

# **Economics of Life and Death: Mortality and Survival Rates for African-Americans**

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## **Introduction**

The classical textbook definition of economics portrays the field as one that deals chiefly with how a society employs limited resources with alternative uses to produce goods and services for present and/or future consumption. However, in a recent issue of *Scientific American*, Amartya Sen exhorted professional economists to look at economic science not as a discipline solely concerned with income and wealth, but as one that deals with social issues and paradoxes such as islands of poverty in rich nations, famines amidst plenty, and higher mortality rates and lower survival rates for racial and ethnic minorities. Given this backdrop, this paper will deal with what Sen called "The Economics of Life and Death." Specifically, the paper examines the correlates of premature death, infant mortality rates, and the associated costs

## **Economics of the Marginalized**

Social scientists, particularly economists, cannot disregard the dualistic aspects of the American economy such as the conspicuously asymmetric income and wealth distribution. This distribution has resulted in affluence for many and deprivation for others. As we have previously mentioned, economics is a social science which deals mainly with how efficiently a society employs limited resources with alternative uses to produce goods and services for present or future consumption. What is missing from this definition is concern with the welfare

of all citizens, especially the marginalized sectors. Such concern should form the core of the discipline.

Economic models must, in a value free manner, address social phenomena such as homelessness, higher mortality, and persistent inequality in income and wealth distribution. The United States is a rich nation with many of its citizens enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the world. However, for many others, poverty is a reality and poor health and inadequate care is a constant reminder that wealth is not equally distributed. For example, the health status of the average African-American has been invariably inferior to that of others since colonial times. Differential mortality and survival rates between whites and blacks have long been subjected to academic scrutiny, but the research has led to no comprehensive policies to narrow the gap (Osei, 1992; Dayal, 1982; Devasa et al; 1980; Kitagawa, 1973; Manton, 1989; the Heckler Report, 1985). To make the preceding point more salient, an examination of the black-white infant mortality rates will show that the differential between the two groups increased between 1980 and 1990, from 1.95 to 2.21.

**Survival Rates.** Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, black life expectancy has been considerably lower than that of whites. This statistic is important for two reasons: (1) life expectancy at birth is a measure of mortality differentials and (2) it is suggestive of the adequacy of health delivery systems. The abridged life table presented in Table I shows that whites can expect to outlive blacks in each functional age group with the exception of the 85 and over grouping. Tables II and III show the probabilities of dying in specific functional age groups. These data further show that the death rates for black males are higher than for any other group. Specifically, if a white male at birth were subjected to a 1987 death rate, he could expect to live approximately 6 years

**Table 1**  
**Abridged Life Table for Blacks and Whites**  
**Number Surviving at Beginning of Specific Age Group**

Age Group	White Males	Black Males	White Females	Black Females
Under 1 year	99,154	98,101	99,355	98,454
1-4 years	99,957	99,918	99,963	99,920
5-14 years	99,974	99,956	99,983	99,972
15-24 years	99,857	99,723	99,952	99,923
25-34 years	88,828	99,586	99,937	99,853
35-44 years	99,731	99,293	99,885	99,702
45-54 years	99,459	99,897	99,704	99,413
55-64 years	98,533	97,677	99,197	98,672
65-74 years	98,754	91,714	98,085	97,750
75-84 years	92,311	91,641	95,158	94,238
85 years and over	82,380	85,675	86,447	88,144

Compiled and computed by the author from U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the U.S.* 1993.

**Table 2**  
**Life Table for African American Females and Males**  
**African American Females**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0164	100,000	1,640	73.6
1-5	.0027	98,360	261	73.9
5-10	.0013	98,099	125	70.1
10-15	.0011	97,973	109	65.1
15-20	.0025	97,864	240	60.2
20-25	.0042	97,624	408	55.4
25-30	.0057	97,216	552	50.6
30-35	.0090	96,664	865	45.9
35-40	.0120	97,799	1,148	41.2
40-45	.0167	94,650	2,579	36.7
45-50	.0241	93,071	2,246	32.4
50-55	.0383	98,825	3,481	28.0
55-60	.0542	87,344	4,730	24.0
60-65	.0853	82,614	7,051	20.3
65-70	.1206	75,563	9,114	16.9
70-75	.1642	66,450	10,914	13.9
75-80	.2229	55,536	12,381	11.1
80-85	.3486	43,156	15,043	8.6
85 +	1.0000	28,112	28,112	6.8

