

I think universities should emphasize commonality as a higher value than "diversity" and "pluralism"—buzzwords for the politics of difference. Difference that does not rest on a clearly delineated foundation of commonality is not only inaccessible to those who are not part of the ethnic or racial group, but also antagonistic to them. Difference can enrich only the common ground.

Integration has become an abstract term today, having to do with little more than numbers and racial balances. But it once stood for a high and admirable set of values. It made difference second to commonality, and it asked members of all races to face whatever fears they inspired in each other. I doubt the word will have a new vogue, but the values, under whatever name, are worth working for.

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The Memory of Enemies

*"One of the most time-consuming things
is to have an enemy."*

—E. B. WHITE

It is only human to give our enemies a distinct territory in our memory, which is why we hear the buzz of summer's first mosquito with mild alarm. We think only fools don't remember their enemies, because remembering is preparedness. And, conversely, what we call preparedness is often really a readiness to remember the enemy, an openness to his memory-triggering buzz. Even today, changing planes in a Southern airport, the sound of a white Southern accent slips right past what I know about the New South and finds my memory of the old South. Recently, in line to buy a newspaper at such an airport, I found myself carefully watching the white saleswoman, whose accent was particularly thick. If she was anything less than gracious to me as the lone black in line, I knew my defenses would come alive. I would think she must be of the Old South at heart, no more than a carpetbagger in the new one. And how many others down here were like her,

imposters in this public relations bromide of a New South? If she put my change on the counter rather than in my hand, I'd have all the evidence I needed to close the case against her and the New South to boot.

I could condemn this woman, or at least be willing to condemn her and even her region, not because of her racial beliefs, which I didn't know, but because her accent had suddenly made her accountable to *my* voluminous and vivid memory of a racist South. Because of this accent and my Northern lack of familiarity with it, I was not encountering the woman so much as my own memory of an extremely powerful and dreaded enemy—the Old South. A flood of emotional images accompanied the memory, constituted it, and I saw right through the woman as if into a screen of memory. Coolly, I circled her with mistrust, ready for what I remembered. I thought I might take the offensive and let her glimpse the slightest disdain in the cut of my eyes. But, at the sight of this mistrustful black man, his eyes verging on disdain, might she not fall under the spell of her own enemy-memory and see before her an arrogant, hostile black against whom she must put up her own chilliness as a defense?

I think one of the heaviest weights that oppression leaves on the shoulders of its former victims is simply the memory of itself. This memory is a weight because it pulls the oppression forward, out of history and into the present, so that the former victim may see his world as much through the memory of his oppression as through his experience in the present. What makes this a weight is that the rememberer will gird himself against a larger and more formidable enemy than the one he is actually encountering. It was the intrusion of the enemy-memory that led me into an exaggerated and wasteful defensiveness with the saleswoman. I was willing to manu-

facture a little drama of one-upmanship, play it out, and then no doubt brood over it as though something was really at stake. Later, I might recount it to my friends and thereby give this battle with memory even more solidity. The enemy-memory clamors to be made real, demands that we work at its realization. And in this working is its real heaviness, since scarce resources are lost in unnecessary defense. Fortunately, in this situation, I caught myself and did not show this woman any disdain. She sold me the newspaper, put three quarters change into my hand, and gave me the same abbreviated, management-encouraged smile she had given everyone else before me. These little battles with memory can also be deflating.

I believe that one of the greatest problems black Americans currently face—one of the greatest barriers to our development in society—is that our memory of oppression has such power, magnitude, depth, and nuance that it constantly drains our best resources into more defense than is strictly necessary. Between defense and development, guns and butter, the enemy-memory perpetuates a costly imbalance in the distribution of energies, thoughts, and actions. None of this is to say that the real enemy has entirely disappeared. Nor is it to suggest that we should forget our oppression, assuming this was even possible. It is only to say that our oppression has left us with a dangerously powerful memory of itself that can pull us into warlike defensiveness at a time when there is more opportunity for development than ever before.

