

# Beyond Black and White

Transforming African-American Politics



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## Contents

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population. Real unemployment rates for adults are over 20 per cent. Harlem currently has more than one-third of the estimated 33,000 abandoned apartment units in the city. On some streets, city service agencies have essentially given up any intervention activities or programs, overwhelmed by rat infestation, drugs, random violence and decaying housing. In terms of health care, the situation for low-income and poor Harlem residents is nothing short of a crisis. Harlem Hospital leads the city in TB cases, with twenty-four times the national average. Several years ago, the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that males in Bangladesh, one of the most impoverished Third World nations, have statistically higher life expectancy rates than Harlem's male population. Only 40 per cent of Harlem males live to the age of sixty-five, compared to nearly 80 per cent of white American males. Death rates in Harlem for cancer are 50 per cent higher today than when Rangel was first elected. The list of devastating socioeconomic statistics pertaining to Harlem goes on and on.

So it is not surprising that Rangel is running a little scared. The social space for a rebirth of militancy already exists. The wild card in Harlem's political future, however, is its growing Latino community. As early as 1930, 45,000 Puerto Ricans lived in East Harlem. In recent decades, West Harlem has become increasingly Latino. Washington Heights is overwhelmingly Dominican. If a new multicultural, radical reform-from-below movement emerges, it must speak Spanish as well as black English; it must capture the cultural specificity of what is distinctive between Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Central American people, who are central to Harlem's future. If such a protest erupts, it will not easily be confined to the boundaries of political liberalism and the Democratic Party. Powell will fail because what Harlem needs most is not a return to the past, however charismatic or nostalgic. What is desperately required is a breakthrough of political imagination, of a social vision of democratic empowerment liberating the energies, talents and abilities of the most oppressed and alienated members of society. The Rangel-Powell race is only the latest act of that old historical drama, the struggle to define the role of race in urban public policy and within the structures of power and ownership in America. But it foreshadows a social storm which may sweep away the older strategies and models of black empowerment.

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## Affirmative Action and the Politics of Race

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The triumph of "Newtonian Republicanism" is not a temporary aberration: it is the culmination of a thirty-year ideological and political war against the logic of the reforms of the 1960s. Advocates of civil rights, affirmative action, and other policies reflecting left-of-center political values must recognize how and why the context for progressive reform has fundamentally changed. And, instead of pleasant-sounding but simplistic defenses of "affirmative action as it is," we need to do some hard thinking about the reasons why several significant constituencies which have greatly benefited from affirmative action have done relatively little to defend it. We need to recognize what the critical theoretical and strategic differences are which separate liberals and progressives on how to achieve a nonracist society. And we urgently need to reframe the context of the political debate, taking the initiative away from the right.

The first difficulty in developing a more effective progressive model for affirmative action goes back to the concept's complex definition, history and political evolution. "Affirmative action" *per se* was never a law, or even a coherently developed set of governmental policies designed to attack institutional racism and societal discrimination. It was instead a series of presidential executive orders, civil-rights laws and governmental programs regarding the awarding of federal contracts, fair employment practices and licenses, with the goal of uprooting bigotry. Historically, at its origins, it was designed to provide some degree of compensatory justice to the victims of slavery, Jim Crow segregation and institutional racism. This was at the heart of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which stated that "all persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall have the same right in every State

and Territory, to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, give evidence, and to the full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of persons and property as is enjoyed by white citizens."

During the Great Depression, the role of the federal government in protecting the equal rights of black Americans was expanded again through the direct militancy and agitation of black people. In 1941, socialist and trade-union leader A. Philip Randolph mobilized thousands of black workers to participate in the "Negro March on Washington Movement," calling upon the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt to carry out a series of reforms favorable to civil rights. To halt this mobilization, Roosevelt agreed to sign Executive Order 8802, which outlawed segregationist hiring policies by defense-related industries that held federal contracts. This executive order not only greatly increased the number of African-Americans who were employed in wartime industries, but also expanded the political idea that government could not take a passive role in the dismantling of institutional racism.

