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America's Equality Promise: Can You Tell Me Where It's Gone?

Civil Rights and Social Wrongs: Black-White Relations since World War II by John Higham

Review by: Bryan K. Fair

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## *Review Essay*

### **AMERICA'S EQUALITY PROMISE: CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE IT'S GONE?**

#### ***Civil Rights and Social Wrongs: Black-White Relations Since World War II.***

Edited by John Higham. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. viii + 223 pp. Notes, list of contributors, and index. \$28.50.

Eleven score and three years ago, the United States embarked on a new political enterprise, declaring all men are equal. The emptiness of that equality declaration was apparent from American slavery, which was then over a century old and which continued with constitutional endorsement for most of the next one hundred years. That nefarious bargain, among others beyond the scope of this review, has haunted the American civic soul to the present, supported by resounding approvals from legislative, judicial, and executive chambers, as well as private folkways resisting change. Thus, the United States Supreme Court ruled that persons of African ancestry had no rights which a white man was bound to respect<sup>1</sup> and government-sponsored white supremacy did not run afoul of the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> Similar preferential decisions became the rule for most of the nation's history, delimiting social, economic, and political opportunities for Americans based solely on the color of one's skin. As a result, American caste emerged with whiteness as a chief form of currency.

In 1954, Thurgood Marshall and others persuaded a unanimous Supreme Court that white supremacy in public schools was inherently unconstitutional.<sup>3</sup> Racial segregation denied equality because it treated colored Americans as outcasts—exiles in their own land. In August 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., captured the conscience of most Americans when, reflecting on national racial injustice and turmoil, he said he had a dream his four little children would one day in America be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. What has come of their quest for equality? Has the United States eliminated its once avowedly white supremacist creed, supplanting it with equality of opportunity? To put the question more precisely, has the United States eliminated racial caste caused by over three centuries of white privilege? And is eliminating racial caste constitutionally equivalent to promoting racial supremacy?

In John Higham's *Civil Rights and Social Wrongs*, the authors wrestle with

many vexing questions regarding the status of race relations in the United States at the close of the twentieth century. The book makes for valuable reading with thoughtful, sometimes controversial arguments. It is also immensely readable, benefitting from effective writing and organization. The book situates readers principally in the 1940s postwar period, examining black-white race relations and racial attitudes since then. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, this bi-polar critique diminishes in effectiveness. Nonetheless, the book remains relevant specifically for what it says about relationships among blacks and whites. The authors describe United States race relations, noting some of the most salient changes, especially the improved status in the lives of many African Americans and lessened white resistance to integration. Finally, it contains plenty that will frustrate ideologic allies and enemies alike, partly because it reveals significant nuances on controversial topics frequently omitted from policy debates.

*Civil Rights and Social Wrongs* is an excellent collection of ten trenchant essays on various aspects of black-white relations since World War II—the Civil Rights Movement, residential segregation, black nationalism, affirmative action, diversity, racial identity, and multiculturalism—written by leading sociologists, philosophers, historians, a political scientist, a constitutional lawyer, and an American Studies specialist. The interdisciplinary approach animates the whole book, revealing the value of collaborative thinking and writing.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt Higham's eminence and careful pruning aided the whole project. The book is rich with historical detail and personal recollection from participants who, for example, like Higham walked with others in Selma to protest black political disenfranchisement. The reader learns from firsthand accounts why, for example, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was necessary nearly a century after passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Without it, many whites were intent on keeping all political power for themselves. Higham writes as a participant/critic, with an insider's perspective and passion.

The book opens and closes with Higham's keen eye and calm voice. The introductory essay, perhaps the best of the group, accomplishes two objectives elegantly. First, it sketches some of the key events that led to the Civil Rights Movement, describing how that essential multi-racial coalition fell apart. Then, it previews the intersecting themes of the remaining essays.

