Immigration, African Americans, and Race Discourse

written by Peter Steinberg | March 8, 2010

We believe this article begins an important conversation on the left. We will be publishing various responses to it in our next issue, along with a reply from Stephen Steinberg. In addition, this article will be published in the Winter issue of New Labor Forum*, together with a different set of responses and a reply from Steinberg. We urge readers to follow this debate in both venues. — Eds.*

> *In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African Americans.*
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> — Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks"[1]

In 1971, the *Amsterdam News*, New York City's oldest African-American newspaper, published a cartoon by Melvin Tapley that gave vent to a uniquely black ambivalence toward immigration. The cartoon portrayed a downtrodden black figure crouched on the ground, labeled "US Folks," a double entendre for "us folks" and "U.S. folks." A chain of other figures, representing Spanish Americans and the foreign born, climb on the back of the crouched black figure, to pluck fruit off the tree of opportunity. Tapley had no illusions about the struggles of these immigrant minorities. Although he portrays them as getting ahead on the backs of blacks, immigrants too must climb over the wall of prejudice, and they reach only the lowest branches on the tree of opportunity.

The accompanying editorial read as follows:

> News from the Census Bureau that Spanish-speaking Americans are now able to earn higher incomes than Blacks will not come as a surprise to many of us.
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> Since our arrival here in 1619 as slaves, Black Americans have watched millions of European immigrants arrive and within a short time hold jobs and reach levels of incomes Blacks were not allowed to attain.
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> In fact, during the early part of the century the hordes of Irish, Italian, Jewish, Polish, German, Scottish, Greek, Spanish, and other European immigrants frequently replaced Blacks as longshoremen, street-car motormen, construction workers, jockeys, blacksmiths, and able-bodied seamen. *Outright, rank racism, and discrimination* were the tools by which Blacks have been deprived of work over the decades.[2]

The cartoon and editorial reflect a long strand of black thought, which regards immigrants and immigration with an ambivalence verging on resentment and bitterness. This should come as no surprise. As Lawrence Fuchs reminds us: "In 1883, when Emma Lazarus, a daughter of immigrants, wrote the impassioned words ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to

breathe free,' the Supreme Court undermined the last of the civil rights laws passed by Congress following the Civil War."[3] And 1965 — the year these rights were finally restored — also marked the beginning of a massive influx of immigrants from every part of the world who were thrust into competition with blacks for jobs and opportunity. The crowning irony is that most of these immigrants would not be here, but for the black protest movement that led to immigration reform abolishing the national origins quotas that had chocked off flow of immigrants from nations outside of northern and western Europe.

Let me throw down the gauntlet: my challenge is to think about immigration from the standpoint of this black figure, crouched on the ground as others pluck fruit off the tree of opportunity. Dare we also read the immigration literature — the celebratory narratives of immigrant progress and triumph against adversity — from the point of view of "the man farthest down," to borrow a phrase from Booker T. Washington? It goes without saying that this is only one among many standpoints for thinking about immigration and immigration policy. My only contention is that it is one that must be considered, and that doing so is an intellectual and moral imperative.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me make clear from the outset what I am *not* saying. I am most definitely not calling into question the rights of immigrants. I am the grandson of immigrants, and the new immigrants have as much right to be here as I do, and to claim all of the rights of their adopted nationality. Nor am I blaming immigrants for the nation's tragic failure to address the enduring legacy of slavery. On the other hand, immigrants cannot hide behind the refrain that "our ancestors didn't own slaves," or claim that, as recent arrivals, they are exonerated from America's racial crimes. Indeed, immigrants are implicated in America's race problem through the very act of immigration. Besides, when immigrants proudly embrace American citizenship and nationality, they not only take possession of American dreams and ideals, but they also acquire some heavy baggage: moral and political responsibility for the vestiges of slavery.

A Historical Perspective

THE CARTOON IN THE *Amsterdam News* is a reminder that the issue of immigration and its impact on African Americans must be seen in historical perspective. I first engaged this issue in 1971 when I conducted research on the impact of European immigration on African Americans. I began with the naïve question: why didn't more southern blacks do what my grandparents had done when they left Russia and Poland: to flee persecution and seek refuge and opportunity in Northern cities that were undergoing an extraordinary economic expansion? At the end of the Civil War there were four million emancipated slaves, and as the British economist Brinley Thomas has written, "after the Civil War the best thing that could have happened to the black workers of the United States would have been a fair opportunity to contribute to satisfying the great demand for labour in the rapidly growing cities of the North and West." This did not happen, however, and the social science literature was strangely unhelpful in explaining why this was the case. In *An American Dilemma* Gunnar Myrdal wrote of the period just after the Civil War: "There was enough industrial activity . . . in many of the smaller centers of the North to permit a significant immigration of Negroes. That Negroes have not migrated to these places is . . . a mystery."[4]

