1985

Approaching Racial Equality Through Indirection: The Problem of Race, Class, and Power

Jennifer L. Hochschild

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylpr

Part of the Law Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylpr/vol4/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Law & Policy Review by an authorized administrator of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.
Americans more vehemently oppose mandatory school desegregation than almost all other policies recently advanced by the federal government. The degree of fury, fear, and physical violence attendant upon "forced busing" seems all out of proportion to the actual, rather simple, fact of assigning and transporting children away from one public school and to another. School desegregation therefore provides an invaluable window for looking through the opaque wall of conventional civilities into the complex interior of American race relations.

Why do so many white parents oppose mandatory school desegregation so strongly? The answer seems obvious, at first glance — as Jesse Jackson quips, "It's not the bus, it's us." Whites dislike desegregated schools because they dislike blacks. But racism is both too strong and too weak an explanation for white opposition to school desegregation policies. It is too strong because it does not account for the fact that many whites differentiate among blacks. Some antibusers, after all, eagerly enroll their children in racially mixed mag-

* Professor of Politics and Public Affairs, Princeton University. My thanks to the National Academy of Education's Spencer Foundation Fellowship for supporting this research, and to Deborah Baumgold, C. Anthony Broh, Elizabeth Bussiere, Thomas Cavanagh, Amy Gutmann, Jane Mansbridge, David Pavelchek, Paul Peterson, and Alan Wertheimer for their very helpful comments on various drafts of the paper.
net schools. Conversely, Jackson's answer is too weak because it does not fully explain why some whites are prejudiced. Residents of Charlestown and Canarsie do not simply dislike blacks; they dislike blacks because, with school desegregation, "the three R's will be turned to Riot, Rape, and Robbery," or because they think of blacks as "the welfare lady splurging" or "nonproductive and counter-productive leeches."2

These critics are more astute than many policy makers or analysts. Tomato-throwing "Townies"3 are pointing out what political leaders often obscure—that the problem of race is the problem of class and power as well. Desegregation policies are so controversial because they bring to the surface not only the issue of racial discrimination but also the facts of class and power inequalities.

School desegregation is not unique in this regard; policies of affirmative action in employment and programs to disperse public housing in suburbs also raise questions of class and power as well as race. Citizens who realize that complexity act accordingly. White anti-busers who enroll their children in magnet schools are distinguishing, implicitly, between middle class and poor blacks. Whites who oppose "reverse discrimination" but endorse "equal opportunity" are denying, implicitly, that whiteness gives undue economic advantages. Whites who resist black "encroachment" on their neighborhood but support "open housing" are fighting, implicitly, for some modicum of control over their environment.

If the problem of race in America is really a problem of cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power, Americans face a conflict between our circumstances and our most cherished political values. To posit the facts of cumulative inequalities against the ideals of liberal democracy is to pose an extraordinarily difficult problem: the United States can only achieve the promise of liberal democracy for all by challenging the practice of liberal democracy for some.4

Defining these concepts permits clearer specification of the conflict. A liberal democracy is a society designed to guarantee its mem-

2. J. A. Lukas, Common Ground 259 (1985); J. Reider, Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism 96, 101 (1985). These books, along with J. Schofield, supra note 1, are among the best recent ethnographic studies of the traumas of contemporary American race relations.
3. See J. A. Lukas, supra note 2, at 262.
4. Gunnar Myrdal, in his classic G. Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy (1944), described part of the problem I am concerned with. He focused on the disjunction between whites' discriminatory practices and their belief in the American Creed of equality and individualism. However, although he described class and power inequities in great detail, he did not incorporate
Race, Class, and Power

bers' right to choose to live the way they wish. Its basic tenets are individualism, popular sovereignty and political equality (usually defined as majority rule), equal opportunity to pursue one's goals, the rights of protection of self and property against unwarranted interference, and only as much government as is needed to ensure these freedoms and rights. The dimension of race is a social and psychological phenomenon. People identify themselves and others as "black" or "white," and they hold views and take actions as a consequence of that identification. Whether races are biologically distinct is immaterial; what matters is that, to a greater or lesser degree, people perceive blacks and whites differently and act accordingly.

The dimension of class refers to the fact of economic stratification. Classes are not necessarily fixed or inherently conflicting. But class origins affect people's position in the economic structure which in turn affects their work, family, social life, and expectations.

The dimension of power refers to political control. It implies at least having some say over an organization's or other people's actions, and at most determining those actions. "Organizations and other people" are typically governmental officials and agencies, but they may be so-called private entities such as corporations, foundations, or social clubs.

These definitions, sketchy as they are, show more specifically how the ideal of liberal democracy clashes with the facts of cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power. Racial prejudice and discrimination violate our belief in individualism and our guarantee of individual rights. A class structure violates equality of opportunity. Power disparities vitiate (although they do not logically contradict) popular sovereignty and political equality. Combining all three inequalities leaves little of the promise of liberal democracy for poor and powerless blacks. But efforts to eliminate these cumulative ine-

all three dimensions of inequality into his understanding of the American dilemma. Thus, from my perspective his argument is correct but incomplete.


5. For the sake of keeping complexity manageable, I am ignoring ethnic or racial groups other than blacks and whites. This exclusion is substantively defensible for two reasons: 1) the histories of Asians and Hispanics in the United States are distinctive and deserve separate treatment; and 2) the history of problems between blacks and whites eclipses the problems of integrating successive waves of non-Anglo immigrants. See, e.g., Jencks, Affirmative Action for Blacks, 28 AM. BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST 731, 743-47 (1985).
qualities conflict with the remaining features of liberal democracy — protection of individual and property rights, majority rule, and minimal governmental interference in private lives.