Higham rightly asserts that the Civil Rights Movement had numerous antecedents and a long gestation. One cause was the Great Migration of blacks away from the rigid controls of the South. Another significant catalyst came from new scholarship by whites and blacks that totally discredited many racist assumptions which had supported much prior research. Also, extant discrimination against blacks caused an avalanche of criticism, especially after fighting the Nazis. Another cause was massive resistance to school desegregation orders. Thus, before Emmett Till was murdered, before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, and before the carnage in Selma, Birmingham, and elsewhere,

the movement was fomenting. The Movement was a culmination of appeals to conscience dating back well before twentieth century. It was part of an ongoing effort to reconcile asserted American principles with American practice.

Higham rightly notes that the clearest beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement were those blacks who joined America's growing middle class. For most blacks, however, the Movement left them in squalid, overcrowded urban tenements of despair. As Higham writes, "[Lower-class blacks] knew that job discrimination was pervasive, that great faraway victories for civil rights were making no difference in their own daily lives, and that their better-off neighbors were joining the exodus from choking cities to green, segregated suburbs, leaving the black masses penned in decaying ghettos" (p. 14).

As segregated ghetto populations swelled, so did black discontent. Higham recalls King's eloquent statement on this deprivation: "The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity and finds himself an exile in his own land" (p. 14). The result was a period of national racial disorder, with rioting and looting occurring in over 100 cities. Most of the loss of life and destruction occurred in the black ghettos, worsening already gloomy conditions for most African Americans. For those in despair, the Movement had not gone far enough. There had been no reconstruction and no redemption. Their demand for "Black Power" bewildered most whites and tore a deep hole through the Movement's coalition.

The fact is that so many persons and institutions have called for reconciliation but only a few have insisted that it include a realignment in power. Thus, one reason for so much pessimism and modern cynicism is the realization that most whites will never voluntarily disavow the privileges of whiteness. Higham does not develop this point. Undoubtedly, as he asserts, the Black Power slogan had numerous meanings: "rebellion, separation, or exodus from white America. For others it stood for little more than a sharply heightened ethnic solidarity. Black Power was a call for racial self-determination" (pp. 17–18). On the other hand, many blacks were by then committed to integration and could not abide calls for separateness. As important, white supporters of civil rights laws had no place in Black Power organizations. Thus, as the 1960s came to an end, black America was divided and white America was all but given up on.

However, while the multi-ethnic coalition was lost, the Movement lived on in the nation's revised laws. De jure segregation was gone and some integration resulted, but officials did no more than had to be done to meet the letter of the new laws. The laws' spirit was held hostage by those simply opposed to yielding white hegemony.

Federal authorities, who were dissatisfied with continuing discrimination, initiated affirmative action policies or administrative preferences for racial minorities and then other disadvantaged groups. Higham is partly correct that "[t]here was nothing novel or constitutionally irregular about governments or private bureaucracies favoring a class of citizens who need special help" (p.

20). (I have argued elsewhere that there is a constitutional difference between policies that advance racial caste and policies seeking to eliminate it.<sup>5</sup>) Another consequence of the collapse of the civil rights coalition was massive white (and some black) flight from urban America, away from crime, violence, decay, unemployment, and disorder. Those blacks and whites who remained competed for inadequate housing and employment, exacerbating longstanding antagonisms and suspicions. Today, multiculturalism, diversity, and affirmative action, the topics of the remaining essays, are concepts which sharply divide the nation. Higham's historical review is unsurprisingly first-rate. However, he misses an opportunity to write much more about white privilege and black caste. To end caste, the United States must end white hegemony.

Lawrence Bobo's essay on changing racial attitudes forcefully challenges those pessimists (like myself) who insist that little has changed, while at the same time noting a revised racialized black image in the white mind. No doubt Bobo is correct in his three essential conclusions: 1) Jim Crow racism has receded from view and been supplanted by a new set of attitudes justifying the status of blacks; 2) the significance of race in social life continues because direct discrimination persists; and 3) many whites and blacks who link black culture with ghetto conditions, such as family dissolution, welfare dependency, crime, failing schools, and drug use, have adopted retrenchment policies on aid programs, further alienating many blacks.

