

JOURNEY'S END:

The Dynamics of Race and Culture in the United States¹

by

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White Lillies hang their Heads and soon decay
And Whiter Snow in Minutes melts away
Such and so withering is our blooming Youth.
To Things immortal Time can do no wrong,
And that which never is to Die,
Forever must be young.

Ames's *Almanack* for 1741

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Take "The Failure of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." as an alternative title for this production. Its aptness derives from the failure of the much-repeated "content of our character" rhetoric popularized by King in 1963. His failure, however, extends beyond rhetorical failure; it is a failure in statesmanship. The appropriate context in which to measure the justice of these reflections, accordingly, would be that in which one likens the inquiry to such themes as "Why did Washington succeed?" (as I have considered elsewhere) or "Why did Lincoln succeed?" (as others have done). In sum, King's failure amounts to the failure to advance the claims of American culture at an hour of crisis in which that was the principal objective required to respond to the crisis.

In addressing this issue I must integrate distinct understandings which span my writings in diverse fora. In my technical writings I have elaborated the principles that bracket the problem of race in the United States (which is to say that I have laid out the grounds on which alone that problem can be resolved). In my official writings I have prescribed modes by which constituted authorities could invoke and pursue such resolutions, and in my popular writings I have articulated the goals which must inform every initiative addressed to the problem of race in the United States.

In order to approach the present question one must bear in mind the first and third of these lines of inquiry. To that end I identify as prefatory reading two works, one from my technical writings and one from my popular writings. The first appeared originally only in a French composition but has since been translated. The essay, "Equality and Right in the Contemporary World" facilitates judgment as to the appropriate terms of discourse in approaching this inquiry. The second essay, "Who Created Dinesh D'Souza," reviews a recent contribution of King's latest victim and in the process identifies the characteristic flaw of the failure to address a conception of American community which has impaired virtually all attempts to discuss race and culture in our time.

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In order to understand the following discussion, one would do well to come to grips with those two essays first. Moreover, one should also consult King's last major publication, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, or at least the fourth chapter in that work, "The Dilemma of Negro Americans." It is necessary to recognize the tremendous impact that King had and not to confuse the notion of his failure with any notion of insignificance. His presence in the nation's history was not less large than those of Washington and Lincoln—only less good.

Any of the topics that bedevil discussions of race and culture could be developed in order to illustrate this argument—affirmative action, the underclass, voting rights, educational attainments, residential isolation. I borrow a form of shorthand, however, for I think that I can convey the conceptual content by describing in a short space what has occurred within the narrow realm of hate speech. After which we can take up King's problem directly.

Hate Speech

The development of the concept of "hate speech" is far more a cultural than a legal phenomenon, despite the concentration of attention on the subject in the legal arena. What is grammatically either a verb or a noun has borrowed adjectival force to obscure a moral vacuum in our culture. Everyone may understand this simply by recurring to familiar experiences. The question, naturally, is why do we refer to this evil as "hate speech" as opposed to "hateful speech." The answer is that we wish to discriminate between the "redneck" who vocalizes "nigger" and the "brother" who vocalizes "nigger." If the speech itself were stigmatized as hateful, we would sweep both parties into our net. Thus, we employ a form—an inapt grammatical form—to express a pre-judgment, namely that those who use hateful speech maliciously *and* as an unfavorable cultural or racial comparison are criminal. The crime is the intent, not the speech—and yet, not the silent intent but only the uttered intent, except where the utterer benefits from a pre-judgment that she is not criminal in this respect (as in the case of the gang-banger who says, "I'm going to kill that nigger!" and indeed does so).

Our familiar experience reveals the chaos in our morality. Most of us as children or parents have experienced the parental admonition that a child abstain from hateful speech. Indeed, many are the parents who have heard from the lips of their own progeny, "I hate you." Parents typically regard this, among other usages, as hateful speech, which should be avoided, but without taking their children literally. Parents do not call such usage "hate speech," however. That would imply that, whatever the locution, the child means to express hatred literally and not merely to wound or offend. Accordingly, it is a parenting skill to discourage "criminal" usages without "criminalizing" the users.

