

Features

The Myth Of Equality - Part I

A myth is haunting Black America -- the illusion that equality between the races has been achieved, and that the activism characteristic of the previous generation's freedom struggles is no longer relevant to contemporary realities.

In collective chorus, the media, the leadership of both political parties, the corporate establishment, conservative social critics and public policy experts, and even marginal elements of the Black middle class, tell the majority of African-Americans that the factors which generated the social protest for equality in the 1950's and 1960's no longer exist. The role of race has supposedly "declined in significance" within the economy and political order. And as we survey the current social climate, this argument seems to gain a degree of credibility. The number of Black elected officials exceeds 6,600; many Black entrepreneurs have achieved substantial gains within the economic system in the late 1980's; thousands of Black managers and administrators appear to be moving forward within the hierarchies of the private and public sector. And the crowning "accomplishment," the November, 1989 election of Douglas Wilder as Virginia's first Black governor, has been promoted across the nation as the beginning of the transcendence of "racial politics."

The strategy of Jesse Jackson in both 1984 and 1988, which challenged the Democratic Party by mobilizing people of color and many whites around an advanced, progressive agenda for social justice, is dismissed as anachronistic and even "reverse racism." As in the Wilder model, racial advancement is projected as obtainable only if the Negro learns a new political and cultural style of the white mainstream. Protest is therefore passe. All the legislative remedies which were required to guarantee racial equality, the spectre dictates, have already been passed.

It is never an easy matter to combat a myth. There have been sufficient gains for African-Americans, particularly with the electoral system and for sectors of the Black middle class in the 1980's, that elements of the myth seem true. But from the vantage point of the inner cities and homeless shelters, from the unemployment lines and closed factories, a different reality behind the spectre emerges. We find that racism has not declined in significance, if racism is defined correctly as the systemic exploitation of Blacks' labor power and the domination and subordination of our cultural, political, educational and social rights as human beings. Racial inequality continues despite the false rhetoric of equality. Those who benefit materially from institutional racism now use the term "racist" to denounce Black critics who call for the enforcement of affirmative action and equal opportunity legislation.

Behind the myth of equality exist two crises, which will present fundamental challenges to African-Americans in the decade of the 1990's. There is an "internal crisis" -- that is, a crisis within the African-American family, neighborhood, community, cultural and social institutions, and within interpersonal relations, especially between Black males. Part of this crisis was generated, ironically, by what I term the "Paradox of desegregation." With the end of Jim Crow segregation, the Black middle class was able to escape the confines of the ghetto. Black attorneys who previously had only Black clients could now move into more lucrative white law firms. Black educators and administrators were hired at predominately white colleges; Black physicians were hired at white hospitals.

As the Black middle class increasingly retreated to the suburbs, they often withdrew their skills, financial resources and professional contacts from the bulk of the African-American community. There

were of course many exceptions—Black women and men who understood the cultural obligations they owed to their community. But as a rule, by the late 1980's, such examples became more infrequent, especially among younger Blacks who had no personal memories of experiences in the freedom struggles of two decades past.

The internal crisis is directly related to the external, institutional crisis, a one-sided, race/class warfare which is being waged against the African-American community. The external crisis is represented by the conjuncture of a variety of factors including: the deterioration of skilled and higher paying jobs within the ghetto, and the decline in the economic infrastructure; the decline in the public sector's support for public housing, health care, education and related social services for low-to-moderate income people; and the demise of the enforcement of affirmative action, equal opportunity laws and related civil rights legislation.

The myth of equality is required in order to convince African-Americans that the external crisis doesn't really exist, and that racism is dead. That's why it's more important than ever for the Black Movement to be reborn, using the strategies of demonstration, community mobilizing and resistance to the "new" racism. Institutional racism may be more sophisticated, using the language of equality, but the necessity for struggle still exists.



Bishop
DESMOND M. TUTU

Anti-Apartheid Activists Elated By South African Reforms

(CPS) -- Anti-apartheid activists on U.S. campuses say they're elated by South African president F.W. de Klerk's sweeping reforms of Feb. 2, but say students should keep the pressure on their schools to avoid even indirect economic support of the South African government for now.

