

THE QUEST FOR RACIAL EQUALITY: A PUBLIC POLICY FRAMEWORK

RONALD SCHMIDT, SR.

California State University, Long Beach

ABSTRACT

This essay asserts there are three central questions that must be addressed in developing public policies aimed at reducing racial inequality in American society. After articulating these central questions, the essay elaborates the most prominent rationales provided by proponents of each side of the central questions, and illustrates the rationales with examples of policies adopted and/or proposed by proponents of each side. The essay concludes with the suggestion that the positions taken in response to the three central questions are directly tied to underlying assumptions and/or arguments about the most important causes of continuing racial inequality in American society.

Keywords: racial equality, “formal” equality of opportunity, “fair” equality of opportunity, human resource development, structural change, ethnoracially monistic, ethnoracially pluralistic

INTRODUCTION

After several decades of very little attention in public discourse in the United States, the subject of racial inequality has been re-charged in recent years. Coinciding with increased public awareness and political attention to growing inequality and increased poverty among the population as a whole, the Black Lives Matter movement has generated greater attention on the question of *racial* inequality in particular. Despite the growing

partisan polarization of the country's politics, a polarization that has been accompanied by an increasing public opinion divide over the question of racial justice, it seems possible that public officials at all levels of U.S. government may be interested in the possibility of a concerted public policy effort to reduce poverty in minority communities, as well as to reduce racial inequality more generally.

This essay is written from the premise that achieving greater racial equality remains among the most important subjects on the country's agenda of unfinished public business, and it seeks to make a small contribution toward strategic clarification by laying out a framework for understanding the kinds of questions that need to be asked – and discussed – by citizens and policymakers who are concerned about realizing this goal. It is my hope that those who are interested in pursuing this long-dormant public purpose may find the framework useful in clarifying their own thinking on the subject, and sorting out the relative importance of various policy arguments in relation to the goal of achieving greater racial equality in the country.

At its most basic level, in any case, the factual premise underlying this essay is that the “goods” most highly valued in U.S. society (e.g., income, wealth, land ownership, health care, educational attainment, occupational and social prestige, residential choice, public office, executive authority) are not distributed randomly or proportionately among the country's primary ethno-racial groups², that is among Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Asian Pacific Islander Americans, and American Indians. Moreover, this racial inequality has been characteristic throughout the country's history, with members of the “White” group receiving a disproportionate share of most of these goods most of the time. In this sense, people of color have long had reduced “life chances” in comparison with members of the country's White population.

In reference to the project of realizing greater ethno-racial equality in the United States, how can students of public policy and racial politics make sense of the wide array of policy proposals aimed at this goal and the frequently rancorous debates surrounding them? What is really *at stake* in the policy alternatives proposed, discussed and debated in relation to the

achievement of greater racial equality? This essay aims to fill a perceived gap in the literature of public policy and political science by offering a conceptual scheme, a framework for analysis, for making sense of a number of arguments about and approaches to realizing greater racial equality in the U.S. through public policy. It does so by outlining and discussing some of the key questions that are necessarily addressed (either implicitly or explicitly) in coming to terms with this relationship.

THE CORE QUESTIONS

In the political world of U.S. policy decision-making, policy advocates (policymakers and political activists attempting to influence policymakers) face three core questions when addressing the proper role of public policy in realizing greater racial equality:

First, should government play a relatively active or passive role in attempting to move U.S. society toward greater racial equality?

Second, to the degree that government should play an active role in realizing greater racial equality in the U.S., should public policy aim primarily at human resource development or at structural change?; and

Third, to the degree that government should play an active role in realizing greater racial equality in the U.S., should public policy aim at realizing an ethno-racially monistic or pluralistic conception of U.S. nationhood?

This essay articulates the core choices lying at the heart of each of these questions, provides examples of public policies premised on these choices, and then critically analyzes the stakes that underlie these choices. The aim is to provide a framework for making sense of the policy alternatives involved in the problematic relationship between public policy and racial equality in the United States, and assessing what is at stake in making choices among these alternatives. The framework developed in this essay is intended as a heuristic device enabling us to better understand the underlying assumptions and stakes involved in public policymaking regarding racial equality, and is not intended to describe the actual choices made by

policymakers in designing and adopting actual public policies. As the result of political, and other, compromises, most public policies actually adopted by governments represent an amalgam of the underlying choices articulated in this paper. The usefulness of the framework developed here, therefore, should be judged on its analytical power for critically discerning the assumptions and values underlying actual public policies and policy proposals, rather than for its capacity to describe extant or potential public policies.

Question 1: *Should government play a relatively active or passive role in attempting to move U.S. society toward greater racial equality?*

This first question confronts policy decision-makers in the U.S. today with the relatively heavy baggage of political ideology and party alignment. That is, since the 1960s, most Democrats and “liberals” have tended to take the *active* position on this question, while most Republicans and “conservatives” have typically supported the *passive* answer. Underlying these positions are a host of political commitments previously made, with attendant organizational and interest group ties that reinforce their continuation. Ideologically, the argument over this question tends to revolve around two contested points: first, is racial inequality a *public*, societal problem that requires a societal response?; and second, is *government policy* the appropriate instrument for attempting a societal remedy for racial inequality? The argument against a strong role for public policy will be outlined first, followed by the opposing position.