To return to the level of life and death, it is clear that we, as a culture, have come to *license* what are otherwise criminal (or at least very bad taste) usages (including much of what is mindlessly defended as black English), while nonetheless criminalizing some users (some people can only use "black English" badly). We have internalized at the deepest moral levels norms of segregation and favoritism, with the result that, as a society, we cannot accomplish what even the least trained parent seeks, namely, to "criminalize" usages without "criminalizing" any users.

I submit that we can trace this catastrophic result directly from the consequences of King's moral confusions regarding the dynamics of race and culture and his failure as a statesman. First, though, we should permit King to define the question and his approach to it.

The Dilemma of the Negro Americans

Martin Luther King was incontestably the foremost public figure in the United States at the time he broached the most important question confronting the nation, the question figuring in

the title of his book, "Chaos or Community." In raising that question as he did, he promised to deliver what the nation most needed at that moment. The question was rhetorical in form, conveying clearly King's judgment that community was the appropriate answer. Moreover, an attentive reading will reveal that every significant issue touching questions of race and culture that we have discussed since have been raised by King. If we seem rather to have inherited chaos than community, we must seek the reason for that in some relation to the response he provided and the nation's response to his response. Several possibilities confront us: either King responded correctly with an adequate view of community but his wisdom went unheeded; or King responded incorrectly and his error passed for wisdom in the nation, entailing the natural consequences; or variants of these and other possibilities.

King looked for moral strength in a mystical and mythical "capacity for hardships" in American blacks to forge the path toward the journey's end of full integration into American society. "It is on this strength that society must now begin to build." In that analysis he jettisoned any potential for the claims of freedom and self-government as sufficient to bottom the appeal for wholesale inclusion in American society ("This is no time for romantic illusions and empty philosophical debates about freedom. This is a time for action." p. 68). The reason for this result is that the difficulties American blacks faced in 1967 (when he wrote) were cultural and inherited, and only a liberation from the weight of that inherited tradition could supply the measure of opportunity required to change life chances for American blacks. The discovery of a cultural basis for black disadvantages provided for King the "most optimistic" part of the story, for he reasoned, culture could be turned from the work of destruction to the work of reconstruction.

...the causes for its present crisis are culturally and socially induced. What man has torn down, he can rebuild. At the root of the difficulty in Negro life today is pervasive and persistent economic want. To grow from within, the Negro family—and especially the Negro man—needs only fair opportunity for jobs, education, housing and access to culture. To be strengthened from the outside requires protection from the grim exploitation that has haunted the Negro for three hundred years. (p. 128)

This "optimistic" conclusion comes eight pages into an analysis which opened with the observation that the "dilemma of white America is the source and cause of the dilemma of Negro America." King's two Americas, setting the tone for the 1968 Kerner Commission report, relate to one another only as "oppressor" and "oppressed" are related to one another. For the American black, therefore, the connection between his pain ("the central quality" of his life) and his hopes is a needed intervention from "outside" to transform oppression into salvation. The reality he found in America is no community.

"Being a Negro in America means being scarred by a history of slavery and family disorganization" (p. 122), King wrote, weaving the reality of 300 years into an accumulated burden of 1967 and presenting an account of the abstract "Negro family" as if it were an autobiography. In these early pages the reader cannot escape the obvious implication that, respecting "negroes," the "content of their character" is a product of suffering, impotence, and impoverishment. Neither in recounting the tales of woe or the magical survival of American blacks does King so much as once advert to any intrinsic human capacities or strengths, either in explanation of past achievements or in projecting future achievements. Culture, it seems, is a force independent of humanity.

Since for King the strophe of cultures in America is color, one might anticipate that the antistrophe would be character, as in the expression that people are to be judged, "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." That would mean that the cultural change one seeks is not so much color blindness (which would be merely a consequence of paying primary attention to character) but rather that sensitivity to character which would merge two cultures into

one. To change the culture one must teach the society how to make judgments of character. According to King, however, American blacks can not take on that task themselves, for they live under the spell of “color shock”:

...it constitutes a major emotional crisis. It is accompanied by a sort of fatiguing, wearisome hopelessness. If one is rejected because he is uneducated, he can at least be consoled by the fact that it may be possible for him to get an education. If one is rejected because he is low on the economic ladder, he can at least dream of the day that he will rise from his dungeon of economic deprivation. If one is rejected because he speaks with an accent, he can at least, if he desires, work to bring his speech in line with the dominant group. If, however, one is rejected because of his color, he must face the anguishing fact that he is being rejected because of something in himself that cannot be changed. (p. 131)

