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### *The Constraint of Race: Slavery, the Legacy of the “White Citizen,” and American Social Policy*

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*Dismayingly, institutionalized racism and prejudice endure too, long after the abolition  
of slavery, or the desegregation of public institutions, or the protest marches or the  
shattering acts of violence. Racism, it turns out, can take the heat.*

Joy Gregory<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, race has been the most endemic division in American politics and policy. Although class is the essential construct in understanding American economic life and in the workplace, Americans often think of themselves as workers, managers, and owners, class remains the elusive little secret in American political life. Indeed few, if any, important political conjunctures in American history have crystallized around American workers acting as a class-conscious political force. It is scarcely exaggerating to say we have had the least non-Marxian acting working class in world history.

By contrast, a politics centered on race has characterized the United States since its birth as a republic. Thus the framers of the Constitution wrangled over how to count enslaved Africans for purposes of taxation and representation. A civil war was justified in the hot-button rhetoric of “freeing the slaves.” The end of Reconstruction was sealed in the infamous Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877, returning responsibility of civil rights to the states. The stability of the New Deal coalition rested in good part on the refusal to enfranchise African Americans, pass anti-lynching laws, and fully include blacks in that era’s social regime. The Great Society--the biggest expansion of the nation’s welfare state to date--ensued from the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, a fact that became almost instantaneously the battle cry for massive white resistance.

It was in the context of the dramatic changes wrought in the 1960s that African Americans, other people of color, and women of all races were finally included on a mass basis in the American welfare state. As African Americans, Latinos, and American Indian insurgency grew and urban strife became the order of the day, the meaning and object of American social policy was refocused. By the 1980s in most discussions, key parts of the social policy agenda, especially poverty, crime and cities were mapped to race.<sup>2</sup> In turn, a new and cryptic vernacular for racial politics developed. As Thomas and Mary Edsall put it in 1991, “when the official subject is presidential politics, taxes, welfare, crime, rights, or values...the real subject is RACE.”<sup>3</sup> Through these code words, wrote Stephen Steinberg, “it is possible to play on racial stereotypes, appeal to racial fears, and heap blame on blacks, other people of color, and immigrants “without naming them.”<sup>4</sup> In American politics, race, state, and party have been much more inextricably linked than class, state, and party. It is scarcely exaggerating to

conclude, as Matthew Frye Jacobson did, American history is race history.<sup>5</sup>

This essay explores the centrality of race in American political development, the impact of whiteness (defined here as the accumulated privileges people of European descent derive from past discrimination that is now embedded in institutions and derivative “colorblind” policies and laws that obscure racism), and implications of whiteness for the way we understand a developing contemporary challenge: the crisis presented by Hurricane Katrina. A three-part argument is developed. First, we conclude that the enslavement of African Americans played a key role in constructing the very meaning of citizenship in America. In effect, the “white citizen” was constructed. Second, we show how the legacy of the “white citizen” has influenced American politics and policy every since. In fact, social policy, the very tool supposed to alleviate inequalities in social citizenship has more often than not reproduced inequality. Finally, we show that there are implications of the legacy of the “white citizen” for understanding contemporary challenges. For example, these implications can be seen in the response to Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf in late 2005.

### **Slavery and the Construction of the “White Citizen”**

The quintessential non-citizens of colonial America were, of course, white women, Indians, and the enslaved. But it was slavery that particularly distinguished citizens from non-citizens and that has had the greatest impact on American citizenship. Slavery both necessitated and dialectically justified rendering a racial identity to citizenship in the earliest documents establishing a European political order in the New World. Although scholars debate the precise point at which individual racist perceptions developed into a full-blown popular ideology, the

system of economic, political, and social preferences for whites and subordination for American Indians and blacks (free as well as enslaved) was in place well before the Constitution was framed.<sup>6</sup> The body of racial laws and statutes was uneven and varied from colony to colony; an equally diverse body of theoretical justifications for the disfranchisement and exploitation of blacks developed during this era. What matters is that by the time the United States became a new nation, citizenship was explicitly racially inscribed by an act of Congress in 1790 that declared that only “free white” immigrants could be naturalized.<sup>7</sup> Then in 1857, Justice Roger Taney glibly asserted in the Dred Scott decision that blacks possessed “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,”<sup>8</sup> further conjoining citizenship and whiteness.

As American democracy grew, suffrage was extended to all white males as it was simultaneously stripped from black men. New York in 1821 and Pennsylvania in 1838 both eliminated their property requirements for voting and prohibited black male suffrage in the same stroke. From 1819 to the Civil War, every state admitted to the union limited the franchise to white males in their constitutions. By 1860, only six percent of the Northern black population lived in states in which they could vote (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island and Maine) and only half of eligible black voters in these states actually voted due to white terror at the polls. The white republic was also defended in state referendums. In the North between 1840 and 1870, equality with black people was overwhelmingly rejected by white voters in 17 of 19 referendums.<sup>9</sup>

As their right to possess property was recognized, as their poll tax was reduced, and as their opportunities for citizenship and voting increased inversely with the degradation of African Americans, poor European men came to identify themselves as “white.” They shared this new

identity with the prosperous planters, further elevating their status and self esteem. As the benefits of this new social arrangement accrued to poor Europeans, they came to have a stake in slavery and its racial basis. Historically “what a citizen really was at bottom was someone who could help put down a slave rebellion or participate in Indian wars.”<sup>10</sup> In effect, the very construction of race from the colonial era through the Jacksonian era was achieved through the elaboration of the rights of the citizen--a privilege reserved for Europeans. Whites only were citizens and “real” Americans; blacks, Indians, the Chinese and other people of color were not. White skin privilege, therefore did not simply distinguish citizen from slave, it contributed to the construction of the American citizen itself.<sup>11</sup> In turn citizenship served to construct and defend the color line.<sup>12</sup> As Judith Shklar concluded, “black chattel slavery stood at the opposite social pole from full citizenship and so defined it.”<sup>13</sup> Thus the color line did much more than bar people of color from the democratic republic, it fabricated citizenship itself. To be a citizen was also to be white. This antebellum understanding of citizenship and the racial distinctions drawn between citizen and non-citizen, between included and excluded in the American polity have had long-reaching effects.

