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NPR

SHOW: ALL THINGS CONSIDERED (NPR 8:00 pm ET)

JULY 15, 1997, TUESDAY

Transcript # 97071515-212

TYPE: INTERVIEW

SECTION: News; Domestic

LENGTH: 1867 words

HEADLINE: Liberal Racism

GUESTS: Jim Sleeper

BYLINE: Robert Siegel, Washington, DC; Linda Wertheimer

HIGHLIGHT:

Robert talks with Jim Sleeper, the author of "Liberal Racism. They discuss why Sleeper believes that liberals are reinforcing racist policies and attitudes and preventing the development of a truly "colorblind" society.

BODY:

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST: As a newspaper columnist in New York City, Jim Sleeper wrote a lot of stories about race and racial conflict.

Sleeper, who describes himself as a liberal, ran up against attitudes and ideas from other liberals that disturbed him -- the idea that political districts must be crafted to form majorities of minorities; that black babies should not be adopted by white couples; that a Hispanic man will experience things more like other Hispanic men than like non-Hispanics who might resemble him in other ways.

Sleeper has written a collection of essays that rebut such ideas from a liberal perspective, but recognize them as feature of American liberal thought. His title for the book is his name for that feature "Liberal Racism."

JIM SLEEPER, AUTHOR, LIBERAL RACISM: It's a condescension. It's an insistence that racial difference are more primordial, that they tell a lot more about us than they really do; and sometimes it's an old-fashioned garden-variety discomfort on the part of white people toward non-white people.

The obvious thing that a phrase liberal racism plays off against is the fact of conservative racism, and I say explicitly in the book that I think the

conservative record on race can't be defended and in my view is not likely to be redeemed.

That makes the liberal defaults all the more consequential to me and that's why I wrote the book.

SIEGEL: But some of the aspects of liberal racism that you would cite, would be say, political redistricting in order to create so-called majority, minority districts on the assumption that if people are Hispanic or black, they have something in common that they don't have with anybody else.

SLEEPER: That's right and I think that assumption goes too far. Obviously, if one can posit an unrelenting and implacable racism, white racism, then what non-white people have in common is opposition to that. And of course that's true.

But to leap from that to the assumption that all Hispanics share a common culture, or that even that all African-Americans share common political views, and perspectives, is reductionist. It's unfair. And we are hearing more and more black voices especially coming forward and telling us so.

I think a lot of the liberal racial remedies from the racial districting to affirmative action, some aspects of it -- the color

coding--is premised on a simplistic view of people of color. My suggestion is that that's not only not the way to fight racism, it winds up deepening race lines and in some ways recapitulating racism.

SIEGEL: Some critics of your book might say that it really is essentially a question for African-Americans to determine how great their identity is determined by African-American or being black and that a white writer like yourself, is essentially a spectator to that decision, not a participant in it.

SLEEPER: Well, as blacks are quick to remind us, and I would certainly agree, we've been locked in a 300-year-old psychic and physical embrace, sometimes intimate, sometimes miserable. And that's the template for our life. Whites have to speak about race just as much as blacks do.

And they have to speak more candidly than they have. I must say that when a portion of this book ran in Harpers about black identity, people started to clear their throats to say, why is white writer talking about why we should give up race consciousness?

And then, low and behold, simultaneously in the Atlantic, the cover story by Randall Kennedy, a black Harvard law professor, went even farther than I would, to say race loyalty and race kinship should be a thing of the past. And I think that's our destiny. I think that's where we're headed.

SIEGEL: What to you have been recent examples of a liberal racism at work?

SLEEPER: Well, one of the most glaring, ironically, was a remark that was made by the president of Rutgers University, Francis Lawrence (ph), which I cite in the book, a couple of years ago, you know, rambling defense of what by any standard was a very excessive affirmative action program, a program that was

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scooping in kids who just weren't ready; who had been under-prepared.

He made a glancing reference too "well, we have to account for blacks' inherited deficiencies," a kind of geneticist thing which he immediately said he hadn't meant and we take him at his word.

But there's a sense in which to the extent that we lower the bar so much, that we stop paying non-whites the elementary compliment of applying the same standards that we whites -- that people would apply to their own neighbors and friends of the same race.

We really are engaged what I think is a racist reduction. And if we create situations where that's the expectation, where kids are unprepared, where workers are ^{un}prepared, where people see that, we wind up with the kinds of epithets flying back and forth, or the kind of liberal Freudian slip that Francis Lawrence made. We wind up assuming that the beneficiaries of these remedies are in fact permanently dependent on them.

SIEGEL: Your charge against liberals is that they have, to too great of an extent, abandoned a belief in certain principles that used to guide liberalism and they've abandoned them in the face of the problem of race in recent years.

SLEEPER: Liberals' great glory, in my view, is that they were the framers of common public story lines or narratives that taught us how to rise above color; to see the part in all of us that's common beyond that. That's been the historic mission of liberalism.

And I think in an effort to redress the obvious departures from that, the obviously horrible historical record, liberals have kowtowed really, just bowed too much to a racial essentialism that separates us, and I say us as liberals, from our historic mission, which is to frame a common destiny, a common purpose.

Each of us can be nurtured in a particular subculture, racial, ethnic or otherwise, but if it's a really good one, it teaches us to face outward as well, and at times to transcend and to join together in the American common experiment.

That is what the civil rights movement was about. That is what liberalism ought to be about. And I think we have slid away from it.

SIEGEL: Well, Jim Sleeper, thank you very much for talking to us.

SLEEPER: Well, thank you.

SIEGEL: Jim Sleeper is the author of Liberal Racism.

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