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**Title: Brief Comments on Race and Progressive Politics**

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**NOTE OF CAUTION:** Jared Diamond writes in his new book (*Collapse*) that people often ask ‘What is the single most important environmental/population problem facing the world today?’ and his flip answer is ‘The single most important problem is our misguided focus on identifying the single most important problem!’ The reason for us stating this is because in our quest as a progressive movement for creating unity by underscoring “our sole most common denominator” (e.g., class) we could be cultivating the seeds of disunity by forcing homogeneity into our diversity of experiences. Hence, by being more “open” to our heterogeneity of experiences from the outset, we might harvest that coveted “unity” and furthermore strengthen our movement and increasing the probability of success: “bringing to reality a life worth living to every human being.”

Politically, there’s no question that class is a lot more appealing as a mobilizing idea for liberal reformers. But focusing on class may not address the unique features of race that are critical to the success of anti-poverty efforts. The structural racism perspective of America’s equity dilemma reveals that even after significant national investment in antipoverty (i.e., class-based) efforts, the race/class Gordian knot has not been untied. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians remain highly underrepresented within the ranks of the middle and upper classes and still represent a disproportionate share of the poor. Moreover, research continues to point out ways in which being a person of color brings disadvantages, regardless of income level or class. The pervasiveness of racial profiling in law enforcement, hiring practices, educational tracking, home mortgage lending, real estate appraisals, health care access, and many other areas suggests that we cannot yet analyze our society in race-neutral terms if we seriously want to address its inequities. – *Aspen Roundtable on Community Change*

King’s message was that we must acknowledge the experience of racial exclusion to remind us about the need ‘to enlarge democracy for all the people.’ The experience of the dispossessed in general and blacks in particular can be politically inclusive if racial justice is a window enabling us to see the larger injustice instead of a plea for succumbing to it. In this way, King claimed race as starting point for systematic reform. – *Miner’s Canary*, 105.

We argue that a progressive politics must be inclusive of both race and class as critical points of inclusion not as opposing or competing structures, but multiple constitutive elements of U.S. life and politics. The history of the U.S. has been and continues to be informed by race. Across the history of the U.S., political institutions, public policies, and social arrangements have been informed by race. To ignore this foundation as we create new political organizations and alliances would be to misunderstand the foundation of the state.

The main questions that arise from our advocacy to include “race” or not solely focus a progressive movement on “class” are: why, what would be our gains, and how should we include “race?” The short answers to these questions would be because of our empirical racial reality, our racialized history, and democracy (why); reaching to our core humanity and humanizing our unjust arrangements (gains); and differentiating among our ethical project, coalition work, policies, and electoral politics (how).

Nevertheless, we argue that an even more relevant (but usually undermined or taken as given) question would be, what do we mean by “race?” For sure we are not advocating an essentialist understanding of race, but as Guinier and Torres conceptualize it: *political race*. They argue,

We use the word ‘race’ in multiple ways within our political race project. First, ...the term race is an empirical diagnostic to assess the material conditions of a group of people. Second, the term describes those who identify with the struggles of racialized groups, usually including people conventionally defined as racial group members but not limited to them. For us, the term connotes those who have made a concrete choice – or whose material conditions can encourage such a choice – to engage in transformative struggle. (*Miner’s Canary*, 106)

In this understanding of “race” it is impossible to argue that it would create divisions within a progressive movement because it is not a conceptualization that indicates that the sole beneficiaries would be those defined as “people of color.” “People of color” would serve as a starting analytical and proactive point because they would make evident the most unjust qualities of our arrangements.

In our view, a progressive movement should attempt to bring to reality a life worth living to every human being. It should attempt to address unjust inequalities in place, which impede achieving a life worth living to many human beings. There is a diversity of unequal outcomes and causes, and that is why a progressive movement needs to remain open and flexible to be able to adjust to changing circumstances and contexts. Historical cleavages exist regarding class, gender, race, ethnicity, creed, and sexual orientation which need to be confronted open and directly for being addressed. We might have as a sublime goal that all of these cleavages become irrelevant, meaning that it would be impossible to predict your life chances by any of these identifiers. Nevertheless, this is not the case today and it might not become true for some time, which makes an open progressive agenda important and necessary. And this sublime goal might just be possible only with an open and stubborn confrontation of these issues. Pretending that they do not exist or will just go away is a delusional strategy.

