

‘Culture of Poverty’ Makes a Comeback

By PATRICIA COHEN, Published: October 17, 2010 NYTimes WebSite

For more than 40 years, social scientists investigating the causes of poverty have tended to treat cultural explanations like Lord Voldemort: ***That Which Must Not Be Named.***

The reticence was a legacy of the ugly battles that erupted after Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant labor secretary in the Johnson administration, introduced the idea of a “culture of poverty” to the public in a startling 1965 report. Although Moynihan didn’t coin the phrase (that distinction belongs to the anthropologist Oscar Lewis), his description of the urban black family as caught in an inescapable “tangle of pathology” of unmarried mothers and welfare dependency was seen as attributing self-perpetuating moral deficiencies to black people, as if blaming them for their own misfortune.

Moynihan’s analysis never lost its appeal to conservative thinkers, whose arguments ultimately succeeded when President Bill Clinton signed a bill in 1996 “ending welfare as we know it.” But in the overwhelmingly liberal ranks of academic sociology and anthropology the word “culture” became a live grenade, and the idea that attitudes and behavior patterns kept people poor was shunned.

Now, after decades of silence, these scholars are speaking openly about you-know-what, conceding that culture and persistent poverty are enmeshed.

“We’ve finally reached the stage where people aren’t afraid of being politically incorrect,” said Douglas S. Massey, a sociologist at Princeton who has argued that Moynihan was unfairly maligned.

... The topic has generated interest on Capitol Hill because so much of the research intersects with policy debates. Views of the cultural roots of poverty “play important roles in shaping how lawmakers choose to address poverty issues,” Representative Lynn Woolsey, Democrat of California, noted at the briefing.

This surge of academic research also comes as the percentage of Americans living in poverty hit a 15-year high: one in seven, or 44 million.

With these studies come many new and varied definitions of culture, but they all differ from the ‘60s-era model in these crucial respects: Today, social scientists are rejecting the notion of a monolithic and unchanging culture of poverty. And they attribute destructive attitudes and behavior not to inherent moral character but to sustained racism and isolation.

To Robert J. Sampson, a sociologist at Harvard, ... the reason a neighborhood turns into a “poverty trap” is also related to a common perception of the way people in a community act and think. When people see graffiti and garbage, do they find it acceptable or see serious disorder? Do they respect the legal system or have a high level of “moral cynicism,” believing that “laws were made to be broken”?

As part of a large research project in Chicago, Professor Sampson walked through different neighborhoods this summer, dropping stamped, addressed envelopes to see how many people would pick up an apparently lost letter and mail it, a sign that looking out for others is part of the community’s culture.

In some neighborhoods, like Grand Boulevard, where the notorious Robert Taylor public housing projects once stood, almost no envelopes were mailed; in others researchers received more than half of the letters back. Income levels did not necessarily explain the difference, Professor Sampson said, but rather the community’s cultural norms, the levels of moral cynicism and disorder.

The shared perception of a neighborhood — is it on the rise or stagnant? — does a better job of predicting a community’s future than the actual level of poverty, he said.

William Julius Wilson, whose pioneering work boldly confronted ghetto life while focusing on economic

explanations for persistent poverty, defines culture as the way “individuals in a community develop an understanding of how the world works and make decisions based on that understanding.”

For some young black men, Professor Wilson, a Harvard sociologist, said, the world works like this: “If you don’t develop a tough demeanor, you won’t survive. If you have access to weapons, you get them, and if you get into a fight, you have to use them.”

... sociologists have ventured into poor neighborhoods to delve deeper into the attitudes of residents. Their results have challenged some common assumptions, like the belief that poor mothers remain single because they don’t value marriage.

In Philadelphia, for example, low-income mothers told the sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas that they thought marriage was profoundly important, even sacred, but doubted that their partners were “marriage material.” Their results have prompted some lawmakers and poverty experts to conclude that programs that promote marriage without changing economic and social conditions are unlikely to work.

Mario Luis Small, a sociologist at the University of Chicago and an editor of *The Annals’* special issue, tried to figure out why some New York City mothers with children in day care developed networks of support while others did not. As he explained in his 2009 book, “Unanticipated Gains,” the answer did not depend on income or ethnicity, but rather the rules of the day-care institution. Centers that held frequent field trips, organized parents’ associations and had pick-up and drop-off procedures created more opportunities for parents to connect.

... Scholars like Professor Wilson, 74, ... have ... felt compelled to look more closely at culture after the publication of Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s controversial 1994 book, “The Bell Curve,” which attributed African-Americans’ lower I.Q. scores to genetics.

