

Beyond Black and White

Transforming African-American Politics



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London · New York

Beyond Racial Identity Politics: Toward a Liberation Theory for Multicultural Democracy

Americans are arguably the most "race-conscious" people on earth. Even in South Africa, the masters of apartheid recognized the necessity to distinguish between "Coloureds" and "black Africans." Under the bizarre regulations of apartheid, a visiting delegation of Japanese corporate executives, or the diplomatic corps of a client African regime such as Malawi, could be classified as "honorary whites." But in the USA, "nationality" has been closely linked historically to the categories and hierarchy of national racial identity. Despite the orthodox cultural ideology of the so-called "melting pot," power, privilege and the ownership of productive resources and property have always been unequally allocated in a social hierarchy stratified by class, gender and race. Those who benefit directly from these institutional arrangements have historically been defined as "white," overwhelmingly upper class and male. And it is precisely here within this structure of power and privilege that "national identity" in the context of mass political culture is located. To be an "all-American" is by definition *not* to be an Asian American, Pacific American, American Indian, Latino, Arab American or African-American. Or viewed another way, the hegemonic ideology of "whiteness" is absolutely central in rationalizing and justifying the gross inequalities of race, gender and class, experienced by millions of Americans relegated to the politically peripheral status of "Others." As Marxist cultural critic E. San Juan has observed, "whenever the question of the national identity is at stake, boundaries in space and time are drawn.... A decision is made to represent the Others – people of color – as missing, absent, or supplement." "Whiteness" becomes the very "center" of the dominant criteria for national prestige, decision-making, authority and intellectual leadership.

Ironically, because of the centrality of "whiteness" within the dominant national identity, Americans generally make few distinctions between "ethnicity" and "race," and the two concepts are usually used interchangeably. Both the oppressors and those who are oppressed are therefore imprisoned by the closed dialectic of race. "Black" and "white" are usually viewed as fixed, permanent and often antagonistic social categories. Yet, in reality, "race" should be understood not as an entity within the histories of all human societies, or grounded in some inescapable or permanent biological or genetic difference between human beings. "Race" is first and foremost an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership and privilege within the economic, social and political institutions of society.

Race only becomes "real" as a social force when individuals or groups behave toward each other in ways which either reflect or perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of subordination and the patterns of inequality in daily life. These are, in turn, justified and explained by assumed differences in physical and biological characteristics, or in theories of cultural deprivation or intellectual inferiority. Thus, far from being static or fixed, race as an oppressive concept within social relations is fluid and ever-changing. An oppressed "racial group" changes over time, geographical space and historical conjuncture. That which is termed "black," "Hispanic" or "Oriental" by those in power to describe one human being's "racial background" in a particular setting can have little historical or practical meaning within another social formation which is also racially stratified, but in a different manner.

Since so many Americans view the world through the prism of permanent racial categories, it is difficult to convey the idea that radically different ethnic groups may have roughly the same "racial identity" imposed on them. For example, although native-born African-Americans, Trinidadians, Haitians, Nigerians and Afro-Brazilians would all be termed "black" on the streets of New York City, they have remarkably little in common in terms of language, culture, ethnic traditions, rituals, and religious affiliations. Yet they are all "black" racially, in the sense that they will share many of the pitfalls and prejudices built into the institutional arrangements of the established social order for those defined as "black." Similarly, an even wider spectrum of divergent ethnic groups - from Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Korean Americans to Hawaiians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Arabs and Uzbeks - are described and defined by the dominant society as "Asians" or, worse still, as "Orientals." In

the rigid, racially stratified American social order, the specific nationality, ethnicity and culture of a person of color has traditionally been secondary to an individual's "racial category," a label of inequality which is imposed from without rather than constructed by the group from within. Yet as Michael Omi, Asian American Studies professor at the University of California at Berkeley has observed, we are also "in a period in which our conception of racial categories is being radically transformed." The waves of recent immigrants create new concepts of what the older ethnic communities have been. The observations and generalizations we imparted "to racial identities" in the past no longer make that much sense.

In the United States, "race" for the oppressed has also come to mean an identity of survival, victimization and opposition to those racial groups or elites which exercise power and privilege. What we are looking at here is *not* an ethnic identification or culture, but an awareness of shared experience, suffering and struggles against the barriers of racial division. These collective experiences, survival tales and grievances form the basis of a historical consciousness – a group's recognition of what it has witnessed and what it can anticipate in the near future. This second distinct sense of racial identity is imposed on the oppressed and yet represents a reconstructed critical memory of the character of the group's collective ordeals. Both definitions of "race" and "racial identity" give character and substance to the movements for power and influence among people of color.

