect him to present some systematic data suggesting that the employer's complaints were grounded in observable behavior, not self-serving ideology. Jencks, however, does not live up to his reputation in this instance. Instead, he offers reasons why it is almost impossible to measure work habits and motivation and he engages in a series of interesting speculations.

> If dissatisfaction is linked to job performance, as countless organization theorists claim, the fact that blacks are dissatisfied could mean that they perform poorly. If so, even unprejudiced employers would end up paying blacks less than whites with similar skills and credentials. This would remain true even if, as one can readily imagine, blacks had good reasons for being dissatisfied. If, through no fault of their own, blacks had worse relations with their supervisors or fellow workers, and if this led to poor performance, it would make economic sense for

employers to pay blacks less than whites with similar credentials and skills.

Careful notice of the formulation reveals important features of this element of the trivialization process. The word "if" appears five times in four sentences; it is used once to state a condition and four times to make an assumption. Each of the assumptions is testable or verifiable in a natural setting. Despite this possibility, the analysis proceeds as if the assumptions are correct; evidence is not presented that they are. The conclusion is therefore built-into untested assumptions; it is not derived from empirical evidence.

Using conditional and parenthetical clauses, a theoretical world is constructed in which the economic sense behind discrimination is detected and black people can be damned with faint compassion. If, the first assumption is correct, then "even unprejudiced employers" can pay blacks less than whites, and this would be true even if, as anyone "can readily imagine," blacks had "good reasons" for being unhappy, and even if, "through no fault of their own," this led to poor performance. The formulation sounds very reasonable and sympathetic to black men earning between 74 and 84 percent of what their white counterparts earn and simultaneously explains why unprejudiced people practice discrimination. Using scholarly sounding language, a series of assumptions are strung together without ever grounding them in an empirically observable context.

Jencks, however, finds the conclusion unsettling. He wants to adopt a "skeptical" posture toward it. After all, he points out, Asian men earn less than Europeans with the same education and, "If it isn't

21

because of discrimination, what is the explanation?" Jencks never addresses this issue directly. Instead, he immediately raises another question: "But if discrimination is really crucial, as liberal doctrine claims it is," he asks in the very next paragraph, "how are we to explain the...striking fact...that black women with college degrees earn more than their white counterparts?"

Jencks never answers the question. Rather, he uses it to speculate that the reason is not affirmative action and to make a specious argument about black men. If certain black women have achieved income parity while black men haven't, he argues, there must be something unique about the men. On the basis of this comparison, Jencks concludes that when employers discriminate against black men they may be responding more to ghetto culture than skin color.

The comparison with black women is crucial to the process of trivializing the impact of racism on black people. Notice carefully the structure of the argument. The data on black women are used to explain discrimination against black men. The conclusion is not based on an examination of evidence pertaining to the behavior of black men. Instead, it comes out of extraordinary inference.

Charles Murray's recent attempt to label affirmative action advocates the "new racists" (Murray, 1984) also relies heavily on the logic of let's pretend. Murray's realization that he is traveling in very "poorly mapped territory" does not make him circumspect. He admits that he has "few numbers" and he is not bothered that the cases he presents are "composites." In fact, he boldly announces that the cases are not intended as "evidence" because, as he candidly confesses: "I cannot tell

you how often they happen" (19).

Most social scientists would be a little reluctant to concede this much ground before venturing a new "theory" of racism. But not Charles Murray. He doesn't worry because his argument is not based on evidence. It is produced by the logic of let's pretend. "If the institutions of this country were left to their own devices now," he asks, "to what extent would they refuse to admit, hire, and promote people because they were black?" Since Murray opposes affirmative action, he wants to minimize the impact of government intervention. Thus, he asks: "To what extent are American institutions kept from being racist by the government's intervention?" The fact that he has no evidence does not prevent him from offering answers. Doing data-free sociology, he suggests "a hypothesis" he thinks "bears looking into." "Suppose for a moment that I am right," he asks of the reader. "Suppose that, for practical purposes, racism would not get in the way of blacks if preferential treatment were abandoned. How, in my most optimistic view, would the world look different?" (19)

With absolutely no data Murray constructs a theoretical world that permits him to reject affirmative action programs. He admits that in his world of make believe, blacks would lag behind. "As a population, yes, for a time." Since the analysis is not based on a demonstrated reality, conclusions can be created that suit his political purposes. Thus, Murray can justify keeping blacks behind whites with the dream that if his advice is followed, "the nation should be mounting a far more effective program to improve secondary education for blacks than it has mounted in the last few decades."

