

The Long Path to Higher Education for African Americans

by Troy Duster

When we consider the possibilities for a new progressive era in American higher education, it seems wise to review the past. Certainly there are lessons to be learned, and there are some surprises, too. In fact, the latter part of the 20th century was one of great progress for diversity in higher education, generally speaking, and for African Americans in particular. Unfortunately, for the first two-thirds of its history, American higher education had a decidedly apartheid-like character. It was not until the late 1960s that the nation finally broke through the barriers that had effectively separated races, religions, and genders into separate colleges.

Today, only four decades after that critically important era, the American higher educational system has one of the most inclusively diverse student body compositions in the world. To set the larger framework for the changes that dramatically reconstituted U.S. higher education and the shifting relationship of African Americans to this system, it will be useful to examine some of the key social, economic and political forces that generated these changes. After reviewing this history, I turn my attention to India and South Africa, two nations that have used the U.S. as a model for their own responses to insurgent claims from previously excluded groups.

As late as the first decade of the 20th century, educational leaders in the U.S. routinely embraced the idea and practice of separate educational institutions by race and gender. In the immediate period after the Civil War and the dramatic seeding of educational institutions for Black Americans during Reconstruction, this dedica-

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tion to segregation resulted in the creation of traditionally Black colleges over much of the South. These institutions would serve to educate more than 97 percent of African American students over the next nine decades. Meanwhile, traditionally White colleges were educating nearly 100 percent of the nation's White students.

In 1967, only two percent of all African Americans attending U.S. higher education institutions were enrolled in traditionally White colleges and universities.¹ In the seven years following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., things changed so much that, by 1975, the majority of Black college students were enrolled in traditionally White universities. The seeds of change, however, were

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sewn in the immediate aftermath of the 1898 Supreme Court decision declaring the legality of “separate but equal” institutions and facilities by race. The backlash began then, and within a decade, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—celebrating the 100th anniversary of its founding this year—would emerge to lay the groundwork for the successful challenge to this decision. It would require another half-century to prevail.

The earliest American colonial colleges were designed to perform two functions: First and foremost, was training a literate clergy. The colonies had allegiance to the British crown, where there was no separation of church and state. The second, but nearly as important mandate in the charter of these early colleges, was that they also trained men who would enter public life in professions other than the ministry. The undisputed fact was that the faculties were men of the clergy. They took it as their mission to weld Christian theology and secular curricular matters. Not only did they see no contradiction (the separation of church and state would become part of the U.S. Constitution only at the close of the 18th century), they saw instead a duty in the integration of Christian teaching, knowledge and service. Quakers and Jews, even if permitted to enroll, would find themselves the “diversity” in most of these institutions in the 1730s. Until the last decade of the 18th century, boards of trustees and the presidents of these colleges were also all men of the cloth. Well into the 19th century (1825), a visiting missionary student from Switzerland wrote:

There are in the United States 40 or 50 colleges containing perhaps in the whole 4,000 or 5,000 students ... A great proportion of these colleges and with two or three exceptions all of the most flourishing are managed more or less by the pious orthodox clergy who are thus preparing to exert an immense influence on the national character.²

The dominance of the clergy was not the only uncontested issue. Social class homogeneity was also a given. For example, the founding documents for Harvard College provide as the only criterion for admission that the young scholar be able to read Latin and Greek. This speaks loudly of the self-selection via social standing, class, and privilege. As was the tradition of the times in Europe as well, all the students were males.

Finally, in this first phase of the American system of higher education, these colleges and universities were primarily private, not public institutions. This would change at the beginning of the 19th century, with state governments and the new

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federal government providing land as grants to new states. The earliest “land grants” preceded the Morrill Act (1857) by half a century. Thomas Jefferson, for example, championed the University of Virginia, a state-owned public university, transferring his allegiance away from Dartmouth College, on the grounds that the University of Virginia would be free from control by any religious denomination.