As we shall see, not even the Civil War and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments would be enough to provide blacks equality in the public sphere, equality of opportunity in the economic realm, the right to participate in public affairs and other standard liberal conceptions of citizenship. As Joy Gregory put it, racism proved it could take the heat.<sup>14</sup>

### **White Desert in the Pre-History of American Social Policy**

It is in the context of the nineteenth century conception of the white citizen that the

nation's first excursions in federal social policy emerge. President Andrew Johnson made it clear where he stood on the matter. As Johnson put it, "This is a country for white men and by God, as long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men."<sup>15</sup> With this ominous beginning, not surprisingly the first two federal experiments in providing social rights (the Freedmen's Bureau and the Civil War veterans' pensions in Reconstruction) produced stunning contrasts between the white citizen and African Americans. The aid provided by the Freedmen's Bureau to black men and women and their children was from the start meager, time-limited, and stigmatizing. It rapidly disappeared from the American agenda. Veterans' pensions--going disproportionately to white men, women, and their children--however were very generous by nineteenth century standards, were open-ended, and rapidly increased in coverage and amounts of stipends. Contrary to the claims of some prominent social policy scholars<sup>16</sup> Civil War pensions did not treat African Americans fairly and honorably. Although the pensions did not formally discriminate on the basis of race, the program remained rife with discriminatory effects because the very eligibility requirements disadvantaged the formerly enslaved. Black union veterans and their widows experienced stark difficulties in providing proof of their services--given requirements for birth certificates, marriage licenses, and so forth. This experience demonstrated the limits of universalist social policies when they simply overlay existing inequality.

More important, political debates over the two federal programs foreshadowed what was to come. President Andrew Johnson and the Democrats in the mid-nineteenth century opposed the Freedmen's Bureau as likely to make blacks lazy, dependent, and prone to live off "handouts." Opponents to the Bureau fretted about black women's sexuality, independence, and

marital status as well as the form and size of black families and what today would be called a fear that the South would become a “welfare magnet.” Moreover, the Bureau was characterized as an “immense bureaucracy,” too expensive for the federal government to pursue. It was said to cater to special interests, to be unfair to whites, and very probably to be a threat to harmonious race relations.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, the generous aid to northern veterans of the Civil War and their widows and children was viewed as wholly justified, and in the end veterans’ pension became virtually an old-age insurance program. Thus we have the origins of the link between citizenship, race, moral worthiness and social policy in the dual and differing histories of the stingily funded Freedmen’s Bureau versus the generously funded Civil War Veterans’ pension system. The ideological construction of difference surrounding the two programs has foreshadowed debates on social policy for more than a century. As white skin privilege institutionalized moral desert according to race during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, so it has for following periods of American social policy innovation.<sup>18</sup>

### **Securing the White Citizen in the New Deal**

Andrew Johnson’s construction of social policy resurfaces in debates at the creation of the welfare state proper, the New Deal, and was used successfully by its opponents. The result was segmented policies that would not undermine the control of African American labor in the South and seemingly neutral policies in the North that when grafted upon differential treatment of black and white workers in labor markets further advantaged whites. This was to be expected since the general thrust of the New Deal was not to transform the American system but to restore

the existing economy to effective operation and to protect every individual's established stake in it. Dan Lacy summed up the situation: "The landowning farmer was assured an income. The depositor's bank account was guaranteed. The investor was assured an honest securities market. Credit was made more easily available to land-owning farmers, the real estate developer, and the homeowner or purchaser. The industrial worker was protected in his right to join a union, and the union in turn its right to represent employees, to strike, and to negotiate union, or closed-shop agreements."<sup>19</sup>

These measures, however, benefited only those who already had a stake in the economy as property owners or industrial and commercial labor, and by and large, that meant white men and their families. Federal mortgages meant nothing to the black worker who could not dream of buying a house, or federal deposit insurance to one with no money in the bank. The protection of the National Labor Relations Act and the creation of Social Security were worthless to domestic servants, agricultural workers and unskilled laborers whose occupations were not organized or covered--jobs held by the vast majority of black workers. The minimum wage and pro-union legislation, while clearly important bulwarks for white male workers, denied or reduced the competitive position of the many blacks who were not welcomed by the unions. Similarly federal housing assistance strengthened the barriers that protected the exclusivity of white neighborhoods and suburbs. Even welfare relief flowed disproportionately to the nonblack.

Thus--and to be certain--the New Deal restored and strengthened American society and economy and bolstered the economic position of many citizens, but it was a racist society and economy that were strengthened and whites whose lives were secured. The jobs, the homes, the farms, the savings, the statuses and futures of many Americans were protected by federal action,



but one of the things these values were protected against was the intrusion of blacks into “white jobs” and “white neighborhoods.” The New Deal did little to end segregation, to improve black education, or to open jobs to blacks; and it did nothing to restore the vote to blacks or even to end lynching. Indeed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused to endorse more than 150 civil rights bills during his long tenure as President.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the New Deal, black peril and its flip side, white skin privilege, continued. In short, the New Deal granted a modicum of security to whites while denying to people of color the full perquisites of citizenship.

