

Book Review

Who Created Dinesh D'Souza?*

Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 700 pp., notes, index.

Reviewed by W. B. Allen

The question posed in this review comes not from one of those hardy skeptics who aim to deny to God his glory. It more resembles the post-World War II inquiry, "Who Lost China?" For D'Souza's massive compendium on the contemporary discourse regarding relations between black people and white people in the United States seems to justify the conclusion that somewhere along the line he strayed dramatically from the only legitimate reason for revisiting that discourse. That legitimate reason remains as it has been to assay prospects of community within the polity shaped by the Declaration of Independence. D'Souza has pursued a different task, though certainly equipped to take up the important work. It is important to ask, therefore, and for reasons I will subsequently elaborate, what influences led him astray. Why in so long a book did he not once speak compellingly of "American community?"

American blacks, says D'Souza, will become the "truest and noblest exemplars of Western civilization," once liberated from dependence. Those are his final words, which echo all too strongly his first words, and all those in-between, which do not merely describe but ratify the existence of separate worlds, black and white. While he briefly acknowledges in his final chapter (if only tacitly) that there is no "black culture" apart from the American culture of the West, D'Souza accepts wholly and uncritically the claim of a distinct black culture in the United States,¹ up to and including the elevation of a mere argot, "black english," into a distinctive language which purportedly prevails among American blacks.

While D'Souza rightly longs for an end to the formal recognition of race in the United States, therefore, he makes clear that his wish is rather contingent (on black performance) than something which has already taken noetic existence within his own soul. He does not espouse color-blindness (as casual critics mistakenly argue), although he recognizes such a regime as superior to the perverse form of color consciousness that now prevails. Indeed, he fully expects consciousness of color to survive into the indefinite future. What he longs for is only the end of regime-plaguing obsessions with color consciousness as a taboo. Thus, his proposal for repeal of

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¹ He wrote, earlier in the book, that "blacks...have nevertheless shaped, out of the debris of oppression, a distinctive ethnic identity which goes back to slavery. This [cultural] identity is distinct from a racial identity..." p. 100. More importantly, his general attitude toward the supposed "black community" reveals that he sees it as distinct and coextensive -- if not identical -- with race: the "guilt" of the black middle class for having "abandoned" their lower class peers whose "heart-wrenching sufferings" purchased middle class comforts. This view is born of the inclination to see the ritual "brother" and "sister" used among American blacks more literally than one should. It is well to remember that some folk actually have real and not merely metaphorical brothers and sisters. Nor may it be said that they have abandoned these real brothers and sisters, even when it is true that many of the latter live in the "ghetto" while the former enjoy "middle class comforts." An entire inability to conceive that any substantial number of American blacks can have had experiences -- including successes and failures -- in no way conditioned by affirmative action and the "cause" of recent years constitutes still another illustration of this blindness.

the 1964 Civil Rights Act (in preference to enforcing it consistent with its original, color-blind principles) aims to liberate public life from what he regards as the inevitable coin of our private lives. This proposal is not unique or radical. Richard Epstein and I have both made the same proposal in earlier writings, but with exceptions (and differences between the two of us) which D'Souza does not seem to understand.² The great difference is the impossibility of isolating private decisions completely from public authority. Thus, it is necessary to say, as a matter of policy, whether marriage licenses will be granted to all comers, without regard to race, despite the fact that the choice of a marriage partner is, and ought to be, a discriminating choice. So, too, is it the case that a contract for the sale of a home or performance of a job is sufficiently considered private, until, that is, it must be enforced by a court of law, upon which event certain kinds of contracts will well conflict with a public policy of non-discrimination.

Such considerations make clear that it is necessary to break cleanly with our tendencies toward group-regardingness, if we genuinely aim to resurrect the language of the Declaration of Independence as fundamental for American prosperity. Deferential nods to African-Americanism, ill-articulated ideas of black culture, and credulous acceptance of "black English" serve no constructive purpose in this regard. By considering some particular characteristics of *The End of Racism* I shall make this truth painfully clear.

Clearly, the first proposition that we must investigate is D'Souza's claim that contemporary liberalism is the source of our current obsession with racism. Though it is sometimes unclear in the text, D'Souza seems to blame liberalism both for the systematic racism introduced by racial preferences (affirmative action) and for the obsessive recurrences to racism by blacks and whites in explanation and exculpation of the failures of some American blacks. In short, he presents the current state of the "dialog" as a debate about the effects of racism in determining the fates and life-chances of blacks both historically and contemporarily. His position in this debate, paradoxically, is that liberals, as the authors of the regime of race preferences, are to that extent responsible for the racism intrinsic to that regime, while the fates and life-chances of blacks do not necessarily result from racism. Indeed, the real burden of this book is to demonstrate that it is "black culture" or "black civilizational" level which most meaningfully determines the fates and life-chances of American blacks. Thus, he defends the society against the charge of racism, insofar as it affects the lives of blacks, but condemns the society of racism, insofar as it sustains policies of racial preferences. This difference derives only partially from the consideration that the racism is targeted against whites (who are in principle all non-black persons, including Asian Indians, such as D'Souza), and therefore makes the argument symmetrical and non-paradoxical. It derives mainly from the consideration that the ascriptive effect of a regime of racial preferences makes the reflex of race consciousness intrinsic to our social existence and therefore forces American whites to look upon American blacks as distinctive and inferior (needing help).

