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No More Cries of Oppression: Black Conservatives in the Post-Civil Rights Era

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By

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Preface

On May 17, 2004, Bill Cosby stood before a predominately black audience at the

NAACP commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education*

decision. In his speech, Cosby lashed out at high school-aged black men and the black

political elite, protesting that whites were no longer to blame for many of the problems in

black communities. Cosby asserted, "People marched and were hit in the face with rocks

to get an education, and now we've got these knuckleheads walking around...the lower

economic people are not holding up their end of the deal," and he concluded by

criticizing blacks for not paying attention to and taking responsibility for poverty, crime,

and underdevelopment within black communities. [1]

Responses to Cosby's message were sharply divided. Many black political

leaders rushed to condemn the message, calling Cosby an elitist who is out of touch with

the lives of "real" blacks and asserting that blacks should be working together and not

against each other. Others, particularly members of the religious community and black

conservatives, praised Cosby's remarks as a dramatic and necessary break from

"traditional" black left-wing political rhetoric that emphasizes community-based

initiatives over personal responsibility. Regardless of whether they thought Cosby was

right or wrong, black America was surprised that Cosby broke the unwritten rule of not

airing dirty laundry in public.

Cosby's comments fall in line with a myriad of remarks and experiences that

relate to community identity and personal responsibility. Immediately after

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[1]*Dr Bill Cosby Speaks.* http://www.eightcitiesmap.com/transcript_bc.htm   Date Accessed: 1April
2007.

Emancipation, educated black Americans felt the tension between community identity and personal responsibility. While a few had experienced freedom prior to Emancipation, establishing comfortable lifestyles as a result of a combination of hard work and coalition building with whites, Emancipation altered the status of this elite group as whites began to view blacks as a distinct and unified group. The changed perceptions and acceptance of elite blacks by whites influenced members of this small but educated body to positively affect the status of the newly freed slaves, hoping that lifting the bottom would also alleviate them from the increased mistreatment and inequality they incurred after Emancipation.[2]

Many blacks, however, have rejected the idea of communal responsibility for African-American communities as early as slavery. While Emancipation freed the slaves and gave them an opportunity to experience a limited freedom, it also nearly shattered all of what many free blacks had worked for. In the South, angry whites, upset with the results of the war, resented and terrorized blacks. Although the North is often characterized as more progressive than the South, the increased number of southern blacks migrating to northern states disrupted segments of northern society, challenging the lifestyles of northern blacks and whites. As a result of the perceived declining state of black Americans, some sought disassociation from their racial identity, emphasizing their personal gains and achievements and sought acceptance by whites for their individuality. These persons viewed the "race problem" as a problem indeed, but not for the same reasons as those who pondered the uplift of African-Americans. The race

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[2]Painter, Nell Irvin. *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 105-146.

problem for these individuals estranged them from African-American communities because of the strife and discontentment they experienced in connection with being black.

Since the early 20th century some black intellectuals have recognized how the search for a community identity has complicated African-American life. In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois articulated the tension felt by African-Americans in the *Souls of Black Folk*, referring to it as a double-consciousness:

> [The double-consciousness] is a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[3]

According to DuBois, this double-consciousness constantly displayed itself in the negotiation between racial allegiance and individual advancement. This sometimes caused personal strife and fostered a development of negative ideas about the black underclass because its lack of advancement was linked to a lack of morals or a lack of desire to succeed. Seemingly, those who felt the double-consciousness most were those who had been successful, causing some to be more critical of the black underclass. The 1936 film, "God's Stepchildren," displays the tension between being black and being American as well as the negative assumptions about the black underclass through its main character, Jimmy. He ponders the race issue, critically examining the excessive gambling, lack of motivation, and uneducated nature of the black underclass.

While many African-Americans emphasized communal identity, not all blacks shared this perspective. A dissenting voice begin to clearly define itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, voicing a sharp critique about blacks'

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[3] W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Blacks 1903 assessed in the Avalon Project.* *http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/treatise/dubois/dubois_01.htm. Accessed 5 May 2006.*

responsibility in the perpetuation of the black underclass. Because this group openly

challenged the presumed unified nature of African-Americans, they were often met with

staunch opposition and tensions arose between them and those who upheld "traditional"

views of African American communities. Thus, tension during the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries between those who asserted individual responsibility was the

key to racial uplift and those who favored collectivism laid the foundation for the

emergence of differing ideas that have challenged the perceived homogeneity of African-

Americans' views on racial responsibility, individual responsibility, and governmental

responsibilities .

In 1965, on the heel of major civil rights victories such as the desegregation of

public transportation systems and the Civil Rights Act of 1964[4], *The Negro Family: the*

Case for National Action, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was published. "The

Moynihan Report," as it has since been labeled, addressed the increased number of

illegitimate childbirths to black mothers, the increase in divorce amongst black couples,

the increase number in households headed by black females, and the increase in welfare

dependency.[5] Moynihan's findings echoed much of what black sociologist E. Franklin

Frazier wrote in his 1939 release, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Frazier

prophesied that:

> . . .it appears that the family which evolved within the isolated world of
> the Negro folk family which evolved within the isolated world of the
> Negro folk will become increasingly disorganized. Modern means of
> communication will break down the isolation of the world of black folk,
> and, as long as the bankrupt system of southern agriculture exists, Negro
> families will continue to seek a living in the towns and cities of the

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[4] The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

[5] Moynihan, Daniel P. *The Case for National Action: The Negro Family*. (Washington, D.C. 1965): 6-11

country. They will crowd the slum areas of southern cities or make their way to northern cities where their family life will become disrupted and their poverty will force them to depend on charity.[6]

In 1965, Frazier's prophesy was becoming reality, and the Moynihan report provided an analysis of what the black family had become. The report sparked controversy in black communities. Some applauded the report, arguing that it brought to the forefront the necessity of individual responsibility. Others lamented it, arguing that the report would only spark more anti-black sentiments in the United States, supporting arguments concerning immorality amongst blacks and their impending failure based on this immorality.[7]

The Moynihan report widened the door for black conservatives, many of whom were critical of blacks and their role in their own development and uplift. Black conservatism finds its roots in Booker T. Washington, the individual who is most often credited with forming and articulating a black conservative agenda. Washington advocated individual responsibility, placing the majority of the weight of uplift on African-Americans themselves. He declared that, "every individual, every race and nation should have its goal, toward which it is continually making progress and in each case that goal should be the very highest and best things which the nation has to furnish."[8] While his principles have not died, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, black conservatives have taken Washington's argument, expanded upon it, and have

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[6] Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Negro Family in the United States.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939): 367-68.

[7] Rainwater, Lee and William Yancey. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy.* (Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1967): 216-245.

[8] Washington, Booker T. *The Washington Papers, Vol. 7.* Ed. L. Harlan and R. Smock. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1977): 469.

found themselves constantly engaged in public discourse about African-American progress.

This distinct voice has been a focal point of the media since the 1980s precisely because it challenges ideas that have been key to African-American progress. Shelby Steele, whose arguments will be explored further in this thesis, describes black conservatives as classic dissenters who are different from white conservatives because they live lives "subversive to [their] own group and often impractical for himself."[9]

For this thesis, I will argue there are three categories of black conservatives. The first group consists of black conservative economists. This group includes economist Thomas Sowell who set the stage for black conservative economists with his 1975 publication, *Race and Economics.* The second group consists of black conservative academics represented by Shelby Steele, author of *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America,* who has been labeled as a forerunner and leader within contemporary black conservatism. The third group consists of black conservative moralists which includes Star Parker and Jesse Lee Peterson. These black conservatives receive praise and criticism for what seems to be an atypical approach to elevating a race of people who have been historically oppressed. All three groups emphasize individualism and challenge the historic argument about the need for collectivism ingrained in black communities and the commonly accepted notion that the government has a responsibility to help correct past injustices African-Americans have experienced.

The objective of this thesis is to articulate the components of black conservatism since the 1960s as they apply to the progress of the black underclass. It will include an

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[9] Steele, Shelby. *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America.* 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 8.

examination of responsibility these conservatives attribute to African-Americans and the role of responsibility attributed to society at large. Specifically, I show that the black conservatives' push towards shedding the double-consciousness of the African-American and seeing oneself solely as an American rather than as a member of the African-American race has dangerous implications because it fails to make the connection between class and race, ignoring the effects of historical oppression evident in American institutions and African-American low-income communities.

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Defining the Black Underclass

The research for this thesis focuses on the academic, economic, and moral arguments of black conservatives, many of which are directed toward addressing the problems plaguing the underclass. It is important, therefore, to define the black underclass since it will be referred to continuously throughout the remaining chapters.[10]

There are two primary models for defining the black underclass: a behavior model and a structural model. The behavioral model emphasizes negative behaviors and decisions of the black underclass to account for its plight while the structural model emphasizes the institutional forces that affect individual choice and thus pave the way for one's economic and social status.

In *Losing Ground,* conservative policy writer and researcher Charles Murray places the responsibility for economic and social instability on the individuals, arguing that their behaviors are not a result of structural or systemic forces but a composite of choices which perpetuate their lower status. Murray agrees that these behaviors are

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[10] "Underclass" is a term taken directly from research material. Please note that "underclass" is used interchangeably with "lower class."

passed down from generation to generation within a family, creating a caste.[11] For

Murray and others, the underclass is characterized by its negative characteristics such as

high propensity for crime, lower test scores, high proportion of women as the head of the

household, high proportion of babies born out of wedlock, and high unemployment rates.

The structural model analyzes institutions and social processes to find answers to

the questions surrounding the formation and the perpetuation of the black underclass. In

The Black Underclass, the authors argue that people are not members of the black

underclass simply because they are poor. Instead, "they may be there because of

institutional structures and processes that deem them to be there. They are not simply

there because of bad choices or perverse incentives. They may be there because

opportunity structures prevent them from occupying alternative positions in society."[12]

The two different models used to define the black underclass are important

because each model identifies a different degree of individual responsibility for social

standing. Nearly gone are the days in which black Americans were deemed intellectually

inferior based on the color of their skin, and black conservatives rely heavily on the

decline in assumed intellectual inferiority associated with being African-American when

arguing that institutional and systemic racism or oppression has a minimal effect on the

black underclass. Black conservatives tend to use the behavioral model when setting up

their discourse about the advancement of African-Americans in this country.

While it is critical to understand the two models of constructing the black

underclass, it is equally necessary to understand the need to make a distinction between

the underclass and the black underclass. Historically, black Americans have had limited

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[11]Darity, William A and S. Myers, Jr., eds. *The Black Underclass: Critical Essays on Race and Unwantedness*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 44.
        [12] Darity and Myers, *The Black Underclass*, 44.

access to economic and social opportunities. The authors of *The Black Underclass* agree

with sociologist Fred Hall who argued that race and gender affect an individual's life

chances and increase the odds of being cast into the underclass due to the discriminatory

structure of opportunities in the nation's major cities.[13] That is to say, behavioral and

cultural differences are secondary to structural processes. This seems to be apparent

especially in inner cities—primarily inhabited by people of color—where the state of

public school systems is dismal and adequate job opportunities is lacking.