This position was reaffirmed in 1953, by President Harry S. Truman's Committee on Government Contract Compliance, which urged the Bureau of Employment Security "to act positively and affirmatively to implement the policy of nondiscrimination in its functions of placement counseling, occupational analysis and industrial services, labor market information, and community participation in employment services." Thus, despite the fact that the actual phrase, "affirmative action" was not used by a chief executive until President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order 11246 in 1961, the fundamental idea of taking proactive steps to dismantle prejudice has been around for more than a century.

What complicates the current discussion of affirmative action is that historically liberals and progressives were at odds over the guiding social and cultural philosophy which should inform the implementation of policies on racial discrimination. Progressives like W.E.B. Du Bois were convinced that the way to achieve a nonracist society was through the development of strong black institutions, and the preservation of African-American cultural identity. The strategy of Du Bois was reflected in his concept of "double consciousness," that black American identity was simultaneously African and American, and that dismantling racism should not require the aesthetic and cultural assimilation of blackness into white values and social norms. The alternative to the Du Boisian position was expressed by integrationist leaders and intellectuals like Walter White, Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin and Kenneth Clark. They, too, fought to destroy Jim Crow. But their cultural philosophy for the Negro rested on "inclusion" rather than pluralism. They deeply believed that the long-term existence of separate all-black

institutions was counterproductive to the goal of a "color-blind" society, in which racial categories would become socially insignificant or even irrelevant to the relations of power. Rustin, for instance, personally looked forward to the day when Harlem would cease to exist as a segregated, identifiably black neighborhood. Blacks should be assimilated or culturally incorporated into the mainstream.

My central criticism of the desegregationist strategy of the "inclusionists" (Rustin, White, Wilkins, et al.) is that they consistently confused "culture" with "race," underestimating the importance of fostering black cultural identity as an essential component of the critique of white supremacy. The existence of separate black institutions or a self-defined, all-black community was not necessarily an impediment to interracial cooperation and multicultural dialogue. Nevertheless, both desegregationist positions from the 1930s onward were expressed by the organizations and leadership of the civil-rights movement. These divisions were usually obscured by a common language of reform, and a common social vision which embraced color-blindness as an ultimate goal. For example, both positions are reflected in the main thrust of the language in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declared that workplace discrimination on the basis of "race, color, religion, sex or national origin" should be outlawed. However, the inclusionist orientation of Wilkins, Rustin and company is also apparent in the 1964 Act's assertion that it should not be interpreted as having to require any employers "to grant preferential treatment to any individual or to any group."

Five years later, after Richard Nixon's narrow victory for the presidency, it was the Republicans' turn to interpret and implement civil-rights policy. The strategy of Nixon had a profound impact upon the political culture of America, and continues to have direct consequences within the debates about affirmative action today. Through the counter-intelligence program of the FBI, the Nixon administration vigorously suppressed the radical wing of the black movement. Second, it appealed to the racial anxieties and grievances of George Wallace voters, recruiting segregationists like Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond into the ranks of the Republican Party. On affirmative action and issues of equal opportunity, however, Nixon's goal was to utilize a liberal reform for conservative objectives, the expansion of the African-American middle class, which might benefit the Republican Party. Under Nixon in 1969, the federal government authorized what became known as the "Philadelphia Plan." This program required federal contractors to set specific goals for minority hiring. As a result, the number of racial minorities in the construction industry increased from 1 to 12 per cent. The Nixon administration supported provisions for minority set-asides to promote

black and Hispanic entrepreneurship; it placed Federal Reserve funds in black-owned banks. Nixon himself publicly praised the concept of "Black Power," carefully interpreting it as "black capitalism."

