

# ON OUR MORAL COMMUNITIES

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Notions of race and the full-blown ideologies of racism that often accompany such social distinctions are not now nor have they ever been entirely static phenomena. Much, and arguably too much, social scientific research proceeds as if race and racism were relatively transparent, discrete, and static phenomena. Furthermore, such a perspective implies that lacking such transparency and fixity, race and racism have lost force and salience in social life. Such phenomena need not be fixed or simplex in order to profoundly affect how individuals in a society live or in order to be made the focus of important systematic social research. Yet, the complexity, pliability, and historical specificity of notions of race and of racism do perforce raise for us challenges of conceptual clarity and theoretical logic, and demand of us clear standards for the collection, deployment, and interpretation of evidence.

One useful avenue of purchase on these matters involves examinations of notions of community and moral obligation. Political scientist Cara Wong (2010) proposes that community involves “an image in the mind of an individual, of a group toward whose members she feels a sense of similarity, belonging, or fellowship” (p. 6). The concept takes on a moral and political flavor to the extent that these ideas about community demarcate not just a simple perceptual distinction between “us” and “them,” but also implicate moral boundaries of relative esteem, worth, and crucially, mutual obligation or disaffiliation. Wong’s array of survey results shows the powerful ways that images of community—sometimes geographic in scope, sometimes national in scope, and at other times ethnoracial in scope—define both to whom we feel bound and obliged and whom we see as other, alien, and different.

This issue of the *Du Bois Review* can be seen as an extended reflection on how ideas of community, refracted through lenses of race and ethnicity, continue to play out in social experience. Our lead essay is a provocative discussion of the contemporary legal and political dynamics of affirmative action in the United States. The issue of how to address the historic and ongoing disadvantages faced by African Americans and other people of color could not be more timely. It is increasingly clear that rollbacks of affirmative action have had adverse effects on college enrollments for Blacks and Latinos (Chea 2012). The possibility of even larger steps backward looms in light of the U.S. Supreme Court decision to hear another major case on the matter

of affirmative action. As the *New York Times* recently reported: “Supporters of affirmative action reacted with alarm to the court’s decision to hear the case. ‘I think it’s ominous,’ said Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia University, who as president of the University of Michigan was defendant in the Grutter case. ‘It threatens to undo several decades of effort within higher education to build a more integrated and just and educationally enriched environment’” (Liptak 2012). On the basis of both careful social scientific research and direct personal experience, the eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson makes the case for continuing affirmative action. He stresses the utility of an “affirmative opportunity” strategy in contrast to one of “racial preferences.” In so doing, he advances what should be both a politically and legally viable strategy for continuing to pursue those policies and practices aimed at making sure all people of color have meaningful pathways to full membership in the American community.

In the age of the postracial narrative, of course, it is increasingly difficult to make a strong commonsense and politically tactile case for race-conscious social policy. Distinguished anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld’s broad-gauge essay offers a strong cautionary note in the rush to postracial analyses. He identifies seven common misconceptions about how children acquire and use racialized notions of the self and the other. Perhaps above all else he finds, from his review and integration of a vast literature, that race exerts a powerful influence on the development of sense of self and social behavior, even in contexts where the rhetoric of equality and racelessness are overtly embraced. To the extent that the larger social order remains stratified and defined by significant divisions between ethnoracially defined communities, children, even from very early ages, are likely to register such signals from the larger environment and incorporate them into how they think and behave.

One critical question for researchers concerns evolving notions of “Whiteness.” Sociologist Matthew Hughey takes up the very “intimate contradictions” of race using participant observation and qualitative interviews. Examining the views and identities of a group of White nationalists and a group of committed White anti-racists, Hughey shows the complex and tenacious influence of notions of Whiteness. In contrast, sociologist and Latin American scholar Carlos Alamo pursues a different take on images of community through a content analysis of the ways in which Black newspapers covered Puerto Rico for the period from 1942 to 1951. He illustrates how the Black popular press worked to sketch a progressive and expansive sense of community and “personhood” that could at once embrace both the Black struggle for freedom in the United States and the Puerto Rican quest for relief from colonial domination.

Following a special section on the varieties of responses to stigmatization (with a separate introduction by Michèle Lamont), this issue also features three major book review essays, each tackling matters of race and community from different angles. In the first of these, Tomas Almaguer examines two major edited volumes that squarely put on the table the question of whether the United States is evolving toward a more Latin American model of race relations. Although no major Latin American country has adopted as simple a Black-White dichotomy as the U.S., one cannot, of course, see Latin America as free of racism and especially of color hierarchy. Two ironies of the current moment are worthy of note. First, it is striking indeed that Brazil, the land that brought us the myth of “racial democracy,” has recently moved even more forcefully to recognize a need for race-based affirmative action (*The Washington Post* 2012).

Second, the Great Recession and the wave of anti-immigration activism and legislation in the United States seems to have brought net migration from Mexico to

the U.S. to a halt (*Los Angeles Times* 2012). Still, Almaguer rightly emphasizes that the growth of the Latino population in the United States has, without question, complicated the ethnoracial landscape and opened new questions about how in the future the lines of caste, color, and racial communities will be drawn.

Community is also built up around notions of who is “fit” for full membership and who has tarnished, compromised, or wholly invalid claims to membership. In this vein legal scholar Dorothy Roberts examines two major books on the point where notions of race, gender, and science intersect. In one critical case she considers the often politicized reproductive rights of Mexican-origin women and in the other case how the clinical diagnosis of Schizophrenia came to be a tool for de-legitimizing Black social protest. In a related manner, crime scholar Geoff Ward reviews three major books on the current state of racialized mass incarceration (Bobo and Thompson, 2010). Perhaps nothing so profoundly marks who has full membership in a community and who does not as the vastly disproportionate incarceration of poor minority men, especially Black men, characteristic of the past three decades in the United States. And, as Ward rightly points out, this circumstance is one of the loudest challenges to the growing chorus of postracialism.

In a fashion, all of the scholarship in this issue of the *Du Bois Review*, particularly the pages of the special section on stigmatization, drives home an analytically key recognition of the ways that social structure and shared culture intertwine to produce common and socially consequential understandings of community (Gans 2012). Progressive social analysis and larger progressive praxis requires such a rich grounding. As political theorist and education scholar Meira Levinson (2012) has recently insisted: “We must grapple with both ethnoracial politics and the politics of race if we are to have any hope of ever achieving a civically inclusive, egalitarian, and hence truly legitimate democratic society in the United States” (p. 63). Movement toward that end will pivot on explicit awareness of and direct action to address the ways that ethnoracial distinction shapes our common images of membership in the moral community.

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