

“THE DEATH OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION”
Part II of II

We must be frank about the weaknesses of affirmative action, of which two were especially significant. Affirmative action policies first were crafted in reaction to the struggles and demands of the Civil Rights Movement. The central issue, in the language of the day, was the status of the Negro in American society. Groups who were not originally part of the national debate over segregation, or who entered the country after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, materially benefited in real terms from blacks' sacrifices. By 2000, the overwhelming number of beneficiaries of affirmative action programs, however, were non-black.

In a recent conversation with legal scholar Lani Guinier, she estimated that 73 percent of the beneficiaries of minority-oriented, affirmative action programs at Harvard University were non-black. In 1995, several years after my arrival at Columbia University, I convinced the administration to create a standing Minority Affairs Committee for the graduate school, and to substantially increase its scholarship funds for “underrepresented minorities” in Ph.D. programs.

Increasingly, individuals who by traditional U.S. standards would be considered “white” demanded financial support on fragmentary and even fictive connections with American Indian, Hispanic, Caribbean, and African-American heritages. Asian Americans, who are underrepresented in some humanities disciplines, have demanded race-based scholarships for the humanities. Some “biracial” individuals have attempted to make a case for themselves as a special, discriminated class worthy of relief.

Affirmative action was a beneficial reform that could have worked well long-term only if “race” stood still. It doesn't. Race is a dynamic, changing social relationship grounded in structural inequality. As the human composition of American society's social order has shifted, the lived reality of structural racism has also changed in everyday existence. The racial element has never been incidental in the structural arrangements of U.S. society. The lack of assets

accumulation severely has been crippling to the development of all kinds of African-American institutions and communities as a whole. Affirmative action as an approach to racial reform did not address the necessary transfer of wealth needed to materially develop black communities. Only reparations could begin to address this.

The rising generation of middle class, African American young professionals are ill-prepared for the post-affirmative action era ahead. Many are so disconnected from social movements and the struggles of their own people that they are unable to clearly interpret or understand what is happening in the public policy arena. In higher education, some have come to believe their career advancement is based solely on their own merit, and that the severe reductions in the numbers of black graduate students, undergrads, administrators, and faculty will not affect them negatively.

Others worry about the loss of affirmative action, but only from the perspective of the reduction of future career opportunities. Even many younger African-American intellectuals who have liberal and progressive political views, lack any theoretical grounding in political economy or practical, intimate experiences working with black working class and grassroots mass-style organizations, and consequently cannot fashion an appropriate praxis for becoming constructively engaged in the current struggles. This is, in many ways, the first black generation adrift from its collective racial history.

Affirmative action and more generally the philosophy of liberal integrationism was largely responsible for the widespread historical amnesia and color-blindness among many under-thirty blacks. Integration rarely asked black people what kind of American society they wanted, it only talked about what our existing structure could permit us to achieve. Integration emphasized individual opportunity and symbolic representation, rather than the removal of deep structural barriers that perpetuated inequality. Integrationists usually spoke a language of the nation-state, rather than a discourse of internationalism and Pan-Africanism.

It did not anticipate that after Jim Crow's demise that an even more powerful racial domain could be erected on its ashes, warehousing millions of blacks in prisons, and disfranchising millions more. An oppressed people without total recall of their history of exploitation cannot craft a new history of liberation.

The restructuring and/or elimination of race-based educational programs is also occurring in a period in which the U.S. government is aggressively pressuring universities to suppress dissent and to curtail traditional academic freedoms. In early March 2004, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control stopped 70 American scientists and physicians from traveling to Cuba to attend an international symposium on "coma and death." Some of the scholars received warning letters from the Treasury Department, promising severe criminal or civil penalties if they violated the embargo against Cuba. In late 2003, the Treasury Department issued a warning to U.S. publishers that they would have to obtain "special licenses to edit papers" written by scholars and scientific researchers currently living in Cuba, Libya, Iran, or Sudan. All violators, even including the editors and officers of professional associations sponsoring scholarly journals, potentially may be subjected to fines up to \$500,000 and prison sentences up to ten years.

These facts may appear to be disconnected from affirmative action's demise and far afield from Black Studies, yet they are actually closely linked. The growing suppression of intellectual freedom and the first amendment inside academic institutions and professional associations, and surveillance of intellectuals, sets the stage for an attempt to restore the *ancien regime*, the essential buttresses of white hegemonic authority that higher education in America once proudly embodied. To take liberties with Fanon, the Negro in higher education is being pressured toward one future: to become white in the name of "diversity." In order to exist, we must culturally cease to exist as blacks.

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.