In the African-American experience, the politics of racial identity have been expressed by two great traditions of racial ideology and social protest: integrationism and black nationalism. The integrationist tradition was initiated in the antebellum political activism of the free Negro community of the North, articulated by the great abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass. The black nationalist tradition was a product of the same social classes, but influenced by the pessimism generated by the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott decision, and the failure of the slave uprisings and revolts such as Nat Turner's to end the tyranny and inhumanity of the slave regime. The integrationist perspective was anchored in a firm belief in American democracy, and in the struggle to outlaw all legal barriers which restricted equal access and opportunities to racial minorities. It was linked to the politics of building coalitions with sympathetic white constituencies, aimed at achieving reforms within the context of the system. The integrationist version of racial politics sought the deracialization of the hierarchies of power within society and the economic system. By contrast, the black nationalist approach to racial

politics was profoundly skeptical of America's ability to live up to its democratic ideals. It assumed that "racial categories" were real and fundamentally significant, and that efforts to accumulate power had to be structured along the boundaries of race for centuries to come. The nationalist tradition emphasized the cultural kinship of black Americans to Africa, and emphasized the need to establish all-black-owned institutions to provide goods and services to the African-American community.

Although the integrationists and nationalists seemed to hold radically divergent points of view, there was a subterranean symmetry between the two ideologies. Both were based on the idea that the essential dilemma or problem confronting black people was the omnipresent reality of race. The integrationists sought power to dismantle the barriers of race, to outlaw legal restrictions on blacks' access to the institutions of authority and ownership, and to assimilate into the cultural "mainstream" without regard to race. The black nationalists favored a separatist path toward empowerment, believing that even the most liberal-minded whites could not be trusted to destroy the elaborate network of privileges from which they benefited, called "white supremacy." But along the assimilationist-separatist axis of racial-identity politics is the common perception that "race," however it is defined, is the most critical organizing variable within society. Race mattered so much more than other factors or variables that, to a considerable degree, the concept of race was perpetuated by the types of political interventions and tactical assumptions by activists and leaders on both sides of the assimilationist/separatist axis.

Both schools of racial identity espoused what can be termed the politics of "symbolic representation." Both the nationalists and integrationists believed that they were speaking to "white power brokers" on behalf of their "constituents" – that is, black Americans. They believed that the real measure of racial power a group wielded within any society could be calibrated according to the institutions it dominated or the numbers of positions it controlled which influenced others. For the integrationists, it was a relatively simple matter of counting noses. If the number of African-Americans in elective offices nationwide increased from 103 in 1964 to over 8,000 in 1993, for example, one could argue that African-Americans as a group had increased their political power. Any increase in the number of blacks as mayors, members of federal courts, and on boards of education, was championed as a victory for all black people. The black nationalists tended to be far more skeptical about the promise or viability of an electoral route to group empowerment. However, they often shared the same notions of symbolic representation when it came to the construction of social and economic

institutions based on private-ownership models. The development of a black-owned shopping plaza, supermarket or private school was widely interpreted as black social and economic empowerment for the group as a whole.

The problem with "symbolic representation" is that it presumes structures of accountability and allegiance between those blacks who are elevated into powerful positions of authority in the capitalist state and the millions of African-Americans clinging to the margins of economic and social existence. The unifying discourse of race obscures the growing class stratification within the African-American community. According to the Census Bureau, for example, back in 1967 about 85 per cent of all African-American families earned between \$5,000 and \$50,000 annually, measured in inflation-adjusted 1990 dollars. Some 41 per cent earned between \$10,000 and \$25,000. In short, the number of extremely poor and destitute families was relatively small. The Census Bureau's statistics on African-American households as of 1990 were strikingly different. The size of the black working class and the number of moderate-income people had declined significantly, and the two extremes of poverty and affluence had grown sharply. By 1990, about 12 per cent of all black households earned less than \$5,000 annually. One-third of all blacks lived below the federal government's poverty level.