**African American Males**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0199	100,000	1,993	66.3
1-5	.0033	98,007	319	66.7
5-10	.0018	97,688	179	62.9
10-15	.0023	97,509	221	58.0
15-20	.0072	97,288	698	53.1
20-25	.0121	96,591	1,171	48.5
25-30	.0142	95,420	1,357	44.0
30-35	.0197	94,062	1,853	39.6
35-40	.0261	92,210	2,403	35.4
40-45	.0321	89,807	2,879	31.1
45-50	.0417	86,928	3,624	27.2
50-55	.0620	83,303	5,161	23.3
55-60	.0853	78,142	6,665	19.7
60-65	.1305	71,478	9,329	16.2
65-70	.1894	62,149	11,772	13.3
70-75	.2537	50,377	12,780	10.8
75-80	.3399	37,597	12,779	8.6
80-85	.4665	24,818	11,977	6.8
85 +	1.0000	28,112	28,112	6.8

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

**Table 3**  
**Life Table for White American Females and Males**  
**White American Females**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0074	100,000	738	79.2
1-5	.0016	98,262	161	78.8
5-10	.0009	99,101	89	74.9
10-15	.0009	99,012	88	70.0
15-20	.0024	98,924	241	65.0
20-25	.0025	98,683	244	60.2
25-30	.0026	98,439	260	55.3
30-35	.0034	98,179	337	0.5
35-40	.0048	97,842	473	45.6
40-45	.0073	97,369	706	40.8
45-50	.0123	96,663	1,192	36.1
50-55	.0204	95,471	1,950	31.5
55-60	.0320	93,521	2,994	27.1
60-65	.0510	90,527	7,051	20.3
65-70	.0766	85,914	6,579	19.0
70-75	.1179	79,335	0,355	15.4
75-80	.1811	69,980	12,677	12.1
80-85	.2899	57,303	16,610	9.2
85 +	1.0000	40,693	40,693	6.9

**White American Males**

Age	Possibility of Dying Within Age Interval	Survivors to Age X by 100,000 Born Alive	Number Dying During Age Interval	Expectation of Life/22 Age X
0-1	.0093	100,000	935	72.3
1-5	.0021	99,065	206	72.0
5-10	.0014	98,860	135	68.3
10-15	.0016	98,724	162	63.2
15-20	.0058	98,563	572	58.3
20-25	.0078	97,991	766	53.6
25-30	.0078	95,225	757	49.1
30-35	.0089	96,468	862	44.4
35-40	.0109	95,606	1,039	39.8
40-45	.0142	94,568	1,347	35.2
45-50	.0220	93,220	2,055	30.7
50-55	.0363	91,166	3,311	26.3
55-60	.0583	87,855	5,121	22.2
60-65	.0918	82,734	7,599	18.4
65-70	.1328	75,135	9,977	15.0
70-75	.2029	65,158	13,222	11.9
75-80	.2932	51,936	15,227	9.3
80-85	.4192	36,709	15,387	7.1
85 +	1.0000	21,321	13,321	5.4

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

longer than his black male counterpart (McDaniels, 1992). White women also can expect to outlive their black female counterparts by approximately 5.5 years. As previously mentioned, mortality differentials are linked to differentials in the force of mortality related to specific causes of death.

The main causes of death for all Americans, in descending order of significance, are presented in Table IV. Blacks suffer disproportionately high rates of death under almost every listed category. Given the disparities in life expectancy and the differential force of mortality due to specific causes of death, Table V shows the relative gains in life expectancy by race after eliminating specific causes. As McDaniels shows, eliminating a specific cause almost always adds more years to the black life expectancy than that of whites (McDaniels, 1992). Looking at these data in a different way, i.e., examining specific causes of death that could have been avoided if the force of mortality for both blacks and whites were the same, yields an interesting picture (See Table V).

The data presented in Table VI reflect excessive deaths, i.e. deaths which could be eliminated with better health care or lifestyle changes. From the economics of life and death perspective, we argue that these deaths not only lower the life expectancy of blacks as a group but have an "opportunity cost" in terms of the potential contribution these persons could have made to the Gross Domestic Product. Even if one is cynical or conservative, the contributions to GDP, could be weighed against the cost of health care delivery.

