

## **Representation, Recognition and Race: Evaluating Spaces for the Reproduction of White Dominance**

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“No one is shushing us anymore; no one is intimidated or quiet. The voices are loud, the accents various, and the result is not harmony – as in the old image of pluralism as a symphony, with each group playing its own instrument (but who wrote the music?); the result is a jangling discord.”

-- Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (96)

In his reflections on American multiculturalism, Michael Walzer describes what he views as the transition, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from minority politics marked by timidity and silence to those of noisy arguments and assertiveness. The radical character of American pluralism, he argues, is much more apparent today; minorities are no longer expected to play their instrument in agreeable harmony in a symphony composed by white, Christian, English-speaking, male power-holders. Or are they? Walzer correctly asserts that the US is a far more egalitarian place socially, though not economically, than it was sixty years ago, yet, upon close analysis of the politics of recognition and representation, it becomes less clear whether we are beyond the reach of a white symphony or script. Though changes in the social atmosphere may allow for a cacophony of minority voices within formal politics, this has not prevented white dominance from reproducing itself *within* movements for representation and recognition. This paper will explore the philosophical commitments connected to the politics of representation and recognition (together, the politics which strive for an acknowledgement of the identities of marginalized groups), and will question whether members of a dominant group can help to promote sounder representations of marginalized groups without recreating forms of dominance in the process. I will focus on efforts to make gains for black Americans, and will argue that the practice of such politics may leave blacks more silent, and less in control of their projected identities, than we would hope. I will finally turn my analysis to the reproduction of white dominance within the realm of student activism, particularly on Harvard's campus.

It is first necessary to distinguish “recognition” and “representation” from each other. Both have been used toward similar ends, yet their philosophical positions and methodologies are distinct and thus require individualized attention.

“Representation” has been the subject of much academic inquiry since about the mid-1960s, when feminist, minority and postcolonial thinkers, among others, began “exploding the notion that representation works innocently or transparently” (Jay 9). The power to name and describe another or oneself translates into very real political capital. The conceptions that groups hold of each other – as false or antiquated as they usually are – carry a great deal of weight, particularly within multicultural societies where such conceptions mark privilege for dominant groups. The politics of recognition and representation

respond to such prevailing (mis)conceptions, as actors seek to break down the cultural and political monopoly of dominant groups. The main distinction between representation and recognition is the location of power and agency; with recognition, the power of the recognizer is taken for granted and remains unchallenged. Groups are still struggling to have their identities validated through the recognition of another. Charles Taylor defines the politics of recognition thus: “A politics that asks us to acknowledge socially and politically the authentic identities of others” (in Appiah, 92). The existence of an “authentic identity” is arguable, still, with this definition, the power to acknowledge (indeed, the power even to recognize an identity as authentic or inauthentic) does not shift – and the structure of the authoritative subject and its “other” remains. K. Anthony Appiah expands upon this irony of recognition, using the example of black American identity:

If, in understanding myself as African-American, I see myself as resisting white norms, mainstream American conventions, the racism (and, perhaps, the materialism or the individualism) of “white culture,” why should I at the same time seek recognition from these white others? There is, in other words, at least an irony in the way in which an ideal... in which authenticity requires us to reject much that is conventional in our society is turned around and made the basis of a ‘politics of recognition’” (94).

Though the politics of representation still imply the need for some level of recognition, this recognition is not the driving force behind the politics themselves (instead, the emphasis is on the act of representing, not on a potential external audience), and thus there is less intrinsic inequality in the pursuit of representation. The primary relationship within the politics of representation is between the represented group and its representer, whereas in the politics of recognition it is between the recognized group and its (external, farther removed) recognizer. It comes down to a question of agency: groups have the power to *represent themselves*, but need to be *recognized by* an outside party.

