

Crossing Lines: Revisoning U.S. Race Relations

Editors

Introduction

AS THIS ISSUE GOES INTO PRODUCTION IN SEPTEMBER 1998, THE ADVISORY BOARD to the President's Initiative on Race has just submitted its final report to a beleaguered President Clinton. After 15 months of unfocused hearings and testimony, the Board's final report lacks clarity and vision, and its reception has been largely buried in the avalanche of publicity surrounding Clinton's possible impeachment. Unlike previous national initiatives on race relations — notably, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* in the 1940s, the 1968 Kerner Commission, and the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969 — this initiative will have almost no impact on national policies.

The responsibility for this impasse lies in part with an administration that has been willing to talk about racial justice and cultivate close relations with the old civil rights establishment, while promoting social policies in welfare, criminal justice, and education that have increased the racial divide. But the crisis in race relations goes deeper than the duplicity of the government. The decline of the civil rights coalition, the demise of mass movements for social justice, the rise to prominence of New Right and neoliberal politics, the dramatically changing racial and ethnic demographics of the country, and divisions within and between various "racial" constituencies — all these momentous changes of the last 20 years present an extraordinary challenge to the development of a vision and strategy for achieving social justice.

In this issue, guest editor Elaine Kim (professor of Ethnic Studies at Berkeley), Tony Platt, and Susan Roberta Katz have taken some modest steps toward addressing how we might begin to forge new alliances in the post-civil rights era. Most of the contributions call for a much more complex understanding of race relations and a need to transcend one-dimensional causality and single-issue politics. In their articles on the location of Asian Americans within U.S. struggles for justice, Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe draw attention to the intersection of processes of immigration, racialization, labor exploitation, and gender relations. Similarly, in his case study of efforts to democratize a labor union, Fernando Gapasin demonstrates the interconnections between issues of race, gender, age, and politics. Meanwhile, Angie Chung and Edward Taehan Chang revisit earlier

models of coalition politics during the 1960s and 1970s and suggest that different economic and social realities in the 1990s necessitate new ways of envisioning race-based alliances.

Unlike earlier struggles for civil rights, we need to give much more prominence to the relationship between language, cultural identity, and citizenship. James Crawford provides a historical context for current assaults on bilingual education in the United States and draws attention to the necessity of incorporating language issues into the politics of racial justice. As Gilberto Arriaza and Arturo Arias remind us in their article on indigenous identities in Guatemala, language rights can play a decisive role in civil rights struggles.

Two articles address the possibilities for new kinds of racial praxis. Danny Widener identifies examples of cooperation and alliances at the local level between African American and Latino activists. Clarence Lusane reports on a recent gathering of the Black Radical Congress at which issues of gender, sexuality, and class were given serious attention as African American leftists tried to forge a new political space between the traditional civil rights organizations and a resurgent black nationalism.

Two other articles — a critique of the role of racism in mortgage lending by Brian Coffey and J. Clarke Gocker, and Tony Platt's personal account of how higher education remains a privileged institution — remind us that race still matters and that there is an urgent need to revitalize the national struggle for social justice.

Finally, we are very pleased after some 25 years of publishing *Social Justice* to include a contribution from the powerful and eloquent voice of Howard Zinn. His anti-militarist perspective is a much needed corrective to the uncritical acclaim that has greeted *Saving Private Ryan*.

— A.M.P.