

Why I Can't Read  
Wallace Stegner  
and Other Essays

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A Tribal Voice

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## America's Oldest Racism

### The Roots of Inequality

In spite of many positive experiences in the academic world, America's oldest racism remains as troubling as ever.

A young East Indian-American scholar by the name of Dinesh D'Souza who is now a John M. Olin Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., has called up the memory of an awful history by giving contemporary voice to the idea of "prudent/rational discrimination" as a virtuous practice for a democracy like America.<sup>1</sup> It is for some a good idea, the last word; for others, the new racism. For Indians the argument is an old idea that they know well, an idea which has been defended in America since the landing of Columbus.

Though I admit to being a little confused concerning D'Souza's particular stance on American Indians (they do not take a central position in any of his arguments), it is my understanding that he believes Europeans were quite justified in thinking themselves superior to Indians and implementing a firm policy to take over their lands. The right of one group to dominate another, he suggests, was not the result of biological racism but the result of "ethnocentric theories of cultural difference," and this reality, he says, makes the "progress" toward civilization which has characterized Western U.S. history a good and inevitable thing. His debatable point that the concept of race in the modern biological sense did not exist when the enslavement of Africans originally occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has little connection to what happened to Indians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when two-thirds of their treaty-protected lands were stolen by America, nor does it connect with the continued colonial power exercised by the United States over Indian populations. Thus, if one looks at D'Souza's

argument and the results of five hundred years of European occupation of native lands on this continent from the point of view of decimated native populations reduced to beggary in the country they occupied for thousands of years, the distinction hardly matters.

In suggesting that affirmative action as a national policy and civil rights activism as a social agenda are no longer necessary, D'Souza says that biological racism, which really raised its ugly head ideologically when Europeans first encountered non-Western peoples, is declining as a social force in America and that discrimination is a good thing if it is based on evidence rather than ideology. He wonders if we should define racism as a "doctrine of *intrinsic* superiority and inferiority" between groups. Before he convinces anyone of what that would mean in terms of actual behavior, he goes on to argue that, in the 1990s and beyond, there are circumstances in which discrimination, at least in the black/white context, makes sense and, furthermore, that prejudice may not be the result of ignorant predisposition (i.e., stereotype), as had once been thought; but rather, it may be one citizen's prudent judgment of another. It is a muddled argument, to be sure. Nevertheless, for the better part of the current decade, ever since D'Souza finished graduate studies at America's elitist institutions and began writing about "illiberal education," he has been touted by editors, scholars, and politicians alike as a new voice, a meritorious scholar of contemporary conservative thinking. The *Free Press* publishes his books; the *Atlantic Monthly* publishes his essays.

For the indigenous populations of this continent, from the Maya to the Cree, there is nothing new about D'Souza's thinking, nor does he bring substantive new evidence to his argument concerning the history and the consequences of racism in America. His argument is that affirmative action and the liberal civil rights programs have failed as social policy because their underlying ideas have not been based on the "reality of traits" attributed to specific racial groups. African Americans, he points out, do have a substantially higher crime rate than whites; therefore, for whites to fear them is not racist—just practical. Women do get pregnant and leave their jobs; therefore, it is sensible for employers to discriminate in favor of men in hiring practices. It is economically justified. He says that affirmative action treats competent individuals as incompetent and thus should be scrapped as social policy. He uses the prejudices of one group toward another to bolster his notion that it is not just whites who notice and discriminate. For example, he says that "49 percent of blacks and 68 percent of Asians say that Hispanics tend to have bigger families than they can support." This means, one supposes, that if Hispanics are

poor, it is their own fault. He says virtually nothing about social policies toward indigenous populations which amount to colonial genocide, Termination/Relocation, jurisdiction, coercive assimilation, and so on.

