The "Color Line" Today

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In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Forty years later Gunnar Myrdal characterized the race problem in the United States as a great dilemma that, if not resolved, threatened the ultimate success of our democratic experiment. Within a decade there had begun a national effort to confront this dilemma. There ensued painful conflict, but also enlightened legislation, courageous leadership, and greater progress than many Americans thought possible (or, in some cases, desirable).

The legal and political transformation of racial issues that has occurred in the U.S. since World War II represents a remarkable accomplishment, powerfully illustrating the vitality and virtue of our free institutions. Quite simply, in little more than a generation we have advanced from a circumstance in which the great majority of Americans were indifferent or actively hostile to blacks' quest for full citizenship rights, to one in which racial equality of opportunity is a value staunchly upheld by the law and universally embraced in our politics. This achievement, attained with comparative little violence, contrasts quite favorably with the experience of many nations whose very survival is threatened by longstanding conflicts among ethnic and religious groups.
Nevertheless, America still faces a "problem of the color line." The dream that race might some day become an insignificant category in our civic life, so eloquently articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his renowned "I Have A Dream" speech, seems naively utopian today. It is no small irony that, two decades after King's moving oration, the passionate evocation in public debate of his "colorblind" ideal is for many an indication of limited commitment to the goal of racial justice. It is also ironic that attempts by social analysts to demonstrate the efficacy of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, by reporting evidence of a decline in discrimination since then, have been bitterly denounced by persons and organizations who urged that the legislation be adopted. The reported progress is said to be "illusory," and the motives of the analysts are called into question.

Though ironic, this state of affairs is not inexplicable, for the stakes in the debate over black progress are very high. Without doubt, there now exists a sizeable number of impoverished blacks for whom the civil rights movement has done very little. Their increasing numbers and desperate plight lend an air of unreality to any finding of black "progress." Moreover, in the 1960s a very powerful idea was born, the widespread acceptance of which has made it difficult for advocates of blacks' interests to acknowledge any diminution in discrimination. This idea, which Thomas Sowell has called the "civil rights vision," is the general presumption that, due to our history of social oppression, blacks' failure to reach parity in American society derives exclusively from the effects of past and ongoing racism, and can only be remedied through state intervention. This notion serves to rationalize the embarrassing pathology of the ghetto, even as it legitimizes governmental transfers to the black middle class.

The reasoning that leads to this curious result takes several steps. First, the large and growing number of black poor directly attests to the existence and severity of racial inequality. This inequality, in turn, must necessarily be understood as deriving from discrimination. (The unpalatable alternative is that blacks are less effective competitors in the American economy—a possibility that will not be taken seriously as long as its very contemplation is regarded as a racist act.) But discrimination is best remedied by ensuring equal results in those arenas where blacks and whites directly compete. The conclusion is that racial injustice is best ameliorated through adopting the goal of proportionate representation for blacks in business, professional, and governmental employments. Thus the squalor and hopelessness of the Harlem ghetto comes to ensure the legitimacy of preferential treatment for black medical school applicants from Scarsdale.

But racially sensitive admissions and hiring programs are not consistent with the ideal of "colorblind" state action. Embracing them implies the tacit repudiation of that ideal. Moreover, the argument for race-conscious policy critically depends on linking current deficiencies in the unaided achievements of (mostly middle class) blacks to the
universally acknowledged sins of the past. This link is weaker if the recent progress against discrimination is taken to be great. (Of course, aid to poor persons, black or not, is in no way undermined by announcing progress against discrimination.) Thus, were it to be widely held that the civil rights legislation of the 1960s has worked, explicitly racial claims would become difficult to justify. Beyond this, doubt would be cast upon the favored explanation of sometimes substantial racial differences in achievement. Every finding of a diminution in discrimination implicitly raises the terrifying question: “Why then do blacks not succeed?” Thus, the publication of a study assessing change in the status of blacks is a political, not simply an intellectual, event.