D'Souza has not spelled out the implications of this analysis in these terms, for that would be inconsistent with the oppositions with which he works. In the actual debate, the term employed by combatants would be "white racism." The charge of "white racism" would refer not

² D'Souza cited Epstein's *Forbidden Grounds*, but he does not seem to have considered the extended discussion of that book published in the *San Diego Law Review* (1994:31,1), and in which I wrote in, "Epstein's Challenge to the Civil Rights Regime," "In the most obvious cases justice can reach no farther than the claims of individuals, however remote or numerous, while the antidiscrimination principle abstracts from persons altogether and deals most comfortably with broad ascriptions... This conundrum leads Epstein toward an abandonment of the antidiscrimination principle. One may question, however, whether the principle were ever rightly conceived as a means to adjudicate just claims. Epstein raises the last question but fails to see that a negative response does not entail a negative response to the question of whether the antidiscrimination principle has any role to play in a free political order."

to the effect of policies designed to combat “white racism” but to the imputed existence, individually and institutionally, of a continuing practice of racial oppression descending from the era of slavery into the present. Though acknowledging the existence of “white racism,” D’Souza seeks to demonstrate that it has been de-fanged through the changes wrought by the civil rights revolution. The elimination of “white racism” was accomplished by liberalism, which, however, put in place a structure of racial preferences that constitute a new racism, not against but nominally in favor of blacks. The new structure is also a form of racism, in the double sense of depending on allegations of continuing “white racism” for its justification and also affecting the fates and life-chances of American blacks and American whites (males, anyway) on the basis of invidious racial distinctions. Now, since the new racism is no less the work of whites than the old racism, and since its effects are not less pernicious than those of the former, it confuses the analysis to attempt to distinguish “white racism” and “liberal racism” very energetically. Nevertheless, D’Souza’s entire project depends on that distinction, and one may judge him successful insofar as he succeeds at that and a failure otherwise.

To understand *The End of Racism* it helps to take a look at it as a whole. While seeking mainly to re-tell the story of blacks in America, it does so with the clear purpose of seeking to inform the current debate regarding the status of blacks in America, what D’Souza calls “the black problem.” In that sense it is a throwback, to an era in which Americans had persuaded themselves that the problem of vexed social relations in the country somehow inhered specifically in American blacks rather than in the country as a whole (a view radically inconsistent with the views of those American founders who anticipated the travail, as I and others have often written). By such lights the “problem” is more a problem of black performance than a problem of social organization, and such a view has always led ineluctably to the question, “What are we to do about the blacks?” By recreating that frame of reference D’Souza recreates the illusion that adroit policy maneuvers can establish peace where turmoil prevails. In that sense the theme proposed is not the end of racism but the end of the saliency of “black issues” in the United States.

The goal is not unworthy, even if different than advertised. Moreover, the tacit goal is worthier than the putative goal, inasmuch as it frames a question much more directly susceptible to fruitful inquiry. The fact is, racism is far less the complex and sophisticated philosophical story of Boasian or cultural relativism that D’Souza tells than it is the persistent reflex of group remedies which long antedate the philosophical change. The idea that government requires a policy to deal with the group is the very soul of racism and its attendant dysfunctions in the United States. For some reason, however, D’Souza missed this story, which has been clearly told the past twenty years, and enlisted himself in the “blacks are a special case tradition,” which has rendered the problem so intractable.

Why D’Souza made this error remains inexplicable after a careful reading of his book. His long and too frequently repetitious account of the history (often erroneous) from the discovery of the new world to the present day fails to inform the reader why he made the choices he did. Partially, the problem is a lack of understanding of the terms and events involved. For example, while rightly reviewing the tendentiousness of liberal attacks on the notion of discovery in the new world, and the emergence of a theory of the rights of native peoples, he nonetheless fails to comprehend the legal and ethical bearing of the North Americans’ insistence on discovery, which was bottomed not on a notion of Western superiority but on a claim of political independence from the metropolis. Moreover, even Victoria’s ethical defense of the natives significantly relied on the principle of discovery! Discovery was the antithesis of conquest, which entailed complete subordination to the metropolis. Thus, the theory said nothing about the character or nature of the natives.

