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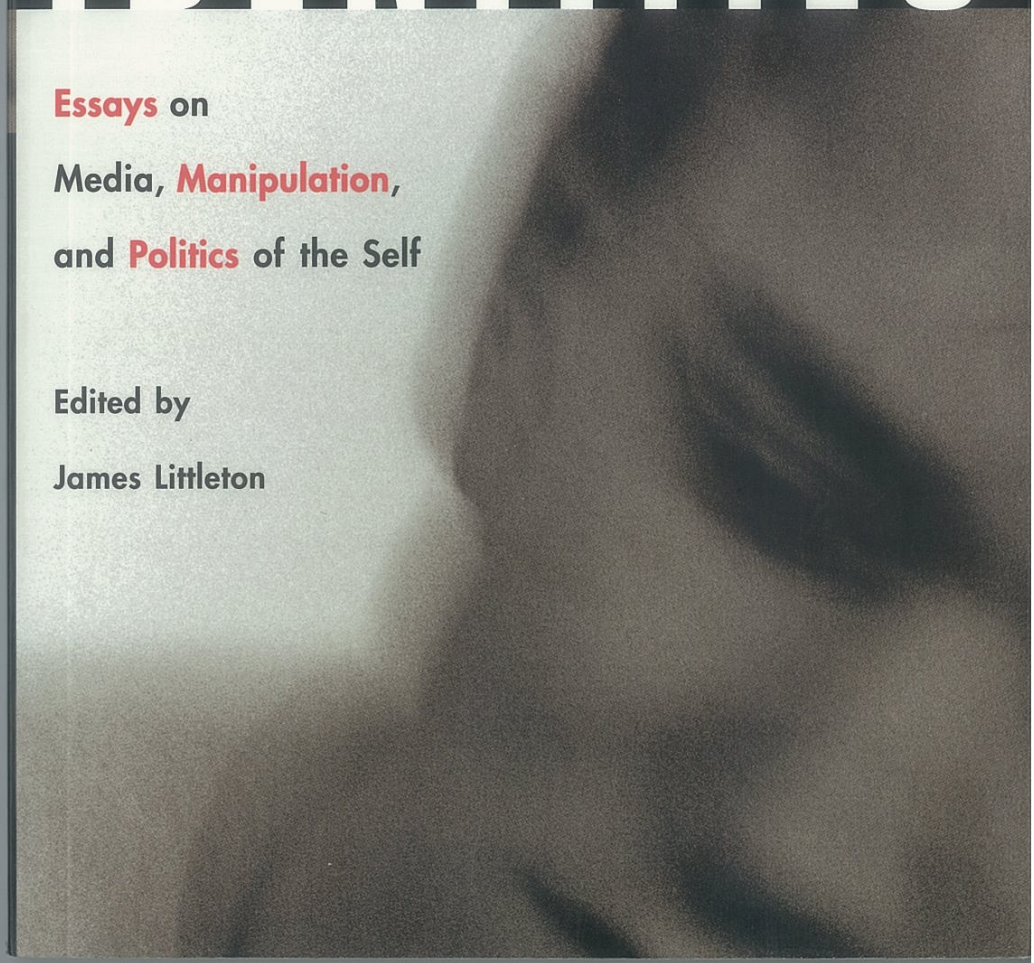
CLASH OF IDENTITIES



Essays on Media, Manipulation, and Politics of the Self

Edited by
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WITH FEAR AND FAVOURITISM: HOW THE CRUSADE FOR DIVERSITY HAS CORRUPTED AMERICAN JOURNALISM

It started as a self-deprecating joke on the left. It referred to one's adherence to the strictures of a multitude of causes: It was not "politically correct" to buy South African wine, drive a Detroit gas-guzzler or refer to women as "ladies." By the early 1990s, this minor form of wry humour had been turned against its inventors. Political correctness became the favoured term of the cultural right in referring to the apparent preoccupations of women, persons of colour and other disadvantaged groups with issues of affirmative action, non-discriminatory language and a host of related collective concerns. In North America, opinion has been polarized. Some hold that radical measures, in language and in other areas, are necessary to overcome the cultural effects of gender and racial oppression. Others, like New York writer William McGowan, argue that the advocates of political correctness

have invented their own oppressive universe, in which truth is the principal casualty.