It was under the moderate conservative aegis of the Nixon-Ford administrations of 1969-1977 that the set of policies which we identify with "affirmative action" were implemented nationally in both the public and private sectors. Even after the 1978 Bakke decision, in which the Supreme Court overturned the admission policy of the University of California at Davis, which had set aside 16 out of 100 medical-school openings for racial minorities, the political impetus for racial reform was not destroyed. What did occur, even before the triumph of reaction under Reagan in the early 1980s, was that political conservatives deliberately usurped the "color-blind" discourse of many liberals from the desegregation movement. Conservatives retreated from the Nixonian strategy of utilizing affirmative-action tools to achieve conservative political goals, and began to appeal to the latent racist sentiments within the white population. They cultivated the racist mythology that affirmative action was nothing less than a rigid system of inflexible quotas which rewarded the incompetent and the unqualified (who happened to be nonwhite) at the expense of hard-working, tax-paying Americans (who happened to be white). White conservatives were able to define "merit" in a manner that would reinforce white male privilege, but in an inverted language which would make the real victims of discrimination appear to be the "racists." It was, in retrospect, a brilliant political maneuver. And the liberals were at a loss in fighting back effectively precisely because they lacked a consensus internally about the means and goals for achieving genuine equality. Traditional "liberals," like Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center, who favored an inclusionist "color-blind" ideology of reform often ended up inside the camp of racial reactionaries, who cynically learned to manipulate the discourse of fairness.

The consequences of these shifts and realignments within American political culture by the 1990s on how to achieve greater fairness and equality for those who have experienced discrimination were profound. In general, most white Americans have made a clear break from the overtly racist Jim Crow segregationist policies of a generation ago. They want to be perceived as being "fair" toward racial minorities and women, and they acknowledge that policies like affirmative action are necessary to foster a more socially just society. According to the 17-19 March 1995 *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll, when asked, "Do you favor or oppose affirmative action programs," 53 per cent of whites polled expressed support, compared to only 36 per cent who opposed. Not

surprisingly, African-Americans expressed much stronger support: 72 per cent for affirmative-action programs to only 21 per cent against. Despite widespread rhetoric that the vast majority of white males have supposedly lost jobs and opportunities due to affirmative-action policies, the poll indicated that only 15 per cent of all white males believe that "they've lost a job because of affirmative-action policies."

However, there is a severe erosion of white support for affirmative action when the focus is more narrowly on specific steps or remedies addressing discrimination. For example, the *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll indicates that only 30 per cent of whites favor the establishment of gender and racial "quotas" in businesses, with 68 per cent opposed. Conversely, two-thirds of all African-Americans expressed support for "quotas" in business employment, with only 30 per cent opposed. When asked whether quotas should be created "that require schools to admit a certain number of minorities and women," 61 per cent of whites were opposed, with 35 per cent in favor. Nearly two-thirds of all whites would also reject policies which "require private businesses to set up specific goals and timetables for hiring women and minorities if there were not government programs that included hiring quotas." On the issue of implementing government-supported initiatives for social equality, most black and white Americans still live in two distinct racial universes.

It is not surprising that "angry white men" form the core of those who are against affirmative action. What is striking, however, is the general orientation of white American women on this issue. White women have been overwhelmingly the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action. Millions of white women have gained access to educational and employment opportunities through the implementation and enforcement of such policies. But most of them clearly do not share the political perspectives of African-Americans and Hispanics on this issue, nor do they perceive their own principal interests to be at risk if affirmative-action programs were to be abandoned by the federal government or outlawed in the courts. For example, in the same *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll, only 8 per cent of all white women stated that their "colleagues at work or school privately questioned" their qualifications due to affirmative action, compared to 19 per cent of black women and 28 per cent of black men. Fewer than one in five white women polled defined workplace discrimination as a "major problem," compared to 41 per cent of blacks and 38 per cent of Latinos. Some 40 per cent of the white women polled described job discrimination as "not being a problem" at all. These survey results may help to explain why middle-class-oriented liberal feminist leaders and constituencies have

been relatively less vocal than African-Americans in the mobilization to defend affirmative action.

A quarter of a century of affirmative-action programs, goals and timetables has clearly been effective in transforming the status of white women in the labor force. It is certainly true that white males still dominate the upper ranks of senior management: while constituting 47 per cent of the nation's total workforce, white males constitute 95 per cent of all senior managerial positions at the rank of vice president or above. However, women of all races now constitute about 40 per cent of the total workforce overall. As of the 1990 census, white women held nearly 40 per cent of all middle-management positions. While their median incomes lag behind those of white males, over the past twenty years white women have gained far greater ground in terms of real earnings than black or Hispanic males in the labor force. In this context, civil-rights advocates and traditional defenders of affirmative action must ask themselves whether the majority of white American women actually perceive their material interests to be tied to the battles for income equity and affirmative action that most blacks and Latinos, women and men alike, continue to fight for.

