REYNOLDS FARLEY

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BLACKS and WHITES Narrowing the Gap?

Reynolds Farley

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Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations

Foreword

For much of the first half of this century, American social science was actively engaged in overcoming what Walter Lippmann in 1922 identified as "the central difficulty of self-government" in the modern world, namely, the difficulty of creating a public competent to confront complexity and change without retreating into political passivity. Quantitative social scientists set out to devise ways of tracking and analyzing change that would make it comprehensible to the public. Social "reporting," as originally conceived, was integral to the underlying political purpose of social science: the accommodation of a plurality of interests in the context of expanding popular expectations.

The classic monument to this commitment was the two-volume *Recent Social Trends*, prepared by the President's Research Committee on Recent Social Trends and published in 1933. The blending of science and public information characteristic of the day is expressed in the summary of the committee's findings: "in the formulation of . . . new and emergent values, in the construction of the new symbols to thrill men's souls, in the contrivance of the new institutions and adaptations useful in the fulfillment of new aspirations, we trust that this review of recent social trends may prove of value to the American public."

Optimism about the role of empirical social science continued into the era of the Great Depression, although it came to emphasize the problems introduced by change rather than progressive improvements. This work nonetheless reflected engaged, hopeful concern, as

vi Foreword

did the contributions of American social scientists to the war effort that followed. When social science emerged from World War II, however, its characteristic posture was far more ironic than formerly, less confident in the meaning of its indicators, more hermetic, more specialized. The task of systematic description and analysis of recent social change fell further away from the ordinary activities of academic social scientists.

As editors of the series Social Trends in the United States, we contend that social science has a collective responsibility to report findings about society to the public, in order to contribute to the informed choices that are necessary in a democracy. If the reports of social scientists are to be useful to citizens, their authors must define questions for educational and political relevance and must translate technical terminology into the language of common discourse. Modern statistical methods make it possible to trace change along a large number of dimensions in which the pattern of change over time is rarely visible to people directly involved in it, and to discern how change in one dimension may affect change in others. Such information, in compact and comprehensible form, can make a useful contribution to political discussion.

This is the rationale of the series, which is sponsored by the Committee on Social Indicators of the Social Science Research Council. The committee invites authoritative scholars to contribute manuscripts on particular topics and has other scholars review each manuscript with attention to both the scientific and the broadly educational purposes of the series. Nevertheless, the volumes in the series are the authors' own, and thus far from uniform. Each is free-standing, but we hope that the effect of the series will be cumulative. Taken together, these volumes will not constitute an overall contemporary history: historical accounts evoke context rather than extract single dimensions of change. The series, however, will provide insights into interconnected aspects of contemporary society that no contemporary history—and no one interested in understanding our present condition—should ignore.

The Social Indicators Committee of the Social Science Research Council consists of Kenneth C. Land (Chair), University of Texas; Richard A. Berk, University of California, Santa Barbara; Martin H. David, University of Wisconsin; James A. Davis, Harvard University; Graham Kalton, University of Michigan; Kinley Larntz, University of Min-

Foreword vii

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James A. Davis John Modell

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Contents

1	Introduction 1
	The Civil Rights Movement 2
	The Optimistic View 6
	The Pessimistic View 8
	The Polarization Thesis 9
	A Demographic Approach 10
	Relative versus Absolute Change 13
2	Education, Employment, and Occupation 1
	Educational Attainment 16
	Integration of Public Schools 22
	Racial Residential Segregation 33
	Employment and Unemployment 34
	Employment Opportunities for the Young 43
	Occupation 46
	Conclusions 50
3	Personal Income and Earnings 56
	The Incomes of Individuals 56
	The Earnings of Workers 62
	Conclusions 79
4	Who Benefited? 82
4	Educational Attainment 83
	Differences within Occupations 90
	Differences within Industrial Sectors 95

xii Contents

Regional Differences 109
Earnings and Age 116
Have Any Blacks Caught Up in Earnings? 125
Conclusions 126

- 5 The Welfare of Families and Individuals
 Changing Living Arrangements 133
 Family Income 142
 Income Inequality 152
 Poverty 156
 Conclusions 167
- 6 Class Differences in the Black Community
 Educational Attainment 174
 Occupational Prestige 178
 Family Income 181
 Dropping Out of the Labor Force 183
 Polarization by Family Type 186
 Subjective Social Class Identification 188
 Hereditary Social Status 190
 Conclusions 190
- 7 A Scorecard on Black Progress 193
 Indicators Showing Improvement 194
 Indicators Showing No Improvement 198
 Mixed Indicators 198
 Views of Racial Change 201
 What Will Happen in the Future? 202