**Table IV.**  
**Causes of Death 1991**

Cause of Death	Crude Death Rate (per 100,000 population)	Percent of Total
Total	854.0	100.0
Cardiovascular Diseases	360.3	33.2
Malignancies, leukemia	202.9	23.8
Accidents	36.2	4.2
Pulmonary Diseases	35.2	4.1
Pneumonia, Influenza	29.6	3.5
Diabetes Mellitus	19.7	2.2
Suicide	11.9	
Liver Diseases, Cirrhosis	9.8	
Other Infectious Diseases	14.5	
Homicide, Legal Intervention	10.8	17.7
Nephrosis, Nephritis, etc.	8.7	
Septicemia	7.7	
Perinatal Problems	6.6	
Congenital Anomalies	4.7	
Neoplasms, Ulcers, Hernia, Anemia, Gall		
Bladder Disorder, Tuberculosis, Meningitis, etc.	27.4	3.1
All Other Causes	70.3	8.2

Source: Compiled by the author from National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the U.S. 1993*.

A crude estimate of the economic loss to the nation due to premature or preventable deaths would depend on, among other things, the hazard rate under each cause of death, the hypothetical life-time or annual earnings of an individual and the number of years of active service prior to premature death. Assuming a modest average loss of \$500,000 per person, the aggregate national loss due to the excess deaths annually would be about \$24 billion, not a modest amount by any standard.

**The Antidote to Excess Deaths.** Demographers and sociologists have offered many explanations for the vast disparity in death rates between blacks and whites (Thomas et al, 1993). The most widely accepted explanations for the extremely high mortality rates experienced by blacks include: lack of adequate and timely health care, lack of education and awareness, unwholesome living and working environments, undesirable life-styles and food habits, nutritional inadequacy in the case of infants and children, and high incidence of crime and violence.

Economic progress could be the best antidote for high mortality rates and this has been proven in numerous studies. Compounding the African American death rates are the extremely high infant mortality rates. The infant mortality rates are not randomly distributed among African Americans but are concentrated among the poor and those born to single mothers. Sen's (1981) explorations into differential infant mortality rates such as under legitimate and illegitimate births found that because, more often than not, illegitimate babies do not have access to an "exchange entitlement" or parents with sufficient incomes, they do not have the basic physiological requirements, thus the higher mortality rates.

Recent studies by Jaynes and Williams (1989) and others have confirmed the Sen hypothesis that high infant mortality rates are correlated highly with out of wedlock births. Specifically, the Winter and Cole study showed that a 50 percent escalation in the rate of infant mortality in Europe during the period from 1914-24 was essentially an illegitimate infant mortality crisis. The authors argued that babies born out of wedlock accounted for 20% of all births during the period under study. This high infant mortality rate was accompanied by increases in maternal mortality rates as well. In an effort to establish an illegitimacy-mortality connection, Winter and Cole examined the economic and vital statistics in several European cities for the same time period and found both the infant mortality rates and illegitimacy to be lower than those in the United States. However, children born to single mothers in London, Paris, and Berlin suffered the same fate as those of unmarried women in the United States. These children and their parents confronted a welfare system which was inadequate at best. Many of the European children were placed in foster care or in crowded shelters where they were exposed to higher risk of disease leading to higher infant and child mortality rates. One can reasonably argue that mortality



**Table 5**  
**Relative Gains in Life Expectancy at Birth,**  
**Males, African American (AA) versus White American (WH)**  
**by Cause Deleted**

Deleted Cause	AA	WH	(AA-WH)	Percent Difference
HIV-AIDS	.49	.22	.27	4.5
Accidents: Motor Vehicle	.60	.79	-.19	**
Accidents: Other	.75	.54	.21	3.5
Suicide	.24	.50	-.26	**
Homicide, Legal Intervention	1.14	.22	.92	15.4
Malignant Neoplasms:				
Digestive Tract	.81	.70	.11	1.8
Respiratory Tract	1.22	1.15	.07	1.2
Breast	.01	.01	.00	**
Urogenital	.47	.38	.09	1.5
Other	.72	.82	-.10	**
Diabetes Melletus	.26	.18	.08	1.3
Myocardial Infarction	1.10	1.69	-.58	**
Cerbovascular	.77	.49	.28	4.7
Remaining CV	3.31	2.73	.58	9.7
Pneumonia & Influenza	.38	.26	.12	1.0
Pulmonary Disease	.33	.48	-.15	**
Liver Disease & Cirrhosis	.36	.26	.09	1.6
Perinatal	.79	.32	.47	7.8
All Other Causes	2.92	1.77	1.15	19.2

\*\*White gains from elimination of this cause of death exceed African American gains.