Sensitivity seminars and management diversity retreats; speech codes and content audits; mainstreaming guidelines for balance; racial and ethnic sourcing; colour-coded hiring, assignment and promotion policies; executive-bonus plans based on improving newsroom representation; hiring quotas and minority newsroom caucuses: Welcome to the Brave New Newsroom of American journalism in the 1990s, where diversity has become an obsession, among its champions and its detractors alike.

To its supporters, who include the Newspaper Association of America, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and almost all minority journalists' associations, these and other measures embraced in the name of newsroom diversity are essential to rectifying decades of insensitivity, discrimination and racial stereotyping. As one correspondent recently wrote to the *Columbia Journalism Review,* "Journalism has an obligation to compensate for its historical mistreatment of people who are not white, male, or heterosexual." Diversity programs are also essential to making newspapers and news broadcasts more relevant to minority audiences, who represent an increasing segment of the news market. Steps taken so far are encouraging, say enthusiasts, but they've made hardly a dent in a journalistic culture still deeply biased and still regularly capable of profound insensitivity. That's why nothing short of proportional representation in the newsroom—the stated goal of the ASNE and the Newspaper Association of America—will do, along with regular editorial monitoring and evaluation.

To its critics, diversity represents the repudiation of an older tradition that valued objective reporting and analysis, and rewarded people on the basis of talent and merit. Some critics have

blamed the diversity agenda for promoting incompetence, for victimizing white males through reverse discrimination, and for newsroom demoralization. More substantive charges, however, have centred on diversity's role in encouraging fashionable PC nostrums of the cultural left and fostering an atmosphere of hypersensitivity, which works directly against frank, fearless and forthright discussion of our most pressing social problems, particularly those with racial and ethnic subtexts. In this view, diversity and PC have forged a new journalistic orthodoxy—part old-line liberalism, part new-age identity politics—that encourages a culture of double standards and advances a fragmented vision of society in which group identity and distinct minority viewpoints are affirmed at the expense of common standards and a shared civic identity.

The dissension caused by clumsily implemented diversity efforts is not to be dismissed. I think that we're in trouble when an editor at the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel,* who holds for one day a story about Martin Luther King because it has egregious holes in it, stands accused of racism by a group of minority staffers. We're in trouble when inter-group frictions reach such a level that the term "Balkanization of the newsroom" is not inappropriate. We're in trouble when reporters are monitored for how many minorities they quote in their stories, which leads to sourcing by quota, and when editors are promoted and given pay raises based on how many journalists of colour they hire, a situation which several ongoing court cases show has encouraged blatant reverse discrimination against more highly qualified white men. We are also in trouble when editors and reporters get so caught up in "sensitivity" and "equity" that we have the Diversity Committee at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* complaining that the paper was running more obituaries of men than of women, and a revised *LA Times Style Guide* advising against the use of such words as "Dutch treat," "gypped," "deaf," "crazy," "alien," "WASP," "middle-aged" and "handicapped."

But the real trouble with the effort to enhance cultural diver-

sity in the newsroom is that it has distorted coverage by skewing the way stories are assigned, reported, written and edited. In trying to overcome very real problems of bias and hegemony, in trying to introduce sensitivity into the newsroom, where it was once conspicuously lacking, we've lapsed into solicitude, avoidance and denial, into what the *Washington Post* media critic Harold Kurtz calls "the new skittishness." In this atmosphere, controversy, once the red meat of journalism, is studiously shunned; journalists tiptoe around sensitive issues that might offend established interest groups.

Steps taken to improve newsroom diversity are welcome correctives to the racial and class narrowness that prevailed in the 1980s. These efforts have widened the radar screen, so to speak, on which news organizations monitor their communities; this has allowed us finally to pay attention to communities long marginalized or ignored. Yet, while the radar screen is wider, the images on it are not as reliable as they need to be.

