INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Vine Deloria, Jr.

Much of the activity in the 1960s revolving about civil rights reflected the belief that racism was a personal flaw which could be corrected by the proper adjustment of federal laws to give substance to the promises of citizenship. George Wallace, Lester Maddox, and Bull Connor all personified racism with their determined efforts to prevent blacks from achieving full citizenship rights and their excesses spurred them to action when it was believed that with the power of the federal government curbing the activities of a few die-hard racists discrimination would finally be conquered. The emphasis on personal attitudes obscured the deeply-ingrained institutional views of race which had systematically discriminated against minority groups for decades. Correcting individual patterns of behavior, people believed, would also cure institutional practices since it was apparent to everyone that institutions were ultimately composed of people.

The social organizations of human society, however, are more than a conglomerate of individuals and their beliefs and values systems. Particularly in western civilization organizations rapidly assume a personality of their own and this personality substantially affects how individual members of the group respond to external phenomena. We see the **personalification** of institutions most clearly in patriotism with the most pronounced, and possibly the most dangerous in our lifetime, the adoration of the "Fatherland" by the National Socialists which produced the Second World War. Before that, however, "Mother Church" inspired many an atrocity and crusade against non-believers and today "Ma Bell" extracts her pound of flesh from us with a cheery smile and a soothing commercial. Strangely, and perhaps because the deity of western civilization is so thoroughly masculine, most institutions of which we are aware assume the feminine gender and behave in fashion similar to an erratic black widow spider. Even the fraternal organizations for men, the Elks, Lions, Moose, and so forth have some feminine elements or appear in more benign masculine guise.

Explorations in Ethnic Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January, 1982)

Feminization of institutional image does not preclude carnivorous behavior; it only masks the aggressive posture for which western civilization is noted. Minority groups, suffering from the actions of the hovering Aryan Bird of Prey as Carl Jung once characterized the western stance, generally attribute their misfortune to deeply-held racial attitudes mistakenly believing that they can either change their pattern of behavior to conform to demands placed upon them by the majority or change the nature of western attitude by well-reasoned arguments and analogies which will bring sensible people to a more human and mature pattern of behavior. In eulogies for the late Roy Wilkins, mourners went to great pains to emphasize the rational basis upon which Wilkins approached racial problems and the steadfast determination with which he constructed arguments designed to demonstrate the humanity of blacks to those members of the white majority who would listen. Racial minorities, therefore, in the face of discriminatory practices and attitudes which are grounded in psychic and philosophical irrationalities, are expected to counter with rigorously logical arguments and irrefutable empirical data to prove their claim to humanity.

If western attitudes focused exclusively on racial minorities there would be some justification in maintaining that racial differences alone constituted the basis for discrimination. However, the western attitude is encompassing and includes a hostile or malevolent posture toward nature, toward dissident sub-groupings within its own relatively homogenous body, toward economically distinct classes, and most of all is hostile and arrogant with respect to the feminine within its midst. The unknown, the unusual, or the identifiably different are the brunt of western anger and disdain; derogatory opinions and images are indiscriminately projected upon anything lacking familiarity within the restricted worldview of the holders of power within the western sphere of influence. Institutional racism, like institutional exclusion and institutional sexism, are merely the external manifestations of beliefs held so tenaciously that they guide behavior spontaneously by excluding any process which would call them into question.

Western political and economic institutions claim to ground themselves on principles of logic which correlate

commonly observed phenomena and bring natural processes to a standard and uniform statement of understanding. The "social contract" of the English and French political philosophers posits the existence of rational, property owning and infinitely profound male citizens who agree to establish legal and political principles which will maximize the well-being of all members of society. Emotion, intuition, and even self-interest of a socially acidic nature are all thrust aside by these founding fathers in favor of abstract principles and procedures which will guarantee equality and justice for every succeeding citizen of the social contract. Economists are even less coherent in their articulation of principles, believing that the uncontrolled pursuit of self-interest works through the hidden cosmic structures to provide the maximum benefits to all members of society, relying on simple supply and demand to eliminate injustice and treachery.

