Stratification Economics

A Primer and an Explanation on Opposition to Affirmative Action

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Abstract

In this chapter, stratification economics provides a vehicle for analyzing attitudes toward affirmative action. The chapter begins with a historical example of an American politician who relied on racial tension and the fears of the dominant group to garner support to promote his campaign. This offers an introduction to the framework and guiding elements of stratification economics – most notably, its emphasis on relative, identity-based, group status. This is followed by a discussion of elemental principles of stratification economics and a summary of a range of its prior applications to explain intergroup disparities, considering outcomes in labor markets, social markets, public good allocations, and more.

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Subsequent sections explore the consistency of this approach with the varying attitudes expressed toward various group-targeted policies in America. In particular, historical examples are gathered into two categories for analysis and exploration: policies that become desirable when they no longer risk benefitting the lower-status (subaltern) group's status and policies that are undesirable *because* they are expected to improve the subaltern group's relative position. Finally, the chapter concludes with additional thoughts on the potential for targeted and universal proposals to achieve popular support in order to advance equity.

Keywords

Stratification economics · Affirmative action · Racial equity · Discrimination · Group identity · Social exclusion

Introduction

With 10 days left before election day in 1990, Jesse Helms trailed in the polls. His opponent, the black democrat Harvey Gantt, was expected to benefit from the fact that a third of North Carolinian voters had grown weary of Helms, who was winding down his third term representing the state as a Republican in the US Senate. Helms went on the attack with "ads subtly priming consciousness of Gantt's blackness" (Jamieson 1992, p. 94).

His initial advertisements hit Gantt's record on abortion, his affiliation with gay rights leaders, and his financial dealings in becoming a millionaire. These ads made various alterations to Gantt's face and voice, shifting to black and white to heighten his hue and slowing his diction so that viewers would later identify him as "stupid" and "definitely black" (Jamieson 1992, p. 96). However, it was Helms' next ad that proved to be a memorable haymaker.

A voice over says, "You needed that job, and you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota." The narrator is never shown; neither is the face of the "you" in desperate need of employment. What is shown are a pair of white hands, first holding a paper, presumed to be a resume, and then crumpling it as they realize they are not wanted. As the narrator paints the candidates' attitudes regarding a proposed racial quota law, the hands have disappeared, but not without a closing gesture on the split screen:

> Note too that in the final frames Gantt is 'for racial' and Helms is 'against quotas.' Here the shot of Gantt is closer—more menacing—than that of Helms. Before this apposition, the hands have exerted control. The fist once clenched in anger is now clenched in action: crushing Teddy Kennedy's head and about to encircle Gantt's! (Jamieson 1992, p. 98)

Helms would go on to win the election with 52.5 percent support, with Gantt garnering a mere 38 percent of the white vote, and the creator of the 30-second spot, Alex Castellanos, would become a mainstay of Republican presidential campaigns in the 1990s and early 2000s, eventually earning a reputation as “one of the keenest, most cutthroat strategists in the business” (Veis and Naddaf 2007).

With what came to be known simply as the “hands” ad, Castellanos had discovered something powerful about the political dynamite that could be used against preferential treatment programs like affirmative action for blacks. Not only are these programs often without wide popular support, but for those politicians reliant on the support of a dominant social group, such issues also can be used as a wedge issue to rally one’s base. A half-century of American politics has proven, beyond a doubt, that nothing motivates white voters like the fear of black folks catching up or surpassing them.

Perhaps it is not surprising that white voters in America would bristle at policies that favor other racial or ethnic groups. After all this is consistent with principles of rational self-interest in the context of group identification and position. Indeed, the overwhelming white American vote for former reality TV star, Donald Trump, in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, ensued after his preying on anxieties related to a *perceived* growing racial threat and his mobilization of outright racist rhetoric.

When a 2017 white supremacist march took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, leading to mayhem and death, Trump refused to condemn the racist protestors. Instead, he placed them on par with those who were resisting their presence and purpose, saying there were “very fine people on both sides,” while repeatedly flashing what appeared to be the “white power” sign.

This perceived threat, of course, was nothing new; it had previously become an essential component of the “Southern strategy” – an effort to shift the white southern vote away from the Democratic party – in the wake of the civil rights movement. In 1981, political consultant Lee Atwater, who successfully led the charge by coding economic policies that appeared to be unfavorable to the working class as policies to preserve white dominance, infamously summarized the approach:

> By 1968 you can’t say ‘n———’—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and you’re getting so abstract. Now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... (Perlstein 2018)

Why is this strategy successful? More broadly, why does the performance and status of other groups matter so much, and how does this lead to individuals – in this case, working class whites – voting against their purported economic self-interest? Why do programs that favor certain groups only become objectionable when they do not benefit the social group in power? Stratification economics offers answers to these questions.