The authors claimed to have taken family background into account, Professor Wilson said, but “they had not captured the cumulative effects of living in poor, racially segregated neighborhoods.”

He added, “I realized we needed a comprehensive measure of the environment, that we must consider structural and cultural forces.”

He mentioned a study by Professor Sampson, 54, that found that growing up in areas where violence limits socializing outside the family and where parents haven’t attended college stunts verbal ability, lowering I.Q. scores by as much as six points, the equivalent of missing more than a year in school.

Changes outside campuses have made conversation about the cultural roots of poverty easier than it was in the ’60s. Divorce, living together without marrying, and single motherhood are now commonplace. At the same time prominent African-Americans have begun to speak out on the subject. In 2004 the comedian Bill Cosby made headlines when he criticized poor blacks for “not parenting” and dropping out of school. President Obama, who was abandoned by his father, has repeatedly talked about “responsible fatherhood.”

Conservatives also deserve credit, said Kay S. Hymowitz, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, for their sustained focus on family values and marriage even when cultural explanations were disparaged.

Still, worries about blaming the victim persist. Policy makers and the public still tend to view poverty through one of two competing lenses, Michèle Lamont ... said: “Are the poor poor because they are lazy, or are the poor poor because they are a victim of the markets?”

... Fuzzy definitions or not, culture is back. This prompted mock surprise from Rep. Woolsey at last spring’s Congressional briefing: “What a concept. Values, norms, beliefs play very important roles in the way people meet the challenges of poverty.”

Dan P, East Village,

I do not think that the writings of Moynihan were particularly "Conservative". If anything, they highlighted the nurture side of the nature versus nurture debate.

Analyzing how poor people think is an appropriate area of investigation. This is not to blame people for how they think but rather to demonstrate the economic consequences of such thoughts.

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Nick Lento, Cliffside Park, NJ

The choice of poverty being caused by either "cultural" factors or external conditions is false and even absurd.

Yes, obviously, there *are* cultural/systemic behavior patterns associated with poverty. It could also be argued that being poor and powerless and oppressed is what "bred" the cultural pathologies that some like to trumpet.

It's cheap to blame poor people for being poor. That lets everyone else off the hook. What Veronika Larsson (#9 above) said needs to be studied closely.

People that were fortunate enough to be born in the right area, with the right parents, schools and a nice trust fund will tend to be wealthy.....and to leave *that* wealth to their own progeny...that will then amplify and perpetuate the "culture" of wealth for the fortunate. Does that make them superior human beings to those born in conditions that are opposite to their own? Or does it just make them lucky?

People who are raised in conditions of multi-generational poverty and oppression can't just "snap out of it" because some judgmental prejudiced conservative wants to "modify their behavior".

Yes, there are always exceptions. Rich folk who blow it, and poor folk who rise above all the odds.....but, generally speaking the poor tend to get poorer and the rich get richer.....and that is *not* an indefinitely sustainable model for the maintenance of democracy.

What's needed is a radical change in our economic policies that create an environment that is fertile with the possibilities of enhancing upward mobility.

As it stands now the police/prison/"justice" industrial complex profits mightily from oppressing and incarcerating the poor....thereby further dispiriting and degrading the poor so that they become even more cynical and hopeless.....thereby reinforcing the self sustaining feedback loop that devolves and metastasizes the cancer of poverty.

The oppression, contempt, prejudice and exploitation of the poor by the rich is also part of the "culture" of poverty *and* of wealth!

One could go on at length talking about the outrageously extreme income disparity that poisons our society and how the agenda of eliminating/reducing the minimum wage is part of the *real* "class warfare" being perpetrated on the have nots by the haves.

America has de-industrialized and virtually destroyed the union movement and the possibility of a blue collar worker being able to raise a family, own a home and send their children to college on a single decent salary.

Bottom line: To reduce the problem of poverty to solely "cultural" factors is indeed unjust and unfair and just one more way of blaming the victims of oppression for their own broken spirits and all of the cumulative deficits that generations of poverty inflicts upon the poor.

So let's deal with the problem from *all* the angles, not just pick on the one that gives aid and comfort to

those who want to blame the whole problem of poverty on the poor themselves. Such a framework can only lead us into the temptation to inflict additional insults to generations of injury.

