

THE RACE PROBLEM AND “MORAL INNOCENCE”

In January 1988 *Commentary* magazine published an essay by a black professor of English at San Jose State University. “On Being Black and Middleclass” introduced Shelby Steele as a new interpreter of American race relations. Since then, Steele’s work has appeared regularly in some of our most prominent intellectual journals. Steele appears on national television and is quoted widely in editorials. At the university where I worked, one of his essays was distributed by an administration in search of campus racial quietude.

Steele’s recent visibility may have more to do with ideological “utility” than with the power of his arguments. He has captured attention for having successfully appealed to sentiments floating around in the popular mind. He has tapped into the enduring American ideology of individual achievement and self-sufficiency. Yet one cannot ignore the obvious. Much of his intellectual capital lies in his blackness. His lack of profundity is concealed by the novelty of his voice as a nonliberal black. It is probably for this reason that Steele has become the black intellectual-of-choice among neoconservatives and establishment liberals.

In *The Content of our Character*,* a collection of previously published essays, Steele states that the true source of trouble between whites and blacks is that “races are competing power groups.” But unlike other students of racial conflict with similar assumptions, Steele informs us that the prize they compete for is neither wealth nor material power but “moral innocence.” “The

racial struggle in America,” he argues, “has always been primarily a struggle for innocence.” White racists created the idea of blacks as inferior in order to feel innocent (read: entitled) in their domination of blacks. Blacks, in making their case for their moral superiority, lay claim to an innocence that absolves them of guilt about their own plight. But meanwhile the lack of black guilt means relinquishing a sense of self-responsibility. At the same time, Steele depicts whites as mired in a pit of racial guilt toward blacks. This guilt stems from their knowledge of the treatment of blacks by their white ancestors. According to Steele, during the 1960s,

whites lost some of their innocence and so lost a degree of power over blacks. Both races instinctively understand that to lose innocence is to lose power (in relation to each other). To be innocent someone else must feel guilty, a natural law that leads the races to forge their innocence on each other’s backs. The inferiority of the black always makes the white man superior; the evil might of whites makes blacks good. *This pattern means that both races have a hidden investment in racism and racial disharmony despite their good intentions to the contrary.* (Emphasis added.)

To show how guilt and innocence control black-white relations, Steele invokes the policies of Ronald Reagan. Although Steele supported Reagan’s attempt to end “racial quotas and any affirmative action that supersedes merit,” he did object to Reagan’s claims for moral innocence toward blacks. According to Steele, blacks sensed that Reagan was trying to deny their claims to innocence and therefore objected to his reasonable domestic policies. Ac-

* *The Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, by Shelby Steele. St. Martin’s Press, 1990.

According to Steele, Reagan's "emphasis on traditional American values—individual initiative, self-sufficiency, strong families—offered . . . the most enduring solution to the demoralization and poverty that continue to widen the gap between blacks and whites in America."

As Steele sees it, the central problem for today's Afro-Americans lies in the fact that their historical oppression at the hands of previous generations of white racists has fueled a self-destructive quest for innocence. Worse still, this memory of oppression is invoked by blacks to explain their own inability to succeed in an age when racism is no longer a major handicap to black lives. But why, one may ask, do blacks relish this innocence? Steele claims that the answer lies in the peculiar way innocence entitles blacks to pursue power. Yet the peculiarity of this black entitlement to power "binds the victim to his victimization by linking his power to his status as victim." The supposed tragic result of this is that blacks have experienced "twenty years of decline and demoralization, even as opportunities for blacks to better themselves have increased." Blacks, Steele notes, "are further behind whites today than before the victories of the civil rights movement." He concludes: "If conditions have worsened for most of us as racism has receded, then much of the problem must be of our own making."

Steele says that blacks cannot generally admit to their flight from responsibility, for they would then lose the sense of innocence they derive from victimization. Blacks, he writes, are now in a paradoxical position where taking responsibility for their lives is seen as nothing less than a capitulation to white power. A corollary argument that Steele repetitiously makes is that blacks invoke racism as the cause of their individual failures when in fact their personal incompetence is probably to blame. Essentially, blacks use the idea of racism as a therapeutic balm for their shortcomings. Worse, too many blacks don't try to better themselves precisely because they hold on to an outdated image of America as a racist country that denies blacks opportunity. Rather than risk their vulnerable identities in the American

meritocratic contest for upward mobility, blacks engage in a "flight from opportunity."

