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The Changing Significance of Race for People of Color

By
Juanita Tamayo Lott

For more than two hundred years, race in the United States has been viewed as a black/white issue. Blacks have been defined not as a people unto themselves, but only in relationship to whites. This relationship is one of power with blacks as a "minority subordinate" group and whites as a "majority dominant" group. Other people of color—whether indigenous to the Americas, settlers who predated Western Europeans, nonwhite settlers with several generations of U.S.-born residents, or newly arrived immigrants and refugees—have been primarily defined as nonexistent. When other people of color have been recognized, it has been in a marginal and stratified fashion. They have been defined not only in relation to a dominant white society, but also in relation to a black society defined by the federal government as the "principal minority."[1]

This view is in contrast to the history of the Americas and to the emerging future of the United States as a heterogeneous society. Racial and ethnic diversity existed in the Americas long before the founding of the United States. Indigenous people from the Hawaiian Islands to the Caribbean and across North America were neither white nor black. They were joined in the post-Columbian period by peoples of African and Spanish ancestry. This intermingling of indigenous peoples, explorers, and colonizers produced *mestizos*, a uniquely New World mixture of African, European, Indian, and, with the Manila Galleon Trade, Asian ancestries.

Until recently, the descendants of these groups—African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and indigenous peoples—have been defined as "minorities." Even in 1970, according to the Census Bureau, "Whites" composed 87 percent of the population. "Blacks" were the only sizable minority at 11 percent. Together they composed 98 percent of the American population. "Asians" were 1 percent of the population. The remaining 1 percent was divided among "American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut," and "Others."[2]

Growing Numbers

Now, however, the numbers of people of color are growing at a high rate across all regions of the United States. Between 1960 and 1990, due to relaxation of immigration restrictions and natural increase, the numbers of racial/ethnic minorities tripled from 20 million to 60 million. Between 1970 and 1990, they grew from one-eighth to one-fourth of the population. This meant that by 1990, "Blacks" composed 12 percent of the population, "Hispanics"[3] 9 percent, "Asians" 3 percent, and indigenous peoples 1 percent.

Census Bureau projections indicate that the proportion of people of color will increase to almost half (48 percent) by the year 2050.[4] The black and indigenous populations will double, the Hispanic population will triple, and the Asian/Pacific Islander population will quadruple over the same time period. In contrast, the non-Hispanic white population will increase by only 5 percent.

Today, the impact of these growing numbers of people of color is more evident at the local level.[5] In seven of the ten largest cities in the United States, people of African, Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian backgrounds constituted more than one-half of the population in 1990. Only Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Diego had a non-Hispanic majority in 1990. It is estimated that as early as 1993, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and St. Louis will also be "majority-minority" cities.[6] In New York, the largest city, and in Houston, the fourth largest city, African Americans and Hispanics were of similar proportion—about one-quarter each in New York and approaching three-tenths each in Houston.

The increase of people of color at the local levels has been differential. Among the twenty largest cities, African Americans were a majority of the total population in Detroit, Baltimore, Memphis, and Washington, D.C. In San Antonio, "Hispanics" were a majority of the total population at 56 percent contrasted to 7 percent for "Blacks," 1 percent for "Asian/Pacific Islanders" and 36 percent for "Whites." In San Francisco, there were more "Asian/Pacific Islanders" (28 percent) than "Blacks" (11 percent) or "Hispanics" (14 percent).

These growing population figures have been accompanied by a rise in political and economic power in the 1990s. At the national level, Latinos have joined blacks in reaching a critical mass necessary to create congressional caucuses. People of color are running for

local, state, and national offices at unprecedented rates. Despite the disproportionate persistence of poverty for communities of color, an educated middle class with entry possibilities into corporate and suburban America has emerged for these groups.