Source: Antonio McDaniel (1990)

**Table VI**  
**Excess Deaths Per Year by Cause of Death**

Heart Disease/Stroke	18,181
Homicide/Accidents	10,909
Cancer	8,118
Infant Deaths	6,178
Chemical Dependency	2,154
Diabetes	1,850

Source: Tunstall, Williams and Holmes (1993)

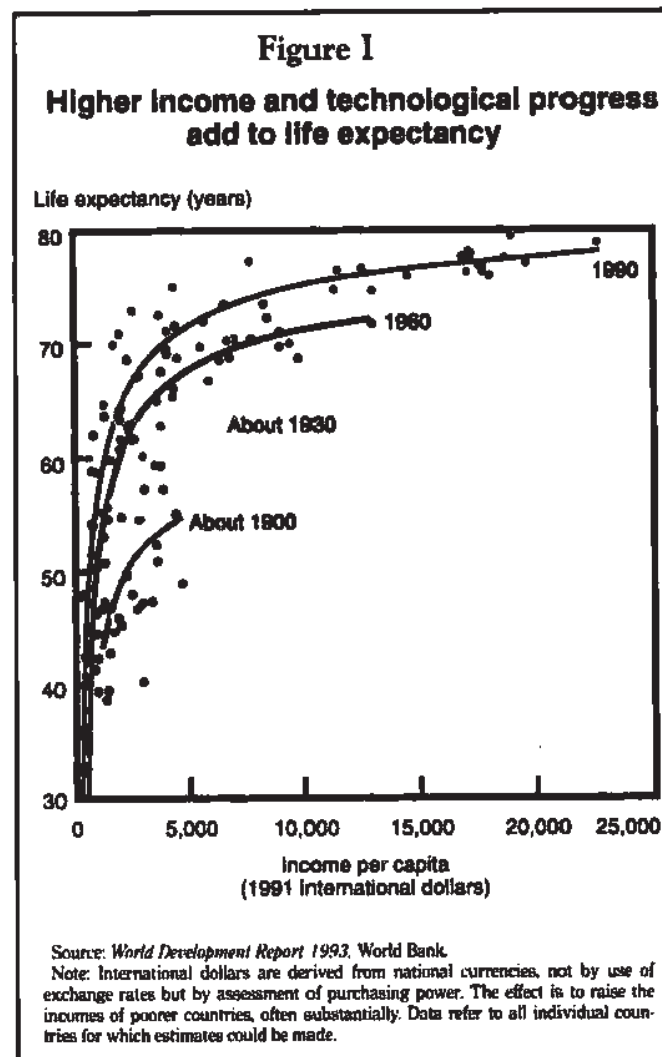
rates are highly related to both personal and societal economic conditions.

**“Hot-Baths” Hypothesis.** There is almost an axiomatic association between the level of a country’s economic development and mortality and survival rates; such rates being significantly leveraged by material advancement (please refer

to Fig.1). For example, the notable differences in life expectancy at birth between former East European Socialist countries and Western European nations is explained by the relatively faster rates of growth and standards of living in the West. In the United States, the African-American economic status has shown little change since the 1940's.

It would be inappropriate to say that the life chances and survival rates for African Americans has not shown some improvement. A case in point would be the infant and child mortality rates which have declined by almost 50 percent, from 32.6 deaths of infants under 1 year of age in 1970 to 18 in 1990. The corresponding numbers for whites are 17.8 and 7.6. The prominent higher starting numbers for blacks explain the larger fall. Relative to whites in this country and other established market economies, African-American rates are still unacceptably high. However, the decline in the African American mortality rates cannot be overlooked and this drop is attributable to better distribution of economic resources in the health care delivery system through programs such as Medicaid.

Fig. I illustrates the positive association between per capita incomes and life expectancy in years. Jee-Peng Tan et al (1994) argue that it is governmental policies outside of the health sector—particularly the ones that affect the macroeconomy, i.e., poverty, education and equal rights which upgrade the health status of a population. The “hot-baths” hypothesis, which states that with an increase in basic creature comforts—food, clothing and shelter—a society's population would automatically level off, and by





implication the mortality rates would fall, has not so far received the attention that it deserves.