This normative problem has an equally unsettling policy dimension. Programs that address only one of the three inequalities are too weak and simplistic to extend the promises of liberal democracy to all Americans. Only programs that attack all three at once can fully succeed. But recent history shows that policies ranging wide enough to encompass all three inequalities run into broad and deep opposition. What we can do will not suffice; what will suffice, we cannot do.

Posed in so stark a fashion, the normative problem and its attendant policy dilemma seem insoluble. Perhaps they are. Nevertheless, we could at least take more action than we have so far to lessen the distance from the top to the bottom of each dimension of inequality, and to loosen the links among the three dimensions. Whether our nation has the policy skill and political will to find and sustain even these partial reforms, however, remains to be seen.

This article explores that set of propositions by demonstrating the cumulative nature of race, class, and power inequalities, and by examining in some detail their implications for the case of school desegregation. It then looks briefly at affirmative action in employment and at residential desegregation through public housing in order to suggest that the analysis extends beyond school desegregation. Finally, it raises some possibilities for reform that address class and power as well as racial inequalities.

I. Cumulative Inequalities of Race, Class, and Power

Consider racial discrimination, the most basic dimension of the cumulative inequalities. Survey data show clearly that whites believe and profess to be glad that blacks are no longer second-class citizens. They perceive that prejudice is declining, they reject prejudice themselves, and they think that our society is becoming more (and sufficiently) integrated. Whites are so sanguine about contemporary race relations that twice as many whites attribute the continuing disadvantaged state of blacks to personal faults as to discrimination.  

Race, Class, and Power

Many blacks, however, see the same society in an entirely different light. Blacks are not optimistic about their long-term prospects, since they perceive lingering prejudice and persisting discrimination. And they are, at least in part, correct. Whites do continue to express racial prejudice, and their enthusiasm for implementing desegregation policies is much lower than their support for general principles of integration. Wage differentials attributable to nothing but race remain high, and blacks are much more likely to become and remain unemployed than whites. Blacks continue to receive poorer education and show fewer positive results of schooling. Residential segregation is declining, but slowly.

Next, consider the effect of class differences on how much prejudice whites express and how much discrimination blacks experience. One survey, for example, found that even among strongly liberal whites, a majority were willing to desegregate professions, neighborhoods, and workplaces only with middle class blacks. Poor black schools have traditionally received fewer funds and less experienced teachers than either poor white or wealthier black schools. The difference in achievement test scores between poor black students and poor students of other races is greater than the corresponding difference among wealthy students.


7. See Lewis & Schneider, supra note 6; CBS News/ N.Y. Times Poll, supra note 6, at 3, 6, 11; Louis Harris and Associates, supra note 6, at 2-4; Schuman, supra note 6. See generally P. Converse, supra note 6.


Most important, although well-off black couples earn about as much as their white counterparts, poverty among blacks is more widespread and deeper than poverty among whites. Forty-six percent of black children are poor, and half of poor black children live below 50 percent of the poverty line. By comparison, only 17 percent of white children are poor, of whom 40 percent live below 50 percent of the poverty line. More generally, the poorest fifth of black families have a smaller share of total black income than the poorest fifth of white families have of total white income, and the wealthiest 20 percent of black families earn more of black income than the corresponding percentage of whites earn of white income. Black incomes, but not white incomes, have become slightly more unequal since World War II.

Finally, consider how inequalities of power contribute to the first two dimensions of inequality. The past few decades have brought a dramatic increase in the number of black elected officials — raising, however, the number of blacks in office from virtually nonexistent to a miniscule 1.2 percent of all elected officials. Many whites admired Jesse Jackson's personal qualities, but neither voters nor political institutions treated him as a serious contender for the Democratic nomination. Three-quarters of whites profess willingness to vote for a qualified black presidential candidate, but 16 percent still reject the idea out of hand; at least in local elections involving black candidates, some supporters give the socially desirable answer on a survey but vote differently, and "the 'undecided' vote breaks overwhelmingly for a white." Thus, "black political candidates must generally rely upon black voters to secure and retain office."

20. T. Cavanagh, supra note 6, at 30-33.
22. T. Cavanagh, supra note 6, at 64.
Race, Class, and Power

Structural reasons also suggest that the number of black elected officials will remain disappointingly low. Blacks usually attain political office either because district boundaries are redrawn to concentrate black voters, because many blacks register and vote for the first time, or because blacks are fairly wealthy compared to the whites in that district. Both simple arithmetic and the fact of greater black poverty suggest that these three mechanisms for increasing black political power have natural limits.

Even winning elections is only a partial victory. Blacks usually attain mayoral and city council positions either in heavily black cities or rural areas that are increasingly poor and demoralized, or in largely white cities and suburbs where they depend on white constituents acutely sensitive to the distribution of excessive benefits to groups other than themselves. The constraints in the two cases are different, but equally powerful. Thus black elected officials are able to do little to change the lives of their black constituents.

In short, despite clear progress in recent decades on all three fronts, the cumulation of race, class, and power inequalities continues to deny the promises of liberal democracy to some Americans. Frederick Douglass' words are more anachronistic in their rhetoric than in their meaning: "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me... To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony."


II. Lessons From School Desegregation

We can start to understand the effects of cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power by looking at the apparently contradictory evidence on the consequences of school desegregation. Many assert, with voluminous documentation, that it has failed; others produce just as many footnotes to show its success. The evidence, however, is only apparently contradictory. Read correctly, it yields consistent, theoretically sensible, and broadly illuminating results.