The memory of any enemy is always a pull into the past, into a preparedness against what has already happened. Some of this is necessary. But when there is a vast lake of such memory—and I can think of no group with a more powerful collective memory of its enemy than black Americans—the

irresistible pull into the past can render opportunities in the present all but invisible. The look is backward rather than forward, outward rather than inward, so that the possibilities for development—education, economic initiative, job training, et cetera—are only seen out of the corner of the backward-looking eye. Thus, between 1976 and 1989, blacks have endured a drop in college enrollment of between 53 and 36 percent while white enrollment increased 3.6 percent. I don't suggest that the backward pull of memory fully accounts for a statistic this dramatic. But neither does it make sense to blame so profound a drop entirely on the shift in financial aid from grants to loans that occurred in the 1980s. White enrollment increased slightly under this same shift.

There are clearly many factors at work in a statistic like this. One of them, I believe, is a certain unseeing casualness toward opportunity that in itself has many sources, one being a powerful collective memory that can skew the vision of blacks away from the self-interested exploitation of opportunity and into a reenactment of past victimization that confirms our exaggerated sense of the enemy but also undermines our advancement. Not only does the enemy-memory pull us backward, it also indirectly encourages us to remain victims so as to confirm the power of the enemy we remember and believe in. It asks that we duplicate our oppression so that our remembered sense of it might be validated. I think this has something to do with the fact that so many middle-income black students decline to be admitted to colleges that woo them with preferential admissions policies. And for black students who are admitted, the national dropout rate is near 70 percent. If this is nothing less than a flight from opportunity, it is also a flight into a remembered victimization, a

position we are used to and one that makes memory into reality.

I think the literary term "objective correlative" best describes the process by which our memory of the enemy pulls the past forward into the present. The white Southern accent I heard in the airport is an example of an objective correlative—an objective event that by association evokes a particular emotion or set of emotions. It was the savvy, musical sound of this woman's accent—an utterly objective and random event—that evoked in me an aggregate of troublesome racial emotions. The accent was a correlative to those emotions by virtue of association alone.

The black comedian Richard Pryor does a funny bit on this. To get away from the pressures and the racism he found on the mainland, he bought a house deep in the forest on a remote Hawaiian island. But just as he settles in one night to at last enjoy his solitude, he hears from the surrounding forest the infamous cry of the Southern "redneck"—"YAAA-HOO!" This was the chilling cry that often preceded an escapade of mindless violence against blacks, the sort of good ole boy violence that could mean anything from harassment to lynching. It correlates with and evokes the sort of terror that blacks lived with for centuries in the South, a terror that Pryor milks for great comic effect. But, as far as we know, there are no real good ole boys in his forest. The shout is by someone who does not know the meaning it carries for Pryor. It is an objective event that by correlation pulls forward a historical terror through space and time.

The enemy-memory works by correlation, by connecting events in the present to emotionally powerful memories of the

enemy. In American life there are objective correlatives everywhere that evoke the painful thicket of emotions—vulnerability, self-doubt, helplessness, terror, and rage—that comes from having lived for centuries under the dominion of an enemy race. In the American language itself there are countless words and expressions that function as correlatives—“you people,” “bootstraps,” “reverse discrimination,” “colored people” (interestingly “people of color” is not a correlative), “black militant,” “credit to his race,” “one of my best friends . . .,” “I never knew a black until college . . . the Army . . .”—any phrase or tone that condescends, damns with faint praise, or stereotypes either positively or negatively. Any generalization about blacks correlates with the practice of generalizing about us that led to our oppression. And then there is an entire iconography of visual correlatives covering everything from Confederate flags and pickup trucks with gun racks to black lawn jockeys, flesh-colored Band-Aids that are actually pink, separate black and white advertisements for the same product, et cetera. Tragically, the most relentless visual correlative may be white skin itself, especially for blacks with little experience in the larger society.

