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Race and social justice in America. By: West, Cornel. Liberal Education, Summer94, Vol. 80 Issue 3, p32, 8p, 6 Black and White Photographs; Abstract: Discusses the democratic tradition in the United States. Effect of downward mobility on the economic decline; Race and democracy; Life after the age of Europe; Dwindling faith in democracy.; (AN 9411230074)

Database: Academic Search Complete

Section: DISCOURSE

RACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AMERICA

Aristotle defined citizens as ordinary people capable of ruling or being ruled: everyday people giving judgments and holding office. I think the best of the democratic tradition attempts to hammer out institutionalized critiques of authority and mechanisms of accountability, to ensure that arbitrary uses of power are checked and curtailed. When I look at present-day America, I'm deeply distressed and disturbed. Why? Because usually democracies are undermined by the persistence of poverty that generates levels of distrust--distrust that deepens social conflict and increases levels of paranoia, that produces despair and usually reinforces cultural polarization.

A slide downward

Poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust, make it very difficult for public life to take on any vitality and potency. The economic decline I referred to earlier has much to do with the downward mobility, the social slippage of so many fellow citizens, usually bringing out the worst in them--and us--leaving them open to scapegoating demagogues. People begin to feel as if they're being pushed to the margins, to the periphery.

The downsizing of the American middle class, and, most importantly, the redistribution of wealth--upwards, has been at work for the last fifteen years, not confined to Republican administrations. It is the undeniable cultural decay of the market culture that makes it very difficult for persons to believe that one, in fact, can inhabit public space. With the market culture producing market moralities, and market mentalities trying to convince us to be addicted to stimulation and titillation, reinforcing privatistic sensibilities, and feeling as if the good life is primarily one of evolvment around sexual foreplay and orgiastic intensities--and this is so very true among young people, but also true for us--the cultural decay results in the erosion of a nurturing system for children. Children feel more rootless and adrift because they feel culturally naked, unable to come up with the cultural armor to deal with life, death, dread, despair, disappointment--the requisite armor that all human beings need to make it from womb to tomb. And of course there is the overlay, the legacy of white supremacy in American civilization, the de facto racial segregation: housing patterns, patterns of social life, which make it very difficult to constitute a vibrant, public life.

I believe that John Dewey was absolutely right when he said in his classic 1927 piece, "The Public and Its Problems," that one distinctive feature of a democracy in decay is the degree to which persons feel as if they cannot constitute a public life, and instead create their own mini-publics, enclaves, usually ethnically driven, racially driven, or regionally driven.

Race and democracy

I stand here today to try to fight for the preservation and the expansion of the best of the democratic tradition. Tradition is not something that you inherit. If you want it, you must obtain it with great labor: intellectual labor, social engagement, personal contestation.

So, I want to reflect on the ways in which we can constitute public life, especially a public conversation for institutional higher learning. Of course, there are a variety of different versions of the public--we talk about public safety, public housing, public transportation--but we're here primarily to talk about public conversation. Or, another way of raising the question: what are the conditions for the possibility of American renewal if you believe--as I do--that American renewal is predicated on a vibrant public conversation that can force us to deal with this frightening and terrifying moment, this multi-level and multidimensional crisis facing us at this very moment.

Well, first I acknowledge the fact that we represent institutions that are fundamentally committed to high-quality scholarly inquiry and broad intellectual exchange: a certain intellectual piety, a certain sense of "calling" to the life of the mind, being willing to interrogate the basic presuppositions and assumptions that often regulate the prevailing paradigms, the frameworks in which we view problems and characterize problems, And because I'm here to talk about race, one may wonder what race has to do with the present crisis, the intellectual crisis, the institutional crisis.

I want to claim that race takes us to the very heart and core of the crisis of democracy. It takes us to the very heart and core of how, intellectually, we redefine and reconceive of the whole: of modernity, of new world experiences, of what it means to be an American, of what it means to be human. We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that talk about race, discourse about race, is alluding to something marginal, or on the edges, or just confined to Chocolate Cities. To talk about race is to talk about "degraded otherness" (to use the jargon of the day), about those who have been cast as different and denigrated because of their difference--in this case, racial difference. And, of course, to talk about race in America is to talk about poverty and paranoia, is to talk about despair and distrust. Why? Because we know the history of black people in America has as much to do with the degree to which there's always been too many black poor people, too many poor people in general, but--disproportionately speaking--too many black poor people. And the degree to which black people are often viewed as exotic objects--transgressive objects that generate levels of fear and anxiety in the larger population and, hence, distrust--exotic objects that keep reinforced, thick lines of demarcation in place.

So for me, any serious discussion about race, social justice or equity, forces us to engage in a discourse that puts a premium on a synoptic vision and a synthetic viewpoint. I should add, one of the difficulties of constituting a public conversation is the degree to which there's a relative paucity of synoptic vision and synthetic viewpoints highlighting interrelations and interdependencies: the ways in which fellow citizens are linked together, highlighting the bonds between fellow citizens. So let's begin with this intellectual crisis.