A MAJOR EVENT of this sort occurred in 1978 with the appearance of the first edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*. William Julius Wilson created a furor with the profoundly subversive thesis that, in the modern period of American race relations, “fundamental economic and political changes have made economic class position more important than race in determining black chances for occupational mobility.” Wilson's idea was not new—Bayard Rustin had predicted this would become the case over a decade before. But Rustin wrote before any interests were vested in affirmative action, and at a time when the benefits of the civil rights revolution could only be guessed at. Wilson, employing an original theoretical perspective and supporting his argument with a wealth of empirical data, posed a direct challenge to the “civil rights vision.” While well aware that a “problem of the color line” remains, he would not define it as “discrimination.” Rather, he contended that the caste-like exclusion of all blacks from full participation in American life, characteristic of race relations from the Emancipation through the end of World War II, has ended. Those blacks languishing in big-city ghettos confront problems deriving from changes in economic structure that would be only marginally ameliorated were they somehow to become white.

For Wilson, today’s “problem of the color line” consists in the vastly disproportionate representation of blacks among the urban underclass. Though “a history of discrimination and oppression created a huge black underclass,” he believes that subsequent “technological and economic revolutions have combined to insure it a permanent status.” While blacks with skills and education do face racial antagonism, he concludes that “the economic and political systems in the U.S. have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in allowing talented blacks to fill positions of prestige and influence at the same time that these systems have shown persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower class blacks.” Most troublesome for adherents to the “civil rights vision,” he holds that a focus solely on racial disparities, and on remedies defined exclusively in racial terms, will be inadequate to solve the contemporary race problem. He urges instead a broad-based program of “economic reform,” which would focus on assuring employment at non-poverty wages for all seeking work.
Wilson makes skillful use of historical, sociological, and economic data to support his tightly reasoned argument. His book is an ambitious attempt at a general theory of race relations that, though motivated by a concern for current policy issues, seeks to explain black-white interaction throughout post-emancipation American history within a single framework. Though I do not judge the effort entirely successful, his is an original and provocative argument that will continue to influence the analysis of racial affairs in the U.S. for years to come. Upon its initial publication the book received the Spivack Award of the American Sociological Association as an outstanding contribution to sociological literature.

Yet this profound and insightful piece of analysis was denounced almost before it could be read. The so-called "black sociologists" were particularly incensed. We learn in Alphonso Pinkney's stridently doctrinaire and tendentious tract, The Myth of Black Progress, that, shortly after Wilson's Spivack Award was announced, "several black sociologists met in San Francisco and expressed their outrage at [the] conservative trend" exemplified by Wilson's work. His book, though but one of many examples of "inappropriate analyses" cited by Pinkney, is particularly egregious because, in addition to being a leading scholar in his field and recently becoming the chairman of one of the world's top sociology departments, William Julius Wilson is also black. Accordingly, the Association of Black Sociologists issued a proclamation censuring Wilson, attacking the sociology profession as racist, and suggesting that the acclaim afforded Wilson's book might become the basis for the "further suppression of blacks." Fearing that "government policy makers would seize on [Wilson's] pronouncements to discontinue such programs as affirmative action [and] busing," these guardians of black sociological virtue decided that "someone [should] come forth and present ... a more objective exegesis of the black population in the U.S." Thus, after six years' gestation, was born Professor Pinkney's tract.

But it is far less than a refutation, or even a rebuttal, of Wilson's thesis. Rather, it is an extended polemic that substitutes assertions for data, and slogans for analysis. Its tone is shrill and often absurdly hysterical. Concerning special preferences for black medical school applicants: "To deny these preferences to the victims of centuries of oppression by the society can only be considered a gross act of cruelty." Concerning discrimination in housing: "There is every reason to believe [he presents not a scrap of data] that the best-educated and most economically mobile blacks have as much difficulty obtaining housing in most sections of the country as their low-income fellow blacks." Concerning loyalty to one's race: "Black sociologists who [like Wilson] support the conservative movement are not unlike government officials in ... South Vietnam who supported American aggression against their own people." Pinkney's aggression against free inquiry, reason, and the standards of evidence and argument widely accepted in the
social sciences, would seem to be rather more to the point. A sad spectacle indeed, this work seems the last gasp of the intellectually bankrupt "black sociology" movement.

