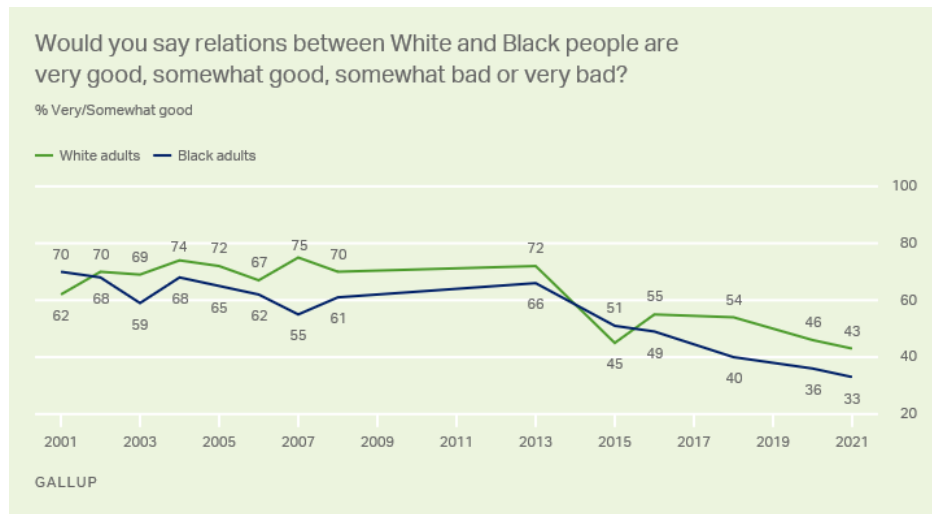


**Review of Coleman Hughes, *The End of Race Politics: Arguments for a Colorblind America*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2024.**

Halfway through *The End of Race Politics*, Coleman Hughes arrives at “perhaps the single most shocking graph relating to American race relations” (p. 92).



Source: [Gallup](#)

It is indeed hard not to be shocked. In 2001, solid majorities of Whites and Blacks told Gallup that relations between the two races were “somewhat” or even “very good.” By 2021, they were saying the opposite. Black optimism had plummeted from an astonishing 70% to a baleful 33%, as White optimism tumbled from 62% to 43%.

What went wrong? What brought American race relations to a twenty-year nadir?

We can’t pin the blame on any one politician, says Hughes. The decline began in 2013—five years after Obama’s historic election, and two years before Trump’s historic escalator ride. Nor can we blame the rising tide of White racism; support for groups like the KKK had by 2013 been dropping for decades, along with the numbers of Black men shot by police. (White racism is bad, but it *used to* be bad, too.) Instead, Hughes blames a new ideology—what he calls “neoracism,” the *bête noire* of his first book—that spread like wildfire with the advent of smartphones and social media.<sup>1</sup>

According to neoracists, our racial problems need racial solutions. White people should openly proclaim their privileges and “strive to be ‘less white’” — which Robin DiAngelo defines

<sup>1</sup> By 2013, just over half of American adults were on Facebook, and for the first time a majority owned smartphones. (These numbers are calculated from the 2013 American Community Survey, in which [74.4% of American households](#) reported using the internet, and from polling from [Pew](#), which found that 71% of online adults used Facebook. The data on smartphone usage is also from [Pew](#), which began surveying Americans on the topic in 2011.)

pejoratively as being “less racially oppressive.” Black people, meanwhile, should be singled out for preferential treatment in hiring, school admissions, and various government programs. “The only remedy to racist discrimination,” says Ibram X. Kendi, “is antiracist discrimination.” It is certainly not enough to shun stereotypes and opt for “colorblind” systems that treat like cases alike. Wherever we find racially disparate outcomes, the system that produced them must itself be racist, and should therefore be abolished. If Black students fail standardized tests, don’t “close the gap” — ban the tests. If Black drivers get more tickets from traffic cameras, don’t serve the fines — tear down the cameras.