In brief, school desegregation succeeds when it is done well and fails when it is done poorly. Stated thus baldly, the new perspective hardly seems novel. But it is a startlingly uncommon view and its ramifications are surprisingly powerful.28

Why seek to desegregate schools, given the extraordinary opposition to "forced busing"?29 Because successful school desegregation benefits virtually all students. Successful desegregation programs raise academic achievement of low-scoring (mainly black) students without harming high-scoring (mainly white) students. They ease race relations and reduce racial stereotyping by both races, as well as enhance community morale, increase parents' involvement in the schools, and minimize or even reverse white flight. The jolt of desegregation enables schools to make structural and pedagogical changes previously stalled for political, bureaucratic, or other reasons. It brings new money, equipment, tutors, and other resources into the schools. In the long run, successful desegregation improves black students' job and college opportunities, increases blacks' likelihood of success in integrated environments, and teaches whites that they share both responsibility for and benefits of racial interaction.

Abstracting from these particular results, a successful school desegregation plan begins to break down the cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power. It begins, that is, to carry out the promises of liberal democracy for all. By bringing blacks and whites into mutually respectful contact and by treating all students in similar ways,

28. See J. Hochschild, supra note 4 at 46-91, 177-190.
29. My conclusions do not grow out of an examination of particular plans in identifiable school districts. Rather they emerge from an evaluation of policy variables common to many cases. Thus, across many districts I have examined the academic and social consequences of the different ages at which children are desegregated, and then the consequences of different tracking systems within schools, and then the consequences of... And so on. This mode of analysis produces a composite picture of excellent and terrible desegregation plans, against which particular plans of identifiable districts can be measured. In short, policy actions, not place names, are the units of analysis.
Race, Class, and Power

good plans exchange racism for individualism. By channeling resources to poor schools and broadening the horizons of poor students, successful plans equalize opportunities and diminish class barriers. By increasing black influence in white society and involving parents in the schools, good plans enhance political equality and reduce power disparities. Above all, successfully desegregated schools take rights seriously, and confront head-on the normative conflict between liberal democracy for some and liberal democracy for all.

Why, then, does mandatory desegregation have such a bad reputation? Because poorly handled plans harm most students as much as they help them. The worst plans do nothing for achievement and resegregate within school buildings through tracking, special education placement, and discriminatory discipline. Flawed desegregation increases both races' hostility, exacerbates white flight, and demotes black teachers and administrators. It undercuts neighborhood schools, which both races prefer, arbitrarily burdens some citizens (mostly blacks and poor whites), and gives poor whites more reason to nurse racial and class hostilities. Severely flawed plans sometimes humiliate blacks and reinforce whites' sense of superiority, and they destroy one of the few black power bases — black schools — without providing any replacement.

Thus, unsuccessful desegregation plans reinforce cumulative inequalities and move the United States further from liberal democracy for all. By strengthening racial stereotypes and discrimination, flawed plans inhibit individualism. By maintaining the connections between parents' economic advantage and children's educational and further economic advantage, flawed plans undermine equal opportunity. By promoting dominance by white elites and undermining poor white and black communities, flawed plans flout popular sovereignty and political equality. They give an unsavory reputation to the whole effort to extend the grant of rights, and they increase (presumptively illegitimate) governmental interference without providing compensating benefits. In short, badly handled desegregation plans undermine the practice of liberal democracy for some and do nothing to extend it to all.

We now know, fortunately, more than what desegregation can do; we also have guidelines for how to do it well. Research shows good results when, in the process of physical desegregation:

- all grades, especially the youngest children, are desegregated quickly after the plan is mandated;
• the plan includes all of a district, and preferably a metropolitan region;
• the plan mixes socioeconomic strata as well as races;
• the schools make every possible effort to include well-off and powerful whites as well as poor and powerless blacks and whites, so long as they do not "give away the farm";
• school officials, local politicians, and community leaders seriously try to implement the plan well, even if they dislike it;
• school faculty and staff are desegregated;
• the schools receive extra resources from public and private sources; and
• parents and other community members play important, not just symbolic, roles in implementing the plan.

Changes in the content of education are just as important as changes in the racial composition of schools and classrooms. Schools should:

• limit tracking, special education, and "pull-outs" to those subjects and students who really require separate help;
• increase cooperative group work within and between classrooms;
• enhance extracurricular activities and nonacademic subjects, and ensure that they are desegregated;
• design and enforce clear and fair disciplinary codes after rigorously eliminating all violence and threat of violence;
• train teachers to avoid racially-based expectations;
• change the school's identity through (preferably participatory) invention of new slogans and other symbols;
• explicitly address racial differences and tensions, sometimes but not only through routinized discussion forums; and
• fully incorporate multiethnic educational programs into all students' curricula.

Again abstracting from the particulars, we see that school desegregation succeeds in breaking down cumulative inequalities if the desegregation program cuts across racial, class, and power lines. In one sense, this finding is tautologous: school desegregation reduces cumulative inequalities if it reduces cumulative inequalities. A more profound truth lurks here, though. To achieve the result of breaking down cumulative inequalities, a desegregation policy must use a process that treats blacks and whites, rich and poor, influential and powerless, alike.