This chapter introduces the basic tenets of stratification economics, the subspecialty of economics that blends economics, sociology, social psychology, and history to understand the feedback loops between group identity, political movements, and individual action. The framework of stratification economics enables an exploration of several case studies related to affirmative action in the United States of America. Specifically, stratification economics shows how whites have benefited from the existence of preferential programs in the past and why they push back against recent initiatives that bolster other groups, typically blacks. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on the potential routes toward garnering popular support for affirmative action and related policies.

How Stratification Economics Explains Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action

A Primer on Stratification Economics

Stratification economics fuses economic theory with sociology and social psychology to explain how group identities affect individuals' behavior, especially when individuals consider protecting both their individual status position and the status position of the group with whom they identify. Relying on the notion that human beings care more about *relative* position than their absolute position, stratification economics posits, with respect to group identification, "the key relevant comparison group will be an outside racial, ethnic, gender, caste, or religious group" (Darity et al. 2017).

An obvious application of stratification economics accounts for racial and ethnic disparities, which "long have been treated as a peripheral object in economics" (Darity et al. 2015). Stratification economics is sufficiently general to apply to all salient instances of group identification and inequality, whether it be on the basis of gender, caste, religious affiliation, as well as race and ethnicity, or at the intersection of combinations of these categories.

Any analysis of intergroup inequalities without understanding the effects of these classifications is sorely incomplete. Consider three factors to highlight this: the racialized distribution of wealth, the significance of wealth as the key economic indicator of well-being and opportunity, and wealth's capacity to be transferred to future generations, both directly or indirectly, to entrench advantage or disadvantage (Tippett et al. 2014). As such, acts of economic discrimination, past or present, have outsized and long-standing effects on who possesses and who is dispossessed.

The principles of stratification economics, drawing heavily from Darity et al. (2015), can be summarized as follows:

- Individuals behave rationally and in a self-interested fashion.
- Individuals form an identity through affiliation and association with a particular social group (or groups).
- Social beliefs about their group can affect their sense of affinity as well as their individual productivity and performance. Such effects include stereotype threat, stereotype lift, and stereotype boost (Taylor 2023).
- Collectively, members of a particular social group (or groups) seek to maintain and extend their group's *relative* performance in hierarchy, in accordance with Herbert Blumer's (1958) important work on the sources of prejudice. The greater

> the perceived difference in status between one's own group and another, the greater the emphasis an individual will place on their personal position in comparison with others in their social group. The narrower (or the narrowing) of the perceived difference in status between one's own group and "the other," the greater the emphasis an individual will place on their social group's position in comparison with the other; colloquially, this is a backlash effect against perceived progress on the part of the subordinate group.

What follows from these tenets is perhaps the most novel element of stratification economics – and its most striking divergence with standard economic theory. Typically, economics treats discrimination as an inefficient irrationality that can be cured by market competition. Gary Becker's influential taste-based models of employer and employee discrimination lead to the conclusion "that non-productivity-based differentials in wages must evaporate over time; both approaches deny the persistence of discrimination" (Darity et al. 2017, p. 48).

In contrast, stratification economics says, because of the desire to maintain one's position – and one's group's position – in a hierarchy, discrimination is not only persistent but also "rational and functional" (ibid. p. 50). Furthermore, market competition is maneuverable to sustain discriminatory outcomes.

What does stratification economics reject? It rejects the conception that economic and related disparities between groups are driven by deficiencies or dysfunctional behavior on the part of the subordinate, or subaltern, group, rather than discrimination, coercion, and inherited advantages.

Applying the lens of stratification economics, a number of social phenomena – which run counter to traditional economic theory – suddenly become explicable. Stratification economics provides a concise explanation for the wage gaps between black and white employees (the presence of discrimination against darker-skinned employees, or colorism, in labor markets), as well as an explanation for the employment gap itself (Goldsmith et al. 2006; Pager 2003; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). It explains why families invest more in the futures of lighter complexioned offspring – employers, like many agents in racialized anti-black societies, offer those individuals with greater proximity to whiteness outsized rewards for similar accomplishments – and why darker-complexioned black women have lower odds of marriage or remarriage than lighter-complexioned black women (Hordge-Freeman 2015; Rangel 2015; Hamilton et al. 2009). And in the public sphere, it has an answer for why natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina disproportionately harm black individuals and families: a dearth of public services and disaster relief for these groups – and excess services and relief for white families (Price 2008). Moreover, it is consistent with studies conducted outside the oeuvre of the framework, such as research showing why America redistributes public goods less than Europe – the United States is more racially heterogeneous, and dominant groups are less willing to provide "handouts" to subordinate groups (Alesina et al. 2001).

Stratification economics also explains more subtle effects. One recent example is the recent trend of whites experiencing increases in their mortality rates – at a time when no other groups in the United States are witnessing declines in their mortality rates (at least until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic). The reason? Their (false) belief that the white relative position is declining – a belief strongly connected, again, to the Trump vote. The belief yields a psycho-emotional threat that has contributed to a decline in mental health resulting in "deaths of despair" from alcohol consumption, opioid addiction, and suicide (Siddiqi et al. 2019).