Therefore we must ask some tough questions. Can the press's new mission of affirming distinct minority viewpoints be reconciled with the goal of objective reporting and analysis? Does the effort to hire minority reporters who can identify and articulate these distinct minority perspectives encourage representation long denied or partisan cheerleading? Does the effort to increase racial sensitivity in the newsroom create an atmosphere in which troublesome racial and sexual issues cannot be adequately and reliably explored? Can news organizations preoccupied with diversity in hiring, promotion and assignment policies and arguments about the biases of the dominant culture report with critical distance on diversity in the rest of society?

To explore the implications of these questions, I've chosen a case study of *The New York Times*. Some may think it an odd choice. The perception—particularly the perception on the left—is that the *Times* is an avatar of stodgy establishmentarianism. In the last few years, however, the *Times* has taken the leading role among American newspapers in setting diversity as a priority. And it is at the *Times* that old-line liberalism has fused with new-age identity politics. The result is a consistently politically correct line on a variety of issues bearing on diversity, with troubling journalistic and political implications.

Diversity has been a concern of the *Times* for some years now, but since the ascension of the new publisher, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., it has been made into a crusade. Arthur Jr., who took over from his father, Arthur Sr. ("Punch"), has said that diversity is the paper's single most important issue. Possessed with an evangelical certitude, Sulzberger refers to diversity as "our cause," and says that "we can no longer offer our readers the predominantly white, straight, male vision of events and say that we, as journalists, are doing our job."

In pursuit of diversity, the *Times* has hired a number of extremely talented, young, minority journalists, and has moved blacks and women into positions of executive authority, where none has been before. It has also expanded its coverage of minority, including gay, issues and devoted considerable attention to improving its coverage of the New York metropolitan area. For years—the '80s in particular—the *Times* ignored the historic changes affecting areas of the city into which new, Third-World immigrant communities were flooding. Now that has changed, and a sense of this historic development is seen virtually every day. As a result, the *Times* is no longer an all-white institution focused on all-white precincts of power; it is closer now to what one staffer calls "the ideal newspaper," made up of as many smart people from as many different backgrounds as possible.

This has helped the *Times* overcome much of its racial and class myopia; unhappily, it has also led to skewed coverage. This hasn't quite made the *Times* the "*Pravda* of PC," as conservative critics such as Hilton Kramer allege, but the paper is hardly a model of detached neutrality. Instead of being a reality check on the fashionable cant of the day—i.e., multicultural ideology and

politics—the *Times* has in many ways become its vehicle. Whether the issue be affirmative action in the workplace, gay rights, immigration, the politics of race and crime, or any other issue connected to the broader issue of identity politics and American society, the *Times* has shown a consistent lack of journalistic rigour, allowing a pre-conceived, ideological script to dictate the way it covers stories irrespective of the facts. Routinely, facts are shaved, stories are ignored, uncomfortable realities are skirted, and essential journalistic questions are left unasked in a bid to make the news conform to a new orthodoxy of the cultural left.

Not surprisingly, the *Times*'s reporting on the national struggle over newsroom diversity has been conspicuously lacking. In 1992 *The Los Angeles Times* offered buyouts to some of its senior people in an effort to trim costs in the face of an advertising slump. To management's surprise, the buyout was much more popular than expected. Four times the estimated number of editorial staff took it—many of them at the peak of their careers.

According to *Washington Post* media reporter Howard Kurtz, the exodus was a reflection of plummeting morale in the wake of aggressive affirmative-action efforts that the paper embraced after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Reporters quoted by Kurtz talked of poisonous "factionalism" and racial strains, which were exacerbated by the very efforts made to ease them. *The New York Times,* however, made only vague references to "dissatisfaction in the working environment" and "the policies of current management," and attributed the popularity of the buyout to its generosity. There was no reference to newsroom racial tension.

Equally telling was the *Times*'s reaction to the adoption of racial hiring quotas at *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* which editor Maxwell King announced in a newsroom news conference in 1991. Although King explicitly referred to his new hiring plan as calling for "quotas," and called it "the most aggressive plan" at any newspaper in the country, the *Times* chose not to report it.