Famously, each of King's hypotheticals served in the earlier part of this century as the catechism black families carefully rehearsed in their children (including, I dare say, the family of the elder King who instructed King, jr.). The conclusion, however, that the aspects of character which one might change have been subordinated to the overriding power and importance of “color shock” serves to relegate the earlier catechism to a second-order necessity. A day may come when one can counsel poor men to “try harder,” if ever the society can rid itself of “color shock.” We have a paradox, however, in the fact that, for King, the evidence of “color shock” became poor education, poverty, and social disadvantage. Thus, the “wearisome hopelessness” is justified by the impossibility of attempting any form of cultural improvement prior to reversing the effects of oppressive victimization.

While King wrote little of questions of character in American blacks, save to exculpate things such as crimes with reference to the “environment” and “victimization,” he did not entirely neglect the matter. It may be a dramatic illustration of the path taken in his book (and life) that he focuses, as did many others, on the disproportionate number of American blacks who served in Vietnam as an injustice, while saying nothing of disproportionate heroism, disproportionate sense of duty, disproportionate inclination to volunteer, etc. Nevertheless, when he enumerated five recommended responses to “the Negro's dilemma,”² he began with his closest invocation of character, “a rugged sense of somebodyness.” To overcome a “feeling of being less than human, the Negro must assert for all to hear and see a majestic sense of his worth.” Naturally, mere self-assertion is not a substitute for solid accomplishment. Moreover, it may be the case that a premature self-assertion may subvert the genuine foundations of accomplishment, which alone engender self-respect. Nonetheless, King evidently means in this appeal to inculcate a sense of need for such fundamental virtues as courage and moderation. In this regard, it is impossible to explain why his spirited defense of real life in the ghetto (where there are “churches as well as bars,” “stable families...as well as illegitimacies,” and “ninety percent of the young people who never come in conflict with the law”) did not provide him substantial opportunity to sermonize on opportunities for emulation in the pursuit of “somebodyness.” Praiseworthy elements of character must surely inform the “striving” and “hoping” which he described in that context. I surmise that he did not expatiate on these themes, because they were not compatible with the ultimate response he had fashioned for the main question.

The remaining responses to “the Negro's dilemma” are “group unity,” a “constructive use of the [limited] freedom we already possess,” union “around powerful action programs,” and

² “...the Negro is called upon to be as resourceful as those who have not known such oppression and exploitation. *This is the Negro's dilemma*. He who starts behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. What a dilemma! It is a call to do the impossible. It is enough to cause the Negro to give up in despair.” (p. 142)

“enlarging the whole society, and giving it a new sense of [progressive] values.” These prescriptions for “social change” merge in a single consideration, which King enunciated in his final chapter, “The World House,” in which he describes the emergence of a coherent political movement transcending the United States and animating a global movement toward social democracy. That ultimate political movement is the analogue to the indigenous political movement on which he relied in the United States to nurture his five-point program (“More and more, the civil rights movement will have to engage in the task of organizing people into permanent groups to protect their own interests”). As he described it, it consisted of blacks (as a group, though needing to be mindful of not being taken for granted), northern liberal Democrats, labor unions, and an ever-widening circle of oppressed peoples. This general account gives full credit to King’s candid assessment that “there is a need for a radical restructuring of the architecture of American society,” in which the emphasis is placed on the word, “architecture,” meaning design and conjuring up fundamental principles rather than incidental or corollary circumstances.

King did not focus on a discussion of character in discussing the future of America for three reasons that are discernible. In the first place, he places no faith in the attributes of character which he discerns in American whites. In the second place, he expects no rewards for exertions of character by American blacks (the argument against the “new black middle class” makes this apparent; as opposed to preaching to the middle class to return to the ghetto, one could always sermonize to the poor to follow the middle class—a lesson no commentators have learned since King’s time). In the third place, a focus on character within the context of a given community would be inconsistent with a mission to transcend that community and to build community anew on entirely different grounds. Though King acknowledged, as one would expect, that “we are also Americans,” that is a decidedly subordinate moral consideration in his analysis. The fact that “our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America (p. 62)” does not commit American blacks, in King’s view, to that view of American destiny which is intrinsic to its founding. For Martin Luther King, it would seem, American racism can be negated ultimately only in the negation of the moral soil from which it sprouted, as though it were native to that soil rather than an excrescence. The appeal to black “group identity” must be understood as a step toward generating new moral soil, as opposed to the feeble cry, “We are people, too!” in retort to the experience of racism. Support for that generous interpretation will derive from the obvious truth, which even King must have recognized, namely, that there has never been an era in which folk honestly believed, no matter how hard they tried, that blacks were not people. That same generosity then places a new construction on the boast,

