

# The Assault on Class

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Of all evils in American society, racial oppression is the most intolerable. Of all priorities for American society, the attainment of racial justice is the most urgent. This is so because the issue of race touches on the very heart of the moral values by which the society lives. Martin Luther King understood this, and the same understanding illuminates his idea of an integrated American society.

The ideal is *not only* the integration of black Americans in terms of all the rights and privileges promised by the society's political creed; and it is *not at all* integration that deprives blacks of their cultural identity, as King's detractors (including the posthumous ones) have falsely claimed. The ideal refers to the integration of all Americans in a moral community and thus to the integration of American society with its historical moral purposes. Nothing in the turbulence of the last few years has invalidated this ideal. It is the only one, today as much as in 1962, which makes sense—sense in terms of the self-interest of blacks and of the whole society, and sense in terms of the imperatives of decency.

For the first time in almost twenty years there is the widespread impression that the national government is turning away from the cause of racial justice. Rightly or wrongly, many feel that the inability or unwillingness of the Nixon Administration to provide moral leadership in this area may mark the end of the second era of Reconstruction. The notion is widespread that the goal of integration is being abandoned in an unholy and ironic collusion between white backlash and black separatism. At the very same time, however, the courts and at least some

elements of the national government continue to push radical measures inspired by the integrationist ideal. Thus, for example, President Nixon issued his statement against busing, while Mr. J. Stanley Pottinger, an official of the same administration, is bombarding private universities with peremptory demands to prove innocence of racial bias in employment. Is it just that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing? Or are some deeper confusions at work here? Or is everything to be explained in terms of *realpolitik*?

We do not claim to know the political strategies of the Nixon Administration. We do claim some expertise on the sociological misconceptions of liberal intellectuals. These misconceptions are, at the very least, one important factor in the present situation. More specifically, there is today a widespread confusion of the issue of race with the issue of class. The assault on racial injustice has, with little notice given it, been turned into an assault on some of the basic presuppositions of the class system. We think that this has been a mistake. Since the class system in America is a vigorous social reality, we expect that the mistake will be costly and that programs based on it will fail. The sooner this is recognized, the sooner will it be possible to return to the agenda of racial integration set in motion by the Supreme Court decision of 1954. Our purpose here is certainly not to eulogize the existing class system but to clarify certain social realities by cutting through confusing rhetoric.

The three issues currently in the forefront of public attention and most relevant to our theme are school busing for purposes of racial integration, introducing lower-class housing into middle-class residential areas as a matter of public policy, and establishing group quotas in certain sectors of employment through government pressure. Each of these issues is today understood primarily in terms of race. Opposition to such programs is widely labeled “racism.”

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There is no doubt that the motive to achieve racial justice has been crucial in the inauguration of these three programs, nor should we underestimate the racial prejudice that is a factor in the resistance to them. Nevertheless, to view these issues exclusively in terms of race is to misunderstand what is going on in such a fundamental way as to merit the appellation "false consciousness." Perhaps what has been going on in the public mind on these issues is a domestic equivalent to the preoccupation with Vietnam in the field of foreign affairs. Certainly race is as much a crucial problem in the domestic affairs of the United States as the Indochinese debacle continues to be in the country's foreign policy. All the same, it is impossible to understand either except in a perspective that transcends each.

The busing of school children to achieve a more balanced representation of racial groups was conceived, of course, as part of a general plan to improve the situation of racial minorities, particularly of blacks, in American society. The institution of public education was to be employed as an instrument toward that end. It may be asked (as, indeed, many have asked) whether this was not based on an inflated estimate of the educational institution's power to effect societal change. Be that as it may, the policy has now made public education a primary focus of assault on the class system.

The point becomes clearer if one looks for the class premise touched upon by busing. The premise is, quite simply, that parents are entitled to hand on to their children the benefits of their class position (a position which, in the case of many, is the result of social mobility achieved within their own lifetimes). It hardly needs emphasis that this premise constitutes a very important motive for people to exert themselves for the achievement or maintenance of a privileged position within the class system. As far as schools are concerned, the "benefits" in question are far more complex than those relating to the physical paraphernalia and educational quality (whatever that may mean these days) of the particular school. The benefits that parents have in mind include the association of their children with children of comparable class position. In negative terms, this means parents want to shield their children from the social and cultural realities of lower-class life—realities that the parents themselves have often known from personal experience.