There is the perception that “racial issues” would “disrupt” the “unity” of a progressive movement because they deviate our attention from the important “issue:” improving life chances of individuals irrespective of demographics. Basically, this is a call for underscoring “class” as THE unifying and relevant cleavage. Nevertheless, we should not be thinking in “either/or” terms. It is true that our objective should be to eradicate any obstacles toward a life worth living for all human beings, but it is also worth-the-while to take the time to think about any conflicts between the underscoring of “racial issues” and the advancing of a generalized agenda. Why?

Because it is a fact that “people of color” tend to be worse off in many important life dimensions, and if genetics or biology are not the answer for those marked inequalities, we need to search elsewhere. What is impeding “people of color” as a group (i.e., diverse in itself) to do better? We can only answer or begin to address this question by making “racial issues” explicit and an important element of our progressive agenda. This is so, because by understanding, identifying, and eliminating those stubborn obstacles impeding life chances for “people of color” we contribute to the emancipation of the majority of humanity. Furthermore, as we stated against an “either/or” mentality to advocate for the inclusion of “racial issues” into a progressive agenda, the same is true for not stopping at “racial issues.” The advocacy is for including and understanding the different interrelations of excluding dimensions that erect invisible, but tangible life barriers for many human beings. Sometimes the exclusionary dimension is race, gender, class, ethnicity, creed, sexual orientation, among others and any combinations among these, but the fact of the matter is that we need to stand for humanity’s emancipation in its entirety and against anything that might truncate the self-realization of any human being.

We are all interested and committed to social justice issues. Our disagreement is regarding the merits of including (or not) “race” as an essential part of this progressive agenda. We would like to underscore a danger (i.e., practical and ethical) of assuming that “class” would encapsulate and address “racial issues.” This has to do with the advocacy of "separate but equal." We argue that focusing on “class” in and of itself would do nothing to address the de facto segregation that we have today in the U.S. (e.g., schools, communities). Our question is if we would be happy/content as a progressive movement with such an outcome? Are we willing, as a progressive movement, to be associated as advocating the slogan of "separate but equal?"

Our aim is not to create divisions within a progressive movement or reify racial divisions in our society, but to confront them by acknowledging that they exist and that only by engaging them it would be possible to surpass them. We are committed to a transformative agenda of our social arrangements and we think that ignoring the material implications underlying “race” would be a disservice to these marginalized groups, to a progressive movement, and to our society as a whole.

We also think that an intrinsic element of a progressive movement is its advocacy (and practice of) for democracy. Thus, eliminating “race” from the outset of our progressive agenda could only be justified if it is done in a democratic manner. Nevertheless, as Amartya Sen argues, every ethical and evaluative system can be characterized by its

“informational bases” (i.e., what it takes or does not take into consideration). And irrespective of the democratic manner through which the inclusion and exclusion of bases of information takes place, it does not deny its ultimate characterization. We argue that such an elimination of “race” from our progressive agenda would be detrimental because ultimately it is based on an instrumental fear of division rather than on a constitutive understanding and creation of a transformative progressive movement.

“Race” is not important in and of itself, but it was made important, it was constructed and embedded into our social, political, and economic realities and continues to be so. Denying the past or wishing a “raceless,” “colorblind,” “de-racialized” future would not make it happen. In order to achieve that “de-racialized” future we need to work for it, assess and address our disagreements through democratic discussion, coalition-building, policy advocacy, and electoral politics. In other words, through multiple action fronts, but without losing sight of a progressive movement quest: to bring to reality a life worth living to every human being.

### **References:**

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Aspen Roundtable on Community Change

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