Given the nature of these distinctions, I will focus my attention primarily on the politics of representation. It is here, I argue, that white dominance can be reproduced more subversively, and to more harmful effect for minority struggles. When Walzer wrote of a shift in the social landscape that allowed minorities to voice themselves more fervently, he was likely referring to a change in the willingness of the dominant group to *recognize* minority voices. Questions of how minorities will represent themselves in a more receptive space inevitably follow, but are not always addressed. Since it is assumed that minority voices are now freer to speak, it is also assumed that – should a minority group have a grievance – they likely *will* speak. Political barriers are considered to be less inhibitory than they were sixty years ago, and so if minority groups remain silent on issues, it seems more likely that this silence is by choice. After all, “no one is shushing us anymore.” (There are revealing parallels here with the American

economic myth of equal opportunity and the purported ability to climb the economic ladder through hard work and perseverance). George Jay cites this as a particular flaw of the politics of recognition, as he holds that recognition “tilts the emphasis toward personal relationships and away from political economy” (10). The emphasis is on the individual – the primary unit in classic liberal theory. Liberal theory has a flexible approach to expanding “recognition” for various classes of individuals (Jay 10), but is poorer at understanding *group* dynamics – much less the macro-level impact of political economy on collective expression. The challenges that minority groups continue to face in representing themselves cannot be understood independently of the political economy, and thus the politics of “recognition” again fall short.

The politics of representation and recognition are often applied to the empirical cases of immigrant societies and in cases where distinct cultures are struggling to stake a claim within broader society. To speak of black-white race relations in America in the context of “cultural diversity” is a small but significant leap; though I maintain that many theories of multiculturalism and representational politics are relevant here, black Americans do not actually constitute a distinct culture in a strict sense. Black Americans often assert or are prescribed a distinct identity, and yet cannot be considered as culturally separate (here, I am not including recent immigrants of African descent, who are of distinct cultures). Appiah provides a useful criterion here:

In order to constitute a common culture, there must be a wide range of shared beliefs, values, signs, and symbols... not... in the sense that everyone in the group actually holds the beliefs and values, but in the sense that everybody knows what they are and everybody knows that they are widely held in the society. Racial groups in the US... do not share such common beliefs and therefore are not cultural subgroups within the broader American mosaic. Nor can cultural identity simply be ascribed to these racial identities by virtue of a process of ‘cultural geneticism’ in which group members are presumed to share a common culture by definition (6).

There may be differences in how black Americans identify and represent themselves, yet these are not cultural differences. Walzer, in a discussion on subordination in immigrant societies, similarly distinguishes indigenous peoples and coercively imported groups (such as African slaves) from newer immigrants (*Toleration*, 58). The economic and political subordination of the descendants of slaves and indigenous peoples is, he argues, of a more radical sort (which has involved the stripping away of culture). Appiah contends that America’s struggle with difference should not be viewed as struggle among cultures:

With differing cultures, we might expect misunderstandings arising out of ignorance of each others’ values, practices, beliefs;

we might even expect conflicts because of differing values or beliefs. The paradigms of difficulty in a society of many cultures are misunderstandings of a word or a gesture; conflicts over who should take custody of the children after a divorce; whether to go to the doctor or to the priest for healing. Once we move from talking of cultures to identities whole new kinds of problems come into view. Racial and ethnic identities are, for example, essentially contrastive and relate centrally to social and political power (88).

Appiah's distinction between discussions of culture and identity is a vital one, and complicates the picture since black Americans share in the dominant American culture which is defined by their own subordination.

Indeed, the culture of white dominance has always had a devastating effect upon the process of identity formation in the United States. Identity is irrefutably linked with power and is contrastive in nature, yet American racial identities are even more contrastive than those of many other cultures – indeed, there exists a unique breed of white domination in the United States. Racial identity in the US is notoriously polarized – the “one drop rule” and its accompanying conceptions of racial purity and absolutism place incredible constraints on the identity formation of minority groups. White American identity has been forged by creating economic, political, and social distinctions between “whites” (in reality, a fallacious category subsuming diverse cultures of European origin<sup>1</sup>) and minority groups – in terms of white identity construction, no “other” has been as significant as the black other. Scholars have hoped that a critical study of whiteness (considered to be the last frontier in race theory) would deconstruct this monolith, thus widening opportunities for identity formation of all groups. Though many positive insights have been gained, this field of study (like many social movements for racial justice) has at times also served to re-inscribe forms of white dominance, as I will discuss later.