The issue of gay rights, particularly the issue of gays in the U.S. military, is yet another subject on which the *Times*'s reporting seems to have been filtered through a concern for its potential political repercussions. True, many on the right who are resistant to the proposal to drop the ban on gay military service invoked antediluvian stereotypes; for example, a U.S. Navy admiral proclaimed that "homosexuals are notoriously promiscuous." But the *Times* answered such charges with its own glib, pro-gay bias, leaving the impression that all opposition was an expression of "bigotry." The paper consistently gave thoughtful objections short shrift and ignored uncomfortable truths that might have thrown doubt on the initiative. For example, reservations about the impact that sexual relations—consensual or unwanted—would have on morale were airily dismissed; sexual relations between consenting gays in the ranks would have no impact on unit cohesion or morale and anyone who was the target of an overture had only to insist that "no means no."

Existing rules prohibiting demonstrations of affection between males and females would hold for gay relations, too, the *Times* implied in a piece headlined "For the Military, Policing Sex is Nothing New." Yet the article ignored both what many feminists say is the military's rampant problem of sexual harassment and the embarrassing rash of pregnancies that occurred among servicewomen on duty in the Gulf War. Also ignored were statistics the *Times* had reported earlier—that in 1992, 37 of the 360 sodomy investigations by the Army involved rape.

The realities denied in the service of gay partisanship were nowhere more obvious than in the coverage of the April 1993 gay march in Washington, which the paper's editorial page declared was to be seen "as a mirror for the nation to see its own reflection." Middle-class America certainly saw its own reflection. In a page-one report, the *Times*'s Jeffrey Schmaltz, an openly gay reporter who died of AIDS shortly thereafter, focused on feelings of gay pride and solidarity among the marchers. Schmaltz chose

not to report on the topless lesbians, the men in leather harnesses and the cross-dressers seen by anyone watching C-Span that day, or on the comic on the podium who said she wanted to "fuck" Hillary Clinton or the speaker who said she "wanted to get it on with Anita Hill." Of course the bizarre behaviour of the few shouldn't have discredited the cause espoused by the thousands who really are the boys and girls next door. Neither, however, should the *Times*'s coverage have deliberately obscured or not acknowledged the obvious.

Like its coverage of gay issues, the *Times*'s treatment of immigration is marked by only the most cursory acknowledgement of unpalatable realities. Although the *Times* is right to remind its readers of American traditions of welcoming immigrants, it seems to be wilfully blind to immigration's drawbacks and downsides, as if to explore these areas would feed a nativist backlash. A prime example of this is the exaggerated sensitivity with which it has reported on alien criminality, such as drug dealing in Manhattan's Washington Heights, one of the city's most violent neighbourhoods. Washington Heights has a huge population of illegal aliens, about 100,000. Police estimate that half of all crimes committed there, most of them drug-related, are committed by illegals. Many of these drug dealers are recruited in the Dominican Republic; they usually reside in the United States illegally and work as foot soldiers in the street trade for several years before returning home to retire.

In the summer of 1992, riots erupted in Washington Heights after a plainclothes police officer killed an illegal Dominican drug dealer who had pulled a gun on him. Yet, falling back on a script in which police brutality is assumed, the *Times* demonized the officer and cast the victim as a martyred innocent. According to police records, the victim was a known associate of a Dominican drug gang, had been convicted of drug felony and drug possession, and had violated his probation by giving authorities a false address and dropping out of sight. Authorities also said he was an

illegal alien who had slipped into the country four years earlier. Other papers reported this information several days ahead of the *Times;* when the *Times* finally did report it, it still conveyed the impression that the dead man was a victim of racist police brutality. When it made mention of the victim's illegal-immigration status, it was to create sympathy for him by implying that his lack of a green card made honest employment difficult and drug-dealing inevitable. How a convicted felon received probation, not deportation, was never pursued. The *Times* was also reluctant to criticize the Dominican community in the neighbourhood for rioting after the killing. The city's other papers reported that this rioting was encouraged by drug dealers, who saw an opportunity to create a political problem for the police that would make them back off from aggressive street-level anti-narcotics tactics. The *Times*, however, seemed unwilling to acknowledge this; instead, it let a Latino-community activist dismiss such allegations as "totally ridiculous and incendiary."

