Employment of English

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Strolling through the Detroit International Airport in October 1995 on my way to my parents' home in Virginia Beach, I came upon a newsstand-bookstore that was devoting eight or ten shelves of space—roughly one-quarter, I believe, of its “new best-sellers” wall—to Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism*. I had heard a great deal about the book before it was published, and had just recently been asked (twice, actually) by the *Chicago Tribune* to review the thing. I declined, partly on the grounds that I've already read more D'Souza than any human should, having perused both *Illiberal Education* (1991) and his rarely mentioned first (and best) effort, *Falwell: Before the Millennium* (1984). That's the book where D'Souza writes, “listening to Falwell speak, one gets a sense that something is right about America, after all” (205). So why would I
want to read the new seven-hundred-page D'Souza, the *magnum opus*, the D'Souza *Ulysses*? Do I really have any obligation to keep plowing through the bookshelves of the Right, demonstrating again, again, and yet again that there's no there there?

Within hours I was in my parents' living room, asking my father whether he thought a *Tribune* review from me would make any dent in the media campaign bringing bulk shipments of *The End of Racism* to airport bookstores, or whether I wouldn't just be giving the book greater visibility and credibility simply by agreeing to treat it as a serious object of some kind. "Well, Michael," my father replied, "you may not have to worry. From what I hear, the book isn't doing very well, in reviews or in sales." When I asked where my father had heard such a thing, he turned to me and asked, with a straight face, if I hadn't seen the new "desperation" ads the Free Press was running for the book. "Two for one deal," he said. "Buy *The End of Racism* at the already low, low bargain price, and receive *The Mark Fuhrman Tapes* for free."

Of course, it's manifestly unfair to compare D'Souza and Fuhrman. To my knowledge, D'Souza has never personally beaten or framed a black person, nor has he suggested creating a large bonfire of black bodies. In *The End of Racism*, he merely proposes a theory of "rational discrimination" based on the recognition that there are vast "civilizational differences" between black and white Americans. At the close of his first chapter, D'Souza offers a brief catechism on the subject: the main problem for blacks is not racism but "liberal antiracism" (24); the civil rights movement failed because "equal rights for blacks could not and did not produce equality of results" (23); and, consequently, the cause of "rational discrimination" is "black cultural pathology" (24). D'Souza's middle chapter ("Is America a Racist Society?") expands on the premises of rational discrimination, which may be unfair to individuals but valid about groups-as-wholes:

> Only because group traits have an empirical basis in shared experience can we invoke them without fear of contradiction. Think of how people would react if someone said that "Koreans are lazy" or that "Hispanics are constantly trying to find ways to make money." Despite the prevalence of anti-Semitism, Jews are
rarely accused of stupidity. Blacks are never accused of being tight with a dollar, or of conspiring to take over the world. By reversing stereotypes we can see how their persistence relies, not simply on the assumptions of the viewer, but also on the characteristics of the group being described. (273)

This, perhaps, is right-wing sociology’s finest moment: reversal of stereotypes! Why didn’t we think of that? OK, now let’s get this straight. Koreans are not lazy, Hispanics do not try to make money, blacks are spendthrifts, and… hey! wait a minute! those clever Jews really are trying to take over the world! Get me Pat Robertson!

Many of my black friends were understandably alarmed to hear that D’Souza’s book endorses the practice of “rational discrimination.” One told me that she’d read only so much of the book—up to the point at which, on page 169, D’Souza notes that the civil rights movement failed because it did not consider its political consequences, namely, that “racism might be fortified if blacks were unable to exercise their rights effectively and responsibly.” After that, she decided the book might as well be called The Negro a Beast, after Charles Carroll’s best-seller of 1900. Such a title, I replied, would almost surely keep the book out of major airport bookstores, and so was probably rejected by the Free Press’s marketing department. But then again, I added, there’s no reason to think of D’Souza as antiblack; on the contrary, the theory of “rational discrimination” may prove even more dangerous to white Americans than to any other group. It doesn’t take a Malcolm or an Ishmael Reed to figure this one out: White people blow up federal buildings. White people pillage savings and loans. White people built Love Canal. White people commit horrid, unthinkable murders of helpless children and pregnant women, and then they blame them on black men. All the great serial killers of the West are white people. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that all white people are crazy or greedy or dishonest. Some of my closest friends are white. But would you want your daughter to marry one?

