Symbolic and Competitive Racism on Campus

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After a short hiatus, overt racism is on the rise again. Increases in reported racially motivated crime and violence have been noted all over the country. In the wider U.S. society, identifiable racial incidents have been estimated to have increased 55 percent from 1986 to 1987.[1] According to the Community Relations Service (CRS), African Americans comprised two-thirds of the victims in the cases reported in 1987. Although this racial violence has taken various forms ranging from name-calling, vandalism, and cross-burning to actual physical assaults that result in casualties and death, these have not been isolated incidents but have their basis in the racism that underlines U.S. institutions. This resurgence is due, in no small part, to the increasing level of conservatism that has swept the country, making racial intolerance and conflict the order of the day.

The college campus has followed suit by becoming a microcosmic haven for society's racial tensions and incidents. Despite the image of the university setting as one of tolerance, liberalism, and equality, a marked rise in the level of inter-racial tension on college campuses across the country has been evidenced by the dramatic increase in interracial conflict and violence. As Shelby Steele relates, "On our campuses, such concentrated micro-societies, all that remains unresolved between blacks and whites, all the old wounds and shame that have never been addressed" are played out.[2]

This analysis explores the phenomenon of overt and subtle racism on campus as "status politics." This is the process by which the dominant ("positively privileged") status group seeks to protect and maintain disproportionate prestige and power while the other ("negatively privileged") status group seeks to encroach upon this dominance in order to raise its level of power and resources. The racial attitudes that underlie this process are hypothesized to be "symbolic" and "competitive" racism.

Symbolic racism is a general conservative ideological orientation which inadvertently promotes discrimination while competitive racism is perceived direct competition between the races over scarce economic resources. This paper will identify the manifestations of both of these types of racism on college campuses today and provide recommendations for their eradication.

In 1989, U.S. college campuses are the last place that one would expect to see outright racism and bigotry. These "seats of higher learning" and "mind expansion" should, according to the findings of many studies, be correlated with lower levels of racism and intolerance.[3] This interracial conflict and violence is also antithetical to the whole spirit behind the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation decision of 1954 that was based on the belief that interracial education would lead to ever increasing racial harmony and understanding. Despite these factors, more than thirty racial incidents serious enough to be reported to the police have occurred on American college campuses in the past three years, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

On the campus, the most blatant interracial confrontations have ranged from racial slurs in the school media and vandalism to actual physical attacks. Some of the more recent interracial incidents on U.S. college campuses have included:

> October 27, 1986 - University of Massachusetts: A group of white students attacked several African American students after a baseball game. An African American student was beaten unconscious and several others were injured.[4]

> March 1987 - Columbia University: Eight African American students were beaten by white students.[5]

> Spring 1987 - University of Michigan: Derogatory racial jokes told over campus radio station and flyer with derogatory references to African American women placed under the door of a meeting of African American females.[6]

> [The Department of Labor's] files read like an honor roll of the country's best universities. Harvard Business School, 1986--A newsletter filled with racial slurs. Swarthmore, 1986--racial and anti-Semitic signs tacked to the main bulletin board. Berkeley, 1987--Ku Klux Klan initials carved in a dorm room. Columbia University, 1987--A racial brawl. And the list goes on: University of Pennsylvania, Fairleigh-Dickenson, Purdue, University of Alabama, Penn State, and more.[7]

These episodes of interracial violence and conflict on today's college campuses have varied in form and degree. They have spanned a continuum of violence in the broader sense of the word ("unjust or callous use of force or power, as in violating another's rights, [or] sensibilities," according to *Webster's 21st Century Dictionary)*. These incidents have also occurred through all U.S. regions, varied in level of organization pre-meditation, included perpetrators and victims of all class back-

grounds and been with and without immediate precipitants. They have, for example, not merely happened in the South where racism is allegedly most intense, or at universities with predominantly lower class students who, theoretically, would be more apt to see African Americans as competitors. They have been perpetrated by both individuals and groups against both individuals and groups. They have shown organized origins at one time and place and been completely spontaneous at others. Some of these racial incidents have been precipitated by identifiable events or catalysts while others have seemingly "come out of the blue." Despite the seeming variability of these incidents, they are all overt expressions of the same things--competitive and symbolic racism.

