



Abolition Of White Democracy

Joel Olson

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Racial discrimination embodies inequality, exclusion, and injustice and as such has no place in a democratic society. And yet racial matters pervade nearly every aspect of American life, influencing where we live, what schools we attend, the friends we make, the votes we cast, the opportunities we enjoy, and even the television shows we watch.

Joel Olson contends that, given the history of slavery and segregation in the United States, American citizenship is a form of racial privilege in which whites are equal to each other but superior to everyone else. In Olson's analysis we see how the tension in this equation produces a passive form of democracy that discourages extensive participation in politics because it treats citizenship as an identity to possess rather than as a source of empowerment. Olson traces this tension and its disenfranchising effects from the colonial era to our own, demonstrating how, after the civil rights movement, whiteness has become less a form of standing and more a norm that cements white advantages in the ordinary operations of modern society.

To break this pattern, Olson suggests an "abolitionist-democratic" political theory that makes the fight against racial discrimination a prerequisite for expanding democratic participation.

Joel Olson is assistant professor of political science at Northern Arizona University.

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