Has there been a sea change, "a fundamental transformation of social norms with regard to race," as Bobo suggests (p. 38)? For me, national survey data confirm that many whites believe enough has been done to aid blacks and that many blacks are themselves responsible for their current despair: many whites are unwilling to accept blacks as their civic, human equals. Bobo explains this rejection based on negative stereotypes about blacks and other persons of color, as well as sharply different perceptions of the prevalence of racial discrimination. While he correctly identifies the white/nonwhite gulf, he thinks Andrew Hacker and Derrick Bell overstate the significance of racism today. Regrettably, I believe that Bobo indirectly trivializes the impact of white racism, past and present. Even though I do not think the color-line is unmodifiable, I think whites have done very little to dismantle racial caste in the United States. To be colored in this country is to be an outsider.

Lawrence Fuch's essay on the changing meaning of civil rights is compelling, reflecting his and others' angst over racial/ethnic politics at the close of the century. Those colonials placed in power by English charter replicated the status patterns at home, refusing to extend basic civil rights to those who did not fit their privileged mold. "All men are created equal" was not intended literally. Much of the nation's history has been linked to this limited extension of civil rights and what has and should be done to remedy the denial of rights to all. Fuch's goal is to move debate and policy beyond color, to ensure that the American constitutional protections extend to all individuals, with appropriate

remedial assistance until 2010 only for native-born African Americans who were denied the nation's protection for most of its history. This goal is admirable but does not reach far enough. Caste in America extends beyond African Americans. On the other hand, to be classified or to appear white is a protective shield, a pass saying the bearer belongs in most places.

I propose a goal that insists that government can and should eliminate caste without running afoul of the Constitution and I would not place a time limit on achieving this goal. Therefore, I hope Erwin Chemerinsky's important affirmative action essay will have broad readership. His critique is that much of the affirmative action debate, while couched in noble rhetoric, "treats affirmative action as if it were one type of government action for a single purpose" (p. 87). He is correct that a meaningful discussion of it must focus on what types of actions are permissible, under what circumstances. He further divides his analysis among goals of affirmative action, techniques of affirmative action, and the need for affirmative action. I embrace his plea for a more careful, meaningful debate. Indeed, I support affirmative action to eliminate caste—racial caste, gender caste, and other forms. I do not support affirmative action to advance or extend race or gender supremacy.

Douglas Massey's essay on the significance of residential segregation on the perpetuation of black poverty is a refreshingly candid discussion of how too many blacks live and die. Why so many black ghettos? Massey suggests many influences, including white prejudice against black neighbors and discrimination in the banking and real estate industries. He insists that the federal government has tolerated and at times actively intervened to sustain segregation, and he concludes that as long as residential segregation persists, black poverty will be endemic and race divisions will grow.

Massey's claim that a distinctive pattern of high black residential segregation cannot be attributed to class, education, or occupation, is a devastating blow to those who believe that class not race matters most today. Massey illustrates another example of a principle that whites accept in word but not in deed: Sure, most whites will say they support open housing, but as black percentages rise in a community, white demand for that neighborhood diminishes sharply. This phenomena reflects contrasting attitudes toward integration.

Massey does not claim that white prejudice operates alone. Housing audits reflect that blacks face subtle but unmistakable discrimination from realtors and banks. One common form of bias is racial steering—whites are shown housing for whites and blacks are shown housing near other blacks. Another is less favorable financial assistance. Finally, and most important, Massey reveals the link between federal red-lining of black neighborhoods and the denial of FHA-backed loans and similar practices by private banks since the 1950s. Another aspect of housing discrimination is the manner in which urban renewal policies placed housing projects away from whites in isolated, concentrated locations. Because government, federal and local, is implicated in the creation

of the ghetto and in the lack of integrated housing that would be available but for discrimination, it should be permissible for government to eliminate this form of caste. Massey recommends eight ways that government could dismantlement America's ghettos. His recommendations merit full consideration.

