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**Essays from
Contemporary Culture**

FIFTH EDITION

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Despite civil rights struggles and the contemporary women's movement, despite legislation to ensure equal treatment under the law and the creation of agencies to monitor and punish discriminatory practices, prejudice and discrimination remain problems in American society. Many people, particularly young adults, believe that the problems faced by women and minorities in the past have been eradicated and that such matters are no longer issues. However, statistics demonstrate that women and minorities have not achieved equity with white males, nor has discrimination on the basis of sex, race, or ethnicity disappeared. Indeed, as some of the selections in this chapter demonstrate, prejudice and discrimination are still very much a part of the American fabric.

The first essay, Michel Wieviorka's "The Ruses of Racism," examines the conditions under which racial violence as a means of oppression is encouraged to grow. Next, writing from personal experience, Mary Crow Dog, in "A Woman from He-Dog," tells of her involvement in the 1970s conflict between Native Americans and federal troops at Wounded Knee. This selection is the first chapter of her autobiography, *Lakota Woman* (1990). According to her publisher, the book documents "a story of death, of determination against all odds, and of the cruelties perpetrated against American Indians during the last several decades. It is also a deeply moving account of a woman's triumphant struggle to survive in a hostile world."

The next essay addresses the subject of affirmative action, or equitable treatment regardless of sex or race. Stephen Steinberg explains, in "The

Affirmative Action Debate,” how affirmative action policies were developed and why he believes they are still needed. Following Steinberg’s essay, Patricia J. Williams, in “Racial Privacy,” raises a number of points related to affirmative action, racial profiling, and discrimination in her argument against a new initiative in California to prevent public agencies from classifying people on the basis of race, ethnicity, color, or national origin. While these two essays alone are not enough to do justice to the complexity of the affirmative action issue or the problem of racial discrimination, they provide starting points for further research and inquiry into a number of topics related to those issues.

One interesting trend resulting from our nation’s collective examination of and sensitivity to prejudice and discrimination has been the “political correctness” movement. The term *political correctness*, or *P.C.*, was developed to describe the views of those opposed to speech, writing, and behavior that smack of racism, sexism, ageism, or other “-isms” that have the potential to demean selected groups. In their efforts to make American culture more inclusive and to eradicate discrimination, for instance, feminists, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, gays and lesbians, disabled people, and similar groups object to language that excludes, belittles, or demeans them. Their attempts to monitor both written and spoken words have led some people to criticize them for being overly sensitive and extreme in their recommendations for change. This controversy has engendered heated debate between those who favor politically correct language and their critics, who find them silly and even obnoxious.

This chapter includes essays by two writers who are critical of political correctness. Writing for a monthly feature of *USA Today Magazine* called “Parting Thoughts,” Gerald F. Kreyche, in “Have We Lost Our Sense of Humor?,” maintains that “political correctness is making cowards of almost everyone” and that “people have become thin-skinned, touchy, overly sensitive.” He provides many examples of jokes to illustrate his belief that virtually any group is subject to being joked about and that such humor is harmless. Michiko Kakutani takes exception to political correctness as well. In “The Word Police,” she explains her objections to “the methods and fervor of the self-appointed language police.” As you read their reasons for opposing political correctness, consider the extent to which you agree with Kreyche and Kakutani. Are all their reasons persuasive? Do you take exception to any of their statements?

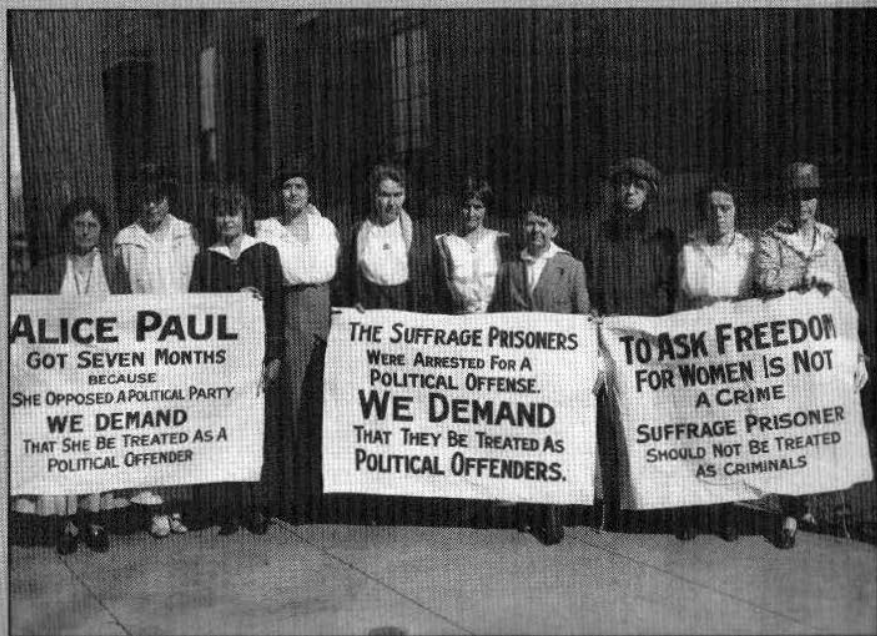
Next is William Raspberry’s “Symbolic Arguments.” Raspberry raises an intriguing question: To what extent are the symbols of the old South—the Confederate flag, General Robert E. Lee, and the song “Dixie”—innocent, nostalgic icons of the culture and heritage of a former way of life, and to what extent are they evidence of present-day racism? In light of the other readings in this chapter, Raspberry’s commentary should lead to some lively classroom discussion.

