

An influential American sociologist endeavors to clear away the ideological cant and slogan in which the discussion of minorities has been enveloped recently.

Some Neglected Aspects of the "Minorities" Problem

GEORGE A. LUNDBERG

I

ONE OF THE most popular subjects of current discussion is the so-called "minorities" problem. *Public* discussion is uniformly of a pious, rhetorical, legalistic-moralistic character. Any other approach, it is felt, constitutes "prejudice," and this is regarded as a very damaging characterization. What is meant, I suppose, is that prejudices which conflict with the publicly accepted ones are deplorable, for nothing is more respectable than the "right" prejudices. To share the *respectable* prejudices which constitute, in large part, the culture of every community is always praiseworthy.

A considerable agitation by highly articulate minorities, a large segment of the press, and a multitude of "civic" organizations has resulted in a kind of "party line" on the subject of relationships between ethnic, religious, racial, and other groups. This "line" is so well established that any deviation therefrom in *public* discussion is much censored and censured. Few can

afford to write a realistic discussion on the subject, and almost no agencies of mass communication can afford to carry any other than the accepted "line."

Why is this kind of nonsense necessary? Why cannot we have a frank and realistic discussion of the minority problem just as one discusses questions of wealth, poverty, disease, divorce, and delinquency? These are problems that also involve deep human tragedies, personal and social. They are problems that also invoke sympathy, indignation, and a desire on the part of nearly all decent people to remedy injustice, unhappiness, and suffering. Why should not the "minority" problem be accorded in *public* a type of discussion it has long received in private?

There are doubtless many reasons for this state of affairs. I should like to call special attention to only one of them because, although it reveals a laudable human quality, it is inimical to objective analysis. I refer to the sympathy of social scientists, as well as most other people, for certain currently disadvantaged minorities. One shrinks from too rigorous or objective examination of the predicament of people whose misfortunes one recognizes and deplores. As one of my friends (the editor of a leading journal of opinion) put it on reading the analysis which follows below: "*Regardless of the logic and the facts, we must lean over backwards* in the special cases before us because a more realistic view would merely be seized upon by the prejudiced as vindication of their hostility. Any aid or comfort to this group is in the direction of Hitlerism, convent-burning, etc. That danger transcends all other considerations." This attitude is certainly understandable, and one cannot help

but admire it as a finely motivated position. Yet I believe that in the long run it only injures the cause it seeks to advance. In objective *scientific analysis* there can be no "leaning over" *backwards or forwards*, of the type contemplated. Any leaning toward or away from conclusions *scientifically warranted* in order to conform to desired ulterior ends, however laudable under existing mores, is recognized by all scientists as a negation of science.

It is the general thesis of the present paper that the confusion, conflict, and frustration in our management of minority problems derives largely from a refusal to face and discuss certain facts and realities on which intelligent progress toward a workable solution depends. I do not contend that the aspects here to be discussed are *all* the aspects of the problem — on the contrary, I merely believe that they are important *neglected* aspects.

II

In every society men react selectively to their fellow men, in the sense of seeking the association of some and avoiding the association of others. Selective association is necessarily based on *some* observable differences between those whose association we seek and those whose association we avoid. The differences which are the basis for selective association are of indefinitely large variety, of all degrees of visibility and subtlety, and vastly different in social consequences. Sex, age, marital condition, religion, politics, socio-economic status, color, size, shape, health, morals, birth, breeding, and B.O. — the list of differences is endless and varied, but all the items have this in common: (1) They are observable; and (2) they are *significant* differences to those who react selectively to people with the characteristics in question. It is, therefore, wholly absurd to try to ignore, deny, or talk out of existence these differences just because we do not approve of some of their social results.

Yet it is not hard to find anthropolo-

gists who, suffering from the semantic delusion that if you get rid of a word you get rid of what the word stands for, have been trying to abolish *the word* "race." Franz Boas, a distinguished anthropologist in many ways, was a leader in this campaign. Some of his students were badly infected with his mania. The main proposition, namely, that the word "race" has no referent, breaks down rather badly in the face of simple observation. The argument therefore tends to shift to the contention that while the alleged characteristics and differences that constitute the referent of the word "race" do exist, they are *not significant*. It is also contended that unfavorable differential behavior toward possessors of certain racial traits are of rather recent (and illegitimate) origin. Finally, it is held that the differential behavior toward groups characterized by certain differences can and should be wiped out by simple legislation. Thus, two learned anthropologists at Columbia University instruct us as follows: "All races of men can either plow or fight, and all the racial differences among them are in nonessentials such as texture of head hair, amount of body hair, shape of the nose or head, or color of the eyes and the skin."¹ Doubtless the characteristics mentioned have no essential relationship to the business of either plowing or fighting. Nevertheless, as characteristics of groups, these traits individually or in configuration are essential in accounting for selective association, prejudice, or by whatever word the resulting discriminative behavior may be called. Having declared that the differences are "nonessential," these authors also have a quick and easy remedy for certain troubles that have arisen throughout history because of such differences; "The Russian nation has for a generation shown what can be done to outlaw race prejudice in a country with many kinds of people. They did not wait for people's minds to change. They made racial discrimination and persecution illegal."² Today it would be both inadvisable and unnecessary to draw such

