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Normalization and the Welfare State

LADELLE McWHORTER

IN *RACISM AND SEXUAL OPPRESSION IN ANGLO-AMERICA*, I argued that as race was absorbed into biology in the nineteenth century, it was recast from a morphological typology to a function of physiological and evolutionary development (McWhorter 2009b). Racial difference became a sign of developmental difference. Racial groups represented stages of human evolution, and raced individuals were to be disciplined and managed in accordance with developmental norms.

Twentieth-century race was therefore a category and tool of normalization; to be raced was to be located at a particular point along a developmental curve. Some races were thought to be more or less arrested in their development, while others were merely retarded, and theorists disagreed at times about which were which. But they all agreed that the most highly developed race was the Nordic or the Anglo-Saxon. Anglo-Saxons were the norm for modern human beings— anatomically, physiologically, intellectually, and morally. There were other white races whose status was debated (Mediterraneans and Ashkenazi Jews, for example), and there were disputes over the evolutionary status of Chinese, Hindus, and Mexicans. But most theorists agreed that at the very bottom of the developmental scale we should place Celts, Negroes, and American Indians. These peoples were savages, primitives. They should be trained to the extent possible to contribute to the society that had already superseded them, but their proper destiny was to pass away into extinction as humanity advanced.

These evolutionary stragglers, along with the evolutionary throwbacks that appeared sometimes among whites, were considered dangerous for two main reasons. First, a great many of them were expensive. They were shiftless, often incompetent, and frequently lawless. Because of them, it was necessary to

maintain police forces, prisons, poorhouses, and asylums. They were a drain on the economic advance of society, which affected its educational and technological advance and ultimately its evolutionary advance as well. Second, because they had primitive sexual urges unrestrained by reason as well as heritable defects and diseases, they threatened the bloodlines of more advanced human beings. In short, they posed a risk for the ongoing evolutionary advancement of the entire Human Race. To protect the Race, it was necessary to contain these primitives, savages, and throwbacks and to reduce their numbers through careful management of their sexuality. This, I argued in the book, was racism's cutting edge in the early twentieth century.

Since publishing the book, I have done some work on the changes in practices of racism in the wake of the Biological Synthesis—that is, the unification of biology and genetics that occurred in the 1930s through the efforts of renowned scientists such as Theodosius Dobzhansky and Ernst Mayr (McWhorter 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). As I discussed in that work, by 1950, evolutionary biology was less a study of species development than it was a study of the effects of evolutionary forces acting on and within populations. Correlatively, racial practices shifted toward management of statistically delineated populations or ethnic groups. Theorists and policymakers recognized that not all members of a given population have the same genes, meaning that old-style racism (which assumed, for example, that all Negroes were stupid) was false; some Negroes might be quite brilliant, in fact. It was not The Negro who was stupid but the population of Negroes in the aggregate that was measurably stupider than the population of Anglo-Saxons. Accordingly, normalization now occurred at the level of the population. Disciplinary practices designed for cultivating the capacities of groups of individuals were altered or replaced to focus on groups as groups, as aggregates. The point was to shift the statistical norm of the population rather than to alter the bodies or behavior of each and every individual. I have argued elsewhere (McWhorter 2009a, 5) that this merger of disciplinary normalization and population management constitutes the full flowering of what Foucault calls biopower (Foucault 1978, 140).

When Lisa Guenther invited me to speak at the plenary on “Re-thinking Whiteness” that took place at the fifth annual meeting of *philoSOPHIA* at Vanderbilt University, she explained that although many presenters offer polished papers, it has been a tradition at *philoSOPHIA* meetings to present work in progress. I accepted the invitation in light of that tradition. Hence, in this essay, I do not attempt to reach any conclusions but only to delineate as fully as possible a question and offer a few brief speculations.

My question has to do with the relation between the welfare state and welfare economics on the one hand and modern racism—normalized, developmental racism—on the other, and with what transformations in race concepts and identities and racial practices may occur as the welfare state recedes.

