

Subtle Prejudice for Modern Times

In 1936, President Roosevelt selected Marshall Shepard, a black clergyman from Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia and a member of the Pennsylvania legislature, to deliver the invocation at the Democratic National Convention. When Shepard reached the podium, Senator Smith of South Carolina rose from his seat and bolted from the hall, declaring as he went that, "By God, he's black as melted midnight. Get outa my way. This mongrel meeting ain't no place for a white man." Later Smith explained his protest by saying that he was "not opposed to any Negro praying for me, but [he didn't] want any blue-gummed, skewfooted Senegambian praying for [him] politically!" Smith refused to lend his support to a Democratic party that, as he put it, "caters to [the Negro] as a political and social equal."¹

Senator Smith's remarks, once thoroughly representative of a particular time and place, are unimaginable today. Politicians and officials simply no longer say such things. Nor, for the most part, do ordinary citizens. Whites' views on racial matters have undergone a sweeping change over the past half-century, quite unlike any other in the annals of public opinion research. Most white Americans now say that blacks and whites should attend school together, that blacks should have an equal chance to compete for jobs, that segregation of buses and restaurants is wrong, that blacks have a right to live wherever they wish. On matters of principle, whites have become dramatically more egalitarian.²

Against these unmistakable signs of progress, however, are clear indicators of continuing racial discord. While most white Americans believe that prejudice and discrimination are problems of the past, black Americans see prejudice and discrimination everywhere.³ And although whites' support for the principles of racial equality and integration has increased majestically over the last four decades, their backing for policies designed to bring equality and integration about has increased scarcely at all. Indeed, in some cases, white support has actually declined. Today, as we know from Chapter 2, large numbers of whites believe that the federal government is too generous with blacks, that school desegregation and equal employment opportunity are not the government's business, and that affirmative action programs for blacks should be abandoned.

By themselves, such opinions should not be taken as evidence of racial

malice. To be opposed to affirmative action and simultaneously sympathetic to blacks is not schizophrenic; rejection of affirmative action may be rooted in considerations that have nothing to do with race. Whites might be convinced that affirmative action programs violate principles they care deeply about: that individuals should advance or fall back entirely on the basis of their own talents and efforts, say, or that government should keep out of matters that are essentially private. We will take such possibilities seriously as analysts, just as every white American may take them seriously as citizens.

At the same time, we must also consider the possibility that behind white opposition to school desegregation or affirmative action lurk considerations that have everything to do with race. Many white Americans may resist changes in the racial status quo not out of principle but out of prejudice. Such prejudice, if it exists, must take a different form from the unvarnished racism expressed by Senator Smith a generation or two ago. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a conception of subtle prejudice for modern times and to ascertain its role in contemporary white opinion.

DISTANT ORIGINS

The origins of race prejudice in America can be traced back at least to the middle of the sixteenth century, when English voyagers began to encounter the people of West Africa. At this fateful moment, "one of the fairest-skinned nations suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest peoples on earth."⁴ Much more than color set the African apart from the English, of course. In the reports they carried back home, the English explorers portrayed the African as utterly different from themselves: as lecherous, apolitic, radically defective in religion, and thoroughly uncivilized. Africans were, by one such account, "a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion, or common wealth."⁵ According to Winthrop Jordan, the perception of profound difference provided "the mental margin absolutely requisite for placing the European on the deck of the slave ship and the Negro in the hold."⁶

Whether Jordan was correct, chattel slavery was well established in the English colonies by 1700, justified on the ground that the African was fit for slavery and for slavery alone. The justification was racist, of course, but it was not until slavery came under direct attack by the abolitionists in the early decades of the nineteenth century that the presumption of black inferiority developed into a full-blown theory of racism.⁷ Prior to the abolitionist challenge, slave holders could defend their practice merely by referring to the fact that slavery was a legally sanctioned economic arrangement. They did not need to make the argument that blacks were inferior; that was simply taken for granted.⁸

