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A Look Into the Phrase “Reverse Racism”

In the past two decades, the United States of America has seen rapid social and political changes in various aspects of everyday life. Colleges have been reporting milestones in diversity in their faculty and student bodies, more minorities are being placed in leadership positions in corporate and political offices, and the first black president was voted into the White House. These changes have been a result of the civil rights movement, where minority activists and their allies are campaigning to be treated as fair and equal as the majority Caucasian population. Despite the progress of the civil rights campaign, America has experienced a backlash movement from people opposing said changes since they believe the changes seem to be taking away opportunities from those who would normally have them. This backlash movement has led to the creation of the term “reverse racism.” Though this term seems appropriate to summarize the backlash movement, I believe that those who believe in the term fail to understand the context of why certain policies are in place. Policies like affirmative action are not enacted to give minorities an advantage, but rather to provide minorities a level playing field to compete for opportunities that were historically barred from them.

Reverse racism, by definition, is the “concept that portrays affirmative action in the United States and similar color-conscious programs as a form of anti-white racism on the part of black people and government agencies; it is commonly associated with conservative opposition to such programs” (Ansell 46). However, if one breaks down the phrase into its individual components of “reverse” and “racism,” one can see how the phrase contradicts itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, reverse is defined as “operating, behaving, or ordered in a way contrary or opposite to that which is usual or expected” (“Reverse”). The definition of racism has

a complex meaning due to the fact that there is the dated definition that is most commonly used, while the modern definition is the one that is relatively unknown to the public. For the purposes of this essay, I will be using the modern definition, where the word racism is defined as “prejudice plus institutional power” (Sivanandan 99). In other words, for someone or something to be racist, they must have a racial prejudice towards another race while simultaneously having institutions in place that support these biases, whether it be outright or subliminally. However, the term “reverse racism” would then be proven illogical because at the current time, there are no institutions in America where a minority group holds major political or societal power nor is any Caucasian facing the same oppression that a typical minority has in society.

Yet, I believe the majority can relate to the struggles of the minority population. To provide evidence of my position, I will propose a statement made by stand-up comedian Chris Rock. In one of his routines, he states that “there isn’t a white man in this room that would trade places with me. None of you! None of you would trade places with me, and I’m rich!” Though this statement was supposed to spur humor from the audience, one may see how that statement highlights another concept that ties into the reverse racism debate: white privilege. White privilege is defined as the “unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits, and choices bestowed upon people solely because they are white” (“White Privilege”). Chris Rock essentially highlights how even though Caucasian people claim that they do not understand white privilege, they understand how they would rather retain their skin color than be an African American with wealth. Chris Rock’s audience then laughs together in a very interesting fashion; a laugh that resembles a uniform awkward acknowledgement that what Chris Rock stated was fact (“Chris Rock”).

Caucasian Americans also seem to understand their privilege when they acknowledge its influence on how successful different aspects of their lives are. In a study by the Pew Research Center, a group of researchers concluded that “among white young adults, college graduates and Democrats are more likely to say their race has been an advantage” when commenting about the impact their skin color has had on their success in life (“Among Whites”).

However, according to many statistical surveys, there seems to be a disconnect in how Caucasian Americans perceive in/equality in many facets of life. For example, 75% of white people believe that police treat every ethnicity fairly while exercising the ample amount of force, despite the multitude of studies and news stories providing evidence of the opposite (Morin and Stepler). Another study shows 75% of white people believe that African-Americans are treated fairly when trying to apply for a bank loan, mortgage, or for housing, when in fact it is very disproportionate (Morin and Stepler). These statistics further the point that though Caucasians typically do not conscientiously think about their racial privilege, it is apparent that there is a disparity in fairness.

Opponents to the modern definition of racism claim that this definition shows the Caucasian population in a negative light (“White Privilege”). To refute, I ask those opponents what traumatic event has occurred to those in the Caucasian community, on American soil, that can be equivalent to what the Slavery era has done to African Americans or the forceful acquisition of land by pioneers has done to the Native American population. I ask this because while these events were going on, American landowners at the time—who I emphasize, were most, if not all Caucasian—were able to establish institutions of power primarily based on the amount of land one owned. Since those in bondage could not own land, those minority groups had little to no voice in any government office. They were left to the discretion of those

Caucasian landowners. Many centuries later, American society still has Caucasian-led institutions holding power, whether it be socially, economically, or financially. As long as these institutions of power are still around, then minorities will always be playing on an uneven field.

By now it is evident how the phrase “reverse racism” is problematic in its definition. However, my argument would be incomplete without the discussion of affirmative action, one of the essential causes for the creation of the term “reverse racism.” Affirmative action is the “practice or policy of favoring individuals belonging to groups known to have been discriminated against previously” (“Affirmative Action”). Affirmative action is normally referred to in the context of college admissions and job placement offers. Affirmative action has been placed in a negative light, with news stories underscoring how the policy ruins America’s system of meritocracy, and therefore those who do not receive the benefits of such policies may feel that they have been held “to different standards,” as stated by an anonymous writer for *The Economist* (“Time to Scrap”). However, two aspects that writers for conservative publishers, such as *The Economist*, forget to mention when talking about affirmative action is its historical context as well as how it is informed by critical race theory.