Poverty is highly correlated with morbidity as well as mortality. Some 7000 babies are born annually to HIV-positive and AIDS infected women and such babies, more likely than not, test positive too. A disproportionate number of such women are black and poor (Osei, *ibid.*). There is an urgent and real need to change the inner city environment and lifestyle and to help such unfortunate women adopt healthier life styles.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the academic suspicion of comparative race-based data, there is enough unimpeachable evidence to confirm the inferior health and survival predicament of African-Americans. The empirical survival function estimates, or the estimated survival probabilities, clearly establish that at all age intervals black survivals are lower than those of whites. Similarly at all age levels and for almost for every cause of death, black vulnerability is greater.

The quality of life of the average African-American is harsh, and many do not have the economic resources to leave the inner cities, which are plagued with a host of social problems. It is the lack of economic resources that is the most critical underlying reason for the state of unacceptable black health, mortality, and survival rates. It has been documented and even demonstrated that black economic progress could have a positive impact on some of the morbid black health statistics. We have also estimated conservatively the cost of excess deaths to be about \$24 billion per annum. This does not take into account the enormous loss in productivity due to black' poor health, and also the cost of such poor health in terms of treatment, surgery, and medicines. If the hot-baths hypothesis is accepted and acted upon, the problems which affect African Americans and our inner cities would decrease.

Social scientists, especially economists, should begin examining ways in which the economic situation of poor Americans can be improved. We spend a considerable amount of the gross domestic product on problems that are the direct result of an inequitable distribution of resources. Social welfare must again become a priority if we are to increase the life chances of millions of Americans.

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## Leadership for Diversity: The Role of African American Studies in a Multicultural World

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It has been relatively easy for advocates of diversity to sidestep questions about the social and historical origins of policies they favor. The idea of diversity seems to have appeared out of nowhere. But the notion of changing institutions so that they better reflect the great range of peoples and experiences in American Culture is not new. In modern times, the most prominent movement for diversity has been the Civil Rights Movement. African American Studies, the intellectual and scholastic offshoot of that movement, initiated the first wide scale effort to broaden racial and social perspectives within the university.

Placing diversity in historical context is important because obscuring the roots of this issue negates the contributions and the importance of African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement and subsequent efforts to present African American life as a legitimate subject of academic study are defining moments in our nation's consciousness of its diverse makeup. This essay is an attempt to recover that neglected legacy and to define the future role of African American Studies in a global world order.

As developing nations like Brazil ponder racial and ethnic relations under democratic conditions, the African American experience stands as an instructive example. The same may be true of South Africa, where an expansive cultural perspective under democratic leadership is all but assured. In these and other situations, African Americans can provide the wisdom of experience gleaned from a

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\*This essay by Delores Aldridge explores the need for African American studies in a contemporary world. *Challenge* strives to publish empirical studies; however, when essays that are germane to African Americans are submitted, we try to accommodate the authors.

generation of pioneering diversity within the world's strongest democracy. The spread of democratic institutions and heightened consciousness among oppressed races are creating conditions for African Americans to provide leadership for the worldwide movement for cultural diversity and individual freedom. Without this acknowledgement of pioneering effort, significant work of African Americans will once again be expunged from the historical record—our role in the future course of social development and human relations unacknowledged. I hope this essay is the beginning of a dialogue to proclaim our commitment to a society with truly diverse institutions. And, I hope it will inspire a fresh examination of the possibilities for leadership African Americans can exert in the future world order.

Diversity is becoming a global reality. America's status as a world leader, and its ability to compete in the next century could well turn on its response to the challenge of diversity. Despite being predicated on lofty political and social ideals, American culture and institutions have not managed diversity very well. In part this is due to a powerful mythology of melting pot opportunity which trivializes legitimate claims of prejudice and inequality. Even more ironically, the very organizations that should be best prepared to meet this challenge—colleges and universities—seem least able to create truly multicultural environments. Today, a generation after struggle began for African American Studies in the university, racial tension and confrontation remain routine features of campus life, just as they continue to permeate society as a whole.

In America, racial tolerance and equality are benchmarks by which diversity must be measured. Without denying the legitimate protestations of other groups, race, not class, gender, or sexual orientation, remains the most unalterable factor in social oppression. Although increased advocacy for language groups, women, gays, and other interests has shifted the focus of diversity to a wider range of targets, race remains the seminal problem in American society.

Along with its mission of research and teaching, the university guards and perpetuates the formal values of our nation. As the main repository for formal knowledge and moral precepts, it has a special responsibility to style itself as a model for society at large. And because higher education serves the leadership class of society, its performance with regard to diversity and equity exerts a powerful influence upon those designated for roles of power, influence, and decision making. Not even life on campus, abstracted from the usual daily struggles and populated by the brightest, most impressionable citizens, has been able to embrace diversity in the academic curriculum as a deeply honored moral imperative.