23

The argument is another characteristic feature of new political language: it justifies discrimination, while sounding scholarly, but without providing data that is directly relevant to the propositions being advanced.

Minimizing Racism Conceptually

The third feature of the new language minimizes racism by being conceptually narrow (Blauner, 1983). Jencks' theory of discrimination is an example of this analytic device. Assuming that employers have sound economic reasons for discriminating against black men, his theory of discrimination suggests how this might occur and what the consequences might be.

Two characteristics of the theory stand out: its conceptual narrowness and the nature of the data generating it. The theory is most notable for what it ignores. Left out are social context, history, the structure of privilege and institutional priorities. The concept of institutional racism is nowhere to be found in the entire explanation for wage differences between black and white men.

Conceptual Blinders: Jencks does not even mention institutional racism as an alternative "hypothesis." In contrast, his theory of discrimination is based on a distinction between motives. Jencks posits four possible reasons for employers to discriminate: "malice," "myopia," "statistics," and "consumer preference." Each kind of discrimination has varying consequences. "Malicious" and "myopic" discrimination raise firms costs; on the other hand, firms that fail to practice

"statistical" or "consumer directed" discrimination can loose money. Thus, the theory provides instances in which discrimination serves employers immediate economic interests and might therefore be justified. Jencks skillfully weaves these concepts together into an account that explains how issues other than skin color may be instrumental in explaining wage differences between black and white men.

The idea of institutional racism became part of the sociological lexicon in the late 1960s as people searched for concepts that might extend analyses of discrimination beyond motives to include institutional patterns of exclusion.[7] The notion was developed to understand unintentional practices that occurred independently of conscious bigotry. As used by the courts and social scientists, institutional racism refers to activities in which individuals have "no intention of subordinating others because of color, or are totally unaware of doing so" (Downs, 1970; emphasis added).

When discrimination is analyzed as a form of institutional racism the unit of analysis is organizational, the focus is on practices. It is not necessary to identify specific discriminatory decisions to explain discrepancies between races with an institutional perspective. So routine are some practices that individuals need not exercise a choice to operate in racist ways. "The rules and procedures of the large organizations," writes one student of institutional racism, "have already prestructured the choice." (Baron, 1969: 142-3).

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[7] For an extended analysis of social science thinking on the subject of race and discrimination see, Feagin and Eckberg, 1980.

Jencks' theory of discrimination, on the other hand, does not account for wage discrepancies in terms of routine institutional practices. Rather, he is concerned with the _motives_ that may or may not justify discrimination. The analysis contains no understanding of historically produced racial hierarchies that have come to be taken for granted and which no longer need to be consciously reproduced. Employment discrimination is treated as if it can be isolated from broader contexts. Analyzing discrimination through motives, Jencks' very narrowly abstract theory leads to the astonishing conclusion that black men are responsible for their own unemployment. As he says candidly,

> I think we must assume that firms are telling the truth when they say they have trouble finding black male high-school graduates who perform well in the skilled, responsible, fairly well-paid jobs traditionally reserved for white male high-school graduates.

This use of theory minimizes racism; it denies a central feature of the black experience in America by assuming the issue is _not_ discrimination.

Given Jencks' theory, the assumption is necessary. If the institutional context is taken into account, however, it is more difficult to accept these firms' word at face value. But given Jencks' logic, the assumption not only makes sense, it also sounds reasonable. In most other contexts, someone subscribing to this view would be thought of as either extremely naive or insensitive to the racism faced by black people.

Mis-using Data: This kind of theorizing is accomplished with a questionable use of data. Propositions are advanced based upon data which are inappropriate for the claims being made. Jencks' theory of discrimination, for example, is derived from the earnings of black

people as a percentage of white people's earnings. Technically known as "gross" or "aggregate" statistics, these data shed light on the results of past practices; they are measurements of outcomes. The theory being advanced, however, addresses the process of discrimination; Jencks is explaining the reasoning behind employment practices. Appropriate data for this theory would get directly at the meanings employers attribute to the behavior of young black males; the data would consist of interpretations employers make of activities associated with black men. The basic data needed to have any relevance to his theory are phenomeno-logical data collected in the natural setting (c.f. Duster, Matza, Well-man 1979).

