

Another American Dilemma: Race vs. Immigration

February 26, 2010

EVER SINCE AMERICA'S NEGRO SLAVES were emancipated after the Civil War, our nation's generous immigration policies have worked against the interests and advancement of African Americans. And for almost as long, African Americans have, to a great extent, nurtured the belief that the post-Civil War open door policies which eventually attracted some 30 million European immigrants to our shores were part of a conscious plan — to some a conspiracy — to prevent the newly-freed slaves and their descendants from ever achieving self-sufficiency and full citizenship.

Readers of *New Politics* should heed the message of Stephen Steinberg's much-needed and well-timed essay (*New Politics* Summer, 2005) that the casting aside of black workers from the moment of Emancipation until the present has been no accident of history but a product of conscious design. African Americans have not been yet another ethnic/racial/religious group against whom our society discriminated for one or two generations only to be absorbed in the great "melting pot." It is true, of course, that since the arrival of English/Scotch immigrants in the early 17th Century virtually every succeeding group of immigrants has encountered discrimination by those who had arrived earlier. Indeed, this practice continues well into contemporary American life as immigrants from Japan, China, Korea and Vietnam, having paid their "dues," are well into the American mainstream while immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East presently bear the brunt as the "newly-arrived" targets of discrimination.

There is one common thread, however, that tends to unite the majorities of virtually all immigrant groups — whether they are fleeing from religious, ethnic or racial oppression or simply seeking better economic opportunities — and that is the almost immediate adoption of our garden variety anti-black bias. Thus, in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution, when hundreds of thousands of European socialists and anarchists emigrated to America and formed the rank-and-file of the nascent trade union movement, the exclusion of African American from these unions — and, therefore, from most jobs in the growing industrial base — become the norm. The charismatic leader of the new American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, was himself an unabashed racist. That tradition has comfortably carried through the history of the mainstream American labor movement during the 20th Century.

Even when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) opened its door to black workers during the 1930s, initiated by Mineworkers President John L. Lewis, it was soon diluted, then abandoned by the Walter Reuther-led CIO, especially after it merged with the AFL in 1955. Neither George Meany nor Lane Kirkland managed to provide more than cosmetic changes to the deeply entrenched racially exclusionary policies and practices of the vast majority of the AFL-CIO's trade unions. The courageous and articulate demands of A. Philip Randolph were rudely dismissed by Meany and ignored by Kirkland. The tireless and imaginative four decades of pressure from the NAACP, led relentlessly by Herbert Hill, produced only marginal gains for black workers in the end.

Almost alone, African Americans had been the object of local, state and federal laws which until 1965 prohibited them from becoming first class citizens. (The noxious anti-Asian laws enacted by the Pacific Rim states is perhaps the only exception.) This is not to argue that local and state practices have not also discriminated against Native Americans and Hispanics.

They have and continue to do so. But no group has ever faced the cumulative burden of racial

oppression to the degree experienced by black Americans.

I WRITE FROM A PARTICULAR SET of experiences which have formed my frame of reference. Since 1949, I actively participated in the civil rights "movement," primarily through the NAACP, as both a volunteer and a professional. Five decades of daily involvement exposed me to an almost universal belief among African Americans: that every immigrant group has been able to leap frog over black Americans, socially, economically and politically. While the empirical and statistical data appears to bear out this widespread belief (though the conclusions in respect to Hispanics are still unclear), there is another, and more disturbing dimension to this dilemma. The majority of blacks believe that the system has been rigged in favor of immigrants (and whites) and against African Americans.

After the widespread and costly riots in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the policemen who had beaten Rodney King — an event captured on video tape and broadcast thousands of times thereafter — some powerful Americans were deeply concerned by the vehemence with which so many of LA's blacks attacked the Korean community's shops and homes. After all, Korean-Americans had nothing to do with the Rodney King beating or with the jury in largely white Simi Valley. The venerable Ford Foundation called upon the NAACP's Executive Director Benjamin L. Hooks to examine this phenomenon with their executives. Ford then offered Hooks a major grant to try to bring together the black and Korean communities in Los Angeles. Hooks flew to the West Coast and met with the leaders of the nineteen NAACP branches in metro Los Angeles, each of whom was an educated individual of considerable achievement.