A cycle of poverty results from a history of racial discrimination and restricted

access of blacks to economic opportunity and "creates a self-perpetuating environment

where actual low opportunities in society create justifiable or rationally low aspirations in

many black youths."[14] On 25 January 2007, ABC's 20/20 aired a documentary entitled,

"Waiting on the World to Change" in which Diane Sawyer spent eighteen months

tracking low-income students of color in Camden, New Jersey. The documentary

captured the effects of drugs and community neglect on the students, showing seven-

year-old Moochie's process of withdrawal and the dimming of her dreams of becoming a

judge. The program's point is that young children have no choice when it comes to their

schools or social environments, and these poor environments foster low self-esteem

which carries over into adulthood and the self-fulfilling prophesy of being trapped in

poverty. Moochie and the others featured in this documentary know nothing about

economic or political power. They simply know that the lives they live are not ideal and

do not compare to the lives of the children in nearby wealthier neighborhoods. When

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[13] Darity and Myers, *The Black Underclass*, 30.
[14] Darity and Myers, *The Black Underclass*, 51.

they look around, they see a common trend: their fellow playmates are almost all children of color.

Seven-year-old Moochie in Camden, New Jersey is an example of those affected daily by class distinctions and racial disparities. Systemic discrimination and racism are the by-products of legal racial segregation in this country, making it necessary to examine the intersection between class and race while continuing to also recognize the distinct nature of the two.

The intersection between race and class and the role of institutional racism and oppression are crucial components for understanding the foundations of black conservative ideology because they provide a contextual framework for black conservative discourse. In "Race and Space," historian Raymond A. Mohl examines the effects of urbanization and the construction of Interstate 95 on a community in Miami, noting that the construction of this Interstate displaced thousands of families who were overwhelmingly poor and black. Little was done to alleviate the displacement of these families, for the state highway departments deferred the social responsibilities associated with the construction of I-95 to other agencies. A cycle of displacement and forced relocation emerged as black residents were removed from their communities as a result of urbanization and revitalization.[15]

Although black conservatives tend to view the conclusions in racial terms, most argue that racism has little to no impact in impeding black progress. Instead, black conservatives argue that other variables such as a lack of individual fortitudes or self-

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[15] Mohl, R. A. "Race and Space in the Modern City: Interstate-95 and the Black Community in Miami". *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. A. R. Hirsch and R. A. Mohl. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

destructive behaviors better explain the lack of black progress. My thesis will examine how black conservatives deny the role of race as an impediment to black progress and the implications of this denial. As powerful as Bill Cosby's arguments may be, his attacks on individual failure fail to acknowledge or lend credence to larger societal structures such as residential segregation and economic and educational disparities that are rooted in African-American history and have not been eradicated. The history of oppression, racism, and inequality are critical in understanding the current position of the black underclass because they have heavily influence the access and choices of black Americans.

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Review of Current Scholarship

My thesis focuses on specific authors and their works for two reasons. First, the authors are representative of the body of work for each category because they have been consistently in the media as representatives. All four authors I focus on have been well sought for public appearances, lectures, and have been identified as persons who are representative of the ideals represented by each category. Second, each author has contributed to defining who a black conservative is and has aided in expanding the discussion about black conservatism beyond politics. Sowell, Steele, Parker and Peterson were all instrumental in developing the different categories of black conservatives that I argue exist. Furthermore, to clarify and maintain the distinctions I argue exist, I stick to authors who self-identify with the category in which they fit.

In addition to these four authors, however, there are several authors and works that are gaining influence in the field of black conservatism. Glenn Loury, an economist, published *One by One from the Inside Out: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility* in 1995. The essays included in this work range from discussions of the moral state of the black underclass to economic discrimination. The collection is a conglomerate of arguments presented by moralists, academics, and economists. Loury addresses the actions and addictions associated with the black underclass and he also addresses the negative affects of self-censorship in public discourse.

Glenn Loury has also published several articles and essays in journals that have been influential. One such article is entitled "Individualism over Multiculturalism" which was published in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* in 1996. In this article, Loury argues that although racial and cultural differences exist amongst people, these can be overcome if people began to see themselves as individuals. Although he does not strictly address African-Americans in this article, Loury's argument supports the push toward individualism that black conservatives advocate.

John H. McWhorter, a linguist, is another contributor to the field worth mentioning. His 2000 publication, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America,* helped to establish him as an authority on the study of language and how black Americans sabotage themselves through anti-intellectualism. In *Losing the Race*, McWhorter argues that victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism are the three key things that cause stagnancy in the black community. This work does not explicitly address racism or oppression but instead focuses on individuals' behaviors and suggests solutions to the three vices. In response to the affirmative action debate, he argues that

the best gift that can be given to black students is the gift of competition rather than a hand out. Further, he argues that eliminating affirmative action combats victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism. In his section labeled "Last Words," McWhorter reasserts his position on the power of competition to combat victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism and challenges black Americans to no longer remain silent about the concerns in African-American communities.

Another work published by John McWhorter, *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, was released in 2005. He continues his argument that blacks are the primary cause of their positions in life and repeatedly cites Shelby Steele's *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* and *The Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. He also cites Julius Wilson's, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a work with which he disagrees. McWhorter argues that the economy and lack of job opportunities are not the primary reasons that black communities lack resources and development. He examines the role of welfare as a contributor to blacks' dependency on the government, and he also examines what he considers to be the destructive nature of the hip hop culture in black communities.

Juan Williams has published one of the more recent works that lend credence to a conservative ideology. *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure that are Undermining Black America—and What we can do About It* was published in the latter half of 2006. Williams, who is a journalist, examines the state of education, crime rates in black communities, and insufficient black leadership. He argues that black politicians have become reliant on rhetoric rather than addressing the reality of

the state of black America. Williams praises Cosby's public remarks in 2004 and asserts that *Enough* is a continuation of the work Cosby began.

J.C. Watts is another figure who has contributed to the field. In 2002, *What Color is a Conservative?* was published. Watts' publication takes a stand on black conservatives in politics. Watts argues that black Americans have become victims of the pressure to conform to group identity, and liberal black leaders cloak this pressure to conform in rhetoric that highlights pervasive racism that he argues does not exist. *What Color is a Conservative?* reflects his Baptist views, arguing that God is the key to success because He provides all the resources needed. He also emphasizes hard work and dedication as instrumental in the pursuit of one's desires.

Armstrong Williams, host of the television program called *The Right Side*, has published two works that espouse black conservative ideals: *Letters to a Young Victim: Hope and Healing in America's Inner Cities* (1996) and *Beyond Blame: How We Can Succeed by Breaking the Dependency Barrier* (1995). *Letters to a Young Victim* is a book compromised of letters Williams wrote to a young African-American male. In these letters, Williams stresses self-reliance and the importance of the young man's personal investment in his own success. The letters are critical of the government's role in the individual's life and express a concern for the lack of individual responsibility on behalf of the young man and others like him. *Beyond Blame* focuses primarily on African-American males. Williams argues that black males have become preoccupied with failure because of low expectations and lack of initiative.

These authors and works find their foundations in the publications that are central to my thesis. Throughout these publications the themes of individual responsibility,

limited government, and moral stagnancy are apparent and echo the arguments of the

forerunners in the field.

Chapter 1: Black Conservative Economists

Thomas Sowell, a black economist, made groundbreaking strides when he published the first edition of *Race and Economics* in 1975, which Cornel West has characterized as "a visual and aggressive black intellectual conservative assault on traditional black liberal ideas."[1] Sowell examined the intersection between race and the successes or failures of economic policies, comparing the economic progress of different ethnic or racial groups. His ideals are echoed in the later works of African-Americans such as Glenn Loury and Julius Williams who analyze the economic underdevelopment of African-Americans.

In *Race and Economics*, Sowell argues that race is used as a way to form distinctive categories through which the economic development of different groups of people can be evaluated:

> There is no racial economics in the sense of a different kind of analysis for black people than for white people, or for Jews and Gentiles, but there is an economics of race in the sense that the basic principles of economics can be applied to deepen our understanding of the social problems that revolve around race.[2]

Thus for black economic conservatives, race is a secondary factor rather than a primary factor in explaining a group's economic development as a result of discrimination.

The manner in which Sowell uses race is important because the outcome of his application of race differs from that of those who argue that race is a primary factor in the underdevelopment of African-Americans. By using race as a primary factor or element in analyzing the economic development or underdevelopment of communities, the

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[1] West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1993): 49.
[2] Sowell, Thomas. *Race and Economics*. (New York: Longman, 1975): v.

underlying assumption is that the amount of discrimination on the basis of race is highly

significant and has a major impact on both ethnic groups and the market. Sowell's use of

race is absent from such assumptions and as a result, frees him from examining whether

or not there is a substantial amount of racial discrimination in job, housing, and education

markets. Instead, black conservative economists such as Sowell primarily focus on the

role of blacks in their economic development.

This allows him to argue, for example, that slavery was an economic institution,

and Sowell views the consequences in purely economic terms. According to Sowell, "the

most obvious economic feature of slavery is that it is the ultimate transfer of wealth from

one group to another." [3] He highlights the economic repercussions while refraining from

commenting on the deprivation as a result of racial tensions. Sowell also shifts his focus

from to the effects of slavery on the South and white southerners, further distancing

himself from viewing the economic position of blacks through the lens of racial injustice.

The South, he argues, feels the repercussions of its underdevelopment during slavery:

> The fact that the southern white population was widely scattered meant
> that the cost of providing services was very high in both money and time. .
> . .Law enforcement over vast areas of sparsely inhabited land was also
> more expensive and never very effective. . . .The scattered pattern of
> living dictated by plantation slavery imposed a very high cost on white
> southerners in general, with much of that cost still being paid today. [4]

Slavery, according to Sowell, not only created a transfer of wealth from blacks to whites,

but it also denied the South the opportunity to maximize its wealth and production

capability. Sowell does not create a hierarchy of who was most economically

disadvantaged as a result of slavery. Instead, he examines how the institution negatively

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[3] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 4.
[4] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 11.

affected whites and blacks, insinuating that the institution affected the two races equally

economically.

To suggest in 1975 that the South was just as debilitated as blacks because of

slavery established a new tone regarding the study of African-American economic

progress. Sowell instead suggested ways to move blacks toward more economic stability.

In doing so, he acknowledges the complexity of striving toward economic stability:

> Perhaps the greatest dilemma in attempts to raise ethnic minority income
> is that those methods which have historically proved successful—self
> reliance, work sills, education, business experience—are all slow
> developing, while those methods which are more direct an immediate—
> job quotas, charity, subsidies, preferential treatment—tend to undermine
> self-reliance and pride of achievement in the long run.[5]

Sowell articulates the sentiment of conservative black economists that other races,

ethnicities, and regions in this country have experienced economic underdevelopment

and may still feel the effects of it, but are demonstrating steady progress toward

economic stability regardless of past obstacles:

> There are, apparently, traits that do and traits that do not produce
> economic advance, and there are historical conditions that do and do not
> produce these traits in various groups. However, all ethnic groups have
> adapted to American conditions to some extent, and virtually all have risen
> significantly as a result.[6]

Thus, the role of race has little or no value in terms of economics. In fact, black

conservative economists argue that race has not hindered blacks from developing because

since the 1970s, African-Americans have demonstrated economic stability. Furthermore,

many argue that it is difficult to cite race as an impediment to economic progress because

blacks were more economically stable during the times when they faced the most overt

injustices and discrimination.