Phenomenological data, however, are not presented. Instead, aggregate data are used to characterize the quality of discrimination. Jencks presumes what the data would look like had he collected it first hand. The meaning attributed to discrimination is generated through an analysis of aggregate data; no evidence is presented regarding the employers' definitions of the situation. That is read into the results of discrimination. Were the topic institutional racism, aggregate data would bear more relevance. But, as we have seen, institutional racism is not addressed.

This casual approach toward appropriate uses of data is an important contributor to the new political language of racial inequality. In certain instances, it enables the speaker to oppose affirmative action and still sound committed to equal rights. For example, Jencks desire to reexamine hiring quotas is justified on the grounds that he is worried Title VII "has sometimes led to discrimination against whites"

27

(emphasis added). Loury also expresses concern for white Americans. In his estimation, the majority of whites "do not think of themselves or their country as responsible" for the position of black people (15).

The issue of fairness and the possibility that white Americans will oppose redistributive social policies are then invoked as the grounds for rejecting affirmative action. Jencks' stated reason for reexamining quotas is that Title VII is being abused and he proposes colorblind hiring as the alternative to "reverse discrimination." He counsels the black community to be cautious on the grounds that a course of inaction will avoid the putative or hypothetical wrath of Euro-America. Given the importance attributed to the alleged abuses suffered by majority Americans and the fear associated with their assumed ire, it seems reasonable to expect evidence or argumentation be provided in support of the analysis. Instead, however, the case is based on assertion, hypothetical relationships, and questionable assumptions. By treating assertions and assumptions as "facts," this "analysis" of affirmative action appears empirical instead of political.

Jencks, for example, asserts that Title VII "has sometimes led to discrimination against whites." Perhaps. But if so, how often? And, how many times are whites told by a prospective employer that "race" is the reason for not hiring them, when there were really only three jobs and 300 applicants? The contention that Title VII leads to discrimination against whites needs to be demonstrated. How, then, is the assertion supported? "Some whites," Jencks states in the next sentence,

> resent having been denied jobs or promotions that they think went to less qualified blacks because of affirmative action. Many others assume that every surly or incompetent worker they

28

encounter who is black owes his or her job to federal pressure
...

There is no doubt that Euro-Americans resent what they take to be an injustice. But that is not the issue. The issue is whether their resentments can be used as evidence that Title VII leads to discrimination against whites in any routine sociologically relevant way? To constitute such evidence, it would have to be shown that these sentiments are based on empirically observable instances in which jobs were denied to people expressing these views because "less qualified" blacks were employed, or that "surly" and "incompetent" black workers owed their jobs to federal pressure. Unless that can be shown, the sentiments have to be regarded as folklore. But no such evidence on discrimination against whites is provided. From the resentments of Euro-Americans, it is infered that Title VII leads to discrimination.

Additional untested assumptions are built into the argument when speculation is introduced about the sentiments of majority Americans. Loury asserts that most white Americans consider the poverty of black communities as "substantially due to the behavior of the people living there;" they are unconvinced by "the tortured rationalizations offered by black and (some) liberal white spokesmen" (15). Jencks alleges that:

> Reverse discrimination has also reinforced white prejudice about black incompetence. In some cases a double standard in hiring leads to clear differences in performance between blacks and whites doing the same sort of work.

Without so much as a transitional sentence, he inserts the terms "reverse discrimination" and "double standards." These two concepts are important components to an interesting thesis, if it is true. But nei-

ther data nor argument are provided to evaluate the validity of these assertions. Thus they have to be viewed as untested assumptions.

The emotionally loaded language of "reverse discrimination," "double standard," and "tortured rationalization" is a substitute for evidence and analysis. By treating stereotypes and prejudice as accurate representations of minority hiring practices, untested assumptions are elevated to the status of "facts." This gives the discussion the appearance of factual foundation and makes the opposition to affirmative action sound like a plea for justice and fairness.

