

A Deontological Interpretation of Racial Justice

By Jai Bansal

The postwar era of United States history can be generalized as a political laboratory, in which politicians and activists tested different methods in attempts to advance the living conditions of various marginalized groups. Civil rights leaders, feminists, and New Deal politicians sought to help black Americans, women, and the poor. From 1930-1970, these proponents achieved major gains on both legislative and cultural levels, in the period commonly known as the liberal consensus. However, each of these factions began to face harsh opposition that aimed to rollback the dividends of the postwar era: capitalist elites protested redistributive labor policies that helped the poor, pro-family Evangelicals argued feminism was catalyzing a breakdown of the American family unit, and white “forgotten Americans”, as described in Peter Schrag’s 1969 essay, felt the government was devoting too much attention to African Americans. As the wheels of reform chugged to a halt, Todd Gitlin and Michael Dyson questioned how to reignite the progressive cause.

Gitlin argued the most effective way for minorities to improve their lives was to focus on class and labor instead of simply identifying with race, because this would help minorities unite with poor whites that made up the majority of the voters, which would ensure smoother passage of progressive policies. Alternatively, Dyson argued that it was impossible to discount race, gender, and the historically subjugated identities that

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defined these minority groups, and ignoring them would perpetuate their oppression even further. My argument is that Dyson's identity-based politics is the better approach because its emphasis on establishing a real framework of justice in the minds of white Americans with regards to minorities is more important than passing redistributive economic policies.

Gitlin's approach to minority politics undoubtedly would lead to more progressive agendas being passed. Logically, if minority movements did not bring up the most divisive and controversial topics in their programs, it makes sense that more people would be willing to work with them, and given this additional support, more policies could be passed. Gitlin's empirical examples prove this hypothesis, as when interracial women's groups in Illinois focused on welfare reform solely, the organization was held together for years. Gitlin's position parallels Bayard Rustin's advice for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was to form coalitions with the progressive wing of American politics to get restorative programs passed. Both Rustin and Gitlin's arguments are contingent on the assumption that economic status was the chief concern facing black Americans at the time, and progressive economic agendas would relieve this. Jefferson Cowie's *The Great Exception* historically proves that when labor and class are the main focus of liberals in the United States, as it was during the postwar era, the lowest classes in America saw extensive economic improvement as inequality dipped considerably. Civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized the importance of obtaining equality through a classist perspective, and feminist leaders strove for economic equality as well, such as through the Equal Pay Act in 1963. Historical analysis proves that when people focus on their similarities and coalitions are forged along economic lines, politicians are most seriously pressured to pass and enforce redistributive programs.

However, the liberal consensus unravelled. Matthew Lassiter explains the unravelling of the New Deal coalition occurred because people's "cultural explanations triumphed over their economic ones" (21). People began to care more about the

preservation of their cultural values than the economic policies they supported a decade earlier. For instance, Lassiter outlines how people became infused with “family values” rhetoric that labeled any government assistance as a waste of tax dollars and unnecessary interference. Cowie’s argument in *The Great Exception* accounts for Lassiter’s analysis. Cowie explains cultural values such as religion and family subsided to make room for the consensus on labor. The beliefs Cowie argued moved over in the 1930s came roaring back in the 1970s. The questions of race, culture, family, and gender disrupted people’s singular focus on class because these central components of identity needed to be resolved.

My argument is that until these identity questions are answered, coalitions will always collapse upon themselves, and disenfranchised minorities will always be pitted against the powerful majority. In other words, I would classify this phenomenon as one of absolute gradualism, but relative stagnation. In absolute terms, these redistributive policies, such as those of the postwar era, marginally improve the lives of minorities such as black Americans. However, they do nothing to shift the relative structure of power in terms of identity, in that these marginalized groups are always still at the mercy of their historic oppressors. Dyson’s approach of identity politics better answers these questions of identity and thus better solves back for this phenomenon.

Dyson’s identity politics does not let the questions regarding blackness, whiteness, and their relationship go unanswered. He explains “blackness helped expose the dominant meanings of whiteness and helped reveal the meaning of whiteness as domination” (166). Talking about race, even if it is polarizing, confronts the notion that whiteness in its current form is no more than a mechanism to control blackness. Whites will control how the policies are implemented and will use them as a tool to maintain their grasp of power, because they have no intrinsic desire to aid black America and relinquish their own power.

Identity politics, under Dyson's interpretation, is important because it prioritizes ethics over the agenda. Even if progressive agendas are passed, they are utilized to maintain the strength and power of white men. The only way to change this dynamic is to fundamentally shift the way majority factions view the marginalized minority groups. White Americans need to prioritize justice and equality instead of merely alleviating poverty because their intentions are just as important as the actual content of the policies passed. Identity politics, while it may be gradual, forces white America to grapple with the questions of race, gender, and cultural values, and only after they achieve answers under a framework of justice and equality will there be legitimate shifts in relative power dynamics.

The status quo features a cycle of economic gains for minorities followed by immense backlash and stagnation. Any time there is a legitimate opportunity for minority groups to upset societal power dynamics, the majority reevaluates their whitewashed cultural values and halts the progressive trends. The only way to break this abusive cycle is to force a change in the way white Americans approach justice and reparations. The only lasting solution requires an infection into the hearts and minds of white Americans. As James Baldwin puts it, the only future he sees is one in which white Americans love black Americans (Baldwin 95).

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