According to Steele, this black self-defeatism has now been institutionalized in affirmative action policies. Affirmative action eliminates the need for blacks to excel. All one need do to benefit from such programs is to be black. However, the hidden consequences of these policies is an employment ceiling beyond which blacks cannot advance, a ceiling enforced by white employers who expect their upper-echelon managers to have earned their positions. In effect, affirmative action limits mobility. Further, blacks who benefit from affirmative action suffer doubt about the authenticity of their achievements. They cannot take pride in their achievements because they know that they have been unfairly favored. They wonder whether they are inferior.

The Content of our Character is an extraordinarily repetitious collection of essays. A reader can get the gist of Steele's arguments by reading one of the longer essays and skipping the rest. Yet each individual essay is well written. In an era when academicians find it difficult to convey ideas even to colleagues in the same discipline, the academic who writes for a general audience should be saluted.

What makes Steele even more enticing to a casual reader is the emotional undercurrent of his writings. His essays are all self-referential in a way that generates a sense of personal vulnerability. At a time when the "personal is political," self-referential writers are able to use their own life stories as the center point for the unfolding of history. Moreover, they do so in a manner that lures readers into believing that they are engaging in a more universalistic commentary than those offered by most autobiographies. Steele is a master of this genre.

Yet, the book is fundamentally flawed. It is riddled with illogical claims and factual misrepresentations. First and foremost, Steele's attempt to analyze black-white relations as a competition for moral innocence is utterly simplistic. He does not use the quest for innocence as a metaphor for the ideological underpinnings of black-white relations. Instead, he asserts that most blacks personally cherish a belief in their moral superiority vis-à-vis white Americans. This is news to me.

Doesn't such an assertion require some mention of data? Do black Americans living in urban welfare hotels sit around at night claiming, "We may not have enough to eat but at least we're morally superior to white folks" or "I won't get a job because then we will have more to eat and a better place to live but in the process we will lose our innocence"?

Steele might want to claim that these views operate on the subconscious level. Still, to believe this, we would need some supporting data—perhaps from shrinks who service black people in welfare hotels. If, as Steele argues, the quest for moral innocence is the fundamental human drive, and moral innocence is derived from victimization, why do we not see a massive migration of affluent whites from Fairfield County to the South Bronx? Given the logic of Steele's argument that moral innocence is a form of power and that this power is greatest among the victimized, one is forced into dialectical frivolity: the powerless are the most powerful!

Steele believes that blacks spend too much time and energy remembering their historical oppression. This "memory of enemies" supposedly hinders blacks from taking advantage of present-day opportunities. But how strong is this black memory? Again, Steele sidesteps any question that demands knowledge greater than that provided by his intuition. For that matter, who has a bigger "memory of enemies" than some American Jews? Yet their memory certainly does not seem to have undermined their upward mobility.

According to Steele's logic, the struggle between David Rockefeller and a black street beggar is a struggle for moral innocence. Rockefeller wants people to think he is entitled to his power; thus he desires to be seen as innocent. The black street beggar wants passersby to feel guilty about his plight. Steele thinks that his discussion is evenhanded because he would be willing to argue that neither Rockefeller nor the beggar is more innocent than the other. As to the reasons behind the differences in their life-styles, Steele has little to say except to imply that Rockefeller may be driven by personal responsibility, while the black beggar is probably self-destructive. White beggars seem unexplainable.

Steele writes about race relations without *any* mention of political and economic structures. Ignoring the work of analysts like William J.

Wilson, he doesn't have a clue as to the significance of status or class. That Steele and his black "yuppie" peers (called in the black community "buppies") have experienced "opportunity" supposedly proves the existence of opportunity for all blacks. Steele's dichotomy of it's either the fault of racism or of us indicates a mind incapable of complexity. He makes empirical claims about the entirety of black life using only his personal encounters as data base. It is incredible that an author can make statements about black life without providing a reference to any scholarly study. For instance, Steele asserts that on most American campuses today the children of black professional parents are offered scholarship monies not available to the children of working-class white parents. This was certainly not the case at Wesleyan University, where I have taught, nor at Harvard or Yale, where I was a student.