Blacks grow up in America surrounded by correlatives to their collective pain. I think the recent demand on college campuses and in the workplace for more racial sensitivity is, among other things, a demand that whites become more sensitive to the myriad correlatives that put blacks in touch with painful emotions. White insensitivity in this area is a form of power, an unearned and unfair power that feels to blacks like another manifestation of their victimization. And in a sense it is, since white insensitivity in whatever form (and sometimes nothing can be more insensitive than a pained

sensitivity that calls attention to itself) carries the power to diminish blacks, even when unintended. On one level the push for racial sensitivity is an attempt to offset the power whites have by birthright to compromise blacks with racial anxiety by ignoring the correlatives to that anxiety.

But objective correlatives are only one part of the process of correlation by which the enemy-memory operates. They are intrusive visitations through which the objective world causes us to feel our emotional history in a way that makes us insecure in the present, and so robs us of power. I believe this process also works in reverse, in a way that tries to restore power. That is, the enemy-memory becomes a force in its own right and actually creates correlatives for itself in the world—correlatives that reinforce its often exaggerated sense of the enemy's power so as to justify black demands for power. In this process, mistrust is the transforming agent that encircles an “event” and redefines it as a correlative to the enemy's continuing intention to oppress blacks. And when the memory of the enemy is as vast and powerful as it is for black Americans, there is an abundance of mistrust available for this purpose. Correlatives created by racial mistrust are subjective rather than objective, since they do not come from the objective world but rather are imposed on it. They are fabrications of racial mistrust in which current events are infused with the memory of a more powerful racism than exists today.

A recent and striking example of this is the claim by many blacks that the drug epidemic in black neighborhoods across the country is the result of a white conspiracy to commit genocide against black people. Here the memory of pernicious racism is being brought forward to redefine a current problem, to transform it into a correlative for what is remembered so

that it cannot be seen for what it is. Even if we assume that government is not doing all it can to combat drug use in the inner city, it takes a long stretch of the imagination to conclude that this is evidence of a white conspiracy to kill off blacks. I think memory and the mistrust born of it are the sources of this hyperbole. Also, once the black drug epidemic becomes a subjective correlative for black oppression, then it stands as a *racial* injustice and so entitles blacks, in the name of redress, to pursue power in relation to whites. Because subjective correlatives always make events into racial issues—by recasting them as examples of black victimization—they are always used to justify the pursuit of power.

All of this, I believe, has something to do with why the civil rights leadership has lost credibility in American society since the days of Martin Luther King. Too much under the sway of their memory of the enemy, this more recent group of leaders has not always made the distinction between hyperbolic correlatives for black oppression and actual oppressive events. When the NAACP marched against the recent group of Supreme Court decisions that severely limited preferential treatment programs, they transformed this cluster of decisions into a correlative for black oppression, even though at least one of them reaffirmed for whites the same constitutional right to sue for representation that blacks demanded during the civil rights movement. None of these decisions deprived blacks of their constitutional rights, so to characterize them as anti-black is to recast them, through memory and mistrust, into symbols of the kind of oppression that blacks knew in the days of *Plessey v. Ferguson*, when the principle of "separate but equal" was established. Decisions that attack *preferences* are made to correlate with decisions that deny black rights. Of course, this correlation is only

suggested through the symbolism of protest marches and a rhetoric of black victimization, but its effect is to diminish the credibility of black leadership. Most Americans simply do not accept the correlation. It is an exaggeration that has the look of a power move.