After the age of Europe

We are living forty-nine years after the end of the age of Europe. One of the distinctive features of the twentieth century, still in its very early stages, intellectually speaking--given our "calling" of coming to terms with the various ways by which persons attempted to understand the world during that age of Europe (roughly 1492 to 1945) and its ambiguous legacies--the distinctive feature of our century is to talk about race at this intellectual level. This means we try to keep track of the various ways in which degraded otherness was operative during the early stages of the making of what we call the modern world: 1492, the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Moslems from Spain; 1492, the encounter of Columbus with indigenous peoples. One could go on and on.

There was a time when the Spanish empire was great. It's always important to keep in mind that when you're the last great empire in the twentieth century, history has a way of humbling you. Fourteen ninety-two is a fascinating beginning point, precisely because, when we talk about race at an intellectual level (acknowledging that it is still less than fifty years after the end of the age of Europe in 1945), it is very clear that Europe could not adequately come to terms with the challenge of otherness. That resulted in those mushroom clouds over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the indescribable concentration camps in Germany, the legacy of the centuries-long slave trade, and the subordination and devaluation of indigenous peoples such as Mexican peoples in the New World.

Taking race seriously allows us to conceive of the whole. And in conceiving of that whole we try dialectically to stay in tune with the good and the bad, the best and the worst, the ways in which the democratic tradition was promoted, expanded, and also predicated, oftentimes on the backs of those who had been cast as degraded other--usually, though not always, black and brown, and red and yellow backs. There were many white backs, working-class backs as well, but that's part of the more complex story once one talks about the complex relations between race and class.

The end of the age of Europe, 1492 to 1945, means that we're forced to reassess and re-evaluate how we teach our basic courses on modernity, modernization, and the various ways in which earlier narratives about the past were silent and blind about the doings and sufferings of those who had been cast as degraded other. How do we keep track of this ambiguous legacy? How do we acknowledge the degree to which the breakthroughs in oceanic transportation and

agricultural production, and the consolidation of nation states and the expansion of markets, the augmentation of bureaucracy--you know, the basic textbook definitions of modernity--how they link to the idea of white supremacy, gentile supremacy? Oftentimes, as we talk about modernity we tend to exonerate modernity and marginalize the white and gentile supremacy. (Male supremacy as well.) To what degree does Judeocide sit at the very center of European modernity? To what degree do we marginalize it and feel as if it's an aberration; race sitting at the very center of our understanding of modernity? To what degree does the slave trade sit at the center of modernity? Or to what degree do we view that as an additive phenomenon that democracy will get to, further down the line?

Or racial caste system. One of the most frightening questions for me as one deeply committed to radical democracy is whether, in fact, the much-heralded stability and continuity of American democracy was itself predicated on black subordination and black degradation, because it's only since 1965 that we've engaged in a genuine experiment of multiracial democracy.

What if it is the case that the experiment in multiracial democracy between 1865 and 1877 is an omen that maybe American democracy itself does not have the resources to deal with the challenge of the legacy of the enslavement of Africans, the subordination of African people, and a racial caste system? That is often the conclusion of some of the black brothers and sisters. Didn't Marcus Garvey say, "As long as black people are in America, it will always lead to ruin and disaster. I cannot imagine American democracy having the capacity to actually include black people on equal status and affirming their humanity. I'm sorry, but the evidence doesn't point that way." Marcus Garvey used to say on 125th Street and 7th Avenue, "Kids, let's go!" leading the largest mass movement of black people in America wanting to leave America, when most of the world wanted to come to America. It's the vantage point of one particular slice in the black community, given the colossal failure of the age of Europe to deal with the issue of race--especially in relation to those, notably Jews, who had been cast as degraded other.

Dwindling faith in democracy

The levels of pessimism, fatalism, and cynicism of those who have lost faith in the democratic tradition are increasing. In my travels I see it. "West, you're talking about the best in the democratic tradition," people say; "That died on April 4 in 1968." We know that people want to believe in democracy, but it seems as if it doesn't work: I still see the same levels of death, disease, and destruction ravaging so much of the Chocolate Cities in this nation. It seems as if so much of that social misery is rendered invisible by a country that doesn't have the will, doesn't have the priorities, doesn't have the vision to deal with it.

Part of the intellectual crisis is, how do we come up with frameworks that on the one hand allow for an understanding of the complexity of the whole and yet link it to those raw realities on the street--that dread and despair on the street, not confined to black folk, no doubt. It's not just the

end of the age of Europe in 1945.