THE “LAISSEZ-FAIRE” ARGUMENT ON PUBLIC POLICY AND RACIAL EQUALITY

As noted, proponents of a relatively passive position on public policy’s role in promoting greater racial equality argue, first, that inequality between ethno-racial groups is not a public or societal problem requiring a public remedy. Most Americans taking this position follow the classic stance of liberal individualism. That is, a person’s standing in society, in relation to most of the social

goods sketched out above, is the responsibility of that person and not the responsibility of society. Each of us is dealt certain “cards” in life, and each of us is responsible for “playing” those cards as best we can to realize our personal aspirations for living the “good life.” Only by ensuring that individuals retain responsibility for their own choices and the consequences of those choices can we protect the freedom to choose that is the foundation for a good society, a society that privileges individual liberty as its highest value.

The appropriate role of government in this understanding is highly attenuated, limited to ensuring that members of the body politic enjoy formal, legal equality, and that the safety and property of the members are protected by a well-developed and authoritative system of security (e.g., police, military, courts, etc.). Beyond these limited functions, the “pursuit of happiness” is to take place in the private sector and not through public policy or other forms of authoritative collective action. Using the authoritative might of government to intervene in the private sphere nearly always leads to bad results. This is so because the inherently monopolistic power of government stifles individual freedom, limits the development of initiative, creativity and productivity among free individuals, and generates inevitable organizational inefficiencies and waste (see, e.g., Nozick 1974; Friedman 1981).

Laissez-faire advocates approach the issue of racial inequality through the lenses of this liberal individualistic ideology. Moving toward greater racial equality is fundamentally a matter of individual responsibility. So long as formal, legal barriers to equality of opportunity (e.g., state supports for racial discrimination) have been removed, each individual is responsible for making the most of her own life chances. Every society is filled with people who feel slighted or disadvantaged for a multitude of reasons in a multitude of ways. Using government to try to sort out these perceived wrongs and provide public remedies is certain to cause more problems than it solves, and this is especially true when dealing with the tangled web of racial identity.

A good example of this line of argument is found in the writings of Shelby Steele, who has argued against public policies

such as Affirmative Action, on the grounds that they discourage Black Americans from taking responsibility for their own lives, and indeed, undermine Black individuals' self-esteem and self-development (Steele 1990). Steele argues that while African Americans suffered terrible injustices in U.S. history, and while they might still expect to encounter occasional instances of racial prejudice and hostility, the legal and social reforms of the 1960s marked a major watershed that freed them to pursue the goods of U.S. society in a new way. This individual freedom, however, stimulates a high level of performance anxiety that too often induces Blacks to "race-hold" (Steele 1990: Chapter 2), by which he means that Blacks "hold" onto the secure familiarity of anticipating racial opposition and oppression, thereby excusing themselves from meeting the challenges of life in a competitive but free society. Steele faults the political leadership of African Americans for constantly reiterating the group's continuing victimization through racial injustice (thereby encouraging Black individuals to persist in the practice of race holding), and for supporting activist government policies that are bound to further limit the capacity for self-determination and self-improvement of individual Black Americans. Linda Chavez (1991) has made a very similar argument with respect to the achievement of social equality for U.S. Latinos, and has extended it with the assertion that giving government the authority to interpret and promote "minority" cultures would deprive adherents of those cultures of the freedom to interpret the meaning and significance of their cultural practices and languages for themselves.

In sum, the passive position on the relationship between public policy and achieving racial equality in the U.S. is that of "hands off" or *laissez-faire*. Having achieved the elimination of arbitrary (including "racial") formal, legal barriers to individual equality of opportunity in the 1960s, in the U.S. individuals are now "free to choose," responsible for the formation and realization of their own aspirations for the good life, pursuing opportunities of their own choosing and being responsible for the consequences of their own choices. Beyond the minimalist enforcement of formal, legal equality for each individual member of the polity, using the crutch of government authority through public policy has the inevitable result of stultifying

individual growth and creativity, and freezing a reified *racial* conception of the American people as divided among “non-white” victims and “white” oppressors.

***THE “ACTIVE GOVERNMENT” ARGUMENT ON PUBLIC
POLICY AND RACIAL EQUALITY***

Proponents of an active government role in realizing greater racial equality, in contrast, argue that the long-standing inequalities between U.S. ethno-racial groups is certainly a *public* and societal problem requiring a societal remedy. Further, proponents of this position argue that the state is the only institutional complex with sufficient authority and power to move us toward this critical public goal. Proponents of an active role for public policy point to a glaring contradiction in the *laissez-faire* position: while claiming to support “equality” for each individual, *laissez-faire* individualists ignore the gaping inequalities in life chances between those born in an advantaged social position versus those born in a disadvantaged position. That is, the “cards” we are dealt in life – taken as given in the *laissez-faire* view of an individual’s social life – are dealt from a “stacked deck” in the real world. Several politically important factors contribute to the stacking of the deck (e.g., the *racial* advantage of those born into “white” families, the *class* advantage of those born into wealthy families, the *gender* advantage of those born male, etc.), but the point is that those born with both advantages and disadvantages in the competition of social life are given these “cards” without having earned them. John Rawls used this reality as one of the principal foundations for his “difference principle,” in which the “least advantaged” in society are to be given moral priority in questions of distributive justice (Rawls 1971).

In a speech delivered in 1965 at Howard University, President Lyndon B. Johnson summarized the proactive government argument regarding racial inequality in his now-classic defense of Affirmative Action:

You do not take a person who for years has been
hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to

the starting line of a race and then say: "You are free to compete with all the others." Legal equity is not enough. We seek not just equality as a right . . . but equality as a fact and as a result. (Johnson 1965).