Immigration is the most important single factor in dispelling this "mystery." The North was able to satisfy its insatiable need for cheap labor through the immigration of some 25 million Europeans between 1880 and 1924. Blacks, on the other hand, were categorically excluded from the entire industrial sector, except for a few menial, dangerous, or backbreaking jobs that immigrants spurned. Note that the culprits in this drama were not Southern sheriffs and lynch mobs. Nor does blame go only to greedy capitalists who played one group off the other. Workers, through their unions,

engaged in a combination of ethnic nepotism and blatant racism that reinforced black exclusion. In effect, the industrial revolution in the United States was "for whites only." Here was a missed opportunity to integrate blacks into the industrial labor force during the critical early stages of industrialization, and the failure to do so, set the nation on a path of racial division and conflict that continues to this day.

The proof that European immigration was devastating to blacks is that as soon as immigration was cut off by the First World War, it triggered a massive migration of blacks to cities in the North and West, resulting in the most significant economic advance since the abolition of slavery. The relationship between immigration and race caught the attention of the *New Republic*, which in 1916 printed an editorial under the caption: "The Superfluous Negro." The editorial began as follows: "The average Pole or Italian arriving at Ellis Island does not realize that he is the deadly foe of the native Negro . . . It is a silent conflict on a gigantic scale."[5]

This is the question I put before you. Is history repeating itself? Has the influx of another 25 million immigrants since 1965 — not to mention millions more of undocumented workers — again made the Negro "superfluous," undercutting black progress? Here was another missed opportunity to integrate blacks into the economic mainstream. Indeed, this new wave of immigration could not have come at a worse time since blacks were poised for progress during the post-civil-rights period, for four reasons:

- Thanks to the civil rights movement, Congress had passed landmark civil rights legislation, not only ending second-class citizenship but also proscribing discrimination in employment (Title VII).

- The black militancy of the 1970s kept up the pressure against employment discrimination. Affirmative action policy, ironically pioneered by the Nixon administration in response to grass- roots protest, drove a wedge into the wall of occupational segregation, resulting in the most extensive deracialization of labor markets since slavery.

- Unlike the earlier period, blacks were concentrated in cities in the North and West, and thus proximate to urban job markets. Although it is often argued that blacks arrived at a time when the industries that had provided opportunity to earlier immigrants were in decline, the fact is that millions of new immigrants were rapidly absorbed into both the residual blue-collar sector and the expanding service industries.

- After 1965, demographic trends favored blacks. The nation's declining birth rate sharply reduced the number of workers, providing for a tight labor market that has always been the *sine qua non* of black employment. I remember that during the depth of the racial crisis in the 1970s, economists issued reassuring forecasts that, given the sharp decline in the birth rate, labor market conditions would improve for blacks around the turn of the century. But, alas, something happened on the way to the new millennium. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act was passed, which would result in the influx of over 25 million legal immigrants over the next four decades. Not to mention millions of undocumented workers who gravitated to the same urban labor markets where blacks were concentrated.

Why did the United States open its door to millions of immigrants at a time that deindustrialization was generating unemployment? One answer, or so we are told, is that the huge

upsurge of immigration was unanticipated when the Hart-Cellar act was passed in 1965. But even after immigration rose from a trickle to a flood, it came to be viewed as a blessing in disguise, which is to say, a conservative policy in liberal garb. I say this because the champions of mass immigration were not liberals, and certainly not ethnic activists, but free-market economists (now tagged as "neoliberals") who saw mass immigration as a panacea for a variety of economic ills.

A notable example is Julian Simon who published a book in 1988 on *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Two years later Simon followed up with an article in *The Public Interest*, entitled "The case for Greatly Increased Immigration." Simon argued:

1. That the nation stood to gain technologically through the addition of "top scientific talent." (Never mind that from the standpoint of the sending countries, this amounted to a brain drain.)

2. That immigration was necessary to satisfy business' demand for labor, given the declining birth rates that had sunk even below replacement levels. (One wonders if the legions of blacks without jobs were ever part of the calculus.)

3. That immigrants helped to pay for the social security pensions of the burgeoning number of retirees. (A recent article in the *New York Times* reported that in 2002 illegal immigrants paid $6.4 billion in Social Security taxes for benefits that they would never receive.)

4. That immigration boosted the image of the United States abroad (read: immigrants fit nicely into various foreign policy agendas).

Granted, there were some strident voices on the right, like Peter Brimlow, whose book *Alien Nation* was an anti-immigrant screed in the worst nativist tradition. Simon's book, in contrast, advanced a respectable economic case for mass immigration, and it received rhapsodic reviews in the *National Review*, *Forbes*, *Business Week*, *The Spectator*, and *Barron's National Business and Fiscal Weekly*.