Alternatively and more strongly, it must use a process that grants resources or access to resources to poor and powerless blacks and
whites at the expense of wealthy and powerful whites. Almost all features of a good desegregation plan directly attack racial stereotypes and discrimination, require the wealthy to share their resources and privileges, and give more power to the heretofore powerless. As participatory democrats used to say, only the right action now will yield the right outcome later.

In parallel fashion, school desegregation generates few benefits and many harms for both races when it maintains cumulative inequalities. More precisely, it fails when: 
- the plan transports only a few children (generally black), desegregates only a few grades, and/or appears to be temporary and easily changed;
- the plan pairs contiguous poor black and white neighborhoods;
- the middle class of both races easily evades the program, or middle class schools and students receive all the new resources and incentives;
- the plan simply creates a few magnet schools without improving the remaining schools (unless the district is very small and mainly white);
- teaching, counseling, extracurricular, and disciplinary patterns do not change to accommodate the new children;
- political leaders and educators do not seriously try to cajole their constituency and to implement changes; and
- within the school system, power remains in the hands of the (generally white) "old guard".

One can anticipate the moral of this story by now: plans that retain old racial, economic, and political structures yield desegregation programs that reinforce discrimination, unequal opportunity, and political inequality. The logic here is exactly symmetrical to the logic of good desegregation plans. Inequality-reinforcing policies generate inequality-reinforcing results.

Given that we now know how to desegregate schools, it is at first glance surprising that horror stories predominate over success stories. The explanation, however, is implicit in the analysis. Major reforms are resisted because they disrupt existing structures and previously settled normative choices. Many citizens, even those

---

30. Two additional reasons for the scarcity of successful desegregation plans are important but tangential to my theoretical concern here. First, only recently have researchers examined desegregation success and failure by aggregating studies of many policy actions across many districts. This method has made the literature on school desegregation dramatically more useful; five years ago, most of the findings which I sum-
whose children might benefit, accept the status quo or fear change. Similarly, many liberal democratic values would have to be reformu-
lated or weighted differently for desegregation to work as it should.

Consider the first obstacle to successful desegregation. Many edu-
icators stand to lose in a desegregation plan that in the long run
benefits most students. Teachers must change pedagogical styles,
clientele, and even workplaces. Administrators must make room for
new faces and take on new responsibilities, often imposed by an ex-
ternal and arguably illegitimate authority such as a court or federal
agency. School board members and political officials must stand for
reelection against newly popular anti-busing candidates. Rich
schools must yield resources to poor schools and must divert atten-
tion from successful (usually white and middle class) to unsuccessful
(often black and poor) students. In short, settled patterns of inter-
action, reflecting assumed relations of economic, social, and polit-
ical hierarchy, must change. All of these “penalties” are borne even
by educators who are not personally prejudiced and who endorse
integration. And, of course, racism may well exist, particularly
among those who have recently been found guilty of de jure
segregation.

White parents oppose even more than educators many of the very
changes yielding the best results for both races. Desegregating the
youngest students, desegregating quickly, transporting children
across city-suburban school district lines, transporting whites as well
as blacks, minimizing tracking, encouraging cooperative work across
ability groups, moving teachers and administrators, granting power-
ful positions to nonwhites, withholding resources and many of the
best staffers from magnet schools for the gifted and talented, di-
recting more tax dollars to the poorest students, schools and dis-
tricts, changing the traditional image of formerly-white schools, and

---

These findings are not at all self-evident, and educators could certainly not have been
expected to stumble upon all the right methods for designing and implementing their
plans. Nor could they have sustained unpopular methods without powerful justifica-
tions, which systematic evidence of success provides. School desegregation provides
excellent evidence for the claim that given enough time, researchers, and resources,
social science can make sense of a very messy and diffuse problem.

Desegregation plans also fail because of typical problems with policy innovation and
implementation. Schools, after all, are large, complex bureaucracies with features that
make institutional change difficult to begin and more difficult to maintain and control.
These features include long histories, a loose coupling between top and bottom, budget
constraints, street-level bureaucrats, and political sensitivities. Add the fact that school
systems traditionally have not wanted to desegregate and still seek to minimize interven-
tion by outsiders, and the question becomes more aptly, “Why do schools make any
reforms?” rather than “Why don’t schools make enough reforms?”
teaching white students black perspectives as much as vice versa — all of these changes are anathema to many white parents, yet all are needed for desegregation to benefit children of both races. The argument is becoming repetitive: necessary changes disrupt old social, economic, and political practices which have, on average, benefitted whites more than blacks. We should not be surprised that whites are reluctant to give them up.

In short, educators and white parents object to features of school desegregation that challenge racial views and practices, change the power structure in schools, or disrupt the normal rewards of economic standing. Only one means can produce desegregation success despite such opposition: policymakers must largely ignore citizens' and implementors' preferences in designing and implementing plans. This unfortunate conclusion follows directly and logically from the points just made. If most school officials and parents do not choose to disrupt their own lives, if "street-level" proponents of change are relatively few and powerless, and if successful desegregation is to occur, then it must be imposed from above.

For once, evidence follows logic. Not all desegregation plans ordered by courts or the Office for Civil Rights have succeeded, but almost all successful plans have been mandated by unelected officials. Federal courts and bureaucrats have taken on the most difficult...
cult cases (southern districts first, northern cities later), imposed the most sweeping changes in school practices (such as a new reading program in Detroit), transferred the most resources to poor schools and poor districts (as in Detroit and St. Louis), and worked hardest to equalize the burdens of busing across races and classes (as in St. Louis and Charlotte, North Carolina).

