S
ome wise American once argued that our
laws protecting freedom of speech do not ex-
tend to the individual who falsely yells "fire" in
a crowded theater. Likewise, freedom of speech
should not allow a group of black faculty mem-
bers to yell "affirmative action" in a crowded,
predominantly white, college faculty meeting.
All hell might break loose.

The phrase "affirmative action" no longer
refers to a specific public policy. Instead, it has
become a proxy for the "race issue." Despite data
showing that white women have been the pri-
mary beneficiaries of affirmative action, the con-
troversy that surrounds it has everything to do
with the conflict between white and black Amer-
icans. Depending on the context, the mention of
affirmative action can spark discussions of black
 genetic inferiority, black criminals, the break-
down in the delivery of services (both private
and public), reverse discrimination, and even re-
verse racism.

When Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke
lost her Pulitzer Prize, and her job, after her se-
ties of articles about a young black heroin ad-
dict was exposed as a fabrication, some argued
that the root cause of her unprincipled behavior
was affirmative action. According to this argu-
ment, Cooke was hired for a job that was be-
yond her qualifications, and therefore was "pres-
sured" into writing deceitful articles. Qualified
Post reporters, presumably, were capable of find-
ing stories that were not only sensational but true.
The important point here is that Cooke's racial
identity became the focus of attention.

Because the term "affirmative action" is rarely
taken to refer to a specific policy, defenders of the
actual policy are at a disadvantage. I have often
been caught in debates on affirmative action that
turned out to be no more than pretexts for venting
opinions about blacks. On one occasion it dawned
on me that my opponent was really commenting
on the supposed moral demise of a once-Christian
America (affirmative action evidently made people
yearn to step outside of their "natural" and God-
given status—and thus represented too much of a
concern for mammon).

It does not surprise me that many white
Americans whose standard of living is declin-
choose to blame their plight on the "unquali-
fied Negroes" who were unfairly given the jobs
that should have gone to them. But I don't know
what white Californians will think when they
wake up to the same declining paychecks after
affirmative action is abolished.

Of course, if every Negro actually received
the "affirmative action" jobs attributed to them
by disgruntled whites, black America would be
prospering. As an advocate of affirmative ac-
tion, I find myself in a discussion that errone-
ously assumes that the policy has been conscien-
tiously instituted. While Pete Wilson and oth-
ers claim that we have gone too far, I'm still
waiting for the policy to be applied. I am caught
defending a status quo that I believe is quite ob-
scene. But publicly to call affirmative action a
cruel hoax—of rhetoric over substance—would
only help to those who want to rid this country
of even the rhetoric of racial justice.

In some respects, affirmative action attempted
to reduce the pariah status of blacks by diffusing
them in greater numbers in professional occupa-
tions and high-skilled jobs. Supposedly, through
seeing blacks in these positions, whites would rec-
ognize that blacks are ordinary people. Now cer-
tainly this has happened to some extent. Yet it has
become increasingly clear that racial
marginalization is more resilient than many of us
had believed. The increasing presence of blacks
throughout the class structure has not changed the
status of blacks as outsiders. In fact, I have been
shocked by the apparent potency of resurgent ra-
cial appeals in this Republican Congress.

All too often, the racial identity of blacks is
a focal point for white attention, particularly
when a white person has been, or believes he
has been, victimized by some bureaucracy. The
white scholar who applies for an academic job
will most likely accept being passed over if the
Affirmative Action

job goes to another white person. But if it goes to a black person, the assumption is easily made that he or she got the job for reasons other than merit.

Take the case of my white Harvard college buddy who graduated Phi Beta Kappa but did not get into Harvard Law School. He was devastated. His explanation was—surprise!—affirmative action. I was angered, torn, perplexed by his response. Though I supported affirmative action, the fact that I could put faces on the individuals concerned (including some black Harvard College peers who were admitted to the law school with lower grade point averages (GPAs) than my friend) only increased my anxiety. I made an appointment with a Harvard Law School admissions dean and spoke to him about the plight of my white buddy. This dean gave me the usual spiel about well-rounded candidates (my buddy was a bookworm) and racial diversity and so forth. Then he mentioned that about 60 percent of the white students admitted to Harvard Law that year had lower GPAs than my friend. “Why,” he said, “don’t you ask about them?”

The democratic left has to figure out how to address the deeply embedded racism in large sectors of the white American populace. There is a lingering escapist tendency in some white leftists, a tendency to believe that the white working and middle classes that blame affirmative action for their problems are not suffering from racial parochialism. Instead, the argument is made that these are decent whites who are merely upset by their individual confrontations with the unjust procedures of affirmative action. Surely there are such people. And because racism need not dominate one’s entire being, many decent people can be found among the ranks of the racist. But the tendency of some within the democratic left to downplay the pervasiveness of racism is morally disappointing and often cowardly.

The United States is a deeply racist country, not only in its enduring historical legacies but in the ordinary, everyday lack of concern that so many white Americans feel for the plight of poor blacks. The utter devastation that takes place on a daily basis in black urban areas could not be tolerated if white Americans viewed blacks as fellow citizens or even as fully equal human beings. Black America lies outside of the scope of white moral empathy—and this is true not only of the black urban poor. For instance, it is common for white suburbanites to try to minimize the black presence in neighboring housing (and this for the black bourgeoisie!). Any serious discussion of affirmative action must be situated within this despairing realization of American racial realities. After all, what makes affirmative action appear so problematic to many whites is that the beneficiaries are imagined as “others.” Whites are willing to make sacrifices to benefit “themselves”—that is, other whites. Until white Americans recognize the depth of our racial crisis, our national conversation about affirmative action will be evasive and inadequate.

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_AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: LEFT PERSPECTIVES_

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