Other cheerleaders of "greatly increased immigration" contended that immigration lowered inflation (never mind that it does this by depressing wages!). Others argued that immigrants lowered the deficit by propping up domestic manufacturing, and generating economic activity through "enclave economies" (never mind that this amounts the creation of a sub-proletariat of immigrant workers!). Still others exulted that immigrants provided the energy and spirit to renew the fading American spirit of enterprise and innovation (never mind that it amounted to disinvestment in black labor, whose family roots go back to the beginning of the nation!). Quite a pile of expectation to pile on the plate of an uprooted immigrant struggling to make ends meet.

The question of the impact of the new immigration on African Americans has not entirely escaped the attention of immigration scholars. Indeed, Simon reassured readers that "a good-sized body of competent recent research shows that immigration does not exacerbate unemployment, even among directly competing groups."[6] Much the same conclusion was reached in a 1998 edited volume published by the Russell Sage Foundation entitled *Help or Hindrance? The Economic Implications of Immigration for African Americans*.[7] In their introduction, the editors answer their own question by stating that immigration is neither a help (who ever said that?) nor a hindrance, and concluded that immigration "appears to have exerted small negative effects on the economic

situations of African Americans." Somebody should tell our crouched black figure that he can get up and grab the fruit off the tree of opportunity! This is precisely the message that emerges from the immigration literature, where immigrant virtues are extolled and invidious comparisons are made to blacks who are portrayed as culturally deficient and lacking the pluck that has allowed immigrants to pursue opportunity.

How is it that these econometricians arrive at a conclusion that defies common sense? Just consider the fact that the ten major gateway cities — Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, San Francisco, Washington, Houston, San Diego, Boston, and Dallas — are all cities of high black concentration, with notoriously high rates of employment and underemployment. Just imagine the opposite scenario, if immigration had remained at the level that existed in 1965 — at 292,000 immigrants annually, compared to just over one million last year. Clearly, the tight labor markets would have provided incentives for employers to lower their racist barriers, to hire and train black workers, and if necessary, to improve wages and conditions to make even these marginal jobs attractive to native workers. Consider the difference this would have made in a city like Chicago where, according to a recent study, 45 percent of black men between 20 and 24 are out of school and out of work.

Defining Racism Out of Existence

ONE PROBLEM WITH THESE econometric studies is that they are methodologically flawed. In an article on "Immigration and African Americans," two economists, Steven Shulman and Robert C. Smith identify several reasons that "the findings of negligible impact should not be taken at face value."[8] For one thing, immigration may have negative effects on low-wage workers and positive effects on high-wage workers, thus canceling each other out. For another thing, most studies are based on comparisons of employment rates and incomes of blacks in cities with high and low immigrant populations, and find little or no difference. However, immigrants flock to cities where the local economies are expanding and labor is in demand, and we do not know what the result would have been, absent immigration. In Los Angeles, for example, the massive influx of Asians and Latinos has actually triggered an exodus of blacks out of the city.

Another problem is that econometric studies are based on massive aggregates. A dramatically different picture emerges if one examines trends in particular industries or job sectors where immigrants have made inroads, often displacing blacks from job niches where they had a foothold. The standard cant among immigration scholars is that immigrants take jobs spurned by native workers, including blacks. This logic may pertain to some notoriously undesirable jobs — in sweatshops, for example. But as we know, immigrants have made inroads into such coveted job sectors as construction, the health-care industries, building maintenance, hotels and restaurants, transportation, and even in government service (which has long been a main staple of black employment). Even in low-wage jobs — in fast food restaurants, for example — black youth have come under severe competition with immigrants.

Several recent studies based on interviews with employers have provided direct evidence that employers prefer immigrants to blacks. This would appear to provide ironclad proof of employer racism. "Don't jump to conclusions," has been the common refrain of the authors of these studies. (Specifically, I refer to studies of employer preferences by Philip Moss & Chris Tilly, Roger Waldinger and Michael I. Lichter, and William Julius Wilson.[9]) Despite their liberal stripes, these researchers uncritically accept the declarations of employers at face value, and in doing so, effectively ratify the self-serving rationalizations that employers put forward to camouflage their racism. The accuracy of employer claims — that blacks are less reliable and efficient workers, that

they lack "soft skills," that they have an "attitude" that antagonizes whites — are never subjected to critical scrutiny, much less put to an empirical test. Indeed, Moss and Tilly acknowledge, "We have no independent information about the people or neighborhoods that the employers told as about." Similarly, Waldinger and Lichter concede: "Absent direct observation, one can at best hazard questionable inferences about the correspondence between employers' view and the world." But inserting a caveat does not compensate for the fact that black workers — their qualifications, their experiences, and their viewpoint — are rendered "beyond the scope" of their studies. As a result, we never hear from "the man farthest down," who is not only crouched on the ground but also reduced to silence.