Let this example of an historical misreading suffice for all such throughout the book. They are not material to the enterprise, for the history contributes little to the reading of current

practices of “liberal antiracism” which are the principal target of D’Souza’s analysis. Indeed, this long book is really two books promiscuously mixed. The one book had been better not written—the history—while the other addresses a question that no one ought to ignore, namely, the contemporary obsession with race.³

The obsession with race remains inexplicable apart from the existence of public policies and practices that codify race as the principal determinant of life chances for blacks. This is clear of whites—and not only liberal antiracists. More significantly, it is also true of American blacks in a way that offers a more powerful explanation than the “civilizational deficiencies” on which D’Souza prefers to rely in the in the second case. He would have seen this had he inquired more closely and with less resort to stereotypes as to why ordinary American blacks today are obsessed with race and whether they are obsessed in the same way their predecessors were or might have been.

W. E. B. DuBois to the contrary notwithstanding, blacks of an earlier generation placed their concern with race in the context of a hoped for assimilation to American political and social principles as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. That is, equality for them meant being at one with America. This remained true into the 1950s, when even Langston Hughes, as Paul Laurence Dunbar before him, still celebrated Harriet Beecher Stowe and Uncle Tom as an ethical model (another historical event which D’Souza misunderstands and relates erroneously).⁴

A political sea change occurred since then and ultimately affected Martin Luther King as well, wedding black hopes to a leftist politics which spurned America as it was founded. In effect, in our era American blacks in large measure reversed Frederick Douglass’ journey from his 1748 “What Country have I?” query to his 1854 embrace of “our fathers.” This reversal, as it happens, took place not only for American blacks (Remember Ronald Reagan’s blasts against the “blame America” crowd?) but also for the inner core of leftist politics, with which black leadership had cast its lot since the election of Roosevelt and which finally captured ordinary black citizens after the election of John F. Kennedy. The story of the deracination of American blacks in our time, while supported by cultural relativism, has far more to do with a widespread and dramatic political decline in the United States.

Oddly enough, politics has little to do with D’Souza’s account despite his obvious political affiliation with conservatives. That is what gives rise to the question, “who created this version of Dinesh D’Souza?” which ignores the fact that what he regards as “black culture” has been shaped in decisive ways by white leftist culture. Indeed, remove the so-called “African American” peculiarity, remove the leftist politics—which is white culture, insofar as race is at all relevant—and what remains, but lower class shifting within a broader mixed-race society, differing but little from peasant orders in more structured European societies?

Because he abstracts from politics and too little understands the foundations of lower class Southern mores, D’Souza over-generalizes race. He does so despite having canvassed an enormous range of writings on his subject. The point of this observation is not to minimize the gravity of social deterioration in numerous American black communities throughout the United

³ This is reflected in the following passage from D'Souza: "America's real problem [] is partly a race problem and partly a black problem. The solution to the race problem is a public policy that is strictly indifferent to race. The black problem can be solved only through a program of cultural reconstruction..."

⁴ D'Souza writes: "During the days of slavery... Uncle Tom accommodated himself to the system of oppression... [and] the 'bad nigger' became normative for the black community... In today's America... Uncle Toms are the true civilizational forces in the black community." Uncle Tom, whether in the novel or for a long time thereafter among American blacks, was never conceived in the terms D'Souza employs, nor was the so-called 'bad nigger' a norm whispered into the ears of babes by black mothers, until very recently.

States. It is, however, to deny the relevance of the analysis of race in addressing those problems. When I say this, I am not liberal. When I say this, I am not conservative, although I am otherwise conservative. How can this be? Conservatism and liberalism (as used today) are perspectives that address our hopes for man more than our understanding of nature. Though liberal insouciance has fostered an intensive contemporary racism, neither liberalism nor conservatism finds it hopes for man on a theory of race.

D'Souza successfully identifies cultural relativism as a special partner of liberalism (though more than one version of conservatism in the world embraces the same philosophical orientation) and demonstrates that cultural relativism provides protective cover for black racism (as it also does for contemporary Asian nations in their resistance to human rights claims). But that argument misses the point. The racism spawned by liberalism is really the old-fashioned variety, namely, the adoption of a corporate relationship toward a group. This reality weighs far more heavily than the notion of racism as a "mode of thought." For, in the end, it is the existing policy that provides the nexus of racism and someone is in charge of that policy. The most significant racist is the person or body of persons in charge of the policies that entail racism as a social problem and not merely a characteristic of certain individuals.

