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The Forgotten Factor: The Economic Principles of Affirmative Action

Patrick Kinuthia

The position that I stand for this afternoon is that Affirmative Action should not be done away with but should be changed so that preferences in education are provided on the basis of economic class, not race or gender. (Kahlenberg 1995, ix). This position implies three things:

1. That America needs Affirmative Action;
2. That the present forms of Affirmative Action are not what America needs; and
3. That Class-based Affirmative Action will avoid the shortcomings of race- and gender-based Affirmative Action.

Let us look at the three separately. Why does America need Affirmative Action? America needs Affirmative Action because of historical reasons. Its history is one that is tarnished by discrimination against minorities and women. To most people this discrimination has led to the poverty witnessed among the minorities and women.

In the 1960's, some people felt that

something ought to be done to compensate for the misdeeds of the majority's ancestors. Some, like James Forman, demanded cash compensation.

However, the popular idea was not aimed at mere reparation of descendants of the actual victims of discrimination but also aimed at reversing the effects it had on them.

Martin Luther King, in his book *Why We Can't Wait* writes that America

"...must incorporate into its planning some compensatory consideration for the handicaps [the Negro] has inherited from the past"(King 1964, 134).

He adds,

"It is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner"

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, was therefore, not enough. More than just outlawing discrimination and segregation in education and employment, it was required to enable the minorities face the challenges of the new, transformed America.

Lyndon Johnson also recognized this fact and took the banner from King. He says,

"Freedom is not enough. You do not

wipe away the scars of centuries saying: now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say 'you are free to compete with all others' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair" (quoted by Kahlenberg 1995, 3).

Thus, for historical reasons Affirmative Action is justified.

Why then do I say that it should be changed from the way it is? This brings us to the second point,

2. Why America should change the present form of Affirmative Action.

Most people are likely to either support or condemn Affirmative Action basing their judgement on the present form of Affirmative Action. To support, or merely object to, the present form of Affirmative Action indicates our failure to grasp the finer but very essential details of the making of American history. Among the supporters are those who connect Affirmative Action to the Civil Rights Movement and would therefore see its eradication as a reversal to the

1960's and the preceding years. To condemn Affirmative Action altogether would be tantamount to refusing to acknowledge the reality of past discriminations' effects.

Affirmative Action both as an idea and as a policy has undergone radical metamorphosis.

I) Civil-Rights-Linked Affirmative Action advocated by Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. This kind of Affirmative Action advocated equal opportunities in education, employment etc.; a color-blind future for America; racial integration to reduce prejudice and foster social harmony; compensation for past discrimination; and addressing the problem of the disadvantaged poor. However with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and retirement of Lyndon Johnson, this form of Affirmative Action was never endorsed in the American book of policies. Instead it was transformed into:

II) Politically-Linked Affirmative Action, which resulted from the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency. Nixon was not famous for his sympathy for civil rights activities. The question is *Why did he ratify minority preference?*

Surely Nixon and the minorities could

not be said to be the best bedfellows. The only answer we can give is that he wanted to gain some political mileage.

Nixon was aware of a possible Democratic political coalition of labor and civil rights groups. If he were to survive as a politician, he had to, prevent such a coalition. The easiest way of attaining this was to put a wedge between the white workers and the minorities (Kahlenberg 1995, 22). *And the best wedge he could handle was making the minorities appear to be stealing the white workers' jobs.* In effect causing conflict and division between the two. This is the Affirmative Action that was endorsed in America.

The insincerity of Nixon was clear when he sought presidential reelection in 1972. He opposed racial quotas that he participated in creating. He had already made the wedge and it was important to remove the tool from the Socio-political wood, just in case it rusts to his disadvantage.

Politically-linked AA drew much criticism and policy makers were quick to justify it saying that AA creates diversity. Therefore, AA was again transformed into;

III) Diversity-supported Affirmative Action.

