

FROM SLOGAN TO SUBSTANCE

Lip service to civil rights won't do. There's a new agenda that requires attention and commitment.

EARL RAAB

The heart of our current civil rights problem is not the debate surrounding affirmative action and quotas . . . nor is it the recent racist events in New York or Georgia . . . nor even the level of overt discrimination that continues to exist in our society.

Moreover, while raising welfare payments, providing better medicare, and increasing the number of jobs are all important social objectives, they will not "solve" the problem of civil rights.

The heart of that problem as it has unfolded now lies somewhere in the mass of black and other minority youth and families who are still caught in the cruelty and hopelessness of what has been called the subculture of poverty, apparently as far away from the mainstream of the American dream as ever.

That is not the only problem in America that calls for our compassionate concern. It may not be the most important problem, depending on your measure. But it has a special significance, and it is a largely abandoned problem. When we look at the domestic social agenda of the Jewish community and its agencies, we find very little that is addressed in any major way to it. We find some expression of continuing concern for civil rights issues, vintage 1950s and '60s, and we find some commitment to providing a more substantial safety net for those who have failed to make it—but we find precious little that is addressed to enabling the true poor to join the mainstream.

To begin with, civil rights means equal opportunity for every *individual*, regardless of group. But we always had something additional in mind when we talked about "good intergroup relations."

"Good intergroup relations" was our shorthand way of expressing our conviction that neither the society in general nor the Jewish community in particular could safely ignore the conditions and claims of any deeply disaffected or alienated ethnic group. Even aside from our commitment to social justice, we understood that the existence of such disaffected groups was a sure democracy-buster, in one way or another.

Civil rights for individuals was of course *necessary* for dispelling such group disaffection, but we knew that it could never be *sufficient*. Beyond the legal claims of individuals, there remained the matter of group status. That was why the Black Revolution followed the Civil Rights Revolution.

No individual can or should be guaranteed more than equal opportunity, actively implemented. But an ethnic group expects, and reasonably so, that it can look forward to results that are not massively out of line with the rest of society. Otherwise it will be an alienated group, especially if it can reasonably ascribe its disproportionate disadvantage to the deliberate workings of that society.

Earl Raab is executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco. His most recent article in MOMENT was "What America Thinks" (January/February 1987).

The organized Jewish community has a mandate to be concerned about individual civil rights for members of any group. That principle of law affects our security directly. (Note the recent Supreme Court approval of the civil rights laws requiring reasonable employer accommodation to "minority" religious holidays.) But we also have a practical mandate to be concerned about group alienation in general, because we know from hard experience that intergroup conflict leads to the kind of bitter fragmentation and political extremism that threatens democracy—and the Jews.

In sum, when we refer to the "civil rights problem," we are not just referring to equal opportunity and treatment under the law. We are talking about the problem of reducing the legitimate alienation of any ethnic group. Furthermore, we are under the practical pressure of the affirmative-action words used in *Brown II*: "With all deliberate speed."

A good case can be made that we have been helped by the pressure of affirmative action in our substantial progress towards protecting individual civil rights. Three decades ago, little more than 1 out of 10 black workers was in a classically middle-class, white-collar, better-paid occupation. Today almost 4 out of 10 are in such occupations. A significant number of individual blacks have become part of the middle class. Perhaps the most striking image of civil rights success is that young black married couples with a college education have an income just about equal to young married white couples with the same education.

Another example: In 1960, only half the proportion of Southern blacks, as compared with Southern whites, voted; today the proportions are about the same. Those results must remain irreversible, and it was to uphold that standard that Jews had to march, as so many did, in Forsyth County.

Forsyth County was itself a perverse demonstration of the triumph of civil rights in the last quarter of a century. At the beginning of that period, civil rights marchers in the South were savagely attacked by local and state law enforcement agencies. In January of this year, they were protected by those same law enforcement agencies. It was never the object of the civil rights movement directly to erase prejudice. The object was to extend civil rights under the law to minorities, even if people were prejudiced against those minorities.

Almost all of these results, and their pace, were brought about by affirmative action programs to implement the civil rights laws on the books. "Affirmative action," in this modern usage simply means reasonable and lawful social action to implement in fact an expressed social intent to better the condition of a group that has been deliberately held back in the past.

We have to maintain our support for these programs, just as we have to continue our opposition to normative and rigid quotas. Such quotas are destructive of individual civil rights, and they are destructive of any kind of rehabilitative affirmative action as well.

There has never been a serious

threat that such quotas would become the accepted norm, except in a few arenas. And it makes sense for us to be tolerant of temporary quotas set by the courts, as in the recent Supreme Court ruling on Alabama state troopers, in which there has not been good-faith compliance with court-ordered affirmative action. But it was important for a normative anti-quota principle to be established. However, we can scarcely make "anti-quotas" the centerpiece of our civil rights agenda; and we have to continue to support affirmative action pressure for individual civil rights.