Appendix: Describing Racial Differences in Earnings 209 Notes 217 References 222 Index 232

Introduction

When he wrote about race relations in the early 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal described a fundamental dilemma. Americans endorsed the principles that all persons were created equal and endowed by God with inalienable rights, that the government existed to protect these rights, and that, before the law, all persons had exactly the same status. And yet the ideals of equality, fair treatment, and democracy were only abstract principles so far as blacks were concerned. In many areas of the South, blacks had almost no civil rights that whites respected. They could not hope to hold public office, to vote, or even to serve on juries. They could be capriciously arrested by the white police force. If they were accused of criminal acts, they were tried by white judges and white juries in racially segregated courts. The segregated system of education often provided nothing but deficient grammar school training for southern blacks. In the North, explicit practices and legal agreements designated where blacks could live and set strict limits on their occupational achievements, and de facto segregation in urban areas ensured that blacks and whites attended different schools.

In the period following World War II, America confronted the basic issue of whether the principles of equality and democracy extended to blacks. The pace of racial change increased after 1960, but there is a very long history of struggle for civil rights in the United States. Many of the laws and court decisions of the 1960s and 1970s resembled similar measures that were enacted during Reconstruction but then lay dormant for nine decades.

The Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement of the period since World War II has six distinct but overlapping aspects. The first is the litigation strategy of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which laid the groundwork for challenging state-imposed racial discrimination. For decades, NAACP lawyers filed suit when blacks were denied the right to vote, kept off juries, denied accommodations on interstate trains, or provided with separate and unequal schools. They were sometimes victorious in the federal courts. In 1940, for example, courts ruled that equally qualified black and white teachers in segregated systems must be paid similar amounts. In the early 1950s NAACP litigation succeeded in getting one black student into a graduate program in education at the University of Oklahoma and another admitted to the law school of the University of Texas. Many of these decisions involved a small number of plaintiffs, plaintiffs who could be harassed if they fought too diligently for their civil rights. Furthermore, southern states frequently established new barriers to racial equality when the federal courts eliminated the old ones. Nevertheless, the litigation strategy, which was based upon the American ideal of equal opportunity, achieved some important victories. The key decision, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), greatly strengthened the civil rights movement by upholding the principles of democracy and, theoretically, overturning state-imposed racial discrimination.

The second aspect of the movement was a massive increase in the number of blacks actively involved in the struggle for rights. The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, initiated by Rosa Parks in 1957 and the Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch-counter sit-in of Joseph McNeil, Izell Blair, Franklin McCain, and David Richmond in 1960 mark the beginning of this phase. There was nothing new about these protests. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had been organizing peaceful demonstrations in northern and border cities for two decades. In Baltimore and St. Louis, for example, their picketing and sit-ins made it possible for blacks to eat at the lunch counters and cafeterias of the downtown stores. It was only after 1960, however, that civil rights demonstrations became widespread in the deep South, where racial discrimination was most blatant. New organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference mobilized many blacks. In 1963 the civil rights

organizations assembled more than half a million people for their March on Washington. Two years later a series of marches in Alabama led to the passage of the Voting Rights Bill.

Third, as the black protests made more white Americans aware of the dilemma Myrdal had described, the attitudes and actions of whites changed. Such changes are not easy to document, but there are several types of evidence. In national opinion polls, the proportion of whites who said they would object if a Negro with an education and income similar to their own moved next door diminished from 62 percent in 1942 to 39 percent in 1963 and 15 percent in 1972 (Pettigrew, 1973). In 1942 only 44 percent of whites approved of racially integrated public transportation, but this rose to 60 percent in 1956, and by the mid-1960s approval was almost universal (Sheatsley, 1966). Similar changes occurred in white views about integrated public education: between 1963 and 1972 the proportion endorsing integrated schooling went from 62 to 82 percent (Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley, 1978). A growing number of whites also participated in the protest movement in the South by marching with blacks, organizing freedom schools, or helping blacks register to vote.