The exaggeration of black victimization is always the first indication that a current event is being transformed by mistrust into a subjective correlative that sanctions the pursuit of racial power. (As discussed in the first chapter of this book, victimization is a form of innocence and innocence always entitles us to pursue power.) The current black leadership has injured its credibility by its tendency to make so many black problems into correlatives for black oppression. The epidemic of black teen pregnancies, the weakened black family, the decline in the number of black college students, and so on are too often cast as correlatives of historic racism. About Mayor Marion Barry's arrest on drug charges, Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP said, "I don't think there's any question there's some racism involved . . ." despite the fact that countless other black mayors have not been hounded by such charges. Such claims are exaggerations because racism simply does not fully explain these problems. No doubt they have something to do with the historic wounds of oppression, but what the charge of racism does not explain is the giving in to these wounds more than ever before during a twenty-five-year decline in racism and discrimination. There are more black males of college age in prison than in college, even as universities across the country struggle to recruit more black students. Black leaders can solve their "credibility gap" only by distinguishing between real oppression and those correlatives that exaggerate it in the interest of narrow racial power. Without this distinction our leaders seem always to be crying

wolf. And here the point must be made that discrimination continues to exist, and we need a credible leadership to resist it.

Tragically, there is a real anti-black sentiment in American life, but it is no longer as powerful as we *remember* it to be. Our memory makes us like the man who wears a heavy winter coat in springtime because he was frostbitten in winter. Every sharp spring breeze becomes a correlative for the enemy of frostbite so that he is still actually living in winter even as flowers bloom all around him. Not only do subjective correlatives cause us to reenact the past, they also rarely bring us the power we seek through them because they are too much based on exaggeration. Worse, they cut us off from the present and its many opportunities by encouraging the sort of vision in which we look at the present only to confirm the past.

But the distortions of correlation are not the only problems that come to blacks from our enemy-memory. I think this memory has also led to one of our most serious mistakes in thinking: to often confuse the actual development of our race with the elimination of racial discrimination, to see somehow these two very different goals as synonymous. Though the elimination of discrimination clearly facilitates our development, the two goals are entirely different and require entirely different strategies. The elimination of discrimination will always be largely a collective endeavor, while racial development will always be the *effect* that results from individuals within the race bettering their own lives. The former requires group solidarity, collective action, and a positive group identity, while the latter demands individual initiative, challenging personal aspirations, focused hard work, and a strong individual identity. Different goals; dif-

ferent strategies. But I believe the powerful memories blacks have of racism and discrimination rally us to the fight against these things at the expense of our development as a people. This is one of the reasons why blacks have fallen further behind whites on many socioeconomic measures in the last twenty years, even as actual discrimination has declined.

The enemy-memory distracts us from development by mirroring us in a very natural process of *inversion* in which we invert from negative to positive the very point of difference—our blackness—that the enemy used to justify our oppression. Inversion tries to transform the quality that made us most vulnerable into an identity of invulnerability. Blackness becomes a source of pride rather than shame, strength rather than weakness. This is a necessary and inevitable process by which any oppressed group regathers dignity and esteem from the experience of denigration.

But inversion—fueled by the visceral memory of the enemy—is also a trap. (I must add that it is also fueled by the racial vulnerability discussed in chapters four and five. However, here I will focus on its connection to the enemy-memory.) The great evil of America's oppression of blacks was the use of the collective quality of color to limit us as individuals, no matter our talents or energies—individual autonomy stifled by oppressive collectivism. When inversion drives us to make our racial collectivity positive rather than negative, it may reach for new dignity, but it also reinforces our bondage to collectivism at the expense of individual autonomy. Whether we are struggling against shame or for pride, we are still spilling scarce energy into the pursuit of collective esteem at the expense of individual development.

Inversion draws us back into a preoccupation with our

collective identity at the very moment when we most stand to gain from the initiative of individuals who are unburdened by too much collective obligation. To carry off inversion we must become self-conscious about the meaning of our race, we must redefine that meaning, invest it with an ideology and a politics, claim an essence for it, and look to it, as much as to ourselves, as a means to betterment. And, of course, this degree of racial preoccupation prepares the ground for intense factionalism within the race. Who has the best twist on blackness, the Black Muslims or the civil rights establishment, the cultural nationalists or the black Baptists, Malcolm X or Martin Luther King? And who is the most black, who the least? Within each faction is a racial orthodoxy that must be endlessly debated and defended, which rallies the faction against other factions while imposing a censorship of thought on its own members. Even when blacks avoid factions, they must be ready to defend that choice to others and to themselves. Inversion perpetuates the fundamental imbalance of racial oppression itself by giving the collective quality of race far too much importance in the lives of individual black Americans.

