

“RACE IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA”*

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by

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William G. Bowen and Derek Bok wrote *The Shape of the River*¹ in order to draw conclusions regarding “the long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions.” In the long term, as the saying goes, we’re all dead. More importantly for us that live now, however, the long term is the twenty-first century. Over the course of that century nothing can be more certain than that the role of race in college and university admission and employment practices must interact with the broader understanding of race in the society at large. As has occurred heretofore, colleges and universities will be as much led as leading. It is therefore timely (if not behind time) to inquire where our deliberations and our practices are leading us.

Of the many studies that have appeared in recent times (one thinks especially of Thernstrom and Thernstrom’s *America in Black and White*) surely Bowen and Bok can command pride of place for the most energetic defense of carrying “race sensitivity” forward from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. This is all the more relevant inasmuch as they endorse the Thernstroms’ argument that the real question of race in America is the question of relations between blacks and whites. They do this only tacitly. Nevertheless, *The Shape of the River* is as much structured around such an expectation as is *America in Black and White*. Bowen and Bok, however, defend this as a good thing, building on the assumption that compelling need and desirable consequences suffice as justifications.

We may take Bowen and Bok’s account of where we are and how we got there, accordingly, as a meaningful index of the foundation from which we should reason. We may do so all the more inasmuch as they agree with the Thernstroms about the latter question, how we got where we are; namely, a vigorous program of race preferences at least in college admissions. As they do, we will also take their statement as a proxy for where the society is today. The goal is to indicate the continuing role that race may play in the next century. To arrive at that view, we will rehearse the course of decisions regarding the present that serve to project future choices.

Everyone concedes a history of racial trauma in the United States. Most concede that much of that racial trauma has been remediated, through trials to be sure, by successive and pro-

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¹ William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

gressive efforts towards inclusion. However, since at least the mid-sixties many have hotly debated the future course and necessity of continuing efforts of remediation. Much of that debate derives from diverse perspectives about two things. First, some maintain while others doubt that racism—the source of racial traumas—remains a substantial life determining element of American society; secondly, some maintain while others doubt that American blacks can advance within American society only by means of special aids. These two perspectives are the crucial elements for determining policy, although other matters will frequently surface as justification for one or the other policy preference. The best example of the latter is the debate about the “preparedness” of American blacks for participation in the society, stemming not from renewed deprivations but from the “lingering effects” of past deprivations. This argument in particular accounts for the passion devoted to the issue of “diversity,” although that argument has been generalized to many ethnic and racial groups in order to dilute the divisive effects it has when discussed directly as commentary on the relations between blacks and whites. Thus, the emergence of a “principle” of diversity, while defended within the academy as an independent value, speaks far less to any rigorously demonstrated intellectual proposition than to a moral determination to act upon the basis of conclusions drawn about the relative status of American blacks.

The reasons people choose to defend their postures or policy choices, however, bear far less weight than the consistent actions they take. As Alexander Hamilton remarked in *The Federalist Papers*, we are not privileged to know the interior sentiments of participants in public debates, and we may be quite certain that, whatever their motives, many will be the persons who stand variously on the right and wrong sides of important questions for reasons good and ill. Some will attack affirmative action from the purest motives, some from the worst; still others will defend affirmative action from the purest motives, others from the worst. There is no tool we possess that will enable us to sort them out.

What we can do, accordingly, is to weigh the actual circumstances as far we can determine them and reason openly about their implications. In that respect we are well advised to begin from the well founded assumption that the twentieth century closes with a vigorous regime of race sensitivity that has spawned several race regarding policies and practices. Within colleges and universities this extends from admissions and financial aid to teaching and public service. I will not affect to assess on this occasion how well these initiatives fare in general with regard to their stated intentions. Rather, I will focus on the best claims in their defense and inquire whether, conceding those claims, they suffice to describe a future course to which we ought subscribe.

Bowen and Bok provide those best claims. Looking at twenty-eight highly selective colleges and universities, public and private, they maintain that a *system* of race preferences has served to ameliorate life circumstances for black graduates, to assimilate white graduates and black graduates alike to an integrated culture, and to improve the intellectual climate on these campuses. Their methodology is straightforward: beginning from the acknowledgement that these highly selective institutions admitted students who could not have claimed admissions on their “merits” as normally conceived, they recognize that they have engendered cohorts of students who constitute test pools to determine the effects of such practices. The effects to be tested focus on the contested points of contemporary race theories: stigmatization effects, social cohesion effects, professional development effects, and civic engagement effects, to name the most

significant. Moreover, they compared their test cohorts against national coordinates in order to measure the degree of “improvement” they could identify. Thus, preferentially admitted students fared better, they maintain, than they could have done had they rather attended the institutions to which their “merits” had entitled entry.