Conversely, a strong African-American petty bourgeoisie, representing the growth of thousands of white-collar professionals, executives and managers created by affirmative-action requirements, has been established. The average median income of African-American families in which both the wife and husband were employed rose from about \$28,700 in 1967 to over \$40,000 in 1990, an increase of 40 per cent. More than 15 per cent of all African-American households earn above \$50,000 annually, and thousands of black professional families have incomes exceeding \$100,000 annually. Many of these newly affluent blacks have moved far from the problems of the main cities into the comfortable white enclaves of suburbia. Nevertheless, many of the strongest advocates of racial-identity politics since the demise of Black Power and the black freedom movement come from the most privileged, elitist sectors of the black upper middle class. The dogmatic idea that "race" alone explains virtually everything that occurs within society has a special appeal to some African-American suburban elites who have little personal connection with the vast human crisis of ghetto unemployment, black-on-black crime, a rampant drugs trade, gang violence, and deteriorating schools. Moreover, for black entrepreneurs, traditional race categories could be employed as a tool to promote

petty capital accumulation, by urging black consumers to "buy black." Racial-identity politics in this context is contradictory and conceptually limited in other critical respects. As noted, it tends to minimize greatly any awareness or analysis of class stratification and concentrations of poverty or affluence among the members of the defined "racial minority group."

Issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment and homelessness are viewed and interpreted within a narrowly racial context – that is, as a by-product of the large racist contradiction within the society as a whole. Conversely, concentrations of wealth or social privilege within sectors of the racial group are projected as "success stories" – see, for example, issue after issue of *Ebony*, *Black Enterprise* and *Jet*. In the context of racial-identity politics, the idea of "social change" is usually expressed in utilitarian and pragmatic terms, if change is expressed at all. The integrationists generally favor working within the established structures of authority, influencing those in power to dole out new favors or additional privileges to minorities. Their argument is that "democracy" works best when it is truly pluralistic and inclusive, with the viewpoints of all "racial groups" taken into account. But such a strategy rarely if ever gets to the root of the real problem of the persuasiveness of racism – social inequality. It articulates an eclectic, opportunistic approach to change, rather than a comprehensive or systemic critique, informed by social theory. In the case of the racial separatists, the general belief that "race" is a relatively permanent social category in all multiethnic societies, and that virtually all whites are immutably racist, either for genetic, biological or psychological reasons, compromises the very concept of meaningful social change. If allies are nonexistent or at best untrustworthy, or if dialogues with progressive whites must await the construction of broad-based unity among virtually all blacks, then even tactical alliances with social forces outside the black community become difficult to sustain.

But perhaps the greatest single weakness in the politics of racial identity is that it is rooted implicitly in a competitive model of group empowerment. If the purpose of politics is the realization of a group or constituency's specific objective interest, then racial-identity politics utilizes racial consciousness or the group's collective memory and experiences as the essential framework for interpreting the actions and interests of all other social groups. This approach is not unlike a model of political competition based on a "zero-sum" game such as poker, in which a player can be a "winner" only if one or more other players are "losers." The prism of a group's racial experiences tends to diffuse the parallels, continuities and common interests which might exist between

oppressed racial groups; this serves to highlight and emphasize areas of disension and antagonism.

The black-nationalist-oriented intelligentsia, tied to elements of the new African-American upper middle class by income, social position, and cultural outlook, began to search for ways of expressing itself through the "permanent" prism of race, while rationalizing its relatively privileged class position. One expression of this search for a social theory was found in the writings of Afrocentric theorist Molefi Asante. Born Arthur Lee Smith in 1942, Asante emerged as the founding editor of the *Journal of Black Studies* in 1969. Asante became a leading force in the National Council of Black Studies, the African Heritage Studies Association, and, after 1980, occupied the chair of the African-American Studies Department at Temple University. Asante's basic thesis, the cultural philosophy of "Afrocentrism," began with the insight that people of European descent or cultures have a radically different understanding of the human condition from people of African and/or non-Western cultures and societies. "Human beings tend to recognize three fundamental existential postures one can take with respect to the human condition: feeling, knowing, and acting," Asante observed in 1983. Europeans utilize these concepts separately in order to understand them objectively. Thus "Eurocentrists" tend to understand their subjects "apart from the emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context." Scholars with a "Eurocentric" perspective – those who view the entire history of human development from the vantage point of European civilization – are also primarily concerned with a "subject/object duality" which exists in a linear environment. European cultures and people are viewed as the central subjects of history, the creative forces which dominate and transform the world over time. Asante states that this "Euro-linear" viewpoint helps to explain the construction of institutional racism, apartheid and imperialism across the nonwhite world.