This position is sometimes described as an argument for "*fair* equality of opportunity," as compared to the "*formal* equality of opportunity" argument of *laissez-faire* proponents. That is, simply ensuring "formal, legal equality" leaves those disadvantaged through no fault of their own in an unfair competitive relationship with those who have unearned advantages deriving from the social positions into which they were cast by birth or circumstance.

In this view, *creating a level playing field* becomes one of the fundamental obligations and responsibilities of government. This is so, in part, because undeserved racial inequality was created and perpetuated over several centuries through state action (Smith 1997), and state action in its eradication is therefore both necessary and just. It is also necessary and just because only the state has sufficient authority and institutional capability to begin to counteract the historical inertia and social perpetuation of racial inequality that remains embedded in U.S. daily life at both the personal and organizational-institutional levels of both private and civil society (see, e.g., Omi and Winant 1994). While governmental institutions may have tendencies toward inefficiency and the stultification of individual freedom of choice, the free market forces of individual choice offer no incentives for those empowered by unjust advantage to rectify the very unearned advantages that create their advantageous way of life. "Free" markets do not work in that manner. Only the intervention of political forces and governmental authority can provide for public goods such as racial equality.

Question 2: *To the degree that government should play an active role in realizing greater racial equality in the U.S., should public policy aim primarily at human resource development or at structural change?*

Politically, this question begins from the assumption that government has some legitimate role in trying to achieve greater racial equality in the United States. For political or other reasons, even those who argue (in principle) in favor of the *laissez-faire* view often find themselves immersed in argument over this (and the third) question as well. The basic distinction here is usefully characterized as follows: a *human resource development* emphasis for public policy involves trying to *change the people* who consistently receive less than a proportionate share of the social goods described above, while policies taking a *structural* approach aim to *change the rules* under which individuals participate in the social structures most involved in the allocation of those social goods. It should be noted here that while there is a clear division between these two approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. It is possible (and, indeed, not unusual) for policy makers and political activists to support or oppose versions of both approaches. Still, taking note of the distinction clarifies an important choice of emphasis because the two approaches involve significant differences in accounting for the origins of and social obligations engendered by ethno-racial inequality, as will be seen below.

THE CASE FOR A HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT POLICY APPROACH TO RACIAL EQUALITY

The argument here begins from the view that those who have been disadvantaged by social circumstances – among which circumstances the following are frequently cited: familial, economic, geographic, racial, gender, etc. – need to receive special public policy assistance to better “equip” them to compete for the goods at stake in social life. Put differently, this approach assumes that disadvantaged individuals have personal “deficits” that hinder their capacities (e.g., intellectual, social, cultural “capital”) for equal participation in the social roles that are thought to allocate the goods outlined above (e.g., income, wealth, occupational prestige, etc.). Children raised in poverty – in single-parent homes, for example – are often viewed as less likely to attain the educational success linked to occupational

mobility and prestige than will children brought up in more advantageous familial and economic circumstances. In an attempt to level the playing field to create *fair* equality of opportunity, therefore, government policy should focus “extra” resources and attention on those individuals by providing them with access to opportunities provided “privately” by more advantageously situated families.

With respect to *racial* inequality, the position here is that the long history of racial (and also cultural) domination in the United States has operated to systematically disadvantage communities of color, rendering their members more likely to suffer from the social circumstances sketched above. That is, members of most U.S. minority groups have a greater than proportionate likelihood to be poor, to have less personal wealth, to have less educational attainment, to have less residential choice, to have less occupational prestige, etc. That this is so means as well that, individually, they will more likely suffer from personal limitations that hinder their competitive capabilities in the marketplace. Leveling the playing field, therefore, requires a substantial governmental effort to develop their individual human resources, thereby enabling them to compete more successfully in U.S. society. The *focus* of these governmental policy efforts, again, is on *changing the people*, rather than on changing the societal rules through which they participate in social life. During the past five decades, governments in the United States have adopted a wide array of policies aimed at creating a more fair equality of opportunity by better enabling such disadvantaged individuals to participate in socially rewarded roles in U.S. society. Some prominent examples of policies primarily following a human resources development approach follow:

Head Start – first begun in President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” this program of structured pre-schools was designed to provide children from poor families the kinds of learning experiences perceived as provided in the home for middle and upper class children by their more affluent and educated parents. A relatively high percentage of the children enrolled in these programs have been from communities of color.

Women, Infants and Children's Health Programs – this Federally-funded and family-centered program is designed to improve the life chances of children growing up in low-income families by enhancing their health and their mothers' health, knowledge and capabilities.

Federally-Subsidized School Lunch (and Breakfast) Programs – begun in the 1950s, this program is based on the assumption that children who are hungry are less likely to make successful students. Federal funds help schools provide meals for children whose parents are unable to provide sufficient nutrition to them for successful learning experiences.

Title I – Federal Funding for Compensatory Education – begun in 1965 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, this policy sought to provide “extra” funds for schools with high concentrations of impoverished children. The aim was to give teachers and schools better educational materials and equipment, which could be used to off-set the typically older and relatively under-funded school rooms populated by a disproportionate number of poor children.

Title VII – The Bilingual Education Act – begun in 1968, this policy provides Federal funds to school districts with concentrations of students whose home languages are not English. The assumption here is that without this “extra” attention and focus, these children will be at an unearned disadvantage in achieving educational success.

