



part one

The Predicament

one **The Rough Road
to Racial Uplift**

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From the beginning, *civil rights* was a misleading term, perhaps an outright misnomer. The moral, legal, and rhetorical pursuit of collective rights of access was but an essential strategy in a multifront war for a much larger prize: the uplift of a people that had endured slavery and, afterward, the trials of subordinate caste status. Civil rights never meant just individual rights, any more than the initials NAACP denoted a National Association for the Advancement of Coherent Principles. Indeed, civil rights leaders and organizations have always known that they must pursue the vast and varied interests of their stigmatized and marginalized constituents by any available avenue. Rights were more a means than an end. If progress appears to have stalled, it is largely because the successive strategies embraced by champions of racial uplift have all encountered important practical and political limits. For the most part, these strategies have not so much failed as fallen victim to inevitable exhaustion and diminishing returns.

Virtually everyone recognizes that the strategy emphasizing legal access, which was pursued during a heroic civil rights golden age, has long since run its course. As textbooks today routinely teach, that phase of the struggle, begun in the courts in the 1930s, shifted the trajectory toward Congress a generation later as favorable public opin-

ion, nurtured by a disciplined plea for simple justice and bouts of segregationist violence, made such a turn politically viable. The basic access argument was simple and therefore potent. Individuals ought not to be proscribed, purely for reasons of color, from plainly quotidian activities available to other citizens: voting for mayor, viewing a movie from a seat of one's choosing, wolfing down a cheeseburger at a dime-store lunch counter. The great majority of white Americans had no particular affection for blacks but had never felt the need for separate water fountains and segregated buses. Such relatively petty outrages proved hard to defend outside the Deep South. Thankfully it has now been a long while since even most white southerners would have insisted that, say, Harvard's distinguished Afro-Americanist Henry Louis Gates Jr. ought not teach at a "white" university in the South.

The high moral perch afforded by the access agenda, however, had stringent limits, which became apparent early. The formal doors to advancement might have been unlocked, perhaps even might have stood wide open, but how many black Americans would or could walk through them? An energetic young "Skip" Gates might march off to Yale, but how many others would follow, especially if all the university did was mail out a brochure to Harlem with a road map to New Haven enclosed? Legally desegregated schools and workplaces could not, by themselves, yield diverse student bodies and workforces, much less ensure equal graduation and promotion rates.

Not surprisingly, as far back as the 1960s, the access agenda was giving way to rather less lofty haggles over dollars and numbers—which are still ongoing. Congress could target funds on a wide array of problems, creating new legal authorities when favorable combinations of support and indifference prevailed. A less openly democratic approach to African American uplift lay in the dull machinery of administration, amid the arcana of government regulations and guidance memoranda and subject to policing by the courts. Merely offering individualized redress to particular claimants according to each specific grievance appeared dreadfully inadequate to the scale of the social challenge—rather like restoring a beach by hauling in one grain of sand at a time. More institutionally aggressive efforts, formal and informal, seemed warranted. Thus were born goals and timetables, minority contracting set-asides, and the entire

regime of both hard (formal, mandated, quantitatively monitored) and soft (informal, voluntary, improvisational, hortatory) affirmative action.

As long ago as the mid-1960s, advocates for black uplift heard a new and disturbing thunder in the distance. Lightning struck in the form of the now-legendary government report crafted by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan.¹ The Moynihan Report, as it came to be called, suggested serious tears in the black community's social fabric, which might widen with time. Neither a leadership anchored in the safe harbor of its access and affirmative action agenda nor the increasingly strident blacks gathering under the "black power" rubric were in any mood to hear some Irishman's embarrassing prattle about "Negro family structure," however plainly sympathetic and data laden. Social policy thinkers and researchers have been making up for considerable lost time as a result.