The framework applies neatly and with great effect to political phenomena, some of which are well-known. The "Southern strategy," mentioned earlier, is especially relevant. The strategy follows the stratification economics framework precisely. A white voter likely will not benefit individually from a given political action, the "abstract. . .totally economic things" Atwater describes. But with its passage, the white would maintain – or even lengthen – the economic lead of his/her "group" over the competing group. And so, the individual supports politicians advancing such a policy or action.

Crucially, by standard economic theory, the person may appear to be acting against his/her self-interest by voting for something that does not benefit them individually. But in promoting the *relative* economic status of the group to which the individual belongs, this act squarely coheres with the core theory of stratification economics. Moreover, there are benefits associated with being part of a dominant social group, regardless whether one is closer to the top or to the bottom within the group. For example, all white Americans have an advantaged position in encounters with the police and the criminal justice system vis-à-vis all black Americans.

Given its potential effects on the relative economic status of dominant and subaltern groups in America, affirmative action (and similar policies that target benefits toward particular subsets of the population) is ideal for analysis through the lens of stratification economics. We undertake a preliminary look at how the principles of stratification economics can illuminate the analysis of affirmative action in the United States.

What Stratification Economics Says About Affirmative Action

Coined by President John F. Kennedy in Executive Order #10925 and elucidated in subsequent orders from President Lyndon B. Johnson, "affirmative action" promised to not just "open the gates of opportunity" but also provide all citizens with "the ability to walk through those gates," as Johnson put it in his 1965 commencement address to Howard University (Katznelson 2006). But in the years to follow, when this turn of phrase was turned into policy, it would immediately bear the brunt of staunch resistance and fierce debate.

Viewed under the conditions of the larger civil rights movement, in which any progress had to withstand myriad volleys of revanchist attack, this opposition should not be surprising. More than a half-century later, its role applied in higher education – debilitated from decades of decisions that have left affirmative action as a policy justified solely as a facet of diversity – likely will soon be revisited yet again when *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* reaches its expected destination before the Supreme Court.

Some have proposed that attitudes toward such policies emerge from a complicated confluence of economic self-interest, social demographics, racial affect, and beliefs toward the merits of stratification (Kluegel and Smith 1983). Others presuppose that resistance to affirmative action is more related to the policies themselves. While racial animus is present in the white population, it is not responsible for all of the opposition to affirmative action (Kuklinski et al. 1997). In their analysis, they find that a majority of whites (in both the north and south) support "extra effort" made by the government to benefit black Americans, but more than three-fourths oppose "preferential treatment" for blacks.

Yet the arguments waged against affirmative action are well worn territory (Darity 2013). Complaints include its violating the principles of meritocracy, its negative effect on productivity, its leading students to be mismatched in higher education and/or stigmatized, its ineffectiveness in assisting all members of the target population, and the implementation of affirmative action along racial rather than class lines.

These complaints all wilt under the heat lamp of investigation. Research shows that "merit" is not an objective scale but a tipped measure, designed to favor male candidates over female peers and altered continuously to exclude black students from public institutions (Uhlmann and Cohen 2005; Cross and Slater 1996). Sect. III, discussing affinity for white affirmative action, details how the "meritorious" students are in fact the beneficiaries of centuries of favorable conditions and policies.

Moreover, claims of decreased productivity following affirmative action initiatives have been debunked at a macrolevel (Conrad 1995). Microlevel analyses have long shown the same, as have anecdotes like that relayed in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro*, of a "crank" manager at the Midvale Steel Works breaking a pattern of exclusionary hiring to let black and white mechanics toil alongside one another in his factory:

> ...he had a theory that Negroes and whites could work together as mechanics without friction or trouble. In spite of some protest he put his theory into practice, and today any one can see Negro mechanics in the same gang with white mechanics without disturbance. (Du Bois 1967, p. 129)

The "crank" was Frederick Winslow Taylor, who later became widely known as the "father of scientific management." In short, top business minds had been aware since the 1880s that at least one form of this complaint was unfounded.

Some of the latter criticisms of affirmative action detailed by Darity (2013) are worthy of particular attention, in that they possess certain kernels of truth but belie their intentions. True, an affirmative action policy may not help all people in the subaltern group; indeed, it is crafted such that it can "produce and/or enhance 'the creamy layer'" of the subaltern middle class (ibid, p.221). True, even if affirmative action is implemented, class-based inequality will remain. Do such grumbles justify scrapping the entire policy? Why would the solution not entail supplementing affirmative action with anti-poverty programs, or (additional) affirmative action on the basis of class?

Stratification economics provides a harsh but consistent answer to these claims, following the principles outlined in the prior section. The desire to curb or alter affirmative action policies that favor black Americans stems from a wish on the part of the dominant group (white Americans) to protect their relative economic status. If affirmative action was to achieve its goals, it would close the gap between white Americans and their subaltern peer group. Scrapping it would alleviate this threat, and shifting its focus to ameliorating class-based disparities would make it much less beneficial to the subaltern group (Darity et al. 2011).