Job Training Programs – a large number of these programs have been enacted and implemented in the past, from the “Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962” to the plethora of “Welfare to Work” programs implemented by states following the Congressional welfare reform law of 1996. In every case, the assumption has been that those eligible for funded training programs lack the skills, knowledge, and/or other behavioral characteristics necessary for upward mobility in an ever-changing job market.

A multitude of other examples could be outlined, but these are sufficient to illustrate the type of policy effort being described here: these government policies are aimed primarily at *changing people* to better enable them to participate successfully in the economic and social arenas of U.S. life. In terms of *racial*

inequality, the assumption is that each of these policies will help to overcome personal disadvantages or limitations experienced disproportionately by people of color in this country.

***THE CASE FOR A STRUCTURAL CHANGE APPROACH
TO PUBLIC POLICY FOR RACIAL EQUILITY***

The argument for a *structural change* approach is premised on the belief that, beyond any presumed personal limitations, there are powerful and continuing *social forces* at work that help account for the disadvantaged position of peoples of color in the United States. In other words, rather than changing the people who have been disadvantaged by the social circumstances of racial (and/or class, gender) injustice, for which they bear no personal responsibility, this approach attempts to change those unjust circumstances themselves. Some of the factors thought to make for an unfair competition for this country's most prized social goods are rooted in the society's institutions, in the social processes, relationships and practices through which decisions are made involving the allocation of those goods. The argument for governmental intervention here, once again, is that public policies are necessary and justified to level the playing field where inequalities result from sources beyond the responsibility of those who are disadvantaged by these structural forces. Intellectually, of course, this category has expanded steadily over the past five decades as studies continue to pile up tracing the roots of social inequities to a wide range of social causes (e.g., patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, racialism, Eurocentrism, homophobia, misguided immigration policies, liberalism, to name only a few). Politically, nevertheless, the number of public policies aimed at making structural changes in the rules under which people participate in U.S. institutions is more limited.

With respect to "race," the rationale for policies aimed at structural change asserts that U.S. institutions have operated in racialized ways for many centuries, and that leveling the playing field to make for *fair* equality of opportunity requires governmental policies that will change the rules (i.e., organizational structures, social processes and relationships, institutional practices, etc.) to ensure greater racial equality.

Perhaps the most common charge of this nature is that of “institutional racism,” the assertion that, quite apart from individual White persons’ personal likes or dislikes, prejudices or biases, our dominant economic, social and political *institutions* operate systematically to advantage White Americans and to disadvantage Americans from communities of color.³ Public policy efforts are needed, accordingly, to overcome these systematic practices of discrimination and domination that perpetuate racial inequality. Again, we find a number of policies aimed primarily at *changing the rules* to ensure greater racial equality in the U.S. Among the most prominent are the following:

Civil Rights Act of 1964 – among other things, this foundational policy changed the rules of U.S. institutions in key public, private and civil society arenas by outlawing racial discrimination in public facilities (e.g., restaurants, hotels, motels, public transportation) and in employment; it also forbids racial discrimination by recipients of federal funds (including schools, universities, defense contractors, state and local governments, etc.). In addition, the law created a federal agency, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, to implement portions of its provisions, and gave new implementation powers to other federal agencies.

Voting Rights Act of 1965 – another foundational policy, this law changed the rules of political life by “nationalizing” voter registration and voting in resistant state and local governments to ensure the right to vote for African Americans. Subsequent amendments broadened the policy to nationalize the Act’s reach (1970), to include protection for “language minorities” (i.e., Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans, Native Americans, 1975), and to protect minority voters against “vote dilution” as well as “vote denial” (1982).

Title VIII-The Fair Housing Act (Civil Rights Act of 1968) – this amendment to the Civil Rights Act changed the rules to forbid racial discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, establishing a right to “fair housing” as an additional civil rights protection.

School Integration Policies – though most of the key decisions regarding this policy approach have been articulated and

implemented through litigation rather than legislation, the policy aim of racially integrating the public schools of the United States may be understood as an attempt to change the rules under which students participate in one of the most omnipresent institutional settings of U.S. society.

Affirmative Action Policy – based on a series of Executive Orders, as well as the Civil Rights Act amendments of 1992, this set of policies changed the rules of employment by requiring covered employers to take “affirmative” steps to ensure that protected groups are included for full consideration at various stages in the employment process. A number of states built on this policy to also change the rules under which applicants are admitted to professional schools, universities and colleges.

Targeted Tax Incentive Policies – A variety of Federal programs, supported by both “conservative” and “liberal” administrations have sought to change the rules under which investors select locations for new or refurbished residential, commercial or industrial facilities. By targeting central cities with large concentrations of people of color, some policy advocates see increased opportunities for higher-paying employment that will help “level the playing field” toward greater racial inequality.

Federal Urban Infrastructure Investments – by investing federal funds in the physical infrastructures of central cities with large concentrations of people of color, some policy advocates see increased opportunities for education, health care, employment, housing, thereby changing the institutional structural context in which these residents participate in urban life.

In sum, a number of policies have been adopted, and many more advocated, which have aimed at greater racial equality in the U.S. by altering the country’s institutional processes, relationships and practices to ensure a higher level of racial inclusiveness and social equality. The structural reach of these policies ranges from changing the rules governing state institutions to using public policy (through both inducements and mandates) to change institutional rules of operation in both “private” and civil society.