This diverse volume reflects a vexing reality. On racial matters, the American condition is overall dramatically improved but is far more complicated than it used to seem and, in important respects, continually depressing. As Gates reminds us in his essay on the two nations of black America, a significant black middle class has emerged (and not solely through affirmative action). White racial attitudes are astonishingly transformed from where they stood during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, when the lynching of blacks was still an informally listed entrée on the menu of Deep South civic entertainments.

Tenacious ills remain, for which neither the pure right of access nor affirmative action is satisfactory medicine. One such problem is educational: significantly lower cognitive skills and test scores among minority youngsters, a problem explored with unprecedented care in the remarkable volume from which the chapter by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips is drawn.² Scholars disagree about the influence of systemic resource disparities in creating and sustaining the gap in skills and scores. While Jencks and Phillips acknowledge some role for funding and other resource inequities, they also contend that this omits too much of the causal story, including preschool and out-of-school experiences. Alternatively, Linda Darling-Hammond strongly emphasizes the structure of educational opportunities offered by school systems. Darling-Hammond, Jencks, and Phillips agree on the salience of at least one

key resource disparity: on average, black students tend to be taught by less-qualified teachers than white students. How would affirmative action remedy this problem? Indeed, one can easily anticipate the argument that affirmative action helps to sustain it. Frustration on this front has led to calls for making schools compete for students, a development that Paul Peterson and Jay Greene view favorably.

Other long-term challenges include teenage pregnancies (although recent trends inspire cautious optimism)³ and the vastly disproportionate involvement of black males in the criminal justice system. With a keen appreciation of how the values that underlie behavior are forged and sustained, John DiIulio pleads (with eloquence, passion, and considerable data) that we attack such problems via the kind of faith-based institutions that have historically anchored black civic life. Although DiIulio is optimistic about the present and potential capacity of such institutions to transform minority residents (and thus their communities), his unstated premise is that the fates of these residents will play out mostly *within* existing locales. Nathan Glazer's pessimistic report on the persistence of residential segregation describes a primary underlying constraint facing anyone aspiring to improve quality of life, and life chances, among African Americans.

Clearly, employment (or the lack of it) remains central to the disparity in life chances between poor African Americans and other citizens. As Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom point out, black employment prospects began looking up a long time ago, well before the affirmative action era. Among the worst-off blacks, those whom William Julius Wilson famously labeled "the truly disadvantaged," unemployment is still rampant and is often manifested in almost complete disengagement from the world of work.⁴ Job training and job-readiness coaching are often promoted and widely attempted; but they work unevenly, and least reliably, among the low-income youths who should have the most to gain from them.⁵ On the other hand, job training has the considerable political virtue of remaining popular among blacks and whites alike.⁶

The widely touted unpopularity of affirmative action notwithstanding, Orlando Patterson offers two novel data-based arguments in its behalf. One is that it helps compensate for deficiencies in the social networks vital to sustaining employment (and other social) opportunities.

The other is that affirmative action in practice actually proves to be more popular than in the abstract.

Even if affirmative action were noncontroversial, various disparities between the races (in accumulated wealth, for example) would endure for a long time to come. Whatever white racism lingers today does not cause most of these difficulties. Moreover, the view that “nothing has fundamentally changed” on America’s racial landscape is insupportable. In their book *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*, the Thernstroms opine that such a flat-earth view of white attitudes “can only be held by those who believe that social science evidence is worthless.”⁷ Actually, as they know, that is too simple an explanation for the widespread reliance on the rhetorical hammer of the term *racism*.

For many African Americans, the term may be an intuitively appealing way to make sense of a complicated and disturbing social milieu. Resort to this term (manifested most starkly in popular belief that antiblack conspiracies abound) appears symptomatic of a frustrated groping for answers to questions triggered, ironically, by the vanquishing of the old racial order and by the failure of newly open doors to reveal reliable pathways to equality. The burial of Jim Crow accompanied the emergence of problems that scarcely existed earlier, and this may help persuade some African Americans that a malicious chicanery must be afoot. In the bad old days, after all, a man with no schooling beyond the primary grades could far more easily feed his family. No one’s worst nightmare would have included crack cocaine or gun-wielding children.

