

Black Americans still face significant challenges, but President Obama can provide a model for wider social and electoral success

Almost half a century ago, **Norman Bonney** arrived from the UK for graduate study in sociology at the University of Chicago. The picture of the deeply embedded African-American disadvantage in US society that he developed then has only been confirmed by the passage of time. While systemic issues show little prospect of changing, Barack Obama could be a very important role model for black Americans seeking to achieve more involvement in the wider American society.



The recent celebration upon the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream speech' combined with the re-election and ongoing presidency of Barack Obama might lead many to believe that there have been fundamental changes in the position of African-Americans in the USA, where they totaled 39 million people and 13 per cent of the population in the 2010 census. But while there have been many enhancements in their lives in the last half century, the rest of society has advanced too, and there remain powerful and enduring forces that continue to perpetuate profound patterns of racial inequality.

Two contrasting theories

Analyses of black America divide between what can be called 'liberal optimism' and 'realistic pessimism' as exemplified, respectively, in the work of the **Thernstroms (2009)** and **Hacker (2003)**.

The liberal optimistic vision has an affinity with views espoused by the majority of the US population in opinion surveys, gathers the evidence for black progress and argues that it can continue. Opinion polls show clear trends from the Second World War onwards towards more **liberal public attitudes opposing discrimination**.

This optimistic perspective also points to the movement of the black population away from the oppressive conditions of the rural South; the civil rights struggle and its achievements; the ending of segregation that was enforced by law; equal voting rights; the overall improved economic and political position of black Americans in both north and south; the growing size of the black middle class;

increased black homeownership and suburbanization; the reduction in black poverty levels and the increasing numbers of black elected politicians. Liberal optimism does not deny that there are major problems facing black communities, but its overall emphasis is on the progress that has been achieved and what more might be achieved through improved education and a more entrepreneurial motivation.



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Economic growth and the achievement of civil rights are seen as the overall engines of black progress. Affirmative action and positive discrimination policies are not seen as constructive measures for remedying black disadvantage, but rather as privileging the black middle class instead of the poor and deprived and are dependent on political decisions to override meritocratic criteria in employment appointments and in selection for university

admission. In turn these measures are seen to promote white majority resentment and correspondingly impede the prospects of black Americans for further advancement.

Realistic pessimism suggests that the handicaps facing black Americans are much more profound. Indeed it argues that black Americans are, despite the erosion of racially vindictive rural Southern lifestyles, still a low status 'caste' in American society. By virtue of their physical appearance and imputed characteristics, they are, in this view, generally seen as a negative reference group to be kept at a geographical and social distance by the majority of society. Despite the evident changes of the last half century the black/white divide is seen as a fundamental and durable fissure. Over the decades many immigrant groups once seen as alien by the majority white population, such as the Germans and Irish in the nineteenth century and various Asian and Hispanic origin groups today, are seen to aspire to become, and become accepted as, integral members of an extended dominant white society, thus buffering the relationships between the white majority and the black minority.

This separation from the majority society, resulting initially from slavery and then from the large scale migration in the twentieth century of black Americans from the south to the large industrial cities of the north, with accompanying profound degrees of residential segregation, was assisted and maintained by federal, state and local government housing policies as much as by the countless decisions of individuals and families as they decided where to buy and rent housing. So profound, indeed, is this residential segregation that it has been convincingly described as the *American Apartheid*.

The pattern of disadvantage

The relative concentration of the African American population in the more depressed parts of the central cities of the northern and mid-western 'rust-belt' add to difficulties in finding rewarding employment and life styles. Even when the more economically successful African American families achieve middle class status, studies suggest that many are in a constant battle to protect themselves from the negative effects of nearby slum neighborhoods from which they have attempted to escape. And while some African Americans have become very successful economically and professionally their relative and absolute numbers are minute compared to the wider population. They constitute only 1 per cent of airline pilots, 2.3 per cent of chief executives, 3.3 per cent of architects and 4.6 per cent of lawyers, **but 18 per cent of cooks, janitors and maids, 24 per cent of bell hops, porters and concierges and 34 per cent of home help aides.**

Two sets of data are particularly telling – incarceration rates and statistics on wealth holding. Black men are **six times as likely to be imprisoned** as white men and among younger men born in the 1990s one in three blacks, compared to **one in ten whites have experienced imprisonment**. At the same time security services also provide employment disproportionately for African Americans with 22 per cent of jailors and 31 per cent of security guards being black.