Let us give the employers and these researchers the benefit of considerable doubt. What if it *were* proved that on the whole immigrants make better workers, or that these employers, driven primarily by self-interest, make hiring decisions based on past experience? Does that warrant their preference for immigrant workers over blacks? Most definitely not! To counter this line of argument, I retrieved my dusty copy of Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*, published in 1954. Allport defines prejudice as follows:

> Ethnic prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of that group. The net effect of prejudice, thus defined, is to place the object of prejudice at some disadvantage not merited by his own misconduct.[10]

Employers who make their hiring decisions on the basis of what group a person belongs to, rather than on individual merits, are engaged in patent acts of prejudice. This is a case of racial profiling, or what Dinesh D'Souza, in *The End of Racism*, unapologetically calls "rational discrimination" or what Joleen Kirshenman and Kathryn Neckerman call "statistical discrimination."[11] But as Allport reminds us, to deny someone access to a job on the basis of group affiliation is the very essence of prejudice! It is strange and regrettable when so-called race experts do not recognize racism when it is staring them in the face. Or engage in a sophism that defines racism out of existence.

For example, take a recent article by Nelson Lim, a research associate at RAND Corporation, entitled "On the Back of Blacks? Immigrants and the Fortunes of African Americans."[12] Lim wants to know why it is that immigrants have higher employment rates than blacks, and he cites three factors: 1) *the enclave economy*, which he describes as "a giant hiring hall for immigrants"; 2) *network hiring*, the practice whereby employers bypass formal hiring mechanisms and rely on referrals from current workers; and 3) *social capital*, the supposition that immigrants have the requisite abilities and work habits that blacks lack. Note that the r-word — "racism" — that figured so prominently in the editorial in the *Amsterdam News* (remember, the editors railed against "outright, rank racism and discrimination") is absent from his explanatory schema. Upon closer examination, however, the three explanatory factors that Lim invokes to explain why employers prefer immigrants to blacks can be seen as little more than circumlocutions for racism. Let me explain:

- By its very nature, the much-ballyhooed ethnic economy is a racist structure whose hiring practices are in massive violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Ethnic nepotism and

racial exclusion are two sides of the same coin.

- Network hiring is a device that employers use to prevent blacks from even getting their foot in the door. This is racism, plain and simple! It is a working-class variant of "the old-boy network" that affirmative action was designed to counteract. In other words, network hiring is a *mechanism* of discrimination, and indeed one that employers use precisely because it insulates them from allegations of racism since they are not directly implicated in the recruitment of workers.

- The concept of "social capital" presumes that immigrants have traits that blacks lack. When employers use these prejudgments as the basis of hiring decisions, they are engaged in acts of prejudice. I fear that Lim has committed the fallacy I alluded to earlier: in this case, using the concept of "social capital" as a smoke screen for shifting the blame for discrimination from employers who actually make hiring decisions to hapless blacks who are denied employment. This illogical argument is advanced even though no evidence is proffered to validate the supposition that there are not black workers in abundance who have precisely the traits that are ascribed to immigrants and who could be readily hired, but for the prejudgments of employers.

The profound impact of immigration on the fortunes of blacks is evident in Waldinger and Lichter's study of Los Angeles, based on case studies of six industries: department stores, furniture manufacturing, hospitals, hotels, printing, and restaurants. In all six industries, there has been a major decline of whites between 1970 and 1990 and a corresponding influx of Latinos and Asians. In only two of these industries — printing and department stores — did blacks increase their representation. In hospitals, where blacks had established a foothold in 1970, their percentage remained the same, despite an 85 percent increase in the total work force. In furniture manufacturing, hotels, and eating establishments, the black percentage in the work force actually declined.

On the face of itself, this would seem to provide incontrovertible evidence that immigrants displace blacks from jobs, or at a minimum, preempt their access to jobs in the expanding service sector. This is not Waldinger and Lichter's conclusion, however. In a section again entitled "On the Back of Blacks?" they downplay the role of "rank, outright racism and discrimination," and emphasize the role of labor market mechanisms — "network hiring," the "capture" of occupational niches by particular ethnic groups, and employer "preferences" which, like the other writers just cited, they construe not as naked bigotry, but as responses to perceived and actual deficiencies of black workers.

So powerful are these reified labor market "forces" in sifting workers along different occupational trajectories that, according to Waldinger and Lichter, "relatively few African-American workers are even *trying* to compete with immigrants in the latter's industrial and occupational concentrations."[13] This is their explanation of why, several decades after the passage of Title VII, blacks in Los Angeles constitute 2 percent of the workforce in furniture manufacturing, 4 percent in eating and drinking establishments, 5 percent in printing, 7 percent in hotels, 13 percent in department stores, and 17 percent in hospitals (note that these are aggregate figures that obscure racial stratification within these occupational domains). Small wonder that, after the Rodney King verdict, rampaging mobs vented their rage on immigrant-owned businesses.[14] Small wonder that since the 1990s there has been a "reverse migration" of tens of thousands of Los Angeles blacks to various parts of the South. Indeed, nothing better epitomizes the extent to which African-American

destiny is linked to immigration. Just as the cutoff of European immigration by the First World War provided a catalyst for the first major migration to cities in the North and West, the resumption of mass immigration after 1965 has led to the first reverse migration back to the South.