For advocates and the intelligentsia, “racism” offers obvious political leverage, a way to seize the moral high ground and press hard for social change. Although racist attitudes have dramatically abated in recent decades, more than enough manifestations of racism remain to offer both a plausible explanation for the black masses and a convenient advocacy fulcrum for black leadership. (NAACP board chairman Julian Bond’s insistence that his organization battles “white supremacy” is mere inches away rhetorically.)

In the volume’s final section, Paul Sniderman and Edward Carmines urge a quite different strategy of “reaching beyond race” to defend public policies helpful to African Americans. Drawing on a series of intriguing experiments, Sniderman and Carmines suggest that opposition to

race-specific policies (even among racially tolerant whites) is anchored not in racism but in genuine moral misgivings about purely racial justifications. They want to sustain racially progressive policies with a more durable political coalition, and they believe it can be done. Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith offer a more pessimistic assessment, grounded in their reading of America's dense racial history. Black progress and regress, they argue, is historically patterned, with identifiable social and political conditions favoring one or the other. Unfortunately, they suggest, conditions favoring progress are diminished or absent, while those leading to regress appear to be on the rise. Jennifer Hochschild ponders looming volatility in interethnic politics, with its prospects for both coalition and competition. Will African Americans advance in concert with other groups? Or will nascent tensions between blacks and other minorities blossom, hindering mutually beneficial alliances?

We need hard and courageous thinking about the complex array of troubles that plague the black community and the nation, but we do not suffer for lack of chatter about race. A careful empirical study of the amount of attention accorded race in both the electronic and print media would surely find an impressive amount of race-related news as well as opinion from every conceivable viewpoint. We may not always be completely forthright with one another, but the subject is never very far off any sentient citizen's radar screen. As Donald Horowitz remarked not long ago, Americans today may be enduring a serious case of "race fatigue."

We *do* lack both crucial knowledge (about how to produce various positive policy effects) and the political consensus essential to making available dramatically increased resources for any number of policy initiatives. As Glenn Loury suggests, we may lack something more profound: the sheer capacity to think about the problems of the black poor with the combination of complexity and sympathy they deserve and require. For Loury, America's history, its very way of life, is deeply implicated in a malaise from which many would too easily distance themselves. Possibly the worst effect of all the furor over affirmative action (whose main beneficiaries are middle class) is to shift the spotlight away from the most disadvantaged African Americans, those whose fates merit the most attention and the hardest thinking of all.

Notes

1. The report, officially known as *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, is reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (MIT Press, 1967).

2. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Brookings, 1998).

3. Stephanie J. Ventura, T. J. Mathews, and Sally C. Curtin, "Declines in Teenage Birth Rates, 1991–97: National and State Patterns," *National Vital Statistics Reports* (Rockville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 1998).

4. William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The New World of the Urban Poor* (Knopf, 1996).

5. Howard S. Bloom and others, "The Benefits and Costs of JTPA Title II-A Programs: Key Findings from the National Job Training Partnership Act Study," *Journal of Human Resources* 32 (Summer 1997), pp. 549–76. See also W. Norton Grubb, *Learning to Work: The Case for Reintegrating Job Training and Education* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); Robert I. Lerman, "Building Hope, Skills, and Careers: Creating a Youth Apprenticeship System," in *Social Policies for Children*, edited by Irwin Garfinkel, Jennifer L. Hochschild, and Sara S. McLanahan (Brookings, 1996), pp. 136–72.

6. A December 1997 *New York Times*/CBS News Poll asked respondents whether they favored "government financing for job training for minorities to help them get ahead in industries where they are underrepresented." Sixty-four percent of whites and 95 percent of blacks favored such financing. See Sam Howe Verhovek, "In Poll, Americans Reject Means But Not Ends of Racial Diversity," *New York Times*, December 14, 1997.

7. Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 500.