By “welfare state” I mean the type of governmentality constituted by the deployment of a relatively centralized set of institutions that manage the biological life of a territorially circumscribed population. A welfare state provides or dictates provision of education; sanitation; housing; sustenance for the poor, elderly, and disabled; medical care for certain segments of the population; and any other material supports it deems necessary for the well-being of its people. It also, and supposedly for the same reason, regulates economic activity to some varying and usually contested degree.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, right-wing pundits have spoken as if John Maynard Keynes were the father of welfare economics. By the time Keynes published his *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* in 1936, however, the United States already fit this definition of a welfare state. From the 1870s forward, federal, state, and local governments instituted marriage licensing, birth and death certification, asylums for those deemed disabled, public shelters for the indigent, public schools, and water and sanitation works, among other programs. I would include among these initiatives many racial segregation laws, which were often justified by reference to public hygiene and dependent for their enforcement upon state bureaus of vital statistics. Through the early twentieth century this biopolitical governmental activity intensified. Institutions for the variously disabled proliferated. Involuntary sterilization programs were instituted in thirty-three states. Antitrust and child labor laws were passed and used to control profiteering in the interest of the public good. Massive government-funded hydroelectric and utility infrastructure projects were undertaken to promote health and support economic development across the country.

The New Deal did greatly increase the federal government’s role in welfare provision, however, and it was based to some degree on Keynes’s theory. To that extent, the pundits are correct. (They are also correct to point to Keynes’s work as the foundation for some of the mechanisms for managing international trade, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, although I do not discuss those institutions in this paper.) Keynes believed that an important function of government was to ensure the well-being of its people primarily by maintaining full employment. He also believed, unlike most of his contemporaries, that full employment was not an automatic effect of an economy in general equilibrium. Production and consumption, supply and demand, could stabilize at a level well below full employment, leaving many people in dire straits. This could happen after a recession or depression—the situation that Keynes was in fact addressing in the mid-1930s—but it could also happen over time in any highly developed capitalist system. As fixed capital proliferated and production became more efficient—which was virtually inevitable under the best of conditions—people would tend to invest less and less in productive capacity. Aggregate demand would inevitably fall (because entrepreneurs would

not be ordering as many new machines, etc.), causing the economy to slow. Whether in hard times or good, therefore, it fell to government to raise aggregate demand, which in turn would increase investment in material production, which in turn would put people to work. Governments had to spend in order for the capitalist economy to flourish. Otherwise, Keynes contended, capitalism itself would ultimately fail (Keynes 1953, 381).

Keynes's moral values led him to think it would be best if governments spent tax money on things benefiting people while at the same time employing them—things such as housing, education, and health care. But from an economic perspective, he declared, spending could be on anything—national defense, sports, the arts, even pyramid building; it did not matter what. Economically, all that mattered was the spending itself (Keynes 1953, 129).

Many policymakers apparently shared Keynes's moral values, and no pyramids were built. Beginning in the 1930s and extending through the 1960s, the federal government instituted numerous entitlement programs—Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security being the most prominent today—and established low-interest, long-term housing loans to stabilize communities and give working-class men a chance to build equity in a tangible investment. Tax money was made available for children's health and nutrition, aid to single mothers, education for the masses, and, eventually, birth control. All these programs stimulated job creation, both in the private sector and in the civil service.

While all this was happening, racism was flourishing in the welfare state. In fact, the rationale for many welfare state programs originally lay in nineteenth-century scientific racism. Government was needed to protect and cultivate the nation construed as an essentially evolving population, with Nordics, Anglo-Saxons, or, more broadly, whites hailed as the leading evolutionary edge, the modern norm. All hope for humanity's future rested on the white, middle-class married couple reliably reproducing while succeeding in the market economy and raising their children to succeed. Protection and cultivation of the nation and indeed the Human Race required support and protection of that reproductive and economic unit. And that was the job of biopolitical government, the job of the welfare state.

For much of the twentieth century there was fundamental agreement on this ideal. Differences arose over risk assessment—what really threatens the white middle-class family? Is it crime? feminism? Negroes? sex perverts? high taxes?—and over the means for reducing risk—should we lock up or sterilize all the dangerous people or should we develop programs to educate and train them and thus bring them up to the level of middle-class heterosexual whites? What would be the most cost effective? What, in fact, was even possible? Obviously, these differences could and did translate into major policy disputes. Conservatives often preferred policies that allowed high infant mortality rates

on reservations and in tenements and sharecroppers' shacks, while progressives often preferred policies that saved infants' lives and then got them out of incompetent parents' hands as soon thereafter as possible, at least for a good portion of the day.

