



Essay by David Lowenthal

## DIVERSITY AT WHAT COST?

**S**TRANGE HOW PEOPLE BECOME THEIR opposites in America. The liberal of 30 years ago, who turned pale at the very thought of color-prejudice of any kind, has for some time now extolled the newest form of racial prejudice: diversity. Martin Luther King, Jr., is still his prophet, but for a distant land. The America of which King dreamt, where people are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, is still the goal, but the way to it, paradoxically, must be through the magnification rather than the disregard of color. So for some time now we have been cajoled into singing hymns to color awareness, color sensitivity, color appreciation, even to the point of forcing such paeans on the obstinate heathen who refuse to bow down.

There is a new twist. Not only have colleges, universities, and other institutions, public and private, been asked to make up for past injustices inflicted by whites: they have also been assured of receiving extraordinary benefits as well. These benefits are the good things that come from diversity—from the mixture of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences it brings. Here is the feature this most recent phase of false and harmful (not true and useful) affirmative action adds to its predecessors. And to

help us swallow this rough reversal of the color-blindness all liberals once sought, we have the syrup of “diversity”—a term suggesting not monotonous and baleful uniformity but the splendid variety that Americans more than any other people adore.

I shall not linger over the question whether non-black “minorities” have been oppressed by American whites in anything like the way blacks have, and whether the sense of guilt shared by so many Americans should extend to them as well. I shall only pause to wonder whether the peculiar use of the term “minority” for such disparate groups is meant to get these non-blacks to share responsibility for complaining and demanding special treatment, despite their having a relationship to white America and Americans that is hardly one of oppressed to oppressor and more like that of rescued to rescuer.

Deeper down, not much has changed. The new liberal—fanatically egalitarian—still fails to recognize that the programs he promotes plainly pin a badge of inferiority on the race or races he wants to assist. Out of a wholly inappropriate condescension, pity, or shame, he prides himself on sticking up for the underdog and doing a good deed, little heeding the evil his good deed does. Lord knows, slavery was a

horror, and blacks still had a difficult burden to bear even after slavery ended. If there were ways of helping, without harming, we’d do it with a full heart. We want everyone finally to prosper. But there are right ways and wrong ways, prudent ways and foolish ways. Let us see what the real evils and putative goods are of this diversity, this newest form of affirmative action (wrongly understood to mean preferential treatment). Let’s weigh it in the balance, unblinkingly, and draw the conclusions we must.

### Seeking Excellence

**S**HOULD “DIVERSITY” BE AN IMPORTANT concern of colleges, graduate schools, and professional schools? For other parts of society at large? Is it even an allowable concern? What is diversity? How much difference makes diversity? We cannot raise these questions without examining the main concerns, the central or primary concerns, of these institutions of higher education. What are they for? If we knew this we should be able to draw some conclusions with respect to subordinate concerns and goals, of which diversity is said to be one.

There will be little opposition to the idea that professional schools should seek to pro-



duce excellent professionals—excellent lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, nurses; graduate schools—excellent specialists; undergraduate colleges—excellent...what? Excellent people of liberal education. Now what is diversity? To begin with, the word itself simply suggests differences of any kind—of stature, strength, beauty, intelligence, character, religion, race, ethnic background. To what extent do such differences, or some of them, contribute to an education aimed at the excellences listed above?

Considered in their essential meaning, excellence and diversity are entirely different things, even opposed to each other rather than harmonious or compatible. Excellence looks at the quality of a thing in itself, diversity merely at relationships among many things, at some trait or traits distinguishing them from each other. To be concerned about one necessarily means that you can't be equally concerned about the other. To be concerned about diversity necessarily takes away from the concern for excellence. To be concerned about excellence necessarily takes away from the concern for diversity.

We don't care if a doctor has the stature and strength of Hercules or the looks of Cary Grant. It doesn't matter whether he is Christian or Jewish, black or white. We just want him to be an excellent doctor. Why? Because it is exceedingly hard to be an excellent doctor, because it requires intellectual capacities and traits of character that are most unusual, and because bad doctoring can be disastrous. Conclusion: the more demanding the skill sought, and the more obvious the harm done by its lack, the less place diversity has along the way. That's why it is law schools rather than medical schools or engineering schools that usually become havens for diversity. Quite mistakenly, the consequences of being an inadequate lawyer are thought to be less noxious (though they may only be less noticeable) than the consequences of being a bad doctor or engineer. And undergraduate education brings up the rear as apparently the least demanding intellectually and hence most amenable to the application of diversity. After all, what's 20 points more or less added to someone's admissions score? How important are grades anyhow? And don't we already have a super-abundance of excellence in college education, so that wasting a bit hardly matters?