We should also recognize that, although all people of color suffer in varying degrees from the stigmatization of racism and economic disadvantage within American society, they do not have the same material interests or identify themselves with the same politics as the vast majority of African-Americans. For example, according to the 1990 census, the mean on-the-job earnings for all Americans adults totaled \$15,105. Blacks' mean on-the-job annual earnings came to \$10,912; Native Americans', \$11,949; Hispanics', \$11,219. But it is crucial to disaggregate social categories like "Hispanics" and "Asian Americans" to gain a true picture of the real material and social experiences within significant populations of color.

About half of all Hispanics, according to the Bureau of the Census, term themselves "white," regardless of their actual physical appearance. Puerto Ricans in New York City have lower median incomes than African-Americans, while Argentines, a Hispanic group which claims benefits from affirmative-action programs, have mean on-the-job incomes of \$15,956 per year. The Hmong, immigrants from Southeast Asia, have mean on-the-job incomes of \$3,194; in striking contrast, the Japanese have annual incomes higher than those of whites. None of these statistics negates the reality of racial domination and discrimination in terms of social relations, access to employment opportunities or job advancement. But they do tell us part of the reason why no broad coalition of people of color has coalesced behind the political demand

for affirmative action; various groups interpret their interests narrowly in divergent ways, looking out primarily for themselves rather than addressing the structural inequalities within the social fabric of the society as a whole.

So where do progressives and liberals go from here, given that the right has seized the political initiative in dismantling affirmative action, minority economic set-asides and the entire spectrum of civil-rights reforms? We must return to the theoretical perspectives of Du Bois, with some honest dialogue about why race relations have soured so profoundly in recent years. Affirmative action was largely responsible for a significant increase in the size of the black middle class; it opened many professional and managerial positions to blacks, Latinos and women for the first time. But in many other respects, affirmative action can and should be criticized from the left, not because it was "too liberal" in its pursuit and implementation of measures to achieve equality, but because it was "too conservative." It sought to increase representative numbers of minorities and women within the existing structure and arrangements of power, rather than challenging or re-defining the institutions of authority and privilege. As implemented under a series of presidential administrations, liberal and conservative alike, affirmative action was always more concerned with advancing remedial remedies for unequal racial outcomes than with uprooting racism as a system of white power.

Rethinking progressive and liberal strategies on affirmative action would require sympathetic whites to acknowledge that much of the anti-affirmative-action rhetoric among Democrats is really a retreat from a meaningful engagement on issues of race, and that the vast majority of Americans who have benefited materially from affirmative action have not been black at all. A Du Boisian strategy on affirmative action would argue that, despite the death of legal segregation a generation ago, we have not yet reached the point where a color-blind society is possible, especially in terms of the actual organization and structure of white power and privilege. Institutional racism is real, and the central focus of affirmative action must deal with the continuing burden of racial inequality and discrimination in American life.

There are many ways to measure the powerful reality of contemporary racism. For example, a 1994 study of the Office of Personnel Management found that African-American federal employees are more than twice as likely to be dismissed as their white counterparts. Blacks are likely to be fired at much higher rates than whites in jobs where they constitute a significant share of the labor force: for example, black clerk typists are 4.7 times more likely to be dismissed than whites, and

black custodians 4.1 times more likely to be fired. Discrimination is also rampant in capital markets. Banks continue policies of "red lining," denying loans in neighborhoods which are largely black and Hispanic. And even after years of affirmative-action programs, blacks and Latinos remain grossly underrepresented in a wide number of professions. For example, African-Americans and Hispanics represent 12.4 per cent and 9.5 per cent respectively of the US adult population. But of all American physicians, blacks account for barely 4.2 per cent, and Latinos 5.2 per cent. Among engineers, blacks represent 3.7 per cent, Latinos 3.3 per cent; among lawyers, blacks account for 3.3 per cent, Latinos 3.1 per cent; and for all university and college professors, blacks made up 5 per cent, Latinos 2.9 per cent. As Jesse Jackson observed in a speech before the National Press Club, while native-born white males constitute only one-third of the US population, they constitute 80 per cent of all tenured professors, 92 per cent of the Forbes 400 chief executive officers, and 97 per cent of all school superintendents.