Immigration and Race Discourse

EARLIER I ALLUDED TO a tendency in the immigration literature to explain away the negative impact of immigration on African Americans, either by pretending that there are no significant negative effects or by defining "racism" out of existence, or by shifting the blame onto blacks themselves. There is another longstanding discourse based on invidious comparisons between immigrants and blacks. In the popular idiom, the question takes the form, "We made it, why haven't they?" When these comparisons were made between European immigrants and blacks, it was always possible to contend that blacks alone encountered racism. Now that most immigrants are nominally "people of color," the question takes a new and pernicious twist: if Asians and Latinos — and now the clincher, if West Indians can make it — why can't African Americans? Doesn't this prove that racism is not an insurmountable barrier?

Having dismissed "racism" as a factor, these writers then leap to the conclusion that in contrast to immigrants, African Americans are saddled with defective cultural systems — weak families, disorganized communities, dysfunctional subcultures — that prevent them from climbing the tree of success. Thomas Sowell was the first to advance this proposition, and Dinesh D'Souza has given it its most explicit and unapologetic expression. The notion that blacks have only themselves to blame for their problems is emblazoned in the title of John McWhorter's recent book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. But this logic is also found, albeit in more circumspect language, in the work of such liberal scholars as John Ogbu and Mary Waters, both of whom extol immigrant culture and then use it as the basis for making invidious comparisons to the cultural practices of African Americans.

In his study of a high school in San Jose, California, Ogbu sought to explain why immigrant children have better academic outcomes than African Americans. Drawing a distinction between immigrant minorities and caste-like minorities, he speculated that African Americans, isolated for generations by segregation and poverty, developed an "oppositional culture" that disparaged learning as "acting white." With this theoretical sleight of hand, he shifted attention away from institutional racism and the racist barriers that continue to impede black access to jobs and opportunities, placing them at a disadvantage even to recent immigrants and even within the schools that both groups share. His totally unsubstantiated claim that black youth spurn educational achievement as "acting white" has been projected as a general theory of the racial gap in academic achievement and test scores, thus absolving societal institutions of blame for the scandalous inequalities along racial lines in educational resources and opportunity.[15]

Mary Waters also contrasts behavior and incomes of immigrants and African Americans, with that same pernicious twist since her subjects are Caribbean immigrants. Note that it is not Waters, but her West Indian subjects, along with their white managers, who insist that Caribbean immigrants are more reliable and productive workers, and are relatively free of those defensive and resentful attitudes that put whites off. As with other studies of employer preferences, however, Waters does not subject these claims to critical examination or to empirical validation. Indeed, her own data indicate that the small number of black workers at American Food, the catering firm that was the principal site for her research, had logged in more years than their foreign-born counterparts.

Waters ascribes to immigrants a tendency to compare "their own hard-working, planning, friendly, upward-striving selves with the lazy, welfare-dependent, unfriendly, bitter black

Americans."[16] But she commits this fallacy herself, through a failure to explore the social class factors that underlie the ostensibly "cultural" differences between the two groups. Waters seems oblivious to the fact that the West Indians who arrive in New York are a product of selective migration, and that many of them enjoyed middle-class status in their countries of origin even though they are forced to take jobs that, in many cases, amount to downward mobility. Besides, one would think from Waters' account (and the pronouncements of her subjects) that Caribbean youth are all paragons of disciplined and achieving students, and there is none of the disorder — school crime, drugs, shattered families, dropouts — that are so rife in African-American communities. By overlooking selective migration, Waters ends up comparing social class "apples" and "oranges," and it matters little that the "apples" are native sons and the "oranges" are imported from the tropics.

Indeed, *Black Identities* is a virtual catalog of the victim-blaming constructions that permeate the immigration canon. Waters embraces 1) Waldinger's concept of "network hiring" to explain why African Americans are relatively absent in the workplace; 2) Ogbu's distinction between "voluntary and involuntary minorities" to explain why, compared to West Indians, African Americans have a "chip on their shoulder," 3) Ruben Rumbaut's contention that immigrants and their children do worse the longer they stay in the United States, allegedly because they lose touch with the achievement ideology and positive culture that were part of their homeland cultures; and 4) Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou's concept of "segmented assimilation," which holds that immigrants who live in close proximity to African Americans adopt their "adversarial stance" toward white society, including a devaluation on education "as a vehicle of advancement." Stated another way, the children of West Indian immigrants run the risk of assimilating "the wrong way," forsaking the rich and positive cultures of their parents for the aberrant culture of African Americans.

