

## *50 Years After Brown: The State of Black Equality In America*

### **Book Excerpt**

#### ***Chapter Fifteen—The Assault On Brown: Angry White Men and the Constitutional Rights Movement***

The 1990s, while serving as the decade where the greatest economic boon in the nation's history would occur, would also serve as the decade where racial anger would resurrect itself, and serve as the basis for policy and legal decisions that would do irreparable damage to the prospects of racial equality. Succinctly put, three decades of "white backlash" reached a maturation point in the 1990s where policy-makers, academic discourse, the courts and public opinion came together to formulate the ultimate racial revolt, in a way that hadn't been seen since the "Redeemers" of the Post-Reconstruction period of the 19th Century returned control of the South to southern whites. The current day redemption movement sought to capitalize on the "optimism" of the Reagan era, to redeem the nation, a redemption that sought protect the individual rights of whites, and reject any policies that would benefit "other minorities," at the expense of infringing upon their "right to be equal." This push toward individualism, and the assertion on "individual rights," changed the nature of race politics in America in two ways. First, it allowed for Whites to re-assert the values of egalitarianism, whereby the privileges and politics of racial group benefits were downplayed, and individual benefit being part of a "society of equals" was highlighted, as a staple of the American values system. Secondly, it allowed Whites, as individuals, to separate themselves from their racial history, as a group of haters and discriminators—in the collective—in order to assert that they, as individuals, should not be punished for the nation's legacy of past discrimination since, they, themselves, had no involvement in slavery, segregation, and other acts of discrimination that Whites, as a group, had clearly benefited from, as racism became more systemically and institutionally ingrained. This argument, while artificial in scope—due to the fact that many Whites, and their direct beneficiaries (their children), who were involved in segregation and other discriminatory and racist behaviors were still living—offered cover to a new generation of Whites that very well may have never discriminated against a black person a day in their life, but were the beneficiaries of a society that had, and continued to, unequally distribute social, political and economic resources on massively inequitable terms. Yet, it was not uncommon to hear such rationalizations as "Why should I have to pay for something that happened 100 or 200 years ago." This segment of the white population gladly accepted the benefits of America's race caste system, and the privileges of whiteness that the system provided to them, but didn't want to pay the costs to repair, or repatriate Blacks for the social, economic and political damage that had been done. This was the weakness of the individualist's argument, as they attempted to escape the remaining downside of America's inequality politic, retribution—and restitution, if affirmation action can be framed as such, for 300 years of past discrimination.

It turns out that the scare of affirmation action was actually a lot worse than the reality of the "threat" posed to white job security. Polling indicated that at the beginning of the decade in 1990, that there wasn't any real hostility toward affirmative action, as a policy that whites, in the collective, felt would displace them in their jobs, largely because white women, to this point, had been the biggest beneficiaries of this inclusion policy. National surveys, by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, reflected a different story than what media pundits, and politicians were advancing, about the threats of affirmative action. The survey indicated that 70% of Whites polls felt that another white person was likely to be hurt by affirmative action for Blacks, but only seven percent of these same Whites claimed to have actually experienced any

form of "reverse discrimination." Only 16 percent knew of someone close to them that had been discriminated against, and only six percent of white women, and eight percent of white men claimed to have been affected by affirmative action policies, in any way, despite their fears about it.<sup>i</sup> Plainly put, the "spin" on affirmative action was actually worse than the effects of the policy itself. However, the "spin" masters, driving fears of what affirmative action was, or wasn't, were the very ones claiming to be most impacted by adverse effects of the policy. When aggregated according to race and gender, clearly the most hostile segment of the population toward affirmative action were white males who, according to then emerging opinion leaders like Pat Buchanan and Rush Limbaugh, were claiming to be the "forgotten minority" in the redistributive benefits of America's public and free market resources. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. This claim proved to be a false assertion. What reason did white men have to be angry about their societal rank? White males were better positioned than any other demographic in American society.