There is no doubt that the passage of the Morrill Act was one of those decisive moments that would fundamentally alter U.S. higher education. Probably the most important thing that it accomplished was the idea of federal support buttressed by annual state funding. This brought to center stage the issue of explicit policy considerations by the state as to what would constitute a relevant curriculum. Indeed, state funding combined seamlessly with increasing industrialization and the surging scientific revolution to push the curriculum into territories far, far removed from the original ecclesiastical concerns of the clergy. Now, the task was to help the agricultural and mining sectors of the economy. In the late 19th century, agriculture and mining were such dominant twinned concerns that everyone came to know them by their initials alone, A&M. In fact, many states would initiate colleges with this specific mandate: Texas A&M, Oklahoma A&M and many others came into being under this banner.

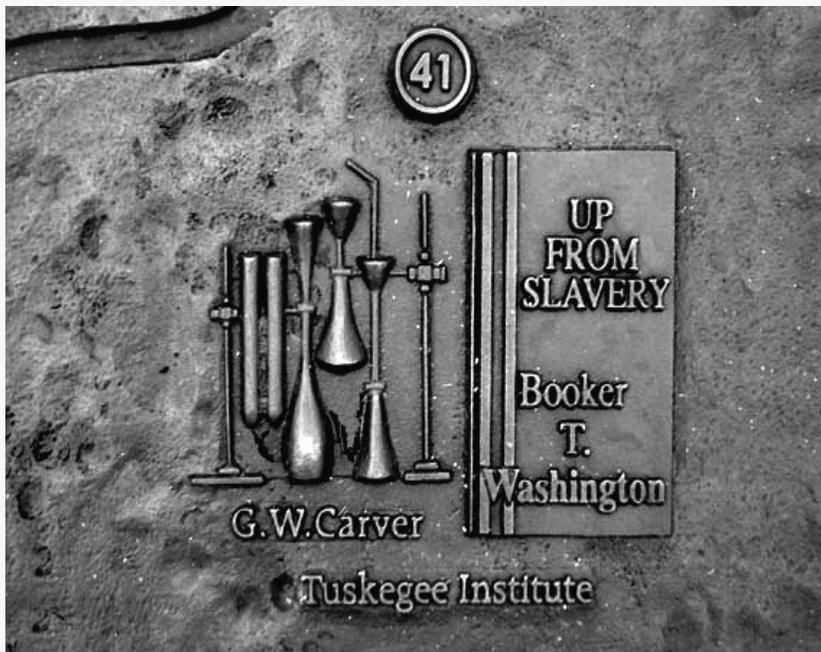
Prior to emancipation, slaves had not only been held back from learning to read and write, in some jurisdictions it was even a criminal offense to teach a slave to read. Nonetheless, while literacy was scarce during slavery, it was not unknown. Nearly 400,000 Blacks—about 10 percent of those in the South—possessed some degree of literacy in 1865. Not all were free Blacks. During the 1930s, of the nearly 3,500 former slaves interviewed by the Works Progress Administration, five percent had become literate before emancipation.³ Once they had their freedom, hundreds of new communities of former slaves were bursting with energy and

enthusiastic support for literacy, for as many as possible, and as quickly as possible. Just after the Civil War, northern troops literally “occupied” the Southern states of the defeated Confederacy, and in the short space of a few years, Blacks suddenly found themselves with the widespread and increasingly used right to vote, to officially marry, to own property, and of course, to go to school.

Education was seen as the key that would open new doors, from employment to political and economic ascendancy. In this new South, Blacks were being elected to city councils, state legislatures, and to the U.S. Congress. This was also a period of northern missionary zeal to help the newly freed slaves, and the new schools were a beacon of hope that beckoned Christian women from the Northeast and Midwest who came south to teach. They came by the hundreds, even thousands, and in that first decade of Reconstruction the rates of literacy among Blacks skyrocketed. A sense of hopefulness, indeed, a trajectory that signaled eventual political and economic sovereignty seized the imagination of many. For thousands of young blacks whose childhood and adolescence was forged in this climate, it was taken for granted that social and political equality between the races would eventually be accomplished—if not in their lifetime, then certainly in a foreseeable future.