I presume that many of my readers are familiar with some of D’Souza’s more extraordinary arguments in The End of Racism. Still, it may be worth pausing briefly over some of the highlights. For I believe that this book, together with The Bell Curve, is an instance of a wholly new genre
of encyclopedic pseudoscience, and it is fundamental to the workings of this genre that the books in question be too bloated and overstuffed for the ordinary reader to fathom (*The End of Racism* features no fewer than 2,198 footnotes, which makes it very scholarly). In this new genre, measured commentary, reportage, and scholarship are blended with ultraconservative and even fascist policy recommendations, regardless of the logical relation between the scholarship and the recommendations. (D’Souza’s book differs from Herrnstein and Murray’s in that it also includes extended hallucinations masquerading as “historical overview.” More on this below.) The authors of these books then appear, calm and composed, on national media, saying they know their work is bound to cause controversy but should at least be granted an honest hearing. (See also, under this heading, David Brock’s book *The Real Anita Hill.*) Phase two of their mission accomplished, they then head back to base camp at *Commentary* magazine to write assessments of their reception, showing that despite their honesty and all-around reasonableness, they were savaged and brutalized by the knee-jerk liberal press. All of which demonstrates *a fortiori* the liberal stranglehold on political discourse in the United States; for as the ever reliable Eugene Genovese memorably put it in a 1995 issue of the *National Review,* surveying the public response to *The Bell Curve,* “once again academia and the mass media are straining every muscle to suppress debate” (44).

So much for the new genre and its characteristic media-saturation strategy. Now for some of the highlights of *The End of Racism.*

- “The popular conception seems to be that American slavery as an institution involved white slaveowners and black slaves. Consequently, it is easy to view slavery as a racist institution. But this image is complicated when we discover that most whites did not own slaves, even in the South; that not all blacks were slaves; that several thousand free blacks and American Indians owned black slaves. An examination of these frequently obscured aspects of American slavery calls into question the facile equation of racism and slavery” (74–75).
- “The American slave *was* treated like property, which is to say, pretty well” (147).
- “Most African American scholars simply refuse to acknowledge the pa-
thology of violence in the black underclass, apparently convinced that black criminals as well as their targets are both victims: the real culprit is societal racism. Activists recommend federal jobs programs and recruitment into the private sector. Yet it seems unrealistic, bordering on the surreal, to imagine underclass blacks with their gold chains, limping walk, obscene language, and arsenal of weapons doing nine-to-five jobs at Procter and Gamble or the State Department” (504).

- “Increasingly it appears that it is liberal antiracism that is based on ignorance and fear: ignorance of the true nature of racism, and fear that the racist point of view better explains the world than its liberal counterpart” (538).

Almost as striking are D’Souza’s incisive rhetorical questions:

- “If America as a nation owes blacks as a group reparations for slavery, what do blacks as a group owe America for the abolition of slavery?” (100).
- “How did [Martin Luther] King succeed, almost single-handedly, in winning support for his agenda? Why was his Southern opposition virtually silent in making counterarguments?” (196).
- “Historically whites have used racism to serve powerful entrenched interests, but what interests does racism serve now? Most whites have no economic stake in the ghetto” (554).

