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A New Paradigm for Race Relations?

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With its unsparing exploration of racial group differences, Dinesh D'Souza's "The End of Racism" (Free Press, 724 pages, \$30) runs the risk of becoming this year's Most Dangerous Book. But unlike "The Bell Curve," whose genetic determinism many found so grim, "The End of Racism" offers an explanation that might even restore liberal hope if given half a chance. Rejecting charges that black failure in America is almost entirely a result of white racism, Mr. D'Souza marshals a convincing counterargument that puts the blame on cultural inadequacies and pathologies shaped by black historical experience.

Yoking impressive scholarship to a pointed political polemic, Mr. D'Souza first explains that there is no historical warrant for the pessimistic view that racism has always existed and will always exist. Racism began on the threshold of the European Enlightenment; far from being the product of irrationality and fear, it was "part of a rational and scientific project" to account for the "large civilizational differences" that could not be attributed to climate and were wrongly assigned a biological determinant. Mr. D'Souza also denies that slavery robbed blacks of "their culture" and that current black illegitimacy and poverty can be traced to its legacy. What slavery did do was shape an African-American "ethnic identity" threaded with irresponsibility and resistance. This identity was adaptive to past oppression but may partly account for patterns of behavior that inhibit black aspirations and opportunities today.

The problems of black ethnic culture, however, came to be obscured by the theory of cultural relativism, which was embraced by early 20th-century social scientists. The relativists asserted that differences between groups

were environmental, not biological, and believed that ranking cultures was wrong.

The good news about the relativist "revolution," says Mr. D'Souza, is that it debunked a malicious view of black racial inferiority. The bad news is that it falsely assumed that white prejudice was the chief cause of black social ills. Yet relativism formed the core assumptions of the civil-rights movement, giving short shrift to the need for addressing black cultural deficits. Thus, although the civil-rights movement fought a long campaign against racial classification, the misguided belief that "equality under the laws" would ensure "equality of outcomes" soon fed a clamor for strict proportionalism based on the idea that America was a "racist society." This hyper race-consciousness, Mr. D'Souza says harshly, has put today's civil-rights movement "in basic agreement with the old racists."

Mr. D'Souza doesn't deny that discrimination still exists. But he believes that taxi drivers passing by young black men, or shopkeepers barring them from stores, are not signs of the old racism, which was based on prejudice and ignorance. They are signs of "rational discrimination" -- understandable responses to the realities of underclass black behavior, such as the shocking proportion of young black men in prison, on probation or parole. (He notes that most cabdrivers who pass by blacks are nonwhite and that even Jesse Jackson admits he's made uncomfortable by black youths on a darkened city street.) Rational discrimination can be unfair to the individual, he acknowledges. But it can be eradicated only by getting rid of the destructive conduct that forms the basis for statistically valid group distinctions.

As for the charge of "institutional racism," Mr. D'Souza believes it is a mask for an attack on merit that grows out of frustration with the reality that "on virtually every measure of achievement, some racial groups do better than others." Accordingly, he dismisses charges of cultural bias on SAT tests and civil-service exams, and claims that the business craze for "managing diversity" is "an ideological movement masquerading as a booster of corporate performance."

Mr. D'Souza is predictably hard on ideological multiculturalism, which he says is based on the relativistic assumption that all cultures are equal and that any differences in wealth or "civilizational achievement" between cultures "are most likely due to oppression." Multiculturalism's most extreme form, Afrocentrism, holds special dangers. Its chauvinistic belief in a separate "black reality" is a recipe for building "a deep and unbridgeable mental chasm between blacks and whites in America" and for fanning black racism, which is systematically played down or denied in public discourse.

Mr. D'Souza's most important chapter is on race and IQ. While he affirms the "Bell Curve" thesis that IQ tests have predictive validity for groups, he reaches a nongenetic conclusion: "It is a `reasonable hypothesis' that IQ differences can be explained by culture and environments." Referring to "a kind of cultural DNA" that can be transmitted generationally through socialization, Mr. D'Souza says we need to examine the "cultural dysfunctionalities" within the black community, something we cannot do "if we continue to insist upon the liberal dogma that all cultures are equal."

The book's persuasiveness is undermined somewhat by off-putting, indelicate phrasing and by a certain tendentiousness, such as Mr. D'Souza's tortured claim that the racist views of slave-owning America reflected a "moral conscience" because they rationalized the oppressor's "betrayal of his highest ideals" (i.e., liberty for all). He also questions whether society owes blacks anything for slavery since it "proved to be the transmission belt that nevertheless brought Africans into the orbit of modern civilization and western freedom so that future generations . . . would be far more free and more prosperous than their former kin in Africa." And though his insistence on the separation of "race and state" is sound, his call for a rollback of the 1964 Civil Rights Act makes his reform program too heavy with slain sacred cows.

Nevertheless, "The End of Racism" announces an important paradigm shift away from an intellectually dishonest orthodoxy on cultural differences that has long silenced those whose ideas and experience contradict it.

Mr. McGowan is writing a book about identity politics and the press.