What no one could have foreseen was the smoldering deal that would be struck between northern and southern Whites in the Tilden-Hayes compromise. Eventually, this would mean the withdrawal of northern troops, the end of Reconstruction, and the ushering in of an era of unprecedented ascendancy of the ideas and practices of white supremacy.

The young Ida B. Wells bore witness to these changes, but never accepted that there could be a permanent erosion of the rule of a more egalitarian law that she



had experienced in her formative years during Reconstruction. In large measure, this is the context in which she refused to take a back seat to Whites—or move to separate and segregated sections—in the famous train episode, an eerie harbinger of Rosa Parks’ bus ride some six decades later.⁴ After Reconstruction, “white supremacy” was codified into specific laws (later called Jim Crow laws) and strict rules forbidding Blacks to have equal access to travel accommodations on trains was but one of the many proliferations of these new laws. Ida Wells went on to become an outstanding crusading journalist and years later would come to play a role in the formation of the NAACP.

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During those 30 years after the emancipation, Black colleges grew rapidly and thrived in the South. They were aided by northern Christian churches, who sent hundreds of “schoolmarm” to the common schools to teach young blacks. The staff of these fledgling institutes was almost entirely comprised of idealistic northern missionaries. For example, the American Missionary Society of New York founded Atlanta University in Georgia and Talladega College in Alabama. At first, the concern was with secondary education. Just getting the basics was a Herculean task, producing functional literacy for 3 million people who had been purposefully excluded from any educational institution. The attempt to found these negro colleges aroused the anger of the White South. In 1870, the president of Talladega was shot and killed.

This is the larger context in which Booker T. Washington would argue for racial conciliation. To at least publicly avoid any appearance of direct competition for higher educational access with Whites, Washington said that Blacks should concentrate on the trades and manual labor. His position eased much of the White southern opposition to the establishment of Black colleges, and most southern states agreed to provide funding for the vocational/trade education of African Americans. This was further advanced by the passage of the second Morrill Act of 1890. While the Act required that federal funds would only go to states that did not discriminate, it also provided that states could provide “separate but equal facilities.” This spurred the southern states to support the building and development of separate Black institutions of higher education, but keeping them primarily as trade schools.

The tension between accommodation to existing social and political circumstances and militant resistance has a long history in the nation’s three centuries of race relations. But, like most socio-historical tales with a simple linear account,

matters are far more complicated than choosing sides. For example, while Washington did publicly preach accommodationism, asserting that Blacks should learn labor skills and not compete with Whites in higher educational institutions, he also took money from White philanthropists and established Tuskegee College as a place where Blacks could get training to become doctors and lawyers.⁵

The complexity of the situation in the South is subtly captured in an exchange between Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist who headed a massive study of race in America, and the president of an NAACP chapter in the Deep South whom Myrdal interviewed:

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“The NAACP stands firm on its principles and demands our rights as American citizens,” explained the person being interviewed, “but it accomplishes little or nothing in this town because it arouses a good deal of anger in whites.” He went on to explain that another local organization, the League of Civic Improvement, was “humble and pussyfooting, begs for many favors, from the whites, and succeeds quite often.” Asked by Myrdal who headed this civic improvement league, the NAACP president—an elderly and distinguished looking man—admitted that he did. “We are all the same people in both organizations.”⁶

In this exchange lies a profound but often unacknowledged truth about the conflict between those who preached accommodation and those who adamantly espoused resistance and militancy. In the pages of history, the two are portrayed as fierce advocates—and in some instances, that was certainly true. But on the ground and in the experience, that conflict was often reconciled in the political astuteness of those who examined context and circumstance. That conflict often had to be reconciled within the same individual, as reflected in the Myrdal interview quoted above.

