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A Black Scholar Who Opposes the “Diversity” Mania

Carol Swain’s latest book takes DEI ideologues to task.

MAY 24, 2024



George Leef

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AMONG “PROGRESSIVES” IS that black Americans must be given preferences in college admissions, hiring, and government contracting because the nation is so suffused with racism that they cannot advance otherwise. There are many problems with that view,

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and in her book *The Adversity of Diversity* Carol Swain explores them.

As a black woman who grew up in impoverished conditions in rural Virginia, Swain has a compelling case to make against the idea that preferences actually help blacks. Her success in life is a strong counter to the leftist racial agenda, and she argues that it makes matters worse—for blacks and for everyone else.

Swain has a compelling case to make against the idea that preferences actually help blacks.

groups, while accomplishing little if any good for struggling blacks. It's good to see a traditional white liberal voicing support for a black conservative who believes that America made a tragic mistake when it turned away from the goal of equal rights for all.

The old civil-rights model worked very well, Swain demonstrates. Under it, schools and companies were encouraged to seek out minority applicants who showed promise, then help them succeed. She benefited from that outlook in her early years—it gave her the boost she needed first to attend a community college to obtain a better job, then to earn a B.A., pursue a Ph.D. in political science at the University of North Carolina, and finally land tenured professorships at Princeton and Vanderbilt.

The “affirmative action” concept was originally meant to assist ambitious minority students without discriminating against non-minorities; nor did it demand the lowering of standards for blacks and others. With equal opportunity, blacks could succeed or fail based on their own capabilities. Unfortunately, that vision has been replaced with something different and alien to the nation’s traditions. The new “diversity” approach, Swain writes, “is based on a conflict model of human relations that

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seems obsessed with differences and grudges about real or imagined historical wrongs."

What the new "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" ideology is all about, Swain contends, is not to improve the prospects for minorities but rather to undermine America's foundations—its culture of liberty and individualism. That ideology is pushed by people who think that tearing down our foundations will allow them to grab the power they desire so they can radically reshape the nation. Concern for minorities is merely a smokescreen for their goals.

More than 20 years ago, Swain wrote a book entitled *The New White Nationalism in America*, in which she argued that racial preferences were creating a white backlash that impeded the goals of integration and colorblindness. Rather than bringing Americans together, the "diversity" obsession was (and is) tearing them further apart.

Students admitted to prestigious colleges with racial preferences often lag far behind their white and Asian classmates.

Swain also explains that racial preferences have a detrimental impact on their supposed beneficiaries. For one thing, young blacks tend to do less than their best, since they know that they have the advantage of racial preferences behind them. Swain writes that she encouraged her sons never to rely on the crutch of preferences.

She also observes that racial preferences at elite universities tend overwhelmingly to favor black students from well-to-do families; nearly all of them would be successful without the benefit of admissions preferences. Even those students, however, may be worse off due to the "mismatch" effect. Swain explains that students admitted to prestigious colleges with racial preferences often lag far behind their white and Asian classmates in academic preparation. As a result, some drop out, while others gravitate into easy majors where they can shine, at the cost of damaging their long-run prospects.

Furthermore, the DEI agenda harms all Americans by lowering academic standards and subverting the curriculum with

ideological distractions such as “institutional racism.” That is particularly worrisome in professional fields such as medicine.

Swain emphasizes the depth to which the DEI agenda has taken root in American higher education. At the University of Texas, for example, there were 171 positions for “diversity” administrators at the time of Swain’s writing, costing over \$13 million per year. In her view, that expense is worse than useless, since the diversity message is *anti-educational*—disinformation intended to sow the seeds of social discord by making whites feel guilty and blacks angry at their supposed oppression.

The DEI toxin also affects the American business world. Many corporations have spent large sums on “diversity training” programs. Swain points out that there is no evidence that they accomplish any good except to line the pockets of the purveyors. She is quite familiar with this because, after leaving the academic world in 2017, she began her own firm, which offers training that is not divisive and never comes across as “cult programming,” as is generally the case with her competitors. Her firm advises business managers to emphasize traditional values, including efforts to inspire employee creativity, show empathy toward them, and actively listen. That approach yields far better results than the angry, divisive “diversity training” that many companies feel obliged to pay for.

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productive careers.

America would be far better off if our schools and businesses dropped the DEI mindset in favor of positive action. In that regard, Swain praises Harvard economics professor Roland Fryer, whose career was sent into a tailspin because he wrote a paper questioning a central belief of the DEI establishment and who argues that elite colleges should take the lead in better preparing minority students for higher education and

She quotes Fryer: “Right now, colleges take the supply of qualified minority students as fixed. They might run a summer enrichment program for local kids, but they don’t intervene in

students’ education in systemic ways. They don’t teach the higher-order skills that students need to get into college. They don’t cultivate the grit and resilience that kids need to navigate a challenging curriculum after they are admitted.” That is a good idea, but actually solving the “pipeline problem” would eliminate the need for lots of “diversity” jobs and undermine the canard that racism is America’s great problem, demanding a radical transformation of the country. Therefore, it will have no appeal to the DEI crowd.

The Adversity of Diversity is a welcome counterweight to the vast, aggressive DEI industry. If we ever get past the hideous mistake of allowing the civil-rights movement to be hijacked by greedy charlatans and malevolent ideologues, it will be because we have finally listened to the counsel of thinkers like Carol Swain.

George Leef is director of external relations at the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal.

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