

that hasn't resulted in more inequality of wealth is a mystery.)

The rise of the stock market since 1983 might have been expected to increase inequality of wealth, since stocks are owned mainly by the affluent. However, the rise has been offset by growth in home equity. Housing values have been rising since the early 1980s, and for most Americans, their home (some 65 percent of all households own their own) is their biggest asset.

As a matter of fact, the rich don't park much of their money (only 10 percent in 1992) on Wall Street. And less than 15 percent of wealthy households (many of them elderly) have stocks as their most important asset. "Surprisingly few among the rich have received any significant inheritance," Weicher observes. Most have gained their wealth the old-fashioned way—by earning it in small businesses, as retailers, small manufacturers, independent professionals such as doctors and lawyers, owners of rental or com-



*Like this car dealer in Washington state, most of America's rich have earned their money.*

mercial real estate, and farmers. Their most important asset is an unincorporated or closely held business. In a sense, then, it seems, Scott Fitzgerald was wrong: the rich are *not* very different, after all. Except, of course, for all their money.

## SOCIETY

### *Reconsidering Affirmative Action*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

Progress is the largely suppressed story of race and race relations over the past half-century," assert Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, co-authors of last year's controversial *America in Black and White*, writing in a special *Brookings Review* (Spring 1998) issue on black America. More than 40 percent of African Americans now consider themselves middle class. But the Thernstroms also note that close to 30 percent of black families still live in poverty, inequality in employment persists, and there is "a glaring racial gap" in levels of educational attainment. Only 22 percent of African-American high school seniors, for example, can do math problems at the ninth-grade level, compared with 58 percent of their white classmates, according to a 1992 study.

What is to be done?

This question has acquired new urgency lately, as liberals and conservatives have been forced to contemplate a world, particularly an academic world, without affirmative action. In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 209, outlawing racial preferences in public education, employment, and contracting. In Texas

that same year, an appeals court struck down the University of Texas Law School's affirmative action admissions policy.

"To judge from the experience of [California's] elite law schools, the San Francisco Fire Department, and the Los Angeles Police Department," writes Jeffrey Rosen, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* (Feb. 23 & Mar. 2, 1998), it appears that the alternative to affirmative action "may be far worse": a stark choice between effectively excluding blacks from the most selective public institutions, or redefining merit at those institutions so as to lower the standards for everyone.

The new situation is prompting some liberals to drop the pretense that affirmative action does not mean lowering standards and confront the unpleasant fact that there is a persistent racial disparity in educational performance. At the same time, it is awakening some conservatives to the virtues of affirmative action.

Harvard University sociologist Nathan Glazer, coeditor of the neoconservative *Public Interest* and a leading critic of affirmative

action for more than two decades, has changed his mind. The author of *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975) now reluctantly favors affirmative action for blacks (though not for other minorities or for women). “We cannot be quite so cavalier about the impact on public opinion—black and white—of a radical reduction in the number of black students at the Harvards, the Berkeleys, and the Amhersts,” he writes in the *New Republic* (Apr. 6, 1998). “These institutions have become, for better or worse, the gateways to prominence, privilege, wealth, and power in American society.” To abolish affirmative action, he now believes, “would undermine the legitimacy of American democracy.”

Nonsense, retorts Jim Sleeper, author of *Liberal Racism* (1997), writing in the on-line magazine *Salon* ([www.salonmagazine.com](http://www.salonmagazine.com)). “The public can and should be cavalier about the vision of Harvard as an arbiter of American destiny.” Outside the clubby universe of some Ivy Leaguers, he says, “a more astringent meritocracy lets countless individuals rise.”

“Elite” liberals who favor racial preferences, Sleeper charges, are “deeply fatalistic . . . about blacks’ capacities and prospects—and dismayingly fainthearted about undertaking any social and moral initiatives that might really reduce blacks’ measured deficiencies.” The best way to refute the notions—privately held, Sleeper asserts, by “more and more elite liberals”—that these deficiencies are genetic in origin, or so culturally embedded as to be virtually impossible to overcome, is “to couple stricter, race-transcendent standards . . . with clearer cultural messages (about families and work).”

Much has been made, Sleeper notes, of the fact that after Proposition 209, black and Hispanic admissions plummeted at the highly competitive University of California campuses in Berkeley (by 57 and 40 percent, respectively) and Los Angeles (by 43 and 33 percent). But such minority admissions “are down only mar-

ginally at the University of California’s eight campuses overall.” In other words, many minority candidates have still qualified “for campuses, like Riverside or Irvine, where they’re far more likely to succeed.”

That’s not the way matters appear to Terry Jones, a sociologist at California State University, Hayward. “For some people of color,” he writes in *Academe* (July–Aug. 1998), “Proposition 209 looks suspiciously like legislative vigilantism or an attempt to impose ethnic cleansing in higher education. . . . Is it in society’s interest to have a state-supported institution that excludes people of color based on grades and aptitude tests? . . . [U]sing such a limited definition of merit can only perpetuate white privilege.”

Americans do not want to do away with affirmative action entirely, writes Christopher H. Foreman, Jr., a Senior Fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Governmental Studies Program and guest editor of the special issue of *Brookings Review*. “Aggressive outreach and job training” are clearly acceptable, for example. But “race-normed tests and further breaks for the already conspicuously advantaged” are not.

Foreman worries that affirmative action, “a boon to middle-class blacks like me,” diverts attention from the needs of low-income blacks. James Traub, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, agrees. “Affirmative action is, at bottom, a dodge,” he writes in a companion piece to Glazer’s in the *New Republic*. “It allows us to put off the far harder work: ending the isolation of young black people and closing the academic gap that separates black students—even middle-class black students—from whites. When we commit ourselves to that, we can do without affirmative action, but not before.” The Thernstroms may not share Traub’s timetable, but like other affirmative action critics, they agree that closing the black gap in cognitive skills is paramount. How to accomplish that may now become the next subject of debate.

## Voting for the New South

“Black Migration to the South Reaches Record Highs in 1990s” by William H. Frey, in *Population Today* (Feb. 1998), Population Reference Bureau, 1875 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Ste. 520, Washington, D.C. 20009–5728.

Voting with their feet (in the famous phrase), African Americans from all parts of the country have now made it unanimous: the once benighted South is no

longer a region to be shunned.

Between 1990 and 1995, the South had a net influx of 368,800 blacks, and, for the first time in any comparable period, saw net gains of