Finally, Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “The Lesson,” which is told from the viewpoint of a street-tough, inner-city, African-American girl, focuses

on insights several children have about the disparity between the rich and the poor as a result of a field trip to a very expensive New York City Fifth Avenue toy store. This understanding of the chasm between what her family and friends can afford and what the rich parents of wealthy children can afford also leads the narrator to discover something important about herself. Implicit in the story is the suggestion that a connection exists between skin color and poverty.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Under what circumstances, if any, do you think that civil protest, picketing, and similar activities are called for?
2. If you have witnessed or been party to discrimination on any basis, describe the experience.
3. Where do stereotypes come from? Why do you think some people are prejudiced against others with a different skin color, religion, nationality, or ethnic identity? How can you personally work against stereotyping and prejudice?
4. Explore the personality of bigots. Are there particular characteristics, such as income, education, or geographical location, that bigots have in common? Under what circumstances does personal preference or opinion become prejudice?
5. Offer one possible solution to the problem of racism or ethnoviolence in America.





The Ruses of Racism

Michel Wieviorka

Michel Wieviorka is a French sociologist, a lecturer at the University of Paris-Dauphine, and director of the Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques in Paris. He is coauthor, with Dominique Wolton, of Terrorisme à la une (1987) and author of Sociétés et Terrorisme (1988), The Making of Terrorism (1993), and The Arena of Racism: Theory, Culture and Society (1995). This essay is reprinted from the February 1993 issue of The UNESCO Courier.

Racism is not always overtly, brutally violent—it does not always kill. Racial discrimination, expressions of prejudice and racist tracts can all carry ominous overtones of violence, but they cannot be ranked alongside the physical violence perpetrated in pogroms, lynchings, immigrant-bashing, murders and other types of assault, which is what I wish to discuss.

What is more, the most violent forms of racism do not necessarily grow out of other varieties of racism. Contrary to popular belief, prejudice does not invariably and inevitably lead on to acts of violence. Deep-seated racism may be widespread in societies where there is no outward sign of naked violence.

For racist violence to erupt, a certain set of conditions must exist. One conditioning factor is the attitude of those in authority: what they are willing and able to do in order to deal with those who engage in racist acts. When a government is weak or remote, or even tinged with racism itself, it encourages political groups and forces wishing to turn their message of hatred, contempt, subordination and rejection into deeds. It may even become actively racist itself or manipulate racist violence, as happened in the Russian Empire at the turn of the century, where the Czarist regime was largely instrumental in setting off the pogroms.

4 But there are other factors. Some institutions—particularly the legal system and the police—may use methods which, although not deliberately or explicitly racist in themselves, nevertheless contribute to the spread of serious outbreaks of violence. Many official enquiries have found that when police behaviour has exacerbated ethnic and social tensions instead of defusing them, it has often led to an escalation of violence in which racism occupies a prominent place.

Yet another factor is the existence of political forces capable of providing racist violence with an organized structure and an ideological foundation. As long as such forces do not exist or are relegated to the sidelines of society, violence is always possible and sometimes erupts, but it crops up in the form of sudden outbursts and short-lived explosions, in other words of acts which, numerous though they may be, are not linked by any apparent unifying principle.

When such forces do gain a political foothold, however, the violence for which they provide a structure, even if it is not directly organized by them, nonetheless becomes more cold-blooded, methodical, and active. It becomes a matter of schemes and strategies; it channels popular feelings of hatred and hostility towards the group marked out as a racial target, but does not allow them to be expressed spontaneously. It may even prevent them from being expressed at all, on the political grounds that any act of violence should be consistent with the aims and thinking of the party or organization.

This is why the emergence of a political force with a racist ideology and plans does not necessarily mean that there will be an immediate increase in violence, for violence may actually be detrimental to its attempts to achieve legitimate political status. Violence may create an image of disorder and accordingly be played down until the movement achieves power, when it will be able to indulge in violence in its most extreme forms. Conversely, there may be an increase in violence when the power of a racist force or party is on the wane, because some of its members may take a harder line if they feel they have no political future. The end of apartheid in South Africa is providing scope not for more racism but for more racial violence.

