

*This call for black Americans to take up their opportunities as individuals rather than as minority group members is a departure from black politics since the Sixties, and questions the current push for "group rights." Shelby Steele is professor of English at San Jose State University in California. This essay, originally published by HARPER'S magazine, is from THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: A NEW VISION OF RACE IN AMERICA, copyright 1990 by St. Martin's Press.*

## GHETTOIZED BY BLACK UNITY

by Shelby Steele

There are many profound problems facing black America today: a swelling black underclass; a black middle class that declined slightly in size during the Eighties; a declining number of black college students; an epidemic of teenage pregnancy, drug use, and gang violence; continuing chronic unemployment; astoundingly high college and high school dropout rates; an increasing number of single-parent families; a disproportionately high infant mortality rate; and so on. Against this despair it might seem almost esoteric for me to talk about the importance of individual identity and possibility. Yet I have come to believe that despite the existing racism in today's America, opportunity is still the single most constant but unexploited aspect of the black condition. The only way we will see the advancement of black people in this country is for us to focus on developing ourselves as individuals and embracing opportunity.

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I have come to this conclusion over time. In the late Sixties, I was caught up in the new spirit of black power and pride that swept over black America like one of those storms that change the landscape. I will always believe this storm was inevitable and, therefore, positive in many ways. What I gained from it was the power to be racially unapologetic, no mean benefit considering the long trial of patience that blacks were subjected to during the civil rights movement. But after a while, by the early Seventies, it became clear that black power did not offer much of a blueprint for how to move my life forward; it told me virtually nothing about who I

was as an individual or how I might live in the world as myself. Of course, it was my mistake to think it could. But in the late Sixties, "blackness" was in invasive form of collective identity that cut so deeply into one's individual space that it seemed also to be an individual identity. It came as something of a disappointment to realize that the two were not the same, that being "black" in no way spared me the necessity of being myself.

In the early Seventies, without realizing it, I made a sort of bargain with the prevailing black identity - I subscribed in a general way to its point of view so that I could be free to get on with my life. Many blacks I knew did the same.

And what were we subscribing to? Generally, I think it was a form of black identity grounded in the spirit of black power. It carried a righteous anger at and mistrust of American society; it believed that blacks continued to be the victims of institutional racism, that we would have to maintain an adversarial stance toward society, and that a tight racial unity was necessary both for survival and advancement. This identity was, and is, predicated on the notion that those who burned you once will burn you again, and it presupposes a deep racist reflex in American life that will forever try to limit black possibility.

I think it was the space I cleared for myself by loosely subscribing to this identity that ultimately put me in conflict with it. It is in the day-to-day struggle of living on the floor of a society, so to speak, that one gains a measure of what is possible in that society. And by simply living as an individual in America - with my racial-identity struggle suspended temporarily - I discovered that American society offered me, and blacks in general, a remarkable range of opportunity if we were willing to pursue it.

In my daily life I continue to experience racial indignities and slights: This morning I was told that blacks had too much musical feeling (soul, I suppose) to be good classical musicians; yesterday I passed two houses with gnomish black lawn jockeys on their front porches; my children have been called "nigger," as have I; I wear a tie and carry a briefcase so that my students on the first day of class will know I'm the professor; and so on. I also know that actual racial discrimination persists in many areas of American life. I have been the victor in one housing discrimination suit, as were my parents before me. My life is not immune to any of this, and I will never endure it with elan. Yet I have also come to realize that, in this same society, I have been more in charge of my fate than I ever wanted to believe and that though I have been limited by many things, my race was not foremost among them.

The point is that both realities exist simultaneously. There is still racial insensitivity and some racial discrimination against blacks in this society, but there is also much opportunity. What brought me into conflict with the prevailing black identity was that it was almost entirely preoccupied with the former to the exclusion of the latter. The black identity I was subscribing to in the Seventies - and that still prevails today - was essentially a "wartime" identity shaped in the confrontational Sixties. It saw blacks as victims even as new possibilities for advancement opened all around.

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Why do we cling to an adversarial, victim-focused identity and remain preoccupied with white racism? Part of the reason, I think, is that we carry an inferiority anxiety - an unconscious fear that the notion that we are inferior may, in fact, be true - that makes the seizing of opportunity more risky for us, since setbacks and failures may seem to confirm our worst fears. To avoid this risk we hold a victim-focused identity that tells us there is less opportunity than there actually is. And, in fact, our victimization itself has been our primary source of power in society - the basis of our demands for redress. The paradoxical result of relying on this source of power is that it rewards us for continuing to see ourselves as victims of a racist society and implies that opportunity itself is something to be given instead of taken.

This leaves us with an identity that is at war with our own best interests, that magnifies our oppression and diminishes our sense of possibility. I think this identity is a burden for blacks, because it is built around our collective insecurity rather than a faith in our human capacity to seize opportunity as individuals. It amounts to a self-protective collectivism that focuses on black unity instead of individual initiative. To be "black" in this identity, one need only manifest the symbols, postures, and rhetoric of black unity. Not only is personal initiative unnecessary for being "black" but the successful exercise of initiative - working one's way into the middle class, becoming well-off, gaining an important position - may, in fact, jeopardize one's "blackness," make one somehow less black.