Many Americans fear terms like multiculturalism or diversity because they believe such concepts threaten significant American traditions and principles. For example, in his essay, Nathan Glazer contends, "[t]he system worked, and it is still working, to fully incorporate all elements into our society and polity" (p. 120). But surely Glazer would not defend the right of whites, for example, to determine what rights blacks will hold, or the right of men to delimit the rights of women. Yet, when he praises "old America," he indirectly praises those traditions and the present consequences of those practices.

Glazer is concerned about the diversity movement's goal, especially in the field of education, to promote multicultural sensitivity—a discourse that respects people and the circumstances of their lives. Often, critics link multiculturalism and political correctness, and Glazer describes a panoply of battles over multiculturalism, especially in curriculum reform or affirmative action policies. He fears that some of the same counter-majoritarian processes that swept affirmative action into the mainstream will operate to the same end with multicultural education. The result, he contends, is that curricula are re-shaped to emphasize one culture, namely black culture and history in many schools. This strikes me as grossly overstated. Glazer must know that American schools could do a better job, not only teaching reading, math, and writing but also in revealing the American story more accurately. Glazer likewise seems troubled that at the center of calls for multiculturalism is black oppression or black studies proposals but that other groups like women are lumped in as well. Yet, I fail to see any harm in celebrating the nation's diversity. Why would that ever be a problem if that diversity is the nation's greatest attribute?

Similarly, Diane Ravitch poses the provocative question, does the United States have a common civic culture, uniting its citizens across their differences. She concludes yes, finding its source in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and general principles of liberty, equality, and government by consent.

I do not think that Ravitch makes the case that this common culture "belongs to all Americans" (p. 138). Instead, some have had a greater claim on this culture than others. For example, one cannot maintain that women were free before they were given the right to vote or to join all-male occupations. Indeed, the pretense that men can give rights to women presupposes male dominance. Likewise, Americans of color have been denied liberty and equality for virtually all the nation's history. And, today, race and gender still matter. Pretending otherwise will not advance change.

Ravitch describes another layer of the common culture. Different Americans believe that national identity requires different things: assimilation, pluralism,

or separatism. She promotes a public policy that embraces individualism and pluralism, concluding separatist communities should be left alone so long as they respect the law. Also, Ravitch advocates an educational policy that teaches about diversity but not one that advances ethnic pride or antagonism.

Jean Bethke Elshtain and Christopher Beem's essay is another that worries about too much modern cynicism. They write, "a free society cannot long survive widespread cynicism among its citizens" (p. 152). This important observation masks several others that are equally significant. I dare say the writers had in mind white male cynicism as the benchmark for risk. For generations, others have expressed widespread cynicism with only modest change. Elshtain and Beem are also concerned about the meaning of multiculturalism. Their critique is that the concept has meant at one time a compelled national identity—American—while today it portends rigid ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual orientation categories that matter more than intellect, character, or common good. For them, the great challenge to American democracy is finding the balance between national unity and difference, locating a commitment to the whole and a respect for variation. They are certainly correct that differences among Americans extend beyond pigmentation, especially between whites and blacks.

While Elshtain and Beem do not directly propose an assault on caste, they assert that the only real, sustainable community is local, intimating that race conflicts must be addressed at that level, not nationally. Moreover, citing Martin Luther King, Jr., they insist that our goal should be a spiritually integrated community built on pluralism and consensus. Elshtain and Beem (as do Glazer and Ravitch) fail to acknowledge that for many Americans of color their public schools have forced upon them Anglocentrism. The addition of enriched, rigorous curricula in our schools will advance the goal of blending and sharing culture.