Grounded in supposedly rational, and generally cosmic natural principles, western institutions project and expound simple and apparently reasonable goals and purposes. Educational institutions are designed to promote the accumulation of knowledge and transmit this increasing body of information and insight to subsequent generations. Political institutions are designed to ensure equal and just treatment to all citizens and to guarantee access to all avenues of participation and redress. Religious institutions claim immediate access to the deity and special knowledge of His Will at any particular crisis or occasion. Social institutions hold out the promise of lofty and respected status within both local communities and the national arena. At every turn the institutions of western civilization purport to open to the individual, irrespective of race, gender or age, the ultimate benefits which western logic sees as the product of its connection with natural and cosmic processes.

Although institutions advocate certain specific goals and formulate their public image in the most favorable terms in which these goals can be symbolized, the primary purpose of institutional life is not to fulfill the goals but to ensure the perpetual life of the organization. Corporations by law have perpetual life, religious institutions claim such longevity by divine decree, and the other organizations ground their right to life in the justice or relevance of their goals. Thus the

corporate manager, knowing full well that the stockholders are helpless before his stack of proxies at the annual meeting, justifies his actions on the argument that were he to do otherwise the company could not remain in business or, more often, could not remain "competitive." Religious leaders of every persuasion admonish their followers in the most fearful terms to continue and increase their contributions "that the Lord's work may continue and grow." Membership drives of voluntary organizations go to extravagent lengths to record the progress of the group against a mythical goal or supposed enemies as a means of bolstering a faltering institution or expanding an already successful operation. It is thus in the nature of western institutions to spurn stability in favor of continued growth and expanded social status.

Adherence to the founding principles and expansion of institutional capability require a homogenous constituency and demand as obedient a constituency as can be reasonably gathered together. If status is conferred by the institution, its price is almost always unquestioning loyalty to the institutional leadership and significant sacrifices by the members. Homogeneity requires that all members, constituents or clients have relatively common interests or adhere to restricted intellectual perspectives so that they find agreement or commonality in their relationships with one another. The history of desegregation of American institutions eloquently illustrates the fact that the threatened destruction of organizational homogeneity posed a far greater perceived danger than the possibility of expanding the institutional outreach and influence to a greater horizon. So homogeneity within existing institutions becomes a more important aspect of institutional life than the avowed goals of the organization and becomes the life blood which forms the emotional guarantee of continued existence of the group.

In the United States, unfortunately, institutional homogeneity assumed a racist-sexist posture on both a practical and philosophical level. Those groups initially excluded from the social contract purview by inadequate analysis became identifiable threats to continued institutional existence by their approach, seeking the benefits of organizational life which were promised in symbol and creed by the public existence of the institution.

Early case law recording the threshhold arrival of blacks, Indians, women, Asians, and even those lacking property qualifications demonstrates the narrow grounds for rejection as grounded in incomplete and sometimes severely restricted considerations regarding the scope of natural law and common sense. The Cherokee Nation, for example, although enjoying all the political attributes of sovereignty and international existence, is characterized by the U.S. Supreme Court as a "domestic dependent nation" and thereby is excluded from the family of nations. Mrs. Bradwell, applying for admission to the Illinois bar, is informed that her gender cannot withstand the rigorous physical and emotional demands of the profession—although drudgery of a less satisfying nature seems to be within her capabilities. Dred Scott may be a person in fact but certainly is not one in law, and Asians, severely restricted in their movements in the western United States, are characterized by the Supreme Court as "clannish" and incapable of assimilating with other members of society. In these and other examples the primary factor linking all exclusionary practices and doctrines is the inadequacy of the initial conception of the social contract and the determined allegiance to this inadequacy for fear of the destruction of the institution itself.

