

From Perception to Viewpoint: Four African American Perspectives on Affirmative Action

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ABSTRACT

In examining the views of four contemporary African American scholars, the research objective is twofold: First, to uncover some examples of societal trends which are particularly meaningful to contemporary black scholars in the formation of their viewpoints of affirmative action; second, to draw comparisons and contrasts between opposing viewpoints to see if some common concerns and themes exist, which could help bring compromise to this issue. The four scholars are Derrick Bell, Theodore Shaw, Brian Jones, and Shelby Steele. Bell and Shaw argue in favor of continuing affirmative action programs. Jones and Steele argue against these programs. Bell and Shaw offer evidence to show that despite the civil rights gains in the last half of the century, racist structures are still entrenched in American society today. They argue that this evidence clearly demonstrates the continued need for affirmative action programs to counteract these forces. Steele and Jones argue that affirmative action programs, as practiced today, tend to benefit the least disadvantaged members of the groups they mean to assist. They also argue there are other crucial factors which are inhibiting black advancement. They believe that illegitimacy, unsafe neighborhoods, black-on-black crime, and the disintegrating black family unit greatly contribute to African American poverty and are a greater barrier to black advancement than are the racist structures that still exist. The results of the research indicate that both the proponents and the opponents of affirmative action tend to cling to their own viewpoints, often in a noticeably myopic fashion. The men on each side of the debate give virtually no attention to arguments which are central to the viewpoints of their opponents. The research also noted, regrettably, that the debate occasionally degenerated into a series of unprofessional personal remarks, from both sides, directed toward an opponent. This observation mirrors, to some extent, the tension that exists among the general public about affirmative action programs. However, until the scholars in this debate can argue persuasively and *respectfully* for their own position on this issue, there may not be much hope that the nation, as a whole, will be able to do so either.

FRAMING THE ARGUMENT: SOME RELEVANT BACKGROUND MATERIAL.

In his compilation of essays, *Point Counterpoint: Readings in American Government*, Herbert M. Levine recalls that the initial rights won by African Americans during the early stages of the civil rights era did not address the problem of existing societal forces which continued to present barriers to black progress in achieving economic equality with whites. Civil rights groups observed manifestations of these forces in many areas. For example, they pointed to the disproportionately low representation of blacks in many businesses and universities as evidence of entrenched recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices, which discriminated against African Americans. As Levine notes, however, the government actions that sought to remedy these problems met with various degrees of support. While most people favored enforcing antidiscrimination laws, there was considerable controversy over the newly proposed affirmative action programs. These programs advocated the use of special measures (some of which will be discussed in the pages

ahead) to alter recruiting and hiring strategies to assist not only blacks, but other racial minority groups, and women, who had been discriminated against in a similar manner (91). Today, three and a half decades later, affirmative action programs continue to be highly controversial.

What accounts for the controversy? A recent social audit study conducted by the Gallup organization shows that 53% of African Americans believe affirmative action programs should be increased, while only 22% of whites agree. The same study suggests the reason for this disparity may be due to a difference in the *perceptions* of blacks and whites about the current status of race relations in the country. While 79% of whites believe that blacks in their community have the same chance as they do of getting any kind of job, only 46% of blacks agree. The same pattern in percentage is seen when the issue is education: whites 93, blacks 71; or housing: whites 86, blacks 58 (Gallup 97). A critical component, then, in understanding the affirmative action debate is to recognize the fact that African Americans, as a group, continue to possess a fundamental mistrust of the

fairness of many institutions in American society.

Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw, two proponents of affirmative action, will draw heavily upon this notion of mistrust as they argue that, for African Americans, winning seats at the table in the boardrooms of companies and in the faculty lounges at universities has not secured an equal standing in those institutions. They will argue that in subtle, and often not so subtle ways, the surviving structures which once worked more overtly against their inclusion in these places continue to exclude African Americans today. These structures also see to it that, once inside the door, the black person's work, ideas, and perspectives will be filtered by his or her white counterparts through a complex set of stereotypes and suspicions simply because that person is black. If she is a woman, another set of filters based on gender will also be at work.

Two opponents of affirmative action, Shelby Steele and Brian Jones, approach the debate from an entirely different direction. Instead of analyzing present-day structures, which continue to discriminate against African Americans, they question the relative merit of affirmative action, in its present form, as a remedy to the problem. They will also stress the importance of other factors in society that seriously hinder black advancement. These factors include education, moral decline, black-on-black crime, and the disintegration of stable black family units, especially in the inner cities.