When addressing the persistent racial discrimination at the time, President John F. Kennedy in an interview in 1961, claimed that the government would implement “affirmative action” as well as sign civil rights laws and uphold the constitution guarantees in order to show equality not as “a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result” (Brunner and Rowen). Essentially, the policy would then make certain that “active measures be taken to ensure that blacks and other minorities enjoyed the same opportunities for promotions, salary increases, career advancement, school admissions, scholarships, and financial aid that had been the nearly exclusive province of whites” in order to “level the playing field” for minorities (Brunner and

Rowen). Now, while this seems on the surface like discrimination against those in power, one must understand the state of race relations at the time. The sixties were known for the beginning of the civil rights movement, an era where minority activists were essentially fighting for their lives to have the same fair and equal opportunities as their white counterparts. These policies are in place in order for minorities to have equal competition for opportunities and to compensate for the consequences of many historical wrongdoings that have caused minority populations to start five meters behind the starting line.

Opponents of affirmative action typically comment about how the policy ruins the meritocracy in college admissions. A writer from *The Economist* stated:

Universities that want to improve their selection procedures by identifying talented people (of any color or creed) from disadvantaged backgrounds should be encouraged.

But selection on the basis of race is neither a fair nor an efficient way of doing so.

Affirmative action replaced old injustices with new ones: it divides society rather than unites it (“Time to Scrap”).

However, these opinions should be dismissed due to critical race theory. Critical race theory, as explained by a group of interdisciplinary scholars and activists, realizes that “power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color” (“What Is Critical Race Theory?”). In other words, the foundations of many of these institutions were by land-owning, Caucasian men who developed these institutions that would systematically keep them in power. Therefore, meritocracy cannot be attained because these systemic barriers will limit those who cannot access those same advantages, which henceforth contradicts the idea of a proper meritocracy; the same meritocracy that is closely associated with the “American Dream.”

It is also important to note that the common notion of how “diversity improves education,” while optimistic on the surface, is false unless a community supplements diversity with cross-cultural education. According to a study by Stanley Rothman et al., “when student, faculty, and administrators evaluations of the educational and racial atmosphere were correlated with the percentage of minority students enrolled at a college or university, the predicted positive associations of educational benefits and inter-racial understanding failed to appear” (Rothman et al. 8). While at first the results of Rothman et al.’s study surprised me, I believe that a personal anecdote will shed light on their research findings and also support my claim.

I graduated from the Lawrenceville School, a boarding school in central New Jersey. Throughout my time there, the Dean of Diversity tried many practices and events to bring about conversations about various social justice issues that were occurring in both America and worldwide. However, in my opinion, these initiatives were often met with an unconcerned attitude from my mostly white peers. The white students, from what I observed, would ignore events, as they would claim that “these issues don’t apply to me.” Now, this attitude may have been due to a variety of factors, such as not having enough time to understand, or even attend, such events due to the high-pressure, academic environment that was my school. However, I became disturbed by my classmates’ reactions when my school brought in Anthony Ray Hinton for a diversity event. Mr. Hinton was a black man who was wrongly accused of murdering two people and was placed on death row for twenty-eight years. As Mr. Hinton was talking, he began to breakdown about solitary confinement on death row, and how even though he is free, he still suffers mentally from that experience. While I was on the verge of tears (what happened to him could happen to me, or any other minority), I observed my white peers sleeping or cracking jokes during Mr. Hinton’s speech. I hope to highlight again that with communities—like schools—

increasing their minority percentages, these said communities should also work to effectively implement workshops for cross-cultural communication. Simultaneously, they can change the attitudes of individuals so they can see workshops not as a waste of time but rather a chance to learn how to communicate with individuals from different backgrounds.

Returning to the opposition's claim that affirmative action is unfair since it only helps those in the minority community, I would like to turn attention to the impact that collegiate athletic commitments have on Caucasian applicants to elite institutions. While one may have preconceived notions that college athletes are comprised of all-black teams, the National Collegiate Athletic Association has calculated that 61% of student-athletes are white ("NCAA Demographics"). The numbers are even higher for Ivy league and the Division III New England Small College Athletic Conference, which have 65% and 79% white athletes, respectively ("NCAA Demographics"). These percentages are due to the sports that many of these institutions offer, such as lacrosse, water polo, and fencing; sports that are too expensive for those families in low-income areas to involve their children in, not to mention the price tag of exposure to college coaches and athletic summer trainers (Desai). It is also important to note that Ivy League and smaller DIII schools cannot receive athletic scholarships, meaning that the potential to even recruit low-income minority athletes are slim to none. As one may see, since colleges already have the price barrier with the cost of admission with no way to provide athletic scholarships, black athletes have a harder time being recruited by these schools. Therefore, colleges need affirmative action policies in place so that black athletes, as well as minority applicants, can have the same opportunity to enter these selective institutions.

As one may see, the phrase "reverse racism," through the definitions and statistics provided, cannot exist because there is no sector in American society in which a minority group

holds the magnitude of power. It is important to note that I did not intend to write this essay to be negative nor condescending. However, I do believe that these points should be taken seriously because of their impact to those in the minority community. When minorities, myself included, enter private white institutions, like colleges, we have to prove to those around us why we deserve to have our place and not to be silenced by our peers. Hearing rhetoric about how “affirmative action is the only reason you are here” downplays the sacrifices that both our parents made in our education as well as our own achievements in order to attend our respective institutions.

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