What a generation of African American students and faculty have discovered is that the university is not so much a molder of society as a reflection of it. When black intellectuals first asserted the validity of academic inquiry focused on issues specific to African Americans, there was resistance. That resistance, in somewhat more subtle form, continues to this day. What should have been an oppor-



tunity to acknowledge real differences of experience and knowledge between black and white lives in a divided society was instead viewed as a power grab by entrenched academic interests. Established departments and their personnel perceived the movement for African American Studies, and the real academic diversity it implied, as an intrusion onto their turf by unwelcome competitors.

Although the debate assumed a lofty tone, just below the surface of flowery rhetoric was the reality of vested economic interests and the management of power relations within the university itself. These interests had an epistemological basis. Acknowledging that the black experience in America has been qualitatively different from that of whites could negate or at least circumscribe the validity of assumptions about American social values. Central among issues raised would be questions about the character of American democracy itself. Delving into this sphere would put the academy at odds with its central political mission: to reinforce and validate social reality. Important though it might have been, this dilemma was actually of tangential importance in the overall scheme of things. The first priority in responding to African American Studies was to preserve the established structure of economic and administrative relations within the university, as well as cultural norms dominant in the society at large.

Thirty years ago neither African American Studies nor its adversaries within the academy could have predicted the radical transformations taking place in the world today. The end of the cold war and East/West political hegemony is ushering in a new era of global realignment. In the next century, most of the world's population growth will occur in countries with non-European cultures. National and ethnic consciousness is on the rise worldwide. Diversity is a global reality; it is driving the creation of a new economic and political order. America is buffeted by these same winds of change. Sometime early in the coming century, a large proportion of the American work force will be non-white. Even sooner, a majority of American schoolchildren are likely to be non-white. The gap in fertility rates between white and non-white populations ensures these trends will continue.

At the same time non-white populations are flexing their demographic strength around the world and at home, American race relations are characterized by increasing segregation, isolation, and enmity. In the future, corporations and the university itself will be drawing new recruits from communities with backgrounds and social attitudes different from the typical middle class white youth. The requirement to accommodate different perspectives and interpretations of social life will become increasingly imperative if American institutions are to make what appears to be an inevitable transition. The failure to embrace fresh, enriching perspectives will no doubt prove a costly error for American society.

Today African American Studies is uniquely positioned to address the diversity issue in America and, by extension, around the globe. The African

American experience from slavery, to emancipation, through Jim Crow oppression, civil rights, black nationalism, and all its other economic and political expressions, has clear application to national struggles waged by oppressed peoples elsewhere. That these experiences have occurred within the Western world's leading democracy can help focus specific economic and political theories likely to have an important impact upon global civilization in the 21st century. Emerging multicultural democracies such as South Africa and Brazil may find the African American experience an especially useful model.

#### **A Leading Role For African American Studies.**

Since its origins on the campus of San Francisco State University in the late 1960's, the African American Studies movement has struggled to establish an intellectual mission and epistemological identity. Although firmly rooted on many campuses, the discipline has a tangential relationship with other academic disciplines and departments. Its impact on scholarship has been significant but largely unacknowledged, and programs vary widely in scope, design, and size. But as global changes and demographic trends impose new perspectives on American culture and its educational system, African American Studies, the pioneer in diversity, has already demonstrated its ability to play a leading role in reshaping America's social and intellectual agenda. Not only is African American Studies positioned as the authority on racial issues in this society, its reach can be extended to burgeoning trends with other people of color in America and throughout the world.

In the 21st century, internationalism will be the focus of much economic and political effort. There is growing awareness among blacks in this country that they do not live in isolation from other people of color. African Americans are therefore becoming more conscious of their ties to other non-European peoples, and in the coming century, those linkages should be even more evident. At the same time, the unique perspective blacks have gained as an integral part of American society can provide a bridge between third world sensibilities and American institutions. The pace of global change, and the rapid integration of undeveloped nations into the international political economy provides an ideal opportunity to expand the content and mission of African American Studies.

Global consciousness is particularly urgent at this point in time. Industrial modes of production in advanced nations like the United States are rapidly being replaced by post-industrial service and information oriented industries. As American factories are shut down and manufacturing transferred to underdeveloped nations, the segment of domestic workers most severely impacted contains a high proportion of African Americans. Far more reliant upon blue collar manufacturing jobs for middle class stability, blacks are in de facto competition with other people of color for the work they are best able to perform. The exploitation of off-shore labor by global corporations, environmental degradation, and exacerbation

of class divisions in underdeveloped countries are obstacles to their evolution as just and democratic societies.

