
not, the familiar division between conservatives backing loyalty and stability and liberals backing individuality and imagination simply reappears. That is hardly surprising. If any cleavage is a permanent feature of the

political landscape, this is it.

—Alan Ryan teaches politics at Princeton University and is the author of *Bertrand Russell: A Political Life* (1988).

Preaching to the Converted

RACE MATTERS. By Cornel West. Beacon Press. 105 pp. \$15

No one would likely dispute the claim that coming to grips with "race matters" is fundamental to understanding American politics, history, or culture. But an argument is certain to arise if one ventures to be more specific. There is no common definition of the problem, no consensus on a historical narrative explaining how we have come to this juncture, no agreement about what now should be done. Perhaps most important, Americans lack a common vision of the future of our racial relations. We seem no longer to know what it is we are trying to achieve—with our laws, through our politics, in our classrooms, from our pulpits—as we struggle with the legacy of African slavery. Indeed, Americans of all races seem to be confused about who "we" are.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West, professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton, tries to bring order to our collective intellectual chaos on this vexing question. Sadly for all of us, he does not succeed. A philosopher, theologian, and social activist, West has emerged in the last decade as an important critical voice on the Left in American public life. Though it may be an exaggeration to say, as one admirer boasts, that he is "the pre-eminent African-American intellectual of our generation," there is no arguing that he is a thoughtful, articulate, and quite influential social critic. His analyses of our "American dilemma" are studied in universities and seminaries across the country. His opinions on social and cultural policy were

solicited by then President-elect Clinton just after last year's election. And shortly after his installment at Princeton, West acquired official academic celebrity status when he was profiled in the *New York Times Magazine*.

This new book is a collection of eight short essays. Taken together, they sketch the outlines of an interesting if problematic vision of race in America. West offers a stunning array of propositions about our economy, politics, and culture, each one elegant and provocative, and some possibly true. But because West writes more in the manner of the prophet than of the analyst, he never stays long enough with any one point to convince us that he has got it right.

West believes the public discourse about race matters in this society is pathetically impoverished. In this he is surely right. But his explanation is a good deal more controversial: The absence of an effective public dialogue on the race question, he believes, derives from the fact that not all Americans are equal members of the national community. This is a failure for which he holds both liberals and conservatives responsible. Both mistakenly define the "racial dilemma" in terms of the problems that black people pose for white people. Liberals see poor blacks as the historical victims of American racism, needful of government assistance, while conservatives see in the behavior of the black poor the need for moral reform. Both, however, look upon lower-class urban blacks as a people different in some elemental way from themselves. The problem for both is how to transform "them" so they will be more like "us." But this, West believes, tragically misconstrues the problem:

To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do all the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.”

West is talking here about hegemony, though (we may be thankful) he avoids the word. He has in mind the historical fact and ongoing reality of the oppression of black folk—our separation from the mainstream of American life for generations, even after the end of slavery, as well as the horrible conditions under which many blacks continue to live. The “cultural stereotypes” he mentions are negative ideas—about the beauty, intelligence, moral worth, and even the humanity of Africans—which, given the need to rationalize slavery in a putatively Christian democracy, evolved over the years into an ugly antiblack ideology. He is asserting that we will get nowhere in our discussions of race until we unburden ourselves of the remnant of this ideological legacy. It is a superficially appealing position. But is it right?

Is it, in fact, true that racial progress depends upon a more ecumenical, less judgmental approach to the question of which ways of life embraced by various groups of American citizens are worthy of tolerance and respect? Is it entirely obvious that certain Americans have no right to say to others that inclusion—if not in terms of legal rights, then in social, cultural, and moral terms—is contingent upon “fitting in,” that is, upon adopting values more or less universally agreed upon. Surely this was what “we” said to segregationists during the civil-rights movement. Should it not also be “our” message to-

day to an Afrocentric spokesman who insists on the moral superiority of blacks (“sun people”) over whites (“ice people”); or to the black mayor of a drug-ridden metropolis who, when caught in the act of illegal drug use, declares himself a victim of racism in law enforcement?

Criticism of offenses such as these—offenses not simply against whites’ sensibilities but against what should constitute core American values—are hard to find in *Race Matters*. This, in no small part, is due to the fact that West is usually “preaching to the choir.” His words collected here serve an emblematic function; they constitute for the like-minded reader banners of progressive sentiment. Few among the students and teachers of the humanities at the many universities where this book will be on the reading lists this fall will need to be persuaded of the correctness of West’s views. But out in the “real” America—the blue-collar districts of the industrial states that elected Bill Clinton last November; the suburban rings around the core cities where whites (and blacks) have fled from the problems of urban decay; in the South, where interracial coalitions still must be built—few doubts will be dispelled or souls converted to the cause by these essays. My concern is that these essays fail in their task of persuasion because they are too “politically correct,” too imbued with the peculiar ethos of the contemporary academy, to serve as a healing vision for our racial problems.

One instance where West does challenge the conventional progressive wisdom is in his discussion of the spiritual condition of the urban underclass. His willingness to confront the phenomenon head-on, and to place it at the center of the crisis of urban black life, is quite admirable. He dares to peer into the vast emptiness and nihilism of the spirit that characterizes life at the bottom of our society, where one youth can kill another over a pair of sneakers or a disrespectful gaze, where children give birth to children amid multigenerational poverty and dependency, where the alienation is

radical, the violence random, and despair rampant. West understands that these conditions announce the arrival of "postmodern poverty," a truly new phenomenon on the American scene.