Gerald Early's essay examines a different aspect of the meaning of diversity, opining that the United States is a difficult place to understand because of its unique history, namely the struggles between masters and slaves and ex-masters and ex-slaves. He notes the central irony in the relations between blacks and whites: "[they] are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they alike depend on the same reality," as James Baldwin put it (p. 163). Moreover, a rhetoric of freedom masks the complete entrapment of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, between blacks and whites. I appreciate the directness with which Early writes.

Early deftly sketches the complex meanings of diversity. Does it refer to European immigrants who came to the United States and made good? Does it call to mind a blended, shared experience based on principles of liberty or equality? Being American has local, regional, and national aspects, as well as cultural components that reach beyond American borders. Here, Early suggests

that the dualism that Du Bois attributed to African Americans is to some degree part of the psyche of all Americans. But, he adds, the diversity movement will not likely succeed because it "has been inextricably intertwined with the idea of racial cure" (p. 172). The movement will not cause real change because it has failed to reach the language of politics and power; it never challenges the assumptions of categorization in the United States. At bottom, Early concludes that the diversity awareness movement fails to explore the most salient questions about what it means to be American, black or white. I think Early's meditation has much to commend it.

In the final essay, Higham reminds readers of the cyclical nature of race reform movements, the ever-changing landscape of progress and retrenchment. Higham locates in each American reconstruction rising racial discontent, liberation and euphoria, and breakdown and retreat. And he asserts that, with the exception of World War I, most racial progress has followed sustained war involvement. Higham recalls the modest, yet clear racial progress made in the 1780s and 1790s, in the 1860s and 1870s, and in the 1960s. Retrogression has followed each period of progress as many Americans called for an end to public strife or as they recoiled from unfavorable economic climates.

Higham also notes a striking difference in the three reconstructions: it has been only in the third that blacks have been in the center, leading and deciding policy in partnership with whites. The loss of that partnership in the late 1960s, Higham believes, "was a significantly contributing cause of the movement's decline" (p. 188). He is certainly correct that the United States today is not what it was; significant change has survived each period of retreat, and the next reconstruction will require a coalition among different groups committed to a common good. This means that those who live in caste must help themselves rise out of it, and those who live in privilege must support policies which seek to eliminate caste.

By the end of the book, Higham returns to one of his central points—genuine reconstruction will require Americans with darker skin to work with whites. Undoubtedly, this is correct, but in some ways it misses the point. It suggests that all Americans have been obstacles to equality, that colored folks imposed caste on themselves. Of course, that idea turns history on its head. While many whites might find it hard to accept, they bear an enormous burden and challenge to dismantle caste. And they have ample power to achieve that result.

In the final analysis, unfortunately the book does not fully explore the contours of modern racial caste or offer solutions to the nation's sordid history of social preferences for whites. Indeed, a central weakness is that it understates the historic and contemporary significance of white privilege in the United States. Even though the contributors correctly cite the many ways that modern laws make much racial discrimination illegal, the book does not lay bare accumulated white privilege and domination. This failure to grapple with the enor-

mous historic benefit of being classified or appearing white, and the concomitant burden for those not so classified, undermines some of the authors' subsequent critiques of the legitimacy of remedial affirmative action, diversity, and multiculturalism.

Nevertheless, *Civil Rights & Social Wrongs* deserves broad readership. It raises many important questions about race relations in the next century. My cynicism about substantive progress in race relations in the future should cause no despair. I do not think that all cynicism is bad or that it has done irreparable damage to our national identity. For me, it has checked American lies, fairy tales and myths that no American should believe. Put simply, American heritage is certainly less inspiring if you are relegated to outsider status, if you cannot belong on equal terms.

Bryan K. Fair  
University of Alabama School of Law

## NOTES

1. *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 691 (1857).
2. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
3. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
4. The project was advanced by The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies through a symposium marking the thirtieth anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
5. Bryan K. Fair, *Notes of a Racial Caste Baby: Color Blindness and the End of Affirmative Action* (1997).