The most lasting legacy of all was the segmentation of social policy during the New Deal. White skin privilege was expanded legally through exclusion of African Americans from its ultimately most successful innovation (social insurance) and through allowing southern states to discriminate in distribution of “relief.” The second leg in the development of the welfare state (hidden welfare benefits such as employer-provided health insurance, pension, and other tax expenditures) virtually excluded black men and women of all races, given differences in the types of industries and jobs where these groups were employed. Thus, program segmentation in the New Deal system solidified, not reversed, white skin privilege. It would take the modern Civil Rights Movement and the social policy legislation of the 1960s to make an assault upon all that.

### **The Civil Rights Movement’s Attempt to Include People of Color as Full Citizens**

In a time of prosperity, with a president who could claim a mandate and a Congress heavily dominated by members of his party, the Civil Rights Movement’s unprecedentedly strong assault on white privilege resulted in new, more inclusive politics. It helped that the

nation was at war in Vietnam and concerned about its image abroad. The government's strident rhetoric of spreading democracy made exclusion of people of color from full citizenship an international embarrassment. As a result of these developments (as well as the modernization of Southern agriculture, demographic change and so forth), three major civil rights (the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968) were passed. They were accompanied by the War on Poverty in particular and Great Society programs in general. Through these developments, the formerly excluded found a measure of inclusion.

To be sure, white advantage remained the order of the day, but poverty plummeted; the food stamp program reduced flagrant hunger and malnutrition; Medicare and Medicaid improved health care dramatically; housing overcrowding and the number of people living in substandard housing declined; Head Start helped thousands of poor children prepare for school; Upward Bound prepared large numbers of adolescents for college; and financial assistance permitted many young people from families with low and modest incomes to gain higher education. Gains among African Americans were particularly evident.<sup>21</sup> For a brief moment, the privileges of whiteness faced a challenge. Still the legacies from the past were influential, if not determinant. Rather than benefitting from the creation of more universal programs, simply a third leg of the welfare state was created and people of color were walled off behind those programs that were most stigmatized and least generous.

This development nearly immediately proved to be a double-edged sword politically. On one side, the welfare state now included all racial and ethnic groups on a mass basis and the new civil rights laws dictated de jure a change in the expression of whiteness; but on the other side, segmentation made it possible to attack those very programs that had included people of color

while leaving those privileging whites popular and intact.

To politically attack the segment of the American welfare state that had finally included more people of color, however, required a new strategy in an age of de jure equality. The new defense of whiteness came in a cultural guise. It was bad culture (particularly the “negative” cultural traits of African American women, frequently portrayed as an urban, drug abusing, criminal class, spewing forth babies) that made blacks unworthy of government support--an argument as old as the Republic but dressed up in new garb. Thus, it was not, as some have contended,<sup>22</sup> that white antipathy to the new social policies of the Great Society ascribed to African Americans the invidious stereotype of unworthiness, but rather that because whites already saw African Americans as unworthy and something less than full citizens that they concluded that any program addressing their needs was unworthy. The hoary stereotypes that had prevailed to undercut the Freedmen’s Bureau and to help shape the New Deal resurfaced as a critical part of the attack on the Great Society and limited how far it could go in overturning centuries of white skin privileges. Many, if not most, whites got collective amnesia about the long history of “when affirmative action was white” (as Katznelson puts it<sup>23</sup>). At times, it seemed that many whites were even propelled toward collective madness. For example, in some places in the South, whites pulled their children out of schools and declared they would rather they remain ignorant rather than sit next to a black pupil; some whites denied themselves religious instruction rather than sharing a pew with a black parishioner; and often community pools were drained to avoid integrating them. Organized labor missed the chance to unionize workers in the South partially because it refused to desegregate unions. Many poor whites--seeing themselves as first and foremost “white”--supported cutbacks in programs that benefited

them because of some mistaken view that “the blacks get more,” and on and on. Thus did race constrain the very political imagination of the white citizen of what a fully democratic society could be. Not only the progress of blacks and other people was delimited but perhaps even more importantly the development of a social policy regime sufficient to meet the needs of the American population became little more than a suppressed historical alternative.

### **Re-normalizing Whiteness**

As it turns out, the 1960s represented something much more than mere lacunae in the policies protecting white skin privilege but quite a bit less than their death. To be sure, presidents from Richard Nixon onward realized that the more racial equality was mandated by law and accepted in principle, the more subtle the defense of whiteness had to be. As Nixon put it to his aide H. R. Haldeman, “The whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to. Problem with overall welfare plan is that it forces poor whites into the same position as blacks....We have to get rid of the veil of hypocrisy and guilt and face reality. There has never in history been an adequate black nation, and they are the only race of which this is true....Africa is hopeless, the worst is Liberia which we built.”<sup>24</sup> And so Nixon, who had campaigned on a platform of “states’ rights,” set out to dismantle the Great Society. Thus the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the very heart of the Great Society created in 1964 was terminated in 1974. As long as movement politics flourished, however, Nixon could only be partially successful and some activities of OEO continued to be funded; but when the movement subsided, the time was ripe for retrenchment.

By 1980, movement politics were virtually dead, as was OEO. In this context, Ronald

Reagan and to a lesser extent George H. W. Bush sought to perfect what Nixon had begun. Devoted to as fully as possible restoring the normality of white skin privilege and producing silence about it as a way of redoubling its hegemony, Reagan through the use of racial symbolism such as announcing his presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi (the site of the murder of three civil rights workers) and railing on and on about “welfare queens and pimps” on the campaign trail made whites comfortable with their prejudices (as former First Lady Rosalind Carter once remarked). In office, Reagan sought administratively to undercut any social policy (and law) that challenged whiteness. One of the first actions of the Administration was to rescind the Economic Opportunity Act in 1981 and fire more than 1,000 employees who had worked for the federal government under the Act’s auspices. In effect, the programs of the Great Society, like the Freedmen’s Bureau, existed in any vigorous sense only ten years and were completely abolished in 1981. Declaring that racism was a thing of the past, Reagan claimed we now live in a “colorblind” America, and no longer needed such programs. In fact, white men were now suffering from “reverse discrimination,” according to the most popular American president of the late twentieth century.