Given the nature of western institutions and their propensity to exist in defiance of their avowed goals and their frenzied quest for eternal life, reform assumes a peculiar costume. Internal institutional consistency is primarily a function of adherence to publicly declared goals and principles and reform makes an immediate challenge to the obvious gap between credal statements and actual performance. Why is the institution failing to achieve its goals? How can it blithely proclaim one thing and blatantly practice its polar opposite? What are the responsibilities of membership to ensure the consumation of goals and the promulgation of the qualities of justice, mercy, and equity? As these questions are thrust at institutions they mark the direct challenge of the natural world according to whose principles of inherent logic the institution claims to abide, and they trigger a process of internal critique which generally consists of rearranging words, concepts, and interpretations within the institutional statement of purpose which would produce a new statement of goals that purports to explain

how present behavior is in fact a fulfillment of previously articulated values and goals.

The accusation of racial minorities during the 1960s and 1970s that American response to their pleas and demands was primarily a matter of rhetoric was well-founded. Credal statements were rearranged to escape any ultimate location of wrongdoing within the institution. The most popular response was not that the institution was doing wrong but that it could do more. In securing this admission militants believed they had achieved a great victory but in fact they had only forced organizations to increase the rate at which they performed their traditional duties and responsibilities. The rhetoric consisted in the reordering of familiar concepts to cover data and phenomena previously excluded from consideration without undertaking the onerous task of rethinking the basis upon which operating principles and the conception of the world had been adopted. No redefinition of any fundamental tenet of belief ever occurred and the assumptions concerning the nature of cosmic process were never given a rigorous critique to ensure their applicability to what was perceived as a new situation. Thus jobs were seen as an economic solution in a rapidly changing technological period in which sophisticated computers were replacing even majority members in their comfortable employment niches.

A failure to examine familiar beliefs which would, of course, call into question the avowed goals of institutional existence has immediate implications in the sphere of institutional racism. Not only are institutions oriented toward particular and favored clientele and constituencies, fulfillment of their goals requires that the general statement of purpose and any temporary aberrational interpretation of the purpose demanded by the times and their confusion be used by institutional managers as the guideline for action and response. At this point personal racism can become the determining factor in establishing the scope of activity of the institution. When law schools were frantically attempting to recruit members of minority groups, ludicrous instances of individual racism occurred. The director of admissions of Yale Law School, informed on the telephone that an Indian law student was available, responded that "we already have one" with the implied message that were a kangaroo

available he or she might be more acceptable since Yale obviously did not have one of these as yet. When the churches and federal agencies adopted the policy of self-determination for racial minorities, equally frantic and demeaning searches were carried out to get at least one Indian, black, Chicano or woman who would become an immediately visible manifestation of the institutional commitment to change. This human insurance policy, dressed up in organizational status, was virtually without power or prestige but was pushed forward on every occasion when the visible presence was required.

The opportunity in this instance for the exercise of personal racism was golden and involved the accumulation of proper profile samples of racial minorities without the slightest intent of making them anything more than a buffer symbol against continued pressure from outside. Individual talents and accomplishments of minority representatives chosen in this scramble for respectability were rarely considered since the task was to symbolize commitment—"we haven't done enough"—and not to undertake it. Like the "best friend in high school" syndrome-slogan, institutional managers deeply believed that the individuals chosen to represent the organization could only function as public relations images and whatever powers were vested in these new institutional tokens were carefully circumscribed at higher levels to prevent any straying from institutional corrals. Eligibility standards depended almost wholly on the personal experiences and knowledge of institutional managers and with qualifications in a state of transition because of the need for symbols of involvment, hardly any rational criteria for institutional acceptance existed. White managers became patrons to minority personnel and a strange institutional feudalism emerged to co-exist with continuing organizational goals and purposes.

The original social contracts which undergirded institutions depended on the recognition of a certain "citizenship" status of individual members whether it was the congregation of the saved, the mutual respect of property holders for each other, or the happy grin and slight smile which professionals in a field accord to one another. Admission of the token racial minority involved the recognition of a previously unserved clientele and the

recruitment of a sample as symbolic reassurance that the danger posed by the group was not ultimate. If, after all, a tame one were allowed to run freely on the premises, there was a good chance that the remainder of the herd could be brought to domesticity before any harm was done. Racial minorities therefore never entered into the status of citizen in the same way that their white predecessors had once become accepted by the institution. If they were no longer subjects of an aggressive institutional mission they were now clients in a larger institutional responsibility but they were never full participants in the internal processes of the institution.