When an admissions office seeks diversity, or places a premium on diversity, it means that people who would not otherwise be admitted—whose record would otherwise be insufficient to allow them to qualify at that institution—are given a boost by their race, provided they belong to a certain race or set of races and not to others. The idea is that it is good for the country, and for education itself, to have a broad representation of certain races, or, rather, a broader

representation than would be available without according this additional leverage. It means that, purely on the record, involving grades, test scores, personal essays, and the like, those admitted on grounds of diversity would have been found wanting.

In schools—which are places where intellectual comprehension and achievement are requisite to success—either of two things must obtain. Either the individual's record on applying is an accurate measure of his intellectual capacities, or it is not. If it is not, and the individual is more capable than his record suggests, he should perform within the range expected at that place. But if he is not more capable, and the record is either inaccurate or overblown, then he will perform less well than is expected—he will bring up the bottom of the class, fail or drop out. The greater the bounty shown by the admissions office in granting extra credit for race, the greater the likelihood of its taking in students who fail or drop out.

Wherever this false form of affirmative action takes hold, what happens is that minority students whose record is true to their talents—and hence under par for that school—are subject to awful pressures just to pass. Nor is the pressure less on teachers (and administrators) to see that they do pass, and to give them better grades than they deserve. The consequence is a grand culture of hypocrisy radiating outward into the institution's every nook and cranny. Many so admitted, realizing how badly the institution wants them, are puffed up with their own importance. Many live in constant fear of failure. Many struggle heroically but fruitlessly to accomplish what their ability or training does not fit them for.

By this misplaced charity, we end up consigning a large number to a life of misery. As a nation, we seem to have forgotten that there are ways to be happy and make positive contributions to society without a higher degree. We all want to be part of the few, not realizing that there's no dishonor in being an honest and capable part of the many. In fact, anyone excellent at what he does is thereby part of the few, the best few, the deserving few. Nor is his value to society inferior, unless we prefer a second-rate druggist or third-rate journalist to a first-rate carpenter or plumber. Nor can we forget the fact that many a son or daughter of artisans, manual workers, storekeepers and the like end up being lawyers, doctors, and professors.

Needless to say, those of any race who make it on their own are the salt of the earth, to be congratulated and honored, especially when they have risen from difficult circumstances. But the very existence of diversity, like the very existence of false affirmative action, throws a pall of suspicion over all members of the minor-

ity group benefitted by it. All are suspected of being there by virtue of color, which is only a special kind of pull, and not by virtue of their own talent. And this pall of pull follows them through life; it is never completely lifted.

### Obsessing Over Race

**W**E HAVE YET TO MENTION THE ALL too obvious paradox of a policy of racial preference that is justified as the necessary means of achieving a completely color-blind society. We make people intensely interested in race, rewarding some and punishing others, in order to get them to forget about race entirely? We claim to be supremely concerned about the individual but insist on viewing him primarily as a member of a race? The psychology of it leaves much to be desired. And just when will this race consciousness fade away, having amassed supporters of every kind whose main interest lies in its perpetuation? How temporary is temporary? And what will be the sure proof that racial preference is no longer needed?

We can only say when it will not be needed if we know when it is needed in the first place. If we know the condition requiring it, we can also know when it is no longer required. Usually the inspiring idea is to represent a given minority in proportion to its place in the population, but why? One is hardly silly enough to ask which population—that of the locality, state, or country? And why not the population that might seem more relevant—that of high school graduates with good grades? The degree to which any given group ends up in any given activity or occupation can vary enormously, depending on its cultural past, situation, interests, proclivities, on custom, and even on fashion. Should we assume that there's something amiss in there being few Jewish farmers, baseball players, or country singers but many Jewish professors? Is it a national crisis if the proportion of blacks attending college remains under 12%? What if the percentage slowly mounts, and then shows ups and downs, or at one point even descends? Why the panic?

