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Affirmative action: Racial preference in black and white
by T. J. Wise. New York, NY: Routledge, 2005.

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Now that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled on race-conscious admissions practices in higher education, many supporters of those practices have since critiqued the more common defense that stressed the educational benefits of diversity in an attempt to steer other supporters toward a social justice orientation. Legal-minded scholars such as Michael Olivas (forthcoming), Lani Guinier (2003), and Derek Bell (2003) understood well the importance of stressing benefits in a pragmatic legal defense, but they do not characterize the need for and problems related to affirmative action the same way the Court did. Tim Wise, an unflagging advocate for dismantling racism, pumps up the volume of this discussion and does not pull any punches in *Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White*.

This book is part of the Positions series of books published by Routledge, which interrogate the intersections of education, politics, and culture. Books in this series are supposed to merge scholarship with politically engaged criticism in a short and accessibly written manner. If these are the goals, then Wise fully delivers and would make Italian cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci proud. The book is organized to send an unqualified message: "affirmative action remains important and necessary because racism remains prevalent and damaging to the life prospects of people of color in the United States" (p. 164). If you do not get this final analysis by the time you finish reading the book, perhaps you can knock yourself over the head with it. In other words, this book is that forceful, relentless, and convincing.

The first chapter makes a case for why affirmative action or deliberate efforts to improve the representation of people of color continue to be necessary. Similar to critics of affirmative action, Wise also centers on "racial preferences," but unlike his counterparts, Wise is primarily concerned that affirmative action has *not* done enough to root out *white* racial preference and privilege. He argues that whites have historically been and continue to be the primary beneficiaries of racial preference in obtaining jobs, contracting, and housing. He adds that racial preference for whites in the larger economy, combined with the cumulative effects of longstanding racial discrimination, has resulted in a cyclical intergenerational pattern, whereby prior economic advantage has produced educational advantage, which in turn reproduces economic dominance for whites.

In chapter 2, Wise specifies the mechanisms ingrained in the American educational system that reinforce racial preferences for whites. Here, he addresses preexisting family advantage, funding disparities in schools, ability tracking, classroom dynamics and norms, color blindness, and "mainstream" multiculturalism, among other topics. The evidence presented points to a litany of educational advantages that better prepare white students for applying to and then enrolling in college. Wise argues that it is against this backdrop of white racial preference that an honest assessment of affirmative action can really be made.

Wise saves his most critical words for chapter 3, where he responds to critics of affirmative action. His discussion focuses squarely on higher education, and

he analyzes the University of Michigan admissions cases, standardized testing, and Asians as a “model minority.” Given Wise’s orientation, his conclusions on those three topics are predictable; reverse discrimination is a myth fueled by white hysteria; meritocracy is a fallacy; and the model minority characterization of Asians is a cynical, divisive, and deceptive tactic. Besides showing his solid grasp of the weightiest race-related issues in higher education, what is most striking about chapter 3 is that Wise expresses his opinions with *attitude* and comes as close to “trash-talking” in academic circles as most of us will ever see. For example, regarding the Center for Equal Opportunity’s report that unfair preferences were given to blacks, Wise states that their argument is “demonstrably absurd and the height of statistical illiteracy” (p. 92). Regarding charges that blacks are “over their heads at selective colleges” because they tend to graduate at the bottom of their class, Wise asks, “What do you call someone who graduates last in his class at medical school? Doctor” (p.112).

This supercharged and deft discussion is carried forward through the final chapter, which proposes a more authentic approach toward making a case for affirmative action. Wise immediately makes clear that he will not let defenders of affirmative action off lightly. Pointing to the 1996 campaign against Proposition 209 in California, he calls the tactic to stress that white women would be hurt if affirmative action were abolished rather than to emphasize the facts about racism a “cowardly” strategy that “failed miserably” (p. 150). He is not as critical about the benefits of diversity defense used by University of Michigan lawyers because he recognizes the practicality of such a defense in court. However, he does not believe that emphasizing the benefits of diversity will prove to be a winning strategy in the “court of public opinion.” The chapter spells out why the diversity rationale for affirmative action fails as a “public rallying cry,” organizing tool, and response to ideological attacks against affirmative action.

While Wise’s criticisms of the diversity defense are well put, he overestimates the public’s willingness to engage in a serious discussion about racism and white privilege. Clinton’s 1997 Initiative on Race, for example, failed to have any obvious impact on race and race relations in United States. Findings reported in the latest Freshman Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (see Farrell, 2005) suggest that the climate for addressing race seems to be worse now than it was a decade ago. Only 29.7% of 2004 entering freshmen cited “helping to promote racial understanding” as an “essential” or “very important” goal for them, compared with 46.4% in 1992. Additionally, more students than ever recorded in the history of the survey believed that racial discrimination was no longer a problem in America, yet at the same time, more freshmen than ever before were pessimistic about their chances of socializing with someone outside their own race group. Given these challenging circumstances that are surely linked to the broader political climate, I wonder if tackling the issue of racism and white privilege head-on will engage undergraduates, let alone the general public.

Still, Wise is right that supporters of affirmative action must retool our public arguments. Rather than jettison a discourse that seems to have traction (although not for all the right reasons), a deliberate effort should be made to more closely couple the diversity rationale with remedying the present effects of discrimination (see, for example, Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005). After all as Wise points out, one irony of the benefits of the diversity argument is that

bringing together people of different races adds educational value because racism causes people of different races to have distinctly different experiences in the first place.

Because Tim Wise does not pretend to offer a balanced argument in *Affirmative Action*, it might be written off as being too lopsided. Unlike most polemics, however, Wise seriously considers the most recent body of research to stake his positions. For this reason, it is an appropriate university text that will guarantee lively classroom discussions. Both critics and supporters of affirmative action alike will learn something new as well as find something to praise and criticize. But, if you are considering this book for instructional purposes, first ask yourself, "Are you ready to bring it on?"

References

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*Sustaining Change in Universities:
Continuities in Case Studies and Concepts*
by Burton R. Clark. Maidenhead, UK:
Open University Press, 2004. 210 pp.
Cloth \$99.95. Paper \$29.95.

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This is the second volume of Burton Clark's examination of how universities can adapt to the competitive world of the 21st century. The first book, *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation* (1998), focused on case studies of five exemplary European universities (Warwick in the United Kingdom, Twente in the Netherlands, Strathclyde in Scotland, Chalmers in Sweden, and Joensuu in Finland). The goal was to analyze how these institutions transformed themselves and created a spirit of entrepreneurialism. Clark argued that this spirit—combining a sense of mission, strong executive leadership, and a willingness to be independent—is the mark of successful academic institutions. *Sustaining Change in Universities* takes this argument to a broader stage.

In this book, Clark looks at a larger number of academic institutions on all continents by providing thumbnail sketches, largely through secondary research,