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[5] Sowell, *Race and Economics,* 238.
[6] Sowell, *Race and Economics,* 148.

Sowell begins his discussion about the South after the abolishment of slavery, arguing that blacks and whites were thrust into similar economic positions of disempowerment. The abolishment of slavery essentially meant that the South now had a free market in which, ideally, African-Americans could participate. In a free market where there are no impediments, the removal of slavery should have enabled blacks to succeed in the American economy, especially since the overwhelming majority of African-Americans lived in the South.

Another important argument made by black conservative economists is the power of the American labor, education, and housing markets to eliminate the black underclass. The labor, education, and housing markets excluded blacks during slavery, and their primary contribution to the American economy was their labor for which they were inadequately paid.

Black conservatives believe in the power of markets, and Sowell articulates why African-Americans should diversify their interests in labor, education, and housing markets and not be hindered by group cohesion:

> Each of these American ethnic minorities was (or still is) unwelcome as neighbors, co-workers, employees, or as participants in the general economic and social life of the country. Clearly this factor alone has been insufficient to prevent their absolute economic advancement or even their relative advancement where that has been achieved.[7]

Regardless of the response of the majority culture, Sowell suggests that minorities in America have been successful in spite of racial discrimination or hostility. Racial cohesion, he argues, can reach a point where it limits success because it prevents people from wanting to leave the comfort of their own group.

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[7] Sowell, *Race and Economics,* 161.

According to Sowell, African-Americans have reached the point where group cohesion has negative implications. As a result, group cohesion without understanding the need of individual contributions to mainstream markets is counterproductive to economic progress. Group cohesion proved to be effective for African-Americans during segregation because many owned their own businesses that catered to their communities, providing for them what mainstream America denied. However, this stage, according to Sowell, is over and perhaps has been over for quite some time. It is now important, that African-Americans shift from a group-cohesion mentality to an individualistic mentality, focusing on entering the mainstream, one person at a time.

Thomas Sowell examines these elements when analyzing ethnic problems: (1) the role of group identity, (2) the significance of political power, (3) the cause of family disorganization, (4) the significance of color, and (5) the conditions for economic advancement.[8] Using Jews and Japanese-Americans as examples, Sowell argues that "it is by no means clear that promoting group identity promotes economic success. Some of the most successful minorities have been Americanized."[9]

For centuries, the biological inferiority of blacks based on race was continuously debated. Sowell addresses this issue, proclaiming that there is no basis for assuming biological inferiority or genetic differences. This, in effect, translates into meaning that on the basis of skin color, African-Americans are as capable of success as other races and ethnic groups. The assertion that no biological inferiority can be claimed for African-Americans serves a dual purpose for Sowell. First, it puts blacks on an equal playing field with other ethnic and racial groups in this country, and is thus an argument against

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[8] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 116.
[9] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 118.

racial preferences. Secondly, it sets the platform on which Sowell compares African-Americans to native born Africans who migrate to America.

Black conservative economists such as Sowell often point to native Africans as examples of blacks who have been able to succeed economically in this country. By comparing these immigrants to blacks who are American born, Sowell uses their common feature—skin color—to argue that if their success was not hindered by the presence of racism or discrimination, then there must not be a connection between economic underdevelopment and race. He argues that "black immigrants to the United States have succeeded economically, educationally, and in other ways much more than native black Americans, under the existing level of racial discrimination, which is largely the same for both."[10]

Sowell argues that economic underdevelopment is unique to African-Americans because of the relative success and stability of black immigrants who have migrated to America. Native black Americans are not simply denied current opportunities but "they were long denied the more basic opportunities to develop their abilities themselves."[11] Furthermore, Sowell focuses on the underdevelopment of black Americans in a historical sense, alleviating society of present responsibility, emphasizing that although there are some current opportunities denied to them, African-Americans' lack of economic progress cannot be attributed to racism. Sowell distinguishes between native Africans and blacks born in America, making a valid claim concerning the role of race in economic advancement. By isolating native born black Americans as the sector that is not succeeding economically, Sowell makes a case that blacks are not victims of

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[10] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 32-33.
[11] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 33.

discrimination. They are suffering from underdevelopment that is disconnected from discrimination.

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Analysis of Black Conservative Economists' Arguments

Sowell recognizes the role of slavery in African-American development and history but argues that contemporary African-Americans are removed from the effects of slavery. Sowell, however, fails to make the connection between race and region in his example of the underdevelopment of the South. Black Americans doubly experienced the effects of underdevelopment. The end of slavery in the South signified social and economic changes for blacks and whites and both groups felt the pangs of economic instability that resulted from losing the Civil War. While they shared these common woes, black southerners had an additional obstacle in their path to economic development: race. Because of this factor, the position of the white southerner and the black southerner—generally speaking—can hardly be compared. Race was a deciding factor in economic dealings in the South and was the primary indicator of social and economic stratification. When slavery was abolished, other forms of oppression were instilled. Jim Crow laws across the country intended to suppress blacks socially and economically. Jim Crow laws were not developed on the basis of economics. On the contrary, these laws were developed on the premise of black Americans' supposed racial inferiority, not their economic inferiority. These laws patterned the social and economic order in the South well into the 1960s.

While black conservatives find it difficult to make a connection between slavery and the present-day economic condition of the black underclass, a more tangible

connection can be made between the effects of Jim Crow and the economic condition of the black underclass. Jim Crow refers to the set of laws and regulations formulated immediately after Emancipation that restricted and terrorized blacks into the 1960s. Many of the members of the black underclass continue to feel the effects of Jim Crow because their parents and grandparents were directly affected, hindering their economic progress. Therefore, the connection between past injustice and present economic instability is more pertinent to the discussion of the black underclass than black conservatives acknowledge.

Not only is the link between slavery and economic stagnancy viewed as irrelevant by black conservatives, but the rise of a solid black middle class complicates the discussion of the economic state of blacks. Discrimination seemingly has not proven to be a hindrance for the black middle class.[12] In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, William J. Wilson, director of the Jobless and Urban Poverty Research Program at Harvard University, argues that a distinction must be made between historical discrimination and contemporary discrimination.[13] It is necessary to make a distinction between the two to adequately assess what is being affected by past discriminations and what is being dictated by present discriminations. Wilson sets the platform for the conservative argument that discrimination is no longer a predominant impediment to black progress. However, a study conducted in the late 1990s in which the researchers concluded that the economic condition of blacks—regardless of class—is still affected by whites, arguing that contemporary discrimination hinders blacks' economic success. In a section of the study concerning housing segregation, the

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[12] Wilson, William Julius. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 30.
[13] Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 30.

researchers found that 73 percent of whites said they would be unwilling to move into a neighborhood that was 36 percent black. Accordingly, 27 percent of whites said they would be unwilling to move into a neighborhood that was just 8 percent black. The results of Wilson's study suggest that housing segregation continues.[14]

For those African-Americans who own homes, the value of their home is contingent upon the presence of whites in the neighborhood. An influx of black families in white neighborhoods, however, results in the fleeing of white families. As a result, "the rushed exodus often devalues the housing, and the socioeconomic character of the neighborhood changes."[15]

African-Americans may have a responsibility to take control of their economic development, but it is also clear that there are external forces beyond their control that have a disproportionately negative effect on the success of the black underclass. The absence of white families often leads to depreciation of home values, but it also often leads to depreciation in school value as well, leaving African-American children in schools that are either inadequate or simply not as good as schools in predominately white areas. Neighborhood segregation has a deep impact on the lives of African-Americans and the achievements of African-American children.[16]

Black conservative economists argue that race has little to no effect on the economic advancement of African-Americans, but current data suggests otherwise. The poverty rate for African-Americans has consistently been more than double the rate for whites since 1959. In 2001, approximately 25 percent of African-Americans were living

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[14] Chideya, Farai. *Don't Believe the Hype: Fighting Cultural Misinformation about African-Americans.* (New York: Plume, 1995) 49-50.
[15] Chideya, *Don't believe the Hype,* 53.
[16] Chideya, *Don't Believe the Hype,* 53.

in poverty versus approximately 9 percent of white Americans.[17] There are several factors that affect the poverty rate for African-Americans. One such factor is the high unemployment rate amongst African-American males.[18] The unemployment rate for African-Americans has continuously been higher than both whites and Hispanics since 1972 and in 2004 was approximately 10 percent.[19] Two factors influence the unemployment rate: exclusion from the labor market and educational level.

Wilson argues that "an expanding economy that provides employment opportunities, particularly for black males, will create the necessary environment in which those blacks for whom the American dream is more aptly described as a daily nightmare can escape poverty and public assistance."[20]

In 1999, 22 percent of African-Americans males who were considered less educated were unemployed despite the fact that 1999 was the peak of one of the longest economic expansions.[21] The key to eliminating the underclass is to provide *employment opportunities* for the black underclass that coincide *with* economic expansion. Economic expansion is most often more beneficial to those who already have stability in the work force. To have an affect on the underclass, however, the economy has to become more inclusive rather than exclusive. Sowell and other black conservative economists trust in the forces of the free market, arguing that more involvement among blacks will address many of the economic problems facing the black underclass. What they neglect to address, however, is that the market is not necessarily inclusive of African-Americans.

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[17] Handler, Joel F. and Yeheskel Hasenfeld. *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality.* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 34.
[18] Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 34.
[19] Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 34.
[20] Darity, William A. and Samuel L. Myers. *The Black Underclass.* (New York: Garland), 26.
[21] Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 34.