There are plenty of good jobs in this country that don't require a bachelor's degree, and plenty of good jobs for those who have graduated from high school or college but lack a more advanced degree. Those will come with time, if not for this generation then for the next, or the one after that, as has been the experience of one immigrant group after another. Don't forget: to some extent the intellectual emancipation of blacks began with desegregation, in 1954. And if the black percentage in this or that respect does not come up to the national average, but in other respects—say, in sports—far exceeds the national average, are we to worry? Are we to continue



affirmative action until that last tenth of a percent of the national population is reached?

If there can be too few members of a certain group in a certain occupation, we imply that it is possible there can also be too many. As we begin this great national effort at allocating places in society, why not direct the agencies of private institutions and government to make sure the proper proportions (of the national population) in every occupation are adhered to exactly? Why not encourage and boost the underrepresented while discouraging and blocking the overrepresented? Far-fetched. A very bad idea. Requires totalitarianism. All true. Then let's put the axe to the false premise that generated it: the very idea of proportional representation in schools and occupations. Excessive haste to win success on the part of many of the lowly, and to grant it on the part of many of the successful, constitutes the main force behind these racial programs. They are meant to do fast artificially what only natural processes can do well. But it is condescending and unwise to make the hurdles easier to jump in order to produce winners. Keep the hurdles up—maintain the standards of excellence—the same for one and all. That and only that produces victors worthy of the name.

We can wish there were more blacks in this profession, and more Hispanics in that. As a general matter, we can also grant that it is better for any individual or group and better for the public if more succeed in getting more (and better) education. But to force the issue, to use artificial means of bolstering some and lowering others (because bolstering some necessarily means lowering others) is to introduce a false element into the picture, with untold ill consequences. To all outward appearances, the process of advancement is speeded up, but a look beneath the surface shows how much is only apparent, and at what cost.

One evil consequence of a policy of racial preference is rarely mentioned because, out of fear and delicacy, we naturally draw back from it. Being a member of a race is not like clearly being one thing or another. Unlike a pot or a hand, it is susceptible of degrees. When is a black a black, a Hispanic a Hispanic? Are we to judge by looks? By what the individuals themselves say? By known or reported racial genesis? By written records alone? How much blackness is sufficient? 100%? 50%? 25%? One drop? Strictly speaking, any program of racial preferences has to be able to answer these questions, and in fact every institution finds some way, usually a very quiet way, to answer them. Most Americans find this kind of inquiry—and this sort of judgment—obnoxious, and they are right to do so. For obvious reasons, Jews are particularly upset by them. All prize the America that, with

its Declaration of Independence unfurled, proclaims the equality of all men, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion.

### Unfair and Divisive

**B**UT WHAT IF THE OBJECT IS TO ASSIST a race rather than to harm it or put it down? Doesn't that justify racial preference? There is no sense acting as if a program of false affirmative action or diversity has beneficiaries but no victims. There would be no victims if admissions were completely and endlessly open, but in that case there would be no need for any such program at all. Admissions are always limited, and if there are more applicants than places, to admit one is always to omit another. One black is advanced, one better qualified white pushed back—this is always and by necessity the pattern.

The whites who suffer from preferential treatment do so because they are white, and the blacks and others who benefit from it do so simply because of their race or color. It is always a better qualified white, not an equally qualified white—always. That these whites are unfairly treated needs no demonstration. Just imagine a situation where whites are elevated and blacks kept out, with individual blacks turned away to make room for whites with fewer admission points. So preferential treatment is unfair, and as such apt to create greater racial discord, not concord.

How often do we hear it claimed that we must make up for past white discrimination against blacks, and, if some whites must suffer, so be it. But some whites have been discriminated against too in gaining entrance to schools and industry. Just think of the Jews and the Irish. Today, many blacks are prosperous, and it could easily happen in these programs that some black youth born to wealth and privilege gets to supplant a white born to deprivation. The white discriminated against and excluded by a diversity program might be one who has devoted much of his young life to ending discrimination. No matter, the judgment is racially based and so the axe must fall pitilessly on him too.

But the main point is more general. The current generation of whites cannot be held responsible for what some whites did years ago. Many did not do these things, many were abolitionists, many came to this country long after the Civil War. Nor can the current generation of blacks lay just claim to anything that might be owed past generations of blacks, or some blacks in the past. It is individuals who are accountable for their actions, and it is the individuals who are directly involved with each other at any given time among whom relationships of justice or injustice obtain.

