

Foreword

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THE THEME FOR THIS ISSUE OF *SOCIAL JUSTICE* IS “RECONFIGURING POWER: Challenges for the 21st Century.” Its goal is to provoke discussion of what we believe to be the central issues our society must grapple with in the coming century. The proximity of the end of the 20th century and the political justice we seek in the United States demand reflection as part of our action.

We attempt to address equity and power issues as they are being reconfigured by transnational corporate interests and worker and community interests. In particular, the positions, perspectives, and categories of immigrants, females, and people of color are examined in light of the post-civil rights, feminist, and immigrant rights movements. In this postmodern era, all of these categories overlap and are both multidimensional and multicultural in the broadest sense. They are dynamic, not static, categories that are constantly being reconfigured, given a particular set of power contexts. The sites of reconfiguration are also in flux and leave room for new possibilities as language, identity, and equity issues are debated and acted out in our daily lives.

As in the Reconstruction Era, the post-Civil Rights Era has been accompanied by a backlash manifested through reactionary, racist, and violent laws aimed at subverting the effects of extending the democratic project to groups of people who have been historically discriminated against and excluded from the provisions of American democracy. There are many clear signs of that struggle for shared power in this democratic project: passage of Proposition 13, which undermined the tax base for public education in California and created an unfair tax advantage for older home owners; the advent of the lottery, or legalized gambling, which amounts to another tax on the poor on an official state scale; the “three strikes and you’re out” laws to criminalize low-income communities and justify building more jails and prisons; Proposition 187, which criminalizes immigrant status and denies health and education services to families; “welfare reform” for low-income families that eliminates the remainder of the social safety net while leaving in place subsidies for the rich; and, most recently, the passage of Proposition 209, which removes one of the few remedies available to provide limited opportunity in education and employment on the basis of race and gender.

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These laws and accompanying policies especially hurt the poor, people of color, and women and children.¹

As California becomes a majority minority state in the year 2000,² or a state where no one racial group holds a majority, a shift in power must occur. Will California lean toward an apartheid state, as in formerly apartheid-ruled South Africa, where the minority group of whites ruled the majority group of Blacks through unbridled force and coercion? Or will California lean toward a situation like the emergent post-apartheid South Africa, where the majority rules and seeks out ways to combine peace and social justice. In California, this nation's trend-setting state, the majority will include many different minority groups, among them Asians, Southeast Asians, Africans, Caribbeans, Latinos, Natives, Pacific Islanders, and more. No one ethnic or racial group, including whites, will hold the majority. How will these changing demographics influence who wields power and how complex issues are addressed? Will groups struggle to build alliances, or will they compete with each other for jobs and contracts in the transnational, global marketplace? Will they scapegoat one another for social ills, or cross borders of mainstream representations and individual and group identities to form new sources of power and resistance to unjust forms of the "new world order(s)"?

All of these positions are examined in the articles in this issue of *Social Justice*. They address these issues as they are lived out in our different, intersecting, and common habitats and spaces. In North America, California, or the edge of Turtle Island, where we work and live, we face possible changes in the rules and assumptions by which we live, a fundamental transformation of our *doxa* (see Giddens, Bourdieu, and Foucault). Language has been the site of contestation for centuries in California and the U.S. as a whole. At the turn of the 20th century, English became the official language, although German was a close second.

Another site for this debate is our educational institutions, where issues of access, immigration, labor, gender, and language acquisition and use are contested. Hegemonic dynamics of English as *official* and Spanish as *remedial* or *private* are played out at the school site. Although Spanish is included in the school curriculum, it is relegated to a subordinate position by school officials and by those students who have internalized this language-use hierarchy. Gilberto Arriaza, Rebecca Benjamin, and Regina Martinez address this issue in their respective articles.

In "Grace Under Pressure," Arriaza describes the relationship between language, identity formation, and the nation-state. He argues that assimilationist national U.S. policies privileging English and subordinating languages such as Spanish destroy the culture and identity of origin. Keeping one's language and culture of origin do not contradict the nation-state project. In "*Si Hablas Español*," Benjamin argues that subordinating Spanish in linguistic minority children adversely affects their identity formation. She believes that students will never be on an equal footing with English-speaking students because of the racism inherent

in our national institutions. Devaluing their language of origin devalues who these children perceive themselves to be. In “Beyond Mexico’s Woman,” Martinez looks at how gender, race, and language can be counterhegemonic through narratives that break national and dichotomous constructions, i.e., Mexican or “American” (U.S.). All three authors center on Mexican immigrants, with Arriaza and Martinez focusing primarily on women’s narratives and Benjamin on students’ narratives. The possibility of struggling together to overcome such hierarchical and colonial constructions are described as *complex*, yet not impossible, because dominant ideological constructions permeate all of our institutions and consciousness levels. Their work hints at hope in recognition of:

1. Past constructions that continue to control our relations with one another and institutions such as the school; and
2. New constructions in the voiced narratives of the immigrant and refugee communities. That recognition allows us to see beyond historical, dichotomous, and hierarchical constructions and allows new spaces for overlapping and cross-border identities and alliances to grow.

