

BY RINKU SEN

White Progressives Don't Get It



EVERY FEW YEARS, a white progressive man begs activists to reject racial questions and focus on the “real” agenda. The latest is Walter Benn Michaels, head of the English Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who wrote the book *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, and who was recently featured in these pages (“Is Diversity Enough?” October).

Rather than saving democracy or liberating the working class, the argument goes, progressives have been forced by narrow-minded people of color to obsess about whether they have one of each kind on their conference panels or college faculties. In this narrative, identity politics is to blame for the inability of progressives to stick together, thereby making room for the rise of conservatism. Michaels says as much, barely acknowledging any other factors, including the right wing’s brilliant (and highly racialized) campaigns to establish its ideas in the American consciousness.

For 20 years, I have worked as an organizer and journalist in racial justice organizations owned and operated by people of color, hoping to contribute to a vibrant larger movement. My current employer, the Applied Research Center, holds that it’s important to be “explicit about race but not exclusive.” That’s not diversity; it’s a sensible analysis for a complicated world.

Analysts like Michaels repeatedly harp on “diversity” as if that’s the only measure of racial progress. That reflects their deep lack of connection with actual communities and their cluelessness about the role that race plays in economics and democracy. They want to write off racism as a distraction from universal solutions, or as a divide-and-conquer tactic to split the working class.

Universal solutions, however, have to deal with discrimination if they’re to be truly universal. Policies designed without racial justice goals can actually deepen the divide, while creating the illusion that they’ve taken care of everyone.

I also often hear that rather than highlighting racial disparities in healthcare, rampant though they are, we should fight for universal healthcare. But if public healthcare were enough to prevent discrimination, then Canada and the United Kingdom wouldn’t have any health disparities. But they do. A study published in July’s *American Journal of Pub-*

lic Health reported that nearly twice as many non-white Canadians needed medicines but could not afford them as their white counterparts, and that 18.6 percent of non-whites had unmet healthcare needs as opposed to 11.1 percent of whites.

Racism leads Americans to make political decisions that undermine their own interests. The current attack on our civil liberties was tested on non-citizens, not after 9/11 but as early as 1996 with hardly a peep out of anybody. That year’s Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act allowed the president to label organizations “terrorist” without any appeal or review, lifted a restriction against the FBI on investigations based on speech or beliefs, and let the Federal government deport or jail immigrants indefinitely for their affiliations or political activity. This is not divide and conquer; it’s about getting white folk used to the practice of

shrinking rights for others—so that they will eventually tolerate it for themselves.

In 2003, when Howard Dean said he wanted to reach out to southern men who had Confederate flags on their pickups, he was forced by both

southerners and blacks to apologize. Dean was on the right track but unable (perhaps from lack of practice?) to articulate what needed to be said—that white southerners had allowed racism to lead them to vote against their own self-interest. White people who absorb racist ideas always think they’ll be exempt from the loss.

If racism dilutes progressive solutions, racial justice can improve life for everyone. Racial justice activists have learned all we could from identity-based movements. First, identity is key—we all start with what is in front of us, as true for white men as for anyone else. But identity doesn’t replace ideas, hence, the difference between “diversity” and justice. Racial justice is about changing the rules of society according to a set of standards: resisting discrimination and violence, not abiding huge disparities, and expanding the role of government to protect economic, social and political rights.

It is white progressives who are stuck on identity politics; progressives of color have long since moved on. The resulting agenda requires far more from the nation, and from our movement, than representation. The failure to incorporate racial justice into a progressive program has deprived progressivism of its true potential—to build a better world for all of us. ■

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BY LAURA S. WASHINGTON

The Second Clinton Ascendancy



ON A POST-ELECTION edition of PBS's "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer," presidential historian Richard Norton Smith told Lehrer: "The Democrats clearly have an opportunity to demonstrate that they're the Bill Clinton party. You know, historically, I think the real winner this week is Bill Clinton."

Smith, a scholar in residence at George Mason University, argued that in recent years "we saw the Democrats veer off" to

the wilderness of the left, much to the delight of the Bushies. But the 2006 election sweep, according to Smith, gives the Democrats "an opportunity, particularly with a new crop of moderate and relative conservatives, to reclaim plausibly the middle of the road. And if they succeed at that, I'm telling you, Bill Clinton looks like a prophet with honor."

Got it. When I noted Smith's point to my leftie friends, they all had to agree, though grudgingly.

So let's acknowledge this Second Clinton Ascendancy, and move on.

Next: What does this move to the middle mean for Hill and Bill? In 2008, will it translate into a Hillary victory or a Clinton calamity? I surmise it will be a little bit of both. A nomination, but no coronation.

Speaking of coronations, Clinton faces the little problem of the "skinny guy with the funny name." In 2004, Barack Obama was a lowly state legislator from the South Side of Chicago. In 2008 the freshman U.S. Senator has a good shot at becoming the first black president of the United States. The tea leaves are overwhelming me with their predictions. There is no doubt that he is going to make his presidential bid official in the next few months. No surprises here, but look for his top political guru, David Axelrod, to orchestrate a Wagnerian drama.

One troubling tea leaf for Obama could be the loss of another black rising star. In his run for one of Tennessee's senate seats, U.S. Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis was defeated, by 51 percent to 48 percent, by former Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker. Ford was vying to become the first black senator from the South since Reconstruction.

Ford's loss might indicate that he fell victim to the sentiments of Southern whites who still can't stomach an African American in high office. That's bad news, the logic goes, for a black candidate who needs some Southern states to win the White House. Indeed, an election exit

poll by the Associated Press found that 40 percent of white voters in Tennessee voted for Ford, compared with 95 percent of the state's black voters.

But another culprit may be afoot here. Ford ran well to the right of his party. He carved out conservative positions on abortion, immigration and Iraq. He even voted for the Defense of Marriage Act. He catered to the holy rollers. Tennessee pundits and activists called Ford a phony. That might have been a key factor in his narrow defeat.

Obama could be headed in the same direction. He is also shifting to the right. Listen beneath the barrage of adoring arias in the national media and you'll detect grumbings from the Democratic left. They are infuriated by some of the centrist stances he's taken. For example, they say, he is ducking support of gay marriage in favor of civil unions.

And earlier this year he voted for the federal Secure Fence Act of 2006, which will create a 700-mile wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Still, I predict that by 2008, the whiners will be vanquished. Obama is in the right place on

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what will be the signature issue of the 2008 presidential contest—the war in Iraq. On that, there is a clear choice between him and the Democratic Party's other leading light. Even before the Iraq debacle began in 2003, Obama was a staunch opponent. Meanwhile, Clinton continues to backpedal on her 2002 vote for the war.

In the meantime, watch out, Washington. Look for the state of Illinois, particularly Chicago, to dominate the seats of power. Obama is just one of a wide and deep pack of clout-heavy characters from the Prairie State.

Take Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), who headed the Democratic Campaign Congressional Committee. The Deaniacs may caterwaul, but I give Emanuel full and unconditional credit for the 2006 Democratic "thumping." This Israeli ballet dancer-turned-White-House-operative is expected to snare the chairmanship of the House Democratic Caucus.

Joining him is Sen. Dick Durbin, who becomes the Number 2 Senate leader. Jan Schakowsky, Jesse Jackson Jr., and Luis Gutierrez are also in line for leadership slots in the U.S. House. The Land of Lincoln is about to become the Home of the Heavies.

They all face a key challenge. They must resist using their newfound clout to exact partisan revenge. Impeachment is a tantalizing prospect for some, but I am salivating at the prospect of the Democrats reclaiming the middle, and letting the Bushies swing, ever so slowly, in the wind. ■