
Wrestling with Stigma

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I HAVE A WHITE FRIEND who has told me many times that he feels no racial guilt despite the fact that he was raised in the Deep South before the end of segregation. Though he grew up amid the inequality and moral duplicity of segregation, and inevitably benefited from it as a white, he says simply that he did not invent the institution. He experienced it as a fate he was born into. And when segregation was finally challenged in the civil rights era, any solidarity that he felt with other southern whites was grounded more in a sense of pathos than in any resistance to change. So, he says, there is no “objective basis” for racial guilt on his part.

Recently I was surprised to hear the novelist William Styron, a southerner by birth and upbringing, say on television that he, too, felt “no [white] guilt” despite the fact that his grandmother had owned slaves as a girl. And there was something emphatic, even challenging in his pronouncement

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that discouraged questioning. For as long as I can remember, I have heard white Americans of every background make this Pronouncement.

This is certainly understandable. White guilt threatens the credibility of everything whites say and do regarding race. Specifically it threatens them with what I have called *ulteriority*—the suspicion that their racial stands do not come from their announced motivations but from ulterior ones driven by guilt. We can say, for example, that the white liberal bends over backward because he is motivated by guilt even though he says he is motivated by true concern. Or we can say the anger of the “angry white male” is simply his way of denying guilt. We can use guilt to discredit every position whites take on racial matters. So it is not surprising to hear so many reflexive denials. When people like my friend or Styron do this, they are disclaiming ulterior motives. They want us to accept that they mean exactly what they say.

But I, for one, very rarely do accept this, or at least not without a glimpse past their words to the matter of ulterior motive. This is because there simply is no social issue in American life more driven by ulterior forces than race. One reason for this is that white American motivation in racial matters has gone largely unexamined, except to attribute support for policies like affirmative action to white goodwill and nonsupport to white racism. “White guilt” is almost a generic term referring to any ulterior white motivation. But the degree of *ulteriority* in American race relations is far too great to be explained entirely by guilt. I think the great unacknowledged event of the civil rights era was that white Americans became a stigmatized group. I also believe that our entire national culture of racial and social reform—the policies, programs, norms, and protocols by which we address race-related problems—has been shaped more by the stigmatization of whites than by any other factor, including the actual needs of blacks.

Ironically, it was the idea of equality that brought stigma to whites. In the civil rights era, when white America finally accepted a legal equality that would extend to different races, it also accepted an idea that shamed it. For three centuries white America had used race to defeat equality. It

had indulged in self-serving notions of white supremacy, had transgressed the highest principles of the democracy, and had enforced inequality on others while possessing the ideas to know better. The American racial shame is special in that slavery and segregation were knowing indulgences. The nation's first president had denounced the institution of slavery and freed his own slaves, yet it would take two more centuries for segregation to be outlawed. An evil strung out over the centuries and conducted in a full knowledge of itself.

America's new commitment to equality in the civil rights era brought with it an accountability for all this. What no one could have foreseen was that a great shaming of white Americans and American institutions was a condition of greater racial equality. In a sense the new embrace of equality floated the nation's racial shame, unanchored it, so that it rose to the surface of American life as a truth that the nation would have to answer for. As a result equality in the United States has depended on a vigilance that associates this racial shame with whites and American institutions. This association, of course, is the basis of white stigmatization.

In this way the idea of equality has established a social framework in which white Americans are no longer "universal" people or "Everyman" Americans. Today there is a consciousness that whites are a specific people, a group with a history, a fate, and a stigma like other groups. So far equality has worked by bringing whites down into stigma rather than by lifting lacks and other minorities up out of it. The morality implied in equality stigmatized whites as racist and thus gave them a group identity that they are accountable to in the eyes of others even if they reject its terms. Very often the strongest group identities form in response to stigmatization because stigmas are a kind of fate, a shared and inescapable experience. In any case the history of white racism, the idea of equality, the stigma created by these two things, and the need to wrestle with this stigma as the way back to decency—all this gave white Americans a new post-sixties identity that was not universal. In the way that blacks had been stigmatized as inferior, whites, too, became a group marked by a human incompleteness.

As black Americans know only too well, to be stigmatized is to be

drawn into a Sisyphean struggle for redemption from the accusation carried by the stigma. It is also to lose some of one's freedom to the judgment, opinion, or prejudice of others. White Americans now know what it is like to be presumed racist and to have that presumption count as fact against them. What blacks know is that one group's stigma is another group's power. Stigmatized as inferior, blacks were deprived by whites of freedom itself. Now stigmatized as racists, whites can easily be extorted by blacks for countless concessions. So, when a group fights against its stigma, it is also fighting for its freedom from the power of another group.