This last item deserves special attention, because it comes close to the main theme of Waters' narrative. Think about what is being said here. In effect, African Americans are blamed not only for their own misery, but also for subverting the uplifting cultures of immigrants and thus condemning their children to live on the fringes. Stripped of its rhetorical gloss, we have here a theory of racial contamination, different only in that it is cultural rather than physical contamination that is to be feared.

Again, Waters may plead that she is merely reporting on fears expressed by her West Indian subjects, but what she forgets is that these same fears are commonly expressed by African-American parents, as Mary Patillo-McCoy found in her study of a mixed-income neighborhood in Chicago. Waters' persistent error is her failure to explore the social class underpinnings of the conflict between West Indians and African Americans, even though this conflict is commonly (mis)understood in terms of a West Indian/African American binary. As we know, deep poverty engenders similar cultural responses in poor Asian and Latino communities, with or without the presence of African Americans. And for that matter, in poor white communities as well, as Jay MacLoed shows brilliantly in *Ain't No Making It*.

Despite disclaimers to the contrary, the message that emerges from the canon of immigration scholarship is clear: if only African Americans had the cultural virtues, the perseverance, and the pluck of immigrants — if only they were not saddled with self-deprecating and anti-intellectual subcultures — if only they could get rid of that defiant and surly "attitude" that whites abhor — if only they would stop seeing themselves as "victims" and stop whining about racism — then they too could climb the tree of opportunity. Or at least pluck the fruit off the lowest branches.

Needless to say, none of the writers whom I have criticized above are oblivious to racism. How could they be? Indeed, they uncover mounds of racism in their empirical research. Rather, the problem is that, with a theoretical sleight of hand, societal racism morphs into culture. According to this line of reasoning, racism — that is, past racism — engenders a host of cultural distortions among

African Americans who develop an "adversarial culture," lack "social capital," are "obsessed" with race and racism, have problems of "self-presentation," and so and so forth, all leading to the erudite conclusion that it is because of these "cultural" traits that black workers are not hired. What we have here is a new iteration of the discredited culture-of-poverty thesis that shifts the focus away from the societal racism to the putative cultural practices of blacks themselves. On this reasoning, even employers who admit that they do not hire blacks are exonerated of racism, since they are seen as merely responding to the damage that racism has wrought in the cultural practices of African Americans. Totally obscured in this explanatory schema is the persistent role of "outright, rank racism and discrimination," to again quote the unvarnished language of the editorial in the *Amsterdam News*. Thus, with this incredible inversion of logic, blacks are blamed for the racist acts of employers!

A second way that immigrants have impacted on race policy and discourse pertains to the fateful shift from "affirmative action" to "diversity." Affirmative action policy was forged in the cauldron of the black protest movement. However, a nation that had no trouble using all the powers of the state to oppress blacks as a people balked when it came to giving preferential treatment on the basis of group affiliation. This, the sophists claimed with glee, violated the cardinal rule of the civil rights protest movement: that a person should be judged by the content of his character, not the color of his skin.

Thus, even at their inception, affirmative action programs were targeted ambiguously for "minorities and women." As it turns out, the primary beneficiaries were upper-middle-class white woman who gained access to the professions and corporate business. Predictably, other "minorities" with historical grievances — Asians and Latinos — began crowding under the meager umbrella of affirmative action. I do not blame them for doing so: I am only saying that it made a difference, and that it derailed affirmative action from its original objective. After the Bakke decision in 1978, which proscribed "quotas" for specific groups but sanctioned "diversity" as a goal in college admissions, affirmative action programs were no longer governed by the logic of reparations, which is to say, as a remedy for past injustices. Clearly, this turn of events worked to the benefit of immigrants and to the detriment of blacks.

A third way that immigration has impacted on race discourse is that social scientists and government officials puzzled about how to classify these new immigrants who were not white, but then again, were not black either. Immigrant leaders and advocacy groups, too, had to locate themselves on the nation's cognitive map. As the exponents of "whiteness studies" have shown, old immigrants, beginning with the Irish, actively sought to disassociate themselves from blacks, lest they be lumped together with these racial pariahs. Clearly, new immigrants were even more "at risk," given their conspicuous racial differences. The result has been a proliferation of books and conferences with titles like "beyond black and white" (over 15,000 hits on Google); "neither black nor white" (14,000 hits); and "in-between people — race" (800 hits). From the standpoint of Asians and Latinos, this is an entirely understandable and, I suppose, unassailable development. On the other hand, the extension of race beyond the binary of black and white, the admission of permutations in the middle, has deflected attention away from the unique and unresolved problems of race *qua* African Americans. The result is that the nation congratulates itself on its "diversity" and celebrates its "multiculturalism," while the problems of African Americans continue to fester from neglect.

But there is something else that needs to be said, and let me be blunt. Immigrants have a political debt to pay to African Americans whose protest movement led to the immigration reform that allowed them to come here in the first place. Furthermore, thanks to the black protest movement, these immigrants entered a nation with a drastically improved climate of tolerance, and with policies in place that reduced their exposure to the scourge of bigotry and opened up avenues

of opportunity that previously did not exist for people of color.