The outcomes of authoritatively ordered plans are as clearly superior as the processes. Only unelected officials have ordered metropolitan-wide plans that come out best on all measures of desegregation success. Plans ordered by courts and agencies have improved race relations (for example, in Charlotte and Louisville), increased academic achievement of black students (as in Charlotte and Boston), minimized second-generation discrimination (as in Cleveland), and given powerful positions to blacks (as in Cleveland and Boston).

The unsettling finding that successful desegregation must largely ignore citizens' views challenges not only preferred political practices but also cherished norms. This point recalls the second and more profoundly disturbing obstacle to desegregation success. To grant all citizens liberal democracy's promise of the right freely to live as one wishes, school desegregation must reformulate many liberal democratic norms or reorder their usual priorities.

Successful school desegregation violates the normal understanding of property rights by redistributing property tax receipts, by requiring rich as well as poor to participate, and by requiring even those who have moved to the suburbs, arguably to escape this whole situation, to participate. For the same reasons, it violates canons of local autonomy and self-governance. Good plans challenge individualism and meritocracy for teachers and staff by differentially rewarding ascriptive traits, and for students by questioning ability grouping, special programs for the gifted and talented, and comparative evaluations. Successful desegregation questions the right of free association by mandating desegregated social and extracurricular activities. It violates the democratic norm of popular sovereignty by calling for authoritative imposition of unpopular, even hated, new policies. To ensure that all citizens may partake of liberal democratic values, school desegregation must violate some citizens' un-

---

ever, have unusual features or can be fit into my framework. Several are atypically liberal college towns, such as Berkeley, California or Princeton, New Jersey. Others have either very few black students, or are threatened by an imminent law suit, or both, such as Seattle, Washington.
Race, Class, and Power

derstanding and exercise of those values. Little wonder that it does not often do so, and never fully does so.

Examining the elements of successful school desegregation shows the baneful effects of cumulative inequalities, and focuses our attention on the dangers for liberal democracy of those inequalities. Addressing only problems of race — merely busing to achieve racial balance across schools — fails because it ignores the consequences of poverty and powerlessness for both blacks and whites. But addressing all three dimensions at once — redistributing educational resources and power along with children — threatens long-standing social, economic, and political hierarchies. The appropriately wide view also threatens our norms in the name of extending those norms, a politically and normatively difficult position at best. My prognosis for success in school desegregation is poor.

III. Analogies With Affirmative Action and Public Housing

Is school desegregation unique? Has our nation, by some extraordinary turn of legal and historical bad luck, spent so much energy on the single most intractable policy for granting the promises of liberal democracy to all citizens? I would be glad to answer "yes"; that answer would imply that the United States has spent thirty years barking up the wrong tree, but it would also imply the existence of other trees in the forest which could yield a more satisfying harvest. Unfortunately, school desegregation is not unique. Other desegregation policies follow the same empirical pattern and have the same normative logic.

Consider, for example, affirmative action in employment. It usually suffers from the same single-minded focus on race as most school desegregation plans. Too often affirmative action policies simply give an extra boost to blacks who have the resources to succeed on their own. Elite colleges and professional schools admit the children of black doctors and politicians; employers hire black graduates of elite colleges and professional schools. Thus well-off

34. The director of financial aid at Yale University, for example, recently said, "[o]ur kinds of schools are not gambling as much on lower-income and lower-ability students. As a result, we are ending up with a somewhat higher socioeconomic profile. Probably a lot of schools were more inclined to make exceptions to normal standards of admissions for low-income minority students when they first adopted affirmative action programs in the late 1960's and early 1970's." See Nix, Inner City, Elite Campus: How 2 Worlds Jar, N.Y. Times, Jan. 4, 1986, at 1, col. 2.
blacks become better off, and poor and powerless blacks remain at the bottom of the heap alongside poor and powerless whites.\textsuperscript{35}

The point is \textit{not} that well-off and well-connected blacks do not face discrimination; they do. But they have more weapons to combat it than poor and powerless blacks have, while would-be black workers who most need a boost are most often passed over by employers.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, I am not arguing for abolition of even badly targeted affirmative action programs. Discrimination persists, and the handicapping effects of previous discrimination may certainly endure. So even this limited form of redress probably does more good than harm.\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, our single-minded focus on race, to the exclusion of serious inequities of class and power, generates a policy that does little to benefit those blacks who need it most and does a lot to anger those whites who also suffer from economic and political inequity.

Because the employment problem is more than racial, any effective solution to it must range wider than most affirmative action pro-

\textsuperscript{35} Alternatively, working class and lower-middle class blacks receive preference for jobs in police departments and social agencies. This practice gives blacks a badly-needed entry into the workforce, but it denies that entry to an equally needy white who probably has not directly participated in, or indirectly gained much from, centuries of racial discrimination. I find this level of affirmative action much more normatively acceptable than the elite level, but it is at least as politically controversial.

Here too, the interaction of race, class, and power can be blamed for much of the frustration, since people who are equally needy and powerless spend their energies on antagonism toward the other race rather than unifying against the wealthy and powerful, or comforting each other over the vagaries of fate, or otherwise recognizing that their similarities outweigh their differences. \textit{See} J. REIDER, \textit{supra} note 2, at 95-131 for a sensitive discussion of white working class sentiments about affirmative action.

\textsuperscript{36} A more argumentative version of this point would claim that rich and powerful blacks need less help than poor and powerless whites. According to this view, affirmative action policy should address class and power disparities more than (or even instead of) racial ones. I do not make this claim for two reasons. First, I am unsure empirically whether any given poor white is worse off than any given rich black, and I know no way to determine the validity of the point. Second, to claim that class or power disparities are worse than racial ones is to violate the basic premise of this article — that the \textit{combination} of inequities is the critical problem, so it does not matter which of the three independently is more serious than the other two.