The Changing Dimensions of Race Among Groups of Color

This rapid growth and differential distribution of numbers and power in a relatively short period of time demand a new framework for describing and explaining the status and relationships of different groups. Specifically, there is a greater need to understand racial and ethnic minorities not only in relationship to whites, but also in relationship to each other and to the total population. Such a framework would replace the current one of "majority" white and "principal minority" black. The first set of relationships would encompass combinations of people of color according to issues of concern for their particular groups. For example, "American Indian/Pacific Islander" would be grouped for issues of relevance to indigenous peoples; "Black/Hispanic" regarding shared municipal services; and "Asian/Hispanic" on immigration and language rights issues. A second set of relations would compare a specific minority group to the total population, for example, "Hispanics/non-Hispanics" and "Blacks/non-Blacks." This comparison places a particular group in the position of the primary unit of analysis for a specific issue and time period.

Racial and ethnic diversity existed in the Americas long before the founding of the United States.

From a public policy perspective, a new framework for understanding people of color and, subsequently, the white majority is an extremely pressing concern considering that minority populations are increasing during a time of budget deficits, scarce resources, and diminished governmental support for equal opportunity. Despite many gains, people of color continue to have less access to and ownership of resources, thereby perpetuating their minority power status. Communities of color are often forced to compete for insufficient and inadequate resources in education, health, social services, employment, economic development, and housing. Even within a group, U.S.-born residents often compete with newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Sadly, this has sometimes resulted in group antagonism across and within minority groups. To a lesser known extent, however, it has also provided opportunities for forging coalitions. In any event, the continued growth in numbers of people of color requires a shift from the traditional view of race as black or white to a global view of a multiracial American society that includes people who are interracial.

Instead of a delineation of various policy issues that are specifically relevant to black, Hispanic, Asian, or indigenous populations, what is needed in order to implement effective public policies is a new perspective. The policy agendas for racial and ethnic minority communities have been established over several decades and need not be re-invented. They have as their basic premise equal opportunity, access, and representation at local, state, and national levels. For the most part, although they may appear to be group-specific, these policy agendas address needed structural changes in education, health care, employment, housing, and income that will ensure equal rights and responsibilities for all Americans.[7] Time has repeatedly shown that more inclusive and representative policies and programs, most notably affirmative action, have benefitted not only targeted groups, but other populations, as well, and American society, in general.[8]

Census Bureau projections indicate that the proportion of people of color will increase to almost half (48 percent) by the year 2050.

While these agendas have begun to be implemented they remain unfinished for two reasons. First, structural changes occur slowly and not without great resistance. Second, the domestic agenda of the United States, including traditional race relations, has been superseded by global changes during the last ten years requiring a new policy perspective. These have included a change in the status of the United States as a major lender to a debtor nation with huge trade and budget deficits; major growth of nonwhite populations in the world, especially in industrial nations, including the United States; the decline of traditionally male-dominated, higher-paid positions along with an accompanying rise in female- and minority-dominated, lower-paid positions; and a shift in global politics from an East/West to a North/South dichotomy. The North has been commonly characterized as being white and affluent (North America and Western Europe) and the South as being made up of people of color and the poor (Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East).

The United States is increasingly becoming a microcosm of the world with a population of many races, colors, and cultures varying in language, religion, nativity, class, and region. Further, the relationships between these groups are affected by U.S. relations with their countries of origin, most notably in terms of immigration, national security, and trade policies. Just as international policies are no longer dominated by socialist and capitalist nations but must include countries which do not neatly fit in a particular category or want to be aligned with any bloc, domestic policies are also no longer dominated by a black/white or white/minority paradigm. If anything, multicultural/multiracial coalitions will continue to expand due to natural increase and immigration. Acceptance of the multiracial/multicultural composition of American society is a necessary factor in ensuring the survival of this nation.