Being white in America has always meant being free from racial stigma, as if "whiteness" might be defined as simply the absence of stigma. Until recently we never had stigmatizing epithets for whites of any real power. "Honky" hardly compared to the visceral "nigger." (Today the term "racist" is quite effective against whites, but this is a post-sixties phenomenon.) This absence of stigma was always the blessing of being white in the United States, while color, even "one drop," was a stigma in itself that defined all who carried it as alienated "others." In America whites have been the "it," not the "other," so they have always had a rather myopic view of race as essentially a problem of "others."

One of the best-selling books on race during my youth was a book called *Black Like Me* by a white man, John Howard Griffin, who had chemically darkened his skin and traveled the South passing for black. What made the book sensational was that a white man had volunteered for the black stigma, the experience of the alienated other. But it was little more than a novelty book that put off many blacks because its very premise tended to mistake the black stigma for the entire black experience. The reader, whom the narrator presumed to be white, was invited to watch one of his or her own in the land of the "other." And the black "other" was shown to endure little melodramas of man's inhumanity to man at which the "good" white reader could be appropriately aghast. This began an age when white America was invited not to see black life but to be aghast at it. However, the book's greater sin was to suggest that even if whites were

morally obligated to support equality, race was still a problem that affected others.

But equality finally gave whites their own racial otherness. The idea of democratic equality—explicitly applied beyond even the boundary of race by the 1964 Civil Rights Bill—showed white Americans as a group to have betrayed the nation’s best democratic principles. Even though it was the white embrace of these principles that brought the civil rights victories, it was the need to embrace them in the middle of the twentieth century that proved the white betrayal of them. And this profoundly injured the legitimacy of whites as a group in relation to principles of any kind. They had used race to give themselves license from principle.

Of course, the fact of a group finding a pretext for violating its own principles was hardly new. What is new is for an oppressive group to embrace equality at the expense of its own moral legitimacy so that it has to live with those it once oppressed without the moral authority to enforce the society’s best principles. This situation, this fate, comprises the “otherness” of white America today. It is alienating to live with this stigmatic association with shame, and to have lost standing in relation to the principles one was raised to cherish, to watch the institutions of one’s society—from the family to the public schools—weaken for want of demanding principles, and to be without the necessary authority to restore them, to lose “universality,” to have one’s angry former victim define social morality, to feel both a little guilty and falsely accused, to feel pressured toward a fashionable relativism as toward racial decency itself—all this and more has come to whites as an experience of “otherness” that I believe is the unexamined source of U.S. racial policy since the sixties. The idea of racial equality has given a new and unique contour to the white American experience. Perhaps a *White Like Me* is now called for, a book that looks into the world behind the white stigma and reports back to us.

One point such a book would no doubt make is that stigmas are often double binds. The stigma of whites as racists mandates that they redeem the nation from its racist history but then weakens their authority to enforce the very democratic principles that true redemption would require. And

this is no small problem, because the United States is no better than its principles. It may be the first country in the world to have principles and ideas for an identity.

The promise of the American democracy was that freedom, and the discipline of principles that supports it, would be the salvation of humanity. This discipline would replace the atavistic power of divine kings and feudalism with a power grounded in reason. Principle would be not only the soul of America but also the basis of its very legitimacy as a nation among nations. The principles of freedom were the case for a new nation.

And yet race is always an atavistic source of power, going back to a primordial source, back to the natural order. Like a divine or natural right, it comes from God or nature and presumes that one's race is free to dominate other races by an authority beyond reason. The white racist believes that God made whites superior so that even a democracy grounded in principle and reason is not obligated to include blacks and other races. Atavistic power always oppresses because it is immune to reason and principle. The great ambition of democracy was precisely to free man from atavistic power through a discipline of principle that would forbid it.

I say all this to make the point that white racism was no small thing. It was a primitivism, a return to atavistic power, and, most important, a flaunting of the precept that America was founded on: that the freedom of man depended on a discipline of fragile and abstract ideas and principles. White racism made America illegitimate by its own terms, not a new nation after all, but an "old world" nation that used God as an excuse for its oppression and exploitation, a pretender to reason and civilization.

So what happens today when a white American leader, even of the stature and popular appeal of a Ronald Reagan, questions affirmative action on grounds of principle? The Reagan administration, famous for its disbelief in racial preferences, refused to challenge these policies because even this extremely popular president lacked the moral authority as a white to enforce the nation's very best principles—advancement by merit, a single standard of excellence, individual rather than group rights, and the rest. Not only have white Americans been stigmatized as betrayers of principle,

but also those principles themselves have been stigmatized by their association with white duplicity.