To Hughes, neoracism is nothing short of a moral and political disaster. Although neoracists claim to be the next coming of the Civil Rights Movement — which delivered victories for Black Americans against forced segregation, suffocating restrictions on voting, and blatant discrimination in the workplace — the neoracists have betrayed the movement’s moral philosophy and have few political wins to show for it.

The philosophical core of the Civil Rights Movement, Hughes argues, was the very opposite of neoracism — a principle of colorblindness. The idea here is not to play pretend, like the person who says they don’t see color. “We all see race,” and nobody should feign otherwise (p. 18). Hughes understands colorblindness instead as a moral aspiration: that “we should treat people without regard to race, both in our public policy and in our private lives” (p. 19). The point is not that racism is irrelevant; it is morally wrong. But that is precisely because somebody’s race is a shallow and “arbitrary” characteristic of theirs, not a part of who they are as human beings (p. 5). Intrinsically, race does not warrant the fuss. Nor does Hughes think it should be used as a “proxy for disadvantage” (p. 11); a better proxy by far would be socioeconomic class.

Nowadays, colorblindness tends to be seen as passé at best, “white supremacy” at worst.<sup>2</sup> When Hughes advocated colorblindness in a TED talk, the “blowback” from staffers was strong enough that TED refused to publish the video without a tacked-on “extension,” in which Hughes and Jamelle Bouie were to debate whether colorblindness “perpetuates racism.”<sup>3</sup> Good progressives know that “colorblind” is coded as conservative.

In *The End of Race Politics*, we get to hear Hughes speak his mind about colorblindness without someone else twisting his arm. And we are lucky for it. A lonely island of honesty in the midst of a vast ocean of insincerity, Hughes’ book is a refreshing read. Besides being the punchiest defense of colorblindness in years, it is a welcome counterweight to figures like Kendi and DiAngelo, whose ideas have been so influential in corporate DEI workshops, humanities seminars, and progressive media.

But that’s just to say that Hughes is worth reading. Is he *right*?

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Maia Niguel Hoskin, “Dear White People, Cut It Out With The ‘Colorblindness.’ It Perpetuates White Supremacy,” [The Washington Post](#), July 13, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For the jot and tittle, see [Hughes’ post-mortem](#), as well as the [reply](#) from Adam Grant and TED Curator Christ Anderson, both published by *The Free Press*.

While he lands some heavy blows against “neoracists,” I think Hughes underestimates the challenges for colorblind politics. Even during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, there were bitter conflicts between more colorblind groups—such as Roy Wilkins’ NAACP and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s SCLC—and the avant-garde SNCC, which embraced Black Power in 1966 and expelled its White members the following year. “Black Power” comes up in Hughes’ book only twice—in denouncements from King (pp. 60, 65) and Wilkins (p. 60). Hughes never grapples with the idea that it might be okay to be proud of one’s race, or that Black people might legitimately prefer a church, a neighborhood, or a college where they can enjoy some relief from being in the minority.

The problem is not that Hughes is a hardliner. He is, if anything, surprisingly pragmatic, showing an openness to narrowly targeted race-conscious policies where they have a clear rationale. He supports hiring Black cops to police Black neighborhoods, for example, as well as the payment of reparations to “specific living victims of government abuses” (p. 122).

The problem is more philosophical. Hughes seems to interpret America’s ongoing racial woes as a mirage that we continue to be fooled by, when they are more like a dilemma on which we continue to procrastinate. Even if colorblindness is our best hope for progress—even if it is our *only* hope—we cannot achieve it without compromising other cherished values.

To be clear, I do not mean that Hughes downplays the prevalence of racism. I mean that he downplays the *tradeoffs* that we have to make when choosing how to be *anti-racist*. The colorblind principle has obvious advantages over the “neoracist” or “woke” alternative. But it has its downsides, too, hiding in the book’s main blind spot.

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The trouble begins with “race.”