...historians in future years will have to say there lived a great people—a black people—who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many days and who, through tenacity and creative commitment, injected new meaning into the veins of American life. (p. 158)

Martin Luther King answered his rhetorical question, “chaos or community,” by dreaming of founding a new community. The unjust treatment he accorded George Washington, depreciating Washington’s moral anguish about slavery and constructively denying the important fact that Washington liberated his slaves in his will, may be accounted for by the immensity of King’s ambition to rival Washington as a founder. King, however, failed where Washington succeeded. It remains but for us to inquire why.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Failure

Repeat, first, the observation that there are few if any hand-wringings about questions of race and culture that we entertain in 1996 which had not been considered, in some manner, by Martin Luther King in 1967. Nor need one document the undeniable reality that the sad state of the cultural reality in numerous black communities throughout the United States is that matters considerably worsened in the three decade aftermath of King's initial influence—a period in which his influence would scarcely seem to have diminished at all. Nothing illustrates this fact better than the correlative to our earlier discussion of hate speech. It was once common in the homes of American blacks whom I knew to admonish youths to avoid terms like “nigger” in referring to one another. Such precepts continued pervasively into the 1960s; since they have disappeared almost altogether. I submit that they have disappeared because of the successful invocation of the false notion of a black culture and the correlative exculpation of blacks for all sorts of “bad behavior” on the grounds of their “victim” status. King's opting to shape community among blacks rather than to shape a community on American principles is the immediate moral cause of this enormous transformation in our society.

Not blacks alone but also many whites have fallen prey to King's misguided legislation. In some cases they have done so on account of the ease with which a transition from thinking of blacks as different and inferior to thinking of blacks as unassimilably different could be made. This move could release much mental and moral energy which otherwise would have had to bent to the task of building community. For guilty consciences anxious to escape responsibility, but at a loss as to what course to pursue, the idea that one could embrace “diversity” or “multiculturalism” (or the idea of a separate black community which merited respect as distinct) provided a natural outlet. By taking that course it ceased to be necessary to ask of America how far it had succeeded in fulfilling its principles on its own terms. Of course, the nettlesome question of economic and social inequality remained—at least such portions of those questions as could not be reduced to cultural difference. Moreover, insofar as no tangible evidence of economic or social progress could ever respond to the imperative of respect for cultural difference, it follows that diminishing inequalities constitute no evidence at all with respect to the fundamental question, the need for special treatment for American blacks (cf., p. 106).

This result produces a paradox, however; namely, that special programs for blacks are justified in reference to their supposed “history” and not their present circumstances. That means one cannot demand either personal or cultural accommodations to American society as an index of the salutary effects of the special programs. Thus, the idea of “progress” escapes any logical mode of assessment, apart from the standard of “representation” which has emerged as the totem to express the goals King aimed at. One speaks of “underrepresented minorities” in the workplace, in schools, and in government offices, appointed and elective. What is actually *represented* in this usage, however, remains vague. Indeed, as long as a single minority individual anywhere might be said to be less advantageously situated than he might wish for himself, a claim of improved representation for “minorities” retains its logical value in this calculus. Hence, criticism of minority cultures—and so-called black culture in particular—does not address the policy implications of the racial problem in the United States.

While the result that nothing the nation does can ever genuinely satisfy the demands that King made, including “massive government expenditures,” it remains the case that those demands are deeply embedded in the conditions of social organization and policy in the nation and touch upon a matter with crisis implications for national community. The task for the United States today is to discover a way to re-connect ideas of American community with both expectations of and obligations to American blacks. To all appearances, however, that task cannot be realized through any means other than the refutation and overturning of the weighty edifice of cultural exceptionalism that King built up.

