



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume IV: Racism and Nativism in American Political Culture

Introduction

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Many students in today's public schools learn about struggles to end slavery, segregation, and black disfranchisement. Attention is also increasingly given to the problems of Native Americans and other minorities. Neither teachers nor research scholars, however, have focused extensively on the justifications given for racial and ethnic discrimination historically and the circumstances under which such positions prevailed. Though understandable, this inattention can make our teaching of history seem unreal, because many of the leading characters are missing. It also does not prepare students to recognize similar circumstances and justifications supporting inequalities in our own time.

Consequently, this seminar examined political tracts, congressional debates, judicial decisions, "scientific" studies, literary works and films defending racial inequality and nativist immigration restrictions throughout U.S. history. It began with works of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, declaring Americans to be (only) of European descent and claiming scientific evidence of black inferiority. It continued through legislative acts, decisions, and popular works upholding slavery and second-class African-American citizenship, discrimination against Irish and other white ethnics, restrictions on Chinese immigration, internment of Japanese Americans during W.W.II. We finished with quite recent articles on race and intelligence that renew themes of antebellum scientific racism. Throughout we explored the different answers writers and lawmakers gave to the question, "Who is truly American?" and "What is a 'race' or 'ethnic group,' and what is their significance"? We also debated different possible reasons why so many Americans have endorsed policies hostile to various racial and ethnic groups. And we looked constantly to see the circumstances and arguments that produced successful egalitarian reforms, insofar as these have occurred.

Our discussions often centered on how to teach about America's long history of racial and ethnic discrimination without either sugarcoating unpalatable truths in ways that might make students justly suspicious, or emphasizing the negatives to the degree that students would wrongly feel no change was possible. We agreed that, given the different backgrounds, interests, and personalities of different classes and teachers, there was no general answer to this question. The curriculum units that resulted explore these issues in an appropriate variety of ways. One focuses on the modern civil rights movement, its difficulties and successes; others stress the longer history of laws and judicial rulings upholding racial inequality. One examines some of the many white nativist groups in America's past, along with the counter-movements they engendered; another deals with the effort of African-Americans and other groups to receive reparations for discriminatory treatment. Yet another stresses the general phenomenon of human efforts to feel "special" and how they can lead into discriminatory directions, while several explore how attitudes and policies conducive to constructive change can be encouraged. The lesson plans include not only readings from American history,

law, and literature but also films and documentaries, creative simulations, role-playing exercises, discussions with community leaders, and a remarkable variety of other methods of imparting knowledge and inspiring thought on these sensitive issues in positive ways. Together these units provide an excellent repertoire of materials and techniques suggesting how we can teach more honestly and constructively about some of the most basic problems shaping everyone who has shared in the complex experience of American life.

Rogers M. Smith

Professor of Political Science

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