To be sure, a certain degree of acceptance is already

underway, as reflected in the following statement in the *Washington Post*:

> Today, blacks are faced with a somber choice. We can go it alone, fighting against the swelling tide of Asian and Hispanic power, or we can forge coalitions with those groups—and with whites who are sympathetic to minority concerns. . . . There exist many more issues, social, political and economic in which the concerns of Asian and Hispanics and blacks intersect. If the Los Angeles riots are anything to go by, it's indeed in the best interests of Asians, for instance, to support more black-owned businesses in African-American neighborhoods. A more cogent coalition between black and Asian businesses in South Central L.A. surely would have reduced riot damages.
>
> As America continues to emerge as a multiracial society, African Americans must face that truth without flinching or retreating into psychic bunkers. Since we remain the most politically potent and sophisticated of the three major ethnic groups, we must then take the lead in forming interracial coalitions. If we don't, the day will come when the powers-that-be, on college campuses and in corporate offices, will greet our demands and concerns with shrugs. They will watch without sympathy as we doom ourselves to social, political and economic stagnancy.[9]

Coalitions among people of color vary from region to region depending on racial/ethnic composition and socioeconomic status. While intergroup programs—crosscultural education and training, mutual heritage celebrations, and the development of personal relations—may be necessary, initial steps, they are not sufficient to sustain and improve relations. The promotion, continuance, and sophistication of relations between multicultural/multiracial populations must be an objective not just of the groups involved, but a firm national goal. Within this goal, three critical policy issues face people of color: the survival of communities and families; the meaning of American citizenship; and potential for economic mobility and political empowerment.

The Survival of Communities and Families

The basic issue uniting black, indigenous, Asian, and Latino populations is the survival of their communities and families. Given their current demographic and socioeconomic profiles,[10] the survival of some segments of these communities and the survival of each group as a unique people have become issues of continuing debate. While kinship bonds and shared heritage, including spiritual values, have in the past been the primary basis of group unity and identity, the racial and ethnic populations are now being demarcated by socioeconomic status, household composition, and by their ability to integrate into the mainstream. Further, these communities have become more heterogeneous due to immigration and, among Hispanics, Asians, and native Americans, interracial unions. With greater diversity will they be transformed and perhaps redefined beyond the unique racial and ethnic groups of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and native Americans? Will they be reduced to a market value of producers and consumers and cease to be defined in terms of kin and community? And if so, will there be an appropriate or different role for civil rights policies? Can policies to ensure the survival and health of racial and ethnic minority communities be developed within current household and family arrangements?

There is a greater need to understand racial and ethnic minorities not only in relationship to whites, but also in relationship to each other and to the total population.

The Meaning of American Citizenship

Much of the tension and competition among different populations is due to an often implicit assumption that entitlement to goods and services is related to citizenship and length of residence in the United States. With the growth of a transnational and multiracial/multicultural labor force around the world, the idea of citizenship seems less important than distinctions among permanent residents, persons in the paid labor force and nonworkers. Policies regarding black, Asian, Hispanic, and indigenous communities must begin to reflect this reality. Indeed, critical policy questions for viable intergroup relations are: What is the relationship of racial/ethnic minority groups in the post–civil rights and new immigration era? Who and what is an American? What are the unique rights and responsibilities of American citizens that are distinguishable from those of noncitizens? Are there appropriate rights and responsibilities for immigrants and language minorities? More specifically, what is the impact of recent black immigrants on the black community? What is the impact of new Hispanic and Asian immigrants on their settled communities? What is the impact of immigrants who are increasingly neither black nor Hispanic? What is the relationship of indigenous peoples to newcomers?

Potential for Economic Mobility and Political Empowerment

Historically, the United States has been viewed as a land of opportunity and upward mobility. This view is now open to question. Even with increased labor force participation and entry into the middle class, black and Hispanic men and women have lower incomes and less wealth than non-Hispanic white men and women. While middle-class status for all families is increasingly

dependent on two earners, for some lower-class families, including Hispanics, blacks, native Americans, and Southeast Asians, earned income has been replaced by welfare income. One out of three black persons is poor. One out of four persons of Hispanic origin is poor. The poverty rate for Asians and native Americans remains greater than that of non-Hispanic whites.