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individual initiative."***

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This sort of identity is never effective and never translates into the actual uplift of black people. Though it espouses black pride, it is actually a repressive identity that generates a victimized self-image, curbs individualism and initiative, diminishes our sense of possibility, and contributes to our demoralization and inertia. Uplift can only come when many millions of blacks seize the possibilities inside the sphere of their personal lives and use them to move themselves forward. Collectively we can resist oppression, but racial development will always be, as Ralph Ellison once put it, "the gift" of individuals.

There have been numerous government attempts at remedying the list of problems I mentioned earlier. Here and there a program has worked, many more have been failures. Clearly, we should find the ones that do work and have more of them. But my deepest feeling is that, in a society of increasingly limited resources, there will never be enough programs to meet the need. We black Americans will never be saved or even assisted terribly much by others, never be repaid for our suffering, and never find that symmetrical, historical justice that we cannot help but long for.

As Jean-Paul Sartre once said, we are the true "existential people." We have always had to create ourselves out of whole cloth and find our own means for survival. I believe that black leadership must recognize the importance of this individual initiative. They must

preach it, tell it, sell it, and demand it. Our leadership has looked at government and white society very critically. Now they must help us look at ourselves. We need our real problems named and explained, otherwise we have no chance to overcome them. The impulse of our leaders is to be "political," to keep the society at large on edge, to keep them feeling as though they have not done enough for blacks. And, clearly, they have not. But the price these leaders pay for this form of "politics" is to keep blacks focused on an illusion of deliverance by others, and no illusion weakens us more. Our leaders must take a risk. They must tell us the truth, tell us of the freedom and opportunity they have discovered in their own lives. They must tell us what they tell their own children when they go home at night: to study hard, to pursue their dreams with discipline and effort, to be responsible for themselves, to have concern for others, to cherish their race and at the same time build their own lives as Americans. When our leaders put a spotlight on our victimization and seize upon our suffering to gain us ineffectual concessions, they inadvertently turn themselves into enemies of the truth, not to mention enemies of their own people.

I believe that black Americans are freer today than ever before. This is not a hope; this is a reality. Racial hatred has not yet left the American landscape. Who

knows how or when this will occur. And yet the American black, supported by a massive body of law and, for the most part, the goodwill of his fellow citizens, is basically as free as he or she wants to be. For every white I have met who is a racist, I have met twenty more who have seen me as an individual. This, I am not ashamed to say, has been my experience. I believe it is time for blacks to begin the shift from a wartime to a peacetime identity, from fighting for opportunity to seizing it. The immutable fact of late-twentieth century American life is that it is there for blacks to seize. Martin Luther King did not live to experience this. But then, of course, on the night before he died, he seemed to know that he would not. From the mountaintop he had looked over and seen the promised land, but he said, "I may not get there with you..." I won't say we are snuggled deep in the promised valley he saw beyond the mountain; everyday things remind me that we are not. But I also know we have it better than our greatest leader. We are on the other side of his mountaintop, on the downward slope toward the valley he saw. This is something we ought to know. But what we must know even more clearly is that nothing on this earth can be promised except a chance. The promised land guarantees nothing. It is only an opportunity, not a deliverance.

# BALANCE OF RIGHTS AND DUTIES: A Book Review

THE BROKEN CORD by Michael Dorris.

New York: Harper and Row 1989.

I was impelled to read *The Broken Cord* after watching the author interviewed on a TV talk show and feeling the glimmer of recognition that as he spoke and wrote about "Adam" he may well be telling me something about one of our adopted grandsons.

*The Broken Cord* is an account of Dorris' struggle to understand, to find out more about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and to cope with his adopted son's malfunctions...an account that is told with such openness that it would engage the heart of any sensitive person whether or not those symptoms were found among his or her acquaintances.

But to recognize the possibilities for damage to the fetus through the mother's ingestion of even a small amount of alcohol also forces us to look at a troubling area of rights and responsibilities: the right of the child to come into the world with all the personal advantages that nature would like to provide; the right of the mother to do as she wishes to amuse or tranquilize herself.

A product and student of the Native American community, Dorris can show us how two cultures wrestle with such issues... how two versions of the "social contract" might try to cope with the human devastation inherent in a woman's consumption of drugs during her child-bearing years. His research led him to the realization that FAS and FAE have been surmised and counseled about in most of Western culture as far back as Ancient Greece.

Dorris' wife, a well-known author as well, gives an impassioned plea for the child in her foreword and expresses the hope that education might help eradicate this preventable tragedy, but she (Louise Erdrich) and husband Michael have understood how some activists could advocate jail terms for pregnant women who refuse to stop drinking during pregnancy.

I recommend *The Broken Cord* as a personal story, admirably told and exhaustively researched, that will add one more example to our human dilemma to keep rights and duties in balance in the course of our social covenanting. (R.K.)

*"In anthropological theory there is a concept called "the superorganic" which is based upon the premise that members of a culture derive their worldview from the same pool of historically generated assumptions. To live harmoniously in society, we must construe a roughly similar future."*

*Michael Dorris in The Broken Cord*