

The Politics of Race

By Joseph M. Schwartz

As economic growth stagnated in the 1970s, most western welfare states witnessed “populist” revolts of middle income taxpayers against public provision, with their wrath focused on increasingly marginalized poor populations, frequently composed of ethnic or racial minorities. But why did the social welfare systems of most countries weather the conservative attack better than the United States? While the universal programs of Social Security and Medicare went largely unscathed, the Reagan presidency witnessed 20 percent real cuts in AFDC benefit levels, 11 percent in food stamps, 90 percent in public housing assistance, and a serious erosion of the purchasing power of the working poor. Except for modest restoration of public housing expenditures, none of these cuts were restored under the Clinton administration, and its “welfare reform” contributed to a 50 percent drop in poor women receiving child support payments (TANF).

The political vulnerability of the American welfare state is largely due to two unique features of American social policy: its lack of universal principles for organizing public social provision and the sharp disjuncture between social and economic policy. This peculiarly American structure arose largely because of the role of racism and racial politics in the construction of the American welfare state. Since the New Deal, American social policy has effectively been divided into two tiers: a top tier of social insurance (old age and disability insurance) for those regularly employed and a bottom level of less generous means-tested public assistance programs (AFDC [now TANF], food stamps, Medicaid) available for those with more sporadic participation in the labor force. Public policies have been supplemented by employer provision of private benefits, such as medical insurance, for those with “good” jobs. This pattern of public and private policy has promoted a sharp division between those segments of society it favors and those it disadvantages. This division has fallen along lines of race and gender, for the attachment to the labor force that qualifies citizens for upper tier programs has traditionally been the prerogative of white males with an uninterrupted formal job history. Not surprisingly, it was the top-tier universal programs (such as Social Security and Medicare) that proved relatively invulnerable to Reagan’s attack.

The allegedly universal social policies of the New Deal (such as Social Security and the National Labor Relations Act) originally excluded agricultural laborers

and domestic workers, the majority of the African-American and Latino workforce of the 1930s. And from 1946 to 1968, the discriminatory lending practices of not only private banks, but also the Federal Home Mortgage Association, created exclusively white middle-class and upper working-class suburbs. Even the GI Bill provided greater opportunities for the white working class, as compared to African-Americans, given lower Black levels of college preparatory education and the segregated armed forces’ exclusion of African-American combatants from

skilled jobs and officer training. Such white suburban enclaves, in combination with the remaining more economically-vulnerable white ethnic urban neighborhoods, formed the backbone of the northern electoral “backlash” to the Great Society pro-

grams of the 1960s that attempted – somewhat – to redress the economic and racial inequalities that the New Deal perpetuated.

Even though the barriers that kept racial minorities and women in inferior labor market positions have relaxed in the past three decades, both groups remain at a disadvantage in the resultant two-tiered welfare state. Mass structural unemployment still excludes over 50 percent of inner city African-American men between the ages of 18 and 65 from participation in the formal labor market (versus 20 percent of whites). And while women now earn close to 75 percent of male wages, a recent study demonstrates that over the course of their adult lives women still earn less than 40 percent of average male wage earners, as women disproportionately disrupt their careers for child and elder care responsibilities.

Beginning with Nixon and Reagan, the Right has engaged in a “social construction” of a “white” identity, which contends that redistributive public policies discriminate against hard-working “whites” in favor of people of color or immigrants who do not play by the rules of the game – the “work ethic” (narrowly defined as full-time participation in the formal labor market). The racially constructed perception of many white Americans of inner cities as a homogenous drug-infested “underclass,” combined with the means-tested nature of public health care and child care, has severely weakened popular support for democratic public provision.

Somebody ran this country deep into debt

I called up Congress, but nobody’s called back yet

Sometimes I get so mad I can’t think straight

We’re looking for relief and it feels so great to hate

All those teenage immigrant welfare mothers on drugs.

—Austin Lounge Lizards

Although they account for less than 25 percent of total federal and state expenditure on social welfare (over two-thirds go to Social Security and Medicare alone), means-tested programs have been lightning rods for right-wing populist agitation, and their visibility has helped to exacerbate the divisions between the poor and the rest of society. Participants in the formal labor market are usually ineligible for child-support payments and publicly-financed health care. Thus, those members of the working class who earn above the poverty line often resent “welfare” recipients (even though recipients are often single parents who need time away from their prior full-time participation in the formal labor market to care for their infant children). The consequences of this divided world of social policy has been particularly devastating for an increasingly isolated inner-city Black and Latino poor.