Today, stirring up resentment against whites because of what some of their ancestors might have done is not only unjust but dangerous. Together with an exaggeration of the virtues of racial brotherhood, it is responsible for the considerable degree of self-segregation by blacks on college campuses. That is the reality of multi-racialism: blacks living apart, isolated not so much by racism as by their own pride, resentment, and suspicion. By its excessive, obsessive and essentially superficial emphasis on race, it takes our attention away from personal character and worth, and threatens the delicate process by which religious, ethnic, and racial groups merge into America.

### Real Diversity

**S**O FAR WE HAVE SEEN NOTHING BUT harm coming from this nostrum, diversity. What are the great benefits to society and to education itself that are attributed to it? Are they real or illusory? Do the benefits outweigh the harms? The benefit to education is said to be the unique experience brought to classroom and campus by blacks and Hispanics, the advantage to society the encouragement given to new talent and the provision of leaders and professionals more representative of society at large.

Let's begin by distinguishing between what private and public institutions can do. If our private institutions of higher learning had not made themselves dependent on government in many ways, they should be able to choose their own course, their own nature, even to the point of recruiting only women or men, blacks or whites, Jews or Catholics. Or they could decide on any numerical proportions of such groups—so many men, so many women, etc. I am aware of the innumerable controls fastened on private industry for many years now, and some are justified. Nevertheless, we seem to have forgotten that, by extending the public arm to many things that had been private, we are weakening the bedrock principle of individual liberty on which the country is founded. Indeed, giving government a further grip, pervasive and controlling, on our private institutions is one of the great unspoken evils of false affirmative action itself. And it is a sign of dependence and weakness, not strength, when eminent places of higher learning accept and even welcome these controls and this loss of independence.

No doubt a class in history or sociology can benefit from the presence of those who can testify personally to what slavery and poverty are like. But though helpful it is not essential: such things can be understood without it. More broadly, sympathies for the oppressed can be engendered on the basis of principles of justice



broadly inculcated, and in this respect being brought up as an American, with our Declaration of Independence, has few rivals. I don't think Karl Marx hung out with the poor very much. An Irish boy educated at Harvard and a Texan who shared an education with very few blacks can turn out to be civil rights leaders in America. Jewish boys brought up with hardly a black in sight ended up risking their lives, and sometimes dying, in the deep South.

I must not be taken to mean that the sharing of experience and friendship among the races should in the slightest degree be minimized. Far from it. Friendship is the natural way affection and respect are shown. But these can only grow properly when they are not artificially forced, and programs of preferential treatment on campuses often have the effect of keeping the races apart rather than bringing them together. Let the slow processes of educational improvement work on their own—let them start to have a cumulative effect—and the increasing achievement that is their necessary outcome will by itself take care of everything. Don't force. Be patient. The love and respect that follow will be solid and lasting, not superficial and easily dispelled.

How vital is it that our leadership and professions be proportionally representative by race? How important is it to the minorities themselves? It is more important to understand the qualities that make for excellent leaders than to expect quick results, as we are prone to do today. If we have that understanding, we won't expect quick results. The same holds for professionals. Let us not reduce the excellence demanded of these positions in order to make them more widely available. An ethnic or racial group will want to prove—to itself at least as much as to others—that it can succeed, but it should not be encouraged to say, "Just look at these numbers." A few outstanding examples—a superb athlete, mayor, Supreme Court Justice, comedian, general—are more important than numbers. And if some of these themselves admit being helped by affirmative action—assuming they're correct—they would no doubt be outstanding in some field or other. It's not that affirmative action (in the sense of racial preference) never works out to good advantage. It's that, as a system, its evils vastly outweigh its benefits.

For the most part, I have omitted considering the legal and constitutional issues involved

in racial preference at educational institutions. I've said nothing about Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, with its absolute ban on preferential hiring, or about the federal constitution. I've passed by the *Bakke* case (1978), said to be the origin of the idea that diversity can be a tool of admissions, as well as the less remote *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and similar cases. It is no accident that neither involves a private institution, suggesting that the rules for public and private institutions may and should differ. My sole object has been to examine the bad forms affirmative action has taken, when its sound beginning sought simply to make members of minority groups aware of employment possibilities. I've examined the disadvantages and advantages of diversity itself, and found it wanting as public policy for a free nation. It is, and must always be, a threat to excellence. If we are not impatient, we can preserve excellence, or strive for it further where it is lacking, while at the same time, more slowly but more surely, achieving real diversity the natural way.

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