In claiming that the welfare state has sheltered and fostered racism and, indeed, in some respects has been predicated upon it, I do not mean to condemn it. These very same policies and disputes that resulted in so much human tragedy also set the stage for the civil rights and liberation movements of mid-century. If government had not provided education, for example, racial minorities and women would not have been able to demand higher quality education or right of entry into educational institutions on the basis of their status as citizens. It is undeniable that the welfare state has incarcerated, mutilated, and hastened the deaths of thousands and thousands of individuals, but it is equally undeniable that it has provided opportunities for economic, social, and intellectual advancement for millions of people who would have remained ignorant, impoverished, and more or less enslaved to exploitative employers otherwise. My point is, rather, that as biological discourses assimilated race as a category and began to shape state policies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the fate of the one became thoroughly entangled with the fate of the other.

We are now witnessing the unwinding of the welfare state. A very different kind of governmentality is currently inventing and asserting itself: neoliberal governmentality, which claims to be and in fact seems to be far less dependent on techniques of normalization than was the biopolitical welfare state. Thus, my question is: Where is race located in this emerging mode of governmentality, and how does it function in these new networks of power/knowledge? Race has been a very effective management tool for a very long time (much preceding the welfare state, in fact). It is highly unlikely that any new form of governmentality, especially one so attentive to cost efficiency, would dispense with it. Before I offer a set of speculations, though, I want to look briefly at techniques of subjectivation in each of the two modes of governmentality, that of biopolitical normalization and that of neoliberalism.

Disciplinary normalization produces certain types of subject, types that function well in a welfare state apparatus or that are at least manageable within it. Individuals are identified by means of a variety of mechanisms as more or less intelligent, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, mature, or dangerous. These identifications allow individuals to be assigned places in disciplinary regimes, where they develop their capacities and submit to both the identities that adhere to them and the institutional sites into which they are inserted. In this way, one becomes a gifted pupil or a juvenile delinquent, a homosexual or a happy housewife. One experiences the world through the frame of one's normalized identity; the identity is one's truth.

According to Michel Foucault's analysis in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), the subject constituted in neoliberal governmental regimes is quite different. I will summarize a portion of lecture nine of that series, which was given on March 14, 1979.

Economists as diverse as Ricardo, Keynes, and Marx reduced labor to time, Foucault asserts. Workers had a commodity to sell, their labor power, which was remunerated in units of time. There was constant struggle over the price of that commodity per hour, and much depended on those struggles' outcomes. Economists, therefore, were to pay close attention to wage rates. Neoliberals maintain instead that we must study the allocation of means to competing ends—which they call substitutability choices. Neoliberal analysis begins, then, not with some homogeneous commodity called labor, but with how individuals allot their limited resources. Economist Lionel Robbins first did this in the 1930s, declaring, "Economics is the science of human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have mutually exclusive uses" (quoted in Foucault 2008, 222). Economics thus becomes a study of human behavior and its rationality; it is not the analysis of processes (of production, of price fluctuations, of rates of currency exchange, or of employment, etc.) but of activity (the reasoned conduct of individual human beings).

With this shift, the distinction between workers and capitalists was blurred. All have resources, which all must allot. Furthermore, with Irving Fisher's definition of income as the return on capital, capital could be conceived as anything that can be the source of future income. Beginning in the 1950s, then, Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz argued that labor is not a commodity; rather, it is capital. Like actual machines on factory floors, a worker's labor-capital is a "machine" that produces an earnings stream. But this "machine" that generates the worker's income—the earnings stream—is the worker him or herself—his or her body, skills, and knowledge. This "machine" is not a labor-commodity sold to capitalists, as classical, neoclassical, and Marxist economists have maintained; it is capital-activity.