With regard to home ownership and wealth African Americans also have a great disadvantage. Only 11 per cent of black families, compared to 24 per cent of white families, have received an inheritance; in the case of the former its median value was \$32,000 compared to \$115,000 among whites. And while almost three quarters of whites in 2004 were home owners, the figure for blacks was just under a half. The median owned home value for blacks was **\$104,000 compared to \$153,000 for whites**. Bearing in mind, too, that aspiring black homeowners were disproportionately affected by the sub-prime mortgage scandal and subsequent re-possession, and taking account of the fact that most blacks are not homeowners, differences in estimated median household net worth in



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2007 were even greater with the figures for non-Hispanic whites being \$170,000 compared to \$27,800 for blacks and Hispanics.

Reactions to disadvantage

Realistic pessimism has the virtue of making intelligible the point of view of many black Americans who resent the caste-like system that is imposed on them and, to varying degrees, accepted by many of them. They would bridle at the suggestion that immigrant mobility models are appropriate for the social advancement of people who are mostly descended from inhabitants of colonial times who have suffered centuries of victimization and relegation to the lowliest positions in society. Yet they have to constantly confront an endless succession of immigrant groups forging ahead of them in the queue for social advancement. In addition they have to confront the constant social criticism about their perceived lack of social and economic achievements from the wider society and from some academics. And wherever they venture in the wider society their physical appearance is a central feature of their identity in a way that white people rarely and comparably experience. The frequent policy suggestions of educational improvement and engaging more in small business as methods of social advancement in the present day echo the same prescriptions and policies of the 1960s and 1970s and illustrate the lack of fundamental change in the intervening period.

Political challenges and opportunities

One indication of the difficulties that African Americans confront in gaining full equality is demonstrated in the unique political career of Barack Obama. Greater racial consciousness and enhanced political organization, particularly in the Democratic Party in recent decades, has enabled black candidates to be very successful in getting elected to local offices and to the US House of Representatives where residential racial segregation provides the electoral basis of support. This, combined with state legislature based congressional constituency redistricting rules and tolerant federal laws, effectively allows for the racial profiling of the electorate and the gerrymandering of constituencies to ensure the election of black (and white) candidates.

But when African American candidates seek office state wide or nation-wide where they have to draw support from more representative sections of the population they have been far less successful. Currently there are 42 members of the US House of Representatives who are members of the congressional black caucus. This represents just under 10 per cent of the membership of the House—a continued statistical under-representation of the black population in the lower house of Congress. Nonetheless this provides a substantial bloc of votes often of strategic importance. However, in the US Senate where redrawing of constituency



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boundaries is not possible, since state boundaries are fixed and black Americans are not a majority in any one single state, similar substantial representation does not appear possible. Indeed only six blacks have been elected to the US Senate since 1967 (one of whom was Obama)—and prior to that date none were elected for over eight decades since the aftermath of slavery. There could be no greater demonstration of the remarkable achievements of Barack Obama in that he was able to get elected and re-elected as President in the face of odds of this scale.

The President as role model

President Obama is an important role model for all Americans and for many internationally in the way that he has been able to build wide coalitions of support beyond the immediate base on which he was initially elected as a state representative in Illinois for a largely black Chicago constituency. Although he served time in the black

community as a community organizer and elected local politician he was able to develop a political style and support base that extended far beyond that. His childhood and early adulthood gave him experience, contacts and insight into multi-cultural and multi-racial life in Hawaii, Indonesia, California, Harvard and Chicago. Black communities can give great strength and support for a people with more than their share of contemporary misfortunes and they provide a key electoral base for black politicians but the future of black Americans in general can only be further enhanced if in much greater numbers they can follow the role model of the President: break out of the confines of the ghetto and achieve and find acceptance in the much wider and more diverse national society. It remains a major challenge not only for black Americans but also for the remainder of American society to make the appropriate accommodations.

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