By contrast, the Afrocentric framework for comprehending society and human development is radically different, according to Asante. Afrocentrism "understands that the interrelationship of knowledge with cosmology, society, religion, medicine, and traditions stands alongside the interactive metaphors of discourse as principle means of achieving a measure of knowledge about experience." Unlike a linear view of the world, the Afrocentric approach is a "circular view" of human interaction which "seeks to interpret and understand." In theoretical terms, this means that the study of African and African-American phenomena should be within their original cultural contexts, and not within the paradigmatic frameworks of Eurocentrism. Drawing upon African

cultural themes, values and concepts, Afrocentrism seeks therefore the creation of a harmonious environment in which all divergent cultures could coexist and learn from each other. Rather than seeking the illusion of the melting pot, Asante calls for the construction of "parallel frames of reference" within the context of a multicultural, pluralistic environment. "Universality," Asante warns, "can only be dreamed about when we have slept on truth based on specific cultural experience."

The practical impact of the theory of Afrocentrism was found among black educators. After all, if people of African descent had a radically different cultural heritage, cosmology and philosophy of being than whites, it made sense to devise an alternate curriculum which was "Afrocentric." Such an alternative approach to education would be completely comprehensive, Asante insisted, expressing the necessity for "every topic, economics, law communication, science, religion, history, literature, and sociology to be reviewed through Afrocentric eyes." No African-American child should "attend classes as they are currently being taught or read books as they are currently being written without raising questions about our capability as a people.... All children must be centered in a historical place, or their self-esteem suffers." By 1991, approximately 350 "Afrocentric academies" and private schools were educating more than 50,000 African-American students throughout the country. Many large public-school districts adopted Afrocentric supplementary and required textbooks, or brought in Afrocentric-oriented educators for curriculum-development workshops. Several public-school systems, notably in Detroit, Baltimore, and Milwaukee, established entire "Afrocentric schools" for hundreds of school-aged children, transforming all aspects of their learning experience. On college campuses, many Black Studies programs began to restructure their courses to reflect Asante's Afrocentric philosophy.

There is no doubt that Afrocentrism established a vital and coherent cultural philosophy which encouraged African-Americans to react favorably towards black nationalism. Some Afrocentric scholars in the area of psychology, notably Linda James Myers, established innovative and effective measures for promoting the development of positive self-conception among African-Americans. Asante used his position at Temple to create a scholastic tradition which represented a sharp critique and challenge to Eurocentrism. The difficulty was that this scholarly version of Afrocentrism tended to be far more sophisticated than the more popular version of the philosophy embraced by elements of the dogmatically separatist, culturally nationalist community. One such Afrocentric popularizer was Professor Len Jeffries, the chair of the Black Studies program at the City College of New York. Jeffries claimed

that white Americans were "ice people" due to environmental, psychological and cultural factors inherent in their evolution in Europe; African-Americans by contrast were defined as "sun people," characteristically warm, open, and charitable. At the level of popular history, the vulgar Afrocentrists glorified in an oversimplistic manner the African heritage of black Americans. In their writings, they rarely related the actual complexities of the local cultures, divergence of languages, religions, and political institutions, and tended to homogenize the sharply different social structures found within the African diaspora. They pointed with pride to the dynasties of Egypt as the classical foundation of African civilization, without also examining with equal vigor or detail Egypt's slave structure. At times, the racial separatists of vulgar Afrocentrism embraced elements of a black chauvinism and intolerance towards others, and espoused public positions which were blatantly anti-Semitic. Jeffries' public statements attacking Jews, and the counter-charge that he espoused anti-Semitic viewpoints, made it easier for white conservatives to denigrate all African-American Studies, and to undermine efforts to require multicultural curricula within public schools.

Scholarly Afrocentrism coexisted uneasily with its populist variety. When Jeffries was deposed as chair of City College's Black Studies Department in the controversy following his anti-Semitic remarks, Asante wisely stayed outside the debate. Nevertheless, there remained theoretical problems inherent in the more scholarly paradigm. Afrocentric intellectuals gave eloquent lip service to the insights of black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois as "pillars" of their own perspective, without also acknowledging that Du Bois's philosophy of culture and history conflicted sharply with their own. Du Bois's major cultural and philosophical observation, expressed nearly a century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, claimed that the African-American expresses a "double consciousness." The black American was "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Africa in effect represents only half of the dialectical consciousness of African-American people. Blacks are also legitimately Americans, and by our suffering, struggle and culture we have a destiny within this geographical and political space equal to or stronger than any white American. This realization that the essence of the inner spirit of African-American people was reflected in this core duality was fundamentally ignored by the Afrocentrists.