Of course, human capital has a life span. It will age, perhaps strengthen and develop new capacities, and ultimately decline, and this means the income that it can generate will vary over time. These changes have to be anticipated and managed by the worker, who needs to maintain his or her income stream through the life cycle. Thus, the worker is, in effect, a capitalist, an enterprise unit. And thus we arrive, Foucault asserts, at the principle for deciphering neoliberalism and its program for rationalization of society and the economy: Neoliberal *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur of itself.

Entrepreneurs invest in their capital. They buy more machinery or upgrade what they have to increase or ensure their future earnings. If government does not inhibit their ability to do so, individuals will behave similarly, say the neoliberals. Free people will likely choose to allocate some portion of their

current resources to invest in their human capital. They may enroll in degree programs, seek job training, or move to an area with more opportunities. Our bodies are a major part of our human capital in which we must invest in order to secure our future earnings stream. I might join a gym, buy nutritional supplements, have my teeth straightened, keep my wardrobe up to date—all in order to make the right impression, get into the right sorority or country club, keep my job or advance to something more lucrative. To get the spouse I want, and therefore the children I want—children who will be well-adjusted and successful—I might need to invest in my appearance and some training in social graces or I might need to buy property in the right neighborhood or vacation in the right locales in the right seasons. Parents invest in their children. Education is an investment. Medical care and migration are investments. Any expenditure that secures or increases my income stream for the future is an investment in my human capital.

Neoliberal governmentality operates to create the conditions under which individuals will experience themselves as human capital and will behave like owners of enterprises, for this is what it means to be “an enterprise society.” It is important for these “enterprises” to have ready access to credit—as individuals suddenly did in the wake of changes in law and policies under both Thatcher and Reagan. The government must not socialize consumption; as much consumption as possible must be left to private individuals or firms—up to and including the consumption of education, transportation, and medical care. (Hence the dramatic moves toward privatization of public assets in the United States and UK, as well as in countries around the world that have accepted loans from the International Monetary Fund in recent decades.) Individuals must assume risk, just as venture capitalists do, and wade into the competition. Many will fail, just as a majority of businesses do. But the ever-present possibility of real failure promotes responsible allocation. It disciplines, in other words. It does so, however, without normalizing. It leaves individuals free to project and cultivate their own developmental possibilities and create their own lifestyles and personal identities—all within the confines of an increasingly global market economy, of course.

There is ample evidence, more than thirty years after Foucault’s lecture, that neoliberalism creates more misery than freedom worldwide. So-called “free trade” has concentrated wealth in fewer and fewer hands and created greater incentive for financial speculation, which has wrecked local and national economies around the globe. Privatization and deregulation in the United States have brought lower environmental quality, greater safety risks, and a fairly steady decrease in real wages, and, if enacted, the Ryan plan to privatize Social Security will likely impoverish millions of elderly and disabled people in coming decades. Burgeoning consumer debt suggests that many individuals have not made good investments in their human capital—that is, have not

used their expanded credit to invest in things that would secure and increase future income streams—and thus are likely to fail, whatever that will mean in a world with very few governmentally maintained safety nets—foreclosure? homelessness? a turn to crime resulting in imprisonment? fatal illness as a consequence of stress or lack of medical care? suicide?

Still, there is at least anecdotal evidence to suggest that while many of these human “firms” might be failing, some people are re-forming themselves into self-entrepreneurs. The rhetoric of investment in human capital is ubiquitous, especially in education, and other aspects of daily life—from home purchasing to intimate relationships—are routinely discussed in the language of investment as well. Furthermore, even as the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is making health care available to more Americans, many people seem to be giving up on the idea that their government will support them in any way as they become elderly, sick, or disabled. Many below the age of fifty believe they will never collect Social Security, for example, and are investing for retirement (if they can) with that in mind, despite the fact that Social Security currently has a \$2.5 trillion surplus, making it solvent through 2037, and, if the cap on SSI taxable income (which currently stands at about \$106,000) were scrapped, could remain solvent indefinitely, with a surplus of \$4.2 trillion projected by 2025. This means that Social Security benefits could be significantly increased rather than eliminated. The welfare state is not collapsing under its own weight so much as rumors of its demise are killing it, and more and more people believe that they must take individual rather than collective responsibility for saving themselves. Meanwhile the rhetoric of normed development and its companion, deviance, have diminished in strength enough to allow some members of groups once reviled as backward or perverted to lead lives of dignity and ease without any need for passing as white or straight—as long as they make sound investments that secure their income streams. Being black, brown, or queer may subject a person to a certain amount of harassment and violence in some places, but race and sexual orientation are not the barriers (or the tickets) to financial success that they once were. Neoliberalism’s techniques of subjectivation do indeed seem to be producing the sorts of subjects that will support and further it, or at least be manageable within it or soon eliminated from it altogether with no resources left to pose a threat.