Middle class blacks have an easier time navigating the markets because they have educational and economic stability. It becomes more evident, however, amid the black underclass that a lower economic status equates to a harder time entering into the markets, specifically the labor market. Black conservative economists would attribute this to a lack of desire to work in the fields that are most available to the black underclass. However, the unemployment rate of African-American males can also be attributed to exclusion from the labor market. In *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, Joel Handler, professor at the UCLA School of Law and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, professor at the UCLA School of Public Affairs state that:

> For a time, discrimination eased, affirmative action expanded opportunities, and the education gap narrowed, but most progress stopped in 1973 when the labor market softened. Older manufacturing plants closed, jobs in central cities declined, and the less educated left the job market.[22]

The second factor that influences the unemployment rate is education level. On average, inner-city high schools lose two-thirds of their students to dropouts year after year--a tragedy that is the root cause of inner-city disintegration and the skyrocketing prison population.[23] That education and economic advancement are closely linked is a fact that black conservative economists recognize as well. This is particular visible in the inadequate education in inner-city schools. Sowell comments that "the segregation of children from ethnic minorities, and the provision of inferior educational facilities for them, is a very old pattern." [24] Black conservatives examine the individual's

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[22]Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 35.
[23]Bonsteel, Alan. "One in Four U.S. Students Drop Out."
http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=10235 accessed 20 February 2007
[24] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 228.

responsibility without paying close attention to the elements over which the student has little or no control like funding, faculty recruitment, and resources:

> The atmosphere in low-performance schools attended by children from disadvantaged groups (native white as well as ethnic minorities) is often one where heavier problems take up as much as half the class time, and where the interruptions and mental stress undoubtedly reduce the effectiveness of the school work done in the other half.[25]

Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, African-Americans were subjected to *separate but equal* education as a result of *Plessey v. Ferguson (1896)* which allowed for separation of races as long as there were adequate accommodations for blacks. The reality, however, was that the vast majority of the accommodations were not equal, leaving blacks to accept inadequacies in major components of social and economic stability, including education. The separate but equal doctrine was ruled unconstitutional over fifty years ago, but the effects of it linger in present generations. Parents to children living in the inner city were affected by this doctrine, limiting their educational pursuits and increasing their chances of being cast into the underclass. Children have then been caught in the cycle of poverty that resulted from the *separate but equal* law.

In 1954, *separate but equal* was declared unconstitutional, laying the legal foundation for integrating schools all across America. While some schools were integrated more easily than others, the overwhelming majority of schools that sought to be integrated faced adamant opposition. Many whites did not want their children educated with blacks. In Little Rock, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus received national attention in September of 1957 when he deployed the National Guard to prevent nine black students from attending Little Rock Central High. The students were successfully

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[25] Sowell, *Race and Economics*, 230.

admitted to school despite the protesters; however, in 1959, the three high schools in Little Rock were closed for the entire school year to prevent integration.

The Little Rock example is indicative of what is now termed as *white flight* or the abandonment of schools or communities inhabited by blacks. The integration of public schools in the 1950s incited more whites to seek private education for their children, leaving public schools to become run down and unfit for proper education. Currently, inner city schools, which are primary populated by minorities, reflect the concept of white flight that was evident in the 1950s. Inner-city schools still suffer from neglect, lack of properly trained teachers, and are sometimes plagued with a lack of funds. The choice is left to students to manage their education. However, the students' options in inner-city schools are drastically minimized compared to students' options in suburban schools. It is difficult not to racialize the problems plaguing inner-city schools when clear racial disparities exist in major metropolitan areas.

Black conservatives rely heavily on personal accounts of their journeys from poverty to prosperity and argue that if they can do it, so can the members of the black underclass. Ward Connerly who was the forerunner in the successful implementation of Proposition 209 in California that prohibits using race in admissions decisions in the University of California system suggests that his success was not impeded by racial discrimination, institutional oppression, or the cycle of poverty that is evident in the black underclass. Connerly and other black conservatives emphasize that each individual has a choice, no matter how marginalized the individual may be and how minimal his or her choices may be. While an individual's choices affect his progress, it does not take the place of society and government taking responsibility for larger, structural conditions of

society.[26] Connerly ignores the societal conditions that affect low-income people: lack of

decent jobs, poor housing, and inadequate educational opportunities at the elementary

and secondary levels which ultimately affect the choices of the future.[27]

Economic data indicates that factors other than individual choice limit the black

underclass. For three decades, black males have averaged only a little more than half the

income of white males (median incomes for each being roughly $12,000 per year as

opposed to roughly $20,000 per year); the yearly median income gap between white and

black families has been abut $15,000. For three decades, 30 percent of blacks and 10

percent of whites have lived in poverty. About 15 percent of all white children live in

poverty as opposed to over 44 percent of all black children.[28] Furthermore, even amongst

college graduates, blacks are more than two times as likely as whites to be unemployed.[29]

Sowell argues that black Americans are not suffering from discrimination but

rather from their consistent underdevelopment, though he does not acknowledge the

relationship between race and underdevelopment. Urban revitalization is an example of

the underdevelopment of African-American communities.

Urban revitalization is the process in which a section of a city undergoes physical,

aesthetic, and economic changes for the betterment of the community or neighborhood.

Often, this entails bringing more retail shops and businesses into the area to generate

more capital and often, houses in the neighborhood or community are bought from their

owners to make space for these businesses or condominiums and apartments—none of

which the current residents can afford. Thus, urban revitalization takes a community that

[26] Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 158.
[27] Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 158.
[28]Le Blanc, Paul. *Black Liberation and the American Dream: The Struggle for Racial and Economic Justice.* (New York: Humanity Books, 2003): 34.
[29] Le Blanc, *Black Liberation and the American Dream*, 35.

perhaps was in shambles and crime-infested and transforms it into a profitable area that attracts people with money. What, then, happens to the residents? If the residents live in a rented home and the owner chooses to sell the house, they are left with few options because they have no entitlement to what is being taken from them. The owner of the house profits from selling it and the resident is forced to relocate. If the resident lives in a home that he owns, he has two options. He can stay in the home as long as possible, fighting off the pressures to sell, possibly facing an increase in property taxes and a higher cost of living on the same fixed income. Secondly, he can sell the home, taking whatever sum of money offered to him to pick up, leave, and find a new home. Urban revitalization changes the face of the community without addressing the specific needs of the people who once lived there.

Chapter 2: Black Conservative Academics

Booker T. Washington was one of the first African-Americans within academia to articulate a conservative ideology that emphasized the role of individual development in the uplift of African-Americans and deemphasized the reliance on government intervention and social services. Since the 1960s, Washingtonian ideals have been expanded and black conservatives have been more vocal and active in promoting their ideals in the academic world and mainstream society. The increased vocal nature of black conservative academics began as a response to Civil Rights Legislation in the 1960s. Black conservatives spoke out about how African-American progress was contingent upon African-Americans taking responsibility for their actions and that while government intervention had been necessary and helpful in the past, it was not the key to their advancement

Among black conservative academics, Shelby Steel has been a leading voice since the 1980s and his three books—*The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (1990), *A Dream Deferred: the Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (1998), and *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006)—embody the themes most embarked upon by black conservative academics. All three of Steele's publications deal with the detriments of Affirmative Action, how blacks capitalize on white guilt, and the dangerous state of victimization blacks have internalized.

Two major themes that run through black conservative academic arguments are individualism over collectivism and the stance that black victimization is antiquated and

in its place has developed a victimization mentality. Steele has become the most well-known black conservative academic because of his articulate and thorough arguments concerning these two themes and how he applies them to the lack of progress in African-American communities.

The concept of individualism that Steele and other black conservative academics promote is not founded on the basis of being strictly self-serving. On the contrary, black conservatives consider individualism as a means to produce role models and mentors for low income persons in black communities. Individualism from a black conservative perspective means seeing oneself as a distinct individual and acknowledging one's own life experiences rather than accepting a diluted or generic rendition inaccurately labeled the "black experience."

Steele argues that looking at ourselves through our racial and cultural lenses alone limits individual progress which in turn limits community progress. According to Steele, this limitation of progress is evident in all facets of life, including education and career. Perhaps one of Steele's most cited example of how damaging the collective mentality can be is his observation that:

> For some years I have noticed that I can walk into any of my classes on the first day of the semester, identify the black students, and be sadly confident that on the last day of the semester a disproportionate number of them will be at the bottom of the class, far behind any number of white students of equal or even lesser native ability. More to the point they will have performed far beneath their native ability.[1]

Steele's observation of his African-American students introduces two important points: how his students view themselves through the collective lens and how society has viewed

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[1] Steele, Shelby. *The Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990) 27.

his students as stereotypical black Americans. Steele observes that his students have

come to identify themselves primarily through their cultural lens and, according to his

observation, this has a negative effect on his students' success in the classroom. The

black students cannot maximize their potential because they cannot recognize their

individual innate abilities to succeed. Instead, their racial identity overshadows their

abilities and presents problems for them in the classroom because attached to their racial

identity are societal stigmas associated with black Americans that, sadly, they do not

seem to be able to overcome.

Another danger Steele isolates is what he terms *race-holding* that stems from the

collective identity. Steele recounts a story of a friend who lamented his poor

performance in the insurance business because he felt no one wanted to buy insurance

from a black man.[2] Steele labeled his friend's response to his inability to successfully

sell insurance *race-holding*, arguing:

> Instead of admitting that racism has declined, we argue all the harder that it
> is still alive and more insidious than ever. We hold race up to shield us
> from what we do not want to see in ourselves. My friend did this at first. .
> .Here he was race-holding, using race to keep from looking at himself.[3]

This race-holding, which is based on a sense of collective identity, provides an unjust

excuse for black Americans when they fail. According to Steele, it prevents African-

Americans from addressing areas that need improvement.

The "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" ideology espoused by Black

conservatives is a noble one and for people such as Ward Connerly, Stark Parker, and

Armstrong Williams this ideology catapulted them out of the ghetto and into the

American limelight— traditional rags to riches stories. It encourages individuals to take

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[2] Steele, *The Content of our Character,* 23.
[3] Steele, *The Content of our Character,*,24.

responsibility for their own lives, to own up to their actions, and to be responsible for their success and failures. As Shelby Steele so eloquently puts it, "the responsible person knows that the quality of his life is something that he will have to make inside the limits of his fate."[4]

Each individual—regardless of race—has to choose if s/he will play the hand that is given and fight through circumstances. Black conservatives are not arguing that African-Americans should forget history; they are arguing that historical oppression has little or no bearing on the current plight of all blacks. They believe that America is far enough removed from a racist mentality and can move toward a society in which each individual would be judged solely on merit and racism will have little or no impact on this raceless society. As such, "black conservatives strongly oppose programs such as Affirmative Action, minority scholarships, and full government involvement in society. Also, black conservatives argue that they do not connect most of the problems in the Black community with the effects of racism."[5] In other words, the pitfalls, the dangers, the slow development of black communities is mainly a result of what is happening within and not from outside them. Steele argues that we must let go of this victimization because it holds us bondage.

African-American history includes both successes and struggles, neither of which would exist without the other; thus, when discussing how to effectively help the race, both the successes and struggles have to be included. The collectivism in African-American communities is often interpreted as African-Americans playing the victim role.

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[4]Steele, *The Content of our Character,* 33.
[5]Asumah, S. N. and V. C. Perkins. "Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America - Ideological Cul-De-Sacs." *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 51-73.

Indeed, Shelby Steele argues that collectivism is based on antiquated victim status and our constant renewal of white guilt in America.[6]

Blacks have created an illusion of victimization because they feel their power is linked to their status as a victim.[7] In turn, Black America's collectivism arises from this sense of victimization, encouraging passivity in regards to personal responsibility which do nothing to propel Black America forward. Instead, it is stuck in fruitless debates about racism when instead each individual should be moving toward his goals which ultimately would have a positive effect on Black America.