Another manifestation of the *Times*'s excessive racial and ethnic sensitivity was its coverage of race riots that took place in the central Brooklyn neighbourhood of Crown Heights in the summer of 1991—one of the *Times*'s most profound journalistic failures in years. Instead of providing accurate and complete information about this incident of racial unrest, the *Times* did not report the dereliction of the city's political officials and leaders for more than two years, until a state fact-finding commission revealed the real story. The matter was a great source of embarrassment for the *Times,* and resulted in a front page *mea culpa* the day after the state report was issued in which the paper admitted to "blind spots" in its coverage that resulted in an account "so deficient as to be misleading."

Reporting the anti-Semitic taunts and the fact that most of those arrested were black, the *Times*'s street reporting of the Crown Heights violence left little doubt that the story was one of black mobs attacking Jews in retaliation for a traffic accident that

had left a seven-year-old black boy dead. Yet news analysis searched for "context" in a way that seemed blatantly exculpatory, focusing on the bitterness and alienation of black youth and the perception, unfounded as other papers showed, that Hasidic Jews in the area received a disproportionate share of city services. The moderate amount of coverage that the paper's columnists and editorial writers gave to the murder of an Australian Jewish scholar named Yankel Rosenbaum, killed by a mob shouting "Kill the Jew," stands in contrast to the crush of attention and accusation generated by the same writers when Yusef Hawkins, a black teenager, was killed by six white boys in a neighbouring section of Brooklyn two years earlier.

The most egregious lapse on the *Times*'s part, though, was in not throwing its reportorial resources at the question of why the police failed to crack down on the rioters until the fourth night of the disturbance. Jewish leaders who filed a lawsuit against the city charged that the police had been ordered by the mayor to stand back so that black youth could "vent their rage." Were police afraid to act lest they be accused of brutality in the wake of the 1991 Rodney King beating in Los Angeles? Was the slow response motivated by fears that a crackdown would have adverse repercussions for New York mayor David Dinkins in the black community, his primary base of support? Whatever the answers to these questions, the *Times* seems to have absolved Dinkins of any responsibility for the way the disturbances were handled. In a January 1992 editorial reviewing the first two years of Dinkins's mayoralty, the *Times* concluded: "But he has learned. . . . When Crown Heights erupted, Mr. Dinkins was at his peace-making best."

It's wrong to blame diversity efforts alone for this misreporting, but diversity has merged with certain tendencies in newsroom culture to create this problem. One of the biggest problems is the way that diversity has been embraced as the spiritual successor to the civil-rights movement. This has fostered a

reliance on an old, outdated paradigm of white oppressor and black victim, which is increasingly irrelevant to a much broader cultural and demographic dynamism. Seeing diversity as a civil-rights issue has also given it an overly moralistic and revivalist air, turning what should be an essentially secular issue into a quasi-religious one, riddled with racial guilt and sanctimony. Moreover, many people in the newsroom are reluctant to speak out or express dissent because they fear being labelled "racist" or suffering retribution from higher-ups or from colleagues angling for promotions, key assignments or pay bonuses. Here, the impact of certain powerful figures in the news business laying down a pro-diversity stance as the new party line cannot be under-estimated. As one of my sources at *The New York Times* puts it: "You are not going to get ahead at this newspaper by telling Arthur that we have gone overboard on this issue and are losing our credibility."

Efforts to expand diversity by race, ethnicity and gender have not been accompanied by any conscious effort to add intellectual and ideological diversity; nor has there been any effort to enhance the diversity of social class. The result is an environment in which conservative and working-class perspectives and experience are under-recognized. This feeds into a professional-class group-think mentality and an insularity that have become problematic. Another sign of the politicization of the newsroom in thrall to diversity is the excessive concern for "context," which makes many journalists reluctant to let facts speak for themselves. In sensitive stories about race and ethnicity, there is far too much caution lest one provoke a backlash.

Consider too the way that the search for separate and distinct minority viewpoints has opened up opportunities for racial and ethnic cheerleading among those who have lost sight of the virtue of professional detachment and become blinded by tribal advocacy. There is also the problem of demographic pressures leaking into newsroom decisions. In too many instances the effort to appeal to new "communities of colour" has crossed the

line into pandering, leading editors to shrink from frank and fearless exposition of the news.