But when Northern abolitionists charged that slavery was evil, Southern

slaveholders rose to the challenge. They began to argue that slaveholding was a just and virtuous institution, and that Negroes were "destined by providence" for slavery.¹⁷ They portrayed the African homeland as barbarous, "the scene of unmitigated savagery, cannibalism, devil worship, and licentiousness." They embraced and popularized scientific research that claimed to prove the inferiority of the African race. They introduced "miscegenation" into the American vocabulary, arguing that the abolition of slavery would lead to intermarriage and the mongrelization of the white race. And they emphasized the squalid condition of the freed black in the North: the "vice and pauperism," the "deafness, insanity, and idiocy," that Calhoun and others took as authoritative evidence of blacks' unfitness for freedom. All these arguments in defense of slavery transformed what had been an unthinking assumption of racial superiority into a self-conscious theory of racism.¹⁸

Slavery and the debate it touched off certainly helped to fortify race prejudice. And yet, when slavery was abolished, prejudice lived on. Discrimination, segregation, and prejudice continued to flourish—and not only in the South. In the view of Leon Litwak, "Discrimination against the Negro and a firmly held belief in the superiority of the white race . . . were shared by an overwhelming majority of white Americans in both the North and the South. Abraham Lincoln, in his vigorous support of both white supremacy and denial of equal rights for Negroes, simply gave expression to almost universal American convictions."¹⁹ As momentous a transformation as it was, emancipation did not mean the eradication of prejudice.

Race prejudice survived slavery's disappearance no doubt for more than one reason, but not least was the persistence of pervasive racism among American elites. Until quite recently, prejudice was an eminently respectable idea in respectable circles. Well into the twentieth century, American institutions of all sorts, including universities, participated in legitimizing the idea of black inferiority. As late as 1921, President Harding felt free to justify his opposition to "racial amalgamation" on grounds of the "fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences" that he believed placed whites above blacks.²⁰

By emphasizing that American race prejudice has a long and durable history, we do not mean to imply that it is somehow permanent and immutable. It is not. Racial prejudice today is not what it once was; its public expression and private language are different now from what they were in the days of slavery.²¹ Prejudice is not some fixed and universal prescription. Rather, like other social doctrines, it is altered by turns in intellectual currents, changes in economic arrangements, and eruptions of political crisis. Prejudice, we believe, has been transformed twice in this fashion during our own century alone: first was the

decline of biological racism in scientific and popular discourse on race, which took place in the first decades of the twentieth century; second and more complex was the change set in motion by the struggle for civil rights in the middle of the century and brought to completion by the epidemic of racial violence that raced through scores of American cities in the late 1960s. We sketch these two changes next. If we want to understand the terminology and logic of racial prejudice today, we must be reminded of the forms it took in the imaginable past.²²

THE DECLINE — NOT DEMISE — OF BIOLOGICAL RACISM

The doctrine of biological racism began as a rationale first for slavery itself and later for postemancipation forms of racial oppression. At its center is the contention that blacks are an inherently and permanently inferior race. During the nineteenth century, biological racism was refined and enriched by various intellectual trends and political causes, most notably by the triumph of social Darwinism. These various developments were mainly slight variations on a constant theme, however. Into the twentieth century, the idea persisted that blacks were inferior to whites in intelligence and character, and that such inferiorities were inherent and permanent, a reflection of inborn differences.

In a shift that Fredrickson calls "the most fundamental change that occurred in white racial thinking after the First World War," biological racism was challenged and eventually replaced by liberal environmentalism.²³ Racial environmentalists insisted that blacks and whites did not differ in any essential way; that the observed differences between blacks and whites in economic standing or artistic achievement were due to differences in environmental conditions, not genetic predispositions. Liberal environmentalists thereby challenged the conventional understanding that blacks were a permanently alien element of the American population. Remove the socially created obstacles that stood in their way, so went the argument, and blacks would take their rightful and equal place in society.

The ascendance of liberal environmentalism reflects first and foremost a tidal change in American intellectual currents, detectable in a variety of places. For one, in the social and biological sciences, the idea of separate and distinct races came under relentless attack, which weakened the popular contention that the "white race" had developed further along the path of evolution.²⁴ At the same time, studies began to show that differences between blacks and whites in mortality and illness could be reduced or eliminated altogether when variations in housing, nutrition, sanitation, and medical care were taken into account. As a consequence, the argument that blacks were an inferior race,

"doomed to spin their brutish existence downward into extinction," relinquished some of its force.¹⁷ Meanwhile, scores of anthropological studies were celebrating the contributions made by African and Asian societies, and were revealing huge differences in temperament and personality due, evidently, to culture. Investigations by Mead and Benedict, among others, argued that human behavior was molded less by genes and more by tradition and custom.¹⁸ And at home came the artistic flowering of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. The conspicuous achievements of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Louis Armstrong, and others made it more difficult to maintain that blacks were inherently disqualified from distinguished contributions to American life.

