

# Perspectives on Our National Experience: Race, Class, and Gender

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On April 18, 1989, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) held its First Annual Provost's Mini-Symposium, titled "Perspectives on Our National Experience: Race, Class, and Gender." Examining the role of color, class, and sexual difference in American society over more than a century, the one-day conference not only sought to highlight the distinct impact of these forces, but more importantly their interaction. Appropriately, the conference presenters represented an interdisciplinary roster of scholars from history, political science, economics, and black and women's studies. While the conference was indeed a success, a close examination of the various papers and the "mini" format reveals certain limitations.

Focusing on the black experience, historians John Bracey (University of Massachusetts at Amherst) and William Chaffe (Duke University) set the historical backdrop and much of the tone for the remaining papers. Bracey analyzed the black experience from the 1880s through 1915. Describing the period as the "nadir" in African-American history, he discussed the fall of Reconstruction, the massive reversal of black enfranchisement, the intensification of legal and extra-legal forms of racial intimidation such as lynchings, increasing entrapment of blacks within the sharecropping, convict-lease, and debt-peonage systems, and growing constraints on the creation of a black artisan class.

While the experiences of black men and women, elites and workers, were constrained by the foregoing dynamics of class and race, Bracey argued that there were important differences along gender and to some extent class lines. When black women formed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in the 1890s, for example, they adopted the motto "lifting as we climb" and protested against gender inequality within and outside the black community. On the other hand, as black elite figures such as Booker T. Washington sought to turn Tuskegee Institute into a training ground for "a docile labor force" and W. E. B. DuBois used Atlanta University to launch a series of social-scientific studies designed to eradicate racism through education, the black masses took hold of their own traditional religious and folk culture and helped to forge new forms of cultural expression like ragtime music and the beginnings of jazz.

From such deep cultural wellsprings, Bracey concluded, the black working class and poor developed the optimism, resolve, and fortitude to "move on and upward." While such family- and community-based cultural responses certainly helped blacks to survive hard times, Bracey might have given greater attention to the specific economic strategies that black sharecroppers developed for survival in

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the highly exploitive southern economy. From the vantage point of black workers, for example, he might have explored the role of transiency, part-time work in nonagricultural pursuits like sawmills, railroads, and coal mines, and female and child labor.<sup>1</sup>

In his presentation titled "The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s," William Chaffe examined the social bases, meaning, and impact of the modern civil rights movement. A new generation of Americans born after 1968, Chaffe argued, have absorbed a series of myths about the civil rights movement: 1) that it was a thoroughly integrated movement of black and whites together, walking hand in hand against the citadel of Jim Crow; 2) that it was essentially a movement of heroes and heroines, like Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Rosa Parks; and 3) that it sprang forth suddenly without the benefit of a solid historical legacy.

Drawing upon evidence from a variety of southern cities, especially Greensboro, North Carolina, Chaffe effectively portrayed the modern civil rights movement as a mass-based black movement with links to a long legacy of political activism within the African-American community. The black community not only nurtured mass action, but it also gave rise to less well-known grass-roots leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper and voter registration activist; JoAnn Robinson, president of Montgomery's black Women's Political Council; and E. D. Nixon, president of the Montgomery local of the Brotherhood of Sleeping-Car Porters. However convincing his presentation, Chaffe tended to treat the movement as more unified than it actually was. He might have acknowledged how the civil rights movement split the black community at a certain level and failed to fully overcome important intraracial cleavages along class, ideological, and even generational lines.

Economist Juliet Schor (Harvard University) delivered a paper titled "The Labor Force in the 1980's." Describing the painful transition from manufacturing to the service economy over the past two decades, Schor emphasized what she called the end of "the old order." She carefully analyzed the shift from the male-dominated, heavily unionized, work force in basic manufacturing and extractive industries (like steel, auto, and coal, where white men made sufficient wages to support their wives and children at home) to new, predominantly female, low-wage, non-union, and service-producing enterprises like fast-food chains. While Schor analyzed a variety of factors that underlay the shift from manufacturing to services, she emphasized gender bias as the major source of low wages in the service sector. Schor acknowledged the need for a strong labor movement in the implementation of her suggestions for reform, but she failed to assess the role of race in shaping either the contemporary status or the probable future of the service sector. By failing to confront the issue of race in the service sector, Schor's prescriptions for change, as well as her analysis of the problem, were incomplete.

