

Book Review

by Young M. Kim

Young M. Kim teaches in the Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Oswego, NY, U.S.A.

Correspondence: ykim1@oswego.edu

Henry L. Tischler (Ed.) (2000) *Debating Points: Race and Ethnic Relations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. 116 pages.

Today's college students seem to care little about many important social issues on the public agenda. Their interest in such issues often appears to be at best minimal and sporadic, and consequently they are more likely to form and express superficial opinions on those matters. One exceptional case is the issue of race. The issue of race matters deeply to students, and most of them know where they stand on it. For example, some strongly endorse principles of racial equality, some reject the notion of old-fashioned racism such as genetic inferiority of blacks, some believe blacks are lazier than whites, and some question affirmative action's fairness in general, to name only a few. Despite their strong interests in the issue of race, their opinions are more often than not either simplistic or misguided.

In light of this, one must welcome Tischler's edited volume, *Debating points: Race and ethnic relations*. As the title indicates, this book is about some controversial issues on race and ethnic relations in contemporary America. The purpose of this book is to promote critical thinking in the classroom setting by providing information on the issues that are relevant to the backgrounds and interests of the students. The issue of race is, without any question, one of them.

The book is divided into eight sections, identified by the following questions:

1. Have affirmative action programs outlived their usefulness?
2. Are greater restrictions on immigration needed?
3. Is the discussion about race and intelligence worthwhile?
4. Has bilingual education been abused?
5. Is transracial adoption cultural genocide?
6. Does racism influence how the death penalty is applied?
7. Should the First Amendment protect "hate speech" on college campuses?
8. Has racism become a thing of the past?

Each section contains a brief introduction, two opposing viewpoints, and a list of key websites related to the issue. As the editor points out, many of these issues do not have "right" or "wrong" answers, and students must rely on their critical thinking skills to digest differing viewpoints.

While this book may enable student readers to develop their understanding of the core issues in race and ethnic relations, it has some significant limitations. First, like many edited volumes, this book suffers from some unevenness of quality among the articles. For example, in discussing

race and intelligence, Charles Murray's article seems to narrowly focus on defending *The Bell Curve* his controversial book co-authored with Richard Herrnstein rather than on addressing the core issues. Second, I do not see any guiding principle in selecting relevant websites. If Tischler's overall objective is to provide a variety of ideological viewpoints on the subject matter, he should have applied this same principle in selecting relevant websites. Unfortunately, the selections appear to be partial, leaning toward the left (i.e., liberal perspectives). Third, two articles on whether racism has become a thing of the past offer simplistic treatments of a very complicated issue. The question that we need to answer is not whether racism has substantially declined, but how racism has transformed in this period of remarkable fluidity and change. For example, Patterson claims that being black is no longer a significant obstacle, as evidenced by the growth in educational attainment and occupational achievement among blacks. Surely, blacks in the United States are better off now than at any other time in their history. But this has little to do with declaring racism a thing of the past. Racism is an ideological matter, usually confounded with other ideological matters, such as conservatism and individualism.

Despite these drawbacks, the book is an excellent tool for teaching and learning critical thinking skills. The book is also fairly easy to read and virtually free from discipline-specific technical jargon. Overall, the wide variety of race-related programs their goals, successes, and failures are carefully explained, discussed, and evaluated. One must appreciate the good job done by the editor in putting together an anthology that touches some of the most controversial issues on race and ethnic relations. This is a book I would assign as general reading for social science students, and perhaps for all college students, for developing critical thinking skills.