

When *Affirmative Action Was White*, these transformative public programs, from Social Security to the GI Bill, were deeply—and intentionally—discriminatory. Faced with a de facto veto by Southern Democrats, throughout the 1930s and 1940s Northern liberals acquiesced to calls for “states’ rights” as they

Race is America’s central drama.

drafted the landmark laws that would create a new white middle class. As first-generation white immigrants cashed in on life-altering benefits, black families who had been here since Revolutionary times were left out in the cold.

Disbursement of federal Depression relief was left at the local level, so that Southern blacks were denied benefits and their labor kept at self status. In parts of Georgia, no blacks received emergency relief; in Mississippi, less than 1 percent did. Agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from the new Social Security system, subjecting 60 percent of blacks (and 75 percent of Southern blacks) to what Katznelson calls “a form of policy apartheid” far from what FDR had envisioned. Until the 1950s, most blacks remained ineligible for Social Security. Even across the North, black veterans’ mortgage, education, and housing benefits lagged behind whites’. Idealized as the capstone of progressive liberalism, such policies were as devastatingly racist as Jim Crow.

To remedy this unacknowledged injustice, Katznelson proposes that current discussions about affirmative action refer to events that took place seven, rather than four, decades ago, when it wasn’t called affirmative action but business as usual. He’s frustrated by the anemic arguments of his liberal allies, who rely on the most tenuous, least defensible of grounds—diversity—while their opponents invoke color blindness, merit, and the Constitution. In short, affirmative action can’t be wrong now when it was right—and white—for so long.

Together, these two books indict the notion of race as, ultimately, a failure of the American imagination. We simply can’t imagine a world in which skin color does not entitle us to think we know what people are capable of, what they deserve, or their character. We can’t imagine what America might become if true affirmative action—not the kind aimed at the Huxtable kids¹ but at poverty and substandard education—was enacted at anywhere near the level once bestowed on those fortunate enough to be seen as white.

NOTE

¹The Huxtables are the fictional family that appeared on the popular sitcom *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s and 1990s.