There is no great mystery about which lower-class realities are foremost in parents' minds. They are, above all, physical violence, high incidence of crime and hard drugs and, more generally, the prevalence of cultural attitudes uncongenial to a middle-class way of life. Especially in many urban areas of the country, the lower-class associations from which parents shrink have racial connotations; that is, in many cases the lower-class milieu from which parents

want to protect their children is *also* a non-white milieu. Racial fears and antagonisms aggravate the class antagonism that would be there in any case. To argue, however, that therefore all opposition to the breakdown of class differentiation between schools is "racism" is to obfuscate the issue. There are large numbers of white middle-class parents with impeccable liberal credentials and without any empirically observable racial prejudice who wish to preserve their children from situations in which they might risk physical harm or in which they might acquire attitudes or habits contrary to the family's life style.

Contrary to what is still the liberal rhetoric on this issue, the major opposition to enforced busing is not attributable to America's being a "racist" society. The widespread failure of some efforts to achieve racial integration is due to the fact that the class system, while under assault, continues to be a fundamental social reality. In this light, we can entertain two scenarios. If we assume that the American class system will continue, then the aforementioned policies will continue to be frustrated. Whatever their professed ideology may be, very few middle-class parents will be willing to abandon the premise that their children are entitled to whatever benefits their class position can obtain. If efforts to defeat busing by political and legal means fail, those middle-class parents who can afford it will do in greater numbers what middle-class parents are already doing. They will either move to areas beyond the offending bus routes or will take their children out of the public schools. The others, those unable to afford these maneuvers, will produce growing tensions in a situation in which they feel trapped. It is hard to see how either eventuality will further racial integration; it is easy to see how we might continue to produce more rather than less segregation in the schools.

The alternative to the scenario above is one of increasing political compulsion. The end point of such compulsion (hardly a plausible one under present circumstances) would be that the government would prevent people from choosing their place of residence or that private schools would be abolished unless they conform to the racial balances prescribed for public education. For the former eventuality one might imagine a new federal offense, "flight to avoid racial integration," somewhat comparable to the offense of *Republikflucht* in East Germany. This, happily, is not a very likely development in the U.S.

The desire to redress racial injustice has also informed present policies to scatter low-income housing across middle-class residential areas and to challenge zoning codes that foster class homogeneity in housing. Here too, as in school busing, assault on the class system challenges an elementary class premise. The physical and social quality of one's place of residence has been one of the most tangible benefits of class position and one of the foremost rewards of class mobility. The choice of one's

neighbors in terms of class compatibility is an integral part of these benefits. Once more the category of "racism" serves to obscure the basic issue. The motives that enliven the debate about scatter-site housing are rooted in the underlying reality of social differentiation, no matter how the latter is defined. Comparable motives would reassert themselves even if the class system were destroyed and some other system of differentiation put in its place.

The plausible scenarios for the future in this area are also quite similar to those mentioned in the case of education. If one assumes that the class system will continue, then almost inevitably ways will be found to frustrate or avoid policies which are conducive to eroding the system at its roots. The alternative to this scenario is, once more, the massive application of political compulsion to change the rules of the class game.

The assault on class in the area of employment derives directly from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act prohibits employment discrimination not only in tax-supported employment but by employers working under contract to the government. As a result of various policy initiatives by the federal government, the original proscriptive barrier against discrimination gave birth to demands for "affirmative action." In the very recent past this trend has led to moves by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to combat "racism" and "sexism" in private universities that receive federal funds under any programs. Whatever the liberal rhetoric by which they are legitimated, the almost inevitable effect of these government policies would be the establishment of systems of group quotas in wide sectors of the labor market and their enforcement by government bureaucracies.

To the extent that social mobility is linked primarily to an individual's relationship to the occupational system and its opportunities, this instance of assault on the class system is probably the most serious of the three discussed here. Pushed to its logical consequence, it would, quite simply, destroy the class system and replace it with a new pattern that at this point is hard to foresee in its detail. The fundamental class premise at issue here is that of individual competition and individual achievement. This premise has provided a basic motivating force for the individual seeking to improve or maintain his position in society. The new pattern in its final consequence would substitute a new principle by which both status and the opportunities for status change would be politically allocated and bureaucratically administered by government agencies (which, presumably, would themselves be organized by quota principles).

This third avenue of assault on class is so recent and so novel that it is difficult to envisage what scenarios are suggested by it. This assault could be

harder to resist than those on schools and housing because fewer escapes from its impact are possible. A middle-class individual (white or non-white) can take a number of actions to avoid lower-class incursions in the education of his children and in his choice of residential neighborhood. Similar moves would become very difficult if his entire profession were subject to a federally imposed quota system.