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This stagnation in economic mobility is not just within families and communities. It is occurring at the local electorate levels as minority politicians, notably blacks and Latinos, are moving into leadership positions in major cities suffering from declining populations and revenues. Racial and minority populations have different geographical distributions. Public policies that promote minority group relationships will have to be implemented differently according to region based on the composition of a given locality. What may be appropriate, for example, in San Francisco may be irrelevant in Washington, D.C., because of the difference in composition and organization of the Hispanic, black, native American, and Asian communities in terms of ethnicity, nativity, length of residence, socioeconomic status, political representation, and their proportion of the total population. Issues affecting the diverse black and Hispanic populations of Miami, for instance, may differ vastly from issues affecting the two communities in New York, Los Angeles, or Houston. Further, the presence and composition of other people of color—Asians, Pacific Islanders, and native Americans—also vary by locality and affect the dynamics within a given metropolitan area, municipality, or school system.

Relevant policy questions regarding economic mobility and political empowerment are: In what ways can power (e.g., ownership or control of land, capital, and marketable skills) be created and/or increased for established and emerging racial and ethnic minority communities? What are viable roles for these young populations as they constitute a critical mass of the labor force? Who can produce and/or negotiate power on behalf of these communities?

Conclusion

People of color are a growing and permanent segment of the American population. They have historically occupied and continue to occupy a lower status than whites politically, socially, and economically. In the post–civil rights and new immigration era, the diversity of these groups has expanded to include persons who are interracial including, for example, black Hispanics and Amerasians. Furthermore, racial and ethnic minority populations contain a substantial proportion of America's youth, including those raised in poor and nontraditional families.

The continued survival of the United States is dependent upon the well-being of its residents. More and more, the American population, especially its children, is becoming multiracial and multicultural. The United States is becoming a microcosm of the world's population not just in terms of color, but according to degrees of affluence and poverty.

Recognition and understanding of these different groups are just beginning. Efforts to promote intra- and intergroup relations are underway even as intergroup tensions escalate. We have come full circle. Intergroup relations initially arose from grassroots black, Hispanic, indigenous, and Asian communities during the 1960s, were maintained by the federal government during the 1970s, and supported by corporate philanthropy during the 1980s. In the 1990s, dialogue among established and emerging racial and ethnic minority communities within a multicultural, multiracial, and global policy perspective can lead to a changing significance of race from competitive to collective power.

Notes

[1]Office of Management and Budget, Statistical Directive No. 15, "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Agencies and Administrative Reporting," *Federal Register* 43: 19269–19270.

[2]Juanita Tamayo Lott, "The Continuing Significance of Race and Ethnicity: A Reassessment of Statistical Policy Directive 15," written testimony on the collection of racial and ethnic data, House Subcommittee on Census, Statistics, and Postal Personnel, U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., April 14, 1993.

[3]Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

[4]Bureau of the Census, *Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origins: 1992 to 2050*, Population Reports, P25–1092, November 1992.

[5]William P. O'Hare, "America's Minorities—The Demographics of Diversity," *Population Bulletin* 47 (December 1992), 25.

[6]Sean Gervasi, "Poverty, Race and the Deficit Dilemma," *Poverty and Race* 2 (March 1993), 2.

[7]Janet Dewart, ed., *The State of Black America* (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1988).

[8]Civil rights policies over the years have been extended to persons discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, and disability.

[9]Stephen Buckley, "Black Like Fewer of Us: Soon We Won't Be the Majority Minority," *Washington Post*, 18 July 1993.

[10]Juanita Tamayo Lott, "Towards a Greater Understanding of Black and Hispanic Relations: Demographic, Historical and Policy Perspectives," commissioned paper for Black-Hispanic Dialogue, Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice, October 1990.

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