As the viewpoints of these four African American scholars are examined, in particular, the very narrow area of focus of each person, and their apparent frustration with opposing viewpoints, a wide gulf between their perceptions of the problem is readily observable. It is possible an open discussion among them might yield much agreement on the issue. However, as they make their own arguments, often very valid, they give little or no attention to issues which are *central* to the argument of the opposing scholar. At no place do their arguments "meet in the middle." This gulf is representative, in many ways, of the gulf in public opinion on the issue. These observations, therefore, cannot be very encouraging to anyone hoping to see some kind of sensible solution to the affirmative action debate in the near future.

DERRICK BELL: THE STRUCTURES OF RACISM ARE PERMANENT.

The noted author, Derrick Bell, uses themes from some of the fictional plots in his book, *Faces At The Bottom of The Well: The Permanence of Racism*, to argue for the necessity of affirmative action programs. In one story, a meeting between the Association of Harvard Black Faculty and university administrators is tragically cut short when a bomb destroys the building they were in. In the aftermath, investigators use notes gathered from some offices and portions of the actual minutes of the meeting uncovered from the rubble that remains to try to piece together the issues discussed at the meeting (127-8). At this point, Professor Bell and his fictional *lawyer prophet*, Geneva Crenshaw, spend some time discussing the findings.

One point that Bell makes is that by relying on traditional

qualifications, such as recruiting heavily from prestigious schools, Harvard is excluding some potentially fine black scholars who did not attend those schools (132). By continuing to define excellence with narrow standards of this kind, disproportionate harm comes to blacks and other minority groups because their academic backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, which may be entirely scholarly, too often depart from the usual forms. This simply means that their scholarship did not take place at the schools from which Harvard traditionally recruits both its students and faculty. As a consequence, the selection process tends to favor African American candidates who "reject or minimize their blackness" in order to fit with established customs (140).¹ Hence, Bell argues, irrespective of whether the administration is aware of it, the existing recruitment structure at Harvard is biased in favor of whites.

Having to reject or minimize one's blackness leads Bell to another observation. In his chapter on "The Rules of Racial Standing," Bell references Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose suffering is so completely ignored by the whites around him that he might as well not exist (Bell 111). Following this thought, Bell states there is a "special discounting of black views" when one African American recommends a candidate of his or her own race for a position or promotion. "When not *ignored entirely*, the unconvinced response from whites will contain the scarcely concealed question 'Who else likes this person?'" (111-2).

It is indictment enough that this disrespectful treatment is observable at all. Bell argues, however, that the level of regard for the black scholar is so low, affirmative action, as practiced by the whites around that person, frequently amounts to little more than "tokenism." Bell uses his example at Harvard to illustrate the point, charging that the administration there, as at other universities, tolerated the presence of black faculty merely to placate student protestors. As Bell puts it, they all wanted "not committed pioneers, but compliant placebos" (130).

As he contemplates the history of this discrimination, Derrick Bell sums up the argument neatly, "The inertia sustained during this long exclusion period was not eliminated by antidiscrimination laws. Standards of qualification now subtly play the role once performed overtly by policies of racial exclusion" (139). This observation is sufficient for Derrick Bell to conclude that affirmative action is still very much needed to combat the structures of discrimination still prevalent in American society.

Obviously, Derrick Bell has given thoughtful and scholarly treatment to this issue. He is passionate about what he sees as racist, and completely unacceptable societal trends which continue to discriminate against African Americans. The title of his book induces a sadness in the reader who quickly realizes that the author has resigned himself to the belief that America, with its present power structures, is incapable of addressing the racism which continues to exist within its borders. This resignation, while understandable based on the evidence presented, does not seem to instill in Derrick

¹Ralph Ellison illustrates this concept when the main character in his novel, *Invisible Man*, is advised by his friend, Trueblood, to "Play the game, but don't believe in it, that much you owe yourself" (153).

Bell any tendency to consider an opposing argument with much objectivity. This observation will gain some support as his views are contrasted with other scholars in the pages ahead.

THEODORE SHAW: SOME EXAMPLES OF RACIST STRUCTURES.

Theodore M. Shaw, in his position as the associate director-counsel of the NAACP, recently appeared before a House Sub-committee dealing with this issue. His testimony echoed Derrick Bell's support for the continuation of affirmative action programs. Like Bell, Shaw recognizes that this country has not reached the ideal stage where merit selection, and a colorblind and genderblind society flourish (Shaw 96). Shaw offers some examples of current affirmative action programs that he argues are both flexible and effective. These examples include student assignments and site selections for public housing, which respectively promote desegregation in public schools and in many residential areas. Other examples are efforts to promote women and minority-owned businesses, and recruitment and hiring strategies that focus on attracting women and minority groups into fields where they have been historically underrepresented (95-6).