Historical Reconstruction

Having created the "fact" that affirmative action promotes "reverse discrimination," the new political linguists analyze how that fact came to be. "How did Title VII," asks Jencks, "which was supposed to forbid discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity, end by encouraging it?" His answer reveals another feature of the emerging language for trivializing racism: it ignores history. The past is used in a limited and tailored manner, one that fits the conclusion that affirmative action leads to reverse discrimination.

Jencks, for example, traces the history of affirmative action to the late 1960s. In his estimation, the ground rules for interpreting new civil rights legislation were established in the ashes of ghetto rebellion. He thinks Title VII was part of an employment strategy to eliminate racial violence with a government promise for jobs and a commitment to reverse the effects of past discrimination. Jencks believes

30

this strategy forced employers to create quotas which resulted in people being hired with less impressive credentials than the ones who had been rejected.

This historical account makes it possible to conclude that affirmative action leads to reverse discrimination. Beginning the historical account in the 1960s makes it appear that Title VII was a response to ghetto rebellions, that the rules for its interpretation were instituted because of problems created by black people, and that discrimination occured as a result of civil rights legislation. The historical cart is before the horse; this account completely ignores the social context for civil rights legislation in 1964. The relevant history for Title VII is the failure of Fair Employment Practices legislation enacted in 1947, not ghetto violence in the late 1960s. Civil rights legislation was necessary because FEPC's were unable to dismantle structures of racial privilege; the doors to racially exclusive occupations, corporations and unions remained closed up until the 1960s despite the efforts of FEPCs in many states. Thus, the failure of FEPC legislation to create racial equality produced the need for legal provisions mandating programs that were affirmative in the sense of aggressively pursuing equality not just opening doors (Duster, 1976). Only when this context is ignored or minimized is it possible to suggest that affirmative action is responsible for reverse discrimination.

Jenck's capacity to oppose affirmative action while sounding comitted to equality is enhanced by the meritocratic appeal of his proposal. He wants to replace the obviously unfair practice of "reverse discrimination" with the clearly egalitarian standards contained in "colorblind

31

hiring." While never demonstrated or made explicit, he assumes that colorblind hiring is a fairer and more productive strategy for achieving equality than affirmative action because people are hired according to the universalistic or neutral criteria of "merit." He can assume this because of his conceptually narrow approach that consistently minimizes the extent to which racial hierarchy is insinuated throughout American society. The formulation shows no understanding of how universalism is connected to the organization of racial privilege in this country (Duster, 1976). When this broader context is taken into account, Jencks' proposal seems neither fair nor very useful.

Hiring according to criteria that are "colorblind" does not mean people are selected on the basis of some abstract, neutral notion of merit that is applied universalistically. This does not occur because the meaning of colorblind criteria like "merit" is always socially defined and structurally located. As a consequence, the people ranked high on these criteria are also typically located well in the social hierarchy. Thus, it is not "merit" which gets established by universalistic standards; more usually it is social location of meritocracy. Thus, the call for colorblind hiring to eliminate racial inequality in the United States is a sociological non-sequitur. It sounds fair; implemented as policy, however, it reproduces inequality.

Conclusion

The new political language certainly resonates with the tenor of the times. As work becomes increasingly difficult to find, people wonder out loud if America can afford an economic policy of special treatment for one category of citizen. Resentment is high and all-white bars and living rooms are thick with tales of "qualified" Euro-American males losing jobs to "the special interests" of "affirmative action candidates." There is good reason to believe that attacks on inequality are not politically feasible during periods of belt tightening. It is therefore understandable that people should seek new ways for "discussing" the issue.

Nearly twenty years have passed since affirmative action became a household concept. The time has come to seriously evaluate this strategy for eliminating racial inequality. Does it work? Is it fair? Is it viable? The questions are legitimate. There is no gain in sticking with social programs doomed to failure. But if the assessment is to result in an informed political agenda, the questions must be addressed with better evidence and logic than is offered by the new linguists.

Were their proposals based on some data showing that racial equality can be achieved through colorblind hiring, or evidence indicating that affirmative action is equivalent to reverse discrimination, their writings might lead to more enlightened and informed debate on the topic. But this is not done. Instead, proposals are based on personal anecdotal data taken largely from the academy, and some very dubious theorizing.

