

Alliances Needed

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STEVE STEINBERG HIGHLIGHTS A CRITICAL ISSUE at an important time. Steinberg is right to draw our attention to the impact of immigration on the project of progressive politics, particularly as it relates to the plight of African Americans. Progressives, workers, people of color, activists for economic and social justice, and especially immigrants and immigrant advocates must grapple with Steinberg's call to "think about immigration from the standpoint" of African Americans if progressive politics is to emerge and thrive.

There is little doubt that immigrants are here to stay. Population projections indicate the foreign-born will grow in number and disperse further throughout the United States, given current family reunification policies, birth rates, domestic economic needs, and so on. Their large and growing numbers make them increasingly important political players. Although questions remain about the direction of U.S. immigration policy, there is little doubt that how immigrants will be incorporated — socially, politically, culturally, and economically — will remain a burning issue for years to come. In other words, it is not a question about whether the millions of immigrants in the United States will be incorporated, but how they will be incorporated.

As Steinberg rightly notes, the problem of persistent and structural racism complicates this process, especially regarding how immigrants are being incorporated vis-a-vis African Americans. Today, just as in the past, some immigrants are becoming "white" while others are becoming "black." A changing but strong racial hierarchy in the United States continues to act as a sorting mechanism. As the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change noted in a recent publication, "Structural Racism and Community Building," racial group status can change but not easily, and not without support from others: "A group that is subordinated in one era can move closer to power and privilege in another era. In the past century, groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews in America started low on the socioeconomic and political ladder and 'became white' over time. More recently, 'model minority' status has been given to some Asian groups, allowing group members to gain access to some of the privileges associated with whiteness."

These authors stress that a group's position and mobility within the racial hierarchy, which in many ways resembles a caste system, cannot be solely determined by the nonwhite or subordinated groups themselves. How those who are at the lower end of the privilege scale perceive themselves, or how they behave, is less significant to their racial privilege status than broadly held perceptions about them. "European immigrants to nineteenth-century America could not 'become white' by simply adopting the mainstream habits and declaring themselves its members. They had to be allowed access into occupational, educational, residential, and other settings that had previously excluded them. In other words, racial and ethnic group position reflects the dominant group's exclusionary or inclusionary exercise of political, economic, and cultural power." Sadly, the enduring fact, as Steinberg rightly casts the spotlight on, is that African Americans have by and large been closed off from the pathways to opportunity. Only in times of mass social movements that give primacy to the conditions of African Americans that actions or inactions of progressive allies have been able to make strides forward, such as in the Civil Rights Movement.

We live in a moment pregnant with disastrous and progressive possibilities. The tide will turn, in part, on how immigrants and their allies line up with others. On the one hand, immigration could further reinforce racial hierarchies by pitting newcomers against the native-born, particularly African Americans. This is evident in tensions between immigrants from the Caribbean and native-born African Americans, for example, or between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. Fear of the other,

particularly by African Americans who witness their numbers dwindling compared with an increasing Latino population, is not unfounded. Just when African Americans have gained political power in electoral terms, they are watching their strength diminish. And while many factors are at work in depressing real wages, immigration is surely one. In addition, whites have successfully exploited divide and conquer strategies to push and pull immigrants in conflicting directions. These dynamics strain already fragile multiethnic coalitions.

On the other hand, as Steinberg notes, new immigrants create opportunities for multiracial coalitions along working class lines. Multiracial alliances — particularly between blacks and Latinos — have won living wage campaigns, gains in public education and health care, and scored electoral victories at the local level. These kinds of alliances, however, require concerted efforts to sustain themselves over time to be effective. To be sure, invoking the need for working-class solidarity across racial and ethnic lines will not alone overcome the multiple and significant challenges that advocates face in forging and sustaining such alliances on a scale able to make significant advances. But progressive efforts will likely falter without multiracial solidarity.

Ultimately, Steinberg points us in the direction that is crucial for progressive politics: The advancement of working people of all stripes hinges on undoing racial hierarchy — read white privilege. The liberation of groups subordinated on the basis of race and ethnicity — immigrants and African Americans alike — is intertwined with the progress of the working class. Immigration complicates these processes. At the same time, the struggle for immigrant and civil rights, i.e., for human rights, offers an opportunity to achieve greater strength through unity. Campaigns for civil and immigrant rights put a human face on the millions of newcomers and can elevate other causes important to African Americans and all working people, including affordable housing and health care, access to good schools and jobs, and so on. But such campaigns can not be won if done at the expense of African-American advancement. They must be done in tandem.

Toward that end, as Steinberg notes, immigrant scholars and advocates and immigrants themselves owe a great debt to civil rights activists. One year after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law (July 2, 1964) and just months after the Voting Rights Act became law (August 6, 1965), the 1965 Hart-Celler Act was enacted in October 1965 (formally titled the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965), which prohibited immigration and naturalization on the basis of race, sex, or nationality, effectively abolishing the nation-of-origin restrictions that were imposed in the 1920s that had previously limited immigration to Europeans and opened up the United States to immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Thus, the reason most contemporary immigrants are persons of color are that the civil rights movement helped open the door to the United States that had been closed to them.

Steinberg challenges immigrant scholars and advocates — and all progressives — to confront racism in order to advance the cause of equality and social justice. Who will heed this timely and critical call?

Footnotes