The so-called black underclass is not an isolated national problem. It is inextricably bound up with the international movement of capital and shifts in social priorities brought about by the changing contours of world economic development. Realities faced by African Americans go far beyond the limits of neighborhood, city, state, region, and nation. Likewise, the general set of concerns—lack of empowerment, disfranchisement—that preoccupy black Americans, are common to a broad set of peoples living under conditions of oppression. There is a pressing need for rigorous theoretical work. A critically focused African American Studies grounded in comparative history, behavioral sciences, and political economy, can generate analytical models that yield fresh, compelling insights into the nature of our oppression, and that of others as well.

Such a mission requires that African American Studies be specific in its research subject, but universal in the scope and application of knowledge. It will be necessary to challenge much of the current curriculum design, which serves an increasingly irrelevant academic status quo. To the extent that it will assume a transformative role African American Studies will be tendentious. It must be an intellectual and pedagogic advocate. This can be accomplished without sacrificing rigor, discipline, and accountability.

#### **Creating A Web Of Communication**

Constructing a dynamic discipline such as that described above will require uniform standards for research, exposition, and meaning within African American Studies. A web of exchange, linking black scholars, students and their communities as well as other important critical scholarship, can provide a vast body of experiential data and theoretical perspectives. This store of information will have draw from different disciplines to discover useful commonalities and instructive contrasts.

Asymptomatic hypertension, for example, affects black people in the United States disproportionately compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Among the various causes postulated to explain this discrepancy is "environmental stress." The medical establishment and the government have made a concerted effort to investigate and control hypertension with medications. The results have not been effective. There seems to be a conscious effort to avoid serious investigation of the impact environmental stress may have on this condition. To do so could raise troubling political issues. Possible linkages between physical illness and environmental factors such as racism, poverty, and oppression challenge existing designs of knowledge. For the status quo it is better for hypertension to be viewed as an individual medical problem than a mark of oppression—a social problem with individual medical manifestations.

A grounding in critical theory augmented by global consciousness would

present a number of possibilities for addressing this problem. Scholars could ponder, for example, the comparative statistics for blacks living in other countries insofar as rates of hypertension are concerned. Such comparisons, properly controlled, could have measurable impact on the quality of life and health for blacks in American society. Linking African American studies and broader frames of reference will allow the leap toward high level research of the sort suggested above. Bringing to bear specialized knowledge of history and economics, social and behavioral sciences, policy analysis, linguistics, and other disciplines, problems endemic to the black American population can be illuminated within a network of relations that place African Americans in a clearer relationship with the rest of the world.

There is a particular need to attack social myths that exert a pernicious hold over both the academic community and American society. It is a powerful fact that even under conditions of bondage, Africans in America managed to maintain a strong attachment to family structure. Newly freed slaves embraced the institution of marriage with such enthusiasm that by the end of the nineteenth century, upwards of black children were born to married couples. In subsequent decades, through countless acts of deliberate economic and political disfranchisement, black family stability was steadily eroded. Today, black families and gender relations in black communities are in crisis, but so are family relations and gender relations in the larger society. The question is, what marginalizing changes have occurred in recent history causing mainstream families to demonstrate characteristics similar to those in oppressed and disfranchised black communities? As the doors of economic opportunity slam for white Americans due to international competition, their family bonds are transformed. As economic conditions force white mothers out of the home and into the work force, mainstream families are undergoing fundamental structural changes. The extreme marginalization and improvisations forced on blacks in contemporary American society may prove an accurate predictor of changes awaiting an even larger segment of American society as we face the economic dislocations in the 21st century. It is the task of African American Studies to seize on such insights, conduct required research, invalidate existing models, produce visionary policy proposals, and postulate new models of social organization. A unique grounding in the experiences of America's historically oppressed minority can, at this moment in history, produce the keen insight required to dissect ongoing social and economic transformation—an insight that should prove instructive for maximizing the options of other oppressed groups.