Rather than clarifying serious issues, the new political language contributes to the current cloud of empirical ignorance about

33

affirmative action. Conclusions are built-into untested assumptions, they are not derived from data bearing directly upon the topics being analyzed. The propositions advanced are based on mere assertions, inference and speculation. The meaning attributed to data on discrimination are read into them, they do not come out of the actors' motivations that are presumably being analyzed. By substituting the resentment of presumed discrimination for observed instances of it, the new talk contributes to the stereotyped, prejudiced thinking that presently dominates talk about affirmative action. The language of "reverse discrimination" and "special interests" is frequently insulting and misleading, even inflamatory.

If the serious questions and issues posed by affirmative action are to be clarified, the method of inquiry used by the new linguists must be rejected. A number of questions need to be carefully addressed and they must be approached without ideologically loaded formulations. It is absolutely necessary to begin by breaking down and differentiating between the various meanings and kinds of affirmative action. The data, reports, and inferences about the varieties of affirmative action need to be brought together in order to assess how much difference these programs make. If it turns out the difference is minimal, then it makes sense to explore the reasons why. But before concluding that black men are responsible for their own problems by carrying around loud radios and reporting late for work, there are even more sociological reasons to speculate that bad old-fashioned employer discrimination is still operating. To what extent do affirmative action programs fail because of self-fulfilling prophesies by employers? Do employers consciously or

unconsciously attach labels to black men that insure poor performance? These possibilities cannot be adequately assessed by imaginative readings onto aggregate data. Questions of this sort can and must be answered through observation in natural settings.

The programs themselves also need to be carefully scrutinized. Do they feed people into career opportunities or are they numbers games that increase the circulation of bodies in and out of dead-end jobs? In what sectors of the economy are affirmative action programs located? How many are found in high-tech, expanding industries, and how many in smoke stack industries and the service sector? Compelling answers to these questions cannot be assumed or inferred from spurious correlations. Data bearing directly on these issues need to be collected and analyzed. If after rigorously digesting these data, it turns out that the explanatory variable is lower class black culture, then sobeit. But it is arrogant and irresponsible to arrive at this conclusion on the basis of speculation, inference and empirically arid theorizing.

The issue of "reverse discrimination" must be treated similarly. The racial composition of unemployment figures and major university faculties should make people suspicious of facile formulations equating affirmative action with reverse discrimination. Black unemployment is still double and triple the rate among Euro-Americans and university professors continue to be predominantly white and male. The new linguists may be correct in their concern for reverse discrimination, perhaps they are aware of something deeper than these impressions convey. But it is reasonable to expect practicing social scientists to present empirical evidence documenting assertions rather than assuming

35

reverse discrimination occurs as the logical consequence of affirmative action.

Do the data exist? Universities and federal contractors are required to keep records of applicants' ethnic and racial ancestry. How many Euro-American males have been actually denied job opportunities because less qualified racial minorities were hired? Or, dare I ask if less qualified Euro-American males have been hired while more qualified Afro-Americans have been tainted with the brush of "reverse discrimination"? Let us look at the numbers before jumping to conclusions. Without convincing evidence documenting the pervasiveness of "reverse discrimination," the assertions offered as "analysis" by the new linguists reinforces stereotyped thinking about affirmative action.

Political thought is equally distorted when blacks are reclassified a special interest. In the lexicon of American politics, the term "special interests" has always been contraposed to "the public interest. "Special interests" were considered inimical to and subversive of "the public interest." Special interests were selfish interests, rapacious, potentially malignant and probably corrupt. To call blacks a special interest is an exercise in derogation.

An important accomplishment of the 1960s was that black people's private troubles were transformed into a public issue. Their private political interests became part of the public interest. This occured most dramatically when a southern President told a national audience on television that "we shall overcome." Designating black people a "special interest" in 1984 therefore does more than abuse the concept and derogate a group of citizens. Politically, it is a step backward. It

implies that the politics of black people can be separated from America's national political priorities.

There is a concept in sociology which is equivalent to Orwell's notion of political language. Talk which substitutes inference for observation, builds conclusions into untested assumptions, abuses political categories, and uses inflammatory language in lieu of empirical evidence is called "ideology." If we are to make informed political choices, we need less ideology; not more of it. Given the alarmingly widening racial division in American life, we should stand for little else.

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