

Downsizing the Dream?

Race, Class and Justice in the United States

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Martin Carnoy, *Faded Dreams: The Politics and Economics of Race in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

In a 1991 commencement address at the University of Michigan, President George Bush officially announced the end of the “Great Society.” Twenty seven years after Lyndon Johnson had used the same forum to reaffirm Kennedy’s War on Poverty, Bush told a more cynical generation of graduates that “we don’t need another Great Society, with its huge and ambitious programs administered by the incumbent few ... An effective government must know its limitations and respect its people’s capabilities.”¹ Instead, Bush offered a vision that he called “The Good Society” based on government deregulation, tax cuts, and individual “common decency.” Of course many historians, sociologists and pundits had already concluded that the Reagan “revolution” had ended liberal reforms and civil rights politics. Programs and policies focused on redistributing enough economic, social, and political resources to

1 George Bush, “The Good Society,” Commencement Address delivered at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 1991.

counter years of racial discrimination and class exploitation died at the altar of a "New Conservatism."

For twelve years, Reagan and Bush preached a dogma of deregulation dictating that the unrestrained freedoms to accumulate and discriminate were constitutional and moral rights; no government should intervene. Whatever hopes sixties youth had of forcing politicians to create a more just society had given way to an eighties generation more apt to understand affirmative action as "reverse discrimination," anti-harassment and anti-discrimination laws as restrictions on free speech, and education and training programs for unemployed, inner city youth as "tax and spend" liberalism that only fostered cycles of dependency among "the poor." Bush argued that "government will not make you good or evil" and stressed personal responsibility: "The Good Society does not demand agonizing sacrifice. It requires something within everyone's reach: common decency and commitment."² What Bush ignored was any discussion of collective responsibility or the general public's welfare, both of which seemed crucial amidst policies that redistributed wealth to the already rich and resulted in growing numbers of homeless families and hungry children. A good society indeed.

Martin Carnoy's latest book, *Faded Dreams: The Politics and Economics of Race* studies the effects that these political and ideological shifts have had on the economic and social status of African Americans and other minorities in the United States. By examining exhaustive data on the relative economic conditions between minorities and whites throughout the twentieth century, Carnoy demonstrates that racial inequality not only still exists, but has intensified during the past fifteen years. He presents three arguments as the dominant explanations for increasing economic, political, and social inequalities: "individual responsibility," "pervasive racism," and "economic restructuring." Each one is a familiar narrative. "Individual responsibility" blames increasing

economic disparity on both minorities (for not taking advantage of educational and job opportunities) and white liberals (for creating anti-poverty programs that only fostered dependency and low self-esteem). The “pervasive racism” explanation contends that, not only does racism endure as a pejorative attitude held by many whites against minorities, it permeates our “common historical experience” and is ingrained in our culture and the very structure of society. And the “economic restructuring” argument poses that *class* and not *race* has become the most salient reason for economic inequality as historical conditions led minorities to occupy industrial jobs in urban centers hardest hit by deindustrialization and disinvestment.

While Carnoy finds kernels of truth in all three explanations, he argues that socio-economic data proves that each one fails to adequately analyze the primary causes for minorities’ changing social and economic conditions: government activities. In each case, Carnoy demonstrates how government policies have intervened to affect systemic inequalities, sometimes allowing minorities a modicum of mobility upwards, and sometimes restricting advancement or even deepening poverty and despair. When the post war economy boomed and civil rights activities desegregated educational institutions, workplaces, housing developments, etc. minorities took advantage of opportunities to get better jobs, education and housing. The “individual responsibility” argument does not account for how structural changes have once again limited the possibilities for minority advancement as opposed to the 1960s and 1970s when these groups experienced relatively improved social and economic conditions. Similarly, the “pervasive racism” argument ignores the tangible gains that minority populations did make during the postwar period, especially due to various civil rights legislation’s “impact in the 1970s on young, higher educated blacks.” And the “economic restructuring” analysis ignores how the retrenchment in civil rights policies that has accompanied deindustrialization and flexible regimes of accumulation intensified the downward mobility of both working and middle class minorities. In all three cases, Carnoy wants us to refocus on how

government policies and national politics have played a primary role in altering the shape and nature of changing racial inequalities.

And Carnoy is persuasive. An energetic and sometimes militant civil rights movement did force the federal government to enact policies that facilitated minority advancements in education, politics, the economy, and elsewhere. Wage and education differentials between minorities and whites decreased and attitudinal studies showed that physical and geographical desegregation and a dominant culture that challenged bigotry had affected whites' racial stereotypes and intolerances. Yet global economic shifts and specific policies constructed to enable corporations more flexibility in meeting the "demands" of global changes created economic chaos in the late 1970s. Reagan responded by deploying "an activist free-market ideology to redistribute national income to the already rich, dismember organized labor, and remove the last affirmative action, poverty program, and compensatory education underpinnings from the gains of the 1960s and 1970s." Although Reaganomics was a more "class intensive" program — hurting many middle and working class whites as well as minorities — it did affect minorities more. This uneven impact permitted Reagan and Bush to not only code policy changes in a racial (and racist) fashion, but also to blame the economic hardships being felt by white middle and working class families on minorities themselves. As Carnoy argues, the only way to maintain white middle and working class support amidst anti-labor policies was to play the "race" card, tying a radical "free-market" ideology to an abandonment of civil rights and anti-poverty policies. Carnoy explains:

Most voters found stability in neoconservatism. Key groups of white voters had become disillusioned with 'welfare for the poor' and other social programs that did not seem to benefit them. The 'conservative egalitarianism' pushed by Republicans ... appealed to whites who had 'made it on their own' ... This appeal worked for most of the decade until it became clear that working-class whites were hardly benefiting from the program. Like the 1920s, the Reagan 1980s were a return to 'normalcy' after a period of turbulence. But normalcy in the 1980s meant playing to un-abashed white middle class materialism and abandoning a tenuous

commitment to racial equality. For minorities, this implied an end to a different normalcy, one that increased their possibility of entering the mainstream of society.