Another issue black conservatives debate is the necessity of Affirmative Action. Steele applauds the efforts that drive Affirmative Action, agreeing that it "certainly has all the moral symmetry that fairness requires—the injustice of historical and even contemporary white advantage is offset with black advantage; preference replaces prejudice, inclusion answers exclusion."[8] However, beyond the good intentions behind the policy, Shelby Steele—like many other black conservatives—identifies dangers associated with the emphasis on such race-based policies.[9]

First, Steele argues that since its implementation, Affirmative Action has done more harm than good for blacks. The racial representation that Affirmative Action has opened doors to achieving is not, according to Steele, the same thing as racial development because it allows entry for middle and upper class blacks without addressing critical issues in black communities that would ensure greater access for a greater number of people. Instead, racial representation is the main goal and a false sense

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[6] Steele, *The Content of our Character*, 26-30.
[7] Steele. *The Content of our Character,* 14.
[8] Steele, *The Content of Our Character,* 112.
[9] Steele, *The Content of Our Character*, 113.

of educational parity is created. Steele argues that "poor and working-class blacks do not get preferences (and, thus, patronage) because preferences go almost exclusively to the wealthiest and best-educated blacks." [10]

Secondly, Shelby Steele argues that it creates an inferiority complex in African-Americans, causing them to continuously think they are not as smart or qualified as their white counterparts. Indeed, Steele argues that this is sometimes the case because institutions are more concerned with diversifying rather than bringing in the most qualified students or workers. As a result, qualified African-Americans are constantly doubting themselves and their abilities because in the back of their minds they are wondering if they were admitted or hired based on their achievements and success or based on their racial identity. Steele reveals that he fears that his own children will succumb to the belief that black progress is contingent upon handouts and that "racial preferences can do for [blacks] what [they] cannot do for [themselves]." [11]

Not only do black conservative academics such as Steele argue that blacks constantly live with an inferiority complex as a result of Affirmative Action policies, but they also argue that Affirmative Action is a means of allowing blacks to exploit their past victimization as a source of advancement and privilege. [12] Many African-Americans, he argues, rely on Affirmative Action rather than their skills to gain an unfair advantage over whites.

An understanding of the role of individual responsibility and a retreat from victimization leads black conservatives such as Shelby Steele to argue that policies such

[10]Steele, Shelby. *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America.*   1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998): 139.
[11] Steele, *The Content of Our Character,* 111, 119.
[12]Steele, *The Content of Our Character,* 112.

as Affirmative Action are the equivalent to anti-progress for African-Americans. Real

progress will occur, they argue, when we move toward a society in which everyone is

judged based on their merit and character rather than their racial classification:

> The new militant black consciousness wanted me to embrace again my race as my destiny. In the age of racism I had wanted freedom as an individual; in the age of white guilt I was learning to want power as a black. To up the ante on white guilt this new black consciousness led blacks into a great mistake: to talk ourselves out of the individual freedom we had just won for no purpose whatsoever except to trigger white obligation.[13]

  A colorless society as is often termed is another issue black conservative academics

such as Steele argue for "racial preferences are [not] a protection against this subtle

discrimination; I think they contribute to it."[14]

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Analysis of Black Conservative Academic Arguments

Black conservatives criticize liberals for harping on the enslavement and

oppression of blacks in this country, because they feel that there is little or no connection

between the problems in black communities and historical oppressions and inequalities.

While it is dangerous to foster a victim mentality that negates individual responsibility, it

is also naïve to assume that the current state of black communities is completely void and

free of past bondage. As Asumah and Perkins, Professor of African-American Studies at

SUNY Cortland and graduate fellow at the same university, respectively, point out:

> Blacks are the only group of people who came to America by force or the threat of force, and this fact is frequently forgotten. . . .As a group, Blacks, from time immemorial, have not been allowed to maintain their individualism or even sustain the family structure. . .but it is important to

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[13] Steele, Shelby. *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006): 45.
[14] Steele, *The Content of Our Character,* 120.

emphasize that the denial of self for African-Americans through the American system of government has continued in several forms.[15]

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Julius Williams argues that there must be a distinction between historical discrimination and present-day discrimination.[16] Conservative black academics argue that currently discrimination it is hardly a factor in limiting black progress. Present-day discrimination may not be as overt as discrimination as the past and may be harder to trace. However, the affects of historical discrimination are still present in residential segregation, educational disparity, and the economic underdevelopment of African-American communities.

Secondly, the concept of individualism for African-Americans is challenged by the presence of white-skinned privilege in this country. The reality is white Americans have unearned privileges because of their skin color that provide them with "head starts" in almost every facet of life. Of course, times have changed, society has reformed, and the typical life of an African-American in this country is much different than it was fifty years ago. Regardless of the changes that have ensued, Black America continues to have restricted access to resources that may lead to success and "[has] to work twice as hard to gain these materials whereas Whites have a knapsack of 'unearned privilege'. . . .For Blacks, skin color generally precludes them from passing as members of the higher status, highly achieved, White society."[17]

Loyalty to race and culture has proven to have a catalytic effect for Black Americans, bringing their concerns and oppressions to the forefront. While Black

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[15]Asumah, S. N. and V. C. Perkins. "Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America - Ideological Cul-De-Sacs." *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 1 (SEP, 2000): 54-55.

[16] Wilson, William Julius. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[17]Asumah and Perkins, "Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America--Ideological Cul-de-Sacs", 55.

America has variety and is composed of individuals rather than just being a homogenous body, Black Americans are bound together not by their homogenous personalities or experiences, but by their common historical identity in this country in regards to systemic and social oppressions and the impulse of the majority to perceive them based on stereotypes.

Black conservatives create an "either/or" dichotomy as it relates to individualism and collectivism, and the history of Blacks in America shows that it does not have to be dichotomous. In fact, individualism and communalism actually coexist. It does no justice to African-American history or the progress of black America to completely dismiss the importance of heritage and cultural pride in the strides that have been made.

Black conservatives and those who oppose them agree on at least one point: Black America has to help itself. Black conservatives, however, argue that Black America can lift itself from within without expanding the government, without initiatives such as Affirmative Action, and without continuously reminding ourselves of historical oppressions that, to most black conservatives, have very little affect on contemporary black life

African-Americans established a legacy of helping themselves during slavery as well as segregation and Jim Crow, and that same desire to help themselves is present today as African-American leaders debate the best methods of racial uplift—similar to the debate between Washington and DuBois that originated one hundred years ago. However, "there are times that [African-Americans] lack the means of beginning the process of helping themselves because of historical social ordering and access denial to a

group that has been marginalized, dominated, and subjugated for more than two hundred years."[18]

This reality that Steele articulates comprises the essence of individual responsibility and choice. However, it does not encompass the external factors—including race—that limit individual choice. The amount and type of the individual's responsibility changes according to socioeconomic status. If a student does not attend college, it is because of the student's lack of effort or desire. The conversation hardly leads to the deficiencies in schools in low income areas or the lack of resources provide to them. This looks to be a socioeconomic issue, but race and ethnicity are closely tied in because the majority of low income urban areas in the United States are heavily populated by races and ethnicities that are considered minorities in this country; this includes Hispanics as well as African-Americans.

The victimization that blacks internalize has the potential to hinder their success, and there is a thin line between understanding one's victimization and allowing that victimization to control one's actions. Black conservative academics argue that most blacks fall in the latter category, allowing past victimization control the present, blinding them from seeing that their progress suffers from their own internalization of a state of victimization that does not exist.

However, black Americans are not so much stuck in its victimization as they are feeling the very real effects of it. Less than sixty years ago, this nation desegregated its public school systems, providing greater access to education for many black families. Less than 140 years ago, African-Americans were released from legal bondage in this

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[18] Asumah and Perkins, "Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America--Ideological Cul-de-Sacs", 63.

country to develop both culture and community outside of bondage, much of which was dictated by a limited definition of freedom. In less than 150 years, African-Americans have made significant progress and have defined and proven themselves in this nation. In the twenty-first century, these significant gains are not an end-all achievement and there are residual effects of slavery and Jim Crow, and systemic oppression still exists that has the potential to hinder black Americans, especially the black underclass. As a community, Black America is hardly an overt victim in ways that have associated with them in the past—victims of Jim Crow laws, lynching, and legal discrimination. However, African-Americans are still subjected to systemic oppression and, perhaps more dangerous, the mindset of Americans that the playing field has been leveled.

The first thing that needs to be addressed when discussing black victimization is the definition of racial oppression and its role in American society. Black conservative academics identify racial oppression as a small portion of American society, something that infects an otherwise healthy society. The reality of racial oppression, however, is that it has been a part of American society since its inception and still resides today. It has taken many different forms and the form it takes today in the lives of African-Americans is largely systemic, penetrating most major aspects of American society. Arguably, the major institutions in this country have been informed and dictated by white supremacy, are racially exploitive social arrangements, and are undemocratic.[19] Joe R. Feagin characterizes legal segregation as slavery unwilling to die and characterizes contemporary racism as slavery still unwilling to die, arguing that racial oppression is not

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[19]Feagin, Joe R. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 262.

an appendage but rather a foundational component of our society that has yet to die

away.[20]

Black conservatives look at the historical victimization of African-Americans and

argue that it is not what has happened to blacks in this country that dictates the present, it

is how the past is internalized. They recognize that understanding slavery, Jim Crow, and

other forms of inequality are necessary to the overall comprehension of the legacy of

African-Americans, but adamantly argue that danger incurs when this victimization is

used as an explanation for all problems faced by African-American communities because

it keeps them from

> understanding the true nature of our suffering. It leads us to believe that all
> suffering is victimization and that all relief comes from the guilty good-
> heartedness of others. But people can suffer from bad ideas, from
> ignorance, fear, a poor assessment of reality, and from a politics that
> commits them to the idea of themselves as victims, among other thing.
> When black group authority covers up these other causes of suffering just
> so whites will feel more responsible—and stay on the hook—then that
> authority actually encourages helplessness in its own people so that they
> might be helped by whites. It tries to make black weakness profitable by
> selling it as the white man's burden.[21]

Systemic oppression or racism is not the only road block to black progress, but it is a

significant part of the problem. Black conservative academics do not acknowledge that

systemic oppression and racism are foundational in American society and as such,

African-Americans do not suffer from an internalized misconception of black

victimization. On the contrary, they are suffering from victimization that is

contemporary, on going, and influencing their lives and success.

Sociologist Joe R. Feagin, president of the American Sociological Association,

argues that the lives of black Americans are dictated by white racial framing which he

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[20] Feagin, *Systemic Racism*, 265-66
[21] Steele, *A Dream Deferred,* 10.

defines as racist practices which are espoused in historically white institutions and are perpetuated and fostered by the racialized conceptions and habits of white Americans.[22] Within this white racial framing, stereotypes about black Americans such as laziness and criminality still prevail. As a result, whites—whether consciously or unconsciously — seek to limit and control the access blacks have to historically white institutions. These institutions range from high-performing schools to prestigious neighborhoods and communities.