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the findings of Kuklinski et al. (1997) also align with stratification economics. It follows that a majority of white Americans will say that they support "extra effort" to aid black Americans *if* they feel that this extra effort does not put their relative status at risk. Likewise, Kluegel and Smith (1983) highlight public polling that shows the white population's desire for shallow benefits ("help") to be conveyed to blacks and for substantive benefits to be denied. In stratification economics parlance, anything that genuinely will close the gap between the dominant and subaltern groups will be opposed; insubstantial attempts, however, are unobjectionable and could even be valuable to the dominant group, if the public and political conclusion is that even with the provided help the subaltern group proves incorrigible.

Moreover, stratification economics suggests that if the dominant group can improve its status relative to the subaltern group – if it can become more dominant – then such a proposal will receive approval. Indeed, a number of recent investigations show that opposition to targeted, group-based policies arises solely when the subaltern group benefits; then, and only then, are such policies marked with the imprimatur of "unfair" to justify their resentment. To see this in action, one needs only to consider the name of the plaintiff in the higher education court case: "Students for Fair Admissions," the implication being that the college admission process – replete with preferential admission for offspring and relatives of alumni and standardized tests that most accurately reflect an applicant's familial wealth – only becomes "unfair" once race is considered.

The following two sections spotlight instances throughout American history that reflect this pattern. The first section consists of a series of cases in which whites have benefitted disproportionately from nominally universal policies; the second features situations in which policies that favor blacks have been instituted – and then quickly disbanded or preemptively headed off. Both cases are consistent with stratification economic theory and, contrary to the "grumbles" stated above, point to the greatest driving force of attitudes toward such policies to be racial or outgroup resentment.

How Stratification Economics Explains Affinity for White Affirmative Action

Given what is known about its founding, expansion, and maintenance, it makes sense that America would strategically promote the rights of certain groups over others. For the duration of its history, the country has been dominated by a minority elite – originally the planter aristocracy who became America's founding fathers – who granted rights to certain groups and not others to preempt unification and revolutionary action from the underclass.

During the century and a half leading up to the American Revolution, and the subsequent near-century prior to the Civil War, the settlers and white (male) working class benefitted. The colonial government and the subsequent US federal and state governments propped them up with allotments of land, stolen from the indigenous people, and with status, gained from the stigmatization, abuse, and further dehumanization of the black population, both free and, especially, enslaved.

These policies were not labelled with a special term like affirmative action because there was nothing special about them: for a very long time, it was taken as given that policies would affirm the predominantly white power structure in the country. Stokes et al. (2003) highlight the Naturalization Act of 1790 as an initial stroke of favoritism that curried no resistance. Whereas the constitution famously sidestepped the racial hierarchy in play in America, the Naturalization Act directly addressed race, allowing "any alien, being a free white person" a path to citizenship in the country. This declaration, the authors note, "was adopted without a single dissent by the first sitting U.S. Congress" (Stokes et al. 2003).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, homesteading, the practice of setting aside cheap or free land for settlement, would continue to consolidate white dominance.

With its synthesis of "the dignity and opportunities of free labor" and "social mobility, enterprise, and 'progress,'" the concept became popular in the run-up to and aftermath of the Civil War (Foner 1981). The passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, along with related subsequent acts – the 1866 Southern Homestead Act, 1873 Timber Culture Act, and 1877 Desert Land Act – launched settlement of western and southern lands. Starting with the 1862 Act, 160 acres of untamed land were available at $1.25 an acre to those willing to cultivate it for 5 years.

This "free land," the sort of tangible, direct help that white Americans would bristle at in the late twentieth century and beyond, was largely viewed not as a giveaway or a handout but as an entitlement. *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley exhorted such ideas in 1842, identifying the need for the lower classes to enjoy "the Right to Labor and to receive and enjoy the honest reward of such labor. . ." (Robbins 1933).

In 1846, George Henry Evans of the National Reform Association petitioned congress with the slogan "Vote Yourself a Farm"; the reformers would go on to advance the notion of "the equal right to land," such that none would be left "dependent on another for the right to work for a living" (Fure-Slocum 1995). Some newspapers did engage in handwringing over these allocations: *The Goshen Democrat* feared "whole contents of European poorhouses emptied down upon our fertile West," and the *Boston Daily Mail* claimed that such a recipient of free land would be a "*pauper entail*" (Robbins 1933).

In the 1800s, homesteading as a policy had faced much southern resistance, with the fear that this expansion of small, independent farmers and their subsequent political weight would lead to greater nationwide opposition of slavery. (Indeed, homesteading's brief unfeasibility was due to the fear that its implementation would eventually lessen the gaps between blacks and whites.) Following the secession of the Confederate states, however, the Homestead Act of 1862 passed resoundingly in both chambers (107 to 16 in the house, and 33 to 7 in the senate). Speaking before congress in 1862, Speaker of the House of Representatives Galusha Grow said that "there has, perhaps, never been a measure before Congress so emphatically approved by a majority of the American people." And its effects could not be overstated, allowing the freemen who were recipients of this land to, in Grow's words, "develop the elements of a higher and better civilization" (Anderson 2011, p. 119).