When Reagan could not win in Congress, he appointed staff supportive of white privilege as secretary or under secretary of any department that oversaw any policy he deemed to cut into the property value of whiteness. He also, obviously with the complicity of Congress, cut spending for any agency whose job it was to enforce equal opportunity in particular and civil rights in general. Reagan, at least partially through the sheer force of personality or acting ability, had the capacity to convince a white population frantic about recent encroachments on its privileges that blacks had made not just some progress but tremendous progress. More than on

any other single dimension, whites who believed that blacks had made “lots of progress” were the least likely to support policies now identified with blacks, such as welfare, affirmative action, full employment, and food stamps. Whites were so confused that in 1986, a *Washington Post* poll found that a quarter of white American reported that blacks composed more than 50 percent of the American population rather than the roughly 11 percent they composed at the time. The more whites were opposed to measures designed to implement racial equity, the larger whites thought the black population was.<sup>25</sup> The accrued benefits of whiteness remained largely unquestioned during the Reagan-Bush years while the rights claims of people of color were subject to open challenge.

The Clinton presidency accomplished little in retrieving racial liberalism in particular or a more generous social policy agenda in general. His job stimulus program went bust in his first year in office; his complex (and some might say, ridiculous) 1,000+ page health care reform bill failed; the welfare reform bill passed during his Administration is more notable for ending the guarantee of a modicum of economic security not dependent on the market or inheritance than anything else; his review of affirmative action which resulted in him declaring that the nation should “mend, not end” affirmative action resulted in a lot of “mending”--so much so that minority business contracting with the federal government had been cut in half by the time Clinton left office. The Omnibus Crime Act, which passed in his first presidential term, increased the number of federal crimes from three to more than sixty and mandated “three strikes, you’re out.” It is considered to be the most punitive federal crime law to date. In short, despite his rhetoric on race and his enormous popularity among African Americans, Clinton was largely a captive both of his own political surroundings, ambitions, and personal failings on the

one hand and historical trends and policy legacies beyond his control on the other. Thus the Clinton years pivot on an irony: Clinton was elected with the broad support of African Americans but presided over retrenchment in social policy, a result that was detrimental to most African Americans. And still his strongest support came from African Americans! The results of welfare reform, the president's initiative on race, crime policy and other key social initiatives not only failed to challenge whiteness but bolstered it.

Arguments as far back as the mid-nineteenth century were advanced throughout the Clinton years to rationalize the property value of whiteness. When the Republicans took control of Congress in January 1995, it was *deja vu* in many ways. Andrew Johnson could have been speaking for many Republicans in their efforts regarding welfare reform. In short, the racial mythology of the welfare state had become so entrenched in party politics that it constrained the policy alternatives of a president who seemingly favored progressive change. The politics of race in reforming crime, welfare, and anti-discrimination policies during the Clinton years were, once again, shaped by underlying patterns of discrimination and notions of the moral unworthiness to the disadvantage of people of color.

Nor were black leaders much help. Indeed there were class implications revealed in a "new black politics" in which black leaders vigorously mobilized to defend affirmative action but were nearly missing in action when it came to welfare reform. This latter factor, a more class-divided "black community" is perhaps the main remaining result of the policies of the Great Society. In 2000, 75 percent of all blacks with college degrees worked for the public sector. Indeed, there would practically be no black middle class without such employment and minority contracting with government.<sup>26</sup>

What, it is often asked, accounts for the turnaround that occurred during the age of retrenchment? Some recent research concludes that it did not require much effort. Gary Gerstle, for example, questions whether there was ever a liberal consensus in the United States. He presents evidence demonstrating that the liberal racial consensus in the 1960s was never anything more than a comforting mirage. Well into the 1950s, polls showed that a remarkable 85 percent of poor and working class whites and a large majority of union members in Midwestern cities, for instance, favored residential segregation. Their grievance was the one that George Wallace used with such devastating effect against Great Society liberalism and paved the way for Nixon. In 1968, polls showed that large majorities of whites supported neither government playing a strong role in solving the social and economic woes of blacks nor further advances in regards to civil rights. Gerstle concludes that it should not shock us, as it did Martin Luther King, Jr., that a peaceful open housing protest march in Chicago in 1966 was greeted by a riotous white mob.<sup>27</sup> (I've never seen anything like it," an uncomprehending King commented afterward. "I have never seen--even in Mississippi or Alabama--mobs as hostile and hate-filled as I've seen in Chicago.")<sup>28</sup> What produced change in the 1960s was the strength of movement politics and the price to be paid to restore order, coupled with liberals placed in powerful government institutions, but separated from the majority of Democratic voters by ideology.

### **White Skin Privilege in the Twenty First Century**

Where in a new millennium does white skin privilege stand? How far has the nation come to overcoming racial disparity?

Even a cursory review of socio-economic data shows how dramatic racial inequality



remains in practically any arena of desired values. As figure one demonstrates, whites, as a group, remain far ahead of blacks and Latinos in nearly every socioeconomic category imaginable. For example, black per capita income was only three-fifths and Latin per capita income was only half that of whites in 2004. The white advantage in wealth is particularly striking with both blacks and Latinos having a net worth of roughly only 10 percent that of whites. The composite index of the eight racial/ethnic equality indexes suggest that while Asian Americans have reached parity with non-Latino whites, both Latinos and African Americans are only half as likely as non-Latino whites to have achieved desired goals such as higher income, education, occupation, profitable business ownership, and wealth. Both groups would have to double their representation in desirable categories representing socioeconomic well-being to be equal to whites. In sum, non-Latino whites remain dramatically advantaged in American society.