One of the many advantages whites enjoy in America is a relative freedom from the draining obligation of racial inversion. Whites do not have to spend precious time fashioning an identity out of simply being white. They do not have to self-consciously imbue whiteness with an ideology, look to whiteness for some special essence, or divide up into factions and wrestle over what it means to be white. Their racial collectivism, to the extent that they feel it, creates no imbalance between the collective and the individual. This, of course, is yet another blessing of history and of power, of never having lived in the midst of an overwhelming enemy

race. It is a blessing won at the expense of blacks, whose subjugation brought whites a sort of automatic racial inversion—a secure sense of superiority that freed them from the struggle for simple racial dignity.

It was clearly impossible for blacks to avoid inversion, just as it was impossible for us to avoid our enemy. Therefore it was also impossible for us to avoid the burden of collectivism and the preoccupation with race that goes with it. Inversion once was a survival impulse, and yet, today, when the oppression of blacks has greatly diminished, I believe this impulse causes our most serious strategic mistake: to put the responsibility for our racial development more in the hands of the collective than in the hands of the individuals who compose it. It is inversion that obscures the distinction mentioned above between the elimination of discrimination (societal change) and racial development by submerging us too deeply in collectivism. And once “collectivized,” collective action seems to be the only remedy for our problems. But, while civil rights bills can be won this way, only the individual can achieve in school, master a salable skill, open a business, become an accountant or an engineer. Despite our collective oppression, opportunities for development can finally be exploited only by individuals.

Whether a stigmatized minority group develops successfully or slips into inertia has much to do with whether or not the group allows its impulse toward inversion (and therefore collectivism) to muddy the distinction between societal change and group development. This is the distinction that allows the group to assign responsibility for development to the individual. Those groups that have somehow maintained this distinction (for historical and cultural reasons too complex to explore here) have thrived in America despite racism, anti-

Semitism, and outright discrimination. Asians, Jews, West Indians, and others have found their avenue for development in the aspirations of their individuals who have approached American society with initiative, energy, and pragmatism. Certainly, the point must be made here that the civil rights movement, which won many victories against discrimination, made the road easier for the individuals within these groups. On the front of collective action against bigotry, no group has made a greater contribution than black Americans. Yet I think the extremely intense memory of our enemy (along with racial vulnerability and the continuing presence of racism in America) has so absorbed us into inversion and collectivism that we have overlooked the developmental power to be found in the aspirations of our individuals.

This imbalance is evident today in many areas of black life. Black college students often take a leading role in demanding change on their campuses, yet as a group they have the lowest grade point average and the highest dropout rate of any student group in America—collective action over individual initiative. The national civil rights leadership relentlessly pressures the government for more and better social programs, yet does not put equal pressure on blacks to achieve as individuals—one result being that we are often not developed enough to take advantage of the concessions civil rights leadership has won, such as affirmative action. Their unconscious strategy is to transform the problems of black America into subjective correlatives. When problems, like black teenage pregnancies, the drug epidemic, poor educational performance, and so on are recast as correlatives for black oppression, the primary responsibility for solving them automatically falls on the larger society. Subjective correlatives serve inversion by blame-placing, by casting blacks as

victims and the society as their oppressor. But most of all they reinforce the collectivism of inversion by always showing black problems as resulting from an oppression that can only be resisted by collective action. And here is where the distinction between societal change and racial development is lost, where the individual is subsumed by the collective.

