

Introduction

ONE OF OUR FRIENDS presses the mute button whenever a commercial comes on the television. It is his small rebellion against a hundred messages intended to subvert his values. Too often the mute button runs the other way, however, closing out dissent and sheltering the dominant view from challenge. Defending affirmative action often feels like talking to someone who owns the remote control to all human discourse. The words explaining affirmative action, carefully chosen to cross great divides, disappear; mouths move, but no one listens. At the outset, in writing this book, we face a clash of world views that makes give-and-take difficult.

One impetus for our writing this book was our frustration with the rhetoric infusing the public debate over affirmative action. Whether they support or reject affirmative action as a remedy for racial and gender subordination, most people define it as taking from one to give to another. Newspaper editors write of their reluctant support for a harsh remedy. Some, in fact, compare affirmative action to chemotherapy: a horrible but necessary cure.³

In contrast, we see affirmative action as a gain for all, an affirmation of democratic values. To our minds, ending racial and gender subordination in our country will liberate all of us and allow us to know the fullness of a community in which all talents are nurtured, all gifts brought to the table for the greater good. We write for our sisters who bear the scars of patriarchy's violence on their bodies; for the children who grow up poor because their mothers can't earn a living wage. As activists and writers, we fight patriarchy first for the sake of the women

and children who are hurt, objectified, erased, and impoverished by it. We support affirmative action for women because women need the chance to go to school, to earn a decent living, to get away from the danger that dependency on men too often means. We fight patriarchy for the batterer as well. A world in which he doesn't have to dominate in order to claim a place for himself is a better world. Because we want this world, because we believe affirmative action is part of the journey to it, we write this book.

We have watched, with mounting dismay, as opponents and proponents of affirmative action speak past one another in the growing darkness. At a recent congressional hearing on a bill to end affirmative action in the federal government, for instance, the arguments, though made at the same table, were so disjunctive in premise and belief that they seemed to come from unrelated planets.

Representative Susan Molinari attacked affirmative action as "a program to confer special benefits on designated groups to achieve not equal opportunity but equal results."⁴ Kingsley Browne, a law professor from Wayne State, argued that affirmative action "shifted the focus of decision-making from the relevant criterion of merit to the irrelevant criteria of race, sex, and ethnicity."⁵

Pro-affirmative action testimony focused on the reality of discrimination. Marcia Greenberger, from the National Women's Law Center, was armed with statistics: "95 to 96 percent of the senior managers of *Fortune* 1000 and *Fortune* 500 companies are male . . . women physicians earned 53.9 percent of the wages of male physicians . . . women received only 9.6 percent of doctorate degrees in engineering . . . 65 percent of working women earn less than \$20,000 annually, and 38 percent earn less than \$10,000."⁶

In the popular mythology surrounding affirmative action, we hear a different story from the one Ms. Greenberger attempted to portray with statistics. Early on, opponents of affirmative action knew their best tactic was to convince white men that affirmative action was taking their jobs, their educational opportunities, their life chances. The rhetoric of reverse discrimination and racial preference erases the statistical reality of inordinate advantage and preference that come from being white and male in this country, creating a surreal landscape for public debate.

Which world is the real one?

- The *Washington Post* reports that the wages of college-educated African Americans are dropping in comparison to similarly educated whites, with the earnings gap growing throughout the 1980s, belying the popularly held notion that education cancels out discrimination.⁷
- On another day, the *Post* runs a feature on a local high school basketball coach, known for his emphasis on "fundamentals." The feature describes the heartache and drama involved in the first few weeks of practice, when the coach must eliminate from the school's team roster most of those who hope to play. The coach is white, as are most of the students and all of the teachers at this private, suburban school. A white student who is cut from the team mutters to the reporter, "They don't keep any white kids unless they're over six-six."⁸
- *Ms.* magazine runs a story on women who rely on affirmative action programs to enter blue-collar professions. Women, the article points out, are .7 percent of plumbers and pipefitters, 1.7 percent of crane and tower operators, 1 percent of carpenters. Women want skilled trade jobs, because those are the only ones in which high school graduates can earn enough to support a family. Wages in the building trades are more than twice as high as those in "women's jobs" requiring comparable education, such as a dental hygienist or childcare worker. The article describes the harassment, ridicule, and discrimination these women — many of whom are single mothers trying to get off welfare — face when they enter the building trades.⁹
- Meanwhile, back in Congress, Clint Bolick — known for his attacks on Lani Guinier — testifies that "affirmative action has absolutely no relevance whatsoever to people who are outside the economic mainstream. In fact, it harms them because it sweeps these serious social problems under the carpet of racial preferences."