Moreover, despite the presumptive role of social policy as arena for correcting the vagaries of capitalist inequality and its dimensions in periods of boom versus bust, social policy in the United States has, more often than not, reproduced inequality; at times, it has even expanded it. This is particularly true of racial inequality. The moral worthiness of those who benefit from social policies is racially defined, and the same tropes are used over and over in debates about social policy, eventually leading to a racial mythology of the welfare state that is fully incorporated into party politics. The very idea of dependency has been inscribed with a racial meaning. Table 1, based on data from the Census Bureau, shows that this racial inscription is reflected in the stratification and segmentation in the American welfare state. Whites benefit disproportionately from the generous side of the welfare state (social insurance, employer-provided health and pension benefits, and other aspects of the hidden welfare state of

tax expenditures) while people of color are relegated to the meager means-tested programs. For example, blacks are heavily overrepresented in every category of poorly funded social welfare, rising from being 2.4 times more likely to be beneficiaries of the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program than the black proportion of the population would predict to 3.2 times more likely to be represented among beneficiaries of public housing. By contrast, blacks are underrepresented in several key social insurance programs such as Social Security and Medicare, where benefits are higher. Racial inequalities in social insurance programs, however, are dwarfed by those in hidden welfare (the most generous programs of all). Hidden welfare benefits such as private pension, private health insurance coverage, the mortgage interest deduction and so forth benefit whites over blacks and affluent over poor. Hidden welfare benefits--privileging whites--are expensive to the public treasury. According to Christopher Howard, in 1995 the federal government spent \$160-200 billion on income security via tax expenditures. Subsidies for homeownership alone cost roughly \$90 billion per year--a fact that undercuts the prevailing image of a nation doing too much to subsidize the rental housing of the poor. In the same year that \$19 billion in taxes were returned as a result of the Earned Income Tax Credit for the working poor, more than \$50 billion in taxes were refunded as a result of the mortgage interest deduction. Allowing employers to write off the costs of providing pensions and health insurance for workers constituted a huge subsidy of billions more. One study found that in the mid-1990s, high-income families (a disproportionately non-Latino white group) were subsidized 33 cents for every dollar spent, while working-class families (disproportionately people of color) received a subsidy of only 15 cents. The unemployed poor, who paid no income taxes, received no benefits from hidden welfare. The American welfare state thus

institutionalizes white privilege and serves as a constraint on the development of social policy. (Given their superior standing in the nation's social policy regime, one might wonder why the white middle class is not being scolded for being "dependent".) In short, the ideology and reality of white privilege has influenced Americans' understanding of social policy, undercut American support for an adequate social policy regime, and impacted segmentation to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of color, given the history of racial oppression and discrimination.

### **Implications for Understanding the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina**

One can see these effects in the response to Hurricane Katrina. To be sure much more than race is at work in the devastation caused by Katrina. A natural disaster, the disaster is also essentially a crisis of public policy, a crisis in the provision of public goods, and a crisis in the pursuit of collective action. It represents the failure to maintain the public infrastructure and to provide security for vulnerable people in times of disaster. The destruction of New Orleans and other areas of the Gulf Coast is a result of a confluence of several long trends in America, to name a few: growing greed and inequality, militarism, environmental abuse, public corruption, the decay of democracy, rising poverty, and continuing racism. Yet instead of focusing on these trends, old stereotypes quickly resurfaced in the hurricane's immediate aftermath to explain what had happened to the victims of Katrina.

Consider just a few examples of the typical commentary. In an interview with National Public Radio, the former first lady exclaimed while visiting the shelter at the Houston Astrodome, "Reliant Park": "What I'm hearing which is sort of scary is that they all want to stay

in Texas. Everybody is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this (she chuckles) is working very well for them.”<sup>29</sup> When later asked by CNN’s Larry King how she felt when people said that her son, the President, “doesn’t care” about race, Mrs. Bush said: “But I really didn’t hear that at all today. People came up to me all day long and said ‘God bless your son,’ people of different races and it was very, very moving and touching. And they felt like when he flew over that it made all the difference in their lives, so I just don’t hear that.”<sup>30</sup>

Another symbol of the class and racial framing of the disaster appeared in news photographs juxtaposing a black man with food in his arms and a white couple with food in theirs with captions that read: “A young [black] man walks through chest deep floodwater after **looting** a grocery store in New Orleans...”, but “Two [white] residents waded through chest-deep water after **finding** bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans...”<sup>31</sup> These comments, however, were mild compared to some. For example, U. S. House Majority Leader Tom Delay speaking to three young hurricane survivors at the Reliant Park Shelter queried “Now tell me the truth boys, Is this kind of fun?”<sup>32</sup> The young men appeared to be perplexed. Conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh laid the blame for the disaster on liberals and dependency. As he saw it, “New Orleans has been run by liberal Democratic governments, people, for as long as I can remember, and there’s an entitlement mentality there. You are never going to have a thriving city relying on handouts or on welfare payments or whatever you want to call them. It’s just not going to happen.”<sup>33</sup> John Derbyshire in the *National Review* said it was because of black inferiority. As he put it, “Under the circumstances, to say that African Americans tend to possess poorer native judgment than

members of better-educated groups and need stricter moral guidance from society does not seem to me to be very outrageous.”<sup>34</sup> According to Bill O’Reilly, the real problem was the survivors’ criminality. “Now what’s the real story....Many, many of the poor in New Orleans ...weren’t going to leave no matter what you did. They were drug-addicted. They weren’t going to get turned off from their source. They were thugs, whatever.”<sup>35</sup> And United States Senator Rick Santorum (Republican, Pennsylvania) demonstrated that he was ready to oblige with punishment. “I mean, you have people who don’t heed those warnings and then put people at risk as a result of not heeding those warnings. There may be a need to look at tougher penalties on those who decide to ride it out and understand that there are consequences to not leaving.”<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, former Secretary of Education Bill Bennett mused on radio in what he called a “thought experiment” about how aborting every black baby in the country would drive the crime rate down.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently these conservative commentators ignored the fact that thousands faced the category five hurricane with nothing. According to a *Washington Post*/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health Survey, among the survivors in Reliant Park (93 percent of whom were black), 39 percent said they had received no help from any government or voluntary agency during the flood and evacuation; 52 percent had no health insurance; 55 percent said they had no car or other way to leave; 59 percent came from homes with less than \$20,000 annual income; 67 percent had evacuated before the hurricane hit; 68 percent had no savings or checking accounts; and 72 percent had no credit cards. These results indicate more about the conditions of work and remuneration in America than anything else since 67 percent were employed before the hurricane, 52 percent full-time.<sup>38</sup>