Here were whites exclaiming the sacredness of individual rights while they used the atavism of race to deny those rights to blacks. They celebrated merit as the most egalitarian form of advancement, yet made sure that no amount of merit would enable blacks to advance. Therefore these principles themselves came to be seen as part of the machinery of white supremacy, as instruments of duplicity that whites could use to “exclude” blacks. The terrible effect of this was the demonization of America’s best principles as they applied to racial reform.

This situation, I believe, has given post-sixties racial reform its most stunning irony: Because difficult principles are themselves stigmatized as the demonic instruments of racism, white Americans and American institutions have had to betray the nation’s best principles in racial reform in order to win back their own moral authority. For some thirty years now white redemption has required setting aside the very discipline of principles that has elsewhere made America great.

If not principles, then what? The answer in a word is deference. Stigmatized as racist, whites and American institutions have no moral authority over the problems they try to solve through race-related reform. They cannot address a problem like inner-city poverty by saying that government assistance will only follow a show of such timeless American principles as self-reliance, hard work, moral responsibility, sacrifice, and initiative—all now stigmatized as demonic principles that “blame the victims” and cruelly deny the helplessness imposed on them by a heritage of oppression. Instead their racial reform must replace principle with deference. It must show white American authority deferring to the nation’s racial tragedy out of remorse. And this remorse must be seen to supersede commitment to principles. In fact, any preoccupation with principles can only be read as a failure of remorse. “Caring,” “compassion,” “feeling,” and “empathy” must be seen to displace principles in public policy around race.

But deference should not be read as an abdication of white American authority to black American authority. American institutions do not let

blacks, in the name of their oppressive history, walk in the front door and set policy. It is important to remember that these institutions are trying to redeem their authority, not abdicate it. Their motivation is to fend off the stigma that weakens their moral authority. So deference is first of all in the interest of white moral authority, not black uplift. Certainly there may be genuine remorse behind it, but the deference itself serves only the moral authority of American institutions.

And this deference is always a grant of license—relief from the sacrifice, struggle, responsibility, and morality of those demanding principles that healthy communities entirely depend on. And virtually all race-related reform since the sixties has been defined by deference. This reform never raises expectations for blacks with true accountability, never requires that they actually develop as Americans, and absolutely never blames blacks when they don't develop. It always asks less of blacks and exempts them from the expectations, standards, principles, and challenges that are considered demanding but necessary for the development of competence and character in others. Deferential reform—everything from welfare to affirmative action to multiculturalism—is the license to be spared the rigors of development. And at its heart is a faith in an odd sort of magic—that the license that excuses people from development is the best thing for their development.

Nowhere in the ancient or modern world—except in the most banal utopian writing—is there the idea that people will become self-sufficient if they are given a lifetime income that is slightly better than subsistence with no requirement either to work or to educate themselves. Nowhere is there the idea that young girls should be subsidized for having children out of wedlock, with more money for more children. And yet this is precisely the form of welfare that came out of the sixties—welfare as a license not to develop. Out of deference this policy literally set up incentives that all but mandated inner-city inertia, that destroyed the normal human relationship to work and family, and that turned the values of hard work, sacrifice, and delayed gratification into a fool's game.

Deferential policies transform black difficulties into excuses for license.

The deferential policy maker looks at the black teen pregnancy problem with remorse because this is what puts him on the path to redemption. But this same remorse leads him to be satisfied by his own capacity to feel empathy, rather than by the teenage girl's achievement of a higher moral standard. So he sets up a nice center for new mothers at her high school, thereby advertising to other girls that they too will be supported—and therefore licensed—in having babies of their own. Soon this center is full, and in the continuing spirit of remorse, he solicits funds to expand the facility. It was not Joblessness that bred the black underclass; it was thirty-five years of deference.

Deferential policies have also injured the most privileged generation of black Americans in history. Black students from families with incomes above seventy thousand dollars a year score lower on the SAT than white students from families with incomes of less than ten thousand a year. When the University of California was forced to drop race-based affirmative action, a study was done to see if a needs-based policy would bring in a similar number of blacks. What they quickly discovered is that the needs-based approach only brought in more high-achieving but poor whites and Asians. In other words, the top quartile of black American students—often from two-parent families with six-figure incomes and private-school educations—is frequently not competitive with whites and Asians even from lower quartiles. But it is precisely this top quartile of black students that has been most aggressively pursued for the last thirty years with affirmative-action preferences. Infusing the atmosphere of their education from early childhood is not the idea that they will have to steel themselves to face stiff competition but that they will receive a racial preference, that mediocrity will win for them what only excellence wins for others.