Question 3: *To the degree that government should play an active role in realizing greater racial equality in the U.S., should public policy aim at realizing an ethno-racially monistic or pluralistic conception of U.S. nationhood?*

This third question has generated intense controversy among public policy decision-makers and policy advocates through the past five decades by raising a fundamental division over the perceived character of U.S. nationhood. Often referred to as the “culture wars,” the underlying question driving this political conflict is whether public policies should be based on a conception of the United States as an ethno-culturally homogenous and “race-neutral” political community, or whether the country should be understood as one that is historically and foundationally *multicultural* and in which ethno-racial distinctions should be understood as relatively permanent social formations constitutive of our national character.

The implications of this question for public policy efforts to achieve *racial equality* are profound. Does equality require that all be treated exactly “alike,” so that cultural and/or behavioral differences and group loyalties play no part in a person’s public *persona* in relation to one’s social roles in employment and commerce, civil society or the political realm? That is, should our ethno-racial identities be considered *private* matters to be “left at home” (similar to the way our religious affiliations have come to be perceived by most, under the “wall of separation” between religion and the state)? Or should our conception of equality entail an understanding of “difference” (cultural; ethno-racial) as a valuable, inevitable and *public* part of any complex human society? Or, is our norm of equality so complex that it might require the first (monistic) understanding in some circumstances, and the second (pluralistic) in other circumstances? These extraordinarily difficult questions cannot be resolved in this essay, but the next several paragraphs will outline rationales for the two primary sides in the debate, and will be followed by examples of public policies illustrating each side of the question.

***THE CASE FOR A “RACE-NEUTRAL,” CULTURALLY
MONISTIC PUBLIC POLICY APPROACH TO RACIAL
EQUALITY***

In the United States, liberal nationalism provides the core of the case for a “race-neutral” and culturally homogenous – a *monistic* – conception of the country’s people. Nathan Glazer articulated the core of the conception very well two decades before his grudging conversion to a multicultural understanding of the country (1997). According to Glazer, the second of three foundational principles for American nationhood was the following: “This was to be a union of states and a nation of free individuals, not a nation of politically defined ethnic groups (1978: 5).” Rejecting the purported view of pluralists that “racism defines our history,” Glazer asserted instead “that the American polity has . . . been defined by a steady expansion of the definition of those who may be included in it to the point where it now includes all humanity; [and] that the United States has become the first great nation that defines itself not in terms of ethnic origin but in terms of adherence to common rules of citizenship. . . .” (1978: 6-7). In short, liberal nationalism asserts that politically, we must conceive of ourselves as individuals bound together in a nation by “common rules of citizenship” rather than through ethno-racial ties.

This view of the relationship between individuals and the state led Glazer and many others to argue that achieving racial equality will require that we cease to include ethno-racial identifications and differences in all matters of public policy. Borrowing heavily from the Civil Rights Movement’s rhetoric demanding racial *inclusion*, this approach urges the country to become a “color-blind” society, in which we perceive ourselves as unique *individuals* whose only publicly significant identity is our shared nationality as Americans. While we may continue to value our ethno-racial and cultural communities, these are to be understood as voluntary and private organizational commitments, analogous to our fraternal, service club or religious attachments. Embedding ethno-racial differences and identities in our public policies, as Justice Sandra Day O’Connor argued for the Supreme Court’s majority in *Shaw v. Reno* (1993),

. . . may balkanize us into competing racial factions; it threatens to carry us further from the goal of a political system in which race no longer matters -- a goal that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments embody, and to which the Nation continues to aspire. It is for these reasons that race-based districting by our state legislatures demands close judicial scrutiny.⁴ (U.S. Supreme Court 1993).

Many advocates of an ethno-racially monistic policy approach are also self-identified political conservatives who generally urge a *laissez-faire* stance on government's responsibility for achieving greater racial equality. Their position favoring a "race-neutral" policy approach is often linked to their generalized resistance to governmental intervention in social and economic life.

Among proponents for an *active* public policy role in realizing greater social equality, however, perhaps the most influential advocate for a "race-neutral" approach has been the prominent sociologist and social democrat William Julius Wilson. Wilson's controversial book, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), argued that social inequality between racial groups in the post-1960s period is best accounted for by economic inequalities and their behavioral consequences rather than by continuing racial discrimination. In subsequent books (1987, 1996), Wilson further developed that argument by tracing the conjoined evolution of the structural economic disadvantages *and* behavioral deficiencies among many "underclass" Blacks that continue to trap them in a devolving cycle of persistent impoverishment. As Wilson saw it, meanwhile, the economic life chances of middle-class African Americans are no longer determined by their racial identities in a fundamental way.

Wilson supplemented his policy analysis for racial equality with a *political* analysis aimed at the Democratic Party. That is, he urged a strong governmental effort combining both human resource development policies and economic structural changes to address the continuing social inequalities that exist in the

United States, particularly in central cities. Wilson emphasized, however, that these policies should be based on socio-economic and geographic criteria and not on racial classifications, in part because using the latter as the basis for public policy divides, rather than unites, the historic multi-racial coalition that remains the best hope for Democratic Party electoral victory (particularly in presidential elections), and therefore the best hope for enactment of his proactive proposals. For political as well as analytic reasons, therefore, he urged (1990) that policies such as Affirmative Action be based on non-racial criteria. Thus, among the policy approaches advocated by Wilson (and by others who agree with this aspect of his position) are the following, all of which it is claimed will help in achieving greater racial equality in the United States:

Human Resource Development policies – many of these policies, outlined above under question 2 are based on economic needs criteria, rather than on ethno-racial criteria. These include Head Start, Title I assistance to school districts, “transitional” bilingual education programs, job training programs, etc.

