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Essay by Myron Magnet

# THE ANTIRACIST RACKET

*And its mind-forg'd manacles.*



**B**EYOND ITS FALSITY, THERE IS NO CURRENT idea so destructive as the fiction that America is systemically racist. It harms black Americans by shrinking their horizons and stoking their resentment; it has fueled crime and disorder in our cities; and by replacing our national faith in the unique excellence of our self-governing republic with a sense of its pervasive injustice and oppression, it makes us more vulnerable in a dangerous world. Confidence that we have a civilization worth defending is vital to our future.

After all, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s succeeded. In what was the defining political experience of a generation, that movement turned the nation inside out in order to remedy the overt racism that then marred America's promise of civil equality. Two decades of sit-ins and marches, of sermons and voter registrations, yielded changes that fully opened political, educational, and employment opportunities to blacks, while society grew dramatically more welcoming. Just compare the advertisements or movies—or college alumni magazines—of the 1950s to today's to get a sense of the revolution in racial attitudes that occurred. Or consider the change in the percentage of Americans who

tell pollsters they approve of interracial marriage—4% in 1958 versus 94% in 2021.

But as the number of Americans who remember the civil rights era dwindles, the harangues of Black Lives Matter and the critical race theorists have obscured that era's accomplishment. The Gallup Poll tracks this trend: in 2014, respondents' satisfaction with U.S. race relations reached a high of 55%, versus 35% dissatisfied, but it began dropping thereafter, in the wake of Eric Garner's death in July of that year. Only 28% expressed satisfaction in 2022.

Because what people believe affects their actions as much as their real circumstances do, the imaginary world these propagandists have conjured up—in which racial injustice pervades everything, racist insults wound blacks at every turn, racism closes off advancement and shuts out fellowship—really does constrict black opportunity by denying it exists. By and large, the civil rights pioneers assumed that, once their movement succeeded, black Americans would gear up to seize the new opportunity, especially through wider educational choices. But the schools and colleges that were to arm black Americans for success now teach systemic racism, infusing a strange mix of suspicious resentment, fatalistic victimology, and aggrieved entitlement that doesn't fuel initia-

tive but instead feeds a resentment or hostility that hinders advancement and poisons race relations again. The poet William Blake wrote strikingly of "mind-forg'd manacles"; for many black Americans, the schools rivet them on, and BLM reinforces the chains.

## Self-Destructive Habits

**P**ERHAPS CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS WERE too optimistic in thinking that the mere opening of opportunity would ensure black success. As it turned out, the vast changes in wider cultural attitudes that were dissolving racism in the 1960s were also harming the worst-off blacks by removing the stigma from self-destructive habits that blacks had long shunned, notwithstanding the history of slavery. Going on welfare became no longer shameful but rather reparations for oppression, nor was not working a personal failing but instead the result of job discrimination. Society, by excluding, oppressing, and impoverishing the criminal, argued social critics in the '60s and '70s, was to blame for black crime, not the outlaw himself. Perhaps he was even a manly rebel against an unjust society, and to imprison him was only to redouble the victimization society inflicts on him. And as

that era's whole culture was having its fling with sex and drugs, the stigma against drug use and unwed childbearing tottered.

These attitudes filtered down the social scale, with the tragic result of entrenching a black underclass in the urban ghettos, held down by non-work, welfare dependence, drug use, dropping out of school, crime, and weak, single-parent families. Too many poorly educated single mothers proved ill-equipped to train children in the virtues and cognitive skills that make for success, or to discipline them in a way that didn't leave sons with the contempt for women and for authority that is a main theme of today's rap music. In place of the work ethic and the deferral of gratification arose an inner-city culture of victimology, grievance, and opposition to a society blamed for failings that would otherwise seem personal.

With what dismay must Americans of all races view the consequences today! In 2018, seven out of ten black children were born out of wedlock, compared to 28% of white babies (and, in 1965, 24% of black babies). The rate of homicide offenses among blacks is eight times higher than among whites, and black men, 6% of the U.S. population, are 40% of the nation's cop killers, the FBI reports. Urban police departments pile up their own dismal statistics. In 2019, the 9% of Los Angelenos who are black committed 44% of their city's violent crime, while St. Louis blacks, just under half the population, committed most of that city's. The 23% of New Yorkers who are black accounted for 72% of the shootings and 63% of the murders in 2020, and black Chicagoans, less than a third of the population, committed 71% of the murders.

Troubling, too, is educational performance, with black pupils who test proficient in basic math skills dropping from 64% in 4th grade to 50% in 8th grade and 30% in 12th. In higher education, affirmative action's competition for qualified black students has filled colleges with blacks who have sharply lower high school grades and admissions test scores than their white classmates. Many flounder; many drop or flunk out.