Out of deference, elite universities have offered the license not to compete to the most privileged segment of black youth, precisely the segment that has no excuse for not competing. Affirmative action is protectionism for the best and brightest from black America. And because blacks are given spaces they have not won by competition, whites and especially Asians have had to compete all the harder for their spots. So we end up

with the effect we always get with deferential reforms: an incentive to black weakness relative to others. Educators who adamantly support affirmative action—the very institutionalization of low expectations—profess confusion about the performance gap between privileged blacks and others. And they profess this confusion even as they make a moral mission of handing out the rewards of excellence for mediocre black performance.

A welfare of license for the poor and an affirmative action of license for the best and brightest—the perfect incentives for inertia in the former and mediocrity in the latter. But this should not be surprising. Because “racial problems” have been a pretext for looking at blacks rather than at whites, we have missed the fact that most racial reforms were conceived as deferential opportunities for whites rather than as developmental opportunities for blacks.

Because deference is a grant of license to set aside demanding principles, it opens the door to the same atavistic powers—race, ethnicity, and gender—that caused oppression in the first place. Again, the United States was founded on the insight that freedom required atavisms to be contained by a discipline of principles. The doctrine that separates church from state is an example. And race, ethnicity, and gender are like religion in that they arise from a different authority than the state. They come from fate, or some would say from God, and so are antithetical to democracy, which comes from an agreement among men to live by a social contract in which no single race can be validated without diminishing all others.

But thirty-some years of deferential social policies that work by relieving us of principle have joined atavisms to the state as valid sources of power. (This also happened recently in Eastern Europe, where the unifying principles of Communism collapsed so that the atavisms of tribe, clan, and religion surged back as valid sources of power and entitlement. War has been the all too frequent result.) A quick look at America’s campuses reveals what I have elsewhere called a “new sovereignty,” in which each minority carves out a sovereign territory and identity based on the atavisms of race, ethnicity, and gender. And this new atavistic sovereignty supersedes the

nation's sovereignty and flaunts its democratic principles. One is a black or a woman before one is an American.

It is no accident that preferential affirmative action became the model for racial and social reform after America's great loss of moral authority in the sixties. Affirmative action is an atavistic model of reform that legalizes the use of atavisms in place of principles right in the middle of a democracy. In this way it mimics the infamous Jim Crow laws that also legalized the atavism of race over democratic principles. In Jim Crow, white supremacy was the motivation; in affirmative action it was deference. The first indulgence in atavisms so wiped out white moral authority that it made the second indulgence inevitable.

To take all this a step further, liberal whites and American institutions also shifted the locus of social virtue itself from principles to atavisms. Since the sixties, social virtuousness has lost its connection to difficult and raceless principles and become little more than a fashionable tolerance for atavisms. Of course tolerance of different races, ethnicities, and genders is virtuous. But moving out of a spirit of deference, white liberals and American institutions have asked that these atavisms be tolerated as legalized currencies of power. This is how the virtue of tolerance becomes a corruption of democratic fairness—you don't merely accept people of different races; you validate their race or ethnicity as a currency of power and entitlement over others.

This is the perversion of social virtue that gave us a multiculturalism that has nothing to do with culture. The goal of America's highly politicized multiculturalism is to create an atavistic form of citizenship—a citizenship of preferential status in which race, ethnicity, and gender are linked to historic victimization to justify entitlements unavailable to other citizens. Culture is a pretext, a cover. The trick of this multiculturalism is to pass off atavisms as if they were culture. So people think they are being "tolerant" of "cultural diversity" when, in fact, they are supporting pure racial power.

In fact multiculturalism actually suppresses America's rich cultural variety, because much actual culture does not mesh with victimization. A troublesome implication of jazz, for example, is that blacks are irrepressible

because they created one of the world's great art forms in the midst of oppression. It is images of helplessness that highlight their racial atavism as a source of entitlement. So the black cultural genius for self-invention and improvisation that made jazz possible are not drawn out and celebrated in multiculturalism. Nor are the many other cultural ingenuities—psychological, social, and political—by which blacks managed to live fully human lives despite their hard fate. Culture gets in the way of multiculturalism.

But multiculturalism is the kind of thing that happens when a democracy loses the moral authority to protect the individual citizen as the only inviolate unit of rights. In any society atavisms can only be repressed, never entirely extinguished. They are always waiting for the opportunity to wedge themselves into the life of society under some high-sounding and urgent guise. No one invents the moral mask better than those driven to have their race, ethnicity, or gender bring them a preference over others—whether white segregationists or minority supporters of affirmative action. And when the majority of a society is stigmatized for past betrayal of principles, and when those principles themselves are emblems of duplicity, then primitive atavisms easily present themselves as salvation itself. Multiculturalism masks a bid for pure atavistic power; it is an assault on democracy that Americans entertain because they feel they must. It was conceived not to spread culture but to win some of the territory opened up by the weakened moral authority of American institutions.