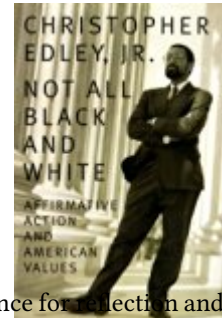


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Edley, Jr. *Not All Black and White: Affirmative Action, Race, and American Values*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. xix + 294 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2955-6.

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Affirmative action is under attack. It's unfair, it's unworkable, it's unamerican. It's time to throw it away. Countering the calls for an end to affirmative action, Christopher Edley, Jr. calls for a reexamination of affirmative action. Let us, says Edley, use the challenge as an opportunity to reopen the debate about not just the programs but also the values that underpin each of the conflicts. As a former advisor to Bill Clinton and key player in the 1994-1995 Presidential review of affirmative action, Edley explores the moral issues that underlie the conflicted, sometimes prejudiced, and often uninformed American way of dealing with race. Edley works from the position that affirmative action needs fixing, not abandoning.

According to Edley, we face a racial crisis, and we are dealing from a position of weakness because of our ignorance and prejudice. The orthodoxy of the past twenty-five years, an orthodoxy set without resolving the underlying tensions, is giving way to a new debate. One instance of the new debate is the Presidential review of 1994-95. Also, the Republican Party is beginning to discuss whether to reject affirmative action or to become more inclusive, bring in people such as Colin Powell. The debate is barely begun, and, as Edley notes, the issues are extremely hard.

And they are extremely complex. Edley explores (as should all parties to the debate) underlying, competing values to establish which have the strongest validity. Then he chooses sides. Edley lists some of the conflicting American values: idealism versus pragmatism; autonomy versus community; public versus private venues; and nation versus community. We are all members of multiple communities; conflicting values divide us within ourselves and separate us from others. As the debate

warms and rhetoric reduces the chance for reflection and reexamination, the positions become rigid and reflexive, and the divide becomes more difficult to cross.

According to Edley, "the peril is that the many sharp differences between the races, expressed along hardened political and social battle lines, may be precursors for an escalating racial conflict and, ultimately, conflagration" (p. 3). In this time of crisis, we must begin building bridges. We must also redefine our beliefs about affirmative action. We must examine why we believe as we do, and why our opponents believe their way. What are the bases for our vision of America? Race relations are no longer a matter of politics or law. The crisis we face is moral.

What is affirmative action? Edley uses the definition from the White House review: "... any effort taken to expand opportunity for women or racial, ethnic, and national origin minorities by using membership in those groups that have been subject to discrimination as a consideration (in decision making or allocation of resources)" (pp. 16-17). Affirmative action programs come in all shapes and sizes: federal preference in contracting and hiring, affirmative action plans with goals, minority set-asides, and so on.

Affirmative action is not quotas; they're illegal. It is not a right; it is a means to a right, a tool. It is not perfect, but all programs are abused. Edley notes some of the abuses—making flexible goals rigid, converting them to quotas (even if it is illegal); emphasizing affirmative action at the expense of other goals such as merit (requiring a judgment call as to when the sacrifice is appropriate); unnecessary trammelling of innocent bystanders (affirmative action to correct wrongs in cases where no wrong is established); and fraud (minority set-aside businesses

that are nothing more than fronts for otherwise ineligible firms).

Above all, affirmative action as currently constituted is not enough. "Race is among several daunting social and economic problems we face, and indeed several of those programs are, in origin and likely solution, inextricably bound up with the matter of color, but neither reason nor experience suggests that the problems of America, or of poor America or black America or poor black America—of *any* America—can be solved by race-conscious measures alone, or even primarily" (pp. 22-23). Rather, there must be an opportunity agenda, a full range of measures that include the public, private, and personal components. Government, the private sector, and people—all must work together if blacks are to move beyond the stalled progress and unmet promises of the past quarter of a century. To establish an affirmative and equitable morality, we must remake our society, and ourselves.

Substantiating the claim that more is needed, racial disparities persist and discrimination remains vigorous. Every year there are 90,000 complaints to the federal government of racial or gender discrimination. We have debated civil rights since 1964 without reaching a political consensus. Disparities persist between black and overall rates of crime, poverty, broken homes, and general failure. Statistics after twenty-five years show the intractability of the problem, show that federal programs alone cannot end the crisis of the black community.

It's time to do something else. Don't tear the programs down, Edley says, but move beyond them. Broaden the American definition of community. Make our reality match the mythological politically correct television commercial. While we're being equally represented in all areas, we still need to keep affirmative action, especially for blacks. The residue of slavery persists as something that almost all blacks share, something that no other group's claim can match. And affirmative

action should expand throughout all walks of life, with successful doctors, politicians, or lawyers, for instance, helping a successful black colleague to match their success. By creating peers, all classes will realize that the shared community encompasses all races.

Edley would have us rethink the values that underlie the debate over civil rights and preferential treatment. We must define honestly why we hold to racism or advocate a color-blind society or insist on special treatment by category instead of need. Once we establish why we believe as we do, we must redefine our community as encompassing all of society. We must give special help when necessary.

We would do well to emulate the military—assume that all ranks should reflect society, and work toward making a truly integrated force. Assume also that all must be qualified for their rank. And do whatever is necessary to qualify the unqualified. The military has chosen a value not widely accepted in the civilian sector. Edley would have us buy into it. Admittedly, we foot soldiers would have to accept the legitimacy of special grooming of officer candidates equal to us in all but race. That's a hard price, but Edley never said it would be easy.

Edley has entered into the fray with a complex justification not only for the continuation of affirmative action but also for its expansion. In fact, Edley would have us expand racial preference beyond the public sector, beyond commerce, and into our hearts and minds. Edley would have us do what is morally right. Or be honest in explaining why we won't. This book is a challenge that cannot go unanswered.

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