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Using Bigotry Against Bias

By Joshua Lederberg

CAN A GOOD society be built on bad biology?

Not long ago, I received an incredible demand, the more so as it was a formal requirement under United States law. It would compel me to look again at my colleagues and the staff of our university department with the eyes of a bigot to produce a racial census of employes belonging to certain minority groups. The purpose—to help enforce laws that forbid racial bias in employment on Government-aided projects—may be laudable. It is not that purpose but the means, namely calculated racial discrimination, that deserves critical discussion, not only because of its flimsy basis in scientific biology, but more importantly because it is setting the precedents for the kind of society we are building.

Must we accept the self-defeating paradox that bias can be eliminated only by obligatory discrimination, even if this now claims to be only descriptive for purposes of enforcement? A generation ago, how many Jews would have relished being registered as such for employment or university admission, even if the quota (unlike the numerous clauses of the Czar of the Russias) were set at an advantageous ratio? Within our present-day minority movements, however, there are many activists whose political visibility depends precisely on the most intense discrimination of racial types.

The problem is a difficult one, and easy answers are likely to be both meaningless and distorting. Lockheed Aircraft Co. recently reported on some results of a laudable recruiting campaign, including the statement that it now employed exactly 967 members of minority groups as scientists, engineers and accountants.

THE SOCIAL VALUE of the campaign speaks for itself. But does the number 967 mean anything whatsoever? It reflects the unskilled judgment of a body

of unqualified non-anthropologists acting according to an undefinable set of criteria. Yet Lockheed, like Stanford, must submit a compliance report that, under law, must be defended for its accuracy in terms of actual records; therefore, some administrator must have made person-by-person classification, an obligatory discrimination.

In numerical terms, the main issue is "just who is a Negro?" Most of us have a stereotype in mind. My first anxiety is the reinforcement of that unrealistic stereotype by the force of law. There is a real problem in meeting the formal demands of a compliance report: Is there a biologically sound definition not for the stereotype, but for a collection of actual human beings?

I am certain that there can be no such definition under Federal law; if there were, it would be repugnant to almost all of us. Do we count how many African ancestors belong to a given human being? What parts of Africa do we count, and unto what generations must we go back? Just what fraction of African ancestry constitutes a Negro? And who would be certain of these facts concerning his own ancestry? Who would have the right to press the point on a human being who regarded such matters as his private affair?

There ought to be little doubt that the law has no place for ambiguities like these.

THE UNIVERSITY of California, Berkeley, is not notorious as a hotbed of racial bias. However, its Anthropology Department, the professional group which professionally must be committed to scientific accuracy in the evaluation of race, has unanimously refused to comply despite a formal university directive in accordance with the Federal demand. I would join them in asserting that we are all Negroes, as a challenge to any meaningful process of decision that could be objectively applied.

The Medical School at Stanford has taken a different tack, suggesting that each employe designate his own preference for minority classification, if any. In our

department, these records are confidential, and each employe is encouraged to alter his preference from time to time according to his own whimsy. But I remain deeply apologetic at even this intrusion into the feelings of my staff.

The Federal agencies are aware how nonsensical these procedures are. When I expressed my chagrin to the Office of Educational Statistics in the Public Health Service, a sympathetic reply suggested that the issue was indeed not genetics nor anthropology, but social welfare.

One personal response: "A Negro is a person whose visible physical characteristics are such that he would be at risk of insult by a redneck."

Plainly, rednecks will now command a premium salary to fill the job of "official discriminator for compliance reports." Until I find one, I am still at a loss how to make out such a report except by self-inventory. Even so, if this definition remains in force, I know a number of blond-bearded youths who will have to be added to the roster.

FROM A SCIENTIFIC standpoint, there can be no

objective classification, at least with the tools actually available in an employment office. Self-identification might work; whether it will serve any useful purpose for enforcement against bias might then be questioned.

More important than the practical difficulty of racial typology is the crucial question of the kind of society we want to build in the long run. The Black Muslims and the White Supremacists share one view with a certain segment of liberal thought: that we should inculcate race-consciousness as a fundamental issue of social organization. Formal classification by race is the essential tenet of apartheid.

My own scientific training leads me to rebel at any form of race-consciousness,

even for the purpose of short-run amelioration of historic prejudices. This is not to insist on cultural homogenization, but I find it preposterous to imagine the Government riding herd on cultural any more than religious affiliations of the citizenry.

The historic injustice in America's race relations has been so extreme that the resort to expedient remedies is not a surprising reaction and I cannot pretend to speak for a majority opinion in reacting to the racial census. However, before these formalities become well-entrenched, we should seek wider discussion of their implications, whether we are building a non-racial or a multi-racial community.

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