The second feature of the twentieth century is the emergence of the United States at the center of the historical stage as uncontested world power, and the degree to which it will build on the democratic tradition of the age of Europe, but at the same time have to deal with the issue of race, the racial divide between black and white. And, of course, with brown and yellow--that being crucial to, but not at the center of, the collective self-definition of the nation in terms of the black-white divide. It's here, I think, where we have a major challenge in our teachings, in our discussions, and in our scholarship. How will this particular civilization, now sitting at the center of the historical stage, come to terms with the ways in which the precious, fragile democratic tradition expands ?

It's no accident that in 1945 to 1973 one has to hit the issue of racial caste head-on. It's here where some of the signs of hope, for those of us who do take seriously democratic tradition, loom large. To think the first 188 years of the 200 years in this democratic experiment, black folk were not just second class citizens but taboo entities. Invisible, as Ralph Ellison says: part of a homogeneous blob which makes each black person interchangeable and substitutable, unable to stay in tune with the diversity and complexity, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of black persons. Hence, you only need one black person to speak and you know what all black people think. I know students often have this feeling in the classroom. Anytime the issue of race arises, you talk to a black student, asking, "What does black America think about this?" One leader emerges. What does Jesse want? If we can just discern what Jesse wants we know what the black community thinks. That's part of the logic of invisibility.

And yet, between 1945 and 1973, major progress warrants a smile. It looked as if, for the first time, after nearly two centuries in the experiment in self-management and self-government, that one was going to hit the issue of racial caste head-on. And, of course, racial caste is not to be confused with ethnic discrimination: anti-Semitic barriers, anti-Catholic barriers. In place, an operative American history, but having neither weight nor gravity, the racial caste system. It's no accident that during this period America creates a mass middle class, a diamond-like social structure, very different from our hourglass-like social structure these days. And that diamond-like social structure allowed for the entry of a whole host of Americans--with help from the GI Bill and a host of other governmental programs. This post-World War II, unprecedented economic boom comes to a close in 1973. It looks as if America goes back to normalcy to a certain degree: The pie is no longer getting bigger. It's more difficult to gain entry to that mainstream in regard to resources and services.

But this second feature of the rise of America to the center of the historical stage is inseparable from the third feature, which is a decolonization of the Third World. What I mean by the Third World is where the majority of the inhabitants on the globe live and die. You can't talk about

America coming to terms with the issue of race without talking about the ways in which various struggles for independence among peoples, colonized peoples, tremendously impact on the struggles of black people in this country. Think of India in 1947, of China in 1949, of Ghana 1957, 1960, with over eighteen African countries gaining their independence after protracted struggle. And it's here, I think, that issues of multiculturalism must be examined very carefully and cautiously.

Often times multiculturalism is a buzzword that means, primarily, race. America primarily embraces the notion that Mario Cuomo's mother dreams in Italian, but they don't have her in mind when they talk about multiculturalism. I dream in English; they have me in mind when talking about multiculturalism. Which is another way of saying that the ideology of whiteness allows us to homogenize Europeans in a multiculturalism already at work among white America.

But the divide is so deep. Multiculturalism has much to do with race. When one looks at the decolonization of the Third World, what does one see? Psychic and physical violence: deep scars, bruises, wounds, tears, visceral levels of scars and bruises and wounds and tears. Is a critique of the discourse of universality, impartiality, objectivity, so often a cloak for the justification, the legitimization of those scars and bruises and tears?

And to think, it was not until after Brother Martin [Luther King, Jr.] was murdered that most of the institutions of higher education decided, "We've got to now hit race head-on." It wasn't the Civil Rights Act of 1964; it wasn't the Voting Rights Act of 1965. For most colleges and universities in 1965 were still predominantly white, if not lily white. But after 1968 and 187 rebellions, you all recall, elites in higher education said, "Yes, I think we're going to have to deal with this issue." We all know that black folk just didn't get that intelligent overnight. Access, deep access; the challenge of how we constitute public space and how we can facilitate high-quality public conversation in these spaces that now will be inhabited by those who do have deep distrust--in some ways even paranoia about this mainstream.

So what do we do? I argue that the disciplines of history, or the process of historicizing and contextualizing and pluralizing are at the very center of our inquiry and conversation. I think it's no accident today that the grand slogan is historicize, always historicize. Why? Because we're living in a moment in which there is tremendous historical ferment with deep intellectual implications. But how do we historicize in such a way that we don't Balkanize? How do we contextualize in such a way that we don't relativize, in a cheap sense? How do we pluralize and diversify in such a way that we don't trump conversation and foreclose dialogue --and thereby preclude public-mindedness and public conversation?

In so many ways we're grappling with this issue. How can we preserve notions of universality when we recognize that universality has been deployed in such ways that it hides certain persons'

particularity? How can we actually defend the notion of impartiality when we know, in fact, it has been used in such a way as to conceal partisanship? How will we hold on to a threadbare notion of objectivity when we recognize that someone's own subjective preferences have been shot through the way in which they view the world, as they try to cast it as if it were objective?