But what he has to say about the causes and the cures of these problems makes very little sense to me. The spiritual problems of the black poor, it turns out, are due to the predations of market capitalism. The black underclass has been infested, as have we all, West says, with a materialistic acquisitiveness fueled by profit-seeking manufacturers, distributors, and marketers of consumer goods. The poor have borne the brunt of this capitalistic onslaught on cultural stability because their civil institutions—churches and families and community structures—are too weak to provide a counterweight to the dictates of television advertising.

One cannot dismiss this claim out of hand. There is a respectable tradition, on both the Left and the Right, that is skeptical about the cultural results of capitalism. But it is far from clear, given the historically unprecedented severity of the problems that have emerged in urban black society during the last three decades, that West's explanation explains enough. After all, a television commercial may lead a youngster to desire a pair of sneakers, but only a pathological deprivation of moral sensibility will allow him to kill for them. In any event, placing responsibility on "market-driven corporate enterprises" tells us nothing about what must be done to reverse the decay.

West's answer to the underclass problem is rather to advocate an all-too-predictable "progressive" policy agenda—more money from the government for schools; investment in infrastructure; the creation of good jobs at good wages; the continuation of affirmative action. But there is no serious inquiry into why such efforts, which have been tried repeatedly, have had so little impact on the deteriorating condition of the urban black poor. To counter this decline, West proposes a "politics of conversion." As I understand it, he is implying a kind of communitarian democratic so-

cialism, built from the grassroots. In advocating this "politics of conversion," West, a professor of religion and sometime preacher of the gospel, oddly makes no reference to the role of religious faith. The spiritual malaise is to be transcended not by a vertical relationship with the Almighty but through horizontal relationships with fellow combatants in the struggle against white supremacy and corporate greed. This sounds just a bit romantic. West offers little useful advice about how to put this new politics into effect, even as he ignores the ongoing ministries in the inner cities that are managing to "turn the souls" of some of those at the bottom.

About some of the more difficult questions that must be asked and answered if real change is to occur, West has even less to say. Why *are* the relations between black men and women so difficult? Why *does* black academic performance lag so in comparison with that of other students, even recent immigrants, and not just among the poor but at all levels of the income hierarchy? How *can* effective engagement in the lives of the alienated urban poor be promoted and achieved by middle-class Americans of any race, when the poor are seemingly so divorced from the social and political commonweal? And what practical political program, implementable in the here and now of American public life, *can* secure enough consensus to support concerted action on these problems?

Questions such as these cannot be answered by sloganeering or with the clever deconstruction of our "patriarchal society" whose "machismo identity is expected and even exalted—as with Rambo and Reagan." It is no political program to call for the emergence of "jazz freedom fighter(s)" who will "attempt to galvanize and energize world-weary people into forms of organization with accountable leadership that promote critical exchange and broad reflection." It is an insufficient argument for affirmative action, which must be sustained by courts and electoral majorities, to invoke the need for an "affirmation of black humanity, especially

among black people themselves, . . . [that] speaks to the existential issues of what it means to be a degraded African (man, woman, gay, lesbian, child) in a racist society." This may be the rhetoric prescribed in the multiculturalists' handbook, but it is a rhetoric, I fear, that is largely irrelevant to the serious racial problems that continue to beset American society.

West talks about transcending race as, he asserts, blacks should have done when instead we rallied in large numbers behind the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Yet he mires himself in an essentially racist vision that makes it difficult to see how such a transcendence can be achieved. Why, one wonders, does he find it necessary to equate the violence-promoting lyrics of rap performer Ice-T with the public statements of former Los Angeles police commissioner Darryl Gates? More disturbing, how can a man whose claim on our attention here rests upon the morality of his denunciation of racism speak of "visible Jewish resistance to affirmative action and government spending on social programs"—as if the fact that some American Jews hold some ideas can be used

to ascribe these ideas to the entire group? West would certainly, and rightly, be offended by a similar-sounding charge that blacks as a group should be judged as engaged in an "assault on Jewish survival" because some criminals who are black have murdered some victims who are Jews.

In the end, the moral authority of Cornel West's voice in these pages must be supplied by the reader. If you come as a true believer, you will be entertained and energized by the eloquence and commitment of this "pre-eminent black intellectual of our generation." The rest of us perhaps must take our lead from the current fashion in literary criticism and read this text not for what it appears to be arguing but, indirectly, for what it can be understood to say about the curious disposition of influence and moral authority in the contemporary American academy.

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The South Rises Again

THE PROMISE OF THE NEW SOUTH: *Life After Reconstruction.* By Edward L. Ayers. Oxford. 572 pp. \$30

When C. Vann Woodward entered graduate school at the University of North Carolina in the 1930s, southern history writing, he later recalled, consisted chiefly of references to injured sectional pride and pretensions to glories that never existed. Slogging through text after text, the man who would become the leading southern historian of his time quickly realized that he had never before read "prose so pedestrian, pages so dull, chapters so devoid of

ideas, whole volumes so wrongheaded or so lacking in point." With a succession of brilliant works, including his popular *Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), Woodward rectified the problem. His classic work, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (1951), covers those years after the Civil War that others had disregarded in favor of the southern golden age from Jefferson's inauguration to Lee's surrender. Woodward demonstrated that, by comparison with a prospering North, the South possessed a distinctively tragic past—a historical record of poverty, defeat, and internal strife that was not uncommon to most nations but to which the Yankee conquerors were the lucky exceptions.