Shaw is also acutely aware of what he calls *non-merit-related* criteria at work in many societal institutions; criteria which, whether intentional or not, continue to grant preferential treatment to whites. Nathan Glazer, a noted professor at Harvard University, supports these observations (Glazer 52). Examples of such criteria include cronyism, nepotism, and alumni preferences. Alumni preferences alone, according to Shaw, account for more of the people in colleges and universities than do affirmative action programs (96). Therefore, Shaw would ask: Why is affirmative action being singled out by those who oppose it as a preferential policy for blacks? Why aren't these same people calling for the abolishment of entrenched structures like alumni preferences, which so clearly benefit white citizens over African Americans and other minority groups? This is a perceptive and persuasive argument.

In addition, Shaw also sites the results of a 1990 Urban Institute study and a 1991 Prime Time Live television program as evidence of the continued prevalence of business practices that give preferential treatment to white citizens. The Prime Time Live program was particularly telling, as viewers were able to watch, while white customers and applicants at various businesses were consistently given a preference over African Americans, who, in some cases, were given false information to discourage their business (99). It is the continued evidence of discriminatory practices such as these that lead Theodore Shaw, Derrick Bell, and others like them to argue so passionately for the necessity of affirmative action programs as a counter measure to these forces until there is sufficient evidence they no longer exist.

More so than any of the four scholars presented here, Theodore Shaw offers particularly persuasive examples of racist practices which continue to thrive in America today. His examples are powerful and demand an immediate judgment from the reader. His observations, quite naturally,

have forced him to conclude that affirmative action programs are still clearly needed as a safeguard against existing racist structures. However, as the viewpoints of two opponents of affirmative action are now examined, the reader will notice that some key elements of the debate have not yet been addressed. This is a simple, yet highly significant observation. It is critical to reflect for a moment as to why, at this point, there should even be an omission of any key element of the debate. Yet, the reader will quickly observe that Shelby Steele and Brian Jones approach the debate from an entirely different perspective. As their arguments unfold, so too will the evidence that the two sides presented here are not even close to one another in their assessment of what factors have brought about the current crisis. They are no closer in their analysis of what measures must be taken to correct it and ensure that African Americans begin to achieve steady progress toward academic and economic equality with white Americans.

SHELBY STEELE: AFRICAN AMERICANS MUST CONTROL THEIR OWN DESTINY.

It is interesting to note that in his book, *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*, Shelby Steele, author of several books about the question of race in America, and an outspoken opponent of affirmative action, does not argue the point that discriminatory structures are still very prevalent in American society. In fact, near the beginning of his book, he ascribes the fear that drove Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, to murder a white girl as having come from "the racism of white Americans that, over time, had congealed into intractable social structures designed to keep the races separate" (Steele 15). So, Steele is quite aware that these structures still exist. What is intriguing, though, is that his awareness of these structures is *not* a motivating force behind his own viewpoint of affirmative action.

What disturbs Steele is the post sixties trend he perceives in affirmative action thinking. His central criticism of affirmative action programs is that they continue to advance the notion that the academic and economic achievement of African Americans, as a group, is *contingent* on what white America does in the form of government interventions (65). Here, it is important to note a critical diversion in focus. Unlike Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw, Shelby Steele does not discuss, at any length, the structures in society which favor white citizens. An observation of vastly greater importance to him is the fact that affirmative action programs, for all their focus on breaking down these barriers, ask virtually nothing of the black individual.

Steele believes the theory behind affirmative action policies is misdirected:

To have more college-educated minorities, we don't need to work at instilling the principle of intellectual excellence, or at raising the standards in inner-city schools, or at making minority neighborhoods safe for children. (In fact, we allow license and lowered standards to prevail in these areas.) And we don't need to engage our "client population" personally. A

group preference in college admissions is a simple and impersonal intervention by which we can manufacture a wonderfully "diverse campus" even when black students average three hundred SAT points below whites and Asians, as has been the case at the University of California at Berkeley. (20-1)

His comments are a bit sardonic, but the implication is clear. Government actions which intervene at the university level are misdirected. In Steele's judgement, to have more college-educated minorities, far greater attention should be given to other areas. He argues that the prevailing focus in current affirmative action thinking suggests little or no work needs to be done in these areas. He goes on to assert that race usually obscures the problems in these other areas. When race is extracted from the equation, we can see these problems more clearly: "Poor reading skills or a lack of preparedness for employment or too many pregnant teenage girls made that way by too many young men" (107). His point is well taken.