Despite how white males sought to frame their "exclusion" from the benefits of American society—work, education, wealth and other public enjoyments—no such exclusion actually occurred. The median income for black families, represented as anywhere from 54% to 64% of white families since 1939 (when such statistics started being compiled), didn't reach "three-fifths" of the median income of white families until 1966 and by 1994, almost thirty years later, black families median income had fallen back to "three-fifths" or 60% of white family median income.<sup>ii</sup> In fact, there was very little, if any, slippage in any of the primary socio-economic indicators for white males; white males were still the top wage earners in the labor force as in 1990. Blacks males earned 60 percent of what white males earned, while black women earned 62% of what black males earned, and white women earned 47% of what white males earned; white males represented 26.8% of the managerial and professional occupations (compared to 28.5% for white women, 19.5% of black women, and 14.1% of black males); white employment, from 1980 to 1990, fell 6.3% to 4.8%, while black unemployment remained literally the same, falling only one-tenth of one percent from 14.3%, in 1980, to 14.2%, in 1990.<sup>iii</sup> The only socio-economic indicator that dramatically impacted Whites, also impacted Blacks, the number of persons below the poverty line. From 1980 to 1992, the percentage of white families below the poverty line grew from 10.2% in 1980 to 10.7% in 1992, compared to the percentage of black families, actually grew twice as much (percentage change) from 31.4% to 33.4%. However, the number of white families in poverty grew by almost six million (from 19,699,000 to 25,259,000), while the number of black families grew by more than two million (from 8,579,000 in 1980 to 10,827,000 in 1992).<sup>iv</sup> Poor Whites were as dramatically affected by "Reaganomics" as poor Blacks were. If any white men suffered under Reagan, it was poor white males, at the bottom of the income strata, but not for the reason opinion leaders and political pundits asserted.

The issue of economic mobility was complicated in the 1990s, by a huge influx of new immigrants, largely Latino and Asian, that changed America's racial paradigm, from bifocal (Black and White), to multi-focal (White, Black, Brown and Yellow). New immigrants arrived in cities, where economies were restructuring, and globalization created bifurcated labor markets, with labor intensive, low-paying jobs that did not provide a living wage on one end, and a growing sector of knowledge-intensive, good-paying jobs requiring extensive educational credentials, and English language proficiency on the other, creating a labor force where immigrants were "underemployed," meaning forced to accept substandard wages, or occupational over-qualification.<sup>v</sup> New immigrants were forced into a highly stratified racial system that imposed on them a "minority status," with all its disadvantages, something that descendants of European immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries didn't face, as they become white as a function of upward economic mobility. As low socio-economic status impeded Blacks and poor Whites economic mobility, it also impeded the new immigrant, and further reinforced their placement in the preexisting, highly stratified, and racialized hierarchy.<sup>vi</sup> Meanwhile, not only had white males dominated the economic, political, legal and educational values of American society.

They were in firm control of the key roles, and top positions, in all of the major institutions, they had maintained control of for nearly four centuries, while concrete barriers or "glass ceilings" emerged for Blacks, white women and other persons of color. According to several studies in the early and mid-1990s, white men controlled almost every U.S. institution from most Fortune 1000 companies and elite universities, to the presidency, the military. In federal and state legislatures, they made up 95 to 100 percent of those in top positions, which were reinforced by other sources, including; a mid-1990s *Newsweek* report that noted white men held 77% of the House and Senate seats, as well as, 92% of the state governorships; 90% of newspaper editor positions and 77 of TV news executives were white men; 95% of white men held corporate positions, at the vice president level and above, according to a 1990s report of the federal Glass Ceiling Commission, and as late as 1998, not a single one of the Fortune 1000 Companies had a black executive as its head.<sup>vii</sup> So in the 1990s, white males were not replaced in the hierarchy, they were reinforced in a newer, more expanded racial hierarchy that subordinated other people of color in the new global economy, and placed whiteness as the head of the hierarchy. White males were at the top of the economic hierarchy, as the measuring point for which all others had to climb to be accepted—not as rich or poor, but as the middle class, or the "underclass." The multifocal racial paradigm created more competition at the middle and the bottom of the labor markets, than at the top, and displacement of white males anywhere in the labor force, particularly at the top of the economic hierarchy, was the exception, and not the rule. Yet, the conservative ideologues would have had the nation believe that, due to the loss of income by the lowest one-fifth of white men at the bottom of labor market and income scale, all white men had been disproportionately impacted. Loss of jobs, and loss of income was blamed on the "browning" of jobs in America, and the racial scapegoating that occurred in the prior century (mid to late-1800s and early 1900s), was resurrected again nearly one hundred years later in the early 1990s.

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