an illustration from Russia—we, too, have made “discrimination and persecution illegal.” Yet, strangely, no one seems quite happy with this simple solution. Another illustration would have to be found today, but the remedy doubtless remains the same.

Another widely publicized notion is the doctrine that while ethnocentrism and discrimination are perhaps both a universal and an age-old phenomenon, their occurrence with reference to racial groups is a rather recent and especially obnoxious development. Benedict and Weltfish claim that the notion of race and racial prejudice is hardly a hundred years old. A recent UNESCO bulletin puts it at three-hundred years.³ Lord Bryce is quoted as unable to find much evidence of it before the French Revolution. He solemnly tells us that before that time people did not think of themselves in terms of ethnology; that they made war for every other sort of reason but never “for the sake of imposing their own type of civilization.” Yet I have always read that the word Arab and the word Navajo mean “the people,” which seems to me to indicate that these groups regarded non-Arabs and non-Navajos, respectively, as non-people. Is this thinking of themselves in terms of ethnology or is it not? Were there wars and crusades before the French Revolution for the explicit purpose of “imposing one type of civilization” upon another or were there not? In short, the word *race* refers to a classification which may be as meaningful and objective as many other categories found useful in science. Any time biologists and social scientists want to drop the word and adopt another to designate a certain observable complex of characteristics, “inherent” or acquired, I have no objection. Likewise, ethnocentrism and discrimination are words denoting social behavior not only usually practiced but enforced according to stipulated patterns in every society as a condition of group survival. It is entirely ludicrous to agitate against “race,” “discrimination” and “ethnocentrism” in general when in fact all we are

opposed to is *particular patterns* of this behavior, especially when they affect ourselves adversely.

III

We have seen that (a) detectable differences among human groups do exist, and that (b) these differences are regarded as significant by the people who make them the basis for discriminatory behavior. In much current discussion of “minorities” these facts are hopelessly mixed up with the entirely separate question of whether among all these groups all conceivable abilities will be found similarly distributed. This is a question of fact to be determined in each case as adequate tests become available. Until such tests become conclusive, we cannot assume the existence of differences in abilities, *nor can we assume that such differences do not exist*. All that can be said is that *we do not know*.

It is perfectly true that wholly unwarranted assumptions have been made about inherent differences and ability among racial and ethnic groups, and that the demonstrable differences can be shown quite conclusively to be merely the results of cultural differentials. The fact that absurd contentions regarding the inferiority of some races have been made does not seem to warrant an equally absurd assumption that *there cannot be* statistically significant differences between racial, ethnic, religious, and any other classification of the human species, in any or all abilities whatsoever. When valid tests of a great variety of abilities become available, we shall be able to answer these questions. In the meantime, there appears to be no warrant for denying the possibility of such differences.

Not that more conclusive tests of ability will make much difference in solving discrimination based on *prejudice*, because it is the essence of prejudice that it should be based on less than scientifically adequate objective grounds. It is quite unlikely, furthermore, that tests will ever be invented which will measure so-called in-

herent abilities *entirely* uninfluenced by cultural factors. In the end we shall have to be content with testing different groups for the abilities which they do possess at the time tested, however these abilities are acquired and however they are influenced by cultural opportunities.

It is probably rather to be taken for granted that the scores achieved by all groups would be different if their cultural opportunity had been different. The fact remains that people will be treated according to the abilities which they *have* at a given time, place, and circumstance, not according to what abilities they *might have had* under different circumstances. Class structure, discrimination, and prejudice are based on detectable, observable differences of some kind *as they exist in a given social context*, regardless of the fact that this context, under different circumstances, might have been different. It does not follow that *all* differences are discriminated against. Only deviations in a *disapproved direction* become the basis of discrimination. And what determines disapproval? Broadly speaking, people disapprove (rightly or wrongly, on the basis of experience or superstition) of that which they *believe* threatens some value of their own.

