

## WARD CONNERLY GETS PINCHED

by Jim Sleeper

AS I WORKED THIS WINTER on my book *Liberal Racism*, I had an impish notion: Why not examine how *New York Times* publisher Arthur ("Pinch") Sulzberger Jr.'s tangled ethnic and religious

roots have nourished his obsession with diversity? "It is not

enough just to hire a more racially and sexually varied work force," Sulzberger has told anyone who'll listen. Variety must be enhanced "through training. We are all going to have to understand those differences, be

aware of them, know what they mean, understand that we don't all see the world or a moment in time in the same way."

Suppose that, following Sulzberger's admonition, we asked him to help us understand how tensions between his own paternal German-Jewish heritage and his maternal Episcopalian upbringing (he grew up with his mother after his parents were divorced) have driven him to create 23 "diversity action teams" at the *Times*?

I nixed the project the instant I thought of it. It was not only impolitic but improper. There was Sulzberger's privacy to consider, public figure though he is; and since my book argues that diversity training is presumptuous, intrusive, and subversive of good journalism, I would have been guilty of those very crimes had I followed my first impulse.

For an object lesson in journalistic malfeasance of this sort, we need look no further than Sulzberger's own *New York Times*—specifically, to the Sunday, July 27 edition. There, in an unprecedented 5,000-word front-page profile, reporter Barry Bearak examines the murky racial bona fides of Ward Connerly, champion of California's Proposition 209 against affirmative action and a formidable opponent of all racial preferences. Bearak's mix of tabloid witch-hunting and dime-store psychoanalysis reinforces the notion that Connerly's strong beliefs grow partly from a shaky, perhaps twisted sense of his blackness.

The piece serves to reduce the political to the personal, to discredit Connerly by locating his opposition to affirmative action in a self-hating black grandmother. It is, in other words, a case study in liberal racism, in that it reduces an independent black man to a psychic can of worms. It signals the *Times*'s desperation in a losing battle over racial color-coding that it does not comprehend. It marks the paper's demise as an arbiter of racial discourse.

Bearak opens by telling us that Connerly is only dubiously black because he has Irish, French, and Choctaw bloodlines. "I suppose I could claim to be Irish," Connerly admits under questioning, "but who wants to stand there and argue the point every time? So I'm black." Bearak does argue the point, not so much to deny Connerly's blackness, which would be impossible, but to discount the moral and political strength Connerly has found in *being* black while refusing to *think* "black." The *Times* can't abide Connerly's insistence that blackness doesn't constrain him to understand the world as liberals think blacks must.

The paper campaigned against him and Proposition 209 and is devoting its resources not to understanding why 26 percent of black voters supported the initiative but to an effort to dismiss Connerly, who has galvanized revulsion against racial groupthink.

"However much a hindrance [Connerly's blackness] may have been in other endeavors, it now offers him a paradoxical advantage," Bearak advises us. "His blackness, he agrees with some reluctance, grants many whites a kind of absolution, allowing them to protest affirmative action 'without having to feel like they appear racist.'" The implication: Whites who support Connerly *are* racist, and Connerly fronts for them.

Instead of exploring other possibilities, Bearak takes great investigative and literary pains to suggest that Connerly is not an entirely honest man. He can't find any noteworthy misdeeds in Connerly's personal or professional life, so he devotes six paragraphs to interviews with disgruntled relatives to establish that Connerly *may* have embellished tales he has told of leading a childhood in abject poverty.

Having established that, at worst, Connerly is no less truthful than most people who mythicize their pasts, Bearak slogs into pits of racial self-loathing. He reveals that Connerly's maternal grandmother, who raised him after his mother died, seems to have had contempt for darker blacks and even for Connerly's father, whom she may have driven away during Ward's infancy. This excursion, too, yields less than Bearak lets on: He doesn't tell us that intraracial color prejudices have long run deeply and tragically among many blacks.

Nor does Bearak note that many black leaders, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, were even more racially mixed than Connerly. Du Bois was descended on his mother's side from a Dutch settler who married a slave; his paternal grandfather, of French Huguenot and black descent, passed for white at the elite Cheshire Academy. Du Bois's own preoccupation with a black "talented tenth" may have figured in his abandonment of black America for fantasies of a pan-African destiny in Ghana.

No such elitism bedevils Connerly, yet Bearak highlights his distance from one Eddie Hall, a poor, 72-year-old black Everyman who often shines Connerly's shoes in a garage. Hall "has watched his own dreams diminish and then disappear," Bearak advises us, and he prompts Hall to comment that a colorblind society is "utopia and there's no such thing." Since

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Hall never utters a word against Connerly, and asserts that "hard work, not affirmative action, is the answer," a desperate Bearak strains to fix Connerly as an elitist by informing us that even though he likes Hall, he doesn't know Hall's name.

Bearak also portrays Connerly as alienated from his family. Most remarkably, Bearak tracked down the father Connerly has long believed abandoned him when Ward was an infant and died soon after. The *Times* found, photographed, and interviewed the 84-year-old man, whose "mental faculties have gone dim," which understandably rattled Connerly. The story ends portentously with Connerly calling the father he never knew—who asks him, in the final words of the piece, "When you coming back this way?"

Bearak has torn open a family's tragic, hidden hurts to stage a morality play whose lesson is that true blackness cannot be reconciled with a principled opposition to racial preferences. This untoward probing of an unorthodox black thinker's personal life recalls the *Times* magazine's long, intrusive "story" two years ago about a personal estrangement between the essayist and scholar Shelby Steele, also a noted foe of affirmative action, and his brother, the psychologist Claude M. Steele. If this is acceptable journalism, then so would be an exploration of the family origins of Sulzberger's obsession with diversity on the other side of the battlefield. Why not carry the battle into Sulzberger's private life, as his newspaper has into Connerly's?

If, for example, group "differences" are as important among whites as Bearak makes them seem among blacks, let's unpack them. "Arthur keeps talking about the day being long past when the news will be told only through the 'straight, white male' point of view,"

a *Times* reporter told the journalist Robert Sam Anson for *Esquire*. "Who is this white male? Adolf Hitler? Albert Schweitzer? Me?"

Let Sulzberger answer by explaining, as he has made Connerly do, the peculiar, conflicting roles his own ethnic shadings and personal family history played in creating the worldview he now holds. Shouldn't everyone at the *Times* become more "aware" of this? Perhaps I can be of some help, in the spirit of "diversity": My Lithuanian-Jewish background makes

me exquisitely "sensitive" to some underappreciated cultural differences between German Jews and WASPs. We Lithuanian Jews "know" that German Jews can be repressed, abstract, and snooty (Shall I count the ways?) and that there is no greater peril to the social fabric than a guilt-ridden Episcopalian (unless, of course, it is an Episcopalian who feels no guilt).

If I go to work at the *New York Times*, can I share this cultural wisdom with Arthur and others in a diversity workshop, like the one where a Puerto Rican *Times* reporter was told he needn't be ashamed because Hispanics have "wonderful family values"?

We have long known that liberal thinking on race has become so patronizing

that it debilitates its intended beneficiaries. Now, the *Times*'s crude ascription of primordial differences to skin shades and surnames has revived 19th-century notions of race that are viciously divisive. The Connerly story represents the full triumph at the *Times* of a mindset that the real Connerly and other Americans who have found their voices and courage are overthrowing everywhere else but on West 43rd Street.

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Ward Connerly

## The New York Times vs. Ward Connerly

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