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Books & Authors

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| Atlantic Unbound Sidebar http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/bookauth/space.gif | "Letting Go of Race"  ***Jim Sleeper talks about the ubiquitous color-coding of American public life and why it must end***  **August 21, 1997**  Jim Sleeper"[Liberal racial doctrine] no longer curbs discrimination; it invites it. It does not expose racism; it recapitulates and, sometimes, reinvents it. Its tortured racial etiquette begets more racial epithets, as surely as hypocrisy begets hostility." So writes Jim Sleeper in his new book, [*Liberal Racism*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0670873918/theatlanticmonthA), in which he indicts liberals for becoming so obsessed with racially defined identity politics that they've turned against their traditional goal of a transracial American civic culture.  Sleeper covers a lot of ground in *Liberal Racism* as he argues against the relentless color-coding of public life: he describes the follies of liberal voting-rights activists whose support of racially gerrymandered districts actually broke up certain integrated communities along racial lines; he takes *The New York Times* to task for engaging in racial and sexual group think that hobbles good journalism; and he argues that Alex Haley's romanticized accounts of an African homeland in his 1976 novel *Roots* distracted many African-Americans from the real challenges of integration. Sleeper also details the racial philosophies of the black intellectuals Randall Kennedy and Glenn Loury, and concludes with an account of W.E.B. DuBois's upbringing in a white, nineteenth-century New England civic culture from which many important lessons for our own time may be drawn.  An excerpt from *Liberal Racism* was published as "Toward an End of Blackness" in the May, 1997, issue of *Harper's*. Sleeper's piece ran simultaneously with Randall Kennedy's May *Atlantic* cover story, ["My Race Problem  -- and Ours,"](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/97may/kennedy.htm) in which Kennedy goes further than Sleeper to reject the notion of racial kinship "in order to avoid its burdens and to be free to claim 'the unencumbered self.'" Though Sleeper may not be as severe in his exhortations to abandon race consciousness, the two clearly share much of the same ideological ground. |
| **Discuss this feature in** [**The Body Politic**](http://pforum.proxicom.com/cgi-bin/usnews/show?ROOT=1) **forum of** [**Post & Riposte.**](http://www.theatlantic.com/pr/index.htm)   **Past *Atlantic* articles on** [**race and affirmative action.**](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/election/connection/race/race.htm)   **Flashback:** [**Black History, American History.**](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/black/blahisin.htm) | Sleeper is the author of [*The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0393307999/theatlanticmonthA) (1990), in which he examined New York's white neighborhoods and found them, contrary to the stereotype, to hold some important lessons for all who would strengthen urban "civic cultures." He has been a political columnist for the New York *Daily News*, an editorial writer for *Newsday*, and is a member of the editorial board of *Dissent*. He has written for *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The Washington Monthly*, and many other newspapers and publications.  Sleeper recently spoke with Atlantic Unbound's Ryan Nally.  Liberal Racism**The reviews of *Liberal Racism*, by quite a broad range of writers, have been surprisingly positive in light of the highly-charged issues that you raise. What do you think accounts for this reaction?**  I confess that I'm a little nonplussed by the positive reaction. I wrote *Liberal Racism* with a faint but persistent dread that, among liberals, it would be asphyxiated by willful silence or dismissed, however decorously; and that, among conservatives, it might be applauded for the wrong reasons -- in order to score points against their opponents. There have been such reactions, but they haven't dominated discussion of the book. Clearer heads have prevailed, not least among black commentators, even when they don't share my views.  It's difficult to say anything about race that hasn't been said before; difficult to say anything that isn't at least half true; and still more difficult to mean whatever one does say amid the fog of half-truths and euphemisms enveloping the subject. The book's title is partly a tactical effort to cut through that fog in order to make room for a clearer, broader understanding of what I think is our American destiny to transcend race as we know it. *Liberal Racism* is really only partly an indictment of liberals. It is mainly an attempt to show why we cannot make race and racial identity the organizing principle of our political and civic life.  I can't say that I've succeeded at doing that nearly as well as I'd hoped, but I think I did it well enough to confirm that there is a public out there yearning for a richer shared language. As I say in the opening chapter, Americans of all colors are pretty much fed up with being labeled and corralled racially, albeit fed up in different ways, depending on their racial experiences. I think that that accounts for the positive reaction.   **You've written about civic culture and racial politics for more than twenty years. What originally prompted your interest?**  I came to it in 1977, when I put a new Harvard doctorate in my back pocket, packed up a van, and left Cambridge for central Brooklyn, where I spent five years in a kind of "down and out in Paris and London" life, writing for inner-city weeklies and engaging in some political activism. Living and working with non-whites who had a good deal of influence (sometimes "power") over my prospects and career boiled out a Cambridge leftie's racial romanticism and left somewhat deeper interracial affinities and bonds.  I came to feel that most well-intentioned "progressive" notions about race are horribly wrong, if not, indeed, racist. Far more than I had been led to expect, my personal and cultural interests in American identity and American exceptionalism were shared by non-white neighbors and co-workers who felt diminished by liberal solicitude almost as much as by the "conservative" racism that dominates the liberal imagination.  **In *Liberal Racism* you argue that many liberals, once the champions of individual opportunity unbounded by race, have now embraced the idea that racial differences should shape identities and opinions. Was there a specific point during the past thirty years or so at which this change occurred?**  One obvious turning point was the "radical chic" period of the late 1960s -- a term immortalized by Tom Wolfe's eponymous satire-- when many white liberals, justly angered by the Vietnam War and by the shallow "materialism" of the affluent society, treated blacks, especially, but also Native Americans and Hispanics, as bearers not only of rage but also of a kind of redemptive social wisdom. There was and is truth in this, but nowhere nearly as much as many of us yearned to believe. If the idea of "oppression" is oppressive, then it damages and limits people more often than it ennobles them. True liberation begins with candor about this, not with romantic projections. The left has foundered on this, I believe.  Great Society and victims'-rights programs institutionalized the "radical chic" mentality in some quarters, creating a vast race industry of people who make their livings and anchor their hopes in the race consciousness I've just mentioned. I think I describe this best in my last book, *The Closest of Strangers*, but a couple of chapters in *Liberal Racism* present current examples of how racial consciousness and racial remedies serve as sops to the consciences of liberals who have no serious intention of redressing the deeper inequities that divide not only whites from blacks but also whites from whites, and, these days, blacks from blacks.  So, I don't think there was really any one dramatic turning point; I think there was an accretion of well-intentioned but also self-serving misconceptions and wrong signals that white liberals sent to non-whites who were searching for some recognition and justice.  **You accuse several prominent intellectuals-- William Kunstler, William Julius Wilson, Andrew Hacker, and Benjamin DeMott-- of liberal racism. Is there a set of criteria that you use to define a so-called 'liberal racist'? Is there any one strain of liberal racism that you find particularly off-putting?**   I define "liberal racism" as: 1) the condescension involved in setting the bar so low that one denies intended beneficiaries of racial policies the hard-won satisfactions of real growth and accomplishment; in short, one fails to pay blacks and others the elementary compliment of holding them to basic standards of human decency and achievement; 2) the consequent essentialism or "primordialism" involved in attributing failures of achievement to deep racial-cultural "differences," which have come to resemble nineteenth-century racist assumptions; and 3) garden-variety bigotry, defined as some liberals’ barely conscious presumptions of their own white supremacy and their visceral discomfort with non-whites -- a racism to which liberals, by their own logic, are hardly immune.  Liberal racism is reductionist and manipulative in these ways, whether it's driven by an ideology that assigns a special role to "people of color," or by the narrower self-interest that comes from making one's living in the "race industry," or by misplaced moralism that uses blacks as objects of exalted fantasies of white moral redemption or as objects of exotic interest. There's no reason to expect better of those white intellectuals who are insulated from daily give-and-take with ordinary non-whites, except in settings that are more-or-less scripted.  **You devote a whole chapter of *Liberal Racism* to the media (especially *The New York Times*) arguing that it often mischaracterizes whites' as well as blacks' religious views and political behavior; you go so far as to say that at times it even misreports election campaigns and other important news because of its "diversity at all costs" mentality. How has this happened?**  By overreaching to correct their obvious past racism, some news organizations label and corral their sources, subjects, and journalists themselves by skin color and surname. This is especially fateful because media shape and limit our perceptions of people of other races whom we know only superficially, if at all. Also, as I make clear in the "Media Myopia" chapter, some news organizations box and label groups of people by race in order to increase their market shares-- an inadequate basis from which to nurture a civil society or polity. The media, like other corporations and like politicians, also fear the moral and legal "liability" that some race hustlers and opportunists threaten to pin on them.  I was annoyed when one reviewer suggested that I present *The New York Times*'s role in generating these misconceptions as some kind of "liberal conspiracy." I couldn't have been more explicit, in that chapter and throughout the book, in saying that I am describing "not a conspiracy but a mindset," a set of unspoken racial assumptions that subtly transform editors' and reporters' thinking and writing.  **At one point you write, "America needs blacks not because it needs blackness but because it needs what they've learned on their long way *out* of blackness -- that which others can't learn on the journeys they need to take out of whiteness." What exactly do you mean by this?**  "Blackness" in America has had meaning only as it has been developed and lovingly embellished in response to the monstrous crime of the mass abduction and enslavement of millions of blacks-- that is, as a response to a "whiteness" that itself finds meaning only in subordinating blacks. I try to break this up in the "Way Out of Africa" chapter by showing that, as our notions of race become more fluid and ecumenical in America, and as transracial and interracial encounters and opportunities proliferate, neither blackness nor whiteness can serve any longer as a vessel of hope, as both did in an avowedly racist system.  