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John Fullinwider, Dallas, Texas,

What would make for some interesting sociology is a study of the "culture of wealth." Why do rich people remain so willfully blind to the injustice that benefits them? Why do landlords who defer apartment maintenance pretend that it's the tenants who "don't care"? Why do cops haul poor black men out of their cars during a minor traffic stop, but give prosperous-looking whites a pass? Why are there a thousand studies about unwed teenage mothers who are poor and zero about the disposition of unwanted pregnancies among Ivy League co-eds? Why don't the sociologists at Harvard study the moral failings of their largest donors? Why doesn't Professor Sampson study his own amoral "culture of well-funded curiosity" as he drops fake letters on the sidewalk of destitute, devastated neighborhoods to see which poor people care enough to return his mail? Why not study residents of the wealthiest census tracts in Chicago to learn why they don't care enough to end the devastation? Instead of studying the disadvantaged, why not study the ones who put so many at a disadvantage?

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elysianhome Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation, South Dakota

...I am writing as a Nebraska raised, college educated white male and current cattle rancher. (Just clearing some things up).

I live on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota and have 54 years of very close and personal experience living among my many Native American friends. My observations are completely identical with KMJ's personal history. The only exception is that my observations are of low income whites and low income Native Americans. The environment and the outcome is the same. So many Native families here have succeeded when so very many others seem to have not even tried.

I really feel that the most significant element of KMJ's experience was when she said "Both my parents cultivated an attitude of achievement and hard work . . .". I'd like to emphasize her use of the word "BOTH", as, in my opinion, that's the single most important aspect of this entire discussion. Yes, it may take a village to raise a child, but the job can be so much more successful when the job starts with both parents taking an active, caring lead role.

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Richard Longworth, Chicago

To Cathy and others who wonder if poor whites, especially those in rural areas, share the same cultural baggage as poor inner-city blacks, the answer is yes. My book, "Caught in the Middle," chronicles the impact of long-term economic decline on the Midwest, both rural and urban. In chapters on poverty-stricken rural areas, it draws a distinct parallel between the lives of rural whites and urban blacks caught in generational poverty -- a pathology of bad education, high drop-out rates, unstable or broken families, high drug use (coke in the cities, meths in the countryside), no access to good jobs, dependence on government support, bad housing and bad health care, down-home religions and general hopelessness -- people in both places who want a good life for themselves and their children but have no idea how to get it. I stress that young people, both black and white, continue to escape from this culture to get an education and good jobs. But the culture itself is inhibiting and offers next to nothing to those who stay. Odd, isn't it -- two tribes who have so much in common yet are, for the most part, totally unaware that the other exists?

Seen this way, it is possible to talk about the pathology of generational poverty without falling into misleading racial stereotypes. As William Julius Wilson wrote, inner-city residents may be in the ghetto because they're black, but they stay there because they're poor. Similarly, rural whites don't stay in rural ghettos because they're white. They stay because they're poor -- and have no idea how to get out.

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Anon, Chicago,

From the article:

"As part of a large research project in Chicago, Professor Sampson walked through different neighborhoods this summer, dropping stamped, addressed envelopes to see how many people would pick up an apparently lost letter and mail it, a sign that looking out for others is part of the community's culture.

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I have significant experience in this particular neighborhood, and what differentiates it from other, more mail-forwarding neighborhoods is the distinct lack of postal service. Mail carriers will not enter the towers to collect or deliver mail, and street drop boxes are rare. Few people will pick up a dropped letter in this neighborhood because there is no way to mail it.

Basic ignorance of local conditions like this make me suspect that this bit of research is another trojan horse for the reactionary right, manufacturing "data" to be used in blaming the poor for being poor.

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Lcfredc, New York, NY

Today's epidemic levels of underclass unemployment and crime are not rooted in the oft-noted "families without men" - but rather in the never-mentioned "men without families."

After all, when 80 percent of the mothers in a community are self-supported or welfare-supported, 80 percent of the men are also unmarried. These men have not disappeared. In their neighborhoods they are history's first majority of never-married men.

Black unmarried births are now at 72% (2008), up from 67% in 1990 and 24% in 1965. White unmarried births have similarly "progressed," now at 29% (2008), up from 17% in 1990 and 3% in 1965.*

Hard labor for low wages requires intense motivation. Before the welfare entitlements of the 1960s and better jobs for women, a father's paycheck was necessary for survival. Now millions of unmarried men need not work to feed, clothe or shelter families. They need never face their hungry child or suffer tender emotions. They need not be deterred by a prison term, nor fear the drug lifestyle - nor cling to a job.

These men impose an outlaw culture. They teach boys coming of age that irresponsibility and crime are viable ways of life, forcing them to dress like convicts, harden their hearts and prove their own brutality to earn protective "respect."

So then, what will happen if we succeed in eliminating racism and improving schools - even if we get unmarried mothers off welfare? How will that change the day-to-day motivations of the mass of men who never marry? The root cause of the crime epidemic will continue, as each unmarried woman's first pregnancy creates an invisible man - a man with nothing to lose.

