

# COMMONWEAL

## THE RESEGREGATION OF AMERICA

PROMISE & THE UNDERCLASS

Jim Sleeper on 'The Truly Disadvantaged' & 'Plural but Equal'

**F**or lots of compelling historical and ideological reasons, most of American society — our popular culture, formal government, electoral politics, and media — have never been very straightforward on the subject of social class.

Our popular and official understanding has come down to something like this: there may be dramatic, even intolerable disparities of income and opportunity in America, but there is also a saving grace: the sheer dynamism and fluidity of our market economy, democratic polity, and open culture insure that no specific individual or group need be trapped at the bottom of the social scale. Low birth and bad luck are formidable obstacles, but less decisive in America than anywhere else. Any family may go "from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves" in three or four generations as fortunes are won, lost, and won again. Individual capacity and our protean economy reinforce each other, creating a kind of permanent revolution; each generation of Americans, from the lowliest immigrants to scions of great wealth, must be sent out onto its playing fields and trained for its rigors. No matter which players win or lose, society as a whole reaps the rewards of their strivings.

But the permanent revolution has had a permanent exception — blacks, who were written as such right into the Constitution by its framers. It isn't surprising that the Communists of the 1930s and forties, anxious to discredit this American fantasy of a society without permanent classes and eager to sow a different sort of revolution whose goal was classlessness itself, championed (and, to their credit, practiced) racial integration. For the Communists, of course, weaving the black thread right into the center of the social fabric was really a way to unravel the fabric itself, exposing its contradictions and lies: this society was not, and under capitalism could not be, a fount of endless opportunity; it had to marginalize some portion of its population, black or otherwise; it had to violate its own stated creed. With blacks visible

and insistent, Americans wouldn't be able to delude themselves about that any longer.

Liberals welcomed the challenge, confident that the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth could offer opportunity to all. All that was needed was some collective action to lift the bottom of the social scale in order to facilitate the old game of opportunity on terms more open and fair than before. Indeed, the New-Deal, wartime, and Cold-War economies outflanked the radical left for more than forty years.

But a catch in the liberal dispensation has caught up with it: the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth has become an increasingly interdependent part of a larger capitalist world economy that has no stake in America's resolution of its own, comparatively minor inequities. If the Communists earlier failed to win Americans to their vision of inevitable confrontation and complete social reconstruction, liberals seem now to



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