When one looks below the surface of civil rights laws of the last fifty years in the US – and casts an eye at the implementation of laws around school desegregation, fair housing, and labor practices – a particularly tenacious form of whiteness comes into view. In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, George Lipsitz explores the ways in which the “possessive investment in whiteness” has undermined the efficacy of civil rights agendas and struggles in the US. He argues, convincingly, that whites (many of whom have come to expect privilege as a right accordant with their whiteness) have responded to civil rights laws with resistance, refusal, and renegotiation. This may be viewed in terms of recognition in the sense that formal recognition of civil rights has come for black Americans, yet white privilege has remained largely intact and, effectively, unchallenged. This has been possible because of the prevailing crisis of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson explores the process by which ethnic minorities, in becoming American, were racialized as “white” in *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

representation; minority groups may have a forum, yet they are not representing themselves in the most effective ways because of the constraints that white dominance places upon the realm of representation. These include obvious constraints, such as the dependence of many minority organizations upon philanthropic foundations for their existence (the majority of which are white-led and tend to withdraw support from more radical initiatives). But there has also been long-running debate over the role of white liberals within organizations that seek gains for minority groups. Throughout the civil rights movement, black activists were divided over the issue of building exclusively black movements (such as Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, the National of Islam, the Black Panthers, and other black nationalist groups) or multiracial coalitions (including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Congress on Racial Equality, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference). Perhaps the most enduring question has been around the role of the white liberal in such struggles, which has at its roots a philosophical question of representation: Can members of dominant groups help to promote sounder representations of marginalized groups without recreating forms of dominance in the process? More broadly: Is there space for representing others that does not subordinate or assume implicit hierarchy?

The debate around this question is an old one, but I find the answers put forth thus far to be unsatisfactory. The answers from academic and activist circles has typically been "yes," though this answer is likely influenced by whiteness as well. (Indeed, the very question of the role of white bodies in minority struggles probably originated with white liberals, seeking to locate themselves in a struggle, and likely unaware of the extent of their own potential to reproduce white dominance within these structures). Some argue that the best antidote is for whites to be constantly aware of their whiteness – that if they wish to take part in a struggle for racial equality, they must understand the ways in which they are still being privileged by their own whiteness. If they are not unrelenting in this way, forms of racial domination will quickly be reinscribed into the struggles themselves (resulting in white intellectual leadership of predominantly black movements, for example). But people grow tired of being "constantly aware," of fighting an uphill battle internally and externally, and they eventually burn out and leave the struggle. In another line of argument, (espoused by the editors of *Race Traitor* magazine) white persons are allowed to assume (however simplistically) that the struggle itself can undo or counteract their whiteness. Others argue that blacks and whites should do work for racial equality from separate camps; it is assumed that whites can do the most for the struggle by dealing with their own "whiteness" (South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko argued that white liberals would best serve the struggle by chipping away at white supremacist structures in the rest of government and society, instead of trying to guide black activists). A similar line of thought gave rise to whiteness studies, followed by critical whiteness studies, in the North American academy during the 1990s. There was an impetus for whiteness to be examined critically – but, since the field of critical whiteness studies is in the hands of mostly white

scholars, there has too often been a re-inscription of white domination here. From the standpoint of many in this field, whites are considered to possess a particularly sharp view on whiteness (born of deep self-reflection), even though darker races have more directly at stake in the outcomes of this analysis. And since figuring out whiteness is the new “key” in the anti-racist project, whites have their role as messianic figures reinforced. I am thus suspicious of some of the conclusions (and philosophical implications) that emerge from this field of study. Lipsitz discusses the skewed perceptions and bloated sense of entitlement that come with whiteness. A study of whiteness which is undertaken through this distorted lens – and which does not incorporate the viewpoints of those most negatively impacted by whiteness (ie. blacks and members of other races) – is bound to be skewed, despite its best intentions.

In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Bhikhu Parekh registers his own skepticism toward efforts at combating dominance through moral persuasion or critical analysis alone:

[Taylor] seems to think that the dominant group can be rationally persuaded to change its views of [marginalized groups] by intellectual argument and moral appeal. This is to misunderstand the dynamics of the process of recognition. Misrecognition has both a cultural and a material basis. ... Misrecognition, therefore, can only be countered by both undertaking a rigorous critique of the dominant culture and radically restructuring the prevailing inequalities of economic and political power. Since the dominant group welcomes neither the radical critique nor the corresponding political praxis, the struggle for recognition involves cultural and political contestation and sometimes even violence (343).