Vulgar Afrocentrists deliberately ignored or obscured the historical reality of social class stratification within the African diaspora. They

essentially argued that the interests of all black people – from Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Colin Powell to conservative Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, to the black unemployed, homeless, and hungry of America's decaying urban ghettos – were philosophically, culturally and racially the same. Even the scholarly Afrocentric approach elevated a neo-Kantian idealism above even a dialectical idealist analysis, much less speaking to historical materialism except to attack it as such. Populist Afrocentrism was the perfect social theory for the upwardly mobile black petty bourgeoisie. It gave them a vague sense of ethnic superiority and cultural originality, without requiring the hard, critical study of historical realities. It provided a philosophical blueprint to avoid concrete struggle within the real world, since potential white "allies" certainly were nonexistent and all cultural change began from within. It was, in short, only the latest theoretical construct of a politics of racial identity, a world-view designed to discuss the world but never really to change it.

How do we transcend the theoretical limitations and social contradictions of the politics of racial identity? The challenge begins by constructing new cultural and political "identities," based on the realities of America's changing multicultural, democratic milieu. The task of constructing a tradition of unity between various groups of color in America is a far more complex and contradictory process than progressive activists or scholars have admitted, precisely because of divergent cultural traditions, languages and conflicting politics of racial identity – on the part of Latinos, African-Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Island Americans, Arab Americans, American Indians and others. Highlighting the current dilemma in the 1990s, is the collapsing myth of "brown-black solidarity."

Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, with the explosion of the civil-rights and black power movements in the African-American community, activist formations with similar objectives also emerged among Latinos. The Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, for example, found their counterparts among Chicano militants in La Raza Unida Party in Texas, and the Crusade for Justice in Colorado. The Council of La Raza and the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund began to push for civil-rights reforms within government, and for expanding influence for Latinos within the Democratic Party, paralleling the same strategies of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

With the growth of a more class-conscious black and Latino petty bourgeoisie – ironically, a social product of affirmative action and civil-rights gains – tensions between these two large communities of people

of color began to deteriorate. The representatives of the African-American middle class consolidated their electoral control of the city councils and mayoral posts of major cities throughout the country. Black entrepreneurship increased, as the black American consumer market reached a gross sales figure of \$270 billion by 1991, an amount equal to the gross domestic product of the fourteenth wealthiest nation on earth. The really important "symbolic triumphs" of this privileged strata of the African-American community were not the dynamic 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson; they were instead the electoral victory of Democratic "moderate" Doug Wilder as Virginia governor in 1990, and the appointment of former-Jackson-lieutenant-turned-moderate Ron Brown as head of the Democratic National Committee. Despite the defeats represented by Reaganism and the absence of affirmative-action enforcement, there was a sense that the strategy of "symbolic representation" had cemented this stratum's hegemony over the bulk of the black population. Black politicians like Doug Wilder and television celebrity journalists such as black-nationalist-turned-Republican Tony Brown weren't interested in pursuing coalitions between blacks and other people of color. Multiracial, multi-class alliances raised too many questions about the absence of political accountability between middle-class "leaders" and their working-class and low-income "followers." Even Jesse Jackson shied away from addressing a black-Latino alliance except in the most superficial terms.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the long-delayed brown-black dialogue at the national level began crystallizing into tensions around at least four critical issues. First, after the census of 1990, scores of congressional districts were reapportioned with African-American or Latino pluralities or majorities, guaranteeing greater minority-group representation in Congress. However, in cities and districts where Latinos and blacks were roughly divided, and especially in those districts which blacks had controlled in previous years but in which Latinos were now in the majority, disagreements often led to fractious ethnic conflicts. Latinos claimed that they were grossly underrepresented within the political process. African-American middle-class leaders argued that "Latinos" actually represented four distinct groups with little to no shared history or common culture: Mexican Americans, concentrated overwhelmingly in the southwestern states; Hispanics from the Caribbean, chiefly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, most of whom had migrated to New York City and the northeast since 1945; Cuban Americans, mostly middle- to upper-class exiles of Castro's Cuba, and who voted heavily Republican; and the most recent Spanish-speaking emigrants from Central and South America. Blacks insisted that Cuban

Americans were definitely not an "underprivileged minority," and as such did not merit minority set-aside economic programs, affirmative-action and equal-opportunity programs. The cultural politics of Afrocentrism made it difficult for many African-Americans to recognize that they might share any common interest with Latinos.