What a challenge! I want to argue, as a product of certain philosophical traditions--mainly American pragmatism as initiated by the great Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey--that there are ways of recovering these notions, but ways of recovering these notions that meet the challenge of historical consciousness and that facilitate our need for critical exchange and dialogue. It begins with the stress on history. That stress on history, for me, is inseparable from empathy and humility and hope.

Reconstituting a public conversation

For me the only way in which we can reconstitute a public conversation is to acknowledge that one must be quite explicit about one's own historical interpretations of the past, in light of the present. Adduce one's evidence, make one's inferences, draw one's conclusions in a fallible spirit, and do it in such a way that it is viewed as transcending one's own identity and constituency, even though one's interpretations will take seriously one's identity and constituency. One will make claims to universality but recognize that it's always mediated by one's own particularity, hence, looking for some provisional transparticularity, but never absolute universality.

One will understand impartiality as a sense of balance, recognizing that all claims of impartiality are also mediated by partisanship, but a partisanship that must never be immune to revision. Always tentative, that objectivity, itself an absolute form, is never reached; but one is always acknowledging a self-critical intersubjectivity that is not reducible to a vulgar subjectivity. Typical pragmatic moves. Pragmatism is a mode of inquiry that puts a premium on that synoptic vision and synthetic perspective that facilitates public conversation.

Charles Sanders Peirce says, "Never block the road to inquiry, but all travelers must be willing to put their relative ignorance and naked power under the spotlight." That's what conversation is, knowing that there is a certain cultural baggage that we all have, a certain set of assumptions and presuppositions that we all bring to the conversation but also recognizing that we must make them open to scrutiny. When we leave public conversation, we ought to be different from when we entered.

Transformative possibilities ought to flow from the public conversation, in light of our understanding of the crisis of the present; and trying to understand the crisis of the present in terms of an interpretation of the past, so that we can project a future. Public conversation is the precious activity of fellow citizens engaging in the exchange, the visions, and analyses mediated by mutual respect and civility. And a sense of history, subtle and sophisticated, is the fundamental

basis of such a dialogue.

Of course there's another issue. We don't have time to talk about whether, in fact, it is possible to have a deep and abiding, subtle and sophisticated conception of history, and a sense of history, in a market culture. But it is crucial. For what happens among a citizenry that has so many experiencing downward mobility? That is so deeply shaped by market mentalities and market sensibilities, in which there is escalating fear and the gangsterization of a society, in which people feel they want to gain access to power and pleasure and property by any means. Hence, others are quite reluctant to enter public space, but rather are concerned with privatistic control over their space. Sometimes there's a need for guns to do it. Think of Los Angeles just a few months ago, responding to the year after the upheaval. The privatistic response of fellow citizens was, "I'll get my gun, and you get yours." A public problem, no public life operative; hence, I will protect mine, you protect yours. Deep distrust of the public in that regard.

As fellow citizens we must ensure that historical consciousness sits at the very center of the public conversation. And it's historical consciousness, as I said before, that acknowledges ambiguous legacies and hybrid cultures and heterogeneous heritage. That means no group, no society, no civilization has a monopoly on truth or virtue or wisdom. That, for me, is where the link between history and empathy actually comes in. I think Simone Weil was absolutely right when she said, "Love of thy neighbor in all of its fullness means being able to say to him or her, 'What are you going through?'" Empathy is precisely an attempt to identify with the other fellow citizen's frustration, anxieties--what it's like to walk a mile in their shoes, to get inside their skin. One can do that most easily when one has a sense of history that keeps track of what they are up against, their conditions and circumstances. The two ought to go hand in hand.

Institutions of higher learning are not to be simply sites where young people acquire high-level skills for professional careers, but also a training ground for citizenship. I like the way Elizabeth Minnich puts that in her paper, when she talks about Dewey's definition of higher education as "a means by which we can generate and cultivate capacities for people to live democratically." But how do you do that? A sense of history; clashing interpretations up; expanding empathy; reinforcing intellectual humility. Trying to convince our students and ourselves that Socrates was right, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And Malcolm X was right, "The examined life is painful." Full of risks and vulnerability. But Nietzsche was right, "It's not simply a matter of having the courage of one's convictions, but also the courage to attack one's convictions." Maturity, development flows from that kind of self-criticism. And that kind of self-criticism is again requisite for inhabiting public space for public conversation.

PHOTOS (BLACK & WHITE): Cornel West, professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies, Princeton University

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Student artwork, the State University of New York-Buffalo

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Pace University students

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CORNEL WEST is professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton University. He is the author of *Prophetic Fragments* and *Race Matters*. This article is based on the address given by Professor West at the plenary session, "Race and Social Justice in a Multicultural Democracy," on Thursday, January 20, 1994, at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

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