After Hooks broached the Ford Foundation's offer, however, he was met with a storm of rejection from the local leaders, virtually all of whom believed that the Korean immigrants had in relatively short time surpassed most African Americans economically and socially, despite the fact that few spoke English well. This process of rapid achievement, they asserted, could have only been the product of underhanded methods. For example, they believed that Korean shopholders, mostly in the greengrocer trade, were awarded bank loans expeditiously and without the collateral demanded of blacks. Few of the NAACP local leaders had any notion of the process by which Korean families worked for decades to reach American shores with a modest amount of capital in hand, or of how, by utilizing the extended family and remaining open for sixteen or more hours a day, they were able to eke out enough to support all of their family members. Nor were any of the black leaders aware of the numerous Korean-American trade groups which, after decades of business "success," often loaned the recently-arrived shopkeepers enough capital to continue to keep their doors open until they too reached firmer ground.

Instead of appreciating or even copying this modest business model, neighborhood blacks often resented the ability of Korean immigrants to sustain their enterprise and especially to do so without hiring local (black) workers. Numerous confrontations erupted between resentful blacks and Korean shopkeepers, many of whom suffered from cultural restraints which made them appear hostile to black customers. The same resentment is now being directed towards East Indian and Pakistani shopkeepers whose entire capital investment is also often located in black or other minority neighborhoods. During the mid-20th century, manifestations of similar hostility were directed towards Jewish and Italian shopkeepers in neighborhoods which had over time become largely African-American.

Though much of the "folk" explanation of the success of other groups has been myth-based within the African-American culture for decades, not all of it is, of course, without a foundation of fact. Recall that the Civil War ended just as the American Industrial Revolution was taking off in the Northeast and then the Midwest. The demand for labor in the new factories and mines appeared

inexhaustible by the late 1860s. At that moment in time, about four million slaves had been emancipated, of whom approximately one million were men over the age of eighteen. All had a heritage of hard work and many had the mechanical skills — iron work, carpentry, plumbing, masonry, construction, and so forth — which had for centuries built and maintained the South's grand plantations. Many were Civil War military veterans. Here was the historically unique opportunity to integrate the emancipated slaves into the larger society and to provide them with dignified work to support their families. Here was the chance for the federal government to not only atone for the oppressive past but to provide solutions to avoid terrible future problems. Yet not only did they and the entrepreneurs of the period avoid the problem; they were actually hostile to employment of blacks. Instead, they pursued immigration policies which brought to our shores thirty times the number of workers than were available among the newly-freed black men

This policy of attracting large-scale immigration has most often resulted in substantial labor surpluses which kept wages levels low and discouraged unionization. On two counts 1965 was the critical year:

1. The enactment of the Hart-Celler immigration measure opened the door to vastly expanded immigration; and,
2. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act became effective, barring employment discrimination while mandating remedial measures to correct the wrongs of the past. Instead of initiating affirmative measures to advance the employment rights of the most aggrieved groups — blacks and Native Americans — the Act expanded the definition of "minority" status to include women (a last minute afterthought) and later Hispanics, Asians, and the disabled. With those changes, the 1964 Act eventually covered some seventy percent of the population but the total economic pie failed to grow fast enough to provide decent jobs for all those covered. Not surprisingly, blacks and Native Americans were the least to benefit. Indeed, white employers turned most often to white women, then Asians, for new hires. (A similar pattern has been reflected in college admissions.)

In late August, 2005, a federal report revealed that fifty percent of black men in New York City were either unemployed or underemployed. Comparable patterns emerged in many other metropolitan regions. Real income, this report noted, has remained the same for almost five years. Does immigration affect this pattern? Since the liberalization of immigration in 1965, about thirty-five million immigrants have reached our shores — roughly equal to the entire African-American population today. With real unemployment (including those who have abandoned hope of a job) nearing ten percent, wages stagnant or worse, and unionization declining, common sense dictates that the steady flow of immigrants has impacted negatively — and harshly — on black workers, as well as on overall wage levels. The most compelling question of the moment is, now that advocates like Herbert Hill have passed away, who will lead the public campaign to demand decent job opportunities for African Americans, even if that requires a moratorium on the current level of immigration?

Footnotes