If low-wage fathers remain unessential, we will continue routing whole communities of women and children into poverty - and great masses of unmarried, unmotivated men into rootless, antisocial, violent criminality.

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Bill, Redlands,

Teaching in an inner-city elementary school for the last 20 years, I have observed the following: working

parents are held in contempt by children of generational welfare families, most students are waiting to turn 16 so they can stop having to attend school, having a man is more important to women than having an education, babies are the way women show a man that she loves him, and going to prison is a good thing because it is an excuse to get away from the responsibilities of being a parent. Finally, too many kids do not know about fathers or marriage. They think men in families are just boyfriends or uncles.

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JTM, , DC,

Capitalism IS a zero sum game. Our wealth depends on people serving us and doing most of the physical labor. The system requires a certain amount of "losers" to perform these tasks for wages that keep them in poverty. No one understands this better than African Americans. It's not stupidity that makes them reject laws but a clear eyed understanding of the system which requires huge numbers of working poor to keep the machine running. Unfortunately for our law and order they seem to be getting tired of this game. Worst of all, they may not mail your envelope.

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A, New York, NY

Perhaps I am oversimplifying, but it seems the article's analysis (and perhaps the academic analysis) is stuck in dichotomized thinking: it's no one's fault (just the market's) or it's everyone's fault (the poor are lazy, etc.). As a former social worker in the Bronx, I think it's inarguable that having a baby as a single teenage mother who drops out of school is generally a recipe for poverty and reduced life chances for the entire family. If instead of moralizing the issue - "bad, bad poor people!" - and we treated many of the behavioral contributors to poverty for what they are - public health issues like smoking (inadvisable, not good for you, but not requiring the wholesale condemnation of the individual) and provided a campaign of advertising and public service messaging, I suspect we might see reductions in the behaviors that statistically are shown to drive poverty - just as we have driven down smoking rates: not overnight, but steadily, with both education and financial disincentives.

But the most important first step would be to reduce the noise from those on both sides of the issue who speak of this debate in moralistic, quasi-religious terms, and substitute sustained public education campaigns (among many other empirically proven initiatives) that target the most obviously self-destructive, self-defeating behaviors one finds in many poor communities. [a moral sentiment]

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ACK Boston

I am baffled by this article's characterization of the Moynihan Report. I was taught in Afro Am studies in college in the 90s that the reason it was so controversial was because it blamed society for locking minorities away and denying them opportunities for progress, thereby creating a separate "culture." A stated purpose of the Report was to identify positive attributes of the African American community from which "mainstream" society could learn, and that would give greater insight into the values actually present. Among these was the notion of "fictive kin," whereby families group together to form larger "family" units to help survive under such difficult circumstances when the deck is so stacked against them. The Moynihan Report has been cited by Afro Am scholars for decades in support of the notion that you must provide hope, opportunity and a vision for a way out before you can expect people to find their way out. I am happy to see social dialogue returning to the principles that the unabashedly liberal Moynihan elucidated so long ago: Until we provide opportunities, no hope can be garnered and no progress made. How can you ask people to climb when you've removed all the ladders?

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MT NJ

As a liberal Black woman with an advanced degree, I have long wondered why we're so scared to talk about a culture of poverty. Acknowledging that cultural norms can continue the cycle of poverty is not the same as criticizing an entire race or denying the impacts of other factors.

Culture plays a huge role in perpetuating poverty! People tend to make choices and pursue goals that fit in with the culture that surrounds them. No one else in my family went to college. They are mostly chronically underemployed and have children out of wedlock. They are not bad or lazy people; they simply lack context for another lifestyle. The middle class American Dream is fiction to them. I, on the other hand, had the luck to fall in with a group of highly motivated students in junior high and high school. This particular group of friends made it seem normal to work hard for good grades. Their parents helped me out with school projects when my parents could not or would not. They brought me along on college tours and showed me what was attainable. They introduced me to a different culture! Four years of college (thanks to copious financial aid) further enhanced my understanding of that culture.

I personally think it is a grave disservice to poor children and their families to not show them ways that their cultural norms put them at a disadvantage. I do not advocate paternalism but people deserve to know what actions they can take to create a better life. I shudder to think how different my life would be today if not for the cultural exposure I received from my friends' families.

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LarryG Alabama

We don't have poverty, it's pseudo poverty. Count the number of televisions, phones and cell phones, autos, etc, in the typical "Under poverty level" home, and think again.

Poverty here is a political tool created by liberals to pander for votes, nothing more. Disingenuous and sleazy. Ask the real victims of poverty around the world if our lower class is poor.