This argument does not deny the existence of black racism. Nor does it accept the power-racism absurdity by which some apologist for social monsters exculpate black racists. It goes rather to the question D'Souza raises at the outset of his book, namely, What is the crisis of racism today? He answers: "black rage," "white back-lash," and "liberal despair." Notice, then, how his account serves to exculpate the architects and guardians of the policies that are most responsible. For him racism consists of the effects of affirmative action more than it inheres in affirmative action itself. This is tantamount to saying that white feelings of superiority and black feelings of inferiority spawned by Jim Crow were racist, while neglecting to characterize the policy. This is consistent with regarding racism as a "mode of thought" rather than as an illicit action of the state.

This turn of thought is important because it infuses the most substantial project of the book, the demonstration of black racism and its concomitant refusal to recognize deficiencies in black people. And that is precisely where D'Souza leaves the realm of salutary cautions and tries his hand at a social analysis which he completely mishandles. A few examples ought to suffice. He takes on the IQ controversy only, in the end, to make a case of no relevance to his argument (in addition to contradicting himself). The prescription of governmental indifference to race does not flow from a supposed demonstration of racially differentiated intellectual capacities. Moreover, his own reliance on the "one drop of black blood" theory makes recourse to an argument about pure genetic heritage largely irrelevant. Finally, as a scientific matter, it makes infinitely more sense to investigate what distinguishes folk who score 85 on the test than to investigate how any of an infinite number of possible groupings score. There is no doubt that Einstein, by some characteristic, belongs to a group the overwhelming number of whom scores in the imbecile range. The knowledge of that fact is of no value whatever, while the knowledge of what all the imbeciles share besides their score could be most helpful and would, by definition, be transracial.

Another case: "Desegregation permits racial separation as long as it is not compelled by government. Integration, by contrast, is a state-mandated result... The Civil Rights Act of 1964 clearly endorsed desegregation rather than integration..." Besides abstracting from the practical history of "separate but equal," and therefore erring in fact though not in principle, this shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the aims and assumed conditions of the civil rights movement. Reality in the South was that de-segregation meant integration, given the geographic, legal, and economic realities. Hence it was wise for legislators to discuss the matter in such terms. Moreover, the real question, from the perspective of the organization of society, was not desegregation versus integration, but rather integration—mere integration—versus mutual dependence. Mutual

dependence is more than integration (which can breed familiarity in company with contempt). White integrationist never attempted mutual dependence, which helps to reveal why affirmative action grew to fill the vacuum.

One further example of poor analysis and poor judgment derives from the use of Dr. Dale Lick, former President of Florida State University, as an example of the hyperbolic use of cries of racism to deny obvious truths. According to D'Souza, for saying what was obvious, namely, "As blacks begin to get into sports, their natural abilities come through," Lick "was promptly accused of racism" and forced to withdraw as a presidential candidate at Michigan State University. This is an error both of fact and of reasoning. Lick was forced "to apologize" years earlier, when he took the position at Florida State, for he made the remark at his antepenultimate post in Maine. Further, his apology, along with a promise to institute a regime of multicultural sensitivity, secured for him the position at Florida State.

In the Michigan State University search, when the issue re-surfaced, Lick offered an explanation of little credit to a gentleman. Moreover, the original statement had been made in answer to a student's question about the absence of blacks in sports like golf and hockey (respecting which his response was entirely irrelevant). In his answer he showed no awareness whatever of the likely effect of his remarks, even against the then contemporary back-drop of the Al Campanis and Jimmy The Greek Snyder affairs (respecting each of whom I provided a specific defense in my role as a member of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights). At MSU Lick was forced out of the search largely upon my decision to resign if he were appointed, and I did so for the sufficient reason that he brought with him baggage—and made professions—that would have made him the worst kind of multiculturalist and politically correct administrator.

D'Souza's inability to understand this story highlights the problem of his book. He assumed that an administrator who is an American black acted on the basis of what D'Souza imagined to be black culture in a situation that eventuated in denying advancement to a white male. In reference to racism and politics, however, the story is exactly the reverse of his imagination. One may think he was deceived by careless press reports. The thoroughness of his research otherwise, however, weakens that excuse and reveals the error as entirely his own, whether of disposition or procedure.

Besides, he has personal knowledge of me and surely was not innocent of my extensive writings on the subject he researched—writings which vary sharply from his own work. The error seems to me rather to proceed from casual and easy assumptions about motives on the basis of race—without sense of a need for investigation—and founded on his radically defective notion of black culture.

Let us close, then, by saying flatly that there is no such black culture as he imagines (and he is not alone in this). Indeed, apart from transient (a temporal reference) immigrant cultures and numerically insignificant Indian cultures, there is but one culture in America, and whites no less than blacks are embraced by it.

To answer our leading question, then, it would appear that prevailing views on race—including those generally referred to as "white racism"—created Dinesh D'Souza.