It is in this larger context that we can begin to better understand the struggle between those urging militancy and confrontation and those counseling accommodation. The Black colleges would come to provide a kind of supportive environment for Black students, and generate and nurture leadership independent from direct control by Whites. These colleges had a near monopoly on the training of the Black elite. As noted earlier, almost all African Americans who were college-educated in the U.S. attended these “traditionally Black colleges” prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. This decision famously struck down the “separate but equal” principal that had generated the funding for separate Black colleges. However, this decision also contained the phrase “with all

deliberate speed” that would confound the policy and action debates and strategies for the remainder of the 20th century. While the government’s initial site for affirmative action was in the American workplace, it would segue into all levels of education thereby producing one of the most politically contested social policies of that era.

During the Second World War, Whites were drafted into the army in large numbers, leaving a gap in many important sectors of the workforce. This was the occasion for a substantial new migration of African Americans from the agrarian South to the industrial North, seeking to fill these newly available jobs. They met

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fierce resistance from the White workers and systematic discrimination in pay levels from employers. The situation was so public and so seemingly intractable a barrier that A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the undisputed leader of the Black labor movement, threatened to “march on Washington,” promising to bring 100,000 Blacks to the city to protest racial discrimination.⁷ As a compromise, President Franklin Roosevelt agreed to create a federal Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). The purpose of this legislation was to find a way to try to facilitate greater Black employment. The emphasis was on using persuasion, some political pressure, and influence to get employers to hire more Blacks, and to help crack the stranglehold of the American Federation of Labor on racially exclusive, skilled, labor unions such as those of carpenters, electricians, and plumbers. The problems with the FEPC were many, but the key weakness was the lack of strong enforcement provisions and the requirement that discrimination had to be proved by catching the discriminating agent in the act.

We are, in effect, back to where we began in the early 1960s. The Supreme Court has been ruling for the last two decades that there must be evidence that there was individual motivation and thus individual intentionality in discriminating to justify race-based programs to redress past inequalities. In this way, there has been a gradual and then escalating erosion of the measuring device of disparate impact, moving steadily to a requirement that there be a smoking gun of clear intentionality to discriminate.

As we shall see in the following section, discrimination and the use of affirmative action to attempt to address the adverse affects of discrimination are not exclusive to the United States, and the parallels with other societies are interest-

ing. The U.S. Supreme Court's reasoning on the clear intentionality to discriminate is, for example, the moral equivalent of saying that, unless one can find a memo indicating that in India unless the Brahmins intended to discriminate against members of the Scheduled Castes, there can be no redress. But individual Brahmins need not intend to do anything to foster discrimination if the very fabric of Hindu society is saturated with practices and institutional and organizational activities that discriminate against those of lower castes.

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lege and university students in the United States, India, and South Africa.⁸ During the last two decades of the 20th century, each of these three nations underwent dramatic, even seismic shifts in the make-up of their higher education student populations. While the reasons were quite different in each case, the parallels in responses among and between the three countries elites were uncannily similar. Among the mantras that the commission would hear many times over: these three sites represented “the world’s oldest (U.S.), largest (India) and newest (South Africa) democracies”—each now dealing with a populist insurgency determined to open access to previously excluded parts of their populations.⁹

When apartheid ended in South Africa in the early 1990s, that country would experience an extraordinary, rapid shift in its university student population, a transformation more substantial than anything seen in the history of the academy. Previously all-White universities in Capetown, Durban, and Johannesburg and the all-Black college at Fort Hare, would within a few years see a level of racial integration (from 20 to 50 percent) that was unimaginable in the previous decade.

India was undergoing a similar transformation, but the origins were less obvious, and less immediate. The caste system officially ended in 1949 with the birth of a new nation, the throwing off of British colonial domination, and the creation of a new constitution that officially prohibited caste designations and practices. The new constitution mandated that the previously excluded groups be given preferential access to employment and education. Nonetheless, for the next four decades, successive Indian governments refused to implement any policies that would crack the stranglehold of the higher castes on entry to colleges and universities, or to employment opportunities. This changed suddenly in the early 1990s, when the government bowed to political pressure and tried to institute an Indian

sub-continent version of affirmative action. The privileged castes perceived a strong threat to their historic monopoly on places in the university and mounted a fierce counter-attack. Their rallying cry was individual merit. In part because of the strident response from the higher castes to these new policies, that government fell within six months of an attempt to implement a policy of purposeful “caste integration” that had been ignored for 40 years.

