
BEYOND THE COLOR LINE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICA EDITED BY ABIGAIL THERNSTROM AND STEPHAN THERNSTROM

By ROGER CLEGG*

Early in his second term, President Clinton announced that America badly needed to have a “dialogue” on race, and created a commission to conduct that dialogue. There is no shortage of discussion of racial issues in the United States, and indeed there is already a federal Commission of Civil Rights that conducts hearings on such matters, and the new commission that President Clinton appointed was ill-equipped to conduct a true dialogue.

Nonetheless, the story has a happy ending. President Clinton’s commission disappeared without a trace. Not only that but, before doing so, it spawned the Citizens’ Initiative on Race and Ethnicity, an alternative panel formed in April 1998 to counter the Clinton commission. And the CIRE has now produced a remarkable book, *Beyond the Color Line: New Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*.

The title alludes to W.E.B. Du Bois’s prophetic and often-quoted line in *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Thus, implicit in the title is the book’s leitmotiv, that perhaps, just perhaps, over the past century, and particularly in the last half of that century, America has had some success in transcending the color-line that was so absolute when Du Bois wrote, and that some new perspectives might be useful. There are, of course, those who would disagree, like the people who served on the President’s commission. But some propositions are so preposterous, observed Orwell, that only an intellectual could believe them, and into that category surely falls the notion that America has not made enormous progress over the last generation in race relations. Jim Crow is gone, discrimination on the basis of race or national origin in just about every public transaction is illegal, bigotry is socially unacceptable, and the biracial color-line is discredited—indeed, obsolete, in an America that is increasingly multiracial and multiethnic, and among Americans who are themselves, more and more, multiethnic and multiracial.

CIRE did not know what the President’s commission would produce, so it had no choice but to cover the whole waterfront, to consider all the various facets of race relations in late twentieth/early twenty-first century America. The editors of the book, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, did this, and found the most accomplished scholars to address them.

Thus, for instance, one would certainly want to include something about school desegregation—since the modern era in race relations arguably began in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*—and, sure enough, the book has a

chapter on the topic by the two most knowledgeable experts on this topic, David Armor and Christine Rossell. One would want to write something about racial preferences in government contracting, since the Supreme Court’s more recent civil-rights decisions—in cases like *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.* and *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña*—have been in this arena and, voila, there is a chapter on such discrimination by the leading authority, George La Noue. And so on, and so on: You would want to read something on crime by James Q. Wilson, on medical care by Sally Satel, on black churches by John DiIulio, on racial demography by Stephan Thernstrom, on politics by Michael Barone, and you would want to hear as well from Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, Abigail Thernstrom, Clint Bolick, Tamar Jacoby, Linda Chavez, and Ward Connerly. Well, it’s all here, and more.

Indeed, so successful is the book, so chockablock with the very best names on every topic you can imagine, that your humble reviewer is presented with a problem. One feels like a pitchman in one of those infomercials for the latest kitchen high-tech gizmo: Not only does it do this, but it does that, and this, too, and if you order by midnight tonight, we’ll send you this attachment as well, and this in addition, and this, and this. The most straightforward way to make this point and the best way to impress upon the potential reader the scope and value of the book is simply to reproduce its table of contents, and so that is what I’ll do.

Part One, “The Big Picture,” includes chapters on “The Demography of Racial and Ethnic Groups” by Stephan Thernstrom, “Immigration and Group Relations” by Reed Ueda, “What Americans Think about Race and Ethnicity” by Everett C. Ladd, and “Wrestling with Stigma” by Shelby Steele.

Part Two, “Private Lives and Public Policies,” has in it chapters on “Residential Segregation Trends” by William A.V. Clark, “African American Marriage Patterns” by Douglas Bersharov and Andrew West, “Crime” by James Q. Wilson, “Health and Medical Care” by Sally Satel, and “Supporting Black Churches” by John J. DiIulio, Jr.

Part Three, “Economics,” has chapters on “Discrimination, Economics, and Culture” by Thomas Sowell, “Half Full or Half Empty? The Changing Economic Status of African Americans, 1967–1996” by Finis Welch, and “Discrimination in Public Contracting” by George R. La Noue.

Part Four, “Education,” has in it chapters on “Desegregation and Resegregation in the Public Schools” by David J. Armor and Christine H. Rossell, “The Racial Gap in Academic Achievement” by Abigail Thernstrom, “Schools

That Work for Minority Students” by Clint Bolick, and “Preferential Admissions in Higher Education” by Martin Trow.

Part Five, “Law,” has two chapters, “Racial and Ethnic Classifications in American Law” by Eugene Volokh and “Illusions of Antidiscrimination Law” by Nelson Lund.

Part Six, “Politics,” has chapters on “Race, Ethnicity, and Politics in American History” by Michael Barone, “The Politics of Racial Preferences” by David Brady, and “From Protest to Politics: Still an Issue for Black Leadership” by Tamar Jacoby.

Part Seven, “One Nation, Indivisible,” includes chapters on “The New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation” by Linda Chavez, “In Defense of Indian Rights” by William J. Lawrence, “The Battle for Color-Blind Public Policy” by C. Robert Zelnick, and “One Nation, Indivisible” by Ward Connerly.

Much of the material in the book will be familiar to those who work in this area, but not all of it, and in any event it is very useful to have so much collected and to have it updated and so well organized. One famous review—not of this anthology—witheringly observed, “What is good in this book is not new, and what is new is not good.” But here, with this embarrassment of riches, the opposite is true: What’s new is good, and what’s not new is worth reading again. *Repetitio est mater studiorum*. Thank you, President Clinton.

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