Not all displays of racism on college campuses are overt and extreme. Continuing our use of the broader definition of violence, African American and other students must contend with racist violence from the university itself. Many theorists and practitioners have noted the institutional racism inherent in the educational system itself as well as more subtle forms of racism that are especially prevalent on majority white campuses.[8] Niara Sudarkasa, President of Lincoln University, expressed the fact that:

> Glaring inequalities remain between the opportunities they offer black students as compared to those available to white students. The differential treatment and experience of black students at predominantly white institutions is reflected in their limited participation in extracurricular activities other than sports, the dearth of leadership roles they have available to them, the limited range of academic concentrations they are encouraged and helped to pursue, the relative absence of mentoring by the faculty, ...and their limited overall success... .[9]

Many explanations for the upsurge of racism and racially-motivated conflict and violence have been proposed. They range from proposing hypersensitivity on the part of African Americans to the prevalence of a kind of "politics of difference" where African Americans segregate and assert themselves, thereby exacerbating racial separatism and conflict on campus.[10] One theorist went so far as to propose that white college students "end up in the paradoxical position of being hostile to blacks as a way of defending their own racial innocence."[11] This study rejects these narrow and myopic assessments of the problems. It proposes that, on a macro level, this phenomenon of racism on campus is part and parcel of the larger socio-political and economic system in which they arise.

In essence, very distinct messages about race relations, both subtle and overt, are sent to students long before they arrive at the university. Once these deep-seated attitudes and feelings are activated by some perceived affront or threat, they become manifest through these racial incidents. The ultimate source of this racial strife, therefore, is ramified in nature. It is a product of the racist notions and the "colonial mentality" internalized by whites and African Americans by the very racism inherent in the U.S. institutions. When this is combined with the competitive atmosphere of the college campus, a virtual "pressure

cooker" is created. In actuality, these incidents of interracial violence and strife are the acting out of both symbolic and competitive racism.

Theorists and students of race relations have long noticed a shift from the more crude racist ideas of African Americans as biologically inferior to a more subtle, elusive type. Some have termed this type "symbolic racism." It is often difficult to discern the racist component of this mode of thought in that it is a derivative of a general "traditional American" ideological perspective that does not directly speak to the issue of race. While it very often does not have racial intents, it has very racial results. Joseph Gusfield equates this phenomenon with a desire to maintain and protect the status quo.[12] For some, however, this status quo style of life is actually one of cultural, political and economic donimance and therefore has distinct racial implications.

Subsequently, symbolic racism is characterized by a stratification ideology which maintains that there is "equality of opportunity" and dismisses the notion of structural limitation to the mobility of any group of people, thus eliminating the credibility, legitimacy and necessity of programs to ameliorate the discrimination "problems" or for African Americans to protest against their inequities. In previous studies, whites characterized by high levels of symbolic racism were found to live and work in areas with a low percentage of blacks and, therefore, had less direct contact with African Americans.[13] They were also characterized by higher incomes and occupational level as well as lower levels of status inconsistency.[14] McConahay and Hough found symbolic racism to be highly correlated with conservative political ideologies and traditional religiosity and values.

Consistent with this definition of symbolic racism, many white students on predominantly white campuses have accepted the belief that African American students are not qualified and are only there as a result of affirmative action and quota systems. To this effect, an African American student at the University of Michigan relates, "It's generally assumed by all the white students that you are...a product of affirmative action." A white Dartmouth college student argued, "Dartmouth College ought to be a meritocracy... . We cannot admit people at Dartmouth who are lower and less academically qualified than other students."[15] This a historic view in one way dates its holders by showing their ignorance of the civil rights struggles that took place to attain equal access to education in a legal sense. It also lacks a certain knowledge about the persistence of institutionalized racism in U.S. society. For any university to be a "meritocracy" when the rest of society is steeped with racial differentials is to inadvertently promote racism. In effect, it is symbolic racism.

Symbolic racism also takes other forms. The disproportionately low representation of African American students and faculty at these predominantly white institutions implies their inability to perform in such environments. Low expectations of African American students by

their professors completes this notion and often results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Further, ethnocentric curricula and textbooks exclude the valid representation and presentataion of African American (and other ethnic) history and culture from mainstream education. This exclusion results in an educational system that actually promotes white supremacy. Moreover, segregation on the social level on campus mirrors the realities of the larger society. For the most part, African Americans and whites are members of separate organizations, networks, and social circles. As in society at large, these separate institutions have differential access to resources and legitimation. African American students are excluded from the mainstream activities which very often dominantly reflect Euro-American culture. The acceptance and defense of these racially biased aspects of the university status quo is actually symbolic racism in a nutshell.

The perception of racism and prejudice as a function of competition between the races has a long history in American sociology as well. W.I. Thomas used this perspective in 1904 to distinguish the different Northern and Southern forms of racism and, in 1932, Robert E. Park posited competition as vital in his four stage racial assimilation process. Blumer defined race prejudice as "a function of the positional arrangements of the racial groups in which the dominant group is concerned with its position vis-a-vis the subordinate group."[15] From this perspective, competitive racism is seen as a defensive reaction to tangible threats which challenge the sense of group status or position in the social realm.