- 8 Since the beginning of the modern era, racism has been linked to patterns of domination, especially those of colonialism set against the background of empire-building. But it has also informed trends in thinking which, from the nineteenth century onwards, influenced aspects of physical anthropology and other doctrinaire intellectual movements. When the term "racism" emerged in the period between the two World Wars, some of the theories from the past were refurbished. Above all, racist attitudes spread all over the world in the wake of the social upheavals that are at the root of various forms of racial violence.

Racial violence is no longer only the crude expression of colonial-type domination. It may also stem from an economic crisis, in which a deprived group, threatened with a decline in social status or exclusion from the mainstream, turns against another group in an attempt to oust it, on racial grounds, from a shrinking job market. The racism of the poor whites, which led to the lynching of blacks in the southern United States in the first half of the twentieth century, came about when the whites saw their black neighbours as dangerous competitors on the industrial job market.

But racial violence may also occur among more affluent classes, which want to maintain the gap separating them from the less privileged. The method they use is a combination of social and racial segregation, which may in fact lead to more cold-blooded and calculated forms of violence. At the beginning of the century, well-to-do white citizens in the southern United States organized lynching parties to punish black men accused of raping white women or theft.

However, racist violence does not always stem solely or directly from social factors. It may originate in a real or imagined threat to the identity of a group, or it may accompany the expansion of a state or religion, sometimes

claiming to represent universal values, as often happened during the colonial period.

- 12 The urge to uphold a particular identity can lead to unlimited violence, fuelled either by an obsessive fear of "racial intermingling" or by reference to an absolute difference that prohibits all social intercourse and all contact between races except in war. Such forms of racism are intended to keep others at bay, to ensure that they are segregated or even expelled or destroyed. The aim is not so much to establish the inferior status of a group on the grounds of its physical attributes as to ensure that a community remains homogeneous or a nation remains pure, or to justify their unimpeded expansion.

Identity-related racism and the violence that goes with it can have three quite distinct motivations.

In some cases, this form of racism is founded on the affirmation of an identity that claims to be universal and seeks to crush everything that opposes it. The history of colonialism contains many instances of this phenomenon. Conversely, it may be based on the resistance of a nation or community to the modern world, in which case the chosen target is a group that is seen as the incarnation of evil, intrusion, or the corruption of culture or traditional values. The Jews have long been denounced and attacked as representatives of a hated modernity. The explosive violence of the pogroms and the more methodical violence of the gas chambers largely grew out of criticisms, phantasms and rumours that reproached the Jews on the grounds of their cosmopolitanism, wealth, political power and influence in the media.

Thirdly, this identity-related racism may flare up as a result of a clash between two or more communities within the same political entity or multiracial or multicultural society. In such cases, violence results from strained relations between communities, from a process of interaction in which one group's real or imagined attempt to assert itself prompts reactions from other groups and triggers off a spiralling power struggle that may end in an outburst of violence and political chaos. The civil war in Lebanon and the breakup of Yugoslavia are recent examples of conflicts where overt or implied references to race can be sensed behind rhetorical appeals to the nation or to the cultural, confessional and historical community.

- 16 When violence is associated with racism, therefore, it is governed by various conditions that dictate the course it takes and is rooted in a wide range of social and identity-related factors. But the important thing about violence is that it compresses into a single action factors that may be not only different but contradictory. Perpetrators of racist violence may wish, for example, to exclude a specific group from their society so as to exploit it. This happens frequently in industrialized countries, where immigrants are employed to do low-grade jobs and rejected on account of their culture. Or to take another case, in Czarist Russia and central Europe at the beginning of the present century, it was the rich, assimilated Jew, symbol of modernity, who was regarded as an intolerable threat, yet the victims of the pogroms were the culturally conspicuous and poverty stricken Jewish masses.

This is the paradox of violence: not only is it unembarrassed by its inherent contradictions, it also creates its own logic and its own dynamics, so that in the end it alters the conditions that allowed it to emerge in the first place.

READER RESPONSE

Wieviorka offers a number of reasons, from a sociological perspective, to account for the emergence and growth of racial violence. What are your personal thoughts on the subject?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Looking at each factor Wieviorka says is necessary for racial violence to erupt, comment on the extent to which you agree with him.
2. Explain, in your own words, what Wieviorka means when he says that when a political force with a racist ideology emerges, there is not necessarily an immediate increase in racial violence (paragraph 7). When is a racist force or party likely to increase its use of violence, according to Wieviorka?
3. Summarize the sociological causes of racial violence that Wieviorka identifies. Can you cite other examples of such violence besides those that he gives?
4. State, in your own words, what you understand Wieviorka to mean by identity-related racial violence, and then summarize the three distinct motivations for identity-related racism that he identifies.
5. Explain the title.