As long as white skinned privilege affects the social and economic conditions of African-Americans in this country, moving toward a society that is based solely on merit is not a possibility. In their discussion of Affirmative Action, black conservatives argue that blacks are victims of Affirmative Action because the very concept of giving someone something on the basis of race implies inferiority.[23] Affirmative Action, however, does not imply the inferiority of African-Americans. The policy recognizes that America is not a society in which progress is based solely on merit. As Feagin points out, racialized politics and policies are the foundation of the major institutions in this country— including educational institutions. Therefore, Affirmative Action is an attempt to balance that racial inequality.

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[22] Feagin, *Systemic Racism*, 230.
[23] Steele, *The Content of Our Character,* 116

Chapter 3: Black Conservative Moralists

Black conservative moralists argue that the conditions of black underclass communities are the result of the breakdown of morals. They integrate economic and academic arguments and suggest that victimization, economic disempowerment, and academic underachievement are a result of lack of moral stability. Persons such as Star Parker, author of *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats: the Stunning Conservative Transformation of a Former Welfare Queen* and Jesse Lee Peterson, author of *From Rage to Responsibility: Black Conservative Jesse Lee Peterson and America Today*, have increasingly gained public attention since the 1990s because of their outspokenness about the problems in African-American communities, using their life stories to make their claims.

These two individuals have been influential and formative in the public discourse about the moral plight of the black underclass. They highlight issues such as addiction to welfare and lack of family development as indicators of an epidemic that cannot be solved by expanding government programs or expanding the economy. Some conservative moralists—including Parker and Peterson—argue that African-Americans in low-income communities have abandoned their reliance on God and therefore have fallen into a pattern of negative behaviors. In his 2006 publication, *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure that are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It*, Juan Williams laments that "very few leading black voices in the pulpit or on the political stage are focused on having black people take

personal responsibility for the exorbitant amount of crime committed by black people

against other black people."[1]

The silence regarding black crime rates and moral issues contributes the focus of

blacks elsewhere. Black conservatives argue that African-Americans must refrain from

viewing the race issue in a black-verses-white dichotomy because it results in blacks

seeing whites are their opponents in American society. Jesse Lee Peterson expands on

this idea, arguing that:

> A significant cost associated with race-consciousness is the anger it
> necessitates. To be a member of a racial group is to always be on guard
> against slights and insults. One must cultivate a super-sensitivity to
> racism, and react with great fury whenever one perceives it. An "us-
> against-them" mentality results, and one's individuality begins to recede
> behind a wall of racial anger and personal hostility that is poisonous to the
> person.[2]

Blacks, he asserts, do not address the decline in morals in their families and communities.

Instead, they project their inadequacies on white Americans through rage rather than

taking responsibility. This rage obstructs the path to advancement because it creates a

false enemy at which black Americans hurl their complaints.

In his book, Peterson tells the story of a young man he counseled who was

bothered because a member of an opposing basketball team called him a *nigger.* In

response to the feelings the word evoked in the boy Peterson asked, " 'Did they get extra

points for calling you that?' 'Did they get to shoot foul shots for calling you that?' 'Did

they get to shoot 3-pointers from beneath the basket for calling you that?' " to all of

which the boy answered "no." Peterson suggests that "the boys were accomplishing

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[1] Williams, Juan. *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure that are Undermining Black America—and What We can Do about It.* New York: Crown Publishers, 2006.
[2] Peterson, Jesse Lee. *From Rage to Responsibility: Black Conservative Jesse Lee Peterson and America Today.* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2000), 21.

nothing for themselves by talking like that, and could only hurt him if he allowed them to."[3] Peterson attributed this young man's preoccupation with the incident to the boy's inner rage that race-consciousness has taught him. From Peterson's perspective, the real issue was not that the young black man had been called a *nigger*. On the contrary, the real issue was that the boy had been trained to harbor anger toward whites and as such he was distracted by the comment made because of the thoughts of racism it triggered. Peterson argues, however, that "the politically-incorrect truth is that racism today is a state of mind, more than a social reality."[4]

Peterson makes a claim about the source of the inner rage that is fostered in African-Americans: black leaders. These leaders, he argues, profit from this race-consciousness and therefore neglect the real issues of morality that plague the black underclass and therefore the actions of black leaders themselves are immoral. Peterson argues that if blacks honestly analyze their current state, they would realize that black leadership has created the illusion that systematic, anti-black racism exists in America.[5] Significant barriers to success have been broken down, allowing blacks more opportunities in this country. Instead of embracing these opportunities to further advance African-Americans, Peterson argues, black leaders find another source of contention to fuel the anti-white sentiment in black communities.[6]

Black conservatives such as Peterson and Parker also assert that the breakdown of black families has led to economic decline for African-Americans. One source they argue that contributes to the breakdown of the black family structure is the role-reversal

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[3] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 18.
[4] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 18.
[5] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 17.
[6] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 18.

between men and women. Peterson argues that during the last forty years, black women have assumed the role of black men, creating resentment in black women toward black men for not fulfilling their responsibilities.[7] Black women then believe that a man is not needed in the household. They can play the role of the mother and father. As a result, the black family structure disintegrates and the children in these families suffer from a serious lack of moral development that comes through the role of the father:

> [Black men] know that the man should be the head of the family, and he should act like it. Now, let me stress that male-headship doesn't mean that the man is better than the woman, or that he should be served by her. Its significance lies in organization. Given the internal constitution of men and women, the family simply works better that way. It is its organic structure.[8]

The mother's role, Peterson argues, is that of the caretaker and the father's role is that of the moral authority who is to place the children under moral obligation. It is natural for the woman to love her children unconditionally. The father must not "heap unconditional love on his children . . .his job is to place his children under moral obligation."[9] The lack of a father in the household is equated to an absence of moral authority, leaving mothers to raise children who, according to Peterson, will not have the benefit of being held accountable for their actions. Peterson highlights the absence of fathers in African-American families as the most urgent issue in African-American communities.[10] The absence of the father encourages the blurring of gender roles and disrupts the natural order of the family:

> Where a mother is nurturing, a father is challenging; where a mother is compassionate and emotionally indulgent, a father is fairly strict and stern; where a mother dotes, a father prods. This is more than a sort of parental

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[7]Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 45.

[8] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 46.

[9] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility*, 40-41.

[10] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 39.

good-cop/bad-cop routine, it is the natural order of the family, one that corresponds to the general character and dispositions of psychologically healthy women and men.[11]

As part of the breakdown of black families, black conservatives also highlight the rise in teen pregnancies and abortions. Parker addresses these two specific issues, agreeing that the number of teen pregnancies in low-income black communities has rapidly increased and so have the number of abortions. Parker ascribes this rise to a lack of moral restraint and self dignity. Parker argues "a little shame goes a very long way," because "if a fifteen-year-old girl decides to get pregnant out of wedlock, I don't think the errant behavior should be rewarded with membership in the teen mommies club at the local high school. What's to discourage this girl from getting pregnant again?"[12]   In low income communities, she argues, there is little regard and respect for the body because there is no positive reinforcement in the home:

> I'd like to take every single mom out there and the father of her child, grab them by the collar, and ask them, "What do you think daddies are for? They teach their kids how to abstain. They teach their sons about hard work. They teach their daughters to value themselves and their bodies. They tell their girls, "No, you're not wearing that outfit out this house. And you better be home at eleven o'clock."[13]

With little self-respect and a seemingly desolate future ahead, young people prefer to live a life of self-gratification, unaware of and unconcerned about the future.

Black conservatives support limited government and limited social programs, and Star Parker articulates such a point of view in *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats: The Stunning Conservative Transformation of a Former Welfare Queen (1997).* Parker's book has been influential in public discourse about the abuse of public assistance by

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[11] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility*, 40.
[12] Parker, Star. *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats.* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997): 160-61.
[13] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats,* 159

black women and has perpetuated the stereotype of the "welfare queen." Parker, who

was once a welfare recipient, writes about her welfare addiction and how she chose to

"live off the county" rather than find a job and support herself. Parker documents her

transformation from a welfare recipient to a hardworking, prosperous woman and

declares that others can make the same transformation if they realize that public

assistance is crippling and addictive. She argues, "welfare in the black community has

transformed receiving public aid into an alternative lifestyle rather than what it was

intended to be, a program to help tide people over in hard times until they could get back

on their feet."[14]

Parker also argues that the format of welfare policies contribute to the break up of

African-American families, indicating that this is why blacks should shy away from

supporting expanded government and social programs. She asserts: "government welfare

policies were adopted that encouraged fathers to leave home so their families could

collect benefits. Those policies contributed to the destruction of marriages, and these

social and economic changes were catastrophic to blacks."[15]

For Parker, there are two types of people: those who work hard and those who

don't. For those who work hard, Parker and Peterson agree that a combination of hard

work and responsibility lead to upward mobility. Parker argues that we live in a society

that has been contaminated by victimization. In other words, blacks have become

comfortable with blaming someone else for their problems.[16] Peterson takes it a step

further and argues that good values are the key to success in America:

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[14] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats,* 131.
[15] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 129-131.
[16] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 145.

> If people adopt the values that make for personal success—hard work, careful spending of money, sustained effort, delayed gratification—and keep themselves psychologically healthy by rejecting rage and resentment as the controlling attitudes of their lives, they will do well. If you want to succeed in this country, and you're willing to work hard, you will.[17]

Those who choose not to work hard suffer from government and social program dependency. Parker provides no middle ground, and indeed her personal life story reflects her membership in both groups of people. Her addiction to welfare perpetuated her shiftlessness and lack of desire for meaningful work. On the other hand, her hard work and determination propelled her out of welfare addiction, helping her to leave behind the life of her past. Parker's message to all is *if I can do it, so can you.* Jesse Lee Peterson makes the same claim in his book in which he articulates his preoccupation with rage directed toward whites as a dependency similar to welfare: "By hating white people and being angry at America, I avoided the pain of facing my resentment of my parents, and my hurtful awareness of how they failed me."[18]

While black conservatives lament the increase in teenage pregnancies, the rise in female-headed households, and the breakdown of African-American families, Star Parker adamantly protests against sex education in public schools. Parker argues that sex education in public schools increases the number of teenagers having sex and decreases the amount of parental involvement in the education of their children outside of the classroom. She refers to sex education as an example of school bureaucrats thinking they are a better source of education than parents.[19] Instead of sex education in school, Parker advocates teaching abstinence in the home. According to Star Parker, the problem with sex education in public schools is it teaches students more than what is necessary to

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[17] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility*, 17.
[18] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility*, 25.
[19] Parker, *Pimp, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 162.

understand the basic concepts of the human body. As a result, Parker, argues, public schools are teaching teenagers how to have sex, increasing the number of teenage pregnancies and the number of HIV/AIDS cases.

