

Topics: The Road to Racial Irrelevance in America

By MARGARET MEAD
 Americans need not choose between integration and black power.

In fact, there are not two but at least three mutually supporting means for resolving racial inequality within the premises of American culture which are shared by whites and blacks: immediate integration for those with the education to use their gifts; political black power in the slums of the inner cities; a new economic and social base in the rural South.

The aim of integration is that race and color will become completely irrelevant and that each American will be judged on his merits and his skills. Such integration is most easily accomplished in the ranks of statesmen and scientists, lawyers and doctors, poets and musicians, where the requirements of gift or education are highest.

Simultaneously, in the ghettos of the inner city, black Americans are confronted by situations and political opportunities that faced other immigrants who came as strangers—uprooted, nonliterate and unskilled—to live in cities that had been built for and by earlier comers. That some of the ancestors of black Americans came to this country

against their will long ago is not the issue in the North.

Their immigrant predecessors—Irish, Italians, Eastern European Jews and others—fled poverty, oppression and despair and crowded together in the enclaves of the slums. They came with hope and they found wretched housing, hostility and discrimination. They also found opportunity. Though they had to dig ditches and work under sweatshop conditions, when they organized politically and made demands on the society they moved up and out.

Political Roads Are Open

The waves of rural Negro immigrants arrived, and their educationally deprived adolescent children are leaving school at a time when automation and welfare have changed this familiar scene of exploitation. Nevertheless, because the Negro immigrants have settled in, because they live crowded into defined areas, the political roads to betterment that the earlier immigrants took are still open to them also.

It is a political gambit to call this racism when done by Negroes in contrast to earlier ethnic solidarities. Political power belongs to the organized, foreign or native, white or black,

on or off welfare. Black political power, based on urban concentration, can wring from politically susceptible leadership what the ghetto needs—housing, schools, policing, credit, financing, capitalization, and a chance together to develop stiff-necked self-respect, to cultivate a sense of identity, and to conserve their own traditions.

The development of political black power will inevitably involve separatism, but it must be at black, not white, initiative. If a black community wishes to bound itself, turn in on itself and gather strength to turn again and face the white community, that is its right.

In the old Southeast, especially in the rural areas, conditions are, of course, different. There black and white have lived together, locked within the different circumstances of their ancient immigration. Caste regulations governing close relationships, not the *de facto* segregation of the North, also have produced a state of deprivation, poverty and despair.

It may be that the South, with such a different history, can shift from the old pattern of kin and caste to a new pattern of kin and kin. Nevertheless, there must be many more new economic opportunities for

the whole South, otherwise emigrants will continue to tax the resources of the cities all over the country.

New models are needed. Today, as the country with the greatest resources, we must recognize that our situation is unique. We cannot look to other nations for solutions to emulate or failures to avoid. We can no longer work with our own earlier proposed solutions. Holding out integration as the principal means—as well as the ultimate goal—has proved totally inadequate.

Toward One Society

All movements toward change will need national planning and financing to expedite talent search and education, to meet the demands of the residents of the inner cities, and to reorganize economic opportunity in the rural South. Supported by the entire American community as a common goal, a combination of these three efforts can lead to the creation of a society in which ancestry no longer determines where a man stands and what he can do.

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