If affirmative action is to be criticized, it should be on the grounds that it has not gone far enough in transforming the actual power relations between black and white within US society. More evidence for this is addressed in a new book by sociologists Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. They point out that "the typical black family has eleven cents of wealth for every dollar owned by the typical white family." Even middle-class African-Americans – people who often benefited from affirmative action – are significantly poorer than whites who earn identical incomes. If housing and vehicles owned are included in the definition of "net wealth," the median middle-class African-American family has only \$8,300 in total assets, to \$56,000 for the comparable white family. Why are blacks at all income levels much poorer than whites in terms of wealth? African-American families not only inherit much less wealth, they are affected daily by institutional inequality and discrimination. For years they were denied life-insurance policies by white firms. They are still denied home mortgages at twice the rate of similarly qualified white applicants. African-Americans are less likely to receive government-backed home loans.

Given the statistical profile of racial inequality, liberals must reject the economic temptation to move away from "race-conscious remedies" to "race-neutral" reforms defined by income or class criteria. Affirmative action has always had a distinct and separate function from antipoverty programs. Income and social class inequality affect millions of whites, Asian Americans, Latinos and blacks alike, and programs which expand employment, educational access and social-service

benefits based on narrowly defined economic criteria are absolutely essential. The impetus for racism is not narrowly "economic" in origin. Racial prejudice is still a destructive force in the lives of upper-middle-class, college-educated African-Americans, as well as poor blacks, and programs designed to address the discrimination they feel and experience collectively every day must be grounded in the context of race. However, affirmative action is legitimately related to class questions, but in a different way. A truly integrated workplace, where people of divergent racial backgrounds, languages and cultural identities learn to interact and respect each other, is an essential precondition for building a broadly pluralistic movement for radical democracy. The expanded implementation of affirmative action, despite its liberal limitations, would assist in creating the social conditions essential for pluralistic coalitions for full employment and more progressive social policies.

What is required among progressives is not a reflective, uncritical defense of affirmative action, but a recognition of its contradictory evolution and conceptual limitations, as well as its benefits and strengths. We need a thoughtful and innovative approach in challenging discrimination which, like that of Du Bois, reaffirms the centrality of the struggle against racism within the development of affirmative-action measures. We must build upon the American majority's continued support for affirmative action, linking the general public's commitment to social fairness with creative measures that actually target the real patterns and processes of discrimination which millions of Latinos and blacks experience every day. And we must not be pressured by false debate to choose between race or class in the development and framing of public policies to address discrimination. A movement toward the long-term goal of a "color-blind" society, the deconstruction of racism, does not mean that we become "neutral" about the continuing significance of race in American life.

As the national debate concerning the possible elimination of affirmative action defines the 1996 presidential campaign, black and progressive Americans must re-evaluate their strategies for reform. In recent years we have tended to rely on elections, the legislative process, and the courts to achieve racial equality. We should remember how the struggle to dismantle Jim Crow segregation was won. We engaged in economic boycotts, civil disobedience, teach-ins, freedom schools, "freedom rides," community-based coalitions and united fronts. There is a direct relationship between our ability to mobilize people in communities to protest and the pressure we can exert on elected officials to protect and enforce civil rights. Voting is absolutely essential, but it isn't enough. We must channel the profound discontent, the alienation

and the anger which presently exist in the black community toward constructive, progressive forms of political intervention and resistance. As we fight for affirmative action, let us understand that we are fighting for a larger ideal: the ultimate elimination of race and gender inequality, the uprooting of prejudice and discrimination, and the realization of a truly democratic America.

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PART II

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African-American Leadership:  
Society, Education and  
Political Change

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