Now, this picture fairly well sums up where we are. Acknowledging that the face of American society is changing, the argument is that it does so in *some* direct proportion to the strength of deliberate efforts of racial inclusion. Moreover, the tendency of these efforts, according to Bowen and Bok, is gradually to attenuate the need for continuing race sensitivity. They profess themselves agnostic regarding the length of time that will be required for this process to approach evanescence, but it is clear that the path is asymptotic. Still more importantly, they insist that the alternative is persistent and asymmetric separation. They do not answer whether parallel development or growing inequality is the meaning of asymmetric separation, an important question indeed but one that has received no rigorous analysis anywhere. This excluded alternative, parallel development, serves as a useful litmus for assessing where we are. For every argument in favor of inclusion constitutes a denial either of the practicality or the acceptability of parallel development. Historically, of course, assimilation occurs not from efforts of deliberate inclusion but in the context of social “bleedings” across parallel lines—thus the patterns of assimilation among Mexican-Americans in the Southwest and especially in California but no doubt true of immigrants in general.

The question of where we are today, the era of race sensitivity, is primarily a question, therefore, of whether eventual assimilation or permanent “diversity” is the likeliest consequence. Bowen and Bok implicitly acknowledge this by asking their 1976 and 1989 cohorts from the highly selective colleges and universities whether, while in college, they managed to get to know well “two or more” minority or majority students (in the case where the student was the “other”). As an index of assimilation this is perhaps only slightly less pallid than the old expression, “some of my best friends are. . .”). Nonetheless, it does represent the principle that assimilation is the goal. Let us conclude, therefore, that the best way to answer the question of where we are today is in the form of some approximation to a degree of assimilation. Because assimilation necessarily means a declining consciousness of otherness, then the measure would have to be, in some fashion, an assessment of the declining significance of race.

Do colleges and universities today suggest a declining significance of race in the practices and atmospheres of the academy? Bowen and Bok’s own study, measuring cohorts from 1951, 1976, and 1989, shows without ambiguity that the more recent the college experience the greater the sense of racial consciousness that prevails. It takes the form of a desire for “more” rather than “less” emphasis on diversity in college programming and curricula. But “diversity” means simply “difference,” and in that context the desire expressed must rather express a heightened than a diminished consciousness of the differences between races. This should not be surprising, for it is manifest in the arguments of Bowen and Bok themselves that they retain a heightened racial consciousness. They make ready judgments about the capacities of black students based on their test scores and grade point averages, even in a work that allows that such indices ought not to be dispositive. In short, they are on the horns of a dilemma. The harder they argue that black students bring other indications of ability than the spare lexical measures admissions offices typically employ, the more they see those “other” measures as evidence of

some kind of inferiority. (Thus, it could not have occurred to them, for example, to test the performance of black students with 1100 SAT scores against other students with 1100 SAT scores, which would seem the most reasonable way to assess the relative performance of students specially admitted.) They do not seem able to maintain both that there are “other” measures and that those “other” measures are personal strengths (as opposed to mere environmental data from the knowledge of which white students may benefit). They seem to have trouble seeing blacks as peers, even though they know that the highly selective institutions they studied included in their cohorts black students whose lexical measures placed them at the top of their classes both coming in and going out. It is the heightened sense of racial consciousness, founded in expectations of neediness in black students, that obscures the accomplishments of the strongest students on ordinary measures. Oddly enough, the same thing happened in slavery, where specific superiorities of individual slaves had to be obscured because the fields in which slaves labored had to be constricted and those human attributes were too large for that narrow stage. Where we are today is in a regime of heightened race consciousness that flattens out differences among black students for the sake of social goals.

