

“THE NEW RACIAL DOMAIN”

The nearly forty million Americans of African descent find ourselves in an unprecedented situation, with the slow demise of affirmative action. The enemies of racial justice have not (yet) reinstalled “colored” and “white” signs at restrooms and restaurants. Jim Crow segregation isn’t just around the corner. Yet something more powerful and deadly seems to be on the agenda.

Several years ago in my book, The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life, I advanced the thesis that the prison-industrial complex was the central, driving factor behind this social transformation. I now think that formulation was too angular and ahistorical. A more dialectical approach would stress the intersectionalities between social variables and institutions that are currently devastating the lives of millions of black people. Simply put, the matrix of what can be called the New Racial Domain is a deadly triangle, or unholy trinity of structural racism: mass unemployment, mass incarceration, mass disfranchisement. This triangle of “color-blind racism” creates an endless cycle of economic marginalization, and social exclusion, culminating in civil and social death.

The cycle of destruction starts with chronic, mass unemployment and poverty. Real incomes for the working poor actually fell significantly during Clinton’s second term in office. After the 1996 welfare act, the social safety net was largely pulled apart. As the Bush administration took power, chronic joblessness spread to black workers in the manufacturing sector. By early 2004, in cities such as New York, fully one-half of all black male adults are now outside of the paid labor force. By January 2004, the number of families on public assistance had declined to two million, down from five million families on welfare in 1995. New regulations and restrictions intimidate thousands of poor people from requesting public assistance.

Mass unemployment inevitably feeds mass incarceration. About one-third of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of their arrests, and others averaged less than \$20,000 annual incomes in the year prior to their incarceration. When the Attica prison insurrection occurred in upstate New York in 1971, there were only 12,500 prisoners in New York State's correctional facilities, and about 300,000 prisoners nationwide. By 2001, New York State held over 71,000 women and men in its prisons; nationally, 2.1 million were imprisoned.

Today about five million Americans are arrested annually, and roughly one in five Americans possess a criminal record. Mandatory-minimum sentencing laws adopted in the 1980s and 1990s in many states stripped judges of their discretionary powers in sentencing, imposing draconian terms on first-time and non-violent offenders. Parole has been made more restrictive as well, and in 1995 Pell grant subsidies supporting educational programs for prisoners were ended. For those fortunate enough to successfully navigate the criminal justice bureaucracy and emerge from incarceration, they discover that both the federal and state governments explicitly prohibit the employment of convicted ex-felons in hundreds of vocations. The cycle of unemployment starts again.

In seven states, former prisoners convicted of a felony lose their voting rights for life. In the majority of states, individuals on parole and probation cannot vote. About 15 percent of all African-American males nationally are either permanently or currently disfranchised. In Mississippi, one-third of all black men are unable to vote for the remainder of their lives. In Florida, 818,000 residents cannot vote for life.

Even temporary disfranchisement fosters a disruption of civic engagement and involvement in public affairs. This can lead to "civil death," the destruction of the capacity for collective agency and resistance. This process of depolitization undermines even grassroots, non-electoral-oriented organizing. The deadly triangle of the New Racial Domain constantly and continuously grows unchecked.

Not too far in the distance lies the social consequence of these policies: an unequal, two-tiered, uncivil society, characterized by a governing hierarchy of middle- to upper-class “citizens” who own nearly all property and financial assets, and a vast subaltern of quasi- or subcitizens encumbered beneath the cruel weight of permanent unemployment, discriminatory courts and sentencing procedures, dehumanized prisons, voting disfranchisement, residential segregation, and the elimination of most public services for the poor.

The later group is virtually excluded from any influence in a national public policy. Institutions that once provided space for upward mobility and resistance for working people such as unions have been largely dismantled. Integral to all of this is racism, sometimes openly vicious and unambiguous, but much more frequently presented in race neutral, color-blind language.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of Public Affairs, Political Science and History, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. “Along the Color Line” is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable’s column is also available on the Internet at www.manningmarable.net.