To approach this problem in a manageable way, begin by asking the obvious question, namely, whether it is true that American blacks in 1996 (or 1967 for that matter) reflect in their characters, habits, attitudes, and prospects the full weight of the implications of 300 years of suffering by American blacks. Take an individual black, born in this generation. In what way can it meaningfully be said that that individual bears the weight of 300 years of experience focused exclusively on black people? Is it irrelevant, in responding to this question, what the individual's natural endowments are? Is it irrelevant what his family circumstances are? Is it irrelevant who are his friends? Is it irrelevant what accidents befall him in the course of living in and moving about this society? The list of relevant "additions" to the 300 years experience need not end here and may, indeed, include the not insignificant weight of 360 years of broader American experience and a European experience stretching from a time whence the memory of man no longer runs. In calibrating the respective weights of these "influences" and seeking to strike a reasonable net allocation of social assets/liabilities, what possible sense can it make to focus on the experience of slavery? No stripes will mark this person's back! In sum, it is an entire fiction that black people today still feel the pains of the past.

The Fiction of Black Culture

Race has long been a problem in the United States in ways adequately explained in various technical writings, including some of my own. It has not, however, been a constituted fact that race is an integral part of American culture. It is a logical error to confuse what is pervasive with what is integral. It is a moral error, however, to derive necessary conclusions from accidental determinants. The conclusion that racism is intrinsic or integral to American principle constitutes such a moral error.

On the basis of this moral error Martin Luther King, and others besides, have created a fiction of black culture and community that serves a single functional purpose—namely, to extract American blacks from the warp and woof of an American culture regarded as fatally flawed. The reality in the United States has been and remains plural communities fused and fusing into a single American culture. There exist plural black communities, no less than plural white communities—despite the reality that black communities in the main have not been constituted by homogeneous migrations as white communities typically have been. The relatively successful effort to flatten the plural black communities into a single conception of *the* black community represents a significant political accomplishment, which has done little to alter the social landscape. On that social landscape, accordingly, one still witnesses the leading dynamic of American culture—assimilation—occurring under the lengthening shadow of a changing political reality. That changing political reality means we might reasonably wonder how long the American dynamic will persevere, as the supporting political framework continues to evolve to accommodate the goals of King's "revolution."

I have written above of the disappearance of certain social practices in the black families that I knew. Others speak and write routinely of the disappearance of supportive social institutions and practices in black communities plagued by crime, illegitimacy, and other dysfunctions. Every evidence suggests a social migration toward the new political standard of participation in society, a standard that distinguishes groups and group rights and measures social obligation strictly in relation to indices of identity. This pattern constitutes a disintegration of that larger patriotism which is founded in the individual's identification of his political happiness with the assurance of rights claimable as against groups. The lesser patriotism—the group identity—undermines the larger patriotism.

One could not well protest undermining American patriotism, if it were indeed the case that American principles neither secured any reasonable prospect of pervasive liberty, nor any foundation for genuine community. To consider only the last point in this space, suffice it to say

that the test of American community has yet to be made. Precisely because King, and nearly all who followed him, have eschewed claims in the name of American community on account of the gamble involved in shedding the lesser claim for the sake of the larger, we have not made an honest test of the notion since the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. Ironic, isn't it: the Civil Rights Movement may inadvertently have spawned the most serious obstacle to the progress of American blacks in our time. As the Americans discovered in the Revolution of 1776, one does not get to see how the journey ends until one has proceeded so far along it that it is not possible to turn back.

The task to renew the appeal of American community and the legitimacy of assimilation—including standards of decent behavior—falls not to American blacks nor to American whites, *per se*. It falls rather to every American for whom King's failed response to the great crisis provides reason sufficient to take on some protection against the chaos that draws nearer with each revolution of our political solar system. It is easy to know what must be done: take heed from the course followed by King, not to follow it. King discarded a history of accomplishment for a paean of victimization. He neglected even his own very middle class biography to engraft a story of deprivation into the lineage of every black. King sold blacks back into slavery, a cultural slavery, for the sake of acquiring political cachet.

Elsewhere I've written that Washington's success may be attributed to the fact that he preferred justice to patriotism. Certainly it is true, one may insist, that King preached justice above patriotism. Why, then, may he not be regarded as equally successful? The answer comes in two parts. First, what one preaches does not always reveal one's purpose. Second, and more pertinent, even if one grants, as I do, that King preached justice, everything must hinge on the question of understanding. A misunderstanding of the requirements of justice will cause even a noble intent to miscarry. King did not grasp what justice in a community requires.