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Law prof adds his voice to ongoing conversation on race

By Hope Lewis

Stanford Law School Professor Richard Thompson Ford: “The Race Card” seeks nothing less than to demarcate the line between legitimate charges of racism and those that are ill-defined or false.

“When are complaints of prejudice valid and appropriate and when are they ... exaggerated, paranoid, or simply dishonest? I’ll try to take an unemotional look at such claims, defending those that deserve sympathy, scrutinizing those that deserve suspicion, and ridiculing those that deserve contempt,” he writes.

An impossibly ambitious task to be sure, but Fords wide-ranging, often maddening effort makes timely and important contributions to continuing debates on race in the United States.

The central controversy at issue in “The Race Card” appears in its subtitle: “How Bluffing About Race Makes Race Relations Worse.” Restating at the notion that this book would be just another simplistic plea for understanding, Ford explores five aspects of contemporary racial politics that he finds particularly troubling:

- racism without racists (in which he argues that structural racial inequality is too often attributed to individual racial bias);
- the wild card: racism by analogy (the arguable proliferation of rights-based claims by non-minority groups);
- the clash of ends: contested goals (lamentable); and
- post-racism: why the race card is a crisis of post-racism.

Ford explores the dynamics of true cross-cultural understanding. This leads to disagreement and confusion. “Disagreement and confusion’ — frequent, unwarranted challenges to their dignity or competence that are attributable to racial bias.

“The Race Card” pulls no punches in trying to deconstruct the spectacles that have helped define popular culture on race. Among them are the Rev. Al Sharpton’s accusations that Tawana Brawley, a teenager from Wappinger Falls, N.Y., had been kidnapped, raped and beaten by a group of white men claimed to include local police officers and a state prosecutor (a grand jury and a civil decision later concluded that the charges were false); the brutal police beating and abuse of Abner Louima in a New York City nightclub; and the torture and murder of Linda Lee Herman, a black woman.

Ford argues that the term “racism” now rests on individual complicity and inertia. It is silence, indifference and unexamined posturing. Still, why not also spotlight big ideas, instead of false charges? Some activists and lawyers also believed that publicizing the facts of racial incidents involving prominent black diplomats, entertainers or professionals, in conjunction with other strategies, could galvanize political will, shame policymakers into more systemic change and shine an international spotlight on U.S. racial hypocrisy.

“The Race Card” makes a persuasive plea for pragmatic strategies to substantively improve the lives of those affected by abuses rather than rely on vague or empty racial posturing. Still, why not also spotlight big ideas, and also be made without corroboration, context and serious investigation.

Unlike Ford, I believe that we spend too much time worrying that false claims will undermine good race relations. Dismissing the broader realities of racism because of a few bad claims would signal that “good” race relations were not built on a solid foundation of true cross-cultural understanding.

If racial minorities and non-minorities from diverse perspectives are engaging in respectful and robust dialogue on a regular basis, then false charges would not so easily undermine just claims.

It is silence, indifference and unexamined fear that will lead to the worst possible outcome — not which cards are dealt. 

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