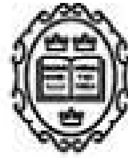

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Toward a New Abolitionism: Race, Ethnicity, and Social Transformation

Steven E. Barkan

In December 1861, abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips (1864) declared to audiences in Boston and New York: "[I]n the quarter of the century that has passed, I could find no place where an American could stand with decent self-respect, except in constant, uncontrollable, and loud protest against the sin of his native land" (p. 417). If we may forgive his use of a male pronoun, Phillips was referring, of course, to the anti-slavery movement that preceded the Civil War, and emphasizing the need to have used sustained political dissent to end slavery. Although social movement scholars have neglected it, abolitionism was one of the most important social movements in American history, for it called attention again and again to the evil of slavery, placed this "peculiar institution" on the national agenda, and, depending on which historians one reads, precipitated the Civil War.

The history of abolitionism and other American social movements illustrates the importance of protest as recognized by Phillips. The women's suffrage movement that began at Seneca Falls used marches, sit-ins, and other forms of protest before it finally won the right to vote some 70 years later. The labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged in strikes and other actions to boost substandard wages and end inhumane working conditions. The 1960s ushered in a new era of activism, and the two major social movements of that decade again illustrated the value and necessity of mass political activity. Through constant, uncontrollable, and loud protest, the Southern civil rights movement ended legal segregation, while the Vietnam anti-war movement opposed a war in a faraway land that some likened to genocide.

Many of us old enough to remember these two movements grew up during the 1950s, when one of the worst problems the star of the popular *Leave it to Beaver* TV show faced was that his mother wanted him to eat Brussels sprouts, and when racial and ethnic inequality and other social problems were far removed from our newspapers and TV screens. As children, we made the mistake of believing what we recited in secondary school, that America was "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." When the 1960s began and we grew old enough to know better, our new knowledge led some of us to become active in the civil rights and anti-war movements and others to sink into despair. It led some of us to rely on our religious faith for strength as we worked to change society, and it led others of us, at least people like me who were active in the anti-war movement, to abandon a God who could let something like Vietnam happen.

This article was presented as the 2009 presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, San Francisco, California, on August 8. The author would like to thank Tom Hood, Michele Koontz, and the rest of the SSSP Executive Office for their wisdom and assistance during his two years as president and president-elect. Direct correspondence to: Steven E. Barkan, Department of Sociology, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5728. E-mail: barkan@maine.edu.

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Some four decades have passed since the glory years of the civil rights and anti-war movements, but racial and ethnic inequality and militarism still remain. This situation is not very different from the aftermath of abolitionism. Although slavery ended with the North's victory in the Civil War, racial inequality obviously continued, as the rise of lynchings during Reconstruction and the advent of Jim Crow laws afterward so horribly illustrated.

In 1903, almost four decades after slavery ended, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois wrote movingly of racial inequality in his classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he observed, "[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (p. vii). More than 100 years later, the problem of the color line continues. We should rejoice that "Jim Crow" racism has largely faded away after so many years of sorrow and struggle, but we should never forget that "symbolic racism," or what has been called a "kinder, gentler racism," has taken its place (Kinder and Sears 1981; Shull 1993). We should rejoice that many people of color have made gains unimaginable a generation or two ago, but we should never forget that these gains remain imaginary for so many of their peers. We should rejoice that the president of the United States looks like Barak Obama, but we should never forget that racial and ethnic inequality endures and that it remains an absolute wrong and a moral and social disgrace.

This inequality manifests itself in many ways but perhaps most strikingly in the areas of wealth and health. The median net worth—savings, home equity, and so forth—of families of color is only $25,000, compared to $141,000 for non-Latino white families (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). More than 21 percent of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans and 10 percent of Asians live in official poverty, compared to only 8.2 percent of non-Latino whites (Bishaw and Semega 2008). About 33 percent of Native American children, 34 percent of African American children, 28 percent of Latino children, and 12 percent of Asian children live in poor families, compared to only 10 percent of white children (Children's Defense Fund 2008; Moore et al. 2009).

Turning to the area of health, racial and ethnic inequality is a matter of life and death. The infant mortality rate—the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births—is 13.6 for African Americans and 8.1 for Native Americans, compared to only 5.8 for non-Latino whites (MacDorman and Mathews 2008). At the other end of the life cycle, African Americans born in 2005 can expect to die at age 73 on the average, a full five years younger than whites, while Native Americans can expect to die at age 75, a full three years younger than whites (Indian Health Service 2006; U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

These and other statistics paint a distressing picture, but behind them are the lives and stories of real people that only qualitative evidence can truly capture. Such evidence appears in newspapers every day and in trade books that many of us assign to our students. As I think about these stories, I find myself remembering 18-year-old Lucia Gonzalez, whom I interviewed in graduate school (Barkan 1974). I do not know how Lucia has fared since that time 35 years ago or even whether she is still alive, but I will always remember what she told me.