Throughout his book, Steele's great burden is for African Americans to begin to take agency over their own fate and not wait for white America to reform its institutions. He is suspicious of this reform, in any case, suggesting it has less to do with actually achieving racial equality than it does with achieving a kind of national *redemption* for America's racist sins in the past (31). To support his argument, Steele offers a few examples of schools that are successful at educating young black students. These schools are successful, he argues, because they expect their students to exercise their own will, and to take responsibility for their own success (92). As he states elsewhere in the book: "If blacks exercise will, their problems cease to be contingent on white will and interventions" (77).

It is clear that Shelby Steele has departed from the framework developed by both Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw. And it is to their discredit that neither Bell nor Shaw have given any serious attention to the harmful social trends which continue to afflict so many impoverished, predominately black communities. Virtually nowhere in the writings of Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw can one find anything but the most illusory reference to illegitimacy, black-on-black crime, or the breakdown of stable, committed, family units as contributing factors to African American difficulties. However, the reader must note with equal disappointment that Shelby Steele, while recognizing the continued prevalence of racism in American society, offers little, if any concrete advice about how the nation might go about ridding itself of this abhorrent practice.

BRIAN JONES: THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION.

Where Shelby Steele's opposition to affirmative action is largely rooted in his passionate desire that blacks take agency over their own fate, Brian W. Jones, President of the Center for New Black Leadership, is motivated by other concerns. His perception of affirmative action policies is that they have, over time, done more harm than good. He borrows a term from Steele in arguing that, whether intended

or not, affirmative action policies have created a *culture of preference* in which groups must "inevitably emphasize their differences and exalt their victimization to compete for preferred status" (Jones 104). The inevitable consequence of social division between groups is an extremely high price for society to pay.

Jones points out some other inadequacies of affirmative action programs. He argues that preferential policies tend to benefit the least disadvantaged members within the preferred groups. For example, among women, and within ethnic minority groups, it is the middle-class members who, despite the educational and economic advantages of their own backgrounds, receive the lion's share of benefits from policies ostensibly designed to help the more disadvantaged members of those groups (108).

Jones also argues that the current objective of affirmative action policies is to achieve proportional representation for blacks and other minority groups, and for women in institutions where they have been historically discriminated against. This objective, however, avoids having to come to grips with real deficiencies in economic and educational preparedness which plague some sections of minority communities (106). Like Shelby Steele, Jones would argue that addressing these deficiencies must be an integral component of any national strategy to help African Americans achieve academic and economic equality with white Americans.

Jones is also moved to offer other recommendations to advance what he calls a positive civil rights agenda. One proposal, for example, is that the government remove some of the regulatory burdens which can hinder minority entrepreneurs who often have less capital with which to start their businesses. Another proposal is that Congress reform existing civil rights laws to reestablish the notion of *intent* on the part of the accused (110). Brian Jones warns that unless reforms such as these are implemented, the middle-class in America will continue to "play the fiddle of preference" at the expense of the truly disadvantaged in society (111).

Brian Jones has pointed out some dramatic failings of affirmative action and his examples and concerns add some new and relevant facts to the debate. However, like Shelby Steele, Jones has failed to comment on the present-day reality of structural racism in America. Steele and Jones have not acknowledged the continued betrayal of a race of citizens who ask simply that they be treated fairly in the day-to-day movement of American society. Similarly, Bell and Shaw have failed to see that there are many disturbing and harmful trends in inner city areas and other predominately black neighborhoods, which the most successful affirmative action programs cannot even begin to address.

To this point, the proponents of affirmative action have, more or less, been piloting the ship called *Racial Justice*. And for lack of a better descriptor, the two opponents of affirmative action have been steering their own ship, which one might reasonably name *Black Self-determination*. It is with profound regret, that the reader must now realize that these two ships have passed in the night. In fact, not even this analogy adequately captures the current demise. There is such a wide gulf between the competing perceptions, that it is more accurate to say that these ships are not even sailing the same sea. So far removed are they from one another,

that the best radar equipment available would not enable one ship to detect the other.