Yet these are merely the book’s most noticeable features—the passages that make a reviewer suppose that the easiest way to slander D’Souza is to quote him directly. *The End of Racism* is not, however, the sum of its pull quotes. More important are its characteristic tics and tropes, which are harder to convey but crucial for an understanding of how the text operates. There is, for instance, the repeated insistence that behind every civil rights initiative looms the specter of cultural relativism, and that the father of cultural relativism is Franz Boas. The last time I encountered this argument—and I am not making this up—I was reading neo-Nazi pamphlets on the cultural inferiority of the darker peoples. D’Souza is unique, however, in finding the determinative influence of the evil Boas everywhere he looks, from the founding of the NAACP to the unanimous majority in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Indeed, the only figure who comes in for as much abuse as Boas is
W. E. B. Du Bois, apparently because Du Bois was so simplistic as to blame white people for lynchings, Jim Crow, and the race riots of 1906 (Atlanta) and 1908 (Springfield). (Actually, to be fair to D’Souza, his book nowhere mentions those riots.) As D’Souza explains at some length, Du Bois was a cultural relativist. And once you’ve been tarred by D’Souza as a cultural relativist, there is no hope for you. Everything you say testifies only to your moral turpitude. Henry Louis Gates suggests that it’s racist to say to him, “Skip, sing me one of those old Negro spirituals” or “You people sure can dance,” and D’Souza replies, “Why are [these statements] viewed as racist? Because contemporary liberalism is constructed on the scaffolding of cultural relativism, which posits that all groups are inherently equal” (268). A century earlier, Du Bois had called for “anti-lynching legislation” and “enfranchisement of the Negro in the South”; D’Souza remarks that “this represented a program strongly influenced by Franz Boas and Boasian assumptions” (190). Johnnetta Cole writes that the “problem” with single-parent households “is that they are deprived of decent food, shelter, medical care, and education,” and D’Souza writes that “Johnnetta Cole finds nothing wrong with single-parent families” (519)—and that, more broadly, “leading African American intellectuals abstain from criticizing and go so far as to revel in what they describe as another alternative lifestyle” (518). Houston Baker writes a book claiming that 2 Live Crew was rightly banned in Broward County for obscenity, and sure enough, D’Souza cites him (and his book) as one of the Crew’s leading defenders. How can this be? You guessed it—cultural relativism. “Instead of seeking to counter the cultural influence of rap, leading African American figures unabashedly condone and celebrate rap music as the embodiment of black authenticity” (513).

In The End of Racism, we find that successful black people are especially whiny (unless they’re conservatives, who, “unknown and unrecognized,” are “striving heroically to make the underclass . . . worthy of respect” [521]); accordingly, they draw from D’Souza a scorn that is indistinguishable from hatred. In 1993, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun argued that the Senate should not recognize the Confederate flag as the official symbol of the United Daughters of the Confederacy; D’Souza calls her protest “histrionic” (286)—and, because he knows who pays
his bills, fails to mention that Jesse Helms made a project of harassing and taunting Moseley-Braun thereafter. In his penultimate chapter he takes up the narratives of middle-class blacks who deal with countless racist slurs and slights every day, and reacts with disbelief to their professions of resentment:

These are the observations of relatively well-placed men and women: an executive, a government worker, and a college professor. Since no reasons are given that would justify such reactions [i.e., D'Souza did not cite them], one might conclude that we are dealing with cases of people who live in a world of make-believe, in mental prisons of their own construction. For them, antiracist militancy is carried to the point of virtual mental instability. It is hard to imagine whites feeling secure working with such persons. (491–92)

D'Souza’s ability to empathize with beleaguered white persons is admirable, and no doubt if he continues to succor the hurt feelings of his powerful white colleagues who don’t see why Skip and Lani get so huffy when they’re asked to sing “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” his career as a prominent right-wing intellectual—and his fellowship from the American Enterprise Institute—is pretty much guaranteed. It was not long after the book was published, in fact, that the Wall Street Journal devoted half a page of op-ed space to an excerpt from D’Souza’s concluding chapter—the part where he finally gets around to delivering his payload, that is, arguing for the repeal of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

D’Souza’s rationale for repeal is clear: “America will never liberate itself from the shackles of the past until the government gets out of the race business” (545). Now that racist discrimination against African Americans is largely a thing of the past—as D’Souza points out, “all the evidence shows that young people today are strongly committed to the principle of equality of rights” (552)—government action can only produce a justifiable white backlash. Drawing his inspiration from legal scholar Richard Epstein, D’Souza does not worry about freeing the private sector from antidiscrimination laws; for in a truly free market, racial discrimination would not exist at all, since “discrimination is
only catastrophic when virtually everyone colludes to enforce it” (539). D’Souza’s case in point is major league baseball, about which he poses a truly novel thought-experiment: “Consider what would happen,” he writes, “if every baseball team in America refused to hire blacks.” Lest we are unable to imagine (or remember) such a state of affairs, D’Souza guides us step by step:

Blacks would suffer most, because they would be denied the opportunity to play professional baseball. And fans would suffer, because the quality of games would be diminished. But what if only a few teams—say the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers—refused to hire blacks? African Americans as a group would suffer hardly at all, because the best black players would offer their services to other teams. The Yankees and the Dodgers would suffer a great deal, because they would be deprived of the chance to hire talented black players. Eventually competitive pressure would force the Yankees and Dodgers either to hire blacks, or to suffer losses in games and revenue. (539)