One and a half million families received this land asset; Williams (2000) estimates a quarter of the US adult population has descended from this cohort. The families who benefitted from these acts, however, were not equally distributed, given the capital constraints to claim the acreage, and to the larger outlays required to build a farm once occupied (Zinn 1980; Deverell 1988). While 300 acres were distributed to about 400,000 interests, writes Greg Grandin in *The End of the Myth*, "this was less than half of the acreage private interests acquired through purchase. Within a decade of the act's passage, large capitalists and regulators had laid claim to the most fertile, best irrigated, and, via railroad lines, best connected portion of public 'free land'" (Grandin 2019, p. 110).

Nominally, homesteading was open to everyone. But the Black Codes of 1865 and other methods of social control – legal or otherwise – wedged blacks geographically, preventing them from settling these western lands and protecting the dominance of white Americans.

In *Boom Town*, his book on the history of Oklahoma City, Sam Anderson details the Oklahoma City Land Run of 1889, in which frontiersmen raced into town at high noon to make claims to the land. The description underscores the attendant pressures black Americans faced in this era of the Jim Crow South – and the west that Jim Crow Southerners would go on to settle:

> The Land Run was for white men. Not officially, in a legal sense, but in practice. The number of African Americans who made the Run is, like many things about that day, hard to pin down, but at least one historian guesses it was fewer than fifty. Others estimate two hundred, or somewhere near one thousand. In any case, it was a tiny fraction of the human tide—roughly 100,000 strong—that rushed in that day over the prairie. Given the opportunity the Land Run represented, especially for the poor and marginalized, that absence screams volumes. Oklahoma's settlers were a heavily armed white mob. Black Americans would have known to proceed with caution. (Anderson 2018, p. 163)

New frontiers and their capacity to generate wealth were denied most blacks (Sect. IV, on white negativism towards black affirmative action, details this further). Moreover, Jim Crow laws dictated their capacity to move and live where they already were. In the ten largest American cities in 1880, the typical neighborhood in which an African American lived was just 15 percent black; by 1940, their local neighborhood was 75 percent black (Rothstein 2018).

This restriction of movement – the denial of what Roscoe Dunjee, publisher of *The Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City, called "the right of natural expansion" – is crucial to generating patterns of segregation (Anderson 2018). Once racial segregation is established, many seemingly innocuous, race-neutral policies can in fact systemically advantage certain groups at the expense of others; in short, segregation turns these policies into affirmative action by a different name.

James Baldwin knew this, skewering the pattern of investment that spread across America in the 1950s with his assertion that "urban renewal means negro removal." Government-sanctioned actions throughout the twentieth century – invariably positively branded as "renewals" or "revitalizations" – would demolish black neighborhoods and public housing to make way for white investment in the downtown; the effects of such policies, then, were not far from those of destructive race riots, like the 1921 Greenwood riots in Tulsa (Anderson 2018). They achieved some amalgamation of promoting the dominant group's economic status and weakening the subaltern group's; regardless of the mixture, the relative status of the dominant group improved.

The New Deal heightened the deleterious aspects of housing segregation. In 1933, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation was created to rescue homeowners near default during the Great Depression, and the loan risk assessment practice of redlining – so termed for the color that would demarcate African American neighborhoods on these maps – was introduced, helping codify the seemingly inherent risks of lending to blacks.

The next year, the Federal Housing Administration, or FHA, was formed to help middle-class Americans access the threshold of homeownership. Approval for applicants was similarly racially restricted and consistent: "no guarantees for mortgages to African Americans, or to whites who might lease to African Americans, regardless of the applicants' creditworthiness" (Rothstein 2018, p. 67). From 1945 to 1959, African Americans received less than 2 percent of all federally insured home loans, a tremendous setback given the outsized role homeownership plays in wealth accrual (Hanchett 2000; Shapiro 2006).

Overtly stating its whites-only preference in the appraisal process, the FHA did not outwardly purport to be race neutral. But an additional significant post-World War II policy that – despite its promise of universality – disproportionately benefitted non-black Americans was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, now commonly known as the GI Bill. It comprised "the most wide-ranging set of social benefits ever offered by the federal government in a single, comprehensive initiative," with spending summing to more than $95 billion between 1944 and 1971 (Katznelson 2006, p. 113). The bill provided avenues to attend college, own homes, and engage in other wealth-building ventures and, in doing so, fostered a new middle class in the country.