Lucia and her family had come to Long Island to work on the United Farm Workers' national boycott of lettuce, grapes, and Gallo wine. Before coming east, they had toiled in the fields of California, where two of Lucia's brothers died, one of them on Christmas morning, from various illnesses. Lucia remembered picking crops at an early age. "I guess I became pretty strong when I was five," she said, "because I was carrying buckets of prunes and peaches then. My parents didn't want to hurt me, so they let me take rests off and on. You know how you feel when you have the flu? That's how you feel all day." Recounting life at the ripe old age of seven, Lucia recalled, "Imagine carrying a 60-pound bag of oranges and being up to your knees in mud. You feel like a pig."

When Lucia was nine, an unspeakable tragedy befell another farm worker family she knew. A young mother who was picking oranges had to put her four-month-old baby on the ground. Suddenly a tractor came by and ran over the infant. "I was really young when that happened," Lucia told me, "but I remember all the sorrow she had. They didn't even have any

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money to bury the baby. I'll never forget that." Lucia also remembered sitting in a classroom when she wasn't picking crops. "I went to school and learned about democracy and how everyone was equal," she recalled. "Then I would go home and see what it was like. I was living in two different worlds." When I asked how many hours a week she spent on the boycott, Lucia laughed and replied, "As long as I can stay awake."

What can be done about the color line that still stains the American dream? I have three proposals, two that are modest and one that is immodest. The first modest proposal is that the social science community rededicate itself to studying and teaching racial and ethnic inequality and to evaluating possible strategies to reduce it. We often lament the failure of social research to inform social policy, but this recognition should only spur us to make a greater effort. As we do so, we should recall Claire Renzetti's (2007) warning in her presidential address to us in 2006 that much of the public and some influential scholars find it too easy to blame people of color for the problems they experience. To counter this notion, social scientists must continue to stress the structural basis for today's racial and ethnic inequality and its roots in the extreme white racism of the American past, a past filled with slavery and lynchings of African Americans, mass slaughter and forced relocation of Native Americans, and discrimination, intimidation, and violence against immigrants from many lands.

The second modest proposal complements the first. I ask that the Society for the Study of Social Problems, acting alone or in collaboration with other professional associations, prepare and issue a white paper—pun intended—on the racial and ethnic underpinnings, dimensions, and consequences of the many social problems studied by SSSP members This white paper should be distributed to legislators and other policy makers, and it should be considered for publication in a format suitable for classroom use.

My final proposal is decidedly immodest. The United States must have a new abolitionism: a new social movement to end racial and ethnic inequality. This movement should use the many strategies and tactics of social movements throughout American history, ranging from working within the system with conventional political activity, to marches, demonstrations, and other types of protest. As it confronts the continuing sin of our native land, this new movement's protest tactics should be responsible and nonviolent but, as Wendell Phillips reminded his audiences, they should also be constant, loud when necessary, and perhaps a tiny bit uncontrollable just to keep things interesting.

The new abolitionism should be a multicultural movement. Although it can be difficult for Americans from different backgrounds to unite against common foes, it is also true that a united movement profits greatly from its members' varied experiences and resources. People of color should thus participate, if they so choose, in the new abolitionism, but whites must not let them do so alone. Racial and ethnic inequality is, after all, a *white* problem. It was a white problem in the past, ever since European settlers first crossed the ocean, and it is a white problem today. Given the resources and institutional access that many whites enjoy, they have the social and political capital and also a moral obligation to take a leading role in the new abolitionism, and they must not sit by silently while people of color stand up for themselves.

A new abolitionism faces a difficult path. Many whites will not readily give up their power and privilege, and history shows that some whites are willing to do almost anything to preserve their status. Yet we *must* take that path, because history also shows that great change does not happen without social movements pushing for it (Meyer 2007; Piven 2006). As Frederick Douglass ([1857]1985)) once famously said, "If there is no struggle there is no progress . . . Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will" (p. 204).

Young Lucia Gonzalez knew this full well when I interviewed her. Despite everything she had experienced, Lucia continued to believe a better day was coming, thanks to the efforts of the United Farm Workers. "The UFW has given us a feeling of dignity in our work," she told me, "and the right not to be pushed around like you were nothing." Lucia was sure the UFW boycott would soon succeed against the large corporate growers at which it was aimed. As she put it, "There's more of us and less of them. All we have to do is get together, right?"

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Lucia's hope for change has been the hope of social movements throughout American history. It was the hope of slaves on the Underground Railroad and of the abolitionists who helped them along. It was the hope of generations of women who marched for the right to vote, and of workers across the land who went on strike to feed their families. And it was the hope of so many people—young and old, black and white—who sat on buses, at lunch counters, and in the streets of the South, and of farm workers like Lucia Gonzalez who campaigned for their national boycott as long as they could stay awake.

Their hope must now be our hope, and their example our inspiration, as we strive to eliminate racial and ethnic inequality in the months and years ahead. Because it is time to get together. It is time once again to end a sin of our native land. When that better day does come, we will stand together as one, we will see what we have achieved, and we will know that we are, at long last, "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

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