

## RECLAIMING INTEGRATION

*By Eric Foner and Randall Kennedy*

Integration, the ideal that once inspired an interracial mass movement to dream of a better America, has lately fallen into disuse or disfavor. Books continue to appear with the word in their titles, but most seem resigned to integration's failure, treating it as an ongoing "ordeal" or seeking to allocate blame for the nation's departure from integrationist principles. Many leftists feel that as a political goal, integration fails to address deeply rooted economic inequalities. Many African-Americans criticize it for implying the dismantling of a distinctive black culture and identity. Those who still claim to favor the idea of integration often reduce it to a matter of "color-blind" laws and social practices.

This special series of feature articles in *The Nation* hopes to rekindle critical discussion of integration by examining whether it remains, thirty years after the end of the civil rights era, a desirable goal and a viable political strategy. The seven essays that follow do not claim to cover every aspect of the subject, or to represent all points of view within today's political spectrum. We conceive of this as a discussion within *The Nation's* extended family, focused on questions essential to a modern assessment of integration: In what historical context did the idea of integration emerge, what do its present status and future prospects appear to be, what relevance does it have to contemporary black politics and how ought liberals and the left to regard integration today?

Although racial discourse in America has increasingly moved away from the bipolar categories of black and white, these essays address the experience of African-Americans, not only because the idea of integration has historically been associated with them but because the black condition has always been a unique litmus test of how fully American society lives up to its professed creed of equal rights and opportunities for all.

As the essays make clear, there is no single definition or understanding of integration. Some of the writers see integration as a worthy goal in itself; to others, it is at most a means toward other ends, such as racial justice or black empowerment. Other essays take different positions. But all agree that the time has come for a fresh consideration of integration, as a political program, moral ideal and social agenda.

Any assessment of integration must acknowledge both the enormous changes in race relations of the past thirty years, and how much remains to be accomplished to fulfill the goals of the civil rights struggle. Nearly one hundred years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois identified the "color line" as the main problem confronting the new century. Today, as Daryl Scott observes, the color line is a "shambles." Thanks both to the movement itself and to a generation of affirmative action policies in public and private institutions, realms of American life from sports to politics, from corporate boardrooms to university classrooms, have achieved an unprecedented racial diversity. The ranks of the black middle class have expanded enormously and African-Americans occupy positions of authority inconceivable only a few decades ago.

Why, then, do so many Americans feel that integration has failed? Partly because the gap between black and white in employment, income and family wealth remains intractable. Our prisons overflow with black inmates, and much of the black population (including 40 percent of all black children) remains mired in poverty. As Douglas Massey and Mary Fischer explain, one reason black poverty is so acute in certain geographical areas is that housing patterns remain nearly as segregated as ever--the product of a long history of discriminatory policies by government, real estate developers, insurance companies and banks, and of millions of individual choices by white homeowners. This "hypersegregation" affects black Americans alone, and helps account for the fact that nearly a half-century after *Brown v. Board of Education*, large numbers of black and white children attend school in racial isolation.

Is integration an adequate response to these social realities? To answer this question, one must recall, as Judith Stein points out, that while the struggle for racial justice in America is very old, the language of integration is a relatively recent innovation. The two men widely considered the most prominent spokesmen for the integrationist strand in black thought--Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois--rarely if ever used the word. When the modern civil rights movement was born during and immediately after World War II, its watchword was "Negro rights," and its central goal was not simply to dismantle segregation but to improve the lives of black Americans.

Integration did not become the rallying cry of the movement for racial justice until the fifties and sixties. The demand for integration proved a potent weapon for mobilizing Americans of all races to break down the walls of legalized segregation. But it tended to encourage a view of race relations as a matter of interpersonal dynamics, and to identify the main problem facing black Americans as segregation--often understood as an abstraction--rather than emphasizing concrete deprivations such as inadequate income, jobs, housing and education.

As with other keywords of our political language, such as freedom and independence, the definition of integration often hinges on the understanding of its opposite, segregation. If one sees this as a system of classifying and separating people by race, it is easy to equate color-blindness with integration and racial justice. Once one realizes that segregation was only one part of a complex system of white supremacy--in which each element, including political disfranchisement, economic disempowerment and social inequality, reinforced the others--then the demand for integration implies a broader program for a far-reaching transformation of American society.

Indeed, in the heyday of the civil rights movement, many proponents of integration persistently drew attention to the inequalities in employment, education and housing left intact after the dismantling of legal segregation, and proposed a variety of strategies, some color-blind, some race-based, to attack them. Martin Luther King Jr. called for a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" to mobilize the nation's resources to abolish the scourge of economic deprivation, and for what would come to be called affirmative action ("special treatment" for blacks, he called it) to address the unique plight of the

black poor. He did not see one as a substitute for the other or either as violating the goal of integration. In fact, by the mid-sixties, addressing economic deprivation in American society had become central to King's understanding of integration.

We do not believe that the left should cede the language of integration to conservatives or to those who understand race relations as a psychodrama rather than a system of unequal access to economic resources and political power. Three years ago, an editorial in this magazine [see Foner, "The Great Divide," October 30, 1995] reaffirmed the radical nature of integration, on the premise that ending the deep racial inequalities that afflict our society and, on a more personal level, fostering brotherly and sisterly relations among all races can only happen in a society of genuine equality. The need remains as great as ever for the left to formulate a political program, including but not limited to integration, to continue in the post-civil rights era the long struggle for racial justice. \*

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