Parekh offers an important critique, and is correct in asserting that the target of struggles must be whiteness itself; in other words, struggles must be undertaken against the economic and social sites where whiteness is reproduced. If whites (through which whiteness is most readily reproduced) want to be part of dismantling this system, their devotion to destroying whiteness will be clear from their actions, from how aggressively they either take part in the project or, conversely, cling to the benefits of white privilege. Yet, I am troubled by Parekh’s rhetorical separation of a radical critique from political praxis. For Parekh’s distinction (though brilliant and well-intentioned) leads to problems in praxis. A rigorous critique of dominant culture and a radical restructuring of prevailing inequalities should not be considered as separate things – for, in fact, American culture cannot realistically be considered as separate from the inequalities of economic and political power. America’s myth-making process and cultural constructions have formed as part of these inequalities. The myths of the self-made man, of the ability to “pick yourself up by the bootstraps,” of equal opportunity and others are deeply racialized, and have been used historically to promote (and then conceal) white dominance. Thus, in order to be effective, the

process of critiquing the dominant culture in the US must be the same process as restructuring the inequalities perpetuated by that culture.

In contemporary discourse, however, these elements have been divorced. Too often, it is assumed that efforts for economic justice can skip over a racial dialogue (and leave it to other groups or thinkers). Some have put forth the argument that class is a stronger factor than race in determining outcomes (here, it is often argued that the poor are white as well as black, and thus whiteness does not necessarily correspond with privilege). This argument has three major flaws. First, it defies social reality, for though there are white poor, it cannot soundly be argued that their position is the same as black poor. Class and economic forces – particularly the affects of capitalism – interact differently with black bodies than they do with white ones. Second, and perhaps more profoundly, we have come to understand the indivisibility of race and class – that race and class articulate with each other and cannot be discussed in such a disparate manner. Finally, it shuts down discussion around issues of race by pointing out the economic and political success of a handful of minorities. This line of thought may hold that the United States government is no longer managing a project of white domination, because Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice are in elite positions of power. However, the presence of black faces within the white dominant power structure does not change the racist logic and practice that drives such a power configuration. Hence, to discuss race or class independently of each other – or to argue that one trumps the other – is to misunderstand the workings of political economy. Sometimes activists will argue for the centrality of race, to the detriment of class analysis. *Race Traitor* editor Noel Ignatiev says in his argument for treason to the white race: “I’m black and I’m proud is the modern rendition of ‘Workers of all countries, unite!’” (in Michaels, 142). When white persons are allowed to consider themselves as revolutionary by promoting black identity, the economic analysis is weakened and their own role within the class structure goes unexamined (because it is considered irrelevant). The failure to recognize the differential impact of class dynamics upon blacks and whites allows white persons to unquestioningly assume positions of power and leadership within racial justice movements.

Contemporary student social movements – including and especially those at Harvard – have suffered from the reproduction of racial domination within their ranks. The race and class demographic is already skewed in institutions of higher learning, as colleges’ demographics are not (on the whole) representative of national demographics. Only one third of college-aged youth are in college, and these are disproportionately white and affluent. Because of this misrepresentation, the university setting might not be the ideal place for building social movements that seek gains for blacks and other minorities, yet the setting has come to assume this role at many points throughout history. An ideal model for political organizing is one that supports grassroots efforts from within those communities which are most affected and which have the most at stake in the issue at hand. However, though this is likely not the case with student

movements, it is worth analyzing the workings of race within these movements because they, unfortunately, represent a model closer to the norm in much of social activism. They also offer a glimpse at the intersection of the academy and political action. Finally, student organizing is also a realm where the author has had a good deal of experience working on global AIDS issues.

At Harvard and other colleges, the lack of diversity in social movements and political organizations is sometimes lamented in activist circles. It is a problem when those most affected by injustice do not have a place in the struggle against it (whether that injustice is a lack of access to AIDS medications, unfair employment practices, issues surrounding international fair trade, etc.). However, it is often philosophically unclear what diversity means in the hands of social movements, as diversity is not necessarily pursued for the goal of eliminating racial domination wherever it is found (including within social movements). Often, the level of diversity within an organization may rise or fall, but the content of the movements (ie. their demands) does not change – they are still pursuing a project engineered by whiteness. Movements may look more diverse, but their views and demands are not informed by this diversity of identity and opinion. This is often the result when progressive, white-led movements attempt to recruit members (in reality, “followers”) among campus cultural organizations. The scenario has been repeated countless times: white students come to a meeting of a minority organization (or, perhaps, they send one of their few minority members) and give them a pitch about why the organization’s membership “should” care about a given issue (ie. why black students should care about AIDS in Africa or why Latino students should care about sweatshops). The obvious (but often overlooked) problem is that the agenda of the struggle has already been determined, without input from those students who “should” care most. This approach is usually successful in securing minority students to do legwork for a particular event, but does not incorporate them into the ranks of strategic organizers or empower them to create political changes they may want to see.