Some people, citing the same sentence you have, accuse me of demanding that blacks give up their own racial consciousness first-- a kind of unilateral disarmament in the face of an unconscious but persistent white racism. That's not what I think should happen or is happening. Thanks in part to non-white immigrants who haven't spent three hundred years locked in our miserable but intimate black-white embrace, the surrender of race consciousness is proceeding without anyone saying, like Alphonse and Gaston, "After you!" As the writer Richard Rodriguez puts it, there ought to be bumper stickers reading, "Assimilation Happens." It's not a question of any organized group renouncing anything; it's a matter of individual and cultural evolution.  When I say that we can best advance social justice by letting go of race as the organizing principle of our public and private lives, I don't mean that we need to jettison every sense of racial affinity or kinship, and I give ample voice in the book to blacks who caution against complete deracination. Throughout, I try to evoke a "two-tiered" American civic model, wherein each of us may be raised in a particular ethnic or racial subculture, but-- if its values are any "good" in humanist terms -- each of us also transcends it at times, or even permanently, to join in a larger American civic culture and identity that is "thick" enough to live in on its own evolving terms. Stanley Crouch's likening of American culture to jazz music, which combines African rhythms and European instruments inextricably, is a pretty good metaphor. At some point, explicit "race consciousness" dissolves.   **You devote considerable attention to the racial philosophy of Randall Kennedy, the black professor at Harvard Law School whose intellectual development you detail in *Liberal Racism*. What is it particularly that draws you to him? Are there others thinking and writing about race whom you regard as highly as Kennedy?**  In "My Race Problem -- and Ours," his *Atlantic* essay of last May, Kennedy went further than I would to insist that individual dignity is raceless and cannot be contingent on ethnic or racial-group nurturance and membership. I first heard him express those ideas in a lecture at Columbia a year and a half ago, and that led to our conversations about his views and how he had arrived at them. Ironically, while Kennedy's *Atlantic* essay is not in his own new book, *Race, Crime and the Law*, it is in mine, in that I quote liberally from the lecture he gave and the talks we had. I provide the only public account of how his upbringing in a solid working-class black subculture in a racially integrated neighborhood led him to develop his views.  Gently, I propose to him that there is something of a self-contradiction in hewing, as he does so nobly, to race-transcendent, universal standards, while, on the other hand, drawing so deeply on the obvious benefits of the particular black community and church that raised him as a child. Kennedy wrestles with this honestly. And I think that he embodies the great American solution to such a contradiction, which is that, at some point, even as each of us is raised in a particular ethnic subculture, each of us transcends it, as I've mentioned, to participate in a larger, common American identity and ethos which the literary historian Daniel Aaron describes as "ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free."  I hesitate to name other intellectuals who are writing about race with the uncompromising moral dignity of Kennedy, because I don't want to neglect anyone. But among blacks whom I engage in the book, C. Eric Lincoln, Gerald Early, Orlando Patterson, James A. McPherson, and Glenn Loury all stand out in this way. I think that a lot of ordinary blacks and whites conduct themselves this way every day and are moving us forward. We also need more public narratives-- say, a Hollywood movie in which a black Jimmy Stewart convinces fellow jurors not to deliberate in exclusively racial terms- - to inspire the ordinary Americans who are trying to do what Kennedy talks so well about doing.   **You end your book by quoting W.E.B. Dubois's grim prophecy written in 1903: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." You then write, "The problem of the twenty-first century is the challenge of racelessness, of the color line's complete dissolution." What will it take for this to happen?**  The dissolution of the color line is already happening, in interracial marriages and adoptions, in polling booths, in the unexpected resonance of Tiger Woods's "Cablinasian" handle, in popular culture. The ground is shifting under our feet. We should embrace the fact that it's happening. We shouldn't fear that if race lost all its value as a distinction among people, we would suddenly have nothing to share. Human beings are deeper and more protean than that. And the development of an American civilization or culture worthy of that depth depends on our letting go of race as its organizing principle.   **What are you working on now?**  Right now and through the end of September, I'm just "promoting" and explaining my book. It was a quick book, written stem to stern in four months; there's more to say and write about our shared American destiny beyond race. In another, longer book, I hope to tell some wonderful story or stories, and to advance some line of thinking to evoke our common destiny.  I'm not by any means certain that we are going to pull it off. We could fragment into separate subcultures, in which case, I believe, the republic and the constitutional protections we depend on and take so much for granted will not survive; I'm influenced by Michael Sandel's rendering of these perils in *Democracy and Its Discontents*. We could also slip into a late-Roman decadence and gnosticism unless we draw from some deep wellsprings to confront and curb corporate consumer marketing, which has become too intrusive and so "bread-and-circus" oriented. Liberals have no defenses against such perils, as Sandel shows. How do we strengthen our immune systems against them and develop a better, more "character"-building politics? That's what I hope to write about in some way.   [**More Books & Authors**](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/bookauth/baindex.htm) **features in Atlantic Unbound**.   **Discuss this topic in** [**The Body Politic**](http://pforum.proxicom.com/cgi-bin/usnews/show?ROOT=1) **forum of** [**Post& Riposte**](http://www.theatlantic.com/atlantic/pr/index.htm)**.**  *Copyright © 1997 by The Atlantic Monthly Company. All rights reserved.* |
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