As Hughes puts it, the concept of race is like that of a month: “a social construct *inspired by* a natural phenomenon” (p. 4, emphasis original). Just as a month loosely fits the lunar cycle, our racial categories loosely track each “cluster of similar genomes” created by “the major out-of-Africa migrations” (p. 5). But now the concept of a race has a life of its own, and we categorize people into races using arbitrary rules with no basis in biology. Barack Obama, for example, is treated as Black rather than White, despite being half of each—a vestige of “the old one-drop rule” (p. 6). Such rules are not the stuff of real science, and they are not the sorts of things we should have in mind when we think about our friends and neighbors.

Thankfully, the one-drop rule has lost much of its legal *oomph*, as the US Federal Government Census now invites Americans to check the box for multiple races. But Hughes still finds the choice of boxes arbitrary. “Black, Hispanic, White, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native

American/Alaska Native” —this “canonical list of five categories” does not reflect deep facts about anyone’s humanity, only a “vague mix of intuitions about racial differences” (p. 6).<sup>4</sup>

Granted: if races were just an armchair attempt at biological taxonomy, the topic of race would indeed be “boring” (p. ix), and caring about race would be as arbitrary as caring about eye color.

But this is not what race actually means in our politics. As the social theorist Joe Heath has argued, much of America’s discourse about “race” is really concerned with conflicts between *ethnic groups*—particular communities that tend to share features like culture, language, religion, and history.<sup>5</sup> In other countries, minority ethnic groups often belong to the majority race—think of Francophones in Quebec or the Ainu in Japan. But in America, we often use “race” as a clunky proxy for ethnicity, and we often say “Black” when we have in mind a more specific ethnic group: the descendants of Africans brought to America to work in slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Even if race is arbitrary, as Hughes believes, it would be hard to say the same of ethnicity. People who share a religion or language will reasonably want to be around one another. People who share a culture may reasonably resent pressures to “assimilate” to the majority’s culture, which may not value their ethnic identity. Such an identity can sometimes involve a shared sense of grievance for past oppression. But it typically involves much more—anything from a distinctive musical tradition to a connection to traditional lands.

Now, you might expect Hughes to dismiss ethnic pride as silly ideology. But here is how he starts Chapter 1:

For most of my life, I saw my mother as neither black nor white. Her Puerto Rican father was darker-skinned than me and her Puerto Rican mother was a light-skinned as any white American I knew. My mother emerged a perfect blend of the two: a light-brown hue that suggested neither blackness nor whiteness—at least not to my mind. ... She would sometimes describe herself as “of color.” But whenever she really cared to show her identity, she would say she was Puerto Rican, and more specifically *Nuyorican*—a person who grew up in one of the Puerto Rican enclaves of New York City. (P. 1)

It makes perfect sense why Hughes’ mother would have pride in being Nuyorican, since there is more to this identity than skin color and ancestry—two traits that, as Hughes emphasizes, have

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<sup>4</sup> This list is not quite accurate anymore. According to the [U.S. Census](#), the U.S. Office of Budget and Management “requires five minimum categories” for census surveys; these are “White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.” Rather than a race, “Hispanic” is the sole “ethnicity.”

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Heath, *Cooperation and Social Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), Chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Heath uses “African-American” to refer to the ethnicity and “Black” to refer to the racial category. In the realm of activist politics, the group known as [American Descendants of Slavery](#) (ADOS) advocates for designating “descendants of chattel slavery in the United States as a protected category,” as distinct from “Black,” which includes post-emancipation migrants.

“nothing essential” to do with “human well-being” (p. 16). To be Nuyorican is to belong to a particular community at a particular place and time. While the community’s sense of itself has something to do with skin and origin, these properties are not its essence.

But what if being Black is—in the context of certain political conflicts—less like having green eyes and more like being Nuyorican?

This is how, historically, many opponents of colorblindness have seen the issue of Black identity. I don’t mean the racists—whether neo or paleo—who believe in White or Black superiority. I have in mind those figures who believed in racial equality while opposing racial integration.