Parker highlights the rise in teenage pregnancies and further argues that school districts contribute to increased teenage sexual activity by providing services such as day care for students with children. She cites Los Angeles Unified School District as an example. LAUSD primarily serves low-income minority students. Parker suggests that while the district claims they are assisting these girls by allowing them access to day-care while they are in school, the reality is that this is another example of a government entity taking over the role of the parent. It encourages, she argues, a decline in morals at home and school because the parent is absolved of the responsibility of helping to provide child care. Furthermore, the allusion of blissful parenthood encourages other teenage girls to pursue parenthood. Society has to be tougher on these teen mothers, she argues, instead of making teen motherhood look so glamorous. She cites an example of what she feels to be the correct solution: one-on-one talks between the parents and teenagers which she feels more appropriate than handing out condoms, birth control, or providing day-care for teen mothers.[20]

Peterson and Parker attribute all the issues that compromise the moral makeup of black communities to one thing that is lacking in these communities: the declining belief in God or a Higher Authority, particularly the Christian God. Peterson laments the fact that the struggle to find identity and understanding is a result of departing from the "old morality of Judeo-Christian absolutes."[21] He further argues that moral relativism has

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[20] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 161.
[21] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility*, 38.

taken the place of Christian values and work ethnic, resulting in fragmented black families, sexual promiscuity, male irresponsibility, and female aggression. All of these things, Peterson asserts, can be remedied when a man puts God first in his life because he then will feel a responsibility for his family and community and to a Higher Authority, God. [22]

Parker agrees with Peterson by painting a before-and-after picture of her life, centering on her initial denial and later acceptance of Christianity. In her pre-Christian days, Parker thrived on welfare, was estranged from her family, and lived a life that included drugs and irresponsible sexual activity. However, as someone who has given up all those things—quitting welfare after feeling convicted as a result of a sermon she heard in church, reconciling with her family, and getting married and becoming more responsible in regards to sexual activity—Parker asserts that her adherence to religion was instrumental to these changes.

According to black conservative moralists, religion provides something that neither the government nor society can provide for individuals seeking a better life. Religion provides stability, discipline, and answers to questions concerning moral obligations. Furthermore, churches provide a family unit, helping those in need to succeed. In fact, Parker suggests that government and social programs should be reduced so that "families, communities, and churches [are given] the privilege of caring for the poor without competition for the government," arguing that black Americans should have the burden of caring for their own.[23] In place of welfare, she suggests that welfare mothers be matched with small business owners in black communities so that they can

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[22] Peterson, *From Rage to Responsibility,* 48.
[23] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats,* 179.

earn a living while learning job skills that may help them in the future. As an incentive,

transportation and daycare should be provided. The day care should be provided by

churches, and Parker argues this is an essential part of the solution because "in black

neighborhoods, churches have the best track record for helping people, they have the

foundation to instill some moral training in the mothers and children involved."[24] The

other stipulation is the women must live in a structured group home or "preferably with a

mentor family that receives a tax credit for opening its home to a welfare mom. This is

one way government can help if it insists on being involved in the social service business:

by providing tax breaks to families working with these moms."[25]

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Analysis of Black Conservative Moralist Arguments

The arguments presented by black conservative moralists receive the most support

from black communities because historically, African-American communities have been

socially conservative. Indeed, many of the arguments articulated by these moralists are

echoed often in black churches and institutions. Black community leaders rally citizens

to mentor and invest in the development of younger generations because they recognize

and understand the necessity and benefit of strengthening the moral face and character of

black communities. Black conservative moralists highlight these very same ideas, but in

a different manner. They take the historical precedence of community support in

African-American communities and argue that through community support and

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[24]Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 181-82.
[25]Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats,* 182.

individual initiative and responsibility, the black underclass can be eliminated. This was

Bill Cosby's sentiment in his 2004 speech:

> I'm telling you Christians, what's wrong with you? Why can't you hit the
> streets? Why can't you clean it out yourselves? It's our time now, ladies
> and gentlemen. It is our time (clapping). And I've got good news for you.
> It's not about money. It's about you doing something ordinarily that we
> do—get in somebody else's business. It's time for you to not accept the
> language that these people are speaking, which will take them nowhere.
> What the hell good is Brown V. Board of Education if nobody wants it?[26]

Black conservative moralists highlight issues that are indeed important to black

development and growth. However, addressing and correcting each of the vices

discussed merely improves the moral condition of the black underclass, improving their

position and condition as members of the black underclass.

No one can reasonably argue that it is wrong to advocate for stronger families or

better home environments. Black conservatives rightfully assert that these two entities

are critical for the development of African-Americans. Many argue that the breakdown

of African-American families can be traced back to slavery, asserting that there is

connection between the instability of underclass families and the break up of families

during slavery. There has been enough recent scholarship, however, to suggest that

perhaps this line of argument is incorrect. The primary family structure during slavery

was the nuclear family and when the family was torn apart, it was understood that it was

by force and not by choice. Furthermore, after Emancipation, many African-Americans

sought to piece their families back together again.[27]   Black conservative moralists

provide an adequate portrayal of how the breakdown of the family structure in African-

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[26]*Dr Bill Cosby Speaks.* http://www.eightcitiesmap.com/transcript_bc.htm Date accessed 1 April
2007

[27] Painter, Nell Irvin. *Creating Black Americans,* 130-131.

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American communities is an important issue and their claims should be at the forefront of conversations about how individuals can take more control over their lives.

The discussion on the breakdown of African-American families highlights the lack of pursuit of the "American Dream." The American Dream consists of being married, having children, and achieving economic stability. Black conservative moralists suggest that unless all these elements are present, the American Dream cannot be achieved. While black conservative moralists present solid evidence about African-American families in low-income communities, they send the message that without the family unit, an individual has very little chance at success. Admittedly, single mothers may have a more difficult time raising children alone and have to make more sacrifices, but success is not unobtainable as implied by black conservatives. They discuss the family breakdown but not ways to build up families that are already considered broken, suggesting that they are hopeless.

Star Parker, like many other black conservatives, argues that much of the underdevelopment of African-American communities is due to the amount of dependency on government social programs such as welfare. Parker's story about her own transformation from a welfare addict to a self-sufficient, family-oriented woman certainly suggests that the "welfare queen" really does exist, living and depending on government funding. The concept of the welfare queen was coined and popularized in the 1980s by President Ronald Reagan.[28] The welfare queen is characterized as a young, African-American mother who has children to continue her dependency on welfare and who fails

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[28] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore poverty and Inequality,* 159.

to teach her children morals or social decorum. These children, in turn, become the criminals of the future.[29]

There are those who take advantage of the social programs in America, but there are those who do not. Parker asserts that at the end of the 1990s, African-Americans accounted for more than one-third of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) roll, which she considers shameful in contrast with the rising black middle class. Parker concludes that the number of African-Americans on welfare is more influenced by lack of individual responsibility and moral constraint rather than economic disempowerment.[30] While Parker highlights her own battle with welfare addiction and cites empirical data about the substantial number of African-Americans on welfare, Parker does not evaluate this data, although studies have shown that the majority of the poor live in households with at least one member working part-time or full-time.[31]

Black conservatives focus on the negative stereotypes, perpetuating the myth of the undeserving poor. These negative stereotypes that they focus on, however, do not reflect characteristics associated with the majority of welfare recipients. In 2004, of the total number of African-Americans receiving AFDC or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, approximately 28 percent worked full-time and approximately 26 percent worked part-time, accounting for about 54 percent of African-Americans reportedly on welfare.[32] Furthermore, the National Survey of American Families in 1997 reported that about 40 percent of all welfare recipients reported having two or more

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[29] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 159.
[30] Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats*, 180.
[31] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality,* 30.
[32] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality,* 60.

significant barriers to employment, including low education, lack of child-care, and poor

physical and mental health.[33]

The welfare myth is a gross overgeneralization. Indeed:

> The welfare crisis has re-ignited a number of myths—including the myth
> of the crisis. The overriding myth continues to be that welfare persists
> because of the characteristics of the families, not because of larger,
> structural conditions on society. Such conditions as gender and race
> discrimination, lack of decent jobs especially for African-American males,
> work-related benefits, child care, housing, transportation, and all the other
> societal conditions that affect the lives of lower-income and poor people,
> especially people of color.[34]

Many Americans believe that welfare recipients are in poverty because of lack of effort

and poor money management, and the face of welfare has been the face of the African-

American woman, therefore associating welfare with blackness.[35] Black conservative

moralists denounce welfare and are critical of its African-American recipients, but they

fail to make a connection between how the portrayal of these welfare recipients has

influenced and perpetuated racial stereotypes and segregation. Welfare itself has been an

easy target for criticism because since its inception, it has served as a symbol of what

happens when one fails to achieve the American Dream, as an admonishment to continue

to work hard so that one does not become a welfare recipient.[36] Because black

conservatives are concerned with addressing the problems of the black underclass, they

rightfully focus on this group of people. However, their emphasis on the negative traits

of one segment of the black underclass fuels racist depictions by the media. It is no

coincidence that people such as Jesse Lee Peterson and Star Parker have become voices

for black conservatives. They are among the most conservative and most critical of the

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[33] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 60-61.
[34] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 158.
[35] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, 174-75.
[36] Chideya, *Don't Believe the Hype,* 36.

group. Their arguments reinforce the idea that people live in poverty because they choose to. This in turn gives people a reason to turn a blind eye to the inequality and injustice that fuel the poverty in the black underclass.

They are also tone deaf on the importance of sex education. Black conservative moralists forget that although abstinence is the best safeguard against sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies, the national trend reveals since 1993, the average percentage of teenagers, regardless of race, who are sexually active is 49.5 percent.[37] Teenagers—regardless of the programs offered at school—have a higher propensity toward sexual activity than teenagers 20 years ago. Because low-income black communities have absorbed a high number of teenage pregnancies and births, sex education in these schools is critical, ideally functioning as a way to teach teenagers about sex, its implications, and the possible results. Sex education in schools was not designed to take the place of parenting, but in some cases, it is the only form of education about sex that some children receive. With so many parents in low-income communities working outside the home and spending little time with their children, there needs to be other effective options. Parker focuses on the parents, but the focus needs to include the community as well. Black conservative moralists often celebrate the role of the church in the elimination of the black underclass, and the black church can be instrumental in sex education. Most churches, however, teach abstinence only, leaving teenagers to discover other options either through the media or by self discovery.

Religion has long sense been a pillar in black communities. It was a beacon during segregation and the civil rights movement and continues to be the center of many,

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[37] http://www.kff.org/youthhivstds/upload/U-S-Teen-Sexual-Activity-Fact-Sheet.pdf Date Accessed: 8 April 2007.

if not most, African-American communities. As indicated previously, many of the arguments presented about the role of religion in improving the condition of African-Americans can be heard in many black churches on any given morning. African-Americans—overwhelmingly Christian—favor the presence of a Higher Authority and adamantly believe that religion is an important source of hope and answers and the church is a vital source of assistance and guidance. In light of the history of African-Americans, black conservative moralists present a valid argument about the return to church and religion. History suggests that when African-Americans strongly adhere to religion and church, individuals are stronger therefore strengthening the community.

The church teaches many of the ideals that are key to black conservative ideology: abstinence, family development, and individual initiative. Black conservative moralists are critical of blacks' non-involvement in local churches, but they are not critical of these churches whose call is to serve those in their community. Black pastors embrace teachings that reflect communal and individual responsibility, but they often fail to embrace teachings that provide alternative ways of addressing major issues if they do not align with their rigid teachings. Most churches teach abstinence only, reinforcing family structure and values. However, the reluctance to embrace other teachings reflects the tendency of black churches to remain silent about highly controversial issues that are not linked to racial disparities.