But it was not just the conservative politicians and media that pointed fingers at the victims themselves. Mainstream media with a more liberal bent also harkened back to the stereotypes of old. For example, Nicholas Kristof endorsed a deal suggested by Rick Lowry in the *National Review* in which the left would devote “greater attention to out of wedlock births ...in exchange for the right’s support for more urban spending.”<sup>39</sup> Missing from the Lowry-Kristof proposal is the fact that out of wedlock births for black teens have been plummeting faster than any other demographic group while those among white women are on the rise, according to the latest figures from the National Center for Health Statistics.<sup>40</sup> Similarly without fact, John Tierney in the *New York Times* lamented the failure of the Great Society programs<sup>41</sup> (programs essentially gutted more than twenty years ago). Recall that not only did those programs enlarge the black middle class, but Medicare, Medicaid and higher education grants and loans among others benefitted whites the most.<sup>42</sup> And E. J. Dionne in *The Washington Post*, while bemoaning the response to Katrina as the shortest War on Poverty ever, nevertheless recommended that liberals should not “shy away from talking about the difficulties faced by children in fatherless homes.”<sup>43</sup> It was if there was no need to discuss how vital resources which could have helped survivors had been cut back or “looted” to pay for war in Iraq or tax cuts for the wealthiest, most protected American citizens and corporate fortunes, actions which let the public sector and the common good wither. It was as if the Bush administration had not cut money for strengthening the very levees that broke and delivered the death blow even in the face of warnings from scientists.<sup>44</sup> Destruction of the Gulf was a work of nature, but a nature that had been heavily influenced by public policy. All too few in the media or politics, indeed, sought to understand the destitution, isolation, and immobility of the poor and sick in this context. Rather

the implication was that victims and survivors fit long-held stereotypes of blacks as too dumb, lazy, immoral, and shiftless to get out of harms way. As the debate shifted to the alleged faults of black women, one might have thought Katrina was one.

Just as the old stereotypes resurfaced, so too did evidence emerge that one could expect little to change in the nation's social policy. Neo-liberalism which reduces spending and cuts taxes and results in rising poverty and inequality, the backlash against civil rights and civil liberties, neglect of the infrastructure and communities remained the agenda of both major political parties in America. The perilous fiction that the state is irrelevant and in fact the source of problems was still the popular theme. Although there was evidence of a growing loss of confidence in the ability of the current political class and the institutions supposed to safeguard the interests that matter in the daily lives of most ordinary people, and recent poll results showed Bush approval ratings dropping precipitously, single incidents alone do not change the country.

It is what leaders and masses do with the window of opportunity created. And in the two month after Hurricane Katrina struck, there was little persuasive evidence to indicate that most liberal or even progressive leaders planned to do anything but capitulate. Meanwhile, the actions of the Bush Administration indicated that its priorities had not changed. For example, not only did Bush's Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) fail to fully include blacks in the millions of dollars in contracts that black leaders championing the interests of the black middle class promoted, actual data on early contracting demonstrated that minority businesses received only 1.5 percent of the \$1.6 billion awarded by FEMA contracts to repair the damages caused Katrina by mid-October 2004. In addition, the Bush administration suspended both affirmative action goals for addressing the employment of women, minorities, the disabled, and

Vietnam veterans for first time contractors working on reconstruction in the wake of Katrina as well as the Davis-Bacon act requiring that workers be paid the prevailing wage in the area.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the majority in Congress pressed ahead to cut taxes by \$70 billion more. According to the Congressional Research Service even the tax cuts for victims of Katrina would disproportionately benefit the wealthy. Private school vouchers were also promoted, as in general was Bush's notion that the work of faith-based charities in the aftermath of Katrina justified further cutting the size of government. Even the delayed action on tax and spending bills were reshaped into using spending cuts to pay for tax cuts, not Katrina or deficit reduction, and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (Republican, Illinois) sought to up the ante in Congress's budget plan to \$50 billion from \$35 billion for five years of cuts in basic programs. Billions for food stamps, Medicaid and welfare reform would be lopped off.<sup>46</sup>

Nor was there much in public opinion data to indicate the neo-liberal agenda would face any sustained challenge from below. A Pew Research Center poll in October 2005 found that Katrina had had little impact on the public's basic values as they relate to poverty, race, or the role of government. Much as it had been since 2003, a 51 percent majority expressed the view that the poor have hard lives because government benefits do not go far enough to help them live decently but 38 percent reported that poor people have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return. Similarly, by more than two-to-one (59% to 26%) more Americans reported that blacks who cannot get ahead in this country were mostly responsible for their own condition, rather than being held back by racial discrimination. That distribution was unchanged since the question was asked in December 2004 and comparable with results dating to 1994. Whites were much more unlikely than blacks to believe that racial



inequality remains a major problem. Only 32 percent of whites thought so compared to 77 percent of blacks in 2005. Optimism that America will ever resolve its racial problems was actually higher in 1963 when Gallup first asked Americans if they think “relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem for the United States, or that a solution will eventually be worked out.” Then 42 percent of Americans said race relations would always be a problem while a slight majority of 55 percent said they would not. In 2005, 46 percent of Americans said black-white relations would always be a problem, while 50 percent said they will eventually work out.<sup>47</sup>