Both black and white veterans leapt at the chance to participate in GI Bill programs. However, John Rankin, the racist Mississippi congressional representative who chaired the Committee on World War Legislation that workshopped the bill, ensured that the federal dollars would be kept under local and state control through branches of the Veterans Administration. As a consequence, in the southern states where Jim Crow racism ran rampant, the desired funds "could be directed to the country's poorest region while keeping its system of racial power intact" (Katznelson 2006, p. 125).

With local control in place – white-staffed state departments and local VA centers who could discourage blacks from taking advantage of the GI Bill's bounty – the barriers to wealth-building for blacks were born anew, and a universal program quickly became targeted to the dominant group. In Mississippi, whites filed six times as many applications for unemployment payments as black (Katznelson 2006).

With most avenues of higher education – the exception being historically black colleges and universities – still closed to blacks, they were forced to turn to crowded, inferior options ("no black college had a doctoral program or a certified engineering program") and, disproportionately, to eschew collegiate opportunities (Katznelson 2006. p. 133). Of the veterans born between 1923 and 1928, just 12 percent of blacks enrolled in college programs, while 28 percent of their white counterparts did (Katznelson 2006).

Job training provided an opportunity in name only: in the first 2 years of training programs in the south, black veterans counted for less than eight percent of the total enrollment, and, rather than earning the living wage the GI Bill allotted, they were occasionally charged a fee for being trained (Katznelson 2006; Frydl 2009). Blacks found themselves the victims of occupational sorting, landed in jobs far beneath their skill level: "Carpenters became janitors; truck drivers dishwashers; communications repair experts porters" (Katznelson 2006).

In addition to the housing policies which created a (white) middle class, the New Deal revamped labor laws through the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which lifted wages, limited the length of work weeks, and guaranteed the right to unionize and collectively bargain. The Democratic Party, spearheading this legislation, carefully carved out exceptions to the legislation to exclude farmworkers and maids from these crucial benefits and protections: two groups that comprised "more than 60 percent of the black labor force in the 1930s and nearly 75 percent of those who were employed in the South" (Katznelson 2006, p. 22).

A 1939 poll of opinions toward the Social Security Act that provided old-age benefits and insurance against unemployment – another New Deal output that (at least initially) excluded agricultural and domestic workers from its benefits – found that 89 percent of the public approved (Amenta and Parikh 1991; Leff 1983).

In short, the political resistance from the Southern Democrats targeted the wide-sweeping nature of these policies; a universal policy was unwelcome because of who it would include. Florida Democrat James Mark Wilcox was unequivocal when discussing the FLSA before congress in 1937:

> We may rest assured, therefore, that when we turn over to a federal bureau or board the power to fix wages, it will prescribe the same wage for the Negro that it prescribes for the white man. Now, such a plan might work in some sections of the United States but those of us who know the true situation know that it just will not work in the South. You cannot put the Negro and the white man on the same basis and get away with it. (Wilcox 1937)

This is the corollary to the Southern strategy that Lee Atwater described in 1981. Instead of a policy in which blacks are hurt worse than whites, the New Deal time and again offered policies in which whites gained more than blacks. When these policies were not targeted so, they had less support. But it was under such guidelines that New Deal policies became implemented and highly regarded.

They had aimed to build a middle class, and they did; they built a white middle class, locking black Americans out of crucial mechanisms to build wealth and thus fixing their place on a lower economic rung of society.

How Stratification Economics Explains White Negativism Toward Black Affirmative Action

For brief windows in American history, the black population has had glimmers of favorable treatment. In 1862, for example, it looked like early waves of freedmen wouldn't have to wait long or move far to start generating wealth through land ownership; they might receive South Carolina parcels directly, with the undertaking of the Port Royal Experiment in the midst of the Civil War, "predicated on the principle that newly freed men and women would have an opportunity to engage in homesteading on land vacated en masse by southern planters" (Darity and Mullen 2020, p. 130). However, the attempt fell apart under "the constant threat of brutality, rife with irregular pay for the black laborers or no pay at all" (ibid., p. 134).

Then General William Tecumseh Sherman's declaration, now colloquialized as "forty acres and a mule" and first made in Special Field Orders No. 15 before being formally provisioned in an 1865 Freedmen's Bureau bill, authorized reallocating confiscated and abandoned lands in the Confederate states, a promise that would have allocated approximately 5.3 million acres of land in three states. But for innumerable reasons – not least of which was Andrew Johnson's occupancy of the White House, his amnesty of former Confederates, and the subsequent return of their property – a key portion of the plan became "null and void, making it impossible for ex-slaves and loyal white refugees to rent up to forty acres with an option to purchase the land and then receive the title" (Darity and Mullen 2020, p. 178).

This has been the pattern for black Americans; anytime it appears that a policy might narrow the gap between themselves and the dominant group, the resistance it engenders from the dominant group – *writ large* or simply from its most powerful actors – means it is inevitably scuttled, shortchanged, or set up for failure.