The most likely scenario here is mounting political resistance, similar to the resistance to busing and residential scattering. Labor unions are likely to be in the forefront of this resistance (the progress of unions in organizing college faculties is an important fact in this connection). Another prospect would be the intensification of conflict between different groups (as well as *within* groups) over the allocation of quotas and, indeed, over the criteria by which individuals are to be assigned to this or that group. Such conflict would be ferocious in occupations that find themselves in a tight spot on the labor market.

The institutionalization emerging from the conflict would be hair-raising in its political and legal complexities. The other day, at a party where academics were discussing the HFW questionnaires sent to universities, someone reported that his sister could not enroll as an astrology major at her college because the Polish quota was filled; she was now trying to get into home economics as a Lesbian. The laughter was uneasy, and the joke perhaps a bad one. But Mr. Pottinger's project to replicate the Hindu caste system in American academia isn't all that funny either. Nor, again happily, is it likely to succeed.

Underlying these three issues and their attendant rhetorical turbulence there is a peculiar twist in the recent course of liberal egalitarianism. This twist is closely connected with the overall assault on class.

In each of the three issues one observes a progression from *proscriptive* to *prescriptive* political and legal positions. It was one thing for the Supreme Court to say in 1954 that to bar a child from a particular school solely because of his race was a violation of the child's rights; it is quite another for the courts and agencies of the federal government to impose specific patterns of racial "balance" on school systems. It was one thing when both federal and state fair-housing laws prohibited discrimination against individuals on the basis of race in the renting or selling of housing; it is quite another if political and legal power should now be used to design a demographic composition of a community or entire region. Similarly, it was one thing for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit racial discrimination in employment; the establishment of a system of racial and other group quotas by government fiat bears little resemblance to that original intention.

We further note that the original proscriptive actions were designed to protect the rights of indi-

viduals; the prescriptive policies now coming to the fore focus no longer on individuals but on collectivities. Indeed, it is becoming popular to cite the necessity of furthering collectivities (be they racial, ethnic or other groupings) in cases where the rights of an individual seem to be infringed upon. The injury to the individual, regrettable though it may be, is legitimated in terms of this or that collective destiny. This constitutes not only a fundamental change in policies but an ideological reversal. Concern for the rights and welfare of the individual regardless of his or her group membership has been one of the great moral themes of modern liberalism. It is deeply ironic that a moral impetus rooted in this same liberalism should now be in the process of giving birth to an ethic of collectivities that is profoundly illiberal in its implications.

**W**e have already indicated that we do not believe that the current assault on class will be successful. It is a useful exercise, though, to try to envisage the success of the project. Were the assault on class to succeed, what might American society look like?

The most immediate implication would be a *quality* jump in the scope of political controls. To the extent that these and similar policies continue and are seriously enforced, they would create vast new bureaucratic agencies of government. More than that, they would entail the extension of governmental power into previously non-politicized sectors of social life to such a degree that the quantitative accretion would result in a qualitative change. The consistent movement from proscriptive to prescriptive legislation in the area of social justice is a portent of which might lie in store.

There are, of course, ample precedents for this tendency in American history. Since the 1930's at least there has been a strong tendency of liberally inspired legislation to produce gigantic new bureaucracies and thus to increase the scope of governmental power. This obvious fact has been characterized by liberal intellectuals as right-wing fantasy and hysteria, but ideological incantations cannot change the historical record.

These tendencies have even deeper roots in American history. The demon racism has quite logically replaced old demon rum, and the new Prohibition requires an extension of police powers at least equal

to those required by the old. The liberal penchant to prescribe morality may be seen as a late if somewhat bizarre flowering of a hoary Puritan ambition. Nor would it be the first time in American history (or, for that matter, in general history) that actions inspired by a passionate morality lead to thoroughly unforeseen consequences, some of them diametrically opposed to the original moral intentions.

What is at stake is much more than a simple extension of the powers of government. One of the most important structural characteristics of modern society, especially since the Industrial Revolution, has been the dichotomization of social life into public and private spheres. Although the relationship between these two spheres has been far from stable, there has been a general tendency to recognize a bifurcation of values dominating those two spheres. What is more, liberal ideology has generally legitimated this bifurcation. The public sphere, with its central political and economic institutions, has been dominated by the abstract relations of what, since Ferdinand Toennies, sociologists call *Gesellschaft*. It was further assumed that these abstract relations were related to formal rights and obligations of the individual—precisely the individual *abstracted* from any particular collective identities. This state of affairs was codified in a legal tradition of civil liberties and legitimated by the liberal ideology of the rights of the individual.