\textsuperscript{37} I say “probably” here because of two powerful arguments against affirmative action. If white opposition to it is (or becomes) strong enough, affirmative action policies could actually exacerbate and spread the racism that they are intended to ameliorate. This argument is not at all compelling morally or legally, but it is pragmatically. Furthermore, if blacks themselves come to believe that affirmative action policies demonstrate or create the fact of black inferiority, then such policies may do more harm than good. For thoughtful critiques of affirmative action, see Howard & Hammond, \textit{Rumors of Inferiority, The New Republic}, Sept. 9, 1885, at 17-21; Murray, \textit{Affirmative Racism, The New Republic}, Dec. 31, 1984, at 18-23; Address by Glenn Loury, \textit{The Crisis in Black America} (National Press Club, Washington, D.C.) (Dec. 17, 1985); and Jencks, \textit{supra} note 5; Wilson, \textit{Race-Specific Policies and the Truly Disadvantaged, 2 Yale L. \\& Pol'y Rev. 272} (1984).
grams do. Formally opening employment possibilities to all, analogous to abolishing *de jure* school segregation, is necessary but insufficient to end racial disparities in employment and promotion. Voluntary measures consisting of exhortation and good intentions yield about as much change as “free choice” policies for school assignments. The next step, analogous to redrawing school boundaries and mandating transportation to correct racial imbalance, is setting requirements for hiring and promoting blacks. Such a “quota” system is about as popular and successful as “forced busing.” And most important for my purposes, the two policies are unpopular and unsuccessful for similar reasons.

Both policies are unpopular because they downplay some liberal democratic values in favor of others. Quotas violate popular sovereignty, defined here as whites’ preferences about where and how they will work and who they will hire and promote. Quotas imposed by courts or agencies challenge the liberal belief in minimal government intervention in private economic decisions. They gainsay individualism and equal opportunity for some, since ascriptive criteria are used to deny a presumably innocent white a job or promotion he (seldom she) might have merited by skill or seniority. Finally, quota systems violate liberal property rights by requiring employers to take actions they otherwise would not take.

Busing and quotas are typically unsuccessful as well as unpopular because, as described above, they both produce perverse consequences. Here the analogy between affirmative action and school desegregation becomes complicated because class and power have opposite effects in the two cases. In school busing, the poor and powerless of both races are disproportionately expected to participate; in affirmative action, well-off and powerful blacks are disproportionately permitted to participate. Thus busing makes the badly-off worse off, whereas affirmative action makes the well-off better off. In both cases, however, inequalities accumulate because both policies take into account only one facet of a multi-faceted structure.

The solutions to the problems of strict affirmative action and mandatory school desegregation are, once again, analogous. Job desegregation must tackle inequalities of race, class, and power simultaneously in order to extend the promises of liberal democracy to all. At a minimum, affirmative action policies should target poor

---

38. *See, e.g.*, Fullinwider, *The AT&T Case and Affirmative Action*, 177-179 in *ETHICS AND POLITICS* (A. Gutman & D. Thompson eds. 1984). This case is interesting because, among other reasons, it involved affirmative hiring of men for jobs traditionally held by women.
and powerless blacks. An intermediate step would ensure that the new employees receive positions of real power and substantial remuneration. At a maximum, Americans should change their social structure enough for affirmative action to be no longer necessary.

If blacks received as good an education as whites, grew up with as many routes out of their childhood world, had as many role models and job contacts, were as mobile or had as many job opportunities near their homes, had as many incentives and as much guidance to develop middle class work habits, and were not seen by (mostly white) employers as potential troublemakers or detractions to clients, then blacks’ chances for success through employment and promotion would equal whites’. For those things to happen, though, blacks must have the same social, economic, and political status as whites. That will not happen if currently wealthy and powerful beneficiaries of the status quo, as well as people who simply fear change, have anything to say about the matter. We have arrived by a different road at the same destination we reached through school desegregation.

Consider as a final analogy to school desegregation the issue of residential integration. Open housing laws, like open employment policies and the abolition of de jure school segregation, are necessary but insufficient. Urging white communities to seek (especially low-income) black neighbors is, as with exhortation about schools and jobs, praiseworthy but largely ineffective. Public housing for poor blacks in middle class white suburbs is just as unpopular and unsuccessful as forced busing or hiring quotas. It, too, runs counter to whites’ preferences, arguably violates whites’ property rights, involves considerable governmental intervention in private lives, and ignores the ways that class and power combine with race to shape people’s behaviors.

For a policy of mandated housing integration to succeed (that is, for the new neighbors to accept each other psychologically and socially, and for the neighborhood to have enough blacks to avoid tokenism but not so many that whites flee), blacks must have the same economic and political means and perhaps the same social mores as their white neighbors. But, in general, they do not; we return to the basic problem of cumulative inequalities. Policies to promote housing integration cannot succeed unless they address the class and power dimensions of residential segregation by race.

This brief treatment of affirmative action and public housing is intended only to suggest that the underlying obstacles to successful
Race, Class, and Power

school desegregation are not unique to schools. Other race policies have the same structure. Because inequalities of race, class, and power cumulate, policies that address only racial discrimination are too weak to succeed, and policies strong enough to address all three dimensions are too unpopular to be sustained long enough. Their unpopularity is not difficult to explain: policies powerful enough to overcome cumulative inequalities and grant liberal democratic rights to all must violate or redefine the liberal democratic rights of some.