Much of the argument for diversity today is predicated on the assumption of widening diversity in the future. It is said that America of the twenty-first century will be a nation (or at least a large part of it) with a majority of minorities. That argument too abstracts from, if it does not deny, the nature of assimilation. Apart from the refusal to acknowledge increasing rates of interracial marriage (of the sort that leads many thoughtful Jews to wonder if they will disappear as a coherent social group in the United States), the argument operates on the assumption that the changing complexion of society will not in fact move in the direction of the major constitutive element of the blend, which remains American whites. It is highly instructive that, until the United States government attracted large numbers of Indians back to reservations with large dollar payments, the population numbers had dwindled drastically. Many who had been away from the reservation—as many who still are—lived ably as white citizens in America. The extraordinary diversity of Hispanic extractions readily enables them to move similarly into the center of white America, and not only on account of intermarriage. In short, what is called “white America” is typically far out of date, leading to false assumptions about what the future may look like. Whatever the typical complexions of individuals may look like, it is far more likely that the vast majority in twenty-first century America will remain “white” than that it will become anything else.

The sole reservation affecting this observation is the incentive-laden preference regime that induces some incontestably “white” citizens to seek recognition as “other” for the sake of competing for benefits or entitlements thus reserved. It is certainly imaginable that a society might “purchase” heightened differentiation among social sub-groups through an incentive structure of that nature. Have we not already observed this phenomenon in microcosm on college and university campuses, on which students not only argue about the legitimacy of theme houses and “interest” groups but also compete to qualify for the recognition? It is fair to say, however, that what we observe on the campuses is only skin deep, and not yet an indication of what the larger society will embrace.

Though it is not inconceivable that society at large could foster differentiation in preference to assimilation, it is questionable whether present tendencies, the inertial thrust toward as-

simulation encouraged by open intercourse commercial and otherwise, can be overcome by anything less than a powerful command and control structure dedicated to the purpose. In light of that observation it would not be unreasonable to surmise that America in the twenty-first century will continue lumbering toward assimilation. The pertinent question next in order is the extent to which that process will encompass American blacks. For surely the most powerful and pervasive command structures enforcing differentiation have long been concentrated on American blacks.

This question may not be answered in the context of responding to inquiries about the viability of color blindness. The opposite of race sensitivity is not necessarily color blindness. As we indicated above, this is far more a matter of whether unregulated, parallel development is viable. It is not the color sensitivity of Bowen and Bok that poses a problem; it is the intrusiveness that seeks to direct development. For if that intrusiveness is generalized throughout the society, it would surely require the existence of command structures that bear on every aspect of life the same force that the highly selective colleges and universities impose on their campus lives.

Placing matters in perspective, we may ask what are the implications for the three thousand colleges and universities not included in the Bowen and Bok study. Their claim that they do so much more for black students (because of their elite status) and therefore for America than do the other institutions must surely leave in doubt the no less vigorous regime of racial preferences practiced throughout most of American higher education. Either we are to hold that all such efforts are similarly valuable, though relatively less so, or we are to hold that other institutions are chasing a goal they will never attain. On the model of the elite institutions, they are to pursue a regime of race sensitivity, although they shall never produce leaders, thinkers, and citizens of the same high quality. They are to heighten race consciousness at lower levels of attainment. It is difficult to imagine that this process can eventuate in anything other than a pattern of stratification that strongly resembles segregation, or assignment of place based on race. Remember the Bowen and Bok argument: students who are “entitled” to places in the lesser institutions are being taken into the elite institutions. Correlatively, students being admitted to the lesser institutions must be no less elevated beyond their “entitlements” at least to some degree. And this process continues throughout the system of higher education. At each stage we find, not students making their own way on the basis of their own claims, but students assigned a social place.

This portrait is of course overdrawn. It is overdrawn, however, not because it is false to the claims of Bowen and Bok, but because their claims are false. And here is where we find the key to answer the question regarding race in the twenty-first century. In fact, the twenty-eight highly selective colleges and universities represented in *The Shape of the River* do practice extensive racial preferences. They do so in the hope that they are making a contribution to society at large. However, there is no support in this extensive study (the data files are not made available, so we can only reason from the results reported) for the proposition that, by practicing such preferences, they are in fact realigning American society. This is intimated in Bowen and Bok’s retort to Thomas Sowell’s observation that strengthened recruiting could fill their classes with just as many qualified black applicants as the “unqualified” applicants they now admit. Their response is that all colleges use extensive data files and write to every qualified student in the country. That is a surprising and entirely unsatisfactory response. We who know anything about

college recruitment and the patterns of visits know quite well how little it suffices merely to write to prospective students, and particularly in the case where the student may not even have envisioned prospects of entering a highly selective institution.