Up until 2014, the majority of Americans focused on the real, if imperfect, progress that blacks have made, while they grew complacent about the extent of black failure. Whites and blacks alike flirted with ghetto culture, by now a quasi-autonomous subculture and the polar opposite of the smoothly sophisticated cultural style of the aspirationally named Count Basie, Duke Ellington, or Nat King Cole of an earlier generation of black musicians. But Black Lives Matter paradoxically highlighted black failure, albeit shrouded in white guilt, while downplaying black success.

A clear-sighted response from blacks and whites alike would have pointed to the reality of black progress and reiterated the need for more black self-development, since by now government has done all that it can do, and continued black progress rests in blacks' own hands. What happened instead was that the angry accusations of Black Lives Matter and its ilk led white America, out of real abhorrence of slavery and Jim Crow and a heartfelt wish to give black Americans every possible hand up, to dismantle the rules and standards that apply to everyone and that undergird the nation's stability and success. If blacks were falling short, it was the measurements that had to go.

### Creating Victims

IT STARTED WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT. ALL the moldy myths of the 1960s and '70s rose from the grave to haunt the present. The criminal was supposedly the real victim of our unjust social order, with the police its all-too-willing enforcers, itching to kill black men. Blacks are imprisoned disproportionately and too often for minor offenses—though of course the black imprisonment rate is lower

### By now, government has done all it can do.

than the black offending rate, and 62% of black prisoners are behind bars for violent crimes, compared to 48% of white prisoners, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. A mere 3.8% of state prison inmates are in for simple drug possession.

This time around, though, big-city prosecutors decriminalized crime as if that, rather than law enforcement, were their job. Forgotten was the fact that government's essential purpose is the protection of life and property, to which police, prosecutors, and prisons are key. Blue state legislatures heaped fuel on the bonfire of law enforcement, while local authorities emptied out the jails, because they housed, it was said, "too many" blacks. These authorities defunded the cops, forbade order-keeping policing, and changed the rules of engagement for officers, barring them from using ordinary force to subdue those resisting arrest. Little wonder that cops retired in droves.

As in the '60s, crime exploded. Nationally, murders shot up at the highest rate in history in 2020—by almost 30%—and they rose another 4% in 2021. In New York, shootings nearly doubled in 2020, and murders skyrocketed

by 42%. The vast majority of Americans who think that black lives matter can only lament that over 95% of these slain New Yorkers were black or Hispanic, while 80% of Chicago's 2020 murder victims were black. As Jesse Jackson grieved in 1993, at the crest of the last great crime wave, when violent criminals also were disproportionately black, "There is nothing more painful to me...than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and...look around and see somebody white and feel relieved.... Just to think we can't walk down our own streets—how humiliating!" After a two-decade respite from fear of assault on the streets, inner-city residents in particular and urbanites in general are once more looking over their shoulders. This time around, with urban economies already battered by the pandemic, it remains to be seen how many cities won't ever recover thanks to crime, joining moribund Baltimore, Camden, and Detroit.

It may sound corny, but one great boon of the national crime drop that began in 1994 with a policing revolution in New York was a growing racial amity in public places. Once Jesse Jackson's contemporaries, both white and black, were freed of the fear of crime, we could acknowledge one another in the streets, recognize the content of character, exchange the silent civilities of urban life—a civil rights movement dream come true. But it didn't last. Anxiety, suspicion, and resentment are back, and they feed one another.

There's something almost comic about the nostrums for dismantling an imaginary systemic racism that the "antiracism" racket promotes, as if one should burn down one's house to cure a termite infestation. Too many blacks aren't measuring up to educational standards? Since it's axiomatic that blacks can't be deficient, that can only mean that the standards are racist. Out they go! A Bill Gates-funded manual for public school math teachers, for example, urges the educators to sweep away the "white supremacy culture...in math classrooms," junking the fundamentally racist assumption that math is about "getting the right answer," which in turn leads to a toxic, factitious "meritocracy" of achievement and knowledge. Antiracist teachers must replace the notion that if pupils "fail it is their fault" with an understanding of "the systemic reasons students fail." And so on up the educational ladder, with selective high schools, colleges, and even law and medical schools scrapping their entrance exams.

But if not by merit, if not by demonstrated skill, perseverance, and accomplishment, how will we select our lawyers and doctors, our scientists and engineers, starting with their admission to professional school? Isn't com-

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petence, even excellence, the goal, if we prize economic prosperity, military might, and a healthy populace? More broadly, unless we want a caste society, with a small overclass of inventive and productive strivers creating the national wealth and driving progress, over against a *lumpen* mob, surely we want a culture that encourages every citizen to develop fully whatever potential excellence lies within him, a democratic culture of striving that raises everyone up rather than one that keeps people down. That requires high standards, not lowered ones that come wrapped in an excuse not to try.

