

# dialogue & initiative

Journal of Theory and Practice of the  
Committees of Correspondence Education Fund, Inc.

winter 2003

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## Symposium on the Concept of Race and the Continuing Practice of Racism

July 25, 2002

San Francisco State University

### Opening Remarks **Charlene Mitchell**

The topic for the panel today is an important one for everyone but especially for the left, and for socialists in particular. Hopefully this will be the beginning of further investigations and exchanges that will be complemented by an increased level of practical work in the struggle for democracy in general and specifically the struggle for equality.

Mark Solomon's guiding remarks for this symposium, printed in the last issue of *Dialogue & Initiative*, are an excellent introduction and example of how we should address the issue of racism. Mark correctly notes that we must dispense with notions of race as a collection of immutable biological characteristics. He wrote, "[Race] is a social construction reflecting material relationships." I would add that racism itself is a social relationship between groups of people who are collectively disadvantaged and advantaged. Clearly among the group that is generally advantaged there are important numbers that are not. So too, among the disadvantaged, as a group, there are those who enjoy many of the benefits of the advantaged. This is manifestly a question of class between both groups.

Historically this relationship in the United States was shaped by the interaction between African Americans and European Americans within the context of the development of capitalism. The slave trade, chattel slavery, and post-reconstruction segregation all played instrumental roles in the development of the political economy of U.S. capitalism. It was in the context of these historical periods of American history that racism, as we know it, was shaped.

We can skip the argument of which came first - capitalism or racism,

and agree that at this point the two are inseparable. They are inextricably twisted together and it will be impossible to unravel one without unraveling the other. At the same time it *is* possible to advance democracy within capitalism and alleviate some of the more egregious aspects of racism, just as it is possible to alleviate some of the more egregious aspects of class exploitation.

While the relationship of African Americans and European Americans was the genesis of racism in this country, it has spread its tentacles to enfold other peoples. Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and the various Caribbean peoples all share, to varying degrees, the material deprivations, which are the manifestations of racism. Yet the core of racism in this country remains the relationship between African Americans and white Americans.

Many years ago Henry Winston, the late chair of the Communist Party, USA, pointed out a developing phenomenon in this country. In his words, African Americans were in the process of becoming "social pariahs," cast aside from educational institutions, targeted by the disciplinary functions of the state, their plight ignored by those in power.

Unfortunately, much of Winston's vision has come true. Increasingly African Americans have become marginalized within U.S. society. This marginalization is reflected in their material circumstances in the areas of health care, education, the criminal justice system and virtually every sector of American society. It's important to note that this marginalization is not reducible only to class. That is, African Americans are unequal on most socioeconomic indicators even when class is accounted for.

Earlier this month the 14th International AIDS Conference met in Barcelona, Spain. At that meeting the Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced that half of those newly infected with AIDS, among the heterosexual population, are African-American women, and another 25 percent are African-American men. This means that African American women suffer from this disease at ten times their proportion in the general population and African American men at five times their proportion in the population.

One would think that these figures would strike a note of alarm in this country. But there was no Ted Koppel special, no special note on the national news broadcasts, and certainly no comment from the White House. This revealing announcement was largely met with silence.

A recent study by the Institute of Medicine entitled, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*, found that African Americans who have the same incomes, insurance coverage and medical conditions as white Americans receive decidedly poorer care. Obviously, the issue of

the oppression of Black Americans is not one that is reducible to class alone.

The study went on to note that in some cases African Americans are more likely to undergo certain medical procedures. For example, they quoted a previous study showing that Black Americans undergo amputations for diabetes at triple the rate of white Americans.

Dr. Lucille Perez, president of the National Medical Association-the organization of African American physicians -- commented on the report by noting that, "It validates what many of us in the NMA have been saying for so long-that racism is a major culprit in the mix of health disparities and has had a devastating impact on African Americans."

African American women are hit especially hard by disparities in health. One recent study in Milwaukee concluded that in 1990, African American mothers lived in less desirable, more segregated neighborhoods than white mothers did. Black infant and neonatal mortality rates were twice those of whites (2.3 and 2.0, respectively), while African-American post neonatal mortality rates were three times that of whites (3.0). Low and very low birth weight rates among Blacks were more than twice those of whites (2.5 and 2.6, respectively). All African-American mothers were nearly eight times as likely as all white mothers to have inadequate prenatal care, whereas poor African-American mothers were three times as likely to have inadequate prenatal care as were poor white mothers.

Once again, the issue is not reducible to class.

The disparity in health care has resulted in a life expectancy of 67.6 years for African American men - nearly seven years less than for European American men and African American women, and 12 years less than European American women.

Other social markers in U.S. society demonstrate that the area of health care is no anomaly.

It has been nearly fifteen years since the Sentencing Project announced that one quarter of African American men between 20 and 29 years of age were on parole, probation, or incarcerated. Five years later those numbers had increased to one-third of African American men and they are undoubtedly even higher today. A recent analysis of the Department of Justice statistics for 2001 showed that nearly fifteen percent of African American males in the 25-34 age range were incarcerated - in prison or jail - on any given day in the past ten years. The Sentencing project, which analyzed the Justice Department statistics, notes that this incarceration rate is having a devastating impact on the African American community.