The private sphere, on the other hand, while embedded within the social and legal structures of the public world, continued to be a sector of life dominated by the particularistic values of *Gemeinschaft*. In the family, in the private relations of friendship and neighborhood, in voluntary religious associations and through a variety of other collective affiliations, the individual was very largely left free to fashion for himself experiences of community that were not formally recognized within the public order. (The legal status of the family, with its profound roots in the most ancient traditions of our civilization, is the major exception to this trend.) The classical formula for the public morality affirmed by this dichotomization of social life is the liberal article of faith that the public rights of the individual exist "irrespective of race, color or creed."

The trends under discussion here indicate a reversal in this area. Communal identities previously defined as belonging to the private sphere (such as

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the individual's racial, ethnic, religious or sexual identity) are now to be embodied in specific allocations of public status. Conversely, the intrusion of public power into areas of the individual's life previously considered to be none of the public's business (such as where to educate one's children or where to live) are legitimated by the new priority of the rights of collectivities over the rights of the individual.

Behind all this lies an ancient dream. It is the dream of the all-embracing society, of a world in which the individual will feel equally "at home" in all areas of his social involvement. Whatever may have been the forms for realizing this dream in other periods of history, it is fairly clear that under modern conditions the state is the only plausible candidate for the role of redemptive agent. Thus the dream of a new *Gemeinschaft*, spanning both public and private spheres, has invariably been the prelude to totalitarian developments in the modern world, regardless of whether the dreamers range themselves on the "right" or "left" of the political spectrum.

Modern society in general and its class system in particular have been accurately described by sociologists as based on a principle of achieved rather than ascribed status. Needless to say, this principle was very often violated, and contemporary American society is hardly a realization of its goal. Nevertheless, the principle of achieved status has not simply operated as a free-floating idea devoid of empirical social reality. Rather, it served as a motivating force, both in the biography of individuals and in political efforts to change the social order. In labor practices, in access to educational opportunity, in the civil service and in the treatment of defendants and litigants in court, a vast variety of provisions is designed to insure that individuals are treated equally, on the basis of abstract and formal rights pertaining to them *as individuals* and not by virtue of their ascriptive membership in this or that collectivity. Indeed, where such ascription took place, it was widely understood as an injustice to the individual and as a corruption of the institutions in question.

The dynamics of the class system were likewise understood in terms of this principle of achieved status. Injustices of the class system were condemned precisely because they violated this principle, as in cases where an individual, because of his ascribed background (that is, because of the "accident of birth") was denied some right or opportunity pertaining to him as an individual. Consequently, liberal efforts to combat social injustices were generally conceived as a further opening up of the class system, and thus "making the system work."

What is beginning to happen now is not an improvement of the class system but an incipient assault upon its fundamental logic. Part of this is a shift from the principles of achievement and merit to

principles of ascription in allocating social privilege. The notion that the individual should achieve a position in society as far as possible by his own effort is increasingly questioned on moral grounds. Instead, the individual's social destiny is morally tied to the destiny of whatever collectivity he is defined as primarily belonging to. It follows that status, instead of being achieved, comes to be ascribed. This means that it will matter less what individuals *do* than what they *are*—or, more precisely, than what they are deemed to be.

And if status is to be ascribed, the logical question is, *Who will do the ascribing?* There can be little doubt as to the answer: The government will do the ascribing. The ultimate consequence is a totalitarian future, the very antithesis of the liberal vision. In such a future not only are the resources and benefits of society allocated politically but the very identity of the individual is politically assigned.

The illiberal implications of the current assault on class cannot be compared with earlier attempts to remedy the injustices of the class system. The liberal reforms of the New Deal, whatever other defects they may have had, were not designed to challenge the principles underlying the class system. The class premise of individual competition for the benefits of achieved status remained unchallenged even within the ranks of organized labor. Rather, the welfare measures instituted by the New Deal could be described as the establishment of a "floor" at the lower reaches of the class system. No one should be permitted to fall beneath that "floor." While the benefits of society should continue to be the objects of competitive striving, it was deemed morally intolerable that anyone should live in outright misery.

Similarly, the movement for racial justice embodied in the civil rights movement of the early 1960's did not constitute an attack on the class system as such. On the contrary, it was designed to open up the class system to those who had previously been excluded from its competitive game and, it could be maintained with some plausibility, such an opening up would benefit the very dynamics of class. Discrimination against individuals on the basis of race was correctly designated as an irrational inconsistency injected into the dynamics of class. Thus the great liberal reform impulses of the 1930's were designed to make the class system more humane; those of the 1960's to make it more inclusive.

