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Lani Guinier

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In *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2002), Harvard Law Professor Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres of the University of Texas Law School, present a provocative study of race and power in America, and put forth an inspiring political manifesto for grassroots organizing and social change. The authors argue that minorities, particularly blacks and Latinos, are like canaries who alert miners to the rising toxicity of the air inside the mine; in other words, the myriad problems now afflicting minorities are indicators of greater ills to come, and signal that all Americans are at risk. The authors conclude with the following call to action: "use the experiences of people of color as the basis for fundamental social change that will benefit not only blacks and Hispanics but other disadvantaged groups."

Lani Guinier came to the public eye in 1993 when President Bill Clinton nominated her to head the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. She would have been the first African American to hold that position had conservatives not scathingly attacked her views on voting and quotas, forcing President Clinton to withdraw the nomination. In 1998 she became the first black woman tenured professor in the history of Harvard Law School.

Africana recently spoke to Professor Guinier about her work and the changing atmosphere at Harvard.

In your book, you introduce the concept of "political race." What do you mean by this concept? And how would you respond to your

critics who would see your attempt to "enlist race" as racially polarizing?

Our book is an effort to respond to the strategy of color-blindness from both the right and the left. We feel that ignoring race in many ways reinforces the racialization of poverty, and the racialization of crime. On the right, the color-blind strategy simply perpetuates the status quo, and on the left, the color-blind strategy feeds into a somewhat elitist, top-down driven approach to social change that ignores the amazing energy that comes from communities of color. So, our strategy with political race is to show the way race maps onto power and privilege, and illuminates structural dysfunction, which when pursued in a transformative and democratic fashion can actually generate multi-racial coalitions for change.

By suppressing race, people are not given the tools to deal with the obvious racial implications of their problems. Part of what we're saying is that this is about racial literacy, not that we want to make race the dominant lens through which you see the entire world. But we have to give the people the tools through which they can begin to understand the racial implications of the distribution of resources or interpersonal interactions, and then by tracking the racial implications, they can begin to observe the implications for working class and poor whites as well.

You speak of "political race" for a people of a "linked fate" — where does that leave whites, particularly upper-class whites, who are politically progressive? Are they included in the "political race"?

"Political race" is not a membership category. It's not as if people are included or excluded — it's not a status. It's an orientation, a set of behaviors, it's a way of interacting collectively. So of course if people join a movement that is led by people of color and they are not themselves people of color, and they have things to bring to that movement, of course they are welcome.

However, the danger of very privileged, upper-class progressive whites is that when people come to join a movement and bring enormous privilege with them, they often are not conscious of the ways in which that privilege may tempt them to take over the movement, to assume certain authority in that movement. So that's why we accompany the notion of "political race" with the notion of "transforming power," because it's not only about changing the way people think about race, so that race is not just a status or what you look like, but it's really a way of tracking and understanding the operation of power in society. So in that sense, it's a window on the present, but political race is also linked to an innovative and future-oriented way of thinking about power that's about sharing power and not just exercising it. So for progressives, who are used to being in charge, that may require understanding how much they have to learn from those who have a lot to teach but not necessarily the same amount of privilege.

In one of your chapters, you talk about "racial bribery" — where the government will expand the category of "white" to include select groups, such as lighter-skinned Cubans. What is the objective of this strategy?

One objective is to try to expand the category of white so that it appears to be a diverse category, so that the people who already have privilege don't have to change in any way. They get to retain their privilege, but get to camouflage the fact that the same people are still in charge, it's just that they've now incorporated a new group of recent immigrants — this is how

the Irish became "white" — as a way of distancing everybody from blackness. So, blackness remains the anchor, and it remains the way in which people can be given the appearances of privilege but not the resources to accompany that privilege. So it's a way of both camouflaging privilege, expanding the category potentially, but without specifically transforming relationships.

You say that political agitation by people of color has made America a freer country, but add that coalitions between blacks and working class whites are difficult because of a lack of trust. Why would there be a higher level of trust between blacks and immigrants, or blacks and other minorities?

There are challenges with all coalitions. Many blacks are very skeptical or fearful of immigrants who they see coming into the country and then benefiting from opportunities that they feel have been denied to them. So there's a certain antagonism, that may lead to what we call "nativism" on the part of blacks, and that nativism can be fueled by racism on the part of some of these recent immigrants who come to the United States and learn that the best way to demonstrate that you are really American is to take on some of these anti-black prejudices.

I just attended a fantastic workshop by a psychologist here at Harvard, Mahzarin Binaji, whose work shows that even with regards to Asian-Americans who have been in this country for a long time and are celebrities like Connie Chung — many white Americans, when given implicit attitude tests, will explicitly say, "Yes, these are Americans," but at the unconscious level, have trouble accepting that Asian-Americans are truly American. But they have no trouble accepting that people who are European citizens, who are not American, are somehow American because they are white. And then they have the same problem even with African Americans like Michael Jordan whom they have tremendous affection for in terms of his athletic ability, but when given the test of "who is the American?" they have trouble identifying Michael Jordan as the American — same with blacks who represent the United States in the Olympics. I say that to show that there is a lot of pressure on new immigrants to demonstrate that they are truly American; one way to do so is to absorb and showcase anti-black sentiments.

Having said that, there are great examples of cooperation between blacks and immigrants. The Bus Riders Coalition in Los Angeles is an example of a coalition of African Americans and immigrants working together to preserve public transportation. There is great energy in poor immigrant communities for transformation. So there are a lot of positive ingredients that need to be pulled together, but also challenges that people need to be conscious of.

You speak of "the system" being fundamentally unjust. Are you speaking of the current administration? What do you see as some of the most pressing issues facing minorities?

This goes beyond Republican or Democrat. There were more people of color, black and Latino men, sent to federal prison during the Clinton Administration than during prior administrations combined, so this is not about Democrats or Republicans. This is about fundamental change that implicates both parties and needs the support of both parties - or people of goodwill from both parties — in order to happen. On the other hand, one of our claims is that the impetus of change is not going to come from the top but will come from the bottom, and so we need to be more sensitive to the

ways in which we can really support indigenous leadership and find those communities where change is happening. Because real change happens when people rise up and demand the change, it's not when people wait for Washington to deliver a change.

Africana.com is based at Cambridge, home to the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the Cornel West affair and the current racial tensions taking place at the Law School?

It's all happening under [Harvard President] Larry Summers' stewardship but I don't think that the incidents affecting people in the law school and the Afro-American Studies department are all because of Summers. In terms of Cornel West and Anthony Appiah's departure — I think it is a big blow to the department but what I worry about is not just the loss of those two men, but whether a larger message is being sent to those of us who are not in the department, but who study race and are committed to using our intellectual platform to reach a large audience, and whether we are being given the message that we should constrain ourselves, that we should not be public intellectuals or public citizens. That's another message that I don't think has been highlighted. Perhaps it's not there, but that's the message I worry about.

First published: July 1, 2002

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