Proponents of DSAA argue that it is good because it creates diversity in all sectors of American life. There is however a negative side to this argument. The minorities are given a price tag, i.e., they have something to contribute to our university. The fact that they may be qualified students comes after they are seen as valuable commodities to the universities admitting them. The idea that they are valuable to the university triggers the notion of being used by the university (Kahlenberg 1995, 35)

So the university does not admit the minorities for their own good but for its own selfish goals. In brief, the present form of Affirmative Action has the following shortcomings: By helping only the minorities it applies racial discrimination as it excludes the disadvantaged poor majorities. By using race as a criterion for university admission, racial based Affirmative Action increases racial consciousness instead of working toward color-blindness. By concentrating the policy at the university and job market, and not at the ghettos, AA comes a bit too late, it does not reach out to those who might not have gone to school in the first place because of poverty inherited from long years of racial discrimination. Thus it does not address the

original question of compensation.

Since it excludes the majority whites they feel discriminated and thus it works against social harmony and integration. Thus, America finds itself in a dilemma, it wants to provide equal opportunities, create a color-blind society and simultaneously address the effects of past discrimination without using discrimination, and thus create harmony and racial integration. So which way out for America?

The best way out of this dilemma is to adopt a class-based affirmative action.

Class-based affirmative action is a system of preference for the economically disadvantaged.

How does class-based Affirmative Action avoid the shortcomings of radical-based Affirmative Action?

A. Compensation:

Given that there is a strong link between past discrimination and current economic situation in America, those minorities who suffered the worst kind of discrimination are concentrated at the lowest stratum of society, while the minorities who suffered the least are the most advantaged minorities. But as is often pointed out, AA benefits often go out to those who can make it in life even without the help of AA. The relationship between the degree of

compensation and the degree of discrimination is thus inverted.

By helping the most economically disadvantaged minorities, class-based affirmative action arguably compensates the most discriminated against minorities other than the least discriminated against (Kahlenberg 1995).

It is not only effective in addressing the problems of minority poor but also the plight of the white poor, a dream that King and Kennedy would have wished come true.

B. Integration:

Class-based affirmative action will obviously benefit more minorities but without the increased racial prejudices and hostility associated with racial preferences. Because class preferences maintain a commitment to address past discrimination, the minority will have no reason to be hostile toward the majority than if AA was eliminated all together. The majority will also have no reason to be hostile toward the minority because class based affirmative action includes them as well.

C. Color- Blind society:

Using color-conscious means like race-based affirmative action contradicts the very message that most Americans would want to create. Class-based affirmative action though it

addresses the problems created by racism does not use racial means. That is, it caters for the poverty experienced by the minorities because of racial discrimination but does not use race as the criterion to help the poverty-stricken. It will increase the number of minority role models without conveying the message that skin color is a qualification.

D. Equal Opportunities:

The phrase 'equal opportunity' is often confused with the word 'opportunity'. We are interested with the former which, according to Kahlenberg, can be realized only if individuals have equal chances to develop their natural talents to the maximum, should they choose to take the time and effort to do so.

Class-based affirmative action will ensure that even the poorest American child will have as equal an opportunity as the child of the richest American. This is because both will not have to worry about inability to pay for their education.

Concluding Remarks:

Affirmative Action in its conception was a great idea, but was polluted by political selfishness. If the wishes of Martin Luther King were followed, perhaps America would not be in the social-political quagmire that Affirmative Action presents. In November 1967, King had

said, "Gentlemen, we are going to take this movement and we are going to reach out to the poor people in all directions in this country. We are going into the Southwest after the Indians, into the west after the Chicanos, into Appalachia after the poor whites, and into the ghettos after Negroes and Puerto Ricans. And we are going to bring them together and enlarge this campaign into something bigger than just a civil rights movement for the Negroes" (quoted from Kahlenberg 1995). But for all Americans.

Postscript

It was brought to my attention after the presentation that 'class' is another 'four-lettered word'. The argument that was put across is that a system like class-based affirmative action will raise class consciousness and therefore cause class tensions, which would result in class hatred and a high degree of class warfare. Such a fear can be diffused if we looked at class in a more positive rather than Marxist perspective.

To claim that class-based affirmative action will raise class consciousness is analogous to saying that race based affirmative action raises race consciousness. They are however different in the sense that while there is something that cannot be done about one's race, a lot can be

done to improve one's economic class.

Rather than being cowed by the Marxist definition of class, we should see class-based affirmative action simply as a way to provide equal opportunities to enable the children of all the disadvantaged utilize their potentials so that they can improve their situation through hard work. The disadvantaged should include both the poor majorities and poor minorities.

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