But despite the dramatic progress, there remains a large mass of the black (and of some other minority groups as well) population that is simply not making it. Two decades ago, this schizoid lag was becoming apparent to observers. A *Washington Post* analysis of the poorer black inner-city neighborhoods reported in 1969, in the middle of some general civil rights progress, that "poverty in these places has increased, average family income has not risen, and unemployment rates have remained very high. This deterioration may reflect the migration of the more successful families from the slums, leaving behind widows, deserted wives and children . . . those least able to cope with their social and economic problems. . . ."

The situation in these racial and ethnic poverty ghettos has become worse, *even while the black middle class has grown*. About 3 out of 10 blacks live below the poverty level. (If all government aid is added to income level, that figure drops by half. But money income is the mark of economic independence.) In any case, the poverty rate among blacks is three

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times higher than among whites, whatever measure we use.

That schizoid situation is further dramatized when we note that between the 1970s and the 1980s, the median income of married black families moved closer to the income of married white families, but the income of black single-parent (largely female) families moved further away from both black married couples and white single-parent families. And more than half of black births now occur to young unmarried women, more than five times the white rate.

Such a disproportionate density of hopeless poverty identified with a specific racial or ethnic group is of special concern. And while the objective situation may be somewhat schizoid, there is nothing schizoid about the consequent group alienation.

Since 1964, more and more whites, but fewer and fewer blacks, have responded affirmatively when asked whether there has been a "lot" of positive change for blacks. Despite the fact that *more* individual blacks are expressing satisfaction about their personal fortune and future, *fewer* of them are saying that much progress has been made for blacks as a group. There is a serious problem of smoldering group disaffection, therefore a civil rights problem that Americans for many reasons, and Jews for those and other reasons, have largely chosen to ignore. And we do so at our peril.

The current situation is apparently impervious to earlier programs of equal opportunity, including affirmative action towards that end. Kenneth Clark referred to "the tangled pathology" of the family situation that is not just a proximate cause but, in a more profound sense, a *result* of the classic civil rights problem. It was largely manufactured by the American society, in the long-range destructive attack on the black family, in the long buildup of hopelessness and oppression.

The result is something more than "just" poverty. Such a "tangled pathology" has been called by many sociologists "social disorganization"—a term that does not explain much but describes a great deal. The point is that such social disorganization, with its base in the deteriorated family situation, almost always has systematic economic and social oppression at its historical root—but *then takes on a momentum of its own*. It will not be dispelled without economic remedy, but economic remedy by itself will not be enough in any short or medium range.

By the same token, the problem is not a reflection of a general decline in family values in America. It is a specific problem for a specific group, with a special density and a special burden of alienation, largely and deliberately created by this society. Therefore, an affirmative action program for improved group results, beyond affirmative action for equal opportunity, is called for.

This does not mean "equal group results" in any mechanical way, or as applied to any specific occupation, industry, or establishment. It *does* mean demonstrable progress towards

"similar group results" on the broadest indices of group accomplishment. I have stressed the problem from the black perspective. Obviously, every identifiable group should receive full attention with respect to equal individual opportunity: women, aged, handicapped, every racial, religious, sexual, and ethnic group. For most groups, the traditional civil rights program, if implemented, will accomplish what is necessary. By and large, most of those groups do not require the *additional* kind of affirmative action program for group results needed to dispel serious group alienation.

Most, not all; there are Hispanic populations in this country that do need such further attention, for similar reasons. But that attention needs to be different because it is so often related to fresh immigration; and their problems are not as thoroughly rooted in this society. The black population is the bellwether of the larger civil rights problem in this country, as it has always been.

Bayard Rustin has properly cautioned against subverting the objective situation within the black population for racist purposes. He calls for "non-racial programs for economic justice." But, while keeping Rustin's caution in mind, we must at the same time recall Lyndon Johnson's classic image of affirmative action: Can we make the race for economic justice fair if we just unshackle the disadvantaged runner after the other runner is already partway through the race? That image is particularly apt when applied to areas influenced by the pathologies of "social disorganization."

What, then, is the affirmative action program that applies to this phase of the civil rights problem? Sometimes, it gets lost in the cracks between our equal opportunity program and our desire for a better society in general. There is a difference between civil rights in particular, and social compassion in general. Take the problem of the homeless, which we have suddenly come to notice. It is a problem compounded by our callousness, especially our callousness to the problems of the emotionally disabled. We have to address it. But we should know that in addressing that problem, we are not seriously addressing the current civil rights problem.

Similarly, when we address other so-called safety-net problems, such as the indigent aged, or the hungry, or the paucity of welfare payments, we are only marginally touching on the current problems of civil rights, or, as I have here termed it, group alienation. In short, we are not, by these means, bringing the deeply disorganized sectors of the ethnic underclass significantly closer to the mainstream.

The general economic condition of our country obviously has *some* relationship to all our social concerns. The emergence of a black middle class occurred under the impetus of civil rights and affirmative action for civil rights, but also in circumstances of an expanding American economy. And a sharp decline in our economy would negatively affect the civil rights progress that has been made. Of course, Jewish security is enhanced in many different ways by a stable and thriving American economy. The only mass anti-Semitic movement in this country occurred during a time of pervasive depression. And the current

movement from a manufacturing-and-farm economy to a finance-dominated economy may present us with new and as-yet unanticipated hazards.