DISCUSSION

A student of this issue, who may have invested a fair amount of time studying the viewpoints of these four men, is left to ponder one or two serious impressions. First, the two proponents of affirmative action are arguing the issue from a perspective that is *entirely divorced* from the perspective of their opponents. What drives Derrick Bell and Theodore Shaw to argue so passionately that affirmative action programs are vital to black advancement? It is the evidence they see and describe so eloquently that clearly shows that racist practices still thrive throughout many institutions in American society. Yet, within the pages of Shelby Steele's book, and throughout the testimony of Brian Jones, there is virtually no analysis of these racist structures.

Similarly, a careful reading of both Derrick Bell's novel, and Thomas Shaw's testimony yields little, if any evidence to suggest they attach any importance to illegitimacy, unsafe neighborhoods, black-on-black crime, or the disintegrating black family as contributing factors to African American difficulties. These are the barriers to black advancement that arouse the passions of Shelby Steele and Brian Jones.

One can also observe a palpable reluctance on the part of these scholars to seriously consider the opposing viewpoint. Shelby Steele accuses Bell and others of "pressing the contingency" that black fate is dependent on what white America does to redeem itself (65). And Derrick Bell charges that Steele and those like him "gain national celebrity" because they are willing to minimize the effect of racism on the disadvantaged status of blacks (115). Reading these comments, one may conclude that each author never read the other one's work. A more discouraging conclusion would be that he did read it, but wasn't really listening.

Finally, some discussion about civility and respect is also appropriate. Throughout their writings, both Shelby Steele and Brian Jones show a proclivity to use phrases such as a *culture of preference* to describe the position of those who favor affirmative action programs. In his book, Steele frequently refers to the high profile proponents of affirmative action as the *grievance elite*. These references add nothing of value to the debate and tend to betray a lack of appreciation for the genuine and valid concerns held by those who feel affirmative action programs are still needed.

It is also true, however, that many of those who favor affirmative action policies could profit from a lesson or two on simple decency and courtesy. Theodore Shaw, for example, observes a "mean-spirited undertone" to the arguments against affirmative action (98). How would he comment on Shelby Steele's experiences at some universities where he has had to endure the shame of having various epithets hurled at him such as "opportunist" and "house slave," "...while university presidents sit in the front row and avert their eyes" (4).

The point of these examples is to illustrate the lack of civility, and the lack of respect often shown to the *person* on

the opposite side of the issue. The only conclusion one can draw is that, too often, the parties are unwilling to listen to each other. If the scholars in this debate, those of supposedly open and professional minds, are not willing to commit themselves to raise the level of the debate above derision and personal insult, there may not be much hope that the rest of society will either.

Yet, there is an invaluable lesson here for the culture at large. The viewpoints expressed here are a microcosm of the national debate on affirmative action. The same stumbling blocks and the same pitfalls that seem to drive a wedge between these scholars, are the very same barriers that keep the opposing sides divided in the national debate. For example, there is a trend of myopia and of disrespect in the perspectives that come from *both* sides in the debate. Listen to a discussion on the radio. Watch a debate on television. Very rarely do the participants display any genuine objectivity. There *may* be a measure of civility present, or there may be something that amounts to little more than a shouting match. A statement, itself, that is quite telling. However, the arguments are seldom expressed or received in an objective fashion. People of good will on both sides of the issue are understandably frustrated when they feel their own viewpoints are being ignored or misunderstood, but these emotions must be controlled. The national debate *must* be conducted on the basis of a mutual respect for all sincerely held viewpoints. And this is achieved only when proponents and opponents alike are, first and foremost, truly willing to listen to one another.

Derrick Bell and Shelby Steele have very valid and passionate concerns about this issue. But the evidence suggests they are both too wrapped up in their own perspective to seriously consider the other man's viewpoint. In essence, they are not really listening to each other. Instead, they seem to be looking for an error of some kind in the other man's work, or a statement that betrays an inconsistency in analysis or judgement. In short, they seem to each be on more of a fault-finding mission than a fact-finding mission. Sadly, the trend in the national debate, too, is to travel this well-worn road. And this trend absolutely must change. For American society to ever truly reach a rational and sound policy about affirmative action, people must educate themselves on this issue, and that means reading and listening, *objectively*, to the arguments on both sides of the debate.

It means, also, that there is going to have to be a national consensus about acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior from the participants in the debate. Attitudes of hostility and disrespect are shameful. They cheapen the debate, and society does not have to tolerate them. America can speak with one voice when it makes up its mind to do so. Just as we tell our kids to "just say no" to drugs, we can, collectively, shame those into decency and respect, who would otherwise drag the debate down to the level of a petulant child. As the affirmative action debate continues, it will only be when society decides that civility and respect are going to be the rule, not the exception, that it will be able to see, in the distance, that great day of resolution.

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