Thus, at the 1989 NAACP convention, the several problems that face black America—from affirmative action to teen pregnancies—were listed on the agenda, but primarily as subjective correlatives, as evidence of society's indifference to blacks, as yet more proof of our continuing victimization and, therefore, our innocence. In this deterministic context the power to be found in the individual is lost amid the exhortations for more societal change. The price blacks pay for inversion, for placing too much of the blame for our problems on society, is helplessness before those problems.

Inversion also hurts our development in another way. If the memory of the enemy leads to inversion (helped along by subjective correlatives), it is also true that inversion requires us to remember the enemy. In order to invert, to make blackness positive, we must know the negative views whites have of us. In this sense, inversion not only makes the black identity itself too much a response to white racism, but it also makes our identity dependent on that racism. With inversion we need a knowledge of our former oppressor's worst view of us in order to carry out the work of self-definition—a process that requires us to remember the enemy at his "worst" in order to know ourselves at our "best." In this way, inversion, born of the memory of our enemy, also demands that we remember him more, thus completing a self-perpetuating cycle of obsessive and painful memory.

By exaggerating our enemy in order to define ourselves,

we put ourselves in the ironic position of having to deny clearly visible opportunities in order to "be black" and claim a strong black identity. Out of this cycle of memory comes the "real black" who sees society as an oppressive withholder of black opportunities. I recently spoke with a black woman who described herself as a cultural nationalist. In her view there were virtually no opportunities for blacks to enter the mainstream of American life, which she saw as fundamentally racist. She was, as we say, the blackest of the black, yet this purified identity was achieved by an absolute denial of mainstream black opportunity. In her scheme, the more opportunity one admitted to, let alone took advantage of, the less "black" one was. The power of memory and inversion had virtually called this woman back to slavery and left her no option but collective action, since individual possibility was all but invisible to her. She was an extreme case, but also an extreme version of the paradigm that touches many blacks. Even among middle-class blacks who function well in the mainstream, when the time comes to declare one's identity, to announce one's blackness, there is invariably a denial of black opportunity. This is the denial that brings one securely back inside the circle of blackness, that quite literally lets one feel black. To point to opportunity is to stand outside this circle, to be less black. Inversion is a reunion with the enemy in which we once again define ourselves as his victim.

Common wisdom sometimes tells us that it is good to have enemies—"We can learn even from our enemies," said Ovid. Probably, this is true, since two other things are certainly true: we will have enemies whether they are good for us or not, and we will have a bond with them whether we wish to or not. But the quarrel I have with such wisdom is that it

does not speak to the issue of degree. It is one thing simply to have an enemy; it is another thing to be inundated and sat upon by an enemy and to live in this condition over the course of centuries. The magnitude of such an enemy makes the common wisdom almost fatuous. No doubt, black Americans have learned much from such an enemy, but at a price that has been absurdly punitive. Still, I think we have one thing left to learn—to discipline our memory of the enemy so that we can distinguish between that memory and the actual "enemy activity" that we may still encounter. To fail in this distinction is to remain at war with a far greater enemy than the one we actually live with.

Our greatest problem today is insufficient development—this *more* than white racism. And just as nations deplete themselves rather than develop in wartime, we can't really advance under the burden of an enemy swollen into a Goliath by memory. I think we should see the enemy for the mad bee that he is rather than the raging lion he used to be. If this metaphor is too charitable, then we can pick another one, but in any case we must diminish his size and scope in our minds to his actual proportions. Then we must free our individuals from the tyranny of a wartime collectivism in which they must think of themselves as victims in order to identify with their race. The challenge now is to reclaim ourselves from the exaggerations of our own memory and to go forward as the free American citizens that we are. There is no magic that will make development happen. We simply have to want more for ourselves, be willing to work for it, and not use our enemy—old or new—as an excuse not to pursue it. It doesn't really matter that Southern accents in Southern airports make me remember. What's important is that I can travel.