If the implicit thrust of current attacks on class were to be crowned with success, both the vision and the (admittedly imperfect) empirical reality of an "open society" would be laid to rest. We think that a most undesirable state of affairs, *not* because we believe there is something intrinsically wonderful about the class system, *nor* because we are committed to the egalitarian doctrine of liberal ideology. Rather, we are convinced that the

only likely alternative to the liberal design in our present situation is one or another variety of totalitarianism. We can imagine forms of *Gemeinschaft* more appealing than the American class system. Unfortunately, these are not realistic options. The realistic alternative is between the class system and the all-encompassing modern state—or, more precisely, the realistic question is to what extent the totalitarian tendencies of the latter may still be curbed. It is for these admittedly pessimistic reasons that we opt for modifications of the class system rather than for its dismemberment.

At the same time, no political future is morally acceptable if it accepts continuing racial injustice as the price for maintaining the class system or, for that matter, any other social pattern. Fortunately, we do not have to choose between the class system and racial justice. We are persuaded that the problems of racial injustice can be best resolved within the structures of the class system. Moreover, such a resolution is emphatically preferable for those who are the victims of racial injustice. The goals of justice and freedom are not incompatible; *both* can be attained by the individual “irrespective of race, color or creed.” We reject a design in which the state will allocate to each race its slice of the collective servitude.

**T**he strategic goal is therefore clear, even though there may be uncertainty about tactics. The strategic goal is that of the early civil rights movement—an integrated and open class society. This certainly does not preclude energetic government action. We incline to the view that the major crisis facing the class system, and indeed American society, in the coming years will stem from the difficulties in absorbing the available labor supply (especially highly educated labor—all those college graduates with exorbitant expectations for their personal futures) in an economy of limited growth. In this situation, energetic government action means not meddling in the private sphere but opening up new economic opportunities. Currently fashionable fantasies of “no growth” notwithstanding, every hope for greater justice (for blacks, for women and for everyone else) will be shattered unless continuing economic growth permits the *reality* of social mobility. The manipulation of the symbols of mobility and the encroachment upon the private life of individuals by government actions simply detract from what needs to be done. (Quota systems as now being fashioned and the wider assault on class and merit are precisely conducive to the undermining of the motives for economic effort. Ultimately, these are policies of social and economic stagnation. But that is the subject for another article.)

In order to modify the class system by ensuring wider and more equitable participation in it, one's

tactical focus must be economic. The basic “engine” of class mobility is the individual's relation to the economy. The basic mechanism of racial oppression has been economic too, namely, the exclusion of racial minorities from access to the economic benefits of the society. This fact, we think, has become much more obvious as a result of the rapid collapse of legally instituted racial segregation. We doubt, therefore, that blacks will benefit in the long run (perhaps not even in the short run) by political allocations of status that are unrelated to the achievement ethic of the class system.

If this is so, the focus of policy should be on employment and income. Measures that forcefully proscribe racial discrimination in every category of employment must be continued. We need income policies that greatly elevate the “floor” below which no one in the society may be permitted to sink. Nor would we do away with the concept of “affirmative action.” Measures might even be “race conscious” in that they make special provision for previously excluded groups, as long as such measures do not contravene the intrinsic logic of the class system. For examples, there should be special training programs in the area of employment, special programs for better housing, special educational efforts on behalf of racial minorities—all forms of “affirmative action” over and beyond the proscriptive measures barring discrimination. If such programs keep their attention on the economic “engine,” they will avoid confusing symbolic and real gains. They will also cost a lot of money. Symbolism is attractive to politicians because it is (or seems to be) inexpensive. Unfortunately, it sometimes fools also the victims of emphatically non-symbolic injustice.

Symbols are important for the mobilization of political will. We should therefore choose our symbols wisely. The symbols of a collectivistic utopianism divorced from the American experience are unlikely to have much political utility. If they did, all of us would be the losers. We cannot agree with the current liberal accusations of “racism” and “repression” against the Nixon Administration. We do fault the Administration, above all for its failure to provide encouragement (we would rather avoid the word “leadership”) to the deepest moral impulses of the society. The Administration cannot be held responsible for the confusions perpetrated by both black and white intellectuals. It can be held responsible for exploiting these confusions. *Realpolitik* may sometimes be unavoidable in dealing with foreign tyrannies. It cannot be the guideline for dealing with those domestic oppressions that violate the moral vision of the society. Our interest, therefore, is not an academic clarification of some current confusions of race and class. Confusions must be removed so that we can move ahead with tasks that are not scientific but moral and political.