Policy Implications

As I acknowledged at the outset, the image of that black man crouched on the ground while others climb on his back to reach the tree of opportunity represents only one standpoint, among many, for thinking about immigration. Immigration has obvious benefit for the millions of immigrants who have courageously pulled up roots to pursue opportunity in the United States. And immigration, including "illegal" immigration that is tacitly sanctioned, has conferred immense benefit on the American economy, as the boosters of "greatly increased immigration" had foreseen. In his book *Immigrants and the American City*, Thomas Muller enumerates the many ways in which immigration has been a boon to the economy as a whole and to employers, including middle-class households who rely upon immigrants for everything from childcare to eldercare. At the same time Muller concedes that aggregate data "can mask less benign redistributional effects upon the working class and native minorities."[17] This should come as no surprise. It used to be a truism that blacks were the "last hired," and it has taken a good deal of intellectual artifice and obfuscation on the part of immigration scholars to deny the obvious: that filling the hiring queue with millions of immigrants has had adverse consequences for African Americans, particularly during the post-civil-rights era when blacks were poised for progress.

The question, from a policy standpoint, is how these negative impacts might be mitigated. The first thing we have to do is to take off our blinders, and confront the incontrovertible fact that, like earlier waves of immigration, the post-1965 immigration has been detrimental to African Americans. Immigration scholars have stubbornly avoided this conclusion, not out of any animus toward African Americans, but rather out of sympathy with immigrants and their struggles. Although their intentions might be benign, they have fallen into the pit of what political philosopher Charles Mills calls "the epistemology of ignorance" — a tendency, when it comes to African Americans, "to deny, to elide, to skim over."[18] So, the first order of business is to acknowledge that immigration has come at a heavy cost to African Americans, and that immigration scholars have unwittingly played their part, as chroniclers of the immigrant experience, in propagating the idea that Toni Morrison captured with characteristic acumen: "of American blacks as the real aliens."

There is also a need to take off our political blinders and to confront the neoliberal underpinnings of current immigration policy. There is nothing progressive about flooding the lower echelons of the labor market with desperate immigrants who depress wages for each other as well as native workers. It is also problematic when the nation imports workers to fill higher echelons of the job pyramid, instead of upgrading the skills of native workers. For example, we import thousands of nurses from the Philippines and the Caribbean and then shut down nursing schools that traditionally provided channels of upward mobility for working-class women. Indeed, the traffic in nurses has become an export industry, with the additional irony is that there is a shortage of nurses in the Philippines.

My point is that the left has to get beyond liberal sentimentality on immigration policy, and face some hard choices. Jewish labor leaders who sought to organize the garment trades at the turn of the century realized that their efforts were undercut by the relentless influx of immigrants, and were forced to choose between their coreligionists in Europe and their economic self-interests. Cesar Chavez confronted the same dilemma in trying to organize California farm workers in the 1960s, and he reluctantly opposed the bracero program that was designed to flood the labor market with cheap migrant labor and to undercut unions. To state the obvious, immigration is not a benevolence program for the "huddled masses" of the world, and it behooves us to confront the downside of current immigration policy, not only for blacks, but also for other low-wage earners, including immigrants and their children who are the first to suffer the consequences of the relentless influx of

new arrivals.

Even if immigration continues at current levels, as it presumably will, there is an urgent need to address the particular impacts on African Americans. Let me suggest the broad outlines of a policy agenda, although I do so without any illusion that these proposals are likely to be enacted in the present political climate.

1. Immigration should be part of a national manpower policy that protects the interests of immigrants and native workers alike. A laissez-faire policy that relegates millions of immigrants to the vagaries of the "free market" only throws low-wage workers in pitiless competition with each other, and closes off avenues of mobility into more desirable job sectors. As a result, current policy exacerbates existing inequalities along lines of race, ethnicity, gender and class.

2. Candid acknowledgement of the negative impacts of immigration on African Americans carries with it an obligation to address the problem. This should begin with vigorous enforcement of laws against employment discrimination. The current practice, documented but unchallenged by immigration scholars, of giving preference to one group over another must be exposed for what it is: blatant discrimination in violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Even the employment practices of "enclave economies" must be brought into conformity with laws against employment discrimination.

3. The employment practices copiously documented by immigration scholars constitute an argument for affirmative action to counter what is deceptively called "network hiring." Affirmative action has been immensely effective in integrating the work force in the professions and in corporate business, and in many blue-collar industries as well. There is urgent need to extend affirmative action to the service industries and blue-collar sectors where immigrants and blacks compete for jobs. Today we have the spectacle of entire job sectors that have become monopolized by this or that immigrant group, and this is precisely the situation that affirmative action was designed to counteract.