In addition, corporate hostility to job-training and public works programs that would compete with the private sector prevented the American welfare state from linking employment policy to social-welfare policy, setting them up instead as separate and competing arenas. Thus, social policy can only be expanded when it can be “afforded.” In the prosperous 1960s, such reasoning facilitated a limited “war on poverty”; from the late 1970s onwards, however, social policy was seen as an unaffordable luxury.

This historic failure to link social policy to broader economic policy contributed to the uniquely American view of unemployment and poverty as predominantly a problem of individual character and culture rather than of economic structure and policy. For example, the anti-poverty programs of the 1960s were largely conceived of as separate, remedial programs, targeted on the poor (particularly Black poor). Most job training programs did not teach marketable skills for jobs with career-track potential, but rather taught “good work habits” for low-wage, dead-end jobs.

The failure to integrate these programs (AFDC liberalization, Medicaid, Food Stamps, job training) with a collective rationale (based on universal entitlement to a decent job and economic minimum) rendered them vulnerable to the racial backlash of the economically stagnant 1970s. A conscious corporate-funded ideological offensive helped increase popular hostility towards “big government” and “taxation.” But the public’s openness to such appeals arose partly from misplaced white middle- and working-class hostility to means-tested welfare.

The primary goals of the anti-poverty and welfare rights movements of the 1960s were not liberalization of AFDC rolls or affirmative action but full employment, meaningful job training, and universal health and childcare. However, center-left political elites designed means-tested income support and health care as palliative measures responding to urban unrest, while opposing the real demands. And the Democratic Party’s abandonment of

“welfare as we know it” has only garnered for former welfare recipients a patchwork of make-work job programs and low-wage, benefit-less employment vulnerable to recessionary downturns.

While some progressives see the universal social programs of the New Deal (plus Fair Deal and Medicare) as models for multi-racial, cross-class solidarity, these programs were, in reality, racially exclusionary. Just as white immigrant political incorporation in the early-to-mid-twentieth century co-existed with the political exclusion of non-whites, so did the achievement of social rights for the white working class in the 1930s coexist with the denial of these social rights to communities of color. The inclusion of people of color as full citizens only occurred during a brief window of opportunity (and militancy) in the mid-1960s.

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The consequent white working- and middle-class abandonment of the New Deal legacy has contributed to almost forty years of conservative ideological dominance: even when Democrats control the presidency, the Party is hypersensitive to the political instincts of white suburban middle- and working-class strata – resulting in a neo-liberal Democratic policy-agenda on social welfare and criminal justice policy well to the right of 1960s liberalism.

The decline in economic and social security of the white working class and middle strata has created a peculiar, white version of DuBois’s “dual consciousness,” in which many whites exhibit a split consciousness between their rhetorical commitment to a diverse citizenry and their “white” identity. This ideology of “whiteness” owes much to the late 1960s-onward politics of racial backlash and the “Southernization” of national politics, in which working-class whites outside the South increasingly drifted, at least at in terms of the presidency, into the Republican Party. The ideology of “whiteness” depicted people of color as a homogenous, indolent, and dependent social stratum who sponged off welfare programs paid for by the taxes of the industrious white working and middle class. This “white” identity developed further after the post-1973 recession increased two social anxieties: fear of downward mobility and fear that insurgent communities of color threatened the unspoken privileges of the white working class. Thus, “whiteness” became a conscious identity among previously semi-subordinate white ethnic groups precisely when their legal advantages over persons of color came under threat.

The end of the post-World War II economic boom and the entry of African-Americans into urban political power in the 1970s framed white working-class anxieties that non-whites were emerging as competitors for the construction, uniform service, and public sector jobs that had aided white ethnic upward mobility after World War I. Anxious upper-middle class whites worrying about their children’s ability to maintain their class status focused their fear on Black and Latino students who gain at most 12 percent of

scarce admissions to exclusive colleges, universities, and professional schools, rather than on the other whites who get close to 90 percent of those seats.