There’s something disingenuous about D’Souza’s plans for integration, since D’Souza had argued earlier, citing Joel Williamson, that Jim Crow laws were “designed to preserve and encourage” black self-esteem (179). But let’s assume, for the nonce, that D’Souza is serious here, and let’s assume also that franchises like the Celtics or the Red Sox of the 1980s could not win games without a sizable contingent of black ball-players. How precisely is this argument supposed to work in American society at large? Are we supposed to believe that bankers and realtors don’t discriminate against black clients for fear that their rivals down the street will snap up all those hard-hitting, base-stealing young Negroes? Or is it that when black motorists are tired of being pulled over in California they will simply take their business to the more hospitable clime of Arizona?

Few commentators have noted that Dinesh D’Souza is himself the most visible contradiction of the Right’s major premise in the culture wars, namely, that campus conservatives are persecuted by liberal faculty and intimidated into silence. For here, after all, is perhaps the most vocal
Young Conservative of them all, a founder and editor in chief of the *Dartmouth Review* who’s since gone on to Princeton University, the Reagan administration, and lucrative fellowships from the Olin Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. He is, in short, a phenomenon. No matter how diligently his critics pore through his work, demonstrating time and again that the stuff doesn’t meet a single known standard for intellectual probity, *he is taken seriously*. Liberal heavyweight champ Richard Rorty is tapped to take his book apart in the *New York Times Book Review*; Harvard’s Stephan Thernstrom weighs in with a trenchant critique in the *Times Literary Supplement*. On the other side of the aisle, both Genoveses stand up to testify to the book’s importance, calling it “impressive” and “courageous.” D’Souza is denounced and celebrated, defended and reviled. He appears excerpted in *Forbes*, the *Atlantic*, the *American Scholar*. Meanwhile, over on page A4 of the hometown paper there’s a story about how the Philadelphia police have terrorized the city’s black citizens for years; on page B10, an NFL star’s cousin, a young black businessman, has been stopped by highway police and beaten to death. No probable cause, no previous record. No one notices.

Not long ago Michael Lind wrote about what he called “the intellectual death of conservatism,” recounting how he watched in amazement as Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich suggested lacing illegal drugs with rat poison—and no one in the room demurred. The publication of *The End of Racism* seems to me a larger version of the same phenomenon: not only a deliberate and at times terrifying attempt to move the center of political gravity as far right as possible, but also so egregious an affront to human decency as to set a new and sorry standard for “intellectual” debate. It is remarkable, I think, that this latest and most virulent brand of postwar American conservatism has so far produced only one defector, only one conscientious objector—the aforementioned Michael Lind. And it is similarly remarkable that D’Souza’s book has provoked only one resignation from the AEI—that of prominent black conservative Glenn Loury.

Still, however much I might lament the resolute ideological conformity on the Right, it strikes me as a gesture of political impotence for
commentators on the Left to criticize The End of Racism for failing to meet any reasonable standard for sound scholarship, informational accuracy, or logical coherence. It’s rather like complaining, after your arms have been removed from their sockets, that your opponent has failed to abide by Robert’s Rules of Order. Does anyone seriously expect that Lynne Cheney, say, will tender her resignation to the American Enterprise Institute as well, on the grounds that D’Souza has flouted the intellectual standards of which she claims to be the defender? And what of Adam Bellow, son of Saul, who, according to D’Souza, “worked closely with me throughout the preparation of the manuscript” (xi)? Wasn’t there anything he could have done to make The End of Racism a saner, a more respectable book? Or was he too busy searching the world over for the Tolstoy of the Zulus?