All this matters, tremendously, for a number of reasons. It matters because the credibility of newspapers is at stake. Much of the American public has the sense that newspapers have grown aloof and remote from the experience of their daily lives, that the reporting and commentary are coming out of some kind of parallel reality. Are we in danger of letting our view of how the world should work put us out of touch with what our audience knows as reality? asked one editor at an American Society of Newspaper Editors conference. This question has grown more urgent as newspapers continue to experience a decline in readership and some, like *New York Newsday*—the world's most politically correct tabloid—actually fold.

Although many pro-diversity editors and publishers at various news organizations have looked to a new multicultural middle class as the salvation of print, the self-conscious effort to appeal to it through enhancing diversity in the news pages and on news staffs has not borne the intended fruit. Indeed, according to some analysts, newspapers have staked too much on the "myth of the minority reader"; in fact, they say, minorities want just what everyone else wants: timely information and analysis produced with professional detachment and objectivity. Pandering, they say, is both transparent and off-putting.

Uncritical journalistic enthusiasm for diversity has also had harmful consequences for the political process, particularly for the viability of the Democratic Party. An over-determined liberal bias in which the cause of diversity is seen as an unquestioned good has been bad for the Democratic Party on at least two levels. It is quite possible that perceived bias in the media has motivated angry centrist and conservative American voters, stoking the broad anti-élite cultural backlash we saw in the 1994 midterm election results. The press's blind spot for diversity also deprives Democrats of the kind of reality check that might have

discouraged them from going forward with policies such as gays in the military and ethnic and race quotas, which pollsters say are unpopular with its middle-class base.

Major U.S. news organizations share the Democratic Party's institutional commitment to diversity. This co-dependent relationship has encouraged a narrow multiculturalist orthodoxy, which has made both the press and the party increasingly dysfunctional. Indeed, however much enthusiasts in the élite insist that diversity is the path of progressivism, popular resistance to it will likely ensure a conservative backlash, as the recent Republican ascendency suggests.

An even wider cause for concern, however, is the impact that slanted and skewed reporting has on the policy-making process in America at this critical juncture in our history when the task of absorbing people from different cultures and apportioning power and rights to various groups is the most essential business of the nation. To the extent that uncritical enthusiasm for diversity delays measures needed to deal with these challenges or prescribes wrong ones, we will suffer the consequences. If a society of such staggering, ever-increasing diversity as the United States is ever to work out a framework for handling its multiplicity, it has to abandon wishful thinking and come to grips with reality. Such a process is undermined by an agenda that encourages intellectually dishonest news reporting and analysis, however well intended. A truly progressive society cannot be built on the kind of public mistrust that reporting in an age of institutionalized identity politics has engendered.

ASH OF IDENTITIES

On Identity Politics

"The politics of identity are inflamed, if not precipitated, by the media's need for snappy narratives characterized by conflict, generalization and stereotype. Unlike the narratives of fiction or mythology, there are few resolutions and almost no healing processes in this narrative."

– Ron Graham

olerance

'Intolerance . . . is a willed refusal to focus on individual difference and a perverse insistence that individual identity be subsumed by the group. The difference between individual and group is major; the difference between groups is minor—yet, perversely, intolerance focuses on the latter, rather than upon the former."

– Michael Ignatieff

cism

'White men, even young blond men, do not worry that they will be blamed because of what Paul Bernardo did; but when young black men were charged with he shooting at Just Desserts in Toronto in 1994, every young black man in the ity felt blamed. . . ." – Judy Rebick

paration

'The truth is that the [Quebec] referendum's unexpectedly close outcome, apart rom shattering the complacency of federalists, has not really altered the essential terms of the debate. Nor has it opened up the possibility of a search for some new compromise." – Ramsay Cook

Media

'Anybody who rises to prominence in heir ranks learns to think along the accommodating lines of any expectant caeerist in any other large corporation. By and large . . . the upper servants of the major news media possess the instincts of an English butler: As long as they have eason to fear or profit from the wisdom in office, they can be counted upon to maintain the decorous façades of government."

– Lewis Lapham

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