Whether America will ever be a genuine multi-racial democracy with harmonious race relations is a problem that only time can answer. But what was clear in October 2005 was that with hundreds of thousands of mostly black people homeless as a result of Hurricane Katrina and likely to remain so for months, if not years, perhaps the most telling sign of all was the survivors’ designation as “refugees” by many in the media. According to the 1961 United Nations Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who has fled across an international border to escape violence or persecution.<sup>48</sup> Reacting to the designation “refugees,” some contended that the word “refugee” was appropriate when applied to those CNN Anchor Wolf Blitzer, with unintended irony, described as “so poor” and “so black,”<sup>49</sup> since, left behind to perish, they certainly were not evacuees and they had always been forced to live a life of persecution in the United States. Others, including some Katrina survivors, spoke eloquently of how being labeled “refugees,” was the final indignity of their horrific saga. Whatever the media’s intent--good or bad, the use of the word “refugee” opened old wounds and reminded anyone who cared to acknowledge it that national belonging has long inflected and been inflected by racial conceptions and

perceptions of peoplehood, self-possession, fitness for self-government, and collective destiny. Whether the plight of Katrina survivors' claim to citizenship ultimately mattered to the powers that be in Washington, Louisiana, or New Orleans remained to be seen, but what was clear in October 2005 was that they were part of a group with a long history of exclusion from the privileges of the white citizen; their heritage of unequal political and social citizenship stretched all the way back to slavery.

Their innate utterances in their modern day version of "time on the cross" voiced links to the past. Thus, some survivors grew fearful as they were transported first from New Orleans to Houston, and from Houston to Little Rock, and then from Little Rock to the deep backwoods of Oklahoma. "Where is they taking us?," Nitayu Johnson, a hotel maid with a young daughter, remembered thinking. "They trying to slave us. They going to make us pick cotton. We gon' die." Deepening the irony was the fact that her family was being taken to Dwight Mission, an old outpost that had once served as a boarding school dedicated to "Americanizing" Indian children. Another survivor, Louis Green, 65, connected his fears to the days of Jim Crow. "I'm thinking about New York, or California or Indiana. I'll just get me a ticket and get on out of here. This always was a rotten state for blacks. I remember when old Orval Faubus blocked the school doors in Little Rock....I knew this was a rotten state."<sup>50</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As the Katrina experience demonstrates yet once again, African American standing underscores the extent to which citizenship and whiteness remain conjoined. To be sure, de jure barriers to full citizenship have been knocked down (albeit such barriers promise to be revisited

in 2007 in the fight over reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act and in mushrooming voter suppression tactics such as voter identification cards, barring ex-felons from voting and so forth), but the substantial extent to which American politics and social policy remain fused with the politics of race demonstrates de facto the continuing impact of the accumulated privileges whites inherited from the past. The struggle for full American citizenship remains the struggle for standing, understood as inclusion in the public sphere. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, “the problem of the twentieth century [was] the problem of the color line.” One might just as well paraphrase him today and say “this meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the [twenty-first] century is the problem of [whiteness].”<sup>51</sup>

What is needed is a successful project that clarifies the real statuses of people of color and the effects on them of accumulated white privilege and institutionalized discrimination today. Such a project rests on inverting the logic of the bill of goods sold by the most prominent leaders of both of America’s major parties. Rather than blunting the wedge issue of race as universalists advocate, both the commonalities that bind and the race-specific experiences that objectively separate whites from most people of color must be components of the new political logic. Both targeted compensatory and universal benefits are needed.

If conservatives triumph by diverting white Americans from legitimate class concerns to focus on racial ones, a progressive alternative must begin by focusing on legitimate race concerns and move people to class concerns. In effect this means that leaders must help people realize that the conception and perception of the white citizen must be eradicated. Only when whites understand the constraint race plays on realizing the interests for the vast majority of whites themselves will a new politics and full citizenship for all emerge. That working class and

middle class whites, too, have much to gain from extending full social as well as political citizenship to people of color is easily revealed in the historical record which shows that racial advancement has nearly always meant class and gender advancement. In the nineteenth century, white women struggling for the abolition of slavery, found voice for their own claims for suffrage and equal rights. Providing education for “freedmen” after the Civil War boosted public school and health care provision for whites, too, throughout the South. Eliminating the poll tax brought far more poor whites to the voting booth than it brought blacks in the early 1960s. Expanding welfare eligibility in the mid-1960s gave millions of poor white mothers and children access to improved government aid. Even a policy stigmatized as “race-specific,” affirmative action, helped hundreds of thousands of the sisters, mothers, daughter, and wives of white men enter colleges, secure employment, and gain promotions. Conversely when poor people of color loose benefits, so do far more whites.

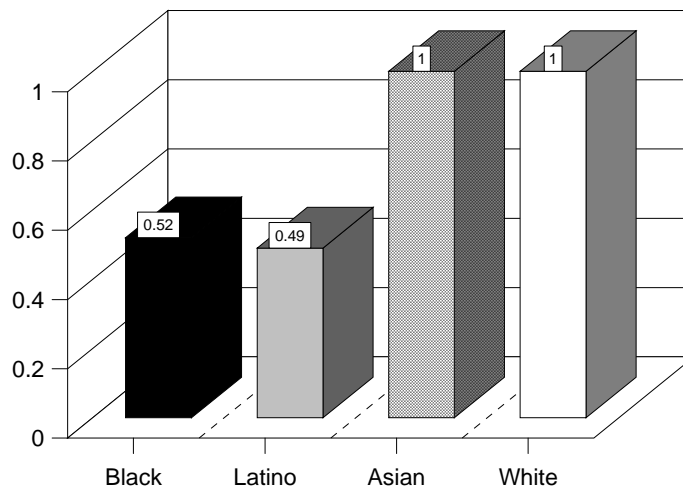
What needs advancing is the understanding of the universal side of the demand for civil and social rights. Thus moving from race to class means the explicit effort to link the interests of people of color with those of the white working and middle classes. But this cannot be done by pretending that class issues have supplanted racial ones any more than it can be done by pretending that racial discrimination is the only factor impeding the progress of blacks. Race and class inequalities are inextricably linked and collective solidarity across the races can be achieved only by fleshing out their intersections.