IV. Remedies

The way out of this tangle of unfortunate circumstances and unfulfilled promises is not obvious. The problem of cumulative inequalities in a liberal democracy may finally be insoluble. Even if solutions are not attainable, however, improvements are certainly possible. After all, the United States has already significantly lessened and loosened the cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power; it can do so further. Existential despair is no excuse for inaction.

Some evidence suggests grounds for encouragement. Once people experience desegregation, their opposition declines considerably. This finding is as surprising as it is consistent. The same survey respondents who reject "forced busing" as an abstract possibility are very satisfied with it after their children have been bused.39 As high school desegregation spread in the 1970s, more college freshmen endorsed busing, with support rising from just over one-third in 1976 to over one-half in 1985.40 Cities, universities, and corporations that have implemented affirmative action plans now resist efforts by the federal government to dismantle their plans.41

40. COOPERATIVE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAMS, AM. COUNCIL ON EDUC., THE AMERICAN FRESHMAN: NATIONAL NORMS 55 (A. Astin, M. King & G. Richardson, eds. 1976); Id. at 56 (1983); Id. at 58 (1984); Id. at 59 (1985) For additional evidence, see J. HOCHSCHILD, supra note 4, at 179-187 and sources cited therein.
It is hard to know how to interpret these results. They may simply indicate that individuals and organizations always prefer the status quo to change, whether because they fear the unknown or because change is inefficient and disruptive. Alternatively, the results may reflect self-selection bias; individuals and organizations willing to undergo busing and quotas may be those who endorsed or at least accepted mandated integration initially. A third interpretation is that school desegregation and affirmative action simply produced less change than people anticipated and people have learned to accommodate token reforms.

However, the best interpretation may be more hopeful. Once the promises of liberal democracy are extended to previously excluded blacks, whites may discover that their fears were not realized and their hopes were. Whites may learn that feeling racially superior is unnecessary for self-esteem, that black leaders can act in the interest of both races, that economic gains for some do not necessarily mean economic losses for others, and that getting along with blacks is more productive and more fun than hating them. They may learn, in short, that the problem of cumulative inequalities in a liberal democracy is a problem of transition costs rather than zero-sum games.

If the hopeful interpretation of these surprising data is correct, the prognosis for racial equality in America is not as gloomy as this article has implied so far. Apparently some desegregation plans, though deeply flawed, have proven better than none. After all, racial differentiation is a problem worth attacking, even if the real problem is the combination of race, class, and power. Where plans are in place and seem to be working, or where blacks and whites are so distant or resources so scarce that racial issues are all they can handle at the moment, or, above all, where the plan makes a serious effort to combat economic and political inequalities as well as racial ones, then policymakers should continue to pursue school desegregation and affirmative action (and perhaps integrated public housing, although we lack data on its effects). I do not, in short, propose that we should abandon all previous efforts to combat discrimination. I am pessimistic about success in most such efforts, but both evidence and the natural urge to act in the face of a problem recommend doing something over doing nothing.

42. For evidence on long-term benefits for blacks who attend desegregated schools, see, e.g., J. Hochschild, supra note 4, at 178-79 and sources cited therein; Braddock, Crain, & McPartland, A Long-Term View of School Desegregation: Some Recent Studies of Graduates as Adults, 66 Phi Delta Kappan 259 (1984).
Race, Class, and Power

However, the analysis above suggests that we should do more than simply improve current programs. It points to two prescriptions which seem more useful for the 1980s than most conventional desegregation plans. Both stem from the earlier observation that racism explains both too much and too little in seeking to understand opposition to desegregation policies. By analogy, racial integration is both too strong and too weak a demand to solve America’s problem of race.

The first, rather paradoxical, claim—that racial integration is too strong a demand to solve the problems of racial separation—grows out of the first lesson of policymaking. We always face tradeoffs; we can seldom pursue all good things at once. Therefore civil rights activists should devote their attention to the worst problems or the problems most amenable to intervention. In my view, these two criteria converge in today’s political climate on a prescription to de-emphasize race and concentrate on class and power.43

More precisely, in some circumstances civil rights advocates should withdraw from aggressive attempts to help blacks join white society. The “worst problems” criterion points to the fact that too many blacks face abysmal schooling, lack of any chance to earn a living, and entrapment in ghettos that drag their children into further poverty and impotence. For them, integration with whites is perhaps desirable but a luxury that comes well down the list of urgent needs. The “greatest chance for success” criterion points the same way. In many central city school systems, meaningful desegregation is arithmetically impossible.44 In some districts, white hostility, opposition from political leaders, black ambivalence, and a paucity of resources combine to make any further meaningful desegregation extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Under these conditions, policymakers should downplay desegregation per se and instead directly attack the effects of class and power inequities. Communities should concentrate on improving school quality regardless of racial composition, creating good jobs even in racially separate firms, and extending residential options even into black suburban communities.

43. Twenty-five years ago I probably would have given different advice, since the most pressing problem then was clearly de jure racial segregation. At present, however, the problem of racial discrimination per se is much less severe than the problems of racially-related inequities of class and power.

Thus political leaders should provide minority schools more than additional funding. Those schools need structural changes to train and retain good staff and bureaucratic maneuvering room to turn ineffective black schools into educationally excellent ones. Policy-makers should ensure that minority families receive mortgages and perhaps mortgage subsidies, are informed about available houses in hospitable communities, and are otherwise helped to move into safe, clean, self-sustaining black neighborhoods. Governments and private actors should grant black businesses the loans and technical aid needed to thrive and create new jobs, and should give potential workers information about and training for those jobs.