In selecting the symbolic sample for inclusion in the institutional group, extreme care is generally exercised to choose an "acceptable" minority representative. Acceptable in this context means possessing a social profile which corresponds as closely as possible to the idealized image of the minority groups held by the managers making the selection. Here personal racism and stereotypes are critical factors. Indians are chosen who "look like Indians" which is to say the fortunate individual picked to become an institutional token is immediately identifiable as an Indian so that happenstance meetings will produce instantaneous affirmative results. A variance of this selection is to choose individuals obviously incompetent who can be easily intimidated or directed so that the symbolic function of leadership remains purely symbolic and any novel contribution which the individual might be capable of making is nullified from the beginning. Racial minorities, faced with these hurdles in obtaining entrance to institutions must choose between becoming display pieces in the institutional public relations program or insecure inhabitants of the institutional reservation willing to accommodate almost any set of values in order to remain within the security of institutional confines.

Although much of this activity in selecting individuals of minority background and in placing them within institutional structures is not consciously intellectually directed, occasional emotional incidents manifest the underlying intent of the organizational managers. Like Middle Age feudalism which sought out court jesters and carefully cultivated unusual physical specimens such as dwarfs to

please the sovereign, institutional managers seek to guarantee the acceptability of individuals of racial minority background by emphasizing the exotic characteristics which might serve to affirm the institutional tie. Accusations of racism fall flat before this institutional selection process because the motivation for including racial minorities at least on the surface is regarded as purely benevolent. Faced with the initial benign acceptance by the institution the token minority individual becomes virtually helpless when confronted with the necessity to rebel or protest on behalf of her or his group when institutional goals and programs take on a harmful or malevolent aspect. It is then that the western institutional ethic asserts itself and token representatives become willing to accept "a little evil" in order to accomplish a greater good. Once the symbolic representative accepts the institutional program and participates in its promulgation, the final link with the minority community is severed and the co-optation is complete.

All of these processes operate in institutions controlled completely by the majority. In the last two decades we have experienced an alternative form of institutional life which is as corrosive of racial minority communities as token participation in majority dominated organizations. This alternative is the establishment of minority institutions which are chartered to perform the same functions as majority entities and are funded almost wholly from the coffers of public institutions. The vaunted Community Action Programs among the poor supported by private foundations and government agencies are the most prominent groups in this category. Among American Indians the tribal governments created under the Indian Reorganization Act which have been in existence nearly half a century represent this category of institutional existence. Proclaimed as instruments of self-government, their every move is subject to the final approval of the Secretary of the Interior or his authorized delegate. With no ultimate decision-making powers, these governments are reduced to mere charades of political freedom and whenever a tribal government has rigorously opposed the wishes of federal bureaucrats it has found itself declared an unauthorized government by the superior powers and has been speedily replaced by a new set

of officers more compliant with government policies. The recent removal of supporting funds by government and private foundations indicates that this alternative institutional stalking horse is seen as irrelevant to contemporary needs of the majority.

Institutional processes work properly because of their restricted worldview and because racial minorities accept the western version of natural law. Majority rule is uncritically welcomed by minorities to replace their older use of community consensus in decision-making. Ownership of tangible property assets is accepted as an empirical indicator of personal worth and social success in lieu of community service and personal charisma. Uncontrolled competition is believed to be the path to prominence rather than personal integrity. The horizontal dimension of folk culture is eliminated in favor of construction of the urban-feudal pyramidal structure favored by western peoples. Hierarchy replaces the community council and conformity routs individual achievement. Eventually, with complete acceptance of the restricted logics and doctrines inherent in the institutional setting, even relationships with nature are terminated in favor of a wholly artificial existence. Racial minorities come to exist within the narrow confines of western philosophy and without realizing it become the subjects of investigation of western science and its malevolent reductionism.

