**(1963) Robert C. Weaver, "The Negro as an American"**

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*In 1966 Robert C. Weaver became the first African American to hold a cabinet post when President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed him Secretary of the new created Department of Housing and Urban Development.  Weaver, however had held a series of federal government and academic positions going back to the Franklin Roosevelt Administration in the 1930s.  As such he had become a recognized expert on housing discrimination.  In the speech below, given on June 13, 1963 in New York City, however,* ***he articulates the position of moderate civil rights advocates who want a racially integrated society.***
When the average well-informed and well-intentioned white American discusses the issue of race with his negro counterpart there are many areas of agreement. There are also certain significant areas of disagreement.

Negro Americans usually feel that whites exaggerate progress; while whites frequently feel that negroes minimize gains. Then there are differences relative to the responsibility of negro leadership. It is in these areas of dispute that some of the most subtle and revealing aspects of negro-white relationships reside. And it is to the subtle and less obvious aspects of this problem that I wish to direct my remarks.

Most middle-class white Americans frequently ask, "Why do negroes push so? They have made phenomenal progress in 100 years of freedom, so why don't their leaders do something about the crime rate and illegitimacy?" To them I would reply that when negroes press for full equality now they are behaving as all other Americans would under similar circumstances. Every American has the right to be treated as a human being and striving for human dignity is a national characteristic. Also, there is nothing inconsistent in such action and realistic self-appraisal. Indeed, as I shall develop, self-help programs among non-whites, if they are to be effective, must go hand-in-glove with the opening of new opportunities.

Negroes who are constantly confronted or threatened by discrimination and inequality articulate a sense of outrage. Many react with hostility, sometimes translating their feelings into overt anti-social actions. In parts of the negro community a separate culture with deviant values develops. To the members of this subculture I would observe that ours is a middle-class society and those who fail to evidence most of its values and behavior are headed toward difficulties. But I am reminded that the rewards for those who do are often minimal, providing insufficient inducement for large numbers to emulate them.

Until the second decade of the twentieth century, it was traditional to compare the then current position of negroes with that of a decade or several decades ago. The depression revealed the basic marginal economic status of colored Americans and repudiated this concept of progress. By the early 1930's negroes became concerned about their relative position in the nation. Of course, there are those who observe that the average income, the incidence of home ownership, the rate of acquisition of automobiles, and the like, among negroes in the United States are higher than in some so-called advanced nations. Such comparisons mean little. Incomes are significant only in relation to the cost of living, and the other attainments and acquisitions are significant for comparative purposes only when used to reflect the negro's relative position in the world. The negro here--as he has so frequently and eloquently demonstrated -- is an American. And his status, no less than his aspirations, can be measured meaningfully only in terms of American standards.

Viewed from this point of view what are the facts? Median family income among non-whites was slightly less than 55 percent of that for whites in 1959; for individuals the figure was 50 percent.

Only a third of the negro families in 1959 earned sufficient to sustain an acceptable American standard of living. Yet this involved well over a million negro families, of which 6,000 earned $25,000 or more.

Undergirding these overall figures are many paradoxes. Negroes have made striking gains in historical terms, yet their current rate of unemployment is well over double that among whites. Over two-thirds of our colored workers are still concentrated in five major unskilled and semi-skilled occupations, as contrasted to slightly over a third of the white labor force.

Despite the continuing existence of color discrimination even for many of the well prepared, there is a paucity of qualified negro scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and highly-trained clerical and stenographic workers. Lack of college-trained persons is especially evident among negro men. One is prompted to ask why does this exist?

**...he explains this further, but I have edited…**

I happen to have been born a negro and to have devoted a large part of my adult energies to the problem of the role of the negro in America. But I am also a government administrator, and have devoted just as much energy -- if not more--to problems of government administration at the local, the state and the national level. My responsibilities as a negro and an American are part of the heritage I received from my parents -- a heritage that included a wealth of moral and social values that don't have anything to do with my race. My responsibilities as a government administrator don't have too much to do with my race, either. My greatest difficulty in public life is combating the idea that somehow my responsibilities as a negro conflict with my responsibilities as a government administrator: and this is a problem which is presented by those negroes who feel that I represent them exclusively, as well as by those whites who doubt my capacity to represent all elements in the population. The fact is that my responsibilities as a negro and a government administrator do not conflict; they complement each other.

The challenge frequently thrown to me is why I don't go out into the negro community and exhort negro youths to prepare themselves for present and future opportunities. My answer is somewhat ambivalent. I know that emphasis upon values and behavior conducive to success in the dominant culture of America was an important part of my youthful training. But it came largely from my parents in the security and love of a middle-class family. (And believe me, there is nothing more middle-class than a middle-class minority family!)

Many of the youth which I am urged to exhort come from broken homes. They live in communities where the fellow who stays in school and follows the rules is a "square." They reside in a neighborhood where the most successful are often engaged in shady--if not illegal-- activities. They know that the very policeman who may arrest them for violation of the law is sometimes the pay-off man for the racketeers. And they recognize that the majority society, which they frequently believe to be the "enemy," condones this situation. Their experience also leads some of them to believe that getting the kind of job the residents in the neighborhood hold is unrewarding -- a commitment to hard work and poverty. For almost all of them, the precepts of Ben Franklin are lily-like in their applicability.

Included in the group are the third generation of welfare clients. It is in this area -- where they learn all the jargon of the social workers and psychologists--that they demonstrate real creativity. It is in activities which "beat" the system that they are most adept -- and where the most visible rewards are concentrated.

All youth is insecure today. Young people in our slums are not only insecure but angry. Their horizons are limited, and, in withdrawing from competing in the larger society, they are creating a peculiar, but effective, feeling of something that approaches, or at least serves as a viable substitute for, security. In the process, new values and aspirations, a new vocabulary, a new standard of dress, and a new attitude toward authority evolve. Each of these serves to demonstrate a separateness from the dominant culture.

As a realist, I know that these youth relate with me primarily in a negative sense. They see me in terms of someone who has been able to penetrate, to a degree, the color line, and to them I have bettered the "enemy." If I should attempt to suggest their surmounting the restrictions of color, they cite instances of persons they know who were qualified--the relatively few boys or girls in their neighborhood who finished high school or even college--only to be ignored while white youths with much less training were selected for good jobs. And such occurrences are not unique or isolated in their experience.

**...he goes on to explain what/who black youth do relate to and how there are plenty more who are just doctors, social workers, teachers, etc. who are also to be admired. Then he continues…**

What are the responsibilities of negro leadership?

Certainly the first is to keep pressing for first-class citizenship status -- an inevitable goal of those who accept the values of this nation.

Another responsibility of negro leadership is to encourage and assist negroes to prepare for the opportunities that are now and will be opened to them.

The ultimate responsibilities of negro leadership, however, are to show results and maintain a following. This means that it cannot be so "responsible" that it forgets the trials and tribulations of others who are less fortunate or less recognized than itself. It cannot stress progress -- the emphasis which is so palatable to the majority group -- without, at the same time, delineating the unsolved business of democracy. It cannot provide or identify meaningful models unless it effects social changes which facilitate the emergence of these models from the environment which typifies so much of the negro community. But negro leadership must also face up to the deficiencies which plague the negro community, and it must take effective action to deal with resulting problems. While, of course, crime, poverty, illegitimacy and hopelessness can all be explained, in large measure, in terms of the negro's history and current status in America, they do exist. We need no longer be self-conscious in admitting these unpleasant facts, for our knowledge of human behavior indicates clearly that anti-social activities are not inherent in any people. What is required is comprehension of these--a part of society's problems -- and remedial and rehabilitation measures.

Emphasis upon self-betterment if employed indiscriminately by negro leaders is seized upon by white supremacists and their apologists to support the assertion that negroes -- and they mean all negroes -- are not ready for full citizenship. This, because of the nature of our society, negro leadership must continue to stress rights if it is to receive a hearing for programs of self-improvement.

Black muslims, who identify the white man as the devil, can and do emphasize -- with a remarkable degree of success -- morality, industry, and good conduct. But, the negro leader who does not repudiate his or his followers' Americanism can do so effectively only as he, too, clearly repudiates identification with the white supremacists. This he does, of course, when he champions equal rights, just as the Black Muslims accomplish it by directing hate toward all white people.

Most negroes in leadership capacities have articulated the fact that they and those who follow them are a part of America. They have striven for realization of the American dream. Most recognize their responsibilities as citizens and urge others to follow their example. Sophisticated whites realize that the status of negroes in our society depends not only upon what the negro does to achieve his goals and prepare himself for opportunities but, even more, upon what all America does to expand these opportunities. And the quality and nature of future negro leadership depends upon how effective those leaders who relate to the total society can be in satisfying the yearnings for human dignity which reside in the hearts of all Americans.

**Sources:**

So Just, “Speeches on Social Justice” http://www.sojust.net/speeches/weaver\_negro\_american.html