Even amidst open class warfare of the rich against the poor, race remains an imperative analytical category for understanding how alliances are formed, battles won, and justice denied.

Nowhere is Carnoy's argument more salient than in examining the current "welfare reform" debate. Both conservative Republicans and "New" Democrats have completely ignored how government policies and corporate strategies have destroyed decent wage jobs, job security and low-income housing, cut aid to higher education, increased interest rates to maintain high unemployment, and established regressive tax policies to give more money to the rich and reduce public services to the poor and middle class. Instead, they blame poverty on poor people themselves, stressing that welfare participants have a "personal responsibility" to lift themselves out of poverty regardless of structural conditions. But the animal imagery that characterized congressional debates on welfare had little to do with "responsibility." After all, legislators' metaphors comparing poor people to "alligators" and "wolves" who get lazy if "fed" by government should also apply to corporations who feed big time at the federal and state troughs.³ Even tax supported Senators and Congress people have luxurious salaries, benefits, and perks compared to the average school teacher, bus driver, brick layer, K-Mart sales clerk, and data entry worker. And the 1%-2% of the federal budget that AFDC, WIC, etc. comprise, even if cut completely, would make little dent in reducing the deficit. Welfare reform has nothing to do with "personal responsibility" or "budget balancing;" it has everything to do with punitive measures against a particular group of people as part of a political strategy to create a scapegoat.

In his excellent book, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie*, Michael Rogin argues that part of our national identity in the United States

3 *New York Times*, 24 March 1995.

has come as a result of demonizing groups (Native Americans, African Americans, Women, Communists, etc.) who seem to threaten a perceived unity or consensus.⁴ Especially during periods of great economic upheaval or social transformation, dehumanizing images of constructed “others” are created partially to explain instabilities — “it’s their fault,” partially to restore a unity of purpose — “we” can all blame “them,” and partially to discipline anyone who might break consensus — “he or she must be one of them.” What Carnoy reminds us is that these demonizing narratives have been constructed as strategies for specific political and economic interests; by tapping into a history of white racism, politicians have been able to mobilize support for anti-poor policies by coding them as anti-minority policies, and then portraying them as solutions to problems such as crime, drugs, inadequate schools, economic insecurities and burgeoning poverty.

The disingenuous nature of these “reforms” are inherent in the imagery itself. Republican Representative John Mica’s, sign, “Please Don’t Feed the Alligators”, was not about empowering welfare participants to escape poverty; it was about disciplining them to participate in a new, low-wage flexible workforce. When tourists feed zoo animals, the animals don’t become lazy, per se, they become less dependent on the zookeepers. By cutting welfare, recipients are not liberated from government dependency, but are forced back into economic slavery at the hands of deregulated industries. Similarly, Representative Barbara Cubin claimed that government’s coddling of wolves in Wyoming ill prepared them for the wilderness to such a degree that the animals would not leave the protected environment and never fulfilled the goal of reproducing a wild wolf population.⁵ Yet she fails to mention that it was a lack of regulatory policies and enforcement that caused the fear of extinction to begin with. What has been missing from the welfare

4 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley 1987).

5 *New York Times*, 24 March 1995.

debate is a sincere discussion of the factors that have caused the increase of poverty and inequality: government policies facilitating corporate strategies to increase profits at the expense of most workers. And anti-civil rights policies and racist rhetoric and imagery have obscured these policies while creating a new generation of intolerance, fear, and suspicion.

Thus, Carnoy concludes that, in order to return the United States to the path of increasing economic and social equality for both minority and white working classes, “the ideological discourse has to include race.” Although this method might be “counterintuitive to current political thinking ... it is the only way to move Democrats to new, out-front approaches to racial inequality that both uncover the misthinking of most conservative egalitarianism and deal honestly with the present reality of black life and black-white relations.” Unfortunately, Carnoy is weakest when discussing how race might be inserted back into the political dialogue in a progressive way. As he argues, race is already a reactionary part of the rhetoric appearing everywhere from Willie Horton, to stereotypes of Japanese laborers, to proposition 187. In contrast, Carnoy claims that “government is able to combine economic, legal, and ideological actions [that have] ripple effects on inequality beyond the direct impact of the actions themselves. It styles the actions of employers and workers in the private sector as they adjust to changes in the ‘atmospheric pressure’ of the social contract.” While I agree with his premise, that governments have the power to create visions and affect cultural attitudes and social ideologies by enacting legislation, doing so runs more than just counterintuitive to New Democratic thinking; it runs counter to policy initiatives, too. It seems hard to believe that “New” Democrats will embrace Carnoy’s strategy when they continue to represent many of the same interests responsible for both increased poverty and civil rights retrenchment.

Still, we should derive hope from the legacy of both the War on Poverty and the Great Society images. After all, both “visions” arose quickly on the heels of 1950s conservatism and malaise. But neither were particularly Kennedy’s or Johnson’s dream; they were

the collective dreams of thousands of people who had taken to the streets to protest racism and economic inequality. Perhaps it's true that we should expect more from our leaders and, in doing so, restore a sense of optimism. My economist friend says that the most important thing we can teach our students is that "government *can* do good things for people." As long as both parties do the bidding of wealthy corporate interests, however, only an increasingly large and militant movement — willing to address both race and class issues in an honest and sophisticated way — can create a new vision of justice and equality. Perhaps a dream worth fighting for.

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