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Role of Community

The discussion must turn to what can feasibly be done to reduce the underclass without demonizing low-income individuals and without suggesting that the entire responsibility of their status is based on their behaviors. Since 1973, the poverty rates for African-American children have consistently been higher than any other race or ethnicity.[38] These children should be raised to be productive citizens with solid moral standards, but there should also be a movement by the community to help these families in need. While black conservative moralists are critical of the position of their parents, presenting a bleak picture of their futures, African-American children are taking in this rhetoric which is filtered through community institutions and schools, internalizing the negative stereotypes and images that are associated with their status. It is time for community leaders to become more involved and to insist that more positive images dominate lower-income African-American communities.

The role models black conservative moralists often highlight as being examples of "how to make it in America" do not live in these low income communities. Many attend churches in these communities because the majority of black communities are planted there, but they fail to invest more than a connection through a spiritual experience on a Wednesday evening or Sunday morning. These examples, in reality, are largely absent from the lives of the people they are supposed to serve as mentors for.

Star Parker's suggestion for welfare reform involves the community and with modifications, has potential to be a successful program. As discussed previously, education is a necessity for economic advancement, and Parker's plan simply provides low-wage work for businesses and does not provide any real opportunities for

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[38] Handler and Hasenfield, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality,* 40.

advancement for the participants. Black conservative moralists highlight ways to improve the moral condition of the black underclass, but this has to be coupled with providing economic and educational options because strong morality absent of economic and education opportunities teaches one how to live a life of integrity but promises nothing in return. Since low performing, inner city schools are primarily comprised of students of color, that alone should be enough to rally community support and concern. The moral quandary (as it is called by many conservatives) of the black underclass is not the responsibility of individuals. It is the responsibility of the community because the community is not really in the hands of the individuals but in the hands of the community leaders. While the individual is responsible for his behavior, the community is responsible for the moral atmosphere that has been set in these communities. Morality issues have to be addressed collectively, with community leaders and members rallying together to demand more from its constituents.

At the same time, these community leaders also need to rally for increased opportunities in these communities, providing legitimate, positive options for low-income people. Conservative moralists fail to highlight the connection between the breakdown of families, the prevalence of drug use, the lack of development of black communities, and the lack of options. Many argue that this is an attempt to shift the responsibility from the individual to the government or society, but it is quite the contrary. This is an attempt to rightfully distribute responsibility so that individuals can have real opportunities. Improving the moral condition of the black underclass works hand in hand with lobbying for equal opportunities in these communities.

Conclusion

Every weekday students at Sam Houston High School roam the halls, attend classes, and interact with their peers. Every weekday these students attend a school that does not meet Texas' educational standards and is in danger of being closed. Students are taught by some teachers who neither invest in their education nor have any confidence in their ability to succeed. Every weekday these students walk down the halls in hearing range of comments such as "we just need to get them through," "half of these students will never leave the ghetto anyway," and "we have the worst kids in the city."[1]

Sam Houston High School in San Antonio, Texas is an example of an inner-city school comprised primarily of African-American students. Most of the attendees live within a ten mile radius of the school and in that ten mile radius there is an apparent lack of entrepreneurship and economic opportunities. When asked what he wants to do after graduating high school, fourteen-year-old Joseph answered, "smoke weed and play basketball. Everyone knows there ain't no opportunities for black people."[2] In a group discussion about commerce, a student remarked that "they would never bring anything nice to the eastside of San Antonio because it's where all the black people live. They don't do nice things for black people."[3]

These students reflect the ideas that many African-American children in inner-city schools are growing up with each day because they are perpetuated in their schools and neighborhoods. As high school students, they have already learned that their

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[1]These are all statements I overheard at Sam Houston High School in March 2007.

[2]Joseph Johnson, small group discussion, 12 February 2007.

[3]This comment was made by a student in a World History class at Sam Houston High School on 21 February 2007.

communities are desolate and void of opportunity and their only explanation is *they don't do nice things for black people. They* to these students is synonymous with the government, with white people, or with anyone or anything they perceive as holders of power and authority.

San Antonio, Texas has a population of 1,592,383 of which African-Americans comprise 6.7 percent. The median income of blacks is $32,347 as compared to $49,088 which is the median for non-Hispanic whites. According to 2000 census data, the proportion of blacks living below the poverty line was 19.1 percent and 26 percent of all black children were living in poverty. Even more disturbing, the public schools in San Antonio are comprised of approximately 8 percent African-American students, and the poverty rate of the schools these students attend is 46.5 percent.[4] .

The data collected about San Antonio, Texas is comparable to data from other metropolitan areas in the United States such as Atlanta, Houston, and Los Angeles.[5] This data confirms the statements of the students at Sam Houston High School. Though they could not articulate it, it seems that the students understood that disparities do exist and affect their daily lives.

The concerns articulated by these students and the data collected about San Antonio and other cities are ignored by black conservatives. Bill Cosby's 2004 remarks

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[4] http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu/profiles.jsp?ma=7240 Date Accessed 7 April 2007
[5] Atlanta: African-Americans are 29.2 percent of the population; the median income is $39,080 compared to $59,709 of non-Hispanic whites; the poverty rate is 16.3 percent; 21.6 percent of black children are in poverty as compared to 5.2 percent of non-Hispanic white children; the average black student attends a primary school with a poverty rate of 62.6 percent. Houston: African-Americans are 17.6 percent of the population; the median income is $31,407 compared to $57,068 of non-Hispanic whites; the poverty rate of African-Americans is 21.8 percent as compared to 5.8 percent of whites; 28 percent of black children live in poverty; the average black child attends a primary school whose poverty rate is 66.6 percent. Los Angeles-Long Beach: Blacks comprise 10 percent of the population; The median household income: $31,885 as compared to $53,978 earned by non-Hispanic whites; The poverty rate of African-Americans is 24.4 percent; 33.5 percent of black children live in poverty; the average black student attends a primary school where the poverty rate is 72.8 percent.
http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu/profiles.jsp?ma=7240 Date Accessed 7 April 2007.

provided a public voice for conservative ideas, suggesting that the black underclass has a

problem that it is manifesting by its behaviors and lack of initiative. However, the

individual effort that black conservatives argue is key to improving one's economic and

social status is insufficient without societal support and improvement as well. Michael

Eric Dyson is critical of Cosby, arguing that "if Cosby's implicit claim is that the black

poor have lost their way, then [he doesn't] mind suggesting, with only half tongue in

cheek, that the black middle class has, in its views of the poor and its support of Cosby's

sentiments, lost its mind."[6] Black conservative economic, academic, and moral

arguments point the finger at the underclass, ignoring the cycle of institutional racism:

> Black Americans throughout their history have always been challenged by the harsh and often brutal reality of institutional racism. As a system of unequal power, political racism led to the disenfranchisement of African-Americans after the Reconstruction era's brief experiment in democracy. Within America's cultural institutions, the representations of blackness were frequently racial stereotypes and crude distortions. And within the economy, generations of African-Americans found themselves excluded from the best jobs, the last hired and the first fired.[7]

Individual responsibility in conjunction with collectivism has aided in antiracism

and antipoverty pursuits and has the potential to continue to be instrumental because:

> Significant racial inequality remains—for example, in average household income, wealth, home ownership, employment opportunities, and access to quality health care. Racial discrimination within the housing and employment markets is still entirely too commonplace. Popular support for civil rights laws appears to be weakening, and the institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of these laws are often under-funded and inadequately administered. *De facto* racial segregation in urban settings continues, with grave consequences for employment and educational opportunity for those living in inner-city communities….Thus, despite their undeniable progress in some arenas, African-Americans are still

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[6] Dyson, Michael Eric. *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or has the Black Middle Class Lost its Mind?* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2005): xv.

[7] Marable, Manning. *Black Liberation in Conservative America.* Boston: South End Press, 1997: (215).

seeking to realize fully the freedom, equality, and prosperity that
American ideals promise.[8]

Black academic, economic, and moral conservatives pursue an agenda that holds black

individuals accountable for their actions but negates the responsibility of society-at-large

to be committed to racial and economic justice in America. Economic and achievement

gaps between blacks and whites are getting smaller but have not completely disappeared.

The students at Sam Houston High School are a small percentage of students who

live in environments that perpetuate poverty and low expectations. They have little or no

knowledge about what black conservatives have to say about the underclass. They do

know, however, that they live in urban ghettos that receive more negative attention than

positive attention. DuBois' concept of the double-consciousness highlights the difficulty

in navigating one's racial identity and national identity, but it also suggests that its

presence increases awareness about racism that has been institutionalized in America's

constituents.

An examination of the black underclass forces Americans to see the intersection between

race and class as a critical issue in American society:

> Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it
> forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and
> distrust. In short, a candid examination of race *matters* takes us to the core
> of the crisis in American democracy. And the degree to which race
> *matters* in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial
> measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic
> experiment we call America.[9]

American citizens are disenfranchised and their disenfranchisement threatens the concept

of democracy while exploiting their underclass state. Many black conservatives boast of

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[8]Shelby, Tommie. *We Who Are Dark*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005): 60-61.

[9] West, *Race Matters,* 156

their upward mobility from the underclass, and their stories serve as examples to others that success is possible, regardless of one's environment. They are correct—success is possible. However, their stories attempt to undermine the existence of inequality in America and threaten to shift the focus from this inequality to solely emphasizing individual behavior. Bill Cosby did it in his speech. Black conservative academics, economists, and moralists emphasize individual behavior in their writings. In the end, behaviors are addressed yet inequality remains untouched.

Cornel West argues that "the fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love. The urgent problem of black poverty is primarily due to the distribution of wealth, power, and income—a distribution influenced by the racial caste system that denied opportunities to most 'qualified' black people until two decades ago."[10] Individual responsibility fits within the framework of this caste system. Racial inequality is not a figment of the imagination as Shelby Steele suggests in his discussion of a perceived victimization of black Americans. Racial inequality affects the choices of the black underclass.

Understanding the presence of inequality is only half the solution. A greater understanding demands action:

> If the elimination of black poverty is a necessary condition of substantive black progress, then the affirmation of black humanity, especially among black people themselves, is a sufficient condition of such programs. Such affirmation speaks to the existential issues of what it means to be a degraded African in a racist society. How does one affirm oneself without reenacting negative black stereotypes or overreacting to white supremacist ideals?[11]

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[10] West, *Race Matters,* 93.
[11] West, *Race Matters*, 97.

The affirmation of oneself means living up to his own potential as suggested by black conservatives. One affirms oneself by being a positive example without demonizing the black underclass in the process. One affirms oneself by acknowledging the presence of inequality rather than choosing to cloak himself in denial. One affirms oneself by challenging white supremacist ideals while helping his brother set and reach goals. One affirms oneself by acknowledging that , "no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.[12]

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[12]Donne, John. "Meditation XVII." http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/ Date Accessed: 8 April 2007

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