I do not believe for a moment that the present status structure is the only possible one, that it is the "best," the "most just," or necessary. I do believe that in all but possibly the simplest societies, class structures with variable status, and "discrimination" on the basis of such status, have always existed, now exist, and will continue to exist. Many people are not prepared to admit this because it flies in the face of certain notions of democracy, human brotherhood, and certain other legalistic-moralistic premises to which most of us have prior emotional commitments. The difference between these preconceptions and the requirements of strictly objective analysis is not apparent to many people. Yet it is such analysis which the problem most needs in order that we may deter-

mine what, if anything, can be done about it.

IV

Closely related to the error of trying to talk out of existence demonstrable differences between racial and ethnic groups is the failure to recognize and emphasize the universality of the phenomenon of discrimination by groups against each other on the basis of all kinds of differences, physical and social. Many people seem to think that if only discrimination against Jews, Catholics, Negroes, Orientals, and perhaps a few other groups could be abolished in this country, "discrimination" as such would disappear and the so-called minority problems would cease to exist. Yet data to the contrary are overwhelming and may be observed about us on every hand.

Collins⁴ has shown that in a New England factory the Irish discriminate against the Yankees, the Yankees against the Poles, etc. Alexander⁵ found that college students admitted antipathies and prejudices against people regardless of ethnic group on the basis of some five hundred characteristics, including such features as large nostrils, black watery eyes, and oily hair. They also admitted prejudice against bowlegged persons, persons whose hands have stubby fingers, people who sniff vigorously when talking, etc., etc. Other studies have shown pioneers discriminating against newcomers, the innumerable discriminations against women, and, of course, the discriminations of in-groups against all out-groups whatsoever, which is one of the most basic generalized facts that sociologists have come up with.

Yet discussions of minority problems are carried on with a fine disregard of everything we know about the subject as a natural phenomenon in favor of the most elaborate legalistic-moralistic philosophizing and psychoanalysis. The popularity of the psychoanalytic approach is not surprising in view of the fact that it usually absolves all minorities from any responsibility whatsoever for any prejudice that

may exist against them for any reason whatsoever. All people who treat members of a minority in a way that the latter do not like are simply deranged, that's all, and it becomes the heavy duty of all minorities and their friends who have seen the light to proceed with the only remedy, namely, psychoanalysis of the "prejudiced." Innumerable books, special courses, institutes, workshops, and lectures give advice as to how to abolish "prejudice," "discrimination," and selective association—all of them entirely normal and necessary social processes in the maintenance of the mores and the social order generally.⁶

In most cases, of course, these efforts do not deal with the general problem. Their discussion usually boils down to how two or three or half a dozen specific minorities can maintain and enjoy their ethnocentric identity and *at the same time* suffer no differential behavior of a negative or out-group sort from the rest of the community. In other words, a substantial part of the agitation on behalf of minorities is directed at the old problem of how to have one's cake and eat it too.

Here it is necessary to distinguish sharply between two types of agitation on behalf of minorities. One of these types is perhaps best represented by certain Jewish and Negro groups. They recognize the basic nature of the problem essentially as

set forth in this paper. They are content to insist upon equal rights under the law, but reserve for themselves the privilege of selective association on religious, cultural, racial, or any other grounds that please them, including the privilege of discriminating against outsiders on these bases and accepting the penalty of being similarly discriminated against by other groups. These groups work quietly and effectively for the achievement of that changed status in the estimation of the community which in the long run is the only solution of the so-called minorities problem, to the extent that it is subject to solution. Such groups fall wholly outside the criticisms of the present paper.

On the other hand, there are those minority groups who appear to have set for themselves the impossible and psychopathic task of maintaining an exclusive group identity (through negative discrimination against outsiders) and at the same time abolishing differential (discriminatory) behavior toward themselves on the basis of precisely the exclusive identity sought. I call it psychopathic because it seeks to advance mutually exclusive values. Most minority movements have at least a lunatic fringe interested in those impossible goals.

Exactly what goals have minority pressure groups set for themselves? Do they actually contemplate a state of affairs un-

Bait-Worm

Fathoms to drop this hope,
Leagues to expend
Wound reels of patience,
Tide at the full,

Sprawl me here hungry
At land's end,
Angling, mocked by a single
Circling gull,

Till my bait-worm, dug
In a dusk hour,
Skewered into a bleeding
Question, shall snatch

From the uneasy flow,
For holiday fare,
Love's spiny, flopping,
Slippery catch.

JOHN MOFFIT