Heath has some revealing examples. In *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton declare that “integration, as traditionally conceived, would abolish the black community.”<sup>7</sup> In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates describes the feeling, conjured by his time at the majority-Black Howard University, that “we were something, that we were a tribe – on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real.”<sup>8</sup>

Or we might turn to W.E.B. Dubois in “The Conservation of Races.”<sup>9</sup> He writes:

We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy. As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development.

To “conserve” the race’s assets, Dubois calls for “Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations,” and so forth. This is a sincere plea for “separate but equal” institutions.

Such institutions, of course, have been irrevocably stigmatized for Americans by their association with Jim Crow laws, which the Supreme Court sanctioned in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, one year before Dubois’ essay. Far from “deprecating inequality,” Jim Crow perpetuated it, with cruel and demeaning strictures governing every aspect of public life. But when the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy* in 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*, the rationale was not a return to Dubois’ dream, but its repudiation. “Separate but equal” was deemed an impossibility, on the grounds that separating Blacks from Whites *itself* makes Blacks feel inferior.

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<sup>7</sup> *Black Power* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 55, as cited in Heath 2022, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), p. 56, emphasis original, cited in Heath 2022, p. 281.

<sup>9</sup> Delivered to the American Negro Academy in 1897.

This is one horn of America's most difficult racial dilemma, as theorized by Dubois, Heath, and others.<sup>10</sup> A significant concern in the Black community is that true integration into American society—a submerging into what many Americans would call “White” culture—would entail the loss of a distinctive African-American identity. There would be no more distinctively African-American music or art, no distinctive dialect, no Black American colleges striving for Black excellence. Or rather, if any of these things were to be conserved, it will have to be a coincidence, rather than the result of conscious organization.

If you are not disturbed by the prospect of such cultural loss, you are not only colorblind but *ethnicity-blind*, a far more difficult attitude to sustain. “Seeing ethnicity” does not require the repugnant chauvinism that Hughes derides as “neoracism.” It only requires some kinds of partial loyalties, a basic part of moral life.<sup>11</sup>

Let me be clear: none of this presupposes that ethnicity is an “essence,” biological or otherwise. As the legal scholar Richard Ford argues, how an ethnic group conceives of itself can be shaped in contingent ways by laws and social policies. For example, when the Supreme Court ruled in *U.C. Regents v. Bakke* that racial quotas for university admissions were unconstitutional, they left the door open for cultural “diversity” as a rationale for affirmative action; this was later affirmed in *Grutter v. Bollinger*. The *Bakke-Grutter* combination gave minority applicants an incentive to play up their cultural distinctness.<sup>12</sup> There can also be economic incentives to do this, as dramatized in the recent *American Fiction*, whose erudite protagonist Monk is prodded by his publisher to write “Blacker” novels, befitting his identity. Disgusted, drunk and directionless, Monk eventually gives in and pens *My Pafology* (later shortened to *Fuck*), B-movie drivel larded with demeaning Black stereotypes—and suddenly finds himself with a lucrative book deal, as well as a potent dose of alienation.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of the “ethnicity first” approach is not to encourage people to embody stereotypes, or to underwrite ethnicity with any dubious moral aura. The goal is just to show where the action really is in America's race politics—to emphasize that it's not all pride and prejudice on the basis of color. Race matters, but culture and history usually matter more. Even when ethnic groups are partly delimited by a color line, what ties the group together is often a deeper kind of solidarity, one that is harder to impugn, and harder to ask people to give up.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992) and Roy L. Brooks, *Integration or Separation? A Strategy for Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> See Andrew Oldenquist, “Loyalties,” *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 173–93. A jewel of a paper, this comes from an era of *JPhil* when you didn't need footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Chapter 1. Ford sometimes contrasts the “cultural” conception of race with a concern for the “history of racism.” But I think of ethnicity as including both a particular group's culture and its history. And I think there is more to “history” than legacies of discrimination. A group's struggles and achievements can be a source of pride and self-understanding.

<sup>13</sup> Dir. Cord Jefferson, 2023.