I think it is important that the American Right is now so supremely self-confident, so assured of its control over the direction of public policy and political debate, that no one at the Free Press or the AEI worried whether The End of Racism might damage the credibility of conservatism. Such self-confidence is altogether impressive, even sublime. What does it betoken? The Wall Street Journal excerpt of the book should probably be our guide. It’s significant that the WSJ trumpeted only D’Souza’s call to repeal the Civil Rights Act of 1964; apparently, the time is not yet right for the Journal to reprint neo-Nazi pamphlet material on the omnipresent cultural influence of Franz Boas. But outright repeal of the Civil Rights Act is still unthinkable in American politics; the most the American Right can do, for the moment, is to shoot holes in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and torpedo those progressive intellectuals, like Lani Guinier, who actually take the legislation seriously. The “race issue” of 1996 wasn’t supposed to be civil rights in toto; it was supposed to be the abolition of affirmative action, spearheaded by the so-called Civil Rights Initiative in California. Isn’t D’Souza jumping the gun? Isn’t the Civil Rights Act too ambitious a target?

But perhaps the jumping of the gun is precisely the point. D’Souza’s not writing for 1996, or even for 2000; he’s writing for generations yet to come. Like Pat Buchanan’s 1992 and 1996 presidential candidacies, The End of Racism may be a short-term novelty but a long-term success.
in pushing the rightward edge of the envelope for what can be plausibly considered a substantive contribution to public debate. It is a disgraceful book by any measure, but it may yet be a landmark—even though, like the *Lyrical Ballads* and the paintings of the Fauves, it be maligned and ill-understood upon its first appearance. And who knows? Maybe the times they are a-changing, and soon it will be as common as rain to hear Buchanan-esque presidential candidates allude slyly to the machinations of international Jewry and to see policy analysts guffawing about how ridiculous it would be to create jobs programs for gold-chained, limping black men. Once upon a time Barry Goldwater was considered an extremist—so much so that the presidential race of 1964 was the only election since 1852 in which a Democratic nominee other than FDR won more than 50 percent of the popular vote. Now, with his defense of gay military personnel and his dismissal of personal attacks on Bill Clinton, Goldwater has almost become the custodian of the party’s “liberal” wing. What if *The End of Racism*, like Goldwater’s nomination, is merely a shot across a bow? What if, by the year 2016, the American Right has carried out Rush Limbaugh’s jocular suggestion that a maximum of two liberals be kept alive on each college campus—and those few thousand of us who remain amidst the rubble are sighing nostalgically for the days when there were still liberal Republicans like Dan Quayle who were at least ambivalent about sterilizing populations with measurable “civilizational differences” from whites?

Allow me my phantasmic scenarios. I now live in a nation where any number of mainstream, nationally syndicated columnists can promote Pat Buchanan’s presidential candidacy, and surely it will not be long before we see the *Atlantic* cover that proclaims, “Pat Buchanan was right.” I live in a nation where it is not considered “extreme” to eliminate capital gains taxes or to turn social programs over to the states so that Republican governors can undo the deleterious effects of the Fourteenth Amendment. I live in a nation where Dinesh D’Souza is lauded as a “courageous, insightful, and eloquent critic of the American social scene” (Linda Chavez) and a book like *The End of Racism* appears on airport bookstore shelves festooned with no fewer than eight testimonial blurbs—including those of Chavez, Eugene Genovese, Charles Krau-
thammer, and a few token liberals like Andrew Hacker and Gerald Early, who really ought to have known better.

What, finally, does the publication of The End of Racism say about the relations between the “responsible” Right and the “extreme” Right? In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, American conservatives were outraged that anyone could have drawn a connection between Rush Limbaugh’s or Gordon Liddy’s mirthful, hypothetical incitements to murder, and the deadly explosives used by right-wing fanatics. Many on the American Right, to their credit, denounced the bombing—usually a few hours after denouncing those few pinkos and bleeding-hearts who had had the gall to suggest that the bombers might not have been Islamic fundamentalists. Not a single white conservative, however, has voiced any reservations or regrets about the publication of The End of Racism. Adam Bellow has not stepped forward to admit that mistakes were made; Bob Dole has not charged that the book will erode our moral fiber; Gertrude Himmelfarb and Lynne Cheney have not confided to Commentary their worries that the book may not meet the ideal of scholarly objectivity. Perhaps it will not be considered outrageous, then, for progressives like me to draw the obvious conclusions—that there are no rightward boundaries for what conservatives will consider acceptable public discourse on race, and that the Wall Street Journal’s editors are willing to flirt with anything, even cryptofascism, so long as it promises to unwrite federal commitments to social justice. As I contemplate The End of Racism, I await the requisite soul-searching on the Right. But in all honesty, I’m not holding my breath.