When talking about affirmative action, Steele would have us believe that blacks are overrunning white meritocratic institutions. But where on American campuses are black faculty roaming around in large numbers? Dartmouth? Berkeley? The University of Virginia? At present, the entire Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences has only two tenured blacks—Orlando Patterson and Martin Kilson.

It is naïve for Steele to assume that prior to affirmative action the United States was a meritocracy for whites. Many white male faculty at the best of our universities were the beneficiaries of a racially and sexually restricted job market. Do these men question the validity of their achievements because of this "advantage"? Of course not. In fact, Steele wouldn't even mention this possibility, for the unstated racist corollary to Steele's arguments concerning contemporary black advantage is that earlier generations of blacks, had they been provided the opportunity, would not have been able to compete for these jobs anyway. And if black beneficiaries of affirmative action policies are so riddled with doubt, why don't they refuse to be beneficiaries? Interestingly, Steele condemns affirmative action and then proceeds to use the black mobility enabled by affirmative action as proof of the attenuation of racism.

Steele does not tell us why we should see his own racial anxieties as characteristic of all

black life. His doubts become “our doubts”; his fears, “our fears.” But then, it is essential to Steele’s arguments that we see him as the typical black. Steele ultimately “essentializes” black Americans to such a degree that he allows for no diversity among us.

Though the book is written as if Steele is a personal voice from everyday black life, it is conspicuously aimed at white readers. But in pursuit of a white ear, Steele’s critique of white America avoids sharpness. The fundamental premise of Steele’s text is that whites have achieved the moral and cultural character that blacks need to acquire. Steele has written a praisesong for white America. He writes as if his white American readership has been exorcised of all remnants of racism. Well, Steele might admit, there are *some* racially parochial white people, but they are few and far between. It is not incidental that Steele can write, “As a black person you always hear about racists but rarely meet any.” Perhaps this is a bad joke, but I think it is one step in a carefully orchestrated shuffle.

If there is a redeeming quality to Steele’s book, it lies in its message to black middle-class readers. Blacks who do have opportunities may be inspired by Steele to confront some racially inspired personal doubts that have kept them from realizing their potential. Steele is quite perceptive about the racial angst present in certain sectors of the black middle class.

Within the black populace there are certainly underachievers, self-defeatists, victim-status pimps, and terrified loudmouths parading in militant garb. There are also many blacks in need of more moral autonomy. Yet its absence in some blacks does not account for the relative absence of autonomy among many blacks. Steele does not understand the distinction between feeling responsible for oneself and being able to realize a self-sufficient (nonwelfare) existence. The latter requires opportunity. It is shameful for Steele to write as if the key to alleviating the plight of the black lower class lies solely in self-help. When coupled with Steele’s claim that Reagan’s presidency offered a reasonable set of policy options toward the black poor, his book becomes appalling.

In some important respects, Steele’s text reads like a modernized version of Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*. Though their subtexts are the burden of American racism, both authors tend to highlight only those personal interactions with whites that were helpful along their journeys. Like Washington, Steele calls for blacks to relinquish political engagement in behalf of improving “the content of their characters.” Whereas Washington wanted to use the passivity of blacks as a trade-off to obtain white philanthropic aid, Steele’s agenda, if he has one, has not been articulated.

I know that I cannot undo Steele’s attractiveness to many white Americans, for he touches deep ideological and psychological wellsprings. After all, Steele’s nonsense found its way into the pages of this democratic socialist journal despite the fact that he wrote about the contemporary black plight with no reference to the political-economic contexts of black lives.

Steele’s popularity rests on the fact that he allows whites to admit their frustration at the fact that the Negro problem just won’t go away. After all these years, black folk continue to spend much of their time generating never-ending accusations and complaints. All the while—the feeling goes—they are robbing and raping, hooked on crack, producing unwanted babies, killing each other, and dancing on Soul Train rather than attending school. Black political leadership is generally mediocre and seemingly indifferent to the wrongs perpetrated by blacks on whites. Admittedly, dealing with the black problem might have frustrated even Francis of Assisi. And who is more frustrated with our problem than blacks themselves?

But when Steele says that it is paradoxical that twenty-five years after the civil rights movement, black conditions have worsened, we need only respond that five years after the 1963 March on Washington the federal government decided that black social inclusion would not be a national priority. Since the days of the Nixon presidency, America has steadfastly refused to tackle its racial problems. We may never solve them; and if we listen to Shelby Steele we may not even try. □