Would Hughes want to extend his colorblind ethos to ethnicity? I am not sure. On the one hand, his sensitive treatment of Nuyoricanism presents ethnic identity as a legitimate thing to care about (if perhaps only in private life). On the other hand, if we can care about ethnicity, then Hughes' call for colorblindness rests upon a questionable assumption—that Black Americans share only a race, and do not comprise an ethnic group.

This, in my view, is the most serious obstacle to Hughes' style of colorblind politics. If colorblindness is to apply to American "race" relations—which are often just ethnic conflicts—then it must ask us also to be blind to ethnicity. This is a painful thing to ask for, since unlike arbitrary census categories and superficial physical traits, ethnic identity can be a legitimate part of how we see ourselves as human beings and acquire self-respect.<sup>14</sup>

The result is that colorblind politics is both less desirable and less feasible than we might have hoped. Because the cost of colorblindness falls upon the ethnic groups who must assimilate, it invites political resistance from anyone who shares Coates' and Dubois' desire to be a "tribe" with separate but excellent institutions.

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Now let's turn to the second horn of the dilemma—the home turf of Hughes' book.

If we aren't for colorblind integration, what alternative do we have? Supposing that Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" is off the table, the only option is non-colorblind integration—or in Hughes' terms, neoracism. The paradigm of this approach is pro-Black affirmative action: the preferential treatment of Black candidates as such when making decisions about whom to hire, whom to promote, and whom to admit to university. Such policies tend to create adverse conditions for colorblindness even between pairs of people. If the Asian students at your university score, on average, 450 points higher on the SAT than their Black classmates—the *actual disparity* between Black and Asian students with the same chance of admission to Harvard (p. 166)—then your classmate's race will suddenly convey more information than it otherwise would, and it will be that much harder to see them as an individual.

But there is a much stronger objection, which constitutes the second horn of our dilemma. *Such policies are so flagrantly at odds with our political morality that they can only survive if we are dishonest about how they work.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> There may also be instrumental benefits to ethnic solidarity, such as a higher self-esteem, as Hughes himself acknowledges when discussing a rather shocking finding from Kenneth and Mamie Clark about Black students during Jim Crow: "The kids who attended segregated southern schools had *higher* self-esteem than the northern kids who went to integrated schools" (p. 54, emphasis original).

<sup>15</sup> By "political morality," I mean the moral principles and values that people *actually* use in the political arena, not necessarily the principles they *should* be using. (See Mark Osiel, *The Right to Do Wrong: Morality*

As Hughes argues, values like common humanity and equal treatment are deep in the DNA of American anti-racist politics, dating back to the days of abolition. Wendell Philips, head of the American Anti-Slavery Society, called for a fourteenth amendment to create “a government color-blind” (p. 47), and would later say that “the work of the great anti-slavery movement” would not be complete until the nation was pledged to “the principle that there shall be no recognition of race by the United States or by State law” (p. 48). In John Marshall Harlan’s legendary dissent to *Plessy*, the great justice declared: “Our Constitution is color-blind” (p. 50)—a saying that would become the “basic creed” of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, in the words of one of his aides at the NAACP (p. 51).

Do I even have to mention Dr. King? Any American who has reached the age of object permanence can tell you the most famous line of his most famous speech: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (p. 16). We also find colorblind ideas in the bill inspired by King’s movement, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which contains text in Title VII explicitly denying any intentions to effect “preferential treatment.”<sup>16</sup> One sponsor in the Senate even called the bill “‘color-blind’ with respect to preferential hiring” (p. 56).

This history, summed up in Hughes’ second chapter, is perhaps a bit too neat. In early 1964, King did call for “some concrete, practical preferential program, ... a crash program of special treatment” meant to help Black Americans.<sup>17</sup> But soon he and his advisors changed course, emphasizing that any “Negro Bill of Rights” would have to “give greater emphasis” to the plight of “the so-called ‘poor white’.”<sup>18</sup>

Let’s face the facts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans are not even close to being willing to tolerate open, widespread, never-ending preferential treatment for one racial group over others in professional and educational settings. We are even squeamish about mere racial quotas, where there is only a ratio to be preserved rather than a preference for one group over the others. (Contrast us with, say, [Singapore](#), where integration is achieved in blocks and neighborhoods by the enforcement of strict quotas for Chinese, Malay, and Indian/Other residents—with exact percentages updated monthly.)