The perception of a direct conflict of material interests felt by whites towards blacks can take many forms. On the economic level, for example, these threats can take the form of perceived interracial competition for jobs and wages. Likewise, African American movement into white areas can be equally threatening. Due to stereotypical notions about African Americans, such actions are perceived as lowering housing values and social respectability. Politically, competitive racism can also be perceived as loss of political power to African Americans as they become more visible in the political and electoral processes. Perceptions of racial threat rise with the percent of African Americans in the same area of the job market as well as increased interracial contact.[16]

The degree of interracial competition in the larger society on these various levels find expression on the college campus. As African Americans assert themselves on the economic, political, cultural and social planes of society, racist backlash is the usual response. Present trends such as a decline in real earnings of white males, rising unemployment rates, and the polarization of the "haves" and "have-nots" have helped to fuel feelings of interracial competition. When this is coupled with the growing presence of African Americans and other minorities in the population and labor market and their increasing assertions of fair treatment and cultural expression, the "in-group/out-group" syndrome between the races becomes more acute.

The college environment is, itself, a haven of competition. Students compete for limited "slots" in departments and programs, limited financial aid resources, and a limited number of A's. Education in the U.S. is approached as a privilege and not a right. It is something for the "elites" and not for the "masses." A recent *Washington Post* article highlighted the differential access to education that exists by race on the college level where African Americans are over-represented in lower level, two-year institutions and are not afforded the legitimacy or respect of the more expensive, prestigious universities which are predominantly white. From this perspective, African Americans become doubly handicapped since they come from a position of disadvantage which, in effect, "rigs" the competition. The university setting becomes the stage for "status politics" where competitive and symbolic racism emerge as a positively privileged status group seeks to protect its interests in the face of an encroaching negatively privileged status group.

Just as the problem of racism on campus is multi-faceted, so, too, are the solutions. Underlying all of these incidents are the racism and inequalities in the society at large. They must be the first level of attack. Racial differentials on all societal levels affect education disparities and the overall interracial experience on the college campus. Inequalities in income, employment, housing, health, and educational quality and quantity must be minimized. This must be seen as beneficial to the entire society, not simply the "minorities."

Further, education must become more multi-cultural and all encompassing from an earlier stage. As Sudarkasa puts it, "We live in a world where it is no longer intellectually defensible to presume to discuss human history or human affairs from the perspective of any one cultural or racial group."[17] A well-rounded approach to the world is beneficial to both African American and white students. This education must also include a study of the realities of race and racism in the U.S. Too often the attitude that racism is a "thing of the past" is perpetuated, creating a false consciousness among the youth. This education must also include a mix of educators. In practical terms this means an increase in the proportion of professors and administrators from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. This in and of itself would symbolize movement towards racial tolerance and equality.

As Reginald Jones relates, "It has been generally assumed that integration will in and of itself lead to more positive attitudes and behavior towards Blacks...[however,] there appears to be no general agreement about the effects of interracial contact on attitude change and intergroup behavior. Some studies have found heightened tolerance; some, heightened resistance; and some, no change."[18] The real changes will have to come in the very workings of the U.S. institutions, especially those of higher learning. Simply adding more minorities and "stirring" will not solve the problems because they go much deeper than that. The mechanisms through which inequalities are perpetuated in every U.S.

institution will have to be assessed and altered. There will, in effect, have to be a change in "form" as well as of "content," of "appearance" and of "substance," of "quantity" and of "quality."

Notes

[1]Oionne Jones, *Racially Motivated Violence: An Empirical Study of a Growing Social Problem* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1963).

[2]Shelby Steele, "The Recoloring of Campus Life: Student Racism, Academic Pluralism, and the End of a Dream," *Harper's* (February 1989): 47-55.

[3]Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racial Attitudes in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[4]Niara Sudarkasa, "Black Enrollment in Higher Education: The Unfulfilled Promise of Equality," in *The State of Black America* (New York: National Urban League, 1988) 7-22.

[5]Sudarkasa, 8.

[6]Frontline #612 Public Television. "Racism 101." (Boston: WBGH Educational Foundation, 1988).

[7]Frontline #612.

[8]Sudarkasa; Jones (1973).

[9]Sudarkasa, 13.

[10]Thomas Short, "A 'New Racism' on Campus?" *Commentary* (August 1988): 46-50.

[11]Steele, 54.

[12]Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

[13]Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967); Michael W. Giles, "Percent Black and Racial Hostility: An Old Assumption Reexamined," *Social Science Quarterly* 58, 3 (1977): 413-417.

[14]Thomas F. Pettigrew and Reeve D. Vanneman, "Race and Relative Deprivation in the Urban United States," *Race* 13, 4 (1972): 461-486

[15]Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," *Pacific Sociological Review* 1, 1 (1956): 3-7; Frontline #612.

[16]Jerry Wilcox and Clark Wade Roof, "Percent Black and Black-White Status Inequality: Southern Versus Northern Patterns," *Social Science Quarterly* 59, 3 (1978): 421-434.

[17]Sudarkasa, 21.

[18]Reginald L. Jones, "Racism, Mental Health and the Schools," in *Racism and Mental Health,* Charles V. Willie, Bernard M. Kramer, Bertram S. Brown, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).