Shelby Steele's Thankless Task

By Joseph Epstein March 20, 2015 wsj

Shame

By Shelby Steele

Basic, 198 pages, \$29.95

'You,' a character in Ossie Davis's 1961 play "Purlie Victorious" says to another, "are a disgrace to the Negro profession." The line recurs to me whenever I see Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson making perfunctory rabble-rousing remarks in Ferguson, Mo., Madison, Wis., current-day Selma, Ala., or any other protest scene where their appearance, like Toni Morrison on a list of honorary-degree recipients, has become de rigueur. I wonder if Shelby Steele has also been called "a disgrace to the Negro profession," and this for diametrically opposite reasons. Had he been it could only have been by people who, despite their endless cries for social justice, in one way or another have a deep emotional if not financial investment in keeping black Americans in the sad conditions in which so many of them continue to find themselves.

Shelby Steele is one of the very few writers able to tell home truths about the plight of black Americans. Telling truth to power used to be a sign of intellectual courage, but today, when the Internet has made this no great feat, what takes courage is telling truth to listeners who have grown accustomed to thinking themselves victims, have accepted the ultimately inadequate benefits of victimhood and, touchier than a fresh burn, take offense at the least criticism. Mr. Steele has taken on this thankless job with, as I suspect he would agree, less than happy results. Still, he shows no sign of letting up. In "Shame," an essay on the political polarization of our country and on the want of progress among black Americans, he has produced his most complex and challenging work.

His authority for writing derives in part from his intellectual cogency, in part from his birth. His white mother married his black father in 1944, a time when a more radical act than miscegenation is not easily imagined. A mixed marriage in those days meant that a couple lived in black neighborhoods. Shelby Steele, born in 1946, grew up in Harvey, Ill., a predominantly working-class town just south of Chicago. He has described his biracial birth as "an absolute gift, the greatest source of insight and understanding. . . . [because] race was demystified for me. I could never see white people as just some unified group who hated blacks." Although he doesn't say so, being biracial has also allowed him insight into the hypocrisy of both blacks and whites on the subject of race.

The author has a fierce racial pride, and his writing about blacks in America is without condescension and imbued with deep sympathy. He is a brother, make no mistake, but a brother quite unlike any other. What distinguishes him is his openly stated belief that blacks in America have been sold out by the very liberals who ardently claim to wish them most good. He regrets that affirmative action, multiculturalism and most welfare programs purportedly put in place to show racial preference, far from liberating black Americans, have failed to advance their fortunes. Judging from high crime, divorce and unemployment rates, as well as relatively

low rates of high-school and college completion, a case can be made that liberal policies have harmed them. To cite a single statistic: In 1965, the year after passage of the Civil Rights Act, 23.6% of black births in America were to single women; today that number is 72%.

“Shame” does not portray the United States as the promised land in which all promises have been made good. Even our liberal royal family, the Kennedys, were, when in power, wobbly on civil rights. Mr. Steele’s father was a truck driver who, owing to racism, was kept out of the Teamsters union, and hence out of making a good living, until late in his working life. Mr. Steele recounts a heartbreaking story of his own high-school days in the early 1960s when he learned that the school swimming team, of which he was a key member, was invited to the coach’s mother’s summer house and that he was excluded because the woman disliked blacks. Pockets of racism of course still exist in the country, and doubtless always will. But legal freedom has long been established, owing in part to the physical courage of civil-rights activists in the South, and opportunities for blacks to rise are now in place. “Shame” takes up the question of why for the most part they haven’t.

Mr. Steele graduated college in that annus horribilis 1968, at the height of protest tumult and before affirmative action kicked in. An Afro-wearing, James Baldwin-reading young man, he worked in an anti-poverty program in East St. Louis, Ill., and was sufficiently swept up in what in those days was called “the movement” to have spent time with members of the Black Panthers exiled in Algiers. He did not attend any of the name-brand, or what today might be called designer, colleges. He went to Coe College in Iowa, Southern Illinois for a master’s degree and the University of Utah for a doctorate in English literature. This relieves him of doubt about his having been given a free pass on his education by affirmative action.

In a few dispiriting pages, Mr. Steele takes up the dubiety that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas has always felt about his own entry, via affirmative action, into Yale Law School. After law school, Justice Thomas applied for jobs with several firms, but to no avail. “His interrogators did not believe that he was as good as his own grades indicated,” Mr. Steele writes. “They assumed his presence before them was explained by racial preferences, not by talent. It was as if they were saying the pretense was over: Yale could afford tokenism, but they could not.” Every black student in the affirmative-action era must feel similar doubt. One wonders if the Obamas, who between them were admitted to Columbia, Princeton and Harvard Law School, ever do.

