

"The Mother of all Racial Preferences"

Affirmative Action Meets the System of White Privilege

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by Tim Wise

Ask a fish what water is and you'll get no answer. Even if fish were capable of speech, they would likely have no explanation for the element they swim in every minute of every day of their lives.

Water simply is.

Fish take it for granted.

So too with this thing we hear so much about, "racial preference."

While many whites seem to think the notion originated with affirmative action programs, intended to expand opportunities for historically marginalized people of color, racial preference has actually had a long and very white history.

Affirmative action for whites was embodied in the abolition of European indentured servitude, which left African (and occasionally indigenous) slaves as the only unfree labor in the colonies that would become the United States.

Affirmative action for whites was the essence of the 1790 Naturalization Act, which allowed virtually any European immigrant to become a full citizen, even while African Americans, Asian Americans and American Indians could not.

Affirmative action for whites was the guiding principle of segregation, Asian exclusion laws, and the theft of half of Mexico for the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.

In recent history, affirmative action for whites motivated racially restrictive housing policies that helped 15 million white families procure homes with FHA loans from the 1930s to the '60s, while people of color were mostly

excluded from the same programs.

In other words, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that white America is the biggest collective recipient of racial preference in the history of the cosmos. It has skewed our laws, shaped our public policy and helped create the glaring inequalities with which we still live.

White families, on average, have a net worth that is 11 times the net worth of African American families, according to a recent study; and this gap remains substantial even when only comparing families of like size, composition, education and income status.

A full-time African American male worker in 2003 makes less in real dollar terms than similar white men were earning in 1967. Such realities are not merely indicative of the disadvantages faced by African Americans, but indeed are evidence of the preferences afforded whites - a demarcation of privilege that is the necessary flipside of discrimination.

Indeed, the value of preferences to whites over the years is so enormous that the current baby-boomer generation of whites is currently in the process of inheriting between \$7-10 trillion in assets from their parents and grandparents - property handed down by those who were able to accumulate assets at a time when people of color by and large could not.

To place this in the proper perspective, we should note that this amount of money is more than all the outstanding mortgage debt, all the credit card debt, all the savings account assets, all the money in IRAs and 401k retirement plans, all the annual profits for U.S. manufacturers, and our entire merchandise trade deficit combined.

Yet few whites have ever thought of our position as resulting from racial preferences. Indeed, we pride ourselves on our hard work and ambition, as if somehow we invented the concepts.

As if we have worked harder than the folks who were forced to pick cotton and build levies for free; harder than the Latino immigrants who spend 10 hours a day in fields picking strawberries or tomatoes; harder than the (mostly) women of color who clean hotel rooms or change bedpans in hospitals, or the (mostly) men of color who collect our garbage.

We strike the pose of self-sufficiency while ignoring the advantages we have been afforded in every realm of activity: housing, education, employment, criminal justice, politics, banking and business. We ignore the fact that at almost every turn, our hard work has been met with access to an opportunity structure denied to millions of others. Privilege, to us, is like water to the fish: invisible precisely because we cannot imagine life

without it.

It is that context that best explains the duplicity of the President's recent criticisms of affirmative action at the University of Michigan.

President Bush, himself a lifelong recipient of affirmative action - the kind set aside for the mediocre rich - recently proclaimed that the school's policies were examples of unfair racial preference. Yet in doing so he not only showed a profound ignorance of the Michigan policy, but also made clear the inability of yet another white person to grasp the magnitude of white privilege still in operation.

The President attacked Michigan's policy of awarding 20 points (on a 150-point evaluation scale) to undergraduate applicants who are members of underrepresented minorities (which at U of M means African Americans, Latinos and American Indians). To many whites such a "preference" is blatantly discriminatory.

Bush failed to mention that greater numbers of points are awarded for other things that amount to preferences for whites to the exclusion of people of color.

For example, Michigan awards 20 points to any student from a low-income background, regardless of race. Since these points cannot be combined with those for minority status (in other words poor African Americans don't get 40 points), in effect this is a preference for poor whites.

Then Michigan awards 16 points to students who hail from the Upper Peninsula of the state: a rural, largely isolated, and almost completely white area.

Of course both preferences are fair, based as they are on the recognition that economic status and even geography (as with race) can have a profound effect on the quality of K-12 schooling that one receives, and that no one should be punished for things that are beyond their control. But note that such preferences - though disproportionately awarded to whites - remain uncriticized, while preferences for people of color become the target for reactionary anger. Once again, white preference remains hidden because it is more subtle, more ingrained, and isn't called white preference, even if that's the effect.

But that's not all. Ten points are awarded to students who attended top-notch high schools, and another eight points are given to students who took an especially demanding AP and honors curriculum.

As with points for those from the Upper Peninsula, these preferences may

be race-neutral in theory, but in practice they are anything but. Because of intense racial isolation (and Michigan's schools are the most segregated in America for African Americans, according to research by the Harvard Civil Rights Project), students of color will rarely attend the "best" schools, and on average, schools serving mostly African American and Latino students offer only a third as many AP and honors courses as schools serving mostly whites.

So even truly talented students of color will be unable to access those extra points simply because of where they live, their economic status and ultimately their race, which is intertwined with both.

Four more points are awarded to students who have a parent who attended the U of M: a kind of affirmative action with which the President is intimately familiar, and which almost exclusively goes to whites.

Ironically, while alumni preference could work toward the interest of diversity if combined with aggressive race-based affirmative action (by creating a larger number of brown alums), the rollback of the latter, combined with the almost guaranteed retention of the former, will only further perpetuate white preference.

So the U of M offers 20 "extra" points to the typical African American, Latino or indigenous applicant, while offering various combinations worth up to 58 extra points for students who will almost all be white. But while the first of these are seen as examples of racial preferences, the second are not, hidden as they are behind the structure of social inequities that limit where people live, where they go to school, and the kinds of opportunities they have been afforded.

White preferences, the result of the normal workings of a racist society, can remain out of sight and out of mind, while the power of the state is turned against the paltry preferences meant to offset them.

Very telling is the oft-heard comment by whites, "If I had only been black I would have gotten into my first-choice college."

Such a statement not only ignores the fact that whites are more likely than members of any other group - even with affirmative action in place - to get into their first-choice school, but it also presumes, as anti-racist activist Paul Marcus explains, "that if these whites were black, everything else about their life would have remained the same."

In other words, that it would have made no negative difference as to where they went to school, what their family income was, or anything else.

The ability to believe that being African American would have made no difference (other than a beneficial one when it came time for college), and that being white has made no positive difference, is rooted in privilege itself: the privilege that allows one to not have to think about race on a daily basis; to not have one's intelligence questioned by best-selling books; to not have to worry about being viewed as a "out of place" when driving, shopping, buying a home, or for that matter, attending the University of Michigan.

So long as those privileges remain firmly in place and the preferential treatment that flows from those privileges continues to work to the benefit of whites, all talk of ending affirmative action is not only premature but a slap in the face to those who have fought, and died, for equal opportunity.

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