Second, immigration issues are also at the center of recent Latino-black conflicts. Over one-third of the Latino population of more than 24 million in the USA consists of undocumented workers. Some middle-class African-American leaders have taken the politically conservative viewpoint that undocumented Latino workers deprive poor blacks of jobs within the low-wage sectors of the economy. Third, bilingual education and efforts to impose linguistic and cultural conformity upon all sectors of society (such as "English-only" referenda) have also been issues of contention. Finally, the key element that drives these topics of debate is the rapid transformation of America's nonwhite demography. Because of relatively higher birth rates than the general population and substantial immigration, within less than two decades Latinos as a group will outnumber African-Americans as the largest minority group in the USA. Even by 1990, about one out of nine US households spoke a non-English language at home, predominately Spanish.

Black middle-class leaders who were accustomed to advocating the interests of their constituents in simplistic racial terms were increasingly confronted by Latinos who felt alienated from the system and largely ignored and underrepresented by the political process. Thus in May 1991, Latinos took to the streets in Washington DC, hurling bottles and rocks and looting over a dozen stores, in response to the shooting by the local police of a Salvadorian man whom they claimed had wielded a knife. African-American mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon ordered over one thousand police officers to patrol the city's Latino neighborhoods, and used tear gas to quell the public disturbances. In effect, a black administration in Washington DC used the power of the police and courts to suppress the grievances of Latinos - just as the white administration had done against black protesters during the urban uprisings of 1968.

The tragedy here is that too little is done by either African-American or Latino "mainstream" leaders, who practice racial-identity politics to transcend their parochialism and to redefine their agendas on common ground. Latinos and blacks alike can agree on an overwhelming list of issues - such as the inclusion of multicultural curricula in public schools, improvements in public health care, job training initiative, the expansion of public transportation and housing for low- to moderate-income people; and greater fairness and legal rights within the criminal justice system. Despite the image that Latinos as a group are more "economi-

cally privileged" than African-Americans, Mexican American families earn only slightly more than black households, and Puerto Rican families earn less than black Americans on average. Economically, Latinos and African-Americans have both experienced the greatest declines in real incomes and some of the greatest increases in poverty rates within the USA. From 1973 to 1990, for example, the incomes for families headed by a parent under thirty years of age declined by 28 per cent for Latino families and by 48 per cent for African-American families. The poverty rates for young families in these same years rose 44 per cent for Latinos and 58 per cent for blacks.

There is also substantial evidence that Latinos continue to experience discrimination in elementary, secondary and higher education which is in many respects more severe than that experienced by African-Americans. Although high-school graduation rates for the entire population have steadily improved, the rates for Latinos have declined consistently since the mid 1980s. In 1989, for instance, 76 per cent of all African-Americans and 82 per cent of all whites aged between eighteen and twenty-four had graduated from high school. By contrast, the graduation rate for Latinos in 1989 was 56 per cent. By 1992, the high-school completion rate for Latino males dropped to its lowest level, 47.8 per cent, since 1972 – the year such figures began to be compiled by the American Council on Education. In colleges and universities, the pattern of Latino inequality was the same. In 1991, 34 per cent of all whites and 24 per cent of all African-Americans aged between eighteen and twenty-four were enrolled in college. Latino college enrollment for the same age group was barely 18 per cent. As of 1992, approximately 22 per cent of the non-Latino adult population in the USA possessed at least a four-year college degree. College graduation rates for Latino adults were just 10 per cent. Thus, on a series of public policy issues – access to quality education, economic opportunity, the availability of human services and civil rights – Latinos and African-Americans share a core set of common concerns and long-term interests. What is missing is the dynamic vision and political leadership necessary to build something more permanent than temporary electoral coalitions between these groups.