What is needed is risk-taking. Those of any color leading comfortable lives in the current status quo must accept the risks involved in going against the prevailing wind if a democracy that is substantive, not just procedural, and a citizenship that is social as well as political are ever to

flourish. Alongside the more dispiriting history chronicled here, at important historical moments this is precisely what has happened. At a few critical historical junctures, whites--a substantial number of leaders and mass--were persuaded to join the challenge to white skin privilege. At several critical turning points in the politics of race and social policy (the Civil War, the presidential administrations of Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, the Second Reconstruction during Vietnam war era--to name a few) an impressive number of whites took risks--sometimes in regard to political fortunes and sometimes in regard to socio economic ones and sometimes in regard to life itself--to expand the very definitions of American citizenship to include people of color. What is needed are leaders who seek not to divide the working class by race and conquer but instead encourage the white masses to understand that eliminating the suffering of the "least of these" is in their own interest. The problem is that there are few such risk takers on the political stage today

Yet a new generation of social policy and full citizenship for all Americans depends on such risk takers mobilizing millions of individuals connected across the races to demand change. Could it happen? Perhaps, for as Martin Luther King, Jr. concluded, people are far from flotsam and jetsam in the river of life. We all have to the power to influence the unfolding events that surround us. Much, then, depends on whether the true friends of racial equality and social justice take seriously their responsibility to act. The answer to the historically linked problem of the white citizen, social policy, and the politics of race is in our hands.

Figure 1: Race/Ethnic Cumulative Equality Index



*Averages of the eight following indices for black and, Latinos and of seven following indices for Asian & Pacific Islanders when compared to non-Latino whites.*

*Race/Ethnic Equality Indices use ratios of minority group to whites. A ratio of 1.0 is the point where the minority group and whites are equal in relation to that index. In the figure above, the proportion below 1.0, indicates the minority group's average deficit when compared to whites; above 1.0, the minority group is advantaged over whites.*

*Race/Ethnic Equality Index by Category*

	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian</i>
<i>Per capita income in 2004</i>	0.59	0.52	0.96
<i>College degree or more in 2004</i>	0.54	0.36	1.62
<i>Managerial/prof. employment of coll. grads. in 2001</i>	0.66	0.44	1.18
<i>Md earnings of year-round, full-time coll. grads. in 2004</i>	0.82	0.83	1.05
<i>Percentage getting low-cost mortgages in 2004</i>	0.74	0.87	1.03
<i>Home ownership rates in 2004</i>	0.65	0.63	0.79
<i>Percentage of bus. with \$1,000,000+, 2002</i>	0.09	0.16	0.36
<i>Net worth/wealth in 2000</i>	0.09	0.10	NA

Sources: U. S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, (Washington, DC) March 2005; Federal Reserve System, *Home Mortgage Disclosure Act Study* (Washington, DC: 2005); U. S. Census Bureau, *Housing Vacancies and Home Ownership* (Washington, DC: 2005), Table 20; U. S. Census Bureau, *Survey of Businesses* (Washington, DC: 2002); and T. J. Eller and Wallace Fraser, *Asset Ownership of Households: 2000* (Washington, DC: U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2004).

**TABLE 1: SOCIAL PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES BY RACE (BLACKS AND WHITES ONLY), 1994  
(Numbers in 000s)**

General Statistic/ Program	Average monthly participation		Average monthly benefit		Racial Diff. <sup>1</sup>	
	Total Number	Percent White	Percent Black	White		Black
POPULATION <sup>2</sup>	271,740	82.2	12.9	\$1,793	1,292	-501
<b>SOCIAL WELFARE</b>						
AFDC	13,435	54.1	38.8	534	451	-83
GA	1,037	73.1	20.8	434	456	22
SSI	5,106	63.1	30.5	332	334	2
Food stamps	25,383	61.3	33.3	244	275	31
Medicaid	29,332	62.9	31.0	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>
Poor housing assistance	12,206	58.7	35.7	138	139	1
Received free or reduced price school lunch and/or breakfast	46,743	64.9	29.4	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>
Received energy assistance	19,071	66.5	28.6	14	13	-1
Women, Infants & Children coverage	3,846	68.6	26.8	130	143	13
<b>SOCIAL INSURANCE</b>						
Veterans payments	3,119	83.7	13.2	90	250	160
Medicare	33,964	89.0	9.0	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>3</sup>
Unemployment Compensation	2,440	85.0	11.4	616	594	-22
Worker's compensation	853	87.3	10.0	919	743	-176
Social Security payments	38,256	88.6	9.5	608	485	-123
<b>HIDDEN WELFARE</b>						
Private health insurance	192,026	87.0	9.3	NA	NA	NA
Private pension plan	11,210	91.8	6.9	632	487	-145
Mortgages held	2,188	95.5	2.6	340	77	-263
Govt. educational assistance	7,742	79.7	14.8	347	264	-83

<sup>1</sup>Racial difference = Black - White income or benefit..

<sup>2</sup>Population data are provided in order to compare percent of population to program participation.

<sup>3</sup> NA=Not applicable or not available.

Source: *Current Population Reports, March 1999*, U. S. Bureau of the Census and *Survey of Income and Program Participation*, U. S. Bureau of the Census.

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