The exploration of alliances between and among minority groups is a theme addressed by Jorge Klor de Alva and Cornel West through dialogue around the possibilities of ethnic and racial alliances. Kim Geron describes institutional alliances taking place in the transnational landscape. The challenges described in the Klor de Alva and West conversation, “Black and Brown Alliances,” intersected, ran parallel to, and departed in different directions. West argues that the racial paradigm, however destructive, must be recognized and tackled. Klor de Alva argues that the cultural paradigm must be recognized and tackled before long-lasting alliances can be built or created. They intersect in their critique of the role of class and the labor movement. Beverly Robinson, the respondent, adds her hope that such an alliance would be a powerful response to hegemonic forces as we enter the 21st century. In “The Local/Global Context of the Los Angeles Hotel-Tourism Industry,” Geron puts forth the notion of *social movement unionism* as a response by labor unions and community groups to the internationalization of their economic institutions. All four scholars look at these possibilities in Los Angeles, where the 1992 uprising/rebellion occurred over the beating of Rodney King and where the multinational Kajima Corporation refused to allow its workers to become unionized only to subsequently concede to a community and labor alliance composed primarily of Asian and Asian Pacific workers.

Anthony Platt’s historical analysis of affirmative action in “End Game: The Rise and Fall of Affirmative Action in Higher Education” reviews U.S. “government-supported interventions” to stop and prevent systemic injustices in the last century. Platt provides examples of interventions: entitlement programs that included Civil War veterans’ benefits, World War II G.I. Bill benefits, welfare benefits from 1910 to 1920, and the New Deal public works job-creation program.

These programs, according to Platt, were all precursors to affirmative action policies that had “roots in the civil rights and feminist struggles...from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s.” Platt discusses the *expansion* of benefits under affirmative action, including higher education, from the almost exclusive domain of Anglo men to the inclusion of African Americans and other previously excluded racial and ethnic groups as well as women. To stop a period of *contraction* in the late 20th century, Platt recommends a renewal of the Civil Rights Movement constituted by a more complex set of alliances and issues.

In an effort to realize the notion of “leveling the playing field” in the last part of this century, and to achieve public spaces on the job and in the schools free of discrimination based on race, gender, income, ability, age, etc., affirmative action policies were implemented. Lily Wong Fillmore and Eric Rofes, David Keiser, Tony Smith, and Matt Wray articulate their perceptions of the state of equity, Wong Fillmore from the position of an educator and Rofes et al. from the position of white men trying to do the right thing.

In “Equity in the Age of New Racism,” Wong Fillmore argues that biological, racially based theories have returned to the main stage of public discourse in the form of Herrnstein and Murray’s *Bell Curve*. She argues that in documentaries such as “School Colors,” segregation and tracking remain enduring practices in the public schools. She looks at ability groupings and IQ tests as justification for differential treatment. The author sees multiculturalists offering culturally and internationally distinct alternatives to such inequitable educational policies. She considers the challenges in racially based initiatives like California’s 187 and 209, which scapegoat the victims of economic transnational shifts, and argues that the U.S. democratic project must be a multicultural and equitable one in order for it to be realized. In “Affirmative Action and White Men,” Rofes et al. reveal issues regarding economics, class, privilege, fear, and the daily practice of challenging one’s own attitudes and those of one’s own group members (white men, a.k.a. liberal white men).

The question still remains: Can we look at affirmative action as a tool to seriously engage a wide body of knowledge and experiences? Can we honor the legacies and ways of being of many peoples and cultures rather than through a hierarchy of mainstream established dichotomies — good/bad, male/female, white/people of color, able/disabled — that stratify and stigmatize? Can affirmative action be rearticulated as recognizing the whole elephant of knowledge and experience, rather than only the pieces individual groups can see, touch, hear, and feel?

Finally, Pedro Noguera and Bernard Schissel look at the damage of social constructions of group identities, one in a predominantly white context, Canada, and the other through a comparison of Blackness in U.S. and Caribbean societies. In “The Crisis of the Black Male in Comparative Perspective,” Noguera cautions against focusing on race and gender without historical social and economic

contexts. He argues that if these contexts are ignored, we will continue to reify, marginalize, and subordinate Black males and not, as institutions believe they do, “save lives.” Schissel, in “Youth Crime, Moral Panic, and the News,” examines the role the media play in scapegoating youth and of manipulating or decontextualizing the perception of youth by the public. This “blaming” is found in historic constrictions, according to Schissel, and can be intervened with postmodern conceptions of power and its relation to knowledge. Schissel credits Foucault with looking beyond the event’s meaning to the more relevant question of what makes it possible. Like Noguera, he argues that the failure to look at the social structures that construct these identities and the failure to ask the question, “Who controls and who benefits,” will prevent us from meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

The challenges of the 21st century include the need to question the dominance of socially constructed identities that prescribe our places in the “new” world order. One of the ways to do this is to build alliances based on new conceptions of who we are that invalidate old stereotypic, essentialist objectifications of who we have been and who we will be in the future. Such a task is essential for those concerned about the kind of future we will create for the sake of all our children and seven generations henceforth.

NOTES

1. “At least one-fourth of the nation’s children under six years of age live in poverty, a rate that is significantly higher than those for children in Canada and Western Europe. The rise in single motherhood is often blamed for the nation’s increasing child poverty rates, but it is not as simple as that. European nations have much higher out-of-wedlock birthrates than the United States but lower child poverty. The European social welfare system may account for this difference.” Citation is from the National Center for Children in Poverty, as reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (December 11, 1996).

2. Based on 1990 Census data and demographic trends.