4. There is a job crisis today in African-American communities that is being ignored, indeed camouflaged behind the façade of "diversity." As mentioned earlier, a study in Chicago found that 45 percent of black youth are out of school and out of work. Another recent study of New York City found that there are nearly 170,000 "disconnected youth," aged 16 to 24, who are not in school, not working, and not looking for work. Excluded from these calculations is the vast number of black men — nearly 1 million nationally — who are incarcerated. According to journalist Jonathan Tilove, "there are nearly 2 million more black adult women than men in America, stark testimony to how often black men die before their time."[19] This is evidence of a massive crisis that, as is customary with race, is being ignored or pasted over with victim-blaming narratives, combined with contrasting narratives of immigrant success. In his report on "disconnected youth" in New York City, Mark Levitan proposed a system of apprenticeships and a jobs corps for minority youth. Such programs urgently need to be enacted on a national scale.

The lesson of history is that these problems will not be publicly acknowledged, much less addressed, without political mobilization. With this in mind, let me end with a plea. That immigrants — especially ethnic leaders and advocacy groups — reject the temptation to distance themselves

from "the black nemesis," and commit themselves to the black struggle for racial justice. It may be a historical accident that made immigrants part of the problem, but it has also positioned them to be part of the solution. Given their own struggles, new immigrants could well provide renewed inspiration and leadership in the ongoing struggle to erase the vestiges of slavery, and I have been struck by Asian and Latino leaders who have spoken out forcefully and with moral conviction on behalf of African Americans.

There is reason for hope, but I fear that there is also reason for pessimism. The danger is that like the old immigrants, the new immigrants, preoccupied with their own struggles, will duck the issue and avert their eyes from that black figure, still crouched on the ground. All through American history, one way in which immigrants avoided pariah status has been to disassociate themselves from African Americans and their plight. Tragically and ironically, it is one way that immigrants "become American." As Toni Morrison has written: "It doesn't matter anymore what shade the newcomer's skin is. A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open."

Footnotes

Thanks to Ron Hayduk, Joanne Landy, Mark Levitan, Gregory Squires, and members of the *New Politics* board for their helpful suggestions.

1. Toni Morrison, "On the Back of Blacks," *Time*, December 2, 1973.

2. *Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1971.

3. Lawrence H. Fuchs, "The Reactions of Black Americans to Immigration," in Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Immigration Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford, 1990): 294. Also, Jacquelyn Johnson Jackson, "Seeking Common Ground for Blacks and Immigrants," in David E. Simcox, ed., *U.S. Immigration in the 1980s* (Westview Press, 1988): 92-103.

4. Brinley Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 330. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974): 189-90.

5. *New Republic*, June 24, 1916, 187.

6. Julian L. Simon, "The Case for Greatly Increased Immigration," *Public Interest* 102 (Winter 1991): 89-103. See also Ben J. Wattenberg & Karl Zinsmeister, "The Case for More Immigration," *Commentary* 89 (April 1990): 19-25.

7. *Help or Hindrance? The Economic Implications of Immigration for African Americans*, edited by Daniel S. Hamermesh and Frank D. Bean (Russell Sage Foundation 1998).

8. Steven Shulman & Robert C. Smith, "Immigration and African Americans," in Cecilia A. Conrad, et al,, *African Americans in the U.S. Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): 200.

9. Philip Moss and Chris Tilly, *Stories Employers Tell: Race, Skill, and Hiring in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001). Roger Waldinger and Michael I. Lichter, *How the Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

10. Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Orig. 1955 (New York: Anchor, 1958): 10.

11. Joleen Kirschenman & Kathryn Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them But . . . ': The Meaning of Race for Employers," in *The Urban Underclass*, Christopher Jencks & Paul E. Peterson, eds. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1991).

12. Nelson Lim, "On the Back of Blacks? Immigrants and the Fortunes of African Americans,: in Roger Waldinger, ed., *Strangers at the Gates: New Immigrants in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 186-227.

13. Waldinger & Lichter, 20; italics in original.

14. See Jack Miles, "Blacks vs. Browns," *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1992).

15. John Ogbu, "Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities in Comparative Perspective," in *Minority Status and Schooling* (New York: Garland, 1991), and Signithia Fordham & John Ogbu, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White,'" *The Urban Review*, v. 18 (3): 176-206.

16. Mary Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 138.

17. Thomas Muller, *Immigration and the American City* (New York: New York University Press, 1993): 160.

18. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell 1997): 18.

19. Jonathan Tilove, "The Gap: In a Single Statistic, the Measure of a Racial Tragedy," *Newhouse News Service* (May 4, 2005). On a national basis there are nearly 5.5 million youth out of school and jobless. See "Left Behind in the Labor Market" Northeastern's Center for Labor Market Studies, 2002. Also, Mark Levitan, "Out of School, Out of Work . . . Out of Luck? New York City's Disconnected Youth," *Community Service Society of New York* (January 2005).