“Liberalism in the twenty-first century,” Mr. Steele writes, “is, for the most part, a moral manipulation that exaggerates inequity and unfairness in American life in order to justify overreaching public policies and programs.” This liberalism, which is not your Aunt Bessie’s liberalism but the liberalism that came into play at the 1972 Democratic convention that nominated George McGovern, “is invested in an overstatement of America’s present sinfulness based on the nation’s past sins.” Mr. Steele argues that liberalism’s efforts to alleviate the past injustices done to blacks in America have amounted to another botched project of that famously failed political construction firm, the Good Intentions Paving Co. “Liberalism,” Mr. Steele writes, “expresses its inborn racism in the way it overlooks the full human complexity of blacks—the fact that they are more than mere victims—in order to distill and harden the idea of their victimization into a currency of liberal power.”

Liberals, Mr. Steele holds, deal in what he calls “poetic truth.” This is a kind of truth “conceived in reaction to the great shames of America’s past—racism, sexism, territorial conquest (manifest destiny), corporate greed, militarism, and so on.” In poetic truth, the world is reduced to victims and victimizers, with liberals alone innocent of evil and thus excluded, by self-dissociation, from the role of victimizers. Under the realm of poetic truth, Mr. Steele explains, the race riots of the late 1960s could find justification and the feminist slogan “woman as nigger” could be taken seriously, while “fifty years of real moral evolution in America” can be entirely ignored.

After the 1960s, in Mr. Steele’s reading, authority was undermined and “authenticity” put in its place. Authenticity, he writes, “meant the embrace of new idealisms and new identities that explicitly untethered you from America’s notorious hypocrisies.” Through rebellion, antiwar activity, dissent, civil and uncivil disobedience, and dropping out before selling out, authenticity rendered one innocent of all the old evils associated with American power, domestic and international; authenticity also gave one the right to view “traditional America as a fundamentally hypocritical society.”

Mr. Steele does not use the word, but authenticity also conferred virtue on those who chose it. Self-virtue is the ultimate consolation to be found in the poetic truth of the new politics that came into being in the 1960s, and millions of Americans, rich white liberals prominent among them—recall Leonard Bernstein’s famous party for the Black Panthers—gloried in it. These politics changed the nature of liberalism from a reform-minded, character-forming set of political ideas into “a broad, guilt-driven, moralistic liberalism in which at least a vague anti-Americanism was decency itself.” America, in this interpretation, is essentially evil, and those who oppose it from within are thereby good. Hence the claim to moral superiority of the protest groups—blacks, women, gays et al.—of our day. For black Americans, the claim to moral superiority took the form of grievance, boisterous, unrelenting and willfully blind to any evidence of progress.

The new liberalism, eager to bring about The Good (Mr. Steele’s capital letters), went in for social engineering to accomplish its missionary work. For Mr. Steele not The Good but true good “would include an incentive to minorities to in fact become equal with all others by talent and merit . . . [and] would ask minorities to assimilate into modernity even if that felt like self-betrayal. . . . And it would discourage them from building a group identity singularly focused on protest. . . . Instead, all would be focused on their becoming competitive.” Blacks, Mr. Steele argues, ran into serious discrimination in sports and music, and yet in these competitive fields “their excellence and merit ultimately prevailed over all else.”

As things now stand in American political life, the desire for equality has trumped freedom; self-virtue, honesty; and preferential programs, the development of character. The effect of these liberal victories has been to lessen the quality of American life. Consider the contemporary university, where the goal of diversity, enforced by the whiphand of political correctness, has brought in various minority studies, women’s and gay studies, and other intellectual vulgarities in the name of redressing old injustices and mollifying grievances. The humanities and the social sciences have become hopelessly tendentious, the ideal of truth besmirched and higher education itself turned sadly comic.

Through the pages of "Shame," Mr. Steele fills in a few of the details behind his own conversion from angry young black man to chronicler of the dead end that anger and moral indignation, supported by white guilt, have brought to American blacks. Strongly implicated in this conversion was his father, who had seen much darker days than his son ever would and who, as long ago as the late 1960s, assured him that "you shouldn't underestimate America. . . It's strong enough to change." After visiting the Black Panthers in North Africa and witnessing their self-destructive hatred for their own country, which left them placeless and bereft, Shelby Steele began to recognize that "the American mainstream would be my fate." The author's conclusion is that black America sold itself out, entered "a Faustian pact," as he puts it, by placing its destiny in the "hands of contrite white people." Doing so, he writes, "left us pleading with government, not for freedom, which we had already won, but for 'programs' and 'preferences' that would be a ladder to full equality. The chilling result is that now, fifty years later, we remain—by most important measures—in the position of inferiors and dependents." The liberalism that has come into prominence since the 1960s, Mr. Steele believes, "has done little more than toy with blacks."