A parallel situation exists between Asian Americans, Pacific Americans and the black American community. Two generations ago, the Asian American population was comparatively small, except in states such as California, Washington, and New York. With the end of discriminatory immigration restrictions on Asians in 1965, however, the Asian American population began to soar dramatically, changing the ethnic and racial character of urban America. For example, in the years 1970 to 1990 the Korean population increased from 70,000 to 820,000.

Since 1980, about 33,000 Koreans have entered the USA each year, a rate of immigration exceeded only by Latinos and Filipinos. According to the 1990 census, the Asian American and Pacific Islander population in the USA exceeds 7.3 million.

Some of the newer Asian immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s were of middle-class origin with backgrounds in entrepreneurship, small manufacturing and the white-collar professions. Thousands of Asian American small-scale, family-owned businesses began to develop in black and Latino neighborhoods, in many instances taking the place of the Jewish merchants in the ghettos a generation before. It did not take long before Latino and black petty hostilities and grievances against this new ethnic entrepreneurial group crystallized into deep racial hatred. When African-American rapper Ice Cube expressed his anger against Los Angeles's Korean American business community in the 1991 song "Black Korea," he was also voicing the popular sentiments of many younger blacks:

So don't follow me up and down your market, or your little chop-suey ass will be a target of the nationwide boycott. Choose with the people, that's what the boy got. So pay respect to the black fist, or we'll burn down your store, right down to a crisp, and then we'll see you, 'cause you can't turn the ghetto into Black Korea.

Simmering ethnic tensions boiled into open outrage in Los Angeles when a black teenage girl was killed by Korean American merchant Soon Ja Du. Although convicted of voluntary manslaughter, Du was sentenced to probation and community service only. Similarly, in the early 1990s African-Americans launched economic boycotts of, and political confrontations with, Korean American small merchants in New York. Thus, in the aftermath of the blatant miscarriage of justice in Los Angeles last year – the acquittal of four white police officers for the violent beating of Rodney King – the anger and outrage within the African-American community was channeled not against the state and the corporations, but against small Korean American merchants. Throughout Los Angeles, over 1,500 Korean-American-owned stores were destroyed, burned or looted. Following the urban uprising, a fiercely anti-Asian sentiment continued to permeate sections of Los Angeles. In 1992–93 there have been a series of incidents of Asian Americans being harassed or beaten in southern California. After the rail-system contract was awarded to a Japanese company, a chauvinistic movement was launched to "buy American." Asian Americans are still popularly projected to other nonwhites as America's successful "model minorities," fostering resentment, misunderstandings and hostilities

among people of color. Yet black leaders have consistently failed to explain to African-Americans that Asian-Americans as a group do not own the major corporations or banks which control access to capital. They do not own massive amounts of real estate, control the courts or city governments, have ownership of the mainstream media, dominate police forces, or set urban policies.

While African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans scramble over which group should control the mom-and-pop grocery store in their neighborhood, almost no one questions the racist "redlining" policies of large banks which restrict access to capital to nearly all people of color. Black and Latino working people usually are not told by their race-conscious leaders and middle-class "symbolic representatives" that institutional racism has also frequently targeted Asian Americans throughout US history – from the recruitment and exploitation of Asian laborers, to a series of lynchings and violent assaults culminating in the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, to the slaying of Vincent Chin in Detroit and the violence and harassment of other Asian Americans. A central ideological pillar of "whiteness" is the consistent scapegoating of the "oriental menace." As legal scholar Mari Matsuda observes:

There is an unbroken line of poor and working Americans turning their anger and frustration into hatred of Asian Americans. Every time this happens, the real villains – the corporations and politicians who put profits before human needs – are allowed to go about their business free from public scrutiny, and the anger that could go to organizing for positive social change goes instead to Asian-bashing.

What is required is a radical break from the narrow, race-based politics of the past, which characterized the core assumptions about black empowerment since the mid nineteenth century. We need to recognize that the two perspectives of racial-identity politics that are frequently juxtaposed, integration/assimilation and nationalist/separatism, are actually two sides of the same ideological and strategic axis. To move into the future will require that we bury the racial barriers of the past, for good. The essential point of departure is the deconstruction of the idea of "whiteness," the ideology of white power, privilege and elitism which remains heavily embedded within the dominant culture, social institutions and economic arrangements of the society. But we must do more than critique the white pillars of race, gender and class domination. We must rethink and restructure the central social categories of collective struggle by which we conceive and understand our own political reality.

We must redefine "blackness" and other traditional racial categories to be more inclusive of contemporary ethnic realities.