A serious and scholarly effort to address the question of black progress is undertaken by Reynolds Farley in *Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap*. Professor Farley, employing what he calls a "demographic approach," provides a straightforward summary of the decennial census and annual Current Population Survey data, focusing on the extent of black progress in the areas of education, employment, and income. He proposes three different interpretations of the experience of the past two decades: a pessimistic view—that the policies of the 1960s have done little to alleviate blacks' plight; an optimistic view—that significant and widespread progress has occurred; and a polarization thesis—that the black middle class has gained, but the black underclass has been unaffected by the changes. This last he identifies with Wilson, and devotes a chapter to its investigation.

The data gathered in this compendium are comprehensive and effectively presented. The work is well organized and well written, and should prove a useful reference on recent trends in racial inequality. Assessing the overall degree of progress, Farley concludes that the optimistic view is the most nearly correct of the three:

> There is good reason to be particularly critical of the view that black gains are superficial. In the important areas of education, occupations, and earnings, racial differences declined substantially. This is not tokenism. Throughout the entire economy and in all regions, racial differences on the most important indicators are smaller now than before... [There is] strong evidence that discrimination in earnings has declined considerably.

Yet Farley is not entirely comfortable with his own findings. A liberal social scientist who has been writing on racial issues for two decades, he is well aware of the political ramifications attending the publication of his scholarship. He worries that while "congratulating ourselves... for the real and impressive progress we have made toward racial equality" we may "lose sight of the distance that remains to be traveled." While avoiding Pinkney's hysteria, he recalls that "advances made by blacks after the Civil War were largely eliminated in the period following Reconstruction." Though certain that no similar reversal is imminent, he asserts that "many more decades of change similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s will be necessary if racial differences are to disappear." This change (he asserts without any supporting data or argument) is threatened by the advent of federal administrations giving "low priority" to civil rights issues. He recalls approvingly President Johnson's endorsement of affirmative action programs, and castigates the Nixon administration's proposed "benign neglect" doctrine (apparently unaware that the same man, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was responsible for both.) Without quite saying so, and with no evidence to support the claim, Farley conveys
the clear impression that Reagan administration policies threaten to undo some of the progress that he has so convincingly chronicled. Thus, he carefully maintains his usefulness to adherents of the "civil rights vision," even as he provides facts that undermine some of its basic tenets.

**This** ideological posturing is evident in Farley's treatment of Wilson's argument. First, he rejects Wilson's thesis on the basis of data that, to this reviewer, seem wholly consistent with it. Noting that polarization among blacks has increased in terms of occupational attainment, absolute incomes, labor force attachment, and frequency of families headed by women, he calls the evidence "mixed," since relative income and educational attainment have become more similar among blacks. But goods are bought with absolute, not relative dollars, and disparity in educational attainment is likely to be understated by omission of any measure of the quality of schooling. Second, he seems to trivialize the implications of class difference among blacks with the fatuous speculation that this growing schism may be "simply one stage [in the process] of assimilation." At a time when, in many big-city ghettos, two-thirds of black children are born out of wedlock, when many black high school graduates cannot read or speak the English language effectively, and when black residents face a risk of criminal victimization many times greater than whites, his suggestion is that increasing inequality among blacks only reflects the fact that some had to be the first to enjoy the fruits of assimilation! It is hardly surprising, then, that he believes giving "high priority" status to the agenda of civil rights advocates is what will be necessary to eradicate remaining racial inequality.

There is another defensible view of the matter—one wholly in line with the evidence Farley presents. This is the view that much of contemporary racial inequality will not go away until failures of family and community, so painfully evident in our inner cities today, are directly addressed. Addressing these failures requires that they first be acknowledged to exist, a task for which liberals like Farley clearly lack the stomach. But coming to grips with the social pathologies of the ghetto will also require an understanding that, whatever culpability white Americans may have for the history of racism, the responsibility for altering attitudes, values, and norms prevalent in black communities lies inescapably with blacks themselves.

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