"This," said Richard Knight of the African fund, a New York-based group that has coordinated much of the anti-apartheid activity on American campuses for 20 years, "is a very big victory for the people of South Africa and the international anti-apartheid movement."

De Klerk legalized the long-outlawed African National Congress (ANC) and other anti-apartheid groups, partially lifted the 43-month old "state of emergency" and called for negotiations to end apartheid and give the voteless black majority a voice in South Africa's government.

De Klerk also promised to free ANC leader Nelson Mandela, imprisoned since 1962, "soon." On Feb. 4, however, Mandela vowed to remain behind bars until de Klerk lifts completely the state of emergency.

Under emergency regulations that remain in effect, the government can detain anyone for as long as six months without charge. Police have wide powers to ban meetings and speeches, and to restrict media coverage of their own actions in dealing with political unrest.

The efforts -- as well as the segregationist apartheid system that denied black citizens most property and human rights -- have always provoked passionate opposition on U.S. campuses. Students have successfully convinced administrations at scores of colleges to sell off shares in firms that do business in South

Africa. "All those students who sat in buildings and shanties," Knight said, "this is their victory too."

Knight hoped students would continue to pressure their schools and communities to divest until black South Africans win all their rights. "This is not the end of apartheid by any means. There are more changes coming, but it's important we continue pushing."

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu also called for a continued divestment campaign during a Feb. 4 news conference at Harvard University, where he attended a private meeting of the school's governing Board of Overseers.

Tutu was elected last year to the post as part of a drive to pressure the university into ridding itself of all investments in companies doing business in or with South Africa.

Tongue Tied: Restricting Racial Speech On Campus

By John Zipperer

Students returning to school this past fall at the University of Wisconsin received a disturbing lesson from their teachers. In response to numerous incidents of racial misconduct in recent years, the university administration instituted a ban on speech that "created a hostile environment" for other students. The administration claimed that racism had grown to such proportions that it demanded immediate and drastic action -- even if this involved the extraordinary step of restricting speech. Interestingly, in the first semester in which the university was armed with such a strong weapon against racism, UW officials failed to use it. Unfortunately for the school, however, the mere presence

of a rule banning racially offensive speech creates "a hostile environment" for the teachers and students within it, and ultimately makes the problem of racism worse.

Attempting to deal with the problem of racism on our college campuses by restricting free speech is destined to fail: most of what we value will be destroyed in the process, while racism will inevitably survive. And yet at the Universities of Pennsylvania, Berkeley, and Michigan, administrators have adopted bans on racial speech similar to the one in place at Wisconsin -- and many other colleges and universities are considering adopting such rules soon.

Almost uniformly these rules prohibit students from making derogato-

ry comments about another student's race. While most rules also ban insults based on a person's age, sex, religion, sexual orientation, handicap, and veteran status, the rules' main focus is racism. Penalties for violation include a reprimand, "sensitivity reeducation," and expulsion from school.

Even those who would never offend another person will still suffer from the mere presence of racial speech rules. They will find themselves getting an incomplete education as their professors avoid harassment by watering down controversial subjects or avoiding them altogether. The reality is that in order to teach, sometimes one must offend. And in order to learn, sometimes one must be offended.

By attempting to teach history without dealing with racially offensive material, we may create a situation in which, perversely, those same racial beliefs we are fighting are able to find a receptive audience. For example, when teaching about slavery or the Holocaust, students must get an understanding of how millions of people could believe in the racist ideologies behind such events. Professors will find it easier to just exclude any material, such as Nazi speeches or slave owner's defenses of slavery, than to go head to head with the institutionalized intolerance created by racial speech rules. By creating an environment that limits the material a professor may use in teaching, we thus face the danger of producing a generation of students who are so poorly educated about

history that they threaten to repeat its worst nightmares through a combination of ignorance and moral arrogance.

Most of us would feel very uncomfortable being forced underground because of our beliefs, but racism actually flourishes in the dark recesses of our society. If racial comments are barred from college conversations, they will still be freely used in the private conversations between fellow racists. By replanting racism in its most fertile soil, the racial speech rules spreading across American campuses will prove worse than ineffectual; they will prove counterproductive.