“Class-based” Affirmative Action programs – the aim here would be to “change the rules” of employment and admission to advanced educational opportunities to overcome obstacles created by economic disadvantage, rather than ethno-racial disadvantage.

Other Economic and Geographic Structural Change policies – those “structural” policies outlined above under question 2 that attempt to change the rules on economic and/or geographic bases, rather than using ethno-racial criteria, would enable a broader-based political coalition and overcome the inherently divisive elements of identity politics. Examples include targeted tax incentive investments to inner city or low-income areas, governmental infrastructure investments in low-income areas, a more steeply graduated income tax, etc. Some policy advocates also claim that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were originally aimed at achieving a “color-blind” society before their implementation was “captured” by ethnocentric pluralists (see, e.g., Thernstrom 1987; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997).

***THE CASE FOR “RACE-BASED,” CULTURALLY
PLURALISTIC PUBLIC POLICY APPROACHES TO
RACIAL EQUALITY***

Advocates for “race-based” and culturally pluralistic public policy approaches to ethno-racial equality do so on the basis of two fundamental claims: first, that a genuinely “race-neutral” or “color-blind” policy approach is *not feasible* because it is conceptually and politically unrealistic; and second, that a “color-blind” and/or culturally monistic policy approach is *not desirable* because it is unjust.⁵ The first argument holds that ethno-racial diversity has been an inherent characteristic of U.S. society since our founding, and there is no realistic possibility that it will soon disappear. Because ethno-racial communities help to constitute the social, economic and political realities of American life, social inequality in the United States is not only economically-based but also deeply racialized. White Americans enjoy countless advantages (“white privilege”) by virtue of their historically dominant position in the country’s political economy. Because they do enjoy these advantages, further, most will fiercely resist any systematic efforts – public or private – that will move the country toward a more truly *random* (i.e., “color blind”) allocation of social goods.⁶ In short, “class” inequalities in the United States have been thoroughly “racialized” by the country’s historical development so that attempting to disentangle them in the manner advocated by W.J. Wilson and others is hopelessly unrealistic. Put differently, because our social inequalities are so thoroughly racialized, moving toward greater social equality inherently means that a large number of European-origin or White Americans believe they will lose ground.

Another part of this line of argument points out that not all aspects of racial inequality are linked to “class” factors – i.e., “race” operates as a separate independent variable in maintaining and sustaining white privilege. A prominent example is the “glass ceiling” operating to restrict the opportunities of those people of color in the U.S. with even the highest levels of educational attainment and with extensive work experience, as

attested to by several prominent studies. This line of argument does not mean that political coalitions between whites and peoples of color are impossible, but it does mean that such coalitions cannot be based realistically on “color-blind” assumptions.

The *second* position argued by advocates of a pluralistic approach to ethno-racial equality is that a “color-blind” or culturally monistic policy approach is *undesirable* because it is unjust. The foundational core of this argument is the belief that the United States has been constituted in its historical development as a *pluralistic* society composed of multiple ethno-racial and cultural communities. And this pluralistic foundation has occurred not only through immigration but also through conquest and annexation, and through the horrors of slavery. In this context, aiming policies toward assimilation to one ethno-cultural community inevitably involves the “normalization” of the dominant “White,” “Anglo” (i.e., European-origin) group such that members of other ethno-racial groups are required to “give up” their distinctiveness in order to realize social equality. It gives to Euro-Americans the dominant position of saying “we are the standard by which ‘American-ness’ is measured, and we will ‘allow’ you be our ‘equals’ only if you become as much ‘like’ us as you possibly can.” This is inherently unjust, pluralists argue, because it is nothing more than another form of “white privilege” in which “equality” is purchased at the price of the loss of one’s ethno-cultural community.⁷ As Turé and Hamilton put it in their now-classic argument against an assimilationist understanding of racial “integration”:

“Integration” . . . means that black people must give up their identity, deny their heritage. . . . The fact is that integration, as traditionally articulated, would abolish the black community. The fact is that what must be abolished is not the black community, but the dependent colonial status that has been inflicted upon it.

The racial and cultural personality of the black community must be preserved and that community must win its freedom while

preserving its cultural integrity. Integrity includes a pride--in being black, in the historical attainments and contributions of black people. No person can be healthy, complete and mature if he must deny a part of himself; this is what "integration" has required thus far. This is the essential difference between integration as it is currently practiced and the concept of Black Power. (Turé and Hamilton 1992: 55)

In short, the assimilative assumptions of a monistic ethno-racial policy are themselves inherently unequal because they reduce minority ethno-cultural communities to marginalized and "privatized" spaces in American society. These inegalitarian premises can only result in unjust public policies, not in ethno-racial "equality." Pursuant to these lines of analysis, the following are among the public policies proposed by ethno-cultural pluralists:

Human Resource Development policies, governmentally funded, operated through ethnically-based, culturally distinct Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – e.g., Head Start and other pre-school programs, Afro-centric academies, job training, housing development, economic development programs, etc.⁸

Pluralistic Language Policies – both "human resource development" and "structural" policies to ensure that language minority children are educated bilingually, in their heritage languages as well as in English, and that language minority adult citizens are given equal access to civil and political rights such as voting, employment opportunities, social services, etc.⁹

"Affirmative Action" and "Minority Set-Aside" policies – changing the rules of employment, government contracting, and admission to advanced educational opportunities to ensure ethno-racially "balanced" participation in these vital social sectors.

Ethno-racial criteria for political representation – changing the organizational rules of operation to ensure "proportionate interest representation" of ethno-racial minority groups in public decision-making bodies.¹⁰

American Indian “Self-Determination” policy – increased Federal government support for sovereignty and self-determination of American Indian tribal governments.