Mr. Steele has himself become a conservative. He is a conservative who believes less in the mysticism of the invisible hand of the market than in the force of strong character as the main element propelling social change. He is certain that there will never be a government program that builds such character. Speaking out about the false bargain that blacks have made with the new liberalism will doubtless earn him, if it hasn't already done so, the old opprobrious title of Uncle Tom. The irony here is that Shelby Steele might just be a Tom of a different kind—a black Tom Paine, whose 21st-century common sense could go a long way to bringing his people out of their by now historical doldrums

Slavery's Long Shadow
The Opinion Pages | Op-Ed Columnist
JUNE 22, 2015 NYTimes website
Paul Krugman

America is a much less racist nation than it used to be, and I'm not just talking about the still remarkable fact that an African-American occupies the White House. The raw institutional racism that prevailed before the civil rights movement ended Jim Crow is gone, although subtler discrimination persists. Individual attitudes have changed, too, dramatically in some cases. For example, as recently as the 1980s half of Americans opposed interracial marriage, a position now held by only a tiny minority.

Yet racial hatred is still a potent force in our society, as we've just been reminded to our horror. ...t the racial divide is still a defining feature of our political economy, the reason America is unique among advanced nations in its harsh treatment of the less fortunate and its willingness to tolerate unnecessary suffering among its citizens.

...

My own understanding of the role of race in U.S. exceptionalism was largely shaped by two academic papers.

The first, by the political scientist Larry Bartels, analyzed the move of the white working class away from Democrats, a move made famous in Thomas Frank's "What's the Matter With Kansas?" Mr. Frank argued that working-class whites were being induced to vote against their own interests by the right's exploitation of cultural issues. But Mr. Bartels showed that the working-class turn against Democrats wasn't a national phenomenon — it was entirely restricted to the South, where whites turned overwhelmingly Republican after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Richard Nixon's adoption of the so-called Southern strategy.

And this party-switching, in turn, was what drove the rightward swing of American politics after 1980. Race made Reaganism possible. And to this day Southern whites overwhelmingly vote Republican, to the tune of 85 or even 90 percent in the deep South.

The second paper, by the economists Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote, was titled "Why Doesn't the United States Have a European-style Welfare State?" Its authors — who are not, by the way, especially liberal — ... eventually concluded that race is central, because in America programs that help the needy are all too often seen as programs that help Those People: "Within the United States, race is the single most important predictor of support for welfare. America's troubled race relations are clearly a major reason for the absence of an American welfare state."

Now, that paper was published in 2001, and you might wonder if things have changed since then. Unfortunately, ...they haven't, as you can see by looking at how states are implementing — or refusing to implement — Obamacare. ..., in 2012 the Supreme Court

gave individual states the option...of blockin g the Affordable Care Act's expansion of Medicaid [Medicaid] provide[s] health insurance to lower-income Americans. ... a federally-funded program [of] major benefits to millions of their citizens, pour billions into their economies, and help support their health-care providers. Who would turn down such an offer?

The answer is, 22 states at this point, although some may eventually change their minds. And what do these states have in common? Mainly, a history of slaveholding: Only one former member of the Confederacy has expanded Medicaid, and while a few Northern states are also part of the movement, more than 80 percent of the population in Medicaid-refusing America lives in states that practiced slavery before the Civil War.

And it's not just health reform: a history of slavery is a strong predictor of everything from gun control (or rather its absence), to low minimum wages and hostility to unions, to tax policy.

So will it always be thus? ... I'd like to think not. ..., our country is growing more ethnically diverse, and the old black-white polarity is slowly becoming outdated. ... we really have become much less racist, and in general a much more tolerant society on many fronts. Over time, we should expect to see the influence of dog-whistle politics decline.

But that hasn't happened yet. Every once in a while you hear a chorus of voices declaring that race is no longer a problem in America. That's wishful thinking; we are still haunted by our nation's original sin.

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Rico Greenville, SC

I am a baby boomer (born in '54) in the South. ... I am old enough to remember the drinking fountain and the separate restroom (singular) in a given public building. Those institutional things are gone but among my white peers a lot of resentment remains. I do not think America will truly be in a post racial state until my children's generation is in the ground beside me. They are more tolerant and accepting than their parents but have been marked by us and so I think they too will need to be out of the picture.

