



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

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Community Action

The growing gulf between two Americas Will it ever be bridged?

May 11, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 19

In the group that has been here longer, white Americans dominate both the FTE sector and the low-wage sector, while African Americans are located almