

Review: The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality by W. B. Michaels. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006. 268 pp. ISBN 978-0-8050-7841-1

In the *Bakke* decision (1978), Justice Blackmun famously wrote, “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way.” This idea is being turned on its head by the Conservative Right, who frequently argue that in order to get beyond racism, we must *ignore* race (see for example, Steele, 1990; D’Souza, 1991, 1995; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997, 2002; Connerly, 2000). Less common is a leftist attack on multiculturalism, but this is precisely where Walter Benn Michaels has positioned himself in the new book, *The Trouble With Diversity*.

Michaels has provoked many intense reactions with his central thesis: a focus on racial and ethnic diversity distracts higher education from *true* inequality, which he defines as economic. Situating himself as the champion of the poor (unlike, according to him, elite actors of any race or political orientation), Michaels takes direct aim at affirmative action and multiculturalism under the guise that race is socially constructed and therefore lacks the power to structure opportunity as class does.

Michaels begins by arguing that racism is largely a relic of the past, as illustrated in the following rhetorical question:

Why does racial difference remain so important to us when the racism it was used to justify is so widely condemned and when the basic idea about race that gave it its power—the idea that there are fundamental physical and cultural differences between people that line up with our division of them into black, white, et cetera—has been discredited? (p. 49)

Referring to race as a “phantasm,” the foundation of Michaels’ argument is to ignore the power of contemporary racism, thereby arguing that race-consciousness is not only unnecessary, but harmful. This is also a critical weakness in the text because he relies on an antiquated understanding of racism to justify his thesis.

Recent theorists have described the means by which racism, despite overt bigotry falling out of fashion, remains a prominent method of social stratification in contemporary U.S. society (see for example, Omi & Winant, 1994; Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The consistent theme of these scholars is the continued significance of racism because the mechanisms that (re)produce racial inequality are largely driven underground.

Additionally, numerous studies have shown that in many spheres of U.S. life (e.g., housing, employment, criminal justice, and education), to quote Cornel West (1994), “race matters.”¹ It is specifically within this context that race and

class become mutually reinforcing concepts. For example, racial minorities are most likely to be concentrated in low-income areas with low-performing schools where low teacher expectations of their ethnic group serve to impede their intellectual development (Brown et al., 2003). This, in turn, limits their future earnings, which reinforces the existing racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

Michaels is dismissive as he writes, “So on the one hand, we get affirmative action in universities, which solves a problem that no longer exists” (p. 99). By ignoring the changing nature of contemporary racism as well as the structural inequalities that persist, Michaels allows himself to create a straw person of antiquated racism that is easily and frequently whipped to support his thesis that we need to move beyond race and focus on socioeconomic status.

Michaels then proceeds to recycle the thesis that economic affirmative action should replace race-based affirmative action as a means of addressing “true” inequality. While there is a high degree of intersectionality between race and class, they are not synonymous terms, and class-based affirmative action simply has not been able to effectively address issues of racial inequality (Orfield, 1998). However, this is not a problem for Michaels for he does not see racial inequality as a pressing social issue; it is only economic class that truly matters.

The one section of Michaels’ argument that does have some merit is when he addresses elite social actors ignoring or paying only superficial attention to economic class. For example, many institutions of higher education do not recruit, admit, or retain poor students. However, Michaels takes this information to make a logical leap that has received a great deal of media attention, but is not supported with evidence: that focusing on race distracts from issues of class.

Despite this being the central argument of the book, Michaels never illustrates how resources targeting economic issues are redistributed to diversity efforts. Thus, Michaels ignores a fundamental rule of Statistics 101: Correlation \neq Causality. Yes, the needs of the poor are generally ignored by elite social actors. Yes, there are diversity efforts in many different social spheres across United States. However, the existence of both of these phenomena does not, therefore, mean one is causing the other.

The example of higher education highlights this logical misstep. There are so many components of colleges and universities; why is diversity the only one that promotes a lack of concern for economic inequality? Why does a college’s focus on athletics not distract from economic inequality? Why is the obsession with raising U.S. News & World Report rankings not a reason for a lack of economic diversity? Michaels’ singular focus on multiculturalism highlights the strong ideological underpinnings of his text, which is less about economic empowerment than attacking diversity.

The Trouble With Diversity is a necessary read only because it is now part of the national dialogue on multiculturalism. Michaels falls into a trap of classical

leftist thinking: any focus on identity politics distracts from working class empowerment. Instead of playing the “Oppression Olympics” and simplistically arguing that one can only focus on *either* race *or* class, why cannot *both* be integral components of the struggle against societal inequality?

Note

1. See Brown et al. (2003) for a review of the various ways racism structures these features of American society.

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