Using universities to restrict free speech is a sad reflection of our times. Universities act as the care-

takers of our society, transmitting and, we hope, improving our values from generation to generation. In attempting to deal with racism by expelling students who say things construed to be racist, the current generation of academic leaders are forsaking one of the most important roles of the university. By their punishment, they force those who may be racists to clam up, and thus take them out of the discussions in which their racist beliefs might be challenged and changed by other students.

Curbing racist speech on our college campuses does not solve the problem of racism; it only hides it. History, while it is still allowed to be taught, should teach us that burying our heads in the sand proves ineffective in making problems disappear.

Myth Of Equality - Part II

The American economic and political system promises equality, but has never delivered for the African-American. In fact, the system uses the rhetoric and myth of equality to hide the process of oppression. Both through legal and illegal means, Blacks are being destroyed.

Illegal drugs destroy thousands of African-American in many direct and indirect ways. We witness the daily, destructive impact with the proliferation of gangs and fratricidal criminality. But there are other indirect effects as well. In January, 1990, a comprehensive study by the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, which reviewed traffic fatalities between 1984 through 1987, observed that nearly one in four drivers age 16 to 45 killed in New York City tested positive for cocaine in autopsies. Researchers suggested that individuals addicted to cocaine experience spatial perception and other physical dysfunction. How many thousands of African-

Americans are crippled and killed in accidents caused by those whose abilities are impaired by crack or other drugs? How many homes are destroyed, and dreams shattered? How many daughters and sons are lost forever from their families and friends?

The cancer of crack creates many more living victims than those who are killed by the drug. Crack is part of the new urban slavery, a method of disrupting lives and "regulating" the masses of our young people who otherwise would be demanding jobs, adequate health care, better schools and control of their own communities. It is hardly accidental that this insidious cancer has been unleashed within the very poorest urban neighborhoods, and that the police concentrate on petty street dealers rather than those who actually control and profit from the drug traffic. It is impossible to believe that thousands and thousands of pounds of illegal drugs can be transported throughout the country, in airplanes, trucks and

automobiles, to hundreds of central distribution centers with thousands of law enforcement officers, unless crack represented at a systemic level a form of "social control."

Most African-Americans do not realize that the most destructive drug problem within our community is tobacco addiction. The tobacco industry makes its highest profits from African-Americans. For two decades, tobacco companies have followed a strategy of "special marketing," targeting younger, poorly educated African-Americans as potential consumers. In late December, 1989, for example, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco company announced the development of "Uptown" menthol cigarettes, a product specifically designed to "appeal most strongly to Blacks." One NAACP leader has called the strategy "unethical," and the American Cancer Society declared that the "campaign exploits Blacks, especially the ghetto poor." Under fire, R. J. Reynolds was forced to

cancel the scheme for higher profits.

The "Uptown" controversy highlights the fact that African-Americans currently suffer higher death rates for virtually all types of cancer, especially cancer of the lungs, prostate, esophagus and cervix, than white Americans. The statistical life expectancy for Blacks actually declined in the late 1980's, due in part to extremely high mortality rates from cancer.

However, the major means for the social control of the African-American remains the criminal justice system. As of June, 1989, the U.S. prison population reached 673,000 of which Blacks comprise 46 percent. Prisons have become the method for keeping hundreds of thousand of potentially rebellious, dissatisfied and alienated Black youth off the streets. There is a direct correlation between the absence of job training programs and social programs designed to elevate Blacks' incomes, and the increased utiliza-

tion of the criminal justice system to regulate unemployed and unemployable Blacks. Keep in mind that between 1973 and 1986, the average real earnings for young African-American males under 25 years fell by 50 percent. In the same years, the percentage of Black males aged 18 to 29 in the labor force who were able to secure fulltime, year-round employment, fell from only 44 percent to a meager 35 percent. Is it accidental that these young Black men, who are crassly denied meaningful employment opportunities, are also pushed into the prison system, and subsequently into permanent positions of economic marginality and social irrelevancy. Within America's economic system, a job has never been defined as a human right but for millions of young, poor Black men and women, they appear to have a "right" to a prison cell or place at the front of the unemployment line.

The struggle against the myth of equality requires a break from the

tactics and ideas of the desegregation period of the 1960s.

Our challenge is not to become part of the system, but to transform it not only for ourselves, but for everyone. We must struggle to make economic and racial equality for all.

PUZZLE SOLUTION

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