In attempting to break out of this cultural straightjacket minorities have rarely attempted to forge a new philosophical base which would align them with heretical elements of the western worldview and lay the groundwork for a transformation of western values and institutions. Believing that they can master the inherent difficulties which face them within the western milieu, they have generally attempted to work their way through the value system of the majority to emerge transcendent above its seats of power believing that they have reached a safer and higher ground. At the highest levels of western institutional achievement they discover hollow men and hollow structures held together by the frenzied affirmation of unexamined historical myths. Supply side economics with its fictional capital investor is an example of the falsity of western political

and economic mythology and the contemporary impasse should be a sufficient empirical demonstration of the inherent error in the western analysis of human social life. Transcendance is not possible because the final term in the equation is wholly without substance.

Perhaps only the demagogues within racial minorities have grasped the essential problem of relating to western culture. Intuitively rather than analytically they proclaimed that ultimate freedom was either withdrawl or participation, as contemporary barbarians, in the final destruction of the political-economic system. But they saw as their ultimate enemies the present holders of power and made an essentially philosophical revolution into merely a political-economic exchange of personalities. Instead of demanding that national institutions, and particularly educational institutions, expand to accommodate their interests, they should have advocated an aggressive confrontational dialogue on a philosophical-ideological plane with the goal of subverting western philosophical beliefs. The complex of concepts which western peoples use to process data and make decisions are the ultimate enemy of minorities, not the robots who grasp them when faced with unexpected situations which demand immediate response.

Unfortunately racial minorities have also adopted the American propensity to rush about being concerned with symptoms rather than rooting out basic causes. It is virtually impossible to discuss abstract notions with leaders of racial minority communities who focus exclusively on bringing immediate if expedient relief to their communities. Expediency brings exceedingly short-term benefits and precludes the opportunity to focus on continuing problems with any degree of sophistication and insight. Constructing a well-conceived plan for altering institutional directions, goals and opportunities must necessarily involve the analysis of underlying philosophies and establishing tactical approaches to institutional change that will bear fruit. Racial minorities have been the hunter-gatherers of western industrialism instead of the planters and builders and until they come to understand the secondary nature of this role, little of lasting significance can be accomplished. Institutional racism, therefore, is a phenomenon created by the western cultural relationship with the natural world,

albeit incomplete, coupled with the inability or unwillingness of its constituents and subjects to see and pursue alternative explanations of the world and the place of human beings in it. By thoughtless actions and ill-considered responses we aid and abet our oppressors and become the last bastion behind which they can retreat and attempt to survive.

Critique

For those who see institutional racism as a problem which can be solved, the points of focus by Deloria are these: An institution is a "person" with a personality shaped by western-culture; and institutional racism is a phenomenon created by western culture. The idea that an institution is a "person" with a personality of its own is not new; the legal profession has held that a corporation, and therefore, an institution, is a "person" protected by the fourth amendment of the Constitution. But humanists, most of whom are found on college campuses, reject the idea that the institution for which they work is a "person." Their rejection is unfortunate, since it leads to the belief that racism can be eradicated by correcting individual patterns of behavior. An institution, they would argue, is made up of individuals. It is. But once an institution takes on a personality of its own, Deloria points out, that "personality substantially affects how individual members of the institution respond to external phenomena," and not the other way around.

Efforts, therefore, to eradicate institutional racism by correcting individual patterns of behavior have generally failed. The signs and symbols of racism are gone. Most institutions are integrated, and most people would say that we have made progress toward an open society. Nevertheless, opportunities for blacks, women, and other minorities are yet rather limited. Of 660 faculty members of the University of New Orleans, fewer than eighteen are black. Yet of its 15,000 students, 4,000 are black. Percentages for women are better than those for blacks, but they too are bad. The failure to include blacks, women, and other minorities in significant number in the administration and on