White “backlash” also derived from the beleaguered sensibilities of urban, white working class enclaves that fought against busing and housing integration. The 1968 Fair Housing Act offered no enforcement mechanisms, and the Nixon administration’s 1971 abandonment of suburban “open housing” efforts prevented residential integration. The 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Ford vs. Miliken* forbid court-mandated school busing across metropolitan school district lines. Once busing only could transport students of color to almost equally underfunded and underserved urban, white working class schools, busing’s viability as a tool to promote equal access to educational resources ended.

The controversy over affirmative action reflects the lack of historical memory in American politics. Most non-Anglo-Saxon “white” immigrant groups had long used urban electoral power to leverage new economic opportunities. Irish urban political power enabled the post-World War I movement of the Irish from male day laborers to members of the construction trades and uniform services and from female domestic servants to public school teachers. Urban political action also facilitated Jewish entry into the lettered civil service and public school teaching one generation later. And Italian-Americans used political power to leverage jobs within construction trades heavily dependent on public contracts, not to mention gaining city contracts for Italian-American small business and contractors. Such strategies would today be termed “affirmative action” – the use of state action to redress structural class, ethnic, or racial disadvantage.

While these earlier forms of “affirmative action” enabled white ethnic middle and upper-working classes to move to the suburbs and develop a new “post-ethnic” identity, those white ethnics still living among the urban working class in the late 1960s and beyond increasingly found themselves defending their urban turf, not from new European immigrant groups, but from post-World War II Latino immigrants and Blacks migrating from the South. In addition, the American racial map grew more complex in the years following the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. Responding to the 1960s’ booming economy’s need for both low-wage service sector labor and skilled technical professionals, the federal government abandoned its long-standing policy of “whites-only immigration.” This opened the doors to an influx of Latino and Asian immigrants, which increased “nativist” white American fears of “life on a colored planet.”

The new Right also utilized the racial code phrases “law and order” and “welfare cheats” to mobilize working class and lower-middle class resentment against the social and economic gains of minorities and women of the 1960s. The new Right successfully associated these gains with the weakening of the “normal” two-parent, male bread-winner family. In the new Right’s analysis, the traditional nuclear family had been undermined by a paternalis-

tic welfare state that supplanted the role of the bread-winning father among those on public assistance.

In the absence of a political majority for the full inclusion of people of color, it was the federal courts, non-majoritarian institutions, that briefly attempted to fulfill the democratic promise of equal rights. Though the federal courts instituted, at best, legal – rather than social – equality, their decisions facilitated conservative ideological claims that court-instituted affirmative action, busing, and reproductive freedoms were the actions of a liberal, elite-controlled state that governed on behalf of “special interests” (i.e., people of color and feminists).

Furthering the divide, the tax-bracket creep used to “covertly” fund the Vietnam war made taxation much more regressive by radically decreasing income tax progressivity and by instituting a high burden of flat-rate payroll taxes upon lower-middle and working-class families. This combined with expanded means-tested social programs exacerbated the individualist American ethos that taxes are paid by the deserving to finance the indolence of the undeserving. The Right successfully portrayed the federal government as disproportionately spending on “them,” even though means-tested social welfare programs constituted at most eight percent of the total federal budget. And half of that eight percent went to the relatively more tolerated Medicaid program.

In addition, because of the structure of American federalism, the most visible public goods, such as uniformed services, public education, and recreational facilities, are provided by local municipalities rather than by the state or federal government. The disproportionate reliance on regressive property taxes for funding critical public goods accentuates the unequal access to education, infrastructure, and public amenities that occurs along lines of geography, race, and class. This structural inequality makes a shift from regressive property-tax financing to income-tax financing of public goods more difficult to achieve. Suburban voters often associate state and national income tax with a politics of redistribution, while they view their (often high) property-taxes as financing “in-their-backyard” local public provision.