I may certainly say, personally, that it never occurred to me that I could afford to enter any one of the institutions represented in this study. Nor did I possess any reliable indication that I could have been admitted even if I could have afforded it. I may say this despite an academic record of distinction sufficient to warrant me a place. I know also that such stories remain common even today. It is a spirit of self-congratulation alone that could persuade serious administrators that their admissions offices are making serious efforts to identify qualified students of special characteristics. The fact is that they spend precious little time at all in *dedicated* efforts to reach such students and tend rather to concentrate their attentions on a relative handful of high schools and known venues for recruiting. Nor do they exert themselves very greatly to fish in waters where it is evident most fish are. In short, their efforts are driven far more by preconceived notions of what constitutes likely sources of recruits and the understandable need to cultivate known sources of continuing enrollments.

Race sensitivity in college admissions proves to be a path of least resistance substitute for real effort to identify qualified students. In that sense it unfortunately suggests that a good deal of the talk about inclusion is more rhetoric than real. That unfortunate result, however, holds good news for America and race in the twenty-first century. The fact that institutions and their leaders are not in fact doing what they claim to do suggests that they may prove, in the end, to be less harmful to social mores than would otherwise appear to be the case. In a very real sense, they are less intrusive than they could be, and have adopted a *de facto* “let them be” policy.

Whatever hope there is for America in the twenty-first century probably derives far more from the likely failures of ill-conceived social initiatives in the twentieth century than from any positive results to be expected from those initiatives. A society dedicated to the proposition that the all men are created equal cannot long endure on the supposition that some men cannot rise to the challenge of equality. In the society at large every indication is that this lesson begins to take root. The emerging pattern of court decisions on affirmative action suggests that the Powell fig-leaf of “diversity” will soon lose its power to hide the reality of affirmative action erected in higher education and elsewhere. The likelihood that voters elsewhere will follow the California Proposition 209 pattern seems sufficiently founded to suggest that we will, as a society, look for new ways to ground our fondest social hopes. In that context, what the twenty-first century offers is the prospect of renewed deliberation, with the ground now laid to make respect rather than assumptions of inferiority the basis of that deliberation.

As the twenty-first century closes race should have receded as a meaningful social datum in the United States. The reason for this is that the society—like higher education—will have abandoned nostrums of declining social value in favor of more direct pursuits. It will become more important to justify education in terms of its intrinsic worth rather than as a totem of social rectification. The Bowen and Bok at the end of the next century will be far less concerned with whether black students and white students knew each other than with whether they studied and learned. Institutional performance will replace institutional profession as the index of value. Nor, for that matter, will it be likely that the succeeding presidents of Princeton and Harvard in

the twenty-first century will be in much position to orchestrate their student bodies to indulge favored social theories—at least, they will not be able to do so and at the same time remain educational leaders in a world that has been shaped by emerging technologies and knowledge applications that are quite unforgiving of unessential distractions.

The country it seems is rather leading higher education than the reverse. Ordinary citizens will likely have voted out racial preferences long before any college or university declares that it intends to operate without them. That is itself a most chilling reflection, given the pretensions that we have long nursed in higher education. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst's recent announcement in this respect, we are reminded, follows only upon a calculated decision by litigants not to appeal a court decision that invalidated racial preferences in a Boston school and was binding on the University.

It is of some moment for us now to reflect on what will become of important social matters that colleges and universities have handled so badly, as they are being taken out of their hands. The greatest danger we face is that, when we lose the struggle to defend the maximum argument (complete race sensitivity in academic programming), that we will abandon even the minimal decencies. The minimal decencies include acknowledging that law and justice require the commitment of resources and energies to assure that equal opportunity operates not only abstractly but also in practice. That means moving beyond self-congratulation and establishing vital links with extensive communities that can communicate the existence of opportunity. Colleges and universities must substitute principles and practices of attraction for the lazy practice of preferences in order to assure, not diversity but, real opportunity for talented students of all backgrounds to benefit from their offerings. For example, it is rather remarkable that institutions that were so generally founded by and in churches should betray so obtuse an ignorance of this most pervasive foundation in our society as a recruiting ground. It is permitted to offer hope. One only needs to imagine that hope may be an incentive to worthy conduct in order to benefit from it. Race in the twenty-first century will recede as an issue in proportion as hope emerges as a promise.