In twelve states a convicted felon cannot vote. This has

*Dialogue & Initiative* is a discussion journal published by the Committees of Correspondence Education Fund, Inc.,  
545 Eighth Avenue, 14th Floor NE, New York, NY 10018.

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resulted in the disenfranchisement of 13 percent of Black males in those states. Further, in many other states having a felony drug conviction restricts access to higher education loans, welfare, and public housing.

African American women are increasingly being dragged into the same criminal justice net as African American men. African Americans make up nearly half of the female prison population. A recent study concludes that African American women are "over arrested, over indicted, over sentenced, and under defended." In addition, they serve more of their sentences in comparison with that of European American women. This surge in incarceration rates has resulted in one of every fourteen African American children having a parent who is incarcerated.

A recent study completed at the University of California found that in 1999 only three percent of African American high school graduates were fully eligible for admission to the University of California, compared to 13 percent of Whites, 30 percent of Asians and a mere four percent of Latinos. The study also noted that:

-- Around three-quarters of both African Americans and Asian Americans who enter kindergarten graduate high school; however, Asian Americans are three times more likely to graduate college.

-- For the academic year 1997-1998, 28 percent of African American high school graduates, compared to 41 percent of Whites, 58 percent of Asians/Pacific Islanders, 44 percent of Filipinos and 24 percent of Latinos, completed course eligibility requirements for admission to the University of California.

Housing patterns also demonstrate this process of marginalization. Social scientists consider dissimilarity scores--an index by which segregation is measured-- over 60 to reflect high levels of segregation. A study by the Brookings Institution based on the 2000 decennial census found that the dissimilarity index did drop slightly for African Americans, from 69.5 in 1990 to 65.2 in 2000. That is Black America's lowest level since 1920.

However, the dissimilarity scores for Latinos (51.5 in 2000 and 51.3 in 1990), and for Asians (42.0 in 2000, and 43.9 in 1990) represent moderate levels of segregation. At this pace (a 4.3 point drop in the decade), it would take three decades for African American segregation levels to fall to current levels of Latino segregation and five decades to reach the current Asian American level.

The study concludes by noting that, "In the midst of the nation's growing diversity - in which about 69 percent of the population is white, 12.3 percent African American, 12.5 percent Hispanic, and about 4 percent Asian - Black America remains the most racially isolated."

Finally, this issue of marginalization or the creation of social pariahs is reflected in what social scientists term "social distance scales," which measure acceptance and rejection within society. One of the markers of the social distance scale is endogamy / exogamy rates - that is rates of intra and inter "racial" marriage.

A recent study on interracial marriage remarks that, "...whites, the largest racial group, have the lowest proportions of interracial marriage; Asian Americans, the smallest group, have the highest. Yet the proportions of interracial marriage for Hispanics are much higher than for African Americans, even though African Americans outnumber Hispanics by a relatively small

margin..."

"The lower percentage of interracial marriage among African Americans indicates that the social distance between whites and African Americans is greater than between whites and either of the other two racial minorities..."

A profusion of statistics documents this continuing process of marginalization. Aside from the affront to humanity that these trends reveal, the progressive movement is in the process of losing what has historically been a bulwark in the struggle to advance democracy in this country.

Major advances in the broad democratic movement have occurred during at least three periods in U.S. history. This includes the Reconstruction era of the 1860's, trade union organizing drives of the 1930's, and the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement of the 1960's and 70's. In each of those struggles the African American community played a central role. African Americans are consistently one of the most progressive sectors of society on issues such as education, labor rights, and political reform, and the various anti-imperialist movements. That the Congressional Black Caucus is the most progressive organized formation in national politics is not an accident. The CBC's politics are what they are because of the base they reflect. To the degree this base socially fragments and deteriorates and becomes splintered from the broad progressive movement is the degree to which the entire progressive movement is weakened.

Conceptualizing racism as a social relation constituted by advantaged and disadvantaged groups is not a new idea. However, many have taken this correct starting point and ended up with an incorrect position, holding that, somehow, members of the advantaged group, i.e., European Americans should in some self-flagellant manner renounce their advantages.

In reality it's impossible to do that. Gaining equality does not mean reducing the standing of the advantaged, but the raising of the standing of the disadvantaged to at least remove the racial inequality. Removal of the advantages of class however is a matter of changing the ownership of the means of production, a revolutionary change of power relations of the whole society. However, what one can do is to involve herself or himself and the progressive forces of society in the struggle to alleviate the inequities that exist as a result of racism. I think that this approach is what typified the motives of white participants in the civil rights struggles. It is this attitude that the left must adopt in its approach to the question of racism.

There are many important areas where we, the left, can make a difference. High on the agenda should be the struggle for affirmative action, the movement for reparations, the struggle to legislate a living wage, quality education, health care and housing.