This was a propitious moment for serious analysis of comparative institutional change. First, each of the three nations was engaged in contentious public debates about what policies could and should be pursued. Second, despite national differ-

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ences in the various factors generating social change, the overwhelming similarity was the fact that, while the student body composition was bursting with newly admitted enrollees, the first in their families to ever attend college, the faculty composition had not changed. This tension with the old guard, grounded in traditions of scholarship that had excluded the communities of the newcomers, would produce a clash of interests that were simultaneously generational, structural, and political. Nonetheless, the typical response of the faculty was to demand that the newcomers fit themselves onto what the traditionalists saw only as a neutral procrustean bed.

As a general phenomenon, elites of every society come to believe that their status, their high position in the social hierarchy, is both natural and just. Whether in caste, estate, or religious systems of stratification, those at the top are either universally born to privilege or frequently anointed at an early age. In class-based systems, those who themselves may have achieved a higher class position by being mobile across class boundaries bequeath their status to their children, who then typically come to believe that they “hit a triple.”¹⁰ The oldest such system is in India, with more than 3,000 years of sorting and ranking people by way of caste. For much of India’s history, the population has been divided into five castes that do not intermarry and who have had hereditary ascription to particular occupations. The top three castes are the Brahmins (priestly, literate), the Kshatriyas (mainly rulers and aristocrats) and the Vaisyas (businessmen). Together these three constitute about 17 percent of the population. The next are the Sudras, who do the menial labor, and are by far the largest group, constituting about half of India’s population. The last are the Ati-Sudras, known by a variety of names, including Untouchables. Gandhi called them Harijans, or children of God, but they currently go by Dalits, or oppressed people.

The upper castes excluded the lower castes from schools, post offices, restaurants, theaters and barber shops. They were denied access to the courts, and of course with this record of exclusion, were never permitted to be employed in any professional occupation.¹¹ As the priestly caste responsible for reading and interpreting the great books, the Brahmins had a monopoly on literacy.

Given this history, it is hardly surprising that the Brahmins, less than 10 percent of the population, make up more than two-thirds of the students at the premier institution of higher education in the country, the University of New Delhi. Not only did the Brahmins have a monopoly on attaining literacy for 3,000 years,

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the Dalits were prohibited from attaining literacy—much as slaves in the U.S. were forbidden by law to be taught to read and write. Imagine the ironic parallels in the situation, when in 2006, the Indian government tried once again to enforce an affirmative action plan, known as the “reservation policy.” Unlike the U.S. language of goals and timetables, the Indian government actually “reserves” places in the law schools and medical schools for a certain proportion of the previously excluded—thus the term “reservation.” The Brahmins were up in arms, and the language of individual meritocracy was their rallying cry.

When the government of V. P. Singh decided, in 1990, to try to redress caste discrimination in higher education, there was a challenge in the courts and a landmark case: *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*.¹² The court ruled that caste could be taken into account in the allocation of job placement, but that it could not be the sole reason. India has a concept called “the creamy layer,” used to describe that small portion of the Dalits who have been economically successful. They have argued that affirmative action, Indian style, would give unfair advantage to the creamy layer, and privilege the children of this new elite.

In South Africa, with the fall of the apartheid regime and the newly ascendant ruling party, the African National Congress was confronted with a massive contradiction. On the one hand, the party was committed to a non-racial society. Moreover, the leadership came from a strong Marxist tradition, ideologically inclined to see class as paramount and fundamental. On the other hand, a half-century of apartheid had stripped the Black population of human capital resources, from education and job training to health care. What to do on the sensitive matter of opening up the doors of the colleges and universities? Part of that debate will be familiar to Americans, because it was strongly argued that to use race as a factor would be contrary to the spirit of ending a racist regime.