In comparative perspective, Frances Fox Piven (political science, City University of New York) surveyed a series of recent changes in American social

welfare policy. While programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) expanded during the 1960s, she argued, the federal government helped to shore up business profits by cutting corporate taxes, escalating military spending, deregulating business practices, busting unions, and, most importantly, cutting social welfare programs like AFDC during the 1970s and 1980s. Since women and racial and ethnic minorities were disproportionately represented among the needy, the cuts were that much easier to implement. Unlike several of the presenters, however, Piven remained sensitive to the link between social welfare policy and changes within the larger political economy of international capitalism.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall (women's studies, Spelman College) reinforced Piven's major propositions, but emphasized the essentially racial dimensions of recent attacks on social welfare programs and affirmative action. According to Guy-Sheftall, the feminization of poverty concept, implicit in much of Piven's and Schor's analyses, is too abstract because it fails to confront the troublesome racial dimensions of poverty, especially black female poverty. Although black women are by no means monolithic in class terms, she argued, they have shared the debilitating impact of gender and racial discrimination over the past two decades. While Guy-Sheftall affirmed her belief in "feminism" as part of the solution to black female poverty, it was an intensely race-conscious feminism. As she put it, the extent to which racism "continues to be so central in the bone marrow of American culture" means it will be very difficult to launch a unified feminist movement.

"Perspectives on Our National Experience" was indeed a major achievement. It brought together an interdisciplinary panel of scholars on the most pressing issues confronting late-twentieth-century American society. Yet, as suggested above, a close examination of the papers reveals certain limitations as well as important contributions. Partly a consequence of the "mini-symposium" format, significant temporal, theoretical, and substantive issues were absent from the analyses presented. For example, although John Bracey provided a telling look at black history between reconstruction and 1915 and although William Chaffe carefully explored the issue of race from about the mid-1950s through the early 1970s, the important changes during World Wars I and II and the Great Depression received little comment. These were the crucial years of black industrial working-class formation, increasing ghettoization, and the nationalization of the "race problem" through the massive migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North and West. Greater attention to this period is essential for understanding race as a historical phenomenon that changed significantly over time and under particular social, economic, and political circumstances.

On the conceptual and theoretical level, the conference needed a sharply focused introductory or concluding paper: one that dealt explicitly with the central issues of race, class, and gender, their intersection, and their relationship to the changing nature of America's involvement in a worldwide capitalist economy.<sup>2</sup> A recent conference held at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., on industrial

democracy and the workplace is instructive. According to James Gilbert, "The conference concluded with a clear sense that labor relations had evolved through three related but distinct phases in the twentieth century, starting with industrial democracy, passing through a stable mid-period of negotiated, contractual relationships, and into a new and highly volatile period as international capital rewrites the rules of production and distribution."<sup>3</sup> The way in which class, race, and gender relations were intricately bound up with, shaped by, and in turn shaped capitalist development in American society remained to a large degree implicit rather than explicit components of the IUP symposium.<sup>4</sup>

Provost Hilda Richards of Indiana University of Pennsylvania deserves credit for stimulating critical thinking on the important role of race, class, and gender in "our national experience." Coordinated by historian Irwin Marcus, the symposium was part of an ongoing series of symposia on contemporary issues in American society. The next symposium in the series will be "Searching for New Horizons: The University at the Gateway of the 21st Century."

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–30* (Urbana, Ill., 1987), 12–38.

2. For a suggestive set of essays, see Jerry Lembcke and Ray Hutchinson, eds., *Research in Urban Sociology: Race, Class, and Urban Change, vol. 1* (Greenwich, 1989).

3. James Gilbert, "Defining Industrial Democracy: Work Relations in Twentieth Century America," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 35 (Spring 1989):81–84.

4. Unfortunately, presentation of a paper titled "Work and Workers in the 1980s" by Harley Shaiken (University of California at San Diego) was canceled at the last minute.