In this new world order, what will it mean to be Anglo-Saxon or Negro or Asiatic or any other racial identity left over from the last hundred and fifty years of normalizing biopolitical governmentality? What will it mean to be white if evolutionary status no longer grounds claims to superiority? What will it mean to be black if success is no longer a bio-anthropological achievement but rather a purely economic one? I do not mean to suggest that these racial

identities will mean nothing, only that what they mean and the consequences they have for their bearers are changing and undoubtedly will change more.

I believe normalized racial identities will persist in at least three sites for the foreseeable future. First, they will remain in institutions where intensive cultivation of individuals' capacities and docility enjoys high priority. Most such institutions are primarily pedagogical in nature. Achievement of their goals requires individuation, identification, norming, and bodily discipline—the sorts of normalizing disciplinary techniques that Foucault studies in detail in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Where such normalizing techniques retain their instrumental value, normalized racial identities are likely to persist as well and play some serious role. After all, it was in the historical development of these techniques that these identities acquired their modern meaning. Educators, for example, still avidly track standardized test score rates along racial lines; furthermore, current educational policy in the United States reinforces the deployment of such tests and their use in allocation practices of many sorts. Racial identities are enjoying a resurging importance in medical research and practice. Normalized disciplinary practices and modern racial identities are extensively intertwined both historically and conceptually; perpetuation of either one is likely to entail perpetuation of the other.

Second, normalized racial categories can serve neoliberalism well by maintaining a set of background assumptions that work to suppress questions about worldwide wealth disparities. Why is wealth concentrated in Europe and North America? Because white people are more advanced and therefore more competitive—and therefore more entitled. Why are states populated by black and brown peoples more likely to be impoverished and governed by harsh dictators than states populated by whites? Because black and brown people have not yet advanced to the point that they can handle self-government successfully and do not have the intelligence, technological know-how, and self-restraint necessary to compete successfully against more efficient nation-states. Civilization, and especially industrial and capitalist civilization, is a European invention which the descendants of non-Europeans can only imitate imperfectly. Without these silent assumptions, few people could accept the impoverishment of billions of human beings without some question arising in their minds. Why them, and not us? How can this be right? The answers were already in place before the current global governmental regime came into existence, so the questions rarely get asked.

Third, racial categories can be—and are being—colonized by market forces that will perpetuate them even if, in the process, they render them all but vacuous. From fashion to pharmaceuticals, racially segmented markets will mean money for investors, who will prop them up whenever they threaten to collapse. In this process, the developmental aspects of race may all but drop

away, but the segmented populations will persist, available for statistical study and targeted advertising.

Since “Re-Thinking Whiteness” is the title of this plenary panel, I will conclude with the question: What is whiteness in the midst of this transformation of governmentality, and what is it likely to become? I have no answers, but I will venture to say that whiteness in and of itself is likely to become less and less the site of guaranteed privilege, and that what is more likely to matter (albeit largely silently) in a neoliberal society is that one’s ancestors were white at a time when whiteness did guarantee privilege. To put it in neoliberal terms, not all parents are able to invest the same amount in their children or to offer them comparable endowments, and we know that ability has been largely determined by race. What will matter, in other words, is genealogy.

And, finally, to raise my panel partner Shannon Sullivan’s question in a very different way, are there resources in whiteness to resist neoliberal governmentality, in particular resources other than a reassertion of normalized racial identities? I will conclude, as is appropriate for a work in progress, with this declaration: I simply do not know.

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