Perhaps most striking in this broad shift from biology to culture was the revolution in the scientific study of intelligence. The superiority of the "Nordic" type was the standard early result in studies of intelligence, based on the measurement of cranial capacity in the nineteenth century and IQ in the early stages of the twentieth. But then came a series of embarrassing demonstrations that differences between racial groups in intellectual performance could be traced to differences in cultural or environmental factors. Authoritative conclusions of Nordic superiority and Negro inferiority were retracted; inquiries into the genetic foundations for racial differences in intelligence quietly disappeared.¹⁹

All in all, a remarkable transformation had taken place. At the turn of the century, the social scientific investigation of race was preoccupied with the pathologies of Negro life, interpreting such pathologies as evidence of the inferiority and alien nature of the Negro, condemned by heredity to a permanent low station. Two or three decades later, racial inequalities were taken as evidence of pervasive prejudice and discrimination. Under the new intellectual regime, the Negro "problem" was situated in the hearts and minds of white citizens and in the discriminatory practices of white society.

By the Second World War, liberal environmentalism had taken over American social science. We presume that its entrenchment was a reflection of a more general turn toward egalitarianism among American elites, and that the liberal environmentalists positioned in America's most prestigious universities contributed directly to a more racially egalitarian public discourse.²⁰ Following the war, their cause was perhaps advanced by "revulsion against the racism of the Nazis" and by American leaders' embarrassment over flagrant incidents of racial discrimination at home that undermined efforts to compete with the Soviet Union for the loyalty of the peoples of Asia and Africa.²¹ Public discussions of race came to be dominated by the assumptions of liberal environmentalism, and this continues to be true, for the most part, today.

The virtual disappearance of biological racism from elite circles leaves open the question of whether it also diminished in the minds of average citizens. The answer here appears to be yes, though the evidence is fragmentary. One bit comes from a series of careful studies undertaken by Apostle and his colleagues in the early 1970s, set in the San Francisco Bay Area and recounted in *The Anatomy of Racial Attitudes*. In this research, Americans were questioned about the differences they saw between blacks and whites and, most relevant to our point here, about how they explained the differences they saw. It turns out that relatively few whites attributed racial inequalities to inborn differences: to differences in intellectual capacity, differences "in the genes," in the "makeup" of blacks and whites, to differences "in the blood." Roughly 6% of Bay Area whites were in possession of a pure version of a genetic account for racial differences, and another 16% or so incorporated such thinking partially. Biological racism was relatively unpopular, therefore, and it was least popular among younger and better-educated whites, suggesting that it might be fading away altogether.²²

Other evidence supports this conclusion more directly. In both the 1972 and 1986 NES surveys, white Americans were asked to consider whether they thought blacks came from a less-able race. In 1972, 31% of white Americans subscribed to the view that blacks were disabled by virtue of their biological inheritance; by 1986, the percentage had fallen to 14%.²³

Another and final example pertains to the allegation of racial differences in intelligence. Beginning with a national survey carried out by NCGC in 1942, white Americans have been asked periodically whether they think blacks and whites are equal in native intelligence. In 1942, fewer than half of the whites interviewed (47%) agreed that blacks were the intellectual equal of whites; by 1956, 80% did so. This is a remarkable increase in so short a time, offering further testimony to the declining fortunes of biological racism.²⁴

From several quarters, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that racial thinking underwent an important change in twentieth-century America, and not only among white elites but also within the white public generally. The notion of genetic difference, of permanent disadvantage, is now less prominent than it once was. The biological argument has not disappeared altogether, but it has diminished. Racial prejudice no longer hangs on the contention that blacks are an inferior race, incapacitated from the outset by their biological inheritance.

The decline of biological racism must not be equated with the decline of racism generally. That most white Americans no longer subscribe to the view that blacks are crippled by inferior genetic endowment is a sign of real progress,