### Racist Symphonies

AS THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT unfolded, government, rather than marches and sit-ins, became its engine, and government action imposed costs that future historians may consider excessive or unnecessary. School desegregation was essential, for example, but was bitterly divisive busing to achieve racial balance required? Some government interference with private business was unavoidable—especially to keep providers of public accommodation from discriminating by race—but did judges and bureaucrats really need to command employers to make their workforces mirror the racial composition of the surrounding area? As a result, government crowded out civil society. Public schools came to look less like neighborhood institutions that provided education than centralized government establishments for producing racial equality—part of the reason the schools fail. Businesses were no longer simply private associations of free people pursuing their own goals. Instead, owners and managers came to look constantly over their shoulders, anxiously attuned to the directives of government masters, like the children of an unreasonably demanding parent.

The benefit of the civil rights movement was huge; many of the costs were, too. But with the movement's goals already realized, there is no justification for any more abridgements of liberty or erosion of what remains of civil society in the name of a spurious antiracism. New York City, for example, now wants to make it illegal for landlords to do criminal

background checks on potential tenants. The absurd rationale: incarceration is a proxy for race, so such checks are racist, redoubling the injustice that society has already inflicted by disproportionately jailing blacks—for offenses for which society is ultimately to blame anyway. In the balance, the liberty of the landlord to protect his property from damage, or of other tenants not to live next door to rapists or thugs, weighs as nothing.

In the light of antiracism, educational and cultural institutions have lost sight of their purpose, too, just as New York's city council has forgotten that government exists to protect liberty, safety, and property, and it becomes illegitimate if it fails to do so. Is a university's purpose to further knowledge or to promote diversity? In choosing a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commissar with no scholarly distinction as its next president, Harvard's board has answered that question, and answered it foolishly. Museums and orchestras have notoriously been abasing themselves to atone for the supposed historic racism of high Western culture, but perhaps none wallows so absurdly as the New York Philharmonic's program notes for a Christmas season performance of *The Messiah*, that most sublime of human achievements. From about 1710, the program tells us, composer George Frideric Handel owned shares in the South Sea Company and the Royal African Company, both of which traded in slaves. No matter that Handel probably got the shares by chance or that there were few joint-stock companies in which to invest in 1710. "Either way, he did profit from the slave trade," the program pontificates. "Today we must acknowledge that the music we cherish benefited from institutionalized racism, and ask ourselves how we can reconcile the joy of Handel's *Messiah* with this dark past." We would do better to hold this silliness in derision and laugh it to scorn.

### Speaking Truth to Power

SO INGRAINED HAS THE ANTIRACISM racket become that undoing it will be no small task. Hordes of apparatchiks—parasitic diversity deans; DEI consultants; Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) "experts"—now have a

vested interest in its spread. Ever since the Democratic Party, during the Kennedy Administration, found its mission in championing the civil rights movement, the party has needed classes of victims to justify the redistributionism and swollen federal power to promote "social justice" that are its heart and soul. Now that real racism is largely a memory, fake racism suits it fine, along with the proliferation of self-appointed faux-victim groups that, by analogy with blacks, supposedly require government's equalizing ministrations. So the ruling Biden Administration has been pumping up the chimera of systemic racism, and wildly infusing diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the whole of government. Our adversaries are happy to lend a hand. Knowing that the morale of the citizenry is no less a key ingredient of military might than weapons and ammunition, as the Ukraine War once again demonstrates, the Russian and Chinese propaganda machines have been gleefully showing dollars on BLM and its avatars, cannily subverting the belief in America's national virtue that prompts citizens to support a war and soldiers to fight one effectively.

Compounding the difficulty of exorcising antiracism, so many have by now been indoctrinated in its quasi-religious dogmas, and an Inquisition has arisen to punish heresies by cancelation of the apostate's livelihood, that for many there's real risk in challenging its tenets. Therefore, the task falls especially to those who can speak the truth with relative impunity—those who work for think tanks or publications that aren't in thrall to the prevailing orthodoxy, and those old enough to face the Great Cancellation, beside which all lesser ones pale. Those organizations should state their opposition to antiracism's lies officially and unmistakably.

It may feel like preaching to the choir, but the truth—in this case so stark that anyone willing to look clearly can see it—has its own power, and soon enough others will chime in and swell the chorus.

*Myron Magnet, a National Humanities Medalist, is the author, most recently, of Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution (Encounter Books).*



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