My point here is ideological as much as programmatic. Civil rights advocates should, in some instances, think of high-quality, black-dominated schools, firms, and neighborhoods as attractive alternatives to mandated integration rather than merely as palliatives or as a surrender to white resistance. After all, student reassignment by itself may cause more harm than good, whereas high quality isolated education, though it lacks important virtues, can begin to break the hold of poverty and powerlessness on black children. A poorly handled affirmative action program may increase whites’ prejudice without improving blacks’ economic chances; conversely, jobs in black-owned businesses may not advance racial integration but can make big inroads into poverty and powerlessness. In parallel fashion, mandated neighborhood integration may simply isolate new entrants and destroy any sense of community; putting public housing in black suburbs at least gives poor blacks who become residents a more hospitable environment and increased control over their own lives.

Nothing in this analysis implies that class and power inequities are much more tractable than discrimination has proven to be. Poor black cities and poor black parents will not easily find the resources to improve schools, create jobs, and arrest the sickening dissolution of family and community strength about which we have recently heard so much. Nevertheless, cumulative inequalities may best be attacked in the 1980’s by deemphasizing integration and strengthening demands for economic and political change within black com-

45. Many black civil rights leaders such as Derrick Bell and organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Inc. now espouse this position. I do not present it as anything new, rather, my point is that what these actors promote for reasons of political expediency and moral outrage also makes sense from the perspective of democratic theory and structural analysis. See generally D. Bell, supra note 32; Toobin, After Integration, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Dec. 30, 1985, at 22, 23.
Race, Class, and Power

communities. More pragmatically, this prescription takes full advantage of the increasing number of black mayors. They may have a better chance to wrest needed resources from the wealthier white society if they use those resources to help black schools, firms, and neighborhoods than if they use them to "encroach" further on the lives of white constituents.

My other prescription for ameliorating cumulative inequalities suggests that the demand for racial integration is sometimes too weak because it narrows the policy agenda too much. Instead of focusing on divisive racial issues, blacks and whites should unite around a broad array of policy demands to lessen class and power inequalities for both races.46

For example, the problem of unemployment crosses racial lines. Regardless of race, unemployed or discouraged workers and their families, jobless teens, and female heads of households would all benefit from policies to increase the number, quality, and remuneration of jobs. Similarly, blacks and whites have mutual interests in developing local communities that are safe, pleasant, and responsive to families' needs. Infant care and after-school care, crime control, renovation of deteriorating buildings and public spaces — these issues could unite racially distinct neighborhoods as policies to integrate neighborhoods seldom can. Even school crises can bring black and white working class parents together in an alliance against mediocre education and apparently indifferent administrators. The black plaintiff in the St. Louis school desegregation case and the white founder of the anti-busing group became close friends once they discovered their shared desire for better schools; they and their respective followers began to sit together in court, disconcerting lawyers and school personnel alike.47

Like the former, this prescription is hardly new, as it echoes the old socialist dream of overcoming racial differences by uniting workers around common class interests. Old ideas are often the best. Alliances might replace divisions if reformers sought to improve schools, create jobs, and enhance neighborhoods rather than seeking to change their membership.

This prescription is no more a panacea than the first one. After all, the old socialist dream was never realized. No one can guaran-

---

46. My thanks to Theda Skocpol for starting my thinking along these lines and for examples of specific policies.
47. The convoluted history of this litigation is recounted in Liddell v. Missouri, 781 F.2d 1294 (8th Cir. 1984) (en banc), cert. denied, 105 S. Ct. 82 (1984); Liddell v. Board of Educ., 758 F.2d 290 (8th Cir. 1985).
tee that blacks will not once again end up on the bottom of the heap, or that new resources and powers will be forthcoming for the poor and impotent of any race. Once again, to ask for a panacea is to ask for too much; it makes the temptation to give up in despair too great. Instead, recognizing the problem as one of cumulative inequalities rather than race per se gives us a framework in which to broaden the agenda for reform and to escape the zero-sum dynamics of racism.

Thus the very breadth of the problem of cumulative inequalities of race, class, and power may be grounds for hope as well as for despair. Because the problem has so many dimensions, it may be possible to address some directly and thereby approach others indirectly. The ideal policy, as the history of school desegregation shows, attacks all three dimensions of inequality at once. My primary prescription grows out of that history: more change not only is better than less but also corrects some of the harms that less change creates. But seldom are prescriptions for ideal policies put into practice. If the primary prescription is unattainable, three others follow from this analysis.

First, in some circumstances partial desegregation is better than none. No general rule can specify all such cases, but surely a flawed reform is sometimes still a worthwhile reform. Second, in some circumstances abandoning desegregation in favor of improving the economic and political position of isolated blacks is the best available choice. Third, in some circumstances ignoring desegregation in favor of unifying poor and powerless blacks and whites around common interests is the most fruitful strategy.

All three prescriptions lack the virtues of the first, ideal, one. The flaws of conventional desegregation are serious; policies to benefit blacks will not promote desegregation at least in the short run, and policies to help the working poor will not help all blacks. On balance, at this point in our history and with some critical exceptions, the two indirect approaches to racial equality seem preferable to the flawed direct one if that is the array of available choices. Perhaps focusing less on race and more on class and power will, in the long run, better enable all Americans to live as well as some Americans now do.