In her book *The Rooster's Egg*, Professor Patricia Williams describes attending a commercial law conference:

I stood with a group of Real Hungry Men, jockeying for position next to a table loaded with nice little creampuffs and fruit-filled

cookies. "My wife wants to move to Chicago to be nearer her family," said one, scooping up a plateful of raspberry thins, "but I told her to forget it. Nobody's hiring white guys anymore."¹⁰

And yet, of the several hundred lawyers in attendance at the conference, Williams notes:

"there was a modest sprinkling of women in the crowd, perhaps fewer than a third. There were maybe ten Asians. I was one of two black women, and as far as I could tell, there were no black men, no Hispanics, no Native Americans, and not a single Pacific Islander. So who is it that's getting hired if not white guys?"¹¹

- A philosophy professor from the University of Michigan warns that "preferential affirmative action on our campus (as on many campuses around the nation) has driven race relations among us to a point lower than it has ever been. The story is long and complicated and has many variants, but the short of it is this: give preference by race and you create hostility by race. And for that we Americans are paying, and we will pay a dreadful price."¹²
- In contrast, researchers at the same university reported that there are positive interethnic interactions on college campuses. Minority students regularly studied and dined with students from other races, interacting across racial lines more frequently than did white students. The study found that "55 percent of blacks, 69 percent of Asians, 78 percent of Chicanos, and 21 percent of whites reported dining with someone of a different race while in college."¹³

In this book we ask how to bring these two worlds together. We know the dominant world because we move within it: the world of disappointed white men who think their place on the team or their job in Chicago was stolen and given to someone without merit in an unfair game of racial preference. We also recognize a second world because we move within it as well — the world constrained by ancient and unacknowledged privileges determining that women become nurses' aides and men become plumbers, that Black men can't get a cab on the streets of the nation's capital, that outspoken Asian women are a threat to the natural order of things.

A clash in perspective of this kind is not resolved by taking away

affirmative action, the immediate impetus for the clash. Returning to a segregated world — and this is exactly what the end of affirmative action would mean — will do nothing to erase racial tension or to resolve our lack of mutual understanding. We answer in these pages the charges that affirmative action breeds incompetence and resentment, that it hands out favors on the bases of race and gender, that it takes from white men and ignores the poor. In answering the charges, we strive also to hear them. The facts may be wrong — the young lawyer who believes women and minorities are getting all the jobs may not have his statistics right — but feelings are never wrong. If he feels anxiety about his job and his life chances, about disruption of race and gender hierarchies, those feelings are real, and we are bound to address them.

The policy of affirmative action comes out of a history that makes it an imperative. It is not an idea cooked up in the abstract. It is an idea born of a struggle — the same struggle that made our parents radicals. But the affirmative action debate, as it is largely presented, focuses on abstract ideas outside of social context — ideas like "colorblind" discussed without the history of racism; ideas like "preference" discussed outside the context of widening class division; ideas like "merit" discussed without reference to social structures like patriarchy.

Our work is about context and history and acknowledgment of culture. We are where we are, with the huge bloody problem delicately referred to as "race relations," because of a history. Women live the lives they do — whether worrying about their weight or struggling for dignity in the workplace — because of a social condition called gender.

This book tells of the early struggles around affirmative action. The news here is that there is no news. None of the arguments put forth today adds anything to the debate set out nearly twenty years ago at the time of the first attack on affirmative action. Ultimately, the result in any contest over affirmative action has less to do with quality of argument than with the social forces behind the debate. At the time of that first assault, in the late 1970s, an organized, grassroots movement for race and gender equality waged an effective fight back. The result was an uneasy compromise: watered-down affirmative action programs remained in place alongside a new rhetoric of "reverse discrimination."

While we believe that social struggle determines outcome, we also

believe that ideology is part of that struggle. What people think and believe, the language they use, and the power of that language to evoke feeling and action are potent forces in the affirmative action battle.