The most explosive element of this “chain reaction” of race, rights, and taxes is undoubtedly affirmative action. While affirmative action obviously has not benefited those marginal to the world of paid labor, its main beneficiaries have not been the Black professional-managerial class, as many critics assert, but the Black working class, who broke into previously racially-exclusive craft unions and patronage-controlled civil and uniform service jobs. Many of these jobs are distributed through patronage and other networks and not solely by allegedly neutral, meritocratic principles. In addition, the vast majority of the African-American middle and upper-working class has been created by political action and not by the workings of the “free market.” A disproportionate share of the Black middle class are employed not in the private corporate sector, but as public administrators, educators, members of the uniform services, and (a declining number of) industrial, unionized workers.

As America cannot maturely discuss how class and racial inequality interact and structurally reproduce themselves, there is little mention in debates about affirmative action of any jobs or university places other than those whose access is allegedly distributed by “meritocratic” tests. In reality, any competitive job or university admission selection process chooses among a surplus of “qualified” candidates, with consideration of the particular needs of the institution, needs that change over time. Leaders in the professions need to be honest that these professions demand much more than high pre-professional school test scores, such as an understanding of and commitment to one’s patients and clients. The defense of affirmative action also needs to reiterate a true, first order principle – that traditional biases overlook candidates of equal potential ability or past accomplishment.

Fear of higher taxes (and a loss of popular faith that taxes can be structured progressively) and declining faith in the administrative capacity of government remain integral parts of the political consciousness of “swing” white voters. But this ideology cannot be eliminated by neo-liberal or social democratic appeals to a race-blind, universal politics of rights and responsibilities. The democratic Left must explicitly combat the right-wing ideological debase-ment of the public sector’s ability to provide those public goods necessary for citizens to live independent lives in civil society. That is, there is no way to deracialize American politics solely through a universal politics of citizenship when the very concept of citizenship is contested on the terrain of racial discourse and perceptions. On the other hand, contrary to the implicit strategy of some advocates of a pure “politics of difference,” social justice cannot be achieved in a democratic polity solely by mobilizing oppressed constituencies. A political majority in favor of the use of progressive taxation to fund the high-quality, universal public goods necessary for social equality remains to be built.

There are three lessons that the democratic Left might learn for a future political strategy that could transcend the racial divide and build majority support for progressive tax reforms and increased levels of high-quality public provision.

First, new social welfare programs should be based on universal, inclusionary principles, even if fiscal reality may preclude a uniform level of benefits. More people support programs that provide some benefits to all than will back strictly means-tested programs. For example, while a new children’s allowance policy might ensure an adequate minimum benefit level for single women who remain at home with infant children, such a program should also provide some benefits to middle-income families.

Second, racist myths and hostility to the welfare state must be directly confronted and cannot be end-run simply by a correct emphasis on universal provision. The plurality of TANF, Medicaid, and Food Stamp beneficiaries are white (over 40 percent) and the vast majority of adult recipients only take a temporary respite from formal labor market participation. Of course, the structural interaction between race and class in the United States insures that disproportionate percentages of Blacks and Latinos receive such benefits. The devastating rates of unemployment among ghetto youth brought about by de-industrialization, urban renewal, and gentrification is another reality that needs to be highlighted as causing low labor market participation rates among inner city adults.

Third, arguments for social rights must be tied to an acknowledgement of social obligations. Support for such obligations does not mean accepting neo-liberal and conservative conceptions of “meaningful work” which devalue forms of productive labor such as caring for children or the elderly (work often done by women outside the formal labor market). While “workfare” proposals that coerce clients without providing real training or access to jobs that pay above poverty wages should be opposed, alternative policies should be designed to enhance recipients’ life opportunities through job training; education; provision of high-quality, publicly-financed child care and health care; and the provision of productive public-works jobs, if necessary.

The real challenge for democratic activists and intellectuals is not the false choice of “universalism versus particularism” often posed by post-modern influenced intellectuals. Rather, egalitarian “difference” can only be achieved on the terrain of a democratic and solidaristic society. As a house divided may not stand, such a divided nation may also not be able to resuscitate itself. The right-wing program of a politics of privatization and policing of the inner cities may not preclude economic distress, nihilism, and crime from visiting suburban white working class and middle class enclaves. But whether or not this occurs, there is no guarantee of a progressive political response to the growing crisis middle- and working-class families face in regards to financing health, child, and elder care. The political resolution of these emerging policy issues will be determined by what the Left does politically and intellectually in regards to contesting the racial construction of American politics.

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