One of the major flaws in almost all of D'Souza's discussion on race and equality in America is that it is based, as is all of the race discourse in this country since the Civil War, on the black/white paradigm almost exclusively. This exclusive and narrow look at American society has skewed the discourse on cause and effect to which we are all now subjected. D'Souza's contention is that the civil rights model as we know it, based as it is on prejudice and stereotype, would be denounced by Martin Luther King as wrong, even immoral. His interpretation of King's ideology on race, whether it is sensible or not, is convenient, because such a conclusion allows all of us to put aside the historical violence of the economic policies of a capitalistic democracy which are at the root of inequality in America. Such an argument is specious, also, because America's oldest racial act, the deliberate theft of a continent from its original inhabitants, could never have been accomplished without government intervention. If any acts in history have demonstrated the triumph of government regulation over the free market, the thefts of Indian lands do so. It was never a free market for the Sioux, who said to potential buyers, "The Black Hills are not for sale." They consented neither to the sale itself nor to the terms. Indeed, the federal government and the state governments have conspired in Indian land thefts for more than a hundred years. If the argument about race and equality in America is ever to be understood, the Indian experience in economics must become part of the discourse.

The rationale for America's oldest racism was never about slavery. It was never about the color of one's skin. The oldest racism in America was about the economically motivated, government-sponsored theft of lands occupied by others and the subsequent, deliberate murder of millions of Indians by the U.S. citizens and military. While one could argue that such activities would give support to D'Souza's call for the removal of government from the process, this has never been a reasoned interpretation of the American Indian experience, because the U. S. government has also represented a democratic "free market" based on the exploitation of resources for profit, an ideology which has always been anathema to native cultures on this continent.

The historical and deep-seated rationale for historical theft, dispossession, and inequality is exemplified by a Horatio Greenough sculpture called "Rescue Group," which was commissioned in 1837 and placed in the East Portico of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., some twenty years

later. The sculpture has remained in the hearts and minds of Americans as an example of the intellectual ideals of a superior civilization. It shows the savage menacing white society, represented by a helpless woman and child, and a pioneer man towering over a dark Indian. According to D'Souza's thinking, this art could be said to be based on experience, not racial ideology. Indians did kill white pioneer families, so they deserved to be defeated and colonized. They did carry tomahawks in one hand and scalps in the other. This art, then, is not racist. It is very simply a logical image arising out of a realistic historical experience.

It is worth noting that at the same time Greenough was modeling his clay—indeed, as early as 1827—the Cherokee Nation, in an effort to save itself and its treaty-protected lands from American democracy, was adopting a constitution with the express purpose of establishing a national Cherokee government modeled upon American principles. It did them little good. Like the Jews who contributed to German culture for hundreds of years and then faced Hitler in the twentieth century, their efforts at participating as Indians in American culture in the middle of the nineteenth century were not only futile, they were considered absurd. The Georgia state legislature, while it did not send them to the ovens, wrote as follows:

Resolved, That all the lands appropriated and unappropriated within the conventional limits of Georgia, belong to her absolutely; that the title is in her; that the Indians are tenants at her will; that she may at any time she pleases determine their tenancy, by taking possession of the premises; and that Georgia has the right to extend her authority and laws over the whole territory, and to coerce obedience to them from all descriptions of people, be they white, red, or black, within her limits.

While many contemporary Americans believe the Jewish holocaust stands alone in the annals of racist crime, Indians who have survived in America are not so sure. D'Souza's argument seems to be trying to convince us that the action of the State of Georgia, which typifies hundreds of such actions across this land, was based on "rational discrimination"—that racism probably had little or nothing to do with it and was, in any case, efficacious. The Cherokees were "removed." The Supreme Court modified the "removal" and allowed the Cherokees to live subject to American law and power. America and the State of Georgia ascended, and the Cherokee Nation today like all of the Indian nations of this land, considers itself among the bare survivors of racist America. Contrarily, D'Souza might suggest that to absorb and assimilate the unwilling Cherokees for the purpose of colonization was

only "Amer-centric," not racist. Thus, to confer American citizenship (in 1924) upon a population that neither wanted it nor requested it, can't be considered anti-Indian or racist, since their "agreement" was documented. The people of the white power structures of America who managed social policy during this removal era were as driven by the ideals of market capitalism as are D'Souza's colleagues today. To steal Indian lands for profit then was simply an economic issue, and today it continues to be a matter of good economics to defend these policies and, in the process, transcend ethnic cultures.