In this book we seek to understand the terms of the affirmative action debate by asking the anthropologist's questions. What would a person have to know and believe about the world in order to make these arguments? Under what world view do they make sense? Who believes that, but for affirmative action, jobs, places at the university, government contracts, and other goodies are handed out according to merit? Why do we need to believe this? We hear many arguments against affirmative action: it stigmatizes beneficiaries, it causes resentment, it disadvantages "successful" minorities, it is discrimination against white men. We explore these arguments in our discussions of meritocracy, stigma, and interethnic conflict.

We consider women's position in affirmative action. Do women need affirmative action, and if so, where are they in the debate? Organized feminist groups have raised valiant defenses of affirmative action, yet women, as this nation's one potentially unbeatable voting block, are not, on the whole, taking an aggressive pro-affirmative action position. We ask why, and offer some answers, as well as a defense of affirmative action that comes from feminist theory.

The war over culture — the PC bashing, ethnotrashing debate that paints multiculturalism as voodoo academics — is also something we put at the center. What do sexual harassment, racial name calling, burning crosses, and anti-Semitism have to do with affirmative action? We think they are the heart of it. The criticism of Eurocentrism; the raising of the Women Question; the so-called cant of race-sex-class that has changed how we think and how we understand the world of ideas, are direct results of affirmative action.

New people bring new ideas, and new ideas are a threat. Someone will inevitably complain that "it's not the same anymore," that people can't say what they want to say, or that new and trivial work is sapping the dignity of the field. No crosses burn when hierarchies are fixed and people stay in their places. The tension created by shifts within hierarchy is what causes eruptions and backlash, name calling, and even violence. Affirmative action counters the belief that the other should "stay in her place." PC bashing, antimulticulturalism, and harassment

are about saying "go back, go back," and so is the attack on affirmative action.

Affirmative action is affirmative. It is action in the face of what history hands us. In the last part of this book, we consider the need for apology and reparation; we look history in the eye. There is no shame and indeed great glory in acknowledging past wrong and committing ourselves to its rectification. This is certainly not the only reason for affirmative action, but it is one we call on in our belief that righting past injustice is part of the task of righting current injustice.

Finally, we do not divide our demand for public inclusion through affirmative action from other means of inclusion. Certainly ending poverty, particularly the poverty of children, is an immediate imperative if any of the words of democracy are to make sense. A democratic government residing in the people presumes that people have basic shelter, food, clothing, education; in short, that they survive.

This book thus offers a vision of affirmative action that includes those disadvantaged by class, as well as those excluded for other social reasons, including homophobia. Nondiscrimination is not enough when powerful state-supported forces systematically keep some people out of the social world: devalued, silenced, casually violated. In a time when many say affirmative action has gone too far, we say it has not gone far enough, and argue for aggressive expansion of existing programs.

Behind the rhetoric of the debate, there are real people. We introduce a few of the beneficiaries of affirmative action in order to give it a human face. The brief portraits in this book are an invitation to the reader to think in concrete terms: what people are in the room because of affirmative action, and what would we lose if they were no longer there? We know legions of people who are proud and talented beneficiaries of affirmative action, whose lives are just as remarkable as the few we present in these pages.

We want readers to feel the presence of these individuals, to feel, as we do, the excitement and promise of their work. The parsimonious language of "quota" and "preference" cannot begin to do justice to their lives; nor, for that matter, can our limited efforts convey all that is rich and wonderful about them. They are introduced here to show how affirmative action works, and to represent the thousands of others who

are still shut out, still waiting for the chance that affirmative action can provide.

Affirmative action is part of a human dream, one that we venture to call universal. All human beings want good, useful, decent lives for themselves and their children. No one feels right when passing the homeless on the streets; no one takes true comfort in the guns and alarms and bars that we use to protect ourselves from crime; no one wants to say, on the last day, "I lived only for myself, with no care or concern for others." This is, ultimately, a spiritual book, written by an atheist and an Episcopalian. Affirmative action is an expression of the best parts of the human condition. It affirms the human family, our connectedness, our inevitable interdependency, and our potential to live generous lives. The anti-affirmative action rhetoric is bluster covering a dark and anxious vision of the human condition: get what you can for yourself, and guard every bit with care, lest someone undeserving take it from you. There is no mercy for you; so should you grant none to any other. Certainly much of human history is marked by that credo, but life under it is unsatisfying, fearful, and sad.

There is joy in deciding to take on the whole world as home, treating every path as sacred, treating every person as deserving of respect and care, taking less so that all the children are fed, needing less so that your soul can sleep in peace.

This we learned at our parents' table. It is the heart of affirmative action and the reason for this book.