Affirmative action is a struggle that we can participate in within our unions, our work place work, and where we live. Many unions have taken relatively advanced positions on this question. Where that is the case, we should publicize it and work to get other unions to adopt similar positions and to conscientiously extend the resolutions to active engagement to win the struggle. However, we can't be complacent about this issue and allow the right wing to set the ground rules and cast the tenor of the debate. The left must be adamant about the legitimacy of imposing quotas and timetables in all areas where the racially oppressed are underrepresented due to racism. Furthermore, the left must insist

## Abolishing American Apartheid, Root and Branch Manning Marable

that African Americans not be left out of affirmative action programs. To demonstrate that an appropriate percentage of our workforce, students, residents, etc., are minorities is necessary but not sufficient. We must raise the question of the African American presence. We must be critical of programs that - under the aegis of diversity and multi-culturalism - importantly have representation from Asian Americans and Latinos, but no, or very few, African Americans.

The proposals for African American reparations is an area where the left can contribute. The NAACP, CBTU, grassroots organizations, scholars, many activists, including lawyers, have endorsed HR40, the reparations bill sponsored by Congressman John Conyers. We should also endorse it. The debate on the issue of reparations allows for many opportunities to discuss the systemic basis of African American oppression. The ensuing discussions can create the atmosphere for a broad, mass critique of capitalism - both historically and in the present.

Finally, the struggle for a living wage, which the CCDS has been engaged in for several years, is an area that allows for the joining of the issues of affirmative action and discriminatory hiring policies with the fight for living wages with benefits, health care, quality education and housing.

If we are to turn the politics of this country around, African Americans must be central in our organizing efforts. They are strategically placed in many public and private sector unions. The service industry is the largest area of growth within the trade union movement. And, just as importantly, they are strategically placed in the South, which has historically been the cutting edge of reaction in national politics.

The joining of class and race interests is paramount to defeating reaction in the south. Nearly fifty percent of African Americans live in the South. They are a consistent force for democracy in an area that is the most economic and politically backward in our country. Let's look at national electoral politics as an example. It's virtually impossible for a liberal/moderate Democratic candidate, not to mention a progressive candidate, to win a national election when one-fourth of the country is automatically ceded to the right. Yet the African American community is a sleeping force in that area. The left, working through mass organizations, grass roots developments and trade unions, can make an important contribution toward awakening that sleeping giant and fusing it with other progressive forces. Without that fusion there will be few meaningful national political victories in the electoral or legislative arenas.

The task before the left is clear. Either we resume our historic role in championing the issue of racial equality in general, and African American equality specifically, or we will continue to be ineffective in our efforts to popularize advanced democratic demands - up to and including socialism - among the people of our country.

---- *Charlene Mitchell, a founder and Co-Chair of CCDS, is a long-time leader in the struggle against racism.*

In 1900, the great African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Du Bois's powerful prediction of a century ago, that the entire world would increasingly be divided along boundaries of north vs. south, between the industrialized, affluent and powerful white populations of Europe and North America and the underdeveloped, poor, and oppressed nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean has largely come true.

The great challenge of the twenty-first century therefore, is the challenge of abolishing American apartheid, root and branch, and creating a genuinely non-racial, pluralistic democracy, a free and fair society with opportunity and justice for all.

For the surgeon to eliminate a cancer, she or he must first identify it, in order to remove it. Only with surgery can the body be healed, and made whole again. For this nation to eliminate cancer, we must clearly and carefully define its character, explaining how and why, a generation after the Civil Rights Movement, that race remains such a powerful and destructive force touching virtually every dimension of public life. We must "speak truth to power" about racism: that race has not magically declined in significance; that affirmative action is absolutely necessary and essential to redress both historical and contemporary liabilities and barriers to the development and progress of black and brown Americans; that "justice" of our police, courts, and prisons has never been and is not to this day "color blind"; that the African American still remains the last hired and the first fired; that the death penalty and life sentences without parole have become the "new lynchings" of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In the past three decades, the structure and character of American institutional racism has changed dramatically. We can measure the advances of African Americans in many ways. The number of black elected officials, barely 100 in 1964, has climbed above 12,000; the black consumer market has grown from \$70 billion in 1980 to over \$450 billion today. There is an affluent and substantial black middle class, and the economic expansion of the 1990s greatly improved the quality of life even for millions of working class and low-income households. However, this new prosperity for the black middle class obscures a very real crisis for millions of other African Americans. The unprecedented expansion of what a number of scholars increasingly describe as a "prison industrial complex" has created an oppressively new context for the articulation of racial politics. The dynamic and seemingly unchecked growth of the U.S. prison population has many profound consequences for all communities of color - politically, economically and socially.

How did we reach this situation? We must understand the connections between race, crime, and justice in an historical context. For a variety of reasons, rates of violent crime, including murder, rape and robbery, increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this increase occurred in urban areas. By the late 1970s, nearly one half of all Americans were afraid to walk within a mile of their homes at night, and 90 percent responded in surveys that the U.S. criminal justice system was not dealing harshly enough with criminals. Politicians like Richard M.