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Race, Discrimination and Group Identity

As this issue of *The Report* goes to press, over 50 people have died in rioting following the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers charged with assaulting a black motorist. The Rodney King case confronts us with graphic images of racial violence: white policemen clubbing and kicking a black man lying on his side; black youths beating up a white truck driver; Korean merchants shooting at Black and Hispanic looters. Yet the jurors who acquitted the policemen insisted with apparent sincerity that race had nothing to do with their verdict or the police beating; President Bush made virtually no mention of race in his first public comments on the worst urban riots since 1967; radio talk show hosts and their callers proclaimed the need for color-blind standards of justice.

It is now taboo in most Western societies to discriminate against individuals because of their race, ethnicity, gender or involuntary group affiliation. Like many taboos, this one expresses deep revulsion at powerful impulses. Bias and prejudice are easy to trigger and hard to suppress. Social psychologists have shown that strangers assigned by arbitrary criteria to nominal groups develop strong, abiding hostility toward out-group members. The antagonisms are far greater, of course, for groups divided by history, language and culture. The renewal of ancient ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Indian subcontinent, and southern Africa reveals how tenacious those antagonisms can be.

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

In This Special Issue

RACISM IN THE HEAD, RACISM IN THE WORLD

Judith Lichtenberg..... 3

MULTICULTURALISM: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Alaka Wali..... 6

THE NEW WAVE OF AMERICAN HATE CRIME LEGISLATION

James B. Jacobs..... 9

RIGHTING OLD WRONGS

Marc Galanter..... 13

HILL, THOMAS AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

Kenneth Taylor..... 16