To be truly liberating, a social theory must reflect the actual problems of a historical conjuncture with a commitment to rigor and scholastic truth. "Afrocentrism" fails on all counts to provide that clarity of insight into the contemporary African-American urban experience. It looks to a romantic, mythical reconstruction of yesterday to find some understanding of the cultural basis of today's racial and class challenges. Yet that critical understanding of reality cannot begin with an examination of the lives of Egyptian Pharaohs. It must begin by critiquing the vast structure of power and privilege which characterizes the political economy of post-industrial capitalist America. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, during the Reagan-Bush era of the 1980s the poorest one-fifth of all Americans earned about \$7,725 annually, and experienced a decline in before-tax household incomes of 3.8 per cent over the decade. The middle fifth of all US households earned about \$31,000 annually, with an income gain of 3.1 per cent during the 1980s. Yet the top fifth of household incomes reached over \$105,200 annually by 1990, with before-tax incomes growing by 29.8 per cent over the 1980s. The richest 5 per cent of all American households exceeded \$206,000 annually, improving their incomes by 44.9 per cent under Reagan and Bush. The wealthiest 1 per cent of all US households reached nearly \$550,000 per year, with average before-tax incomes increasing by 75.3 per cent. In effect, since 1980 the income gap between America's wealthiest 1 per cent and the middle class *nearly doubled*. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities relates, the wealthiest 1 per cent of all Americans – roughly 2.5 million people – receive "nearly as much income after taxes as the bottom 40 per cent, about 100 million people. While wealthy households are taking a larger share of the national income, the tax burden has been shifted down the income pyramid." A social theory of a reconstructed, multicultural democracy must advance the reorganization and ownership of capital resources, the expansion of production in minority areas, and provision of guarantees for social welfare – such as a single-payer, national health-care system.

The factor of "race" by itself does not and cannot explain the massive transformation of the structure of capitalism in its post-industrial phase, or the destructive redefinition of "work" itself, as we enter the twenty-first century. Increasingly in Western Europe and America, the new division between "haves" and "have nots" is characterized by a new segmentation of the labor force. The division is between those workers who have maintained basic economic security and benefits –

such as full health insurance, term life insurance, pensions, educational stipends or subsidies for the employee's children, paid vacations, and so forth – and those marginal workers who are either unemployed, or part-time employees, or who labor but have few if any benefits. Since 1982, "temporary employment" or part-time hirings without benefits have increased 250 per cent across the USA, while all employment has grown by less than 20 per cent. Today, the largest private employer in the USA is Manpower, Inc., the world's largest temporary employment agency, with 560,000 workers. By the year 2000, half of all American workers will be classified as part-time employees, or, as they are termed within IBM, "the peripherals." The reason for this massive restructuring of labor relations is capital's search for surplus value or profits.

Increasingly, disproportionately high percentages of Latino and African-American workers will be trapped within this second-tier of the labor market. Black, Latino, Asian-American, and low-income white workers all share a stake in fighting for a new social contract relating to work and social benefits: the right to a good job should be guaranteed in the same way as the human right to vote; the right to free high-quality health care should be as secure as the freedom of speech. The radical changes within the domestic economy require that black leadership reaches out to other oppressed sectors of the society, creating a common program for economic and social justice. Vulgar Afrocentrism looks inward; the new black liberation of the twenty-first century must look outward, embracing those people of color and oppressed people of divergent ethnic backgrounds who share our democratic vision.

The multicultural democratic critique must consider the changing demographic, cultural and class realities of modern post-industrial America. By the year 2000, one-third of the total US population will consist of people of color. Within seventy years, roughly half of America's entire population will be Latino, American Indian, Pacific American, Arab American and African-American. The ability to create a framework for multicultural democracy, inter-group dialogue, and interaction within and between the most progressive leaders, grassroots activists, intellectuals and working people of these communities will determine the future of American society itself. Our ability to transcend racial chauvinism and inter-ethnic hatred and the old definitions of "race," to recognize the class commonalities and joint social-justice interests of all groups in the restructuring of this nation's economy and social order, will be the key to constructing a nonracist democracy, transcending ancient walls of white violence, corporate power and class

privilege. By dismantling the narrow politics of racial identity and selective self-interest, by going beyond "black" and "white," we may construct new values, new institutions and new visions of an America beyond traditional racial categories and racial oppression.