But it is not clear that the organized Jewish community, as such, has much to add—either by mandate, consensus or expertise—to such global economic problems as inflation, taxes, the national debt, and mainstream job production. Nor will the application of social compassion, or the establishment of stronger safety nets, however worthwhile these are in and of themselves, solve our global economic problems.

Further, no matter how undeniably connected our economy is to most of our problems—including American aid to Israel—it is predictable that the Jewish community will not be able to gather consensually around any proposed major economic remedies. No two different coveys of Jewish *economists* can gather consensually around any proposed major economic remedies.

Perhaps, under the circumstances, the organized Jewish community should take an approach to the economy that is stimulating rather than position-taking. The objective: a more active and better-informed individual citizen's choice. That may be all we can do as a common Jewish enterprise on global economic techniques—but, if we have the energy and resources, perhaps we should do no less.

However, neither the safety nets nor the betterment of the overall economy will realistically address that most stubborn civil rights problem. Neither the creation of more mainstream jobs, for example, nor more generous welfare standards will in themselves crack that problem. *This* core problem became worse even during periods when mainstream jobs and welfare standards were increasing.

Our *civil rights* problem requires a more specific response. There is no easy blueprint for what has to be done. But neither is there great mystery. There are perhaps only two institutional settings in which, as a society, we have some access to the children and to the families that are involved.

The first is the school system. We know what kinds of programs this would mean, because we have thought about it before. The schools would take on a specific social function as well as an educational function. This would mean not just visiting teachers to make contacts with the home, but also street workers to make direct contact with the children. And it would mean that they both would have to have some imaginative incentive programs at their disposal. It would mean clinics at the schools to perform social as well as medical functions.

And to make the job even more difficult, it would have to be done without return to the self-defeating, politicized, standards-dropping programs of the 1960s, which brought the city schools in general to the drums, and worse.

The other institutional setting to which we have major access is the welfare system itself. The task here is not principally about raising welfare grants, but about providing adequate support for an insistence that the welfare parent complete education and job-training. The support would have to be more systematic, in coordination with adequate child-care facilities, job placement, and special school programs, than anything that most past work-incentive programs have been able to provide.

None of these kinds of affirmative action programs will come as news to anyone. They have been proposed in the past; they still exist in a scattered fashion—but they have been applied with less and less seriousness. And the Jewish community has become less and less involved with them.

The major problem is not to identify the remedial roads; the major problem today is to revive the will to embark on them—and to revive that will first at the *local* level. The Jewish community can be most effective if, its own will revived, it becomes part of efforts in communities around the country to revive the communal will for those kinds of specific affirmative action programs.

The collapse of that will over the past years can be attributed to several factors. The remedies that are now required are difficult, often frustrating, and strikingly non-panacealike. At best, they will not have the dramatic impact of earlier individual equal-opportunity programs. The results will not be measured in mass improvements, but only in subtly reversing the slide.

And they are costly remedies, at a time when money is dear. All things considered, it is much easier to claim virtue by loudly reaffirming individual civil rights, or calling for a better economy, or joining in an ecumenical hunger project, all worthy endeavors. Besides, there are other pressing problems calling on our compassionate energies, many of them easier to contemplate.

On another level, many people may feel that the problem we now face is *tolerable*, as long as the social pathology it creates can be relatively contained. If those who suffer the pathology are also those who suffer its consequences, it can readily be put out of mind. There have been no riots recently, after all.

Further, much of the activist leadership has been drawn out of the poverty ghettos for the time being, ironically because of progress on other civil rights fronts. And finally, some day, over the rainbow, when the world gets all better, with a new order of abundance, this problem, too, will naturally dissipate.

On the latter score, those who would ignore the problem may be right; who knows? But the hard fact is that these ethnic concentrations of social disorganization exist today, an artifact of our society. They will not dissolve in the foreseeable future, much less with “deliberate speed,” without the kind of systematic affirmative action I have here described.

As far as the Jewish community is concerned, it should be axiomatic that any *civil rights* problem is *our* problem, too. Even for those of us to whom the classic appeal to social justice no longer thunders, there is, as I have said, a matter of prudence here.

The problem of group isolation and alienation presents a potential hazard familiar to and particular to the Jewish community. Intergroup conflict and alienation, especially if general conditions worsen, would be predictably dangerous to democracy in general, and to the Jews in particular. And it is a problem that falls specifically within our experience and expertise.

We may not have the will to attack this problem seriously. We must continue to support the simpler principles of individual civil rights; for various reasons, it is reasonable for us to be concerned about certain safety-net standards; and we can make all kinds of self-satisfying economic proclamations. But unless we help to revive a far more elaborate affirmative action program, along the lines I have here suggested, and specifically targeted for particular socially disorganized areas, then let us acknowledge that we are knowingly abandoning today's central civil rights problem.