How did we end up with so many progressive political organizations with predominantly white membership in the first place? In some cases, these organizations are chapters of national organizations, which were not sufficiently mindful of combating white dominance when they initiated their campus recruitment. In a top-down model of organizing – in which someone has an issue and wishes to recruit others to organize around it – it is most expedient to reach out to students who already identify themselves as progressive and are already energized about related issues. Because of the residual structures of white dominance, these are more likely to be white students (who have more education and experience on political issues, whose parents may have been politically conscious and involved, who might have grown up talking politics at the dinner table, and who were more likely to attend private schools). These students possess a higher level of social and political capital than their minority counterparts. When a progressive organization begins, there may be a diverse

turn-out for the first few meetings (since many minorities are, in fact, very interested in issues pertaining to racial/economic justice, foreign policy, etc.), yet white students are likely to assume leadership positions because of their political knowledge and experience. These students know how to organize, know what a movement needs to do in order to accomplish its goals, and thus become leaders; blacks and other minorities fill the membership ranks, but understandably become burnt out by doing the legwork and by being told what to do, while exercising little strategic input into the movement's activities. When the black students leave the movement totally, it becomes another white-led, white-executed student movement. This cycle could be broken, if time and effort were devoted to building up real power among minority students and seeking and respecting their input in strategic discussions at the highest level. Many minority students (particularly in an institution such as Harvard with such a staggering patriarchal, white legacy) are not groomed to seek out the financial and political resources that movement organizations need (and they have less of these resources when they enter college). They have fewer connections to political speakers, and may not be poised to seek out such speakers or discussion series happening on campus. And if minority students do go, they may not be as accustomed to networking – to approaching a speaker afterwards, asking for their e-mail address, or asking for an internship.

I do not wish to place the burden on racial minorities here – I am not arguing that their quiet presence within social movements comes by choice. Rather, the opposite is so. When movements and their membership (or potential membership) are analyzed within the context of political economy, it is evident how easily white domination can subversively reproduce itself. Dominant bodies may be able to represent minorities in ways that are not inherently subordinating, yet, these attempts are rarely as successful as anyone hopes. It is exhausting to police the micro-level reproduction of power – those dynamics which cause some to speak up in meetings and others to remain silent, or which inspire deference in some and leadership in others. The most promising course of action is likely an attack on the sites of economic and social dominance, an attack which is not divorced from a racial critique, but that *embodies* a racial critique. If a movement levels a direct attack at white privilege, and the commitment of its white activists does not waver, then they are renouncing their whiteness in the strongest possible way. If this is the case, it is probably already obvious to these members that an active, accurate representation of blacks (likely embodied by blacks) is a fierce critique of dominant white culture. In the practice of movement organizing, thriving and dynamic diversity (in which blacks and other minorities speak their minds and have the strongest possible presence) thus comes to embody the destruction of whiteness. The dominant culture abhors this active political critique; if movement members also prove wary of such a critique, this hesitancy will reveal their own (perhaps subconscious) impulse to cling to white privilege.

In her 1991 study of the politics of multiculturalism in higher education, Evelyn Hu-Dehart writes: “Multiculturalists understand that diversity and assertion need not lead to divisiveness if there is no social inequality based on constructed and imposed racial and gender categories. Unless we eliminate these basic barriers to equal opportunity, what does a ‘common culture’ mean, and how do we forge unity and a genuinely democratic American future?” (in Lowy, 595). A large amount of economic inequality is an assumed aspect of American culture; this becomes a seed of the most virulent intolerance and division when these inequalities lie along racial lines, as they so often do (Walzer 56). In combating the sources of division and working towards an American culture that exhibits dynamic recognition and representation of minority identities, we must target the reproduction of an American culture of white dominance. The debate over the role of white persons in this struggle is a valuable one, but it should not distract us from the tasks at hand or allow for further re-inscription of white dominance. Understanding the character of whiteness – and even recognizing it in ourselves – is valuable, but it will continue to limit the identity formation and life opportunities of minority groups for as long as it exists. It must therefore be attacked directly, even though this means upsetting some of the foundations of American culture which have always produced it and continue to reproduce it.

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