This should not been seen as a message of despair though but of hope. Today because none of us knew slavery we find the idea unacceptable, because my children and grandchildren never knew Jim Crow they find that unacceptable. Time and the generations march on. The very young today have a black President. No he is not the cure to racism, he is the next step for a new generation, the ones who will look back at us and scratch their heads in wonder at us just as we do our 'greats' from the 19th century.

Karen Garcia New Paltz, NY

We may have more anti-racist laws on the books, and surveys might show that white attitudes have changed, but Jim Crow is alive and well in the land of the free (defined in GOP-speak as freedom to slash the social safety net to shreds and along with it, millions of "disposable people.")

Black people have taken the brunt of the economic pain since the great 2008 meltdown. They are at least three times as likely to be poor, they earn at least 40% less than whites and their average net worth is about an eighth that of whites. This is true in all the states. In Blue New York, for example, Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as whites, and Black infant mortality rates are more than double those of whites.

There are currently more Blacks imprisoned in America than there were enslaved in the decade before the civil war. A study by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement reveals that one Black person is killed by a security officer or a vigilante every single day in this country. A less racist nation?

If anything, "we" are a more racist nation. I hope that the "tear down this Confederate flag" community spirit catches fire. I hope that revelations that the same white supremacist hate group which inspired Dylann Roof also funds certain GOP candidates result in more than the usual "national conversation."

Lectures by well-meaning experts to be patient, that things will improve "over time" are wearing pretty thin. The time for change is now. It's getting desperate out there.

Paul Cohen Hartford CT 5

Karen, ... Your comment on, "being patient, that things will improve over time," harkens back to Dr. Martin Luther King's immemorial speech at the reflecting pool"

"We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

Rima Regas Mission Viejo, CA

"America is a much less racist nation than it used to be, ... The raw institutional racism that prevailed before the civil rights movement ended Jim Crow is gone..."

America is about as racist, in a different way. I am sorry to disagree with you Professor Krugman...

Education is one huge factor at play in subconscious bias which is now equal in millenials as it is in the older generation. As education has declined and the humanities been de-emphasized, racism, or the lack of historical and sociological end of it has declined. Add to that the inequality and increasing disenfranchisement of young whites in a job market that isn't promising, and we have a recipe for disaster.

Racism as it is practiced in red states, in the South and Midwest, especially, is driven by

those who control the GOP apparatus. The oligarchs forged alliances with extreme organizations in order to take control.

Institutional racism is alive and well, whether it is in the for-profit prison system, out of control state prison system, housing, the courts... You name the institution and its racist apparatus is there. In California, there is an initiative to stop the same kind of fining system that was discovered in Ferguson.

Race isn't the problem. Racism is. It is this nation's most burning issue....

Tom Cuddy Texas

One thing that is not well understood is that racism is a system which does not require racists. It only requires people go along with a racist system. That is why we always hear 'he doesn't have a racist bone in his body'. Someone can be quite racist, as in supporting a racist system, without being bigoted or prejudiced. This also reflects why Blacks and Whites see our racial situation so differently.

Walter Rhett Charleston, SC

Au contraire: Reganism made race a formidable political force! Here's how: earlier, race/slavery/the bondage at the source of our political economy was debated in theological terms. Every sermon, abolition speech, pamphlet, novel, court decision, Declaration of Secession referenced God's will and divine order and plan--with both sides speaking fervently in God's name!

Texas declared: "that the African race had no agency in their establishment [is] the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations." The Dred Scott decision declared white supremacy to be the supreme law of the land, as the Chief Justice wrote, "it was God's will." Those who disobeyed the fugitive slave law were "disobeying God's will."

The pushback was also definitive: Henry Highland Garnet preached: "But others--their fellow men, equal before the Almighty and made by Him of the same blood, and glowing with immortality--they doom to lifelong servitude and chains. Yes, they stand in the most sacred places on earth, and beneath the gaze of the piercing eye of Jehovah, the universal Father of all men, and declare that 'the best possible condition of the Negro is slavery.'"

Until Dr. King, race was a moral/theological issue. Reagan secularized it by shifting the debate to personal virtues and social justice within a conservative social order. The welfare queen, the dole cheat reframed race and the poor! He opened the door for the arguments of the balance sheets and freed hate.

Dave NYC

..., I would suggest one important correction. American treatment of those living here before the European invasion, that is, the many tribes once thriving, is our original sin. Not that our

kidnapping and enslavement of Africans wasn't an horror beyond imagination, it just wasn't the first one. Both, skipped over lightly in our schools and largely in the media, are shames remaining unanswered in full. Healing means full disclosure from our leaders and reparations when necessary. Our failure to do so thus far goes a long way toward explaining why the divisions remain.