Summing Up: A Typology of Policy Approaches for Racial Equality

Putting the above varying approaches together yields the following typology of policy approaches to ethno-racial equality, with examples of policies that aim *primarily* at given combinations of these policy choices:

Figure 1: Typology of Policy Approaches for Racial Equality.

	<u>Monistic</u>	<u>Pluralistic</u>
<u>Human Capital</u>	compensat. educ English “immersion” job training programs health care Head Start	ethnic preschools “maintenance” bilingual ed. ethnic NGOs
<u>Structural</u>	infrastructure invest. targeted investment tax reform corporate reforms	Affirm Action minority set-asides ethnic CBO EconDev AI Self-Determ. policy. linguistic access policies

CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

Having outlined a way of making sense of the multiple and conflicting public policy approaches to realizing greater ethno-racial equality in the United States, it remains to point toward the analytical usefulness of this framework for understanding. There is some usefulness in simply articulating a way of uncovering some of the core decision trade-offs at stake in the relationship between public policy and the quest for racial equality – i.e., whether government should actively use public policy to attempt

greater ethno-racial equality, whether such policy approaches should prioritize “human resource development” or “structural change,” and whether public policy should be based on a “monistic” or “pluralistic” conception of U.S. society and social equality.

Beyond this basic articulation of decision trade-offs, however, it is possible as well to point toward a form of critical analytical utility. And this level of critical analysis comes from recognizing that the varying answers to the three questions outlined above are rooted in certain core assumptions regarding the *causes* of ethno-racial inequality in the United States. That is, the *roots* of the political conflicts over the above varying positions on the appropriate relationships between public policy and ethno-racial equality may be traced to the partisans’ (often unarticulated) assumptions regarding the origins of this country’s social inequality. Thus, the *prior question* that underlies the answers to the positions of policy advocates on the three core questions articulated above might be formulated as follows: *how can we account for the absence of social equality among ethno-racial groups in the United States?* The concluding argument I want to make here is that the policy positions of advocates is inevitably linked to their responses to this underlying question. I will conclude, therefore, by sketching out some of the most prominent responses to this underlying question, linking those responses to the policy positions articulated above in the main body of the essay.

1. Answer One: “*Ethno-Racial Inequality Derives from Essentialist, Biological Factors*”: This is now a discredited answer to explaining racial inequality in the United States; nevertheless it lies, often hidden as a “shadow” answer, at the root of many racist assumptions that continue to haunt the American political landscape. Indeed, without some kind of essentialist assumptions there can be no “racial” explanation at all for the inequality that has persisted throughout U.S. history. In its barest form, this answer to the question of racial inequality assumes or argues that people of color are *inherently* less fitted for the rigors of modern social, economic and political life. Accordingly, in the “natural” competition for social goods that characterizes human existence, members of these “inferior”

groups “naturally” fare less well than members of more robust groups. While this position has been discredited both intellectually¹¹ and politically, and while this linkage is not logically necessary, it seems very likely that it still accounts for part of the support for a *laissez-faire* position on the relationship between public policy and greater ethno-racial equality. For if ethno-racial inequality is ordained by “nature” (or by “nature’s God”), then why should it be proclaimed a public problem in need of correction?

2. Answer Two: “*Ethno-Racial Inequality Derives from Cultural, Behavioral Factors*”: This answer accounts for ethno-racial inequalities by pointing to the cultural commitments and/or behaviors of the different ethno-racial groups in American society. The assumption here is that there is a “culture of success” in the United States and that becoming successful in the acquisition of the social goods at issue in this debate over inequality requires the successful acquisition by individuals of the appropriate cultural beliefs, practices and behaviors. Thus, ethno-racial inequality may be attributed to a *failure of acculturation* on the part of members of certain ethno-racial groups.

Depending on how one assigns responsibility for this lack of acculturation in the “culture of success,” one can draw from this account either “conservative” or “liberal” implications for public policy development. Thus, “conservatives”¹² argue that individuals (and sometimes families) are responsible for the acquisition of the appropriate cultural beliefs, practices and behaviors that lead to success in U.S. society. This reasoning, of course, leads directly to a *laissez-faire* position on the relationship between public policy and greater ethno-racial equality. Individuals (and families) wanting to “succeed” in U.S. society should take steps to acculturate by acquiring the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, practices and behaviors that enable one to compete successfully in the dominant culture. “Liberals” who attribute social inequality, at least in part, to cultural, behavioral factors also believe that members of less successful ethno-racial groups need to better acculturate to the dominant society if they are to become more successful at acquiring the social goods at issue here. Unlike conservatives,

however, liberals are likely to perceive racialized *social* obstacles to successful acculturation as the key to their understanding that members of ethno-racial minority groups have suffered disadvantage through no fault of their own. In this view, as noted above, our national heritage of racialized domination and oppression have created handicaps that require governmental intervention before “fair” equality of opportunity can be realized. These liberals, therefore, tend to strongly support *human resource development* policies aimed at enabling culturally “disadvantaged” individuals to acculturate more successfully.

It should be noted, in addition, that proponents of a “monistic” conception of U.S. society, supportive of “race-neutral” and culturally assimilative policies also tend to account for ethno-racial inequality through cultural, behavioral factors. Support for both English-immersion and “transitional” bilingual education policies, for example, is premised on the assumption that English is the sole legitimate public language in the United States, and that speakers of other languages (e.g., Spanish) are therefore “foreign” and “handicapped” and in need of personal change before becoming successful participants in U.S. society.