In practice, preferential hiring and admissions have survived in America, and in part that is because we conceal what we are doing with euphemisms and rarely talk about it openly.

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*and the Limits of Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), Chapter 1.) A striking thing about academic philosophy is its contempt for political morality as a constraint on democratic politics.

<sup>16</sup> See David J. Garrow, “The Evolution of Affirmative Action and the Necessity of Truly Individualized Admissions Decisions,” *Journal of College and University Law* 34 (1): 1–19, at p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.



On the point of euphemism, Hughes cites a pair of polls from February 2019. In one, Pew asked 6,637 Americans about the role of race in college admissions; in the other, Gallup asked 6,502 Americans about “affirmative action.” The results: Pew found that “73 percent of respondents said that race should not be a factor in college admissions. But 61 percent of respondents to the Gallup survey said they supported affirmative action programs for racial minorities” (p. 164). The very *name* seems to be tricking people into supporting a policy they morally reject.

As for the lack of openness, consider how little we actually know about the way that race factors into admissions decisions at American universities. Quotas are unconstitutional, due to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Bakke*. But vaguer (if less honest) appeals to diversity are fine. One suspects that, in practice, universities have *de facto* quotas achieved through cynical semi-systematic fudges.

When we do get to see how the sausage is made, it’s not a pretty sight. Consider the following chat between two admissions officers some years ago at my own institution, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill:

“[P]erfect 2400 SAT All 5 on AP one B in 11th [grade].”  
“Brown?!”  
“Heck no. Asian.”  
“Of course. Still impressive.” (Pp. 165–66.)

*Of course.*

In addition to causing moral outrage, racially preferential policies must also contend with opposition from the courts. Last year, the Supreme Court declared affirmative action in college admissions unconstitutional.<sup>19</sup> No doubt, admissions officers are already looking for creative ways around the law. But such efforts will require yet more obfuscation, as universities strive to achieve a diverse mix of students without leaving any evidence of how they do it.

Is all this duplicity worth it? Hughes sees little payoff in terms of justice. Elite universities get to boast of their diversity, but this “pretense of social concern” yields few tangible gains for Black Americans (p. 168). According to [one sociologist’s estimate](#), only 1% of America’s Black and Hispanic eighteen-year-olds enjoy a boost from affirmative action in a given year; moreover, of those Black students admitted to Harvard, a majority are not descendants of slaves—who may have inherited a claim to reparations—but are instead the children of wealthy parents from Africa or the Caribbean (pp. 167–68).

Nor are the benefits of such policies likely to last, since they are so easily clawed back by the moral-legal riptide. Consider a couple of Hughes’ examples of racial preference in government

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<sup>19</sup> In *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard University*. The UNC officers’ chat emerged during the discovery process for the former case.

aid programs. In 2020, the Center for Disease Control’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices decided to prioritize COVID vaccines for “essential workers” over the elderly, a policy that would predictably lead to *more deaths for White people as well as Black people*.<sup>20</sup> The rationale for this choice was, basically, that the elderly were less poor and less diverse. “Thankfully, public outcry over the decision led to a last-minute reversal” (p. 72). A similar fate befell the Biden Administration’s “Restaurant Revitalization Fund,” which offered aid to restaurant-owners during the pandemic. For its first three weeks, the fund promised to prioritize businesses run by “women, veterans, and socially and economically disadvantaged individuals” (p. 70), effectively disqualifying White men. Not only did this lead to a lawsuit; when a court ordered the fund to stop discriminating, it had to rescind a portion of the \$28.6 billion that had “already been promised to restaurant owners in the priority group” — a “double dose of racial discrimination” (p. 71).