The argument in defense of this kind of Indian history is the same defense D'Souza advocates for the continued well-being of America. It is not racism to discriminate, his argument says, because "people's perceptions of others are always filtered through the lens of their own prior experiences," the "distilled product of many years of experience." Moreover, these acts are efficient; they make economic and common sense.

If you agree that such discrimination "forces a choice in which the claims of morality are on one side, and the claims of rationality and productivity are on the other," so be it, says D'Souza's argument. The choices he gives simply leaves out Indians who even today, through some miracle or unaccountable oversight, continue to possess thousands of acres of land and historical rights as citizens of Indian nations. He puts everything into a civil rights mode, ignoring the treaty rights model which is the true basis for American Indian history. For Americans of the future, D'Souza suggests, the choices are threefold: first, racial preference could be treated as an essential remedy (one wonders if this could mean the defense of native nationhood); second, all discrimination, including rational discrimination, could be considered illegal in both the public and private sectors (one wonders if this means the federal government and state governments would be forced to stop colonial practices on Indian lands); or, third—clearly D'Souza's preference—rational discrimination could be made legal and civil rights legislation be repudiated. What would become of two hundred years of agonized defense of Indian rights, property, and sovereignty under the contrived paradigm of these three choices is left to the imagination.

The modern dialogue and the history of Indians on this continent leads one to cynicism about the possibility that the average American and the average Indian can define the world in terms of mutually acceptable ideals. Because the debate on race and society in America, at least since the Civil War, has been almost entirely about black and white, the end of slavery, and the new immigrants and diversity, the hope of the American public was for a time that desegregation would bring the

end of racism. Some say the end of racism as a widespread phenomenon has, indeed, come to pass. Though others say the hopes for solutions to racial conflict under present circumstances are getting more and more difficult, optimists like D'Souza believe that harmony is possible and that there is no longer any need for public policy in desegregating blacks and whites, nor any federal intervention of any kind. People today are in regular contact with each other, these optimists say, and they no longer have false views of one another; their newly formulated, clear images of one another promote racial harmony, and *continued assimilation will make oppression of one group by another group impossible*.

Such idealization of a long and troubled racial history has made any modern civil rights debate almost meaningless to the Native Americans who are citizens of Indian nations in this country. Because these debates are based on the experiences of blacks, whites, and new immigrants, the result has been a failure to understand that for equality and democracy to be defined according to the original constitutional and aboriginal intent, Indians must be seen as Indians, not as ethnic individuals in America. They must be seen as the original peoples, possessing dual citizenship in their own tribal nation(s) as well as in the United States. They must be seen as nations of people who occupied this continent for thousands of years with personal and national rights and who still do.

The problem with much of what D'Souza writes is not that it is ahistorical; rather, it is a return to a failed history of justice for America's first peoples. Of course, D'Souza readily admits that he is not a historian of either society or ideas. His point is that affirmative action as public policy and the repeal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are necessary if the black/white dialogue is to improve and if blacks are ever to achieve parity. Indians are not in this discourse, nor have they ever been his concern.

His argument, however, for the return of individual rights unfettered by government and his enthusiastic defense of the traditions of the West and of progress toward civilization are frightening. They deny again the right of Native America to see its Indianness as separate from mainstream Americanism, and they put at risk much of the work done by native scholars in academia over the past thirty years in the development of Native American Studies as a defensive mechanism for unique tribal experience and knowledge. It excludes participation by Indians as anything but "ethnic minorities."

For Indian country today, D'Souza's argument seems to defend colonization by economics and conquest by assimilation. What's new about that?