3. Answer Three: “*Ethno-Racial Inequality Derives from Structural Factors*”: This answer attributes the origins and on-going causes of ethno-racial inequality to factors in the social context of various members of the society. Rather than looking to “faults” or “wrongs” in the attitudes or behaviors of individual human beings that need “correction” before success for them is possible, this answer looks to the social world within which those individuals live and finds powerful social forces at work to explain why members of some groups get “more” of the society’s most valued goods while members of other groups get “less.” As hinted at above, a wide variety of these social forces have been identified by scholars and policy advocates. Among the most influential of these are the following, and each may be linked to a particular approach to public policies aimed at greater ethno-racial equality in the United States:

Economic Structural Factors – some scholars and policy advocates see “economic” forces at work that are primarily responsible for perpetuating ethno-racial inequality in the United

States. As noted above, for example, W.J. Wilson has argued that structural economic factors are more responsible for continued racial inequality in the U.S. than are more directly “racial” factors. Many Marxists, too, have argued that racial inequality is reflective of more basic and fundamental economic structural forces. Unless these more basic economic forces are corrected, social inequality will continue to plague all capitalistic societies, including those societies that are ethno-racially diverse. Both Wilson’s social democratic analysis and various Marxist analyses, accordingly, point in the direction of “race-neutral” and culturally monistic *structural* policy approaches to attempts at achieving greater ethno-racial equality.

Structural Racialization – other scholars and policy advocates, as noted above, believe that racialization operates as an independent structural variable that needs to be taken into account in explaining ethno-racial inequality in the United States. That is, ethno-racial identity formation processes have operated historically to advantage some groups at the expense of other groups. In one example, Martin Marger has argued (1994) that the nature and dynamics of initial contact between two groups often leaves one group dominant over another (this can occur through differential military technology, differential ideological interpretations of the contact, differential population size, differential immunity to disease, etc.). This dominance then becomes institutionalized and rationalized so that inter-generational dominance is consolidated and perpetuated over time, embedded in the shared society’s institutions. Ideology is employed to further justify the dominance of one group over another, and that ideological behavior may attain hegemonic status so that the “normality” of one group’s dominance becomes “common sense” in the dominant cultural institutions of the society.

Another example of a structural racialization analysis may be found in Kim’s (2000) rich work on Korean-Black conflict in New York City, which extends the “racial formation” theory of Omi and Winant (1994). Kim theorizes an historical pattern in the U.S. leading from “racial power” to the construction of a “racial order” structured with distinct patterns of advantage and disadvantage for various ethno-racial groups. This racial order,

in turn, has stimulated political “resistance” on the part of those disadvantaged by it. In the context of Kim’s work, public policy efforts aimed at greater ethno-racial equality may be seen as efforts to realize both material and symbolic gains from these efforts at political resistance to the extant racial order. In any case, these lines of “structural” analysis may be linked to support for “race-based” and/or culturally pluralistic public policy approaches aimed at achieving greater ethno-racial equality.

In sum, the preferences of policy advocates need to be understood in the context of these competing explanations of the *origins* of ethno-racial inequality in this country. Having articulated a framework for understanding important distinctions between different policy positions in relation to ethno-racial equality, work on this subject now needs to move toward a comprehensive and sustained critical analysis of these competing explanations. This is so because the political future of public policy efforts aimed at achieving greater ethno-racial equality in the United States may depend crucially on the (often unarticulated) understandings of policy advocates as to *why* ethno-racial inequality continues to characterize the country.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.
2. I use the term “ethno-racial groups” to indicate that, while human “races” do not exist in nature, powerful social forces of racialization in the historical development of the United States have constructed these five “groups” for a time period long enough that they have begun to take on certain characteristics of “ethnic” groups. Some scholars use the term “pan-ethnic groups” to designate the same groupings, but I wish to emphasize the role of racialization in their social construction.
3. For elaboration of this argument, see Omi and Winant (1994), and Kim (2000).

4. O'Connor's specific reference was to "racial gerrymandering" by the State of North Carolina, seeking compliance with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
5. For examples of this line of analysis, see Turé and Hamilton (1992 [1967]), Bell (1992), Carr (1997), Smith (1997), Kousser (1999), Reed (1999).
6. See Bobo (1997) for public opinion data in support of this assertion.
7. For elaborations of this argument, see Barrera (1988); Kymlicka (1989, 1995); Schmidt (2000); Turé and Hamilton (1992 [1967]), Chapter Two; Young (1990).
8. See Schmidt (1988) for an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to culturally pluralistic policy implementation.
9. See Schmidt (2000), Chapters 7-8, for an elaborated justification of these policy proposals.
10. Lani Guinier (1994) has been the most prominent advocate for this proposed enhancement to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. A more theoretical justification is provided by Young (1990).
11. But see Jensen (1973) and Herrnstein and Murray (1994), for evidence that these explanations survive in academia.
12. One of the most noteworthy of these accounts was that of Edward Banfield (1974).

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Author's Biography

Ronald Schmidt, Sr. is professor emeritus of political science at California State University, Long Beach, and visiting adjunct professor of political science at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. He is the lead co-author of *Newcomers, Outsiders, and Insiders: Immigrants and American Racial Politics in the Early Twenty-First Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2010) and author of *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States* (Temple University Press, 2000), as well as of numerous journal articles and book chapters on U.S. ethnoracial politics and the politics of immigration.