To reach its potential as an academic discipline and intellectual pursuit, African American Studies cannot define "blackness" in fixed terms. We live in a dynamic universe, and the experiences of black folk are being transformed along with the rest of the world. African American Studies is not and should not be dominated by a fixed precept of racial identity. Its mission is to develop a set of



cognitive values which distinguish the black experience as a unique intellectual subject, yet is open to participation and inquiry by all interested parties. This is a significant challenge. Internal criteria defining the discipline's intellectual mission are not enough. Our scholars must put forth original concepts for historical interpretation and social change that establish our linkages to other segments of America's increasingly multi-cultural order. The focus must be simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic. A dynamic, reflexive methodology will produce a compelling vision of society, and position African American ideals at the forefront of progressive thinking in the next century.

African American Studies has been treated with disdain, even contempt by the American academic community. Pioneers in the field have been refused the acknowledgement and professional regard they are due. Higher learning in America is the poorer for that. The university has failed to enthusiastically embrace a new and potentially enriching perspective. It has failed to demonstrate the flexibility, openness, and grounding in reality evident in the revised strategies of this country's global corporations. Most disturbingly, the university, in contrast to the business community, continues to exhibit a reluctance to hasty change and innovation.

A renewed emphasis on race is in order. Racial divisions in American society are as tense today as any time in modern history. American universities and the society itself face a burgeoning racial dilemma. The high level of racial polarization on campus and in the streets is just one sign of unabating trouble. Yet, for the most part, African American Studies has been overshadowed by better funded programs focusing on women, gays, and other groups. Even granting they are valid areas of inquiry in their own rights, one reason for the attraction of these curricula may be that they divert attention and resources from African American Studies. However, none of these fields addresses the seminal social problem still faced by American society: the problem of the color line.

The potential of African American Studies as a rich trove of transformative knowledge is undiminished. That potential, like many aspects of African American life, is simply underdeveloped. In the 21st Century, issues of race and social equity will confront American society like a Hydra. In African American Studies, higher education has a neglected, but powerful tool for expanding intellectual boundaries.

#### **Toward A Way Out.**

It is time for higher education to embrace African American Studies as an aggressive, focused, transformative academic discipline which pioneered the diversity movement. Specifically, African American Studies needs to be accepted as a solution, a course of study which addresses one of the nation's most enduring and tenacious problems. Campuses are being compelled to reevaluate race relations in a context of accelerating diversity. African American Studies

can assume a leading role in that process, providing the grounding in racial realities everyone needs to be considered a truly educated American .

With an appropriate level of resource support and status confirmation, African American Studies can address issues of racial and cultural diversity in ways that can serve as a model for other disciplines. It has the platform to address issues of racism and oppression directly, from the perspective of its historical victims, within the belly of the beast. It alone can transcend the celebratory emphasis of "Black History Month" and other well-meaning, but superficial concepts. They address symptoms, but do not grasp the depth of America's racial dilemma. African American Studies exemplifies a clear, practical, emphatic course of action: infusing all curricula from K-12 to the university with diverse knowledge representing the different perspectives, experiences, and issues facing black and oppressed people in the world. Such an approach can preserve scholastic rigor and intellectual discipline, while accessing important knowledge ignored by traditional courses. For example, traditional social stratification courses too often focus on culturally different behavior and social class without forthrightly dealing with the socially determined role of race in structures of inequality. The role race plays in complicating concepts of culture and class appears less powerful in study than it does in the world of lived experience. African American Studies has the potential to correct this discrepancy between what is formally taught and what is intuitively known to be true.

As racial tension, hostility, and conflict experience a resurgence on campus and throughout the larger society, an opportunity exists for African American Studies to recapture its pioneer role in diversity leadership. Seminars and workshops on prejudice reduction cannot address the underlying, structural causes of persistent racism. In fact, such exercises, by focusing on individual attitudes and preferences, mask core problems. Intermittent courses on race relations modified from traditional course offerings have the same effect. In their case, gatekeepers and ideological paradigms grounded in the status quo are charged with changing that very status quo. Mere courses on contributions made by blacks and other minorities do not address the central issue.

Of critical import is the issue of color; its role in power relations, allocation of resources, and impact on the resulting configuration of society. This realm of inquiry must be elevated from a "discipline of disciplines" to an autonomous, respected intellectual endeavor. What is our past, present, and future "fit" in American society and the world? That is the seminal question for African American Studies. Its pioneering history, enriched by continuing innovation, makes African American Studies a model for all the "new studies." At the same time, its human focus probes broader questions of what kind of world is to exist in the future. A transformed academic discipline can point the way toward a more transformed university. That would be good for our people, good for the nation, and good for the emerging world culture of the next century.



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