In politics, sometimes you have to change hearts and minds, and sometimes you have to deal with the hearts and minds you’ve got. Given the history of America’s political morality — its egalitarian roots, its North Star of equal treatment, its decades of post-*Brown* Supreme Court precedent — it is hard to see any viable path forward for a policy of giving preference, openly and honestly, to one racial group over others. Either the policy will strike most Americans as immoral, or we will have to camouflage it with deceitful jargon.

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What about colorblindness — does *it* have a viable path forward in American politics?

If *The End of Race Politics* is right about Blackness — if it is a superficial and arbitrary property, only weakly correlated with what ethical people should care about — then it shouldn’t be too hard to convert people to colorblindness. For if race is shallow, so is *racism*, as an ideology. The only real obstacles to racial harmony left, on Hughes’ analysis, are pseudoscience and crass self-interest. “Racial strife is what fuels the neoracist industry” (p. 177) — but supposing we can put them out of business, the political future of colorblindness can look rather rosy.

There is a problem ahead, however, which Hughes sees clearly: colorblind policies tend to produce racially disparate outcomes. If Black people begin at a disadvantage, colorblindness will not fix that. And if groups differ in demographics or culture, that by itself may lead to disparities (pp. 110–11), on top of those due to the almighty forces of random chance. Can a just country really allow one racial group to be poor while others are rich?

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<sup>20</sup> The ACIP’s presentation is still available to view on the [CDC website](#). Notice the fudges on slides 30–33 enabled by the choice to treat “Mitigate health inequities” as a criterion of choice on par with, and independent from, “Maximize benefits and minimize harms” — as if inequities could be measured simply by picking the least White group and ignoring sizes of harms. Again: *more Black people were likely to die if they gave vaccines to essential workers*, because the most vulnerable Black people were nearly all elderly.

Hughes' response is that racial disparities don't always entail racial injustice. Some disparities are *malignant*—these are the ones produced by “discrimination” or more generally an “unfair process” (p. 109). These are unjust even on a colorblind view. Other disparities, however, are *benign*—they “arise naturally because of cultural and demographic differences between groups” (p. 109). (I would add “or because of random chance.”) Hughes does not see such disparities as being anywhere near as serious, and he warns that “invasive procedures to remove them,” such as preferential hiring, may “do more harm than good” (p. 109).

But if a fair process leads to huge “benign” disparities, one race might still be left desperately poor. Does Hughes think we should tolerate this? I don't think so. Like the later King, inspired by Bayard Rustin, Hughes favors class-based policies to aid the truly disadvantaged—whatever their race. The result is an attractive package: treat malignant disparities as race problems to be solved with anti-discrimination laws, and treat “benign” disparities as economic problems to be solved with race-neutral redistribution and social services. (At least, do this when the “benign” disparity is so vast that one group is left in poverty. Some disparities we have to live with.)

The biggest obstacle to colorblind politics, as I said earlier, is the one arising from Heath's inconvenient insight. Concepts like Blackness, far from skin-deep racial categories, often denote ethnic identities, so a truly colorblind policy would have to be not just “race blind” but “ethnicity blind.” This is what leads to the dilemma of integration. If we opt for colorblindness, we are committing ourselves to not caring about race *or about ethnicity*, and we should expect the ties in some ethnic communities, perhaps including the Black community, to dissolve as its members join the melting pot. If we opt for “neoracism,” we are forsaking some of the most potent and high-legitimacy moral ideals in the country's history—while sailing against its jurisprudential headwinds—and we will struggle to find effective political support for our project even if we are willing to lie and dissemble.

Since Dubois's generation, Americans have made astonishing if unsteady progress towards racial equality. But when it comes to our dilemma, we are still procrastinating—never giving up on colorblindness, never truly leaning into it. Hughes' defense of colorblindness is not quite complete, since he does not have an answer to the critic who insists on “seeing ethnicity.” But *The End of Race Politics* makes a real case. The book's more provocative ideas are sure to strike some readers as “[Blasphemy](#).” But in such a dismal state, maybe it's time an apostate shook things up.

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