Yet, there was another part that would be unfamiliar to citizens of the U.S. Because this nation is overwhelmingly White, a class-based affirmative action would greatly benefit poor Whites, and at a much higher percentage than it would advantage poor Blacks. In South Africa, a wing of the ANC could argue persuasively for a class-based affirmative action, given that, with approximately three-quarters of the population Black, and most of them poor, a class-based strategy would benefit them more. Adding to this uniquely South African dimension to the issue was the specific apartheid historical context of Blacks versus coloreds versus Whites, and what this does to the contemporary situation.

Elites in every society are threatened by calls for social change because such changes constitute a potential redistribution of wealth and privilege.

In 2006, a court ruling gave precedence to a Black engineer over a colored engineer in the implementation of an affirmative action program.¹³ The court ruled that, during apartheid, Blacks suffered more than Coloreds. In the Western Cape, Coloreds were permitted to work, while Blacks were not. Indeed, it was not uncommon for Blacks to “apply” for Colored status, so that they could be employed. This was the famous “pencil test” that was used in Capetown to determine if one could claim “Colored” status.¹⁴ Ultimately, South Africa did allow race to be a factor in its affirmative action policies.

Elites in every society are understandably threatened by insurgent and populist calls for social change, because such changes constitute a potential redistribution of wealth and privilege that have been assumed as established rights and entitlements. The common thread across nations is to invert that charge, and to accuse the insurgents of seeking entitlements. The debate over affirmative action is relatively unique because it is such a public debate about redistribution and entitlement. Social institutions are replete with group entitlements across all societies, across the globe. Yet only a very few of those are challenged as “group criteria” versus “individual merit.” From royalty to family wealth, from gendered entitlement to religious preference, sociology has long pointed to the organizational and institutional forces that are deeply embedded in all societies that sustain hierarchy.

A comparative study of the caste system in India, the class systems of the U.S., and the post-apartheid struggles of the new South African state provide fertile ground for the illumination of how elites can effectively counterattack insurgencies in behalf of sustaining traditional privilege. It is the task of a critical perspective to reveal the deeper embedded domain assumptions about taken-for-granted privileges that otherwise never ascend to public scrutiny and challenge. If we are to spur a new progressive era in higher education, be it in the U.S. or anywhere else, we must address the systematic replication of privilege in

society. The lessons from previous progressive eras throughout history and around the globe can help point the way. 

ENDNOTES

1. Karen, "The Politics of Class, Race, and Gender: 1960–1986," 208–237.
2. Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education in transition: An American History*, 1636–1956, 74.
3. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming, Blacks and Equality*, 1890–2000, 30–31.
4. Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*, 2008. In 1884, Ida Wells came into conflict with railroad officials over her refusal to travel in the smoking car rather than the ladies' car. She sued the railroad and initially won her case, but the verdict was overturned in 1887.
5. See note 3 above, 49.
6. *Ibid*, 161.
7. A march on Washington would materialize, of course, in 1963, culminating in King's dramatic oration. Randolph was a key architect and strategist for this event.
8. Beckham, *Diversity, Democracy, and Higher Education*, 2000.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Jim Hightower once famously noted about George H.W. Bush, "born on third base, thought he hit a triple."
11. Galanter, "Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes of India," 1984.
12. The recommendations were suggested by the Mandal Commission beginning as early as 1979. The commission's mandate was to identify the "socially or educationally backward."
13. van Glass and Mde, "Arbitration Court Rules in Favour of Eskom Employing a Black Engineer over a Coloured One," 2.
14. The pencil test was not about paper and pencil. Rather, a pencil was inserted into the thick part of the hair of the applicant. The applicant was told to shake her/his head vigorously. If the pencil fell out, the person was "coloured" – but if the pencil remained lodged in the hair, failure!

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