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Race Relations: A Critique
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By Stephen Steinberg

Stephen Steinberg begins his latest book with some lingering questions from the civil rights movement: What did sociology do while Rome burned? Why did sociology as a discipline fail to anticipate the depth and combustibility of the racial divide leading up to the civil rights revolution, and then remain on the sidelines during that turbulent decade? Is sociology still guilty of failing to confront the persistent racial divisions that rend American society?

Race Relations: A Critique (available in September, 2007) challenges a century of mistaken scholarship on race and ethnicity. It is a sweeping critique of the race relations school in sociology (founded a century ago at the University of Chicago). Ever since, according to Steinberg, sociologists unwittingly have been practicing a white sociology that reflects white interests and viewpoints.

Although conservatives like Dinesh D'Souza and Samuel Huntington come under attack, most of his criticism is directed at such liberal icons as Robert Park, Gunnar Myrdal, Nathan Glazer, and William Julius Wilson for their omissions and opacities, and for concealing victim-blaming discourses under a respectable liberal cover. Steinberg is critical both of writers on the political right when they trample on the rights of minorities, including the right to preserve their native languages and cultures, and of writers on the political left who engage in wishful thinking about the viability of the multicultural project or who go the other way and are impatient to get "beyond race" and "beyond ethnicity."

The problem with the race relations model begins with the obfuscating terminology of "race relations," which implies that the problem between the races is one of misunderstanding, easily remedied by eradicating prejudice. For a brief period in the aftermath of the civil rights revolution, sociologists engendered "a scholarship of confrontation" that stressed the institutional sources of racism and the need for structural reforms, like affirmative action. But this intellectual revolt was trumped in the ensuing decades by scholarship that resurrected victim-blaming discourses and provided intellectual justification for the dismantling of affirmative action. The restoration of the antiquated race relations paradigm was monumentally evident in Bill Clinton's race initiative, which emphasized the twin bromides of the race relations paradigm: dialogue and racial harmony. Steinberg contends that the nation has pursued a policy of pacification rather than racial justice, both inside and outside the academy.

On ethnicity, Steinberg turns the tables and argues that the early Chicago sociologists were right in predicting the gradual assimilation of immigrants into the proverbial melting pot. The evidence is compelling that, notwithstanding their "racial" difference, Asian and Latino immigrants are assimilating more rapidly and more completely than did earlier waves of immigrants from Europe. In a notably original section, Steinberg shows how assimilation literally begins in the

cradle, reflected in the names that Asian and Latino immigrants inscribe on their children at birth. With astonishing speed, these children are becoming monolingual in English, and integrated socially and culturally into the dominant mainstream. The strongest evidence is the soaring rate of marriage across ethnic, religious, and even racial lines—proof that the melting pot can no longer be rejected as apocalyptic nonsense.

However, the assimilation model breaks down when one considers the case of African Americans who, we must remember, arrived on slave galleys, not immigrant vessels, and remained in slavery and Jim Crow during the centuries that immigrants made inroads into agriculture and the expanding industrial economy. Even today, African Americans are more segregated than recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America. Whereas immigrant communities have always functioned as a decompression chamber preparing the children of immigrants to enter the mainstream of society, for African Americans the ghetto has been a permanent fact of life. These ghettos—precisely because they are so cut off from mainstream society—have spawned and nourished a dynamic African-American culture, with an integrity and vitality all its own. This has been missed by generations of sociologists who portrayed ghettos primarily as sites of social disorganization or pathology. In recent decades, this African American subculture, which runs through music, dance, sports, and oral expression, has had a powerful impact on the national culture, proving that assimilation is a two-way street.

Where do these contradictory trends leave us? Steinberg concludes with the provocative prediction that we are moving toward a “dual melting pot,” one for people of African descent—including African Americans, Caribbean Americans, Afro-Latinos, and African immigrants—and the other for everybody else, including Asians and light-skinned Latinos.

Race Relations: A Critique is engaged scholarship at its best. Written in vibrant and accessible prose, it lays bare truths that call into question the nature and future of American nationality and democracy. In his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King drew a distinction between “a negative peace, which is the absence of tension and a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.” Steinberg’s book is a serious attempt to assess if we continue to mistake order for justice even today.

Stephen Steinberg is Professor in Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Among his books are *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* and *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*, which received the Oliver Cromwell Cox Award for Distinguished Anti-Racist Scholarship. He has written articles for the *Nation* and *New Politics*.

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