The fourth aspect of the movement involved the elected officials of the federal government, who gradually, by the mid-1960s, came to support effective civil rights laws, laws overturning the principle of states' rights. In 1945 the Congress spurned President Truman's efforts to extend the Fair Employment Practices Commission, but twelve years later it enacted a modest civil rights law, which was followed by much more encompassing legislation. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in 1964, ended the poll tax requirement for federal elections. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations, provided assistance for integration of schools, put the Justice Department on the side of plaintiffs in civil rights litigation, banned racial discrimination in the use of federal funds, and outlawed discrimination in employment. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was effective in bringing blacks into the electoral process: it called for the appointment of federal registrars if local ones persisted in keeping blacks off the voting rolls. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which banned racial discrimination in the sale or rental of most housing units.

Fifth, the Supreme Court joined the executive and legislative branches in protecting the rights of black citizens. Throughout the twentieth

4 Blacks and Whites

century the Court had been issuing rulings that seemed to defend the rights of blacks, but all too often southern states had developed strategies that voided the intent of the rulings. For example, the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional to use grandfather clauses to determine who could vote. (These clauses waived literacy requirements for those whose forebears had voted before the Civil War, effectively granting the vote to illiterate whites and denying it to blacks.) But several southern states then decided that political parties were private organizations and as such could establish their own racist rules. After 1960 there was a change in the pace and scope of federal court rulings concerning civil rights. Rather than focusing upon the theoretical legal rights of individual blacks, the courts began to protect the interests of blacks as a class and to consider their actual status compared to that of whites. The Supreme Court approved the use of federal powers to eliminate discrimination in areas that had been subject to state law only, including public accommodations, the assignment of pupils to local schools, the registration of voters, and the private sale of real estate.

After years of delays and inaction, the Court finally insisted upon the actual integration of public schools. In a series of decisions beginning in 1968, it outlawed the ineffective freedom-of-choice plans used in southern states, overturned the "all deliberate speed" principle, the use of racial ratios and busing to integrate urban school systems, and declared that northern school districts were under the same requirement to operate racially integrated schools as southern districts. The Court also gradually came to endorse affirmative action programs designed to increase educational and employment opportunities for blacks. In the 1978 Bakke decision it ruled that universities might use race as one of a number of criteria when deciding whom to admit; in 1979 it upheld a quota system that reserved some of the better-paying jobs for blacks even if they had less seniority than similarly qualified whites; and the next year it endorsed a law requiring that 10 percent of federal construction funds be spent with minority contractors.

The sixth aspect was the high level of racial violence that marked the 1960s. Many of the early black protesters in the South lost their jobs, were shot at, or were harassed in other ways. In the summers of 1963 and 1964 more than two dozen black churches in Alabama and Mississippi were burned or bombed (Franklin, 1967; Meier and Rudwick, 1975). Civil rights protesters in Birmingham were attacked

by police with German Shepherds and fire hoses. Numerous civil rights activists were slain by white racists. Some of the victims were whites, such as Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who died in Mississippi, or Viola Liuzzo, who was killed while helping blacks register to vote in Alabama. Other victims were black leaders, including Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. The 1960s were also a decade of urban racial violence. In 1967 alone, some 164 incidents of racial disorders were recorded in American cities. Black protesters fought with white policemen or firemen or attacked whiteowned stores. In most cases these were minor events that were quickly quelled, but in Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit dozens of lives were lost. In the summer of 1967, eighty-three people died in urban racial riots (U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

It is extremely difficult to assess the consequences of this violence. Myrdal noted in 1944 that getting publicity was of highest strategic importance for blacks. He predicted that whites in the North would be shaken when they learned the facts about the treatment of blacks in the South. And apparently the nightly television reports showing peaceful protesters clubbed by policemen and mauled by snarling dogs dramatically increased the support of whites for strong civil rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Garrow, 1978).

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, studied the riots of 1967 and helped to publicize the discriminatory treatment of blacks. Its report pointed out that this was a national issue, not just a southern one. The Commission did not legitimate the violence of the late 1960s, but it stressed civil rights abuses and the immense racial differences in housing, job opportunities, education, and income found in northern cities. Rather than blaming blacks for their own poverty and for the urban violence or attributing the problem to communist agitators, the commission pointed out that "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it" (U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968:2).

These conclusions strengthened the civil rights movement and helped to bring about the War on Poverty which was designed to provide educational and employment opportunities to the poor. The Head Start program was created to prepare poor children to do well in