A telling instance is the first (brief, quickly aborted) instance of preferential treatment for black Americans: the operations of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands – better known as the Freedmen's Bureau – following the Civil War. Supplying necessities for those displaced by the war; establishing schools, hospitals, and other institutions; assisting in the process of (re)settlement for those displaced during the war; and providing "a government guardianship for the relief and guidance of white and black labor from a feudal agrarianism to modern farming and industry," it was a rather unique undertaking. Du Bois, in 1935, called it "the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted" (p. 219).

Notably, the bureau did not simply benefit blacks. In certain states in the Deep South, "the bureau extended twice—and in some cases four times—as much relief to whites as to blacks" (Nancy Isenberg, in Grandin 2019, p. 103). Nevertheless, President Andrew Johnson decried the bureau "as a giveaway," an ostensible double-edged sword that "was both trapping African Americans in a new form of slavery and giving African Americans preferential jobs" (Grandin 2019, p. 106).

The Southern Homestead Act of 1866, championed by Oliver Otis Howard, commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, tried to provide blacks with the wealth-building mechanism their white peers had seized. It offered up the best public land remaining in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi to "freedmen and loyal refugees," although the most fertile and promising land had previously been claimed prior to the war (Lanza 1990; Williams 2000). In total, only 2.9 million acres, or six percent of the total land offered, was transferred before the program was disbanded after a decade. Williams (2000) provides a dispiriting analysis of the demographic data:

> Estimates from a sample of homestead claims in Mississippi reveal that about 23% of claimants under the Southern Homestead Act were judged to be Black. In that sample, 35% of Black claims were successful compared to 25% of white claims (Lanza 1990). Using these percentages, 5440 of the 27,800 final patents may have been awarded to Black homesteaders. Citing Magdol (1977), only 4000 Blacks even made homestead entries under the Act (p. 160). Either way, the reality is that few homesteads were granted to Black claimants. (Williams 2000)

With its mission and focus aiding predominantly black Americans, the Freedmen's Bureau faced much resistance. In 1866, the second Freedmen's Bureau bill, both expanding the bureau and making it permanent, was vetoed by Johnson. A modified version of the bill would eventually pass over yet another Johnson veto, but it was indicative of the staunch resistance the bureau faced throughout its work, as Du Bois writes in *Black Reconstruction:*

> Even if it had been a perfect and well-planned machine for its mission, the planters in the main were determined to try to coerce both black labor and white, without outside interference of any sort. They proposed to enact and enforce the black codes. They were going to replace legal slavery by customary serfdom and caste. And they were going to do all this because they could not conceive of civilization in the South with free Negro workers, or Negro soldiers or voters. . .Under these circumstances, the astonishing thing is that the Bureau was able to accomplish any definite and worth-while results. . . (Du Bois 1935, p. 223–224)

Despite "haphazard" financial support throughout the bureau's short-lived existence – it wrapped up its operations in 1872 – the committee that reviewed the bureau's performance in 1874 commended its efforts, while noting the resistance the program faced: "No thirteen millions of dollars were ever more wisely spent; yet, from the beginning, this scheme has encountered the bitterest opposition and most relenting hate" (Du Bois 1935, p. 229).

Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, the honing of polling practices enables an analysis with finer granularity of which policies and proposals continue to spark resistance from the dominant group.

As stratification economics predicts, attitudes toward group-based preferential treatment became more hostile as the recipients of such benefits changed. Following the advent of Executive Order #10925 that established "affirmative action" – and, after a 54-day filibuster, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – policies targeting or disproportionately benefitting black Americans have received varying levels of support.

In certain instances, such support can be inconsistent, if not contradictory. One poll from 1992, for example, showed that 44 percent of respondents thought too much was being spent on "welfare" but only 13 percent thought too much was being spent on "assistance to the poor" (Zinn 1980, p. 579). As racial animus drives much of the animosity toward programs like "welfare," use of that term – as well as the tinged phrases "quotas" and "reverse discrimination" – can trigger a more negative response in the dominant group (Gilens 1995; Feagin and Porter 1995).

More generally, public support for policies benefitting blacks shifts in proportion to the policies' magnitude and/or directness of help. A 2019 Pew survey showed three-quarters of Americans believed it is important for "companies and organizations to promote racial and ethnic diversity in their workplace"; the same exact survey showed nearly three-quarters saying race and ethnicity should *not* be taken into account when considering hiring and promotions (Horowitz 2019). Diversity is all well and good, until the necessary steps toward greater inclusion are explicit and the status and privileges of the dominant group become threatened in a job market that is seen as a zero-sum game.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, stratification economics does not afford much optimism for effective policy solutions. On the face of it, universal policies that disproportionately benefit the subordinate group might hold the greatest political possibility. There are caveats. Universal policies – and especially universal opportunities – are rarely truly universal. They can be easily derailed by bad actors, in the winding journey from fruition to implementation, to become targeted policies hiding behind a veneer of universality, as was the case with the GI Bill. They can be victims of the cruel calculus of bigotry, as the victims of historical injustices are then deemed lending risks and redlined out of future funding. They can be submerged in the heavy sands of historical injustice, in which barriers are overlooked – the fees that black homesteaders would have to pay, the bigotry they would face as landowners – and the moment for racial change passes.

But upon closer inspection, it appears that policies often escape unflagged when they work with and calcify existing patterns of discrimination. When such policies work against the grain of such patterns, however, they become objectionable; while white privilege and discrimination has been "normalized over time, and has shaped everyday interactions between blacks and whites from enslavement to the present day," what some might call "reverse discrimination" is unacceptable (Stokes et al. 2003, p. 14).

The period after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 shows us that discrimination falls when "active corrective policies" are implemented (Darity 2005). But since 1968 and the civil rights era, whites in America have, in fact, largely maintained their dominant economic status, slightly widening the racial wealth gap (Kuhn et al. 2020). Despite the initial promise that affirmative action held as an "active corrective policy" for black Americans, attacks on its constitutionality through a series of Supreme Court cases have drastically weakened and broadened its focus such that most of its benefits have been shuttled to white women (Moseley-Braun 1995). It is not unreasonable to expect similar fates to befall policies that directly aim to assist subaltern groups.

However, there exist a few scenarios in which gains may be made, somewhat indirectly and unpredictably. First, history has previously provided periods of shock and serendipity in which the subaltern group is the majority or finds itself in the halls of power with the capacity to write the rules for affirmative action. The direct hand that B.R. Ambedkar had in writing the post-independence Indian Constitution – and garnering support for a system akin to affirmative action to benefit the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes – comes to mind (Weisskopf 2023).

Indeed, in moments of great upheaval and crisis, ideas that were previously unfeasible can suddenly achieve popular support. Many of the examples discussed in this chapter – homesteading during and following the Civil War, the New Deal during the Great Depression, the civil rights bills amidst the upheaval of the 1960s – came amidst unrest. Similarly, profit-seeking opportunists have used natural disasters and fomented crises around the world in order to create volatile environments in which economic policies might be changed for their benefit (Klein 2007). While none of these examples (save, perhaps, some consequences of the provisions in the Indian Constitution) led to long-term improvements for subaltern groups, the principle – that in such moments, bold ideas become more feasible – is worth heeding.

Second, it is worth considering universal policies in which relative gains for subaltern group members are overshadowed by the individual gains for dominant group members. For example, a federal job guarantee, as proposed by Paul et al. (2018), would not target any specific group, but due to the intersection of race and un−/underemployment, individuals in the subaltern group would reap the most benefit. While many individuals in the dominant group will continue to resist this – those that are gainfully employed and would receive no economic benefit and would simply see their group's relative economic status decline – it is feasible that enough lower-class individuals in the dominant group would receive a substantial direct benefit and support the policy. Indeed, initial polling suggests substantial popular support for such a program (Budryk 2020).

However, this is akin to a class-based affirmative action policy. Thus, it will not alleviate all the disparities that have accrued and continue to accrue from race-based discrimination and intergenerational inherited deprivation, as Darity et al. (2011) emphasize.

Third, one could project a "Trojan horse" scenario in which the subaltern group gains in the short term because a previously implemented policy, viewed as innocuous, has beneficial effects that were initially overlooked. For example, job training programs for blacks have more support than job quotas, as the gains they promise are less substantial and tangible (and, notably, such programs are consistent with the view that black exclusion stems from black deficiency, not from discrimination). If these programs were to be improved – perhaps by accurately predicting macroeconomic demands and retraining applicants accordingly – such that they led directly to well-compensated job offers for all in the program, the relative position of the subaltern group would improve. However, over time, it is likely that the dominant group would realize the threat it had missed and rectify, or terminate, such a program.

Finally, demographic change presents us one last, Charlie Brown-esque kick at the football. If the dominant group becomes overwhelmed numerically or the subaltern population develops a majority voting bloc, then a path to approval for affirmative action might not have to garner support from white America. A number of problems arise, though, when considering the overwhelming inclination of immigrating individuals to self-identify as white (regardless of skin tone) and that the strength of the self-identity of individuals in the subaltern group scales with the penalty they face for belonging to said group (Darity et al. 2006, 2017). In other words, it is unlikely that the dominant group will disappear soon (let alone peacefully), and the agitation from the subaltern group for such affirmative action policies might weaken as the dominant group becomes less powerful and punitive.

As such, stratification economics – and the balance of American history – tells us that to project a feasible route to a group-based affirmative action policy on behalf of a subaltern group in America is rather wishful. Such an outcome is not impossible, but it will require some fortune, the arrival of which will undoubtedly spark a discovery of new depth under the bedrocks of this burgeoning subfield.

Given what stratification economics says about the dominant group's resistance to threats to its status, though, perhaps the best chance of achieving popular support for a policy that lets black Americans "walk through the gates of opportunity" is if white Americans do not think it actually will help black Americans walk through the gates.

Cross-References

► Affirmative Action in the USA and India
► Stereotype Threat

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