

MIDWEST SURFBOARD CO.

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Editorial: Column

The new racism in America

by Dave Lewis
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During the recent SGA racism controversy, many students questioned the extent of racism on campus. The issue could have been an opportunity for the UMass community to engage the many different perspectives on racism. But the people who most needed a dialogue instead only got a barrage of loaded opinions. In final assessment, the conversation about the racism in the drawing drowned out the more important issue of its social context.

Many Americans now seem to believe that racism and racial inequality no longer exist. Nothing could be further from the truth. Current census data shows that racial inequality is ingrained in our society as much now as during the Civil Rights era.

The inequalities are so well-documented that after listing a few of them, it begins to feel redundant. According to recent US Census statistics: the median income of black and Latino families is \$34K compared to \$54K for whites (2001); the average net worth of white households is nearly five times that of black households (1998); the unemployment rate for blacks is twice that of whites (2002); Latinos are three times more likely than whites not to finish high school (2003); 26 percent of whites completed four years of college compared to 15 percent of blacks and 11 percent of Latinos (1999); black small businesses are denied loans 70 percent of the time compared to 27 percent for whites (1998); 22 percent of blacks and Latinos are below the poverty level compared to 10 percent of whites (2001); for males, blacks are six times and Latinos are four times more likely than whites to spend time in prison (1999); blacks are six times more likely to be murdered than whites (2000); black girls are twice as likely to become teenage mothers as white girls (1999); there are currently still no black or Latino senators or governors.

These disparities are the direct result of institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism is racial inequality that is caused by social institutions as opposed to direct discrimination on a personal level. Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans continue to be systematically disadvantaged in the areas of education, health care, criminal justice, employment, business and home funding and government representation. These disadvantages apply to all necessary aspects of human life.

The "new racism" is the acceptance of institutionalized racism as the status quo. It operates through the belief that the US has achieved equality and that now all Americans are born with an equal opportunity to succeed. The new racism is perhaps even more insidious than the overt racism of the past, because it suggests that poor conditions in black and Latino communities are due to their inferior intelligence,

personal choices and values. The new racism plays on the traditional notion that with the right combination of ambition and hard work, anyone can achieve the American Dream. Therefore, blacks, Latinos and Native Americans should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

This ideology says that failure to get ahead is solely one's own fault. It teaches us to see ourselves as individuals and not as part of a larger social fabric. But this mentality denies or downplays historical context and social responsibility. Clearly, minority communities have been systematically disadvantaged throughout US history.

The widespread illusion of equality has tilted public opinion away from the need for social programs. If we already have equality, then programs like welfare, food stamps, unemployment assistance, day care, Medicare, urban development, clinics, shelters, public education, youth centers, job training and teen mother assistance are "government handouts" paid for by our taxes. This argument ignores the fact that our existing social programs are largely under-funded and inadequate.

Whether we choose to believe it or not, we are all intimately connected to the racism of our society. As an individual you may strive not to be racist, but the dominant form of racism has more to do with whether you accept or oppose institutionalized racism than your personal values.

Before the Civil War, many Northerners talked about how they opposed slavery, but only a small minority joined the Abolitionist movement. It is a criticism of our society that still remains true: we talk about social justice, but we don't act. Saying "I am not a racist" while failing to oppose institutional racism is akin to saying, "I oppose slavery" while failing to fight it. We must assume personal responsibility for fighting injustice if our professed values are to be taken as anything but empty talk.

Although usually disguised with words like "urban" and "underprivileged," issues of race are very much at the forefront of policy discussions both here at UMass and on the national stage. Taking a stand on these issues requires education, community involvement and direct action on a political level. If you want to make an impact, educate yourself, engage in dialogues with your peers, find out about the community organizations serving local cities such as Holyoke and Springfield (visit the CSL office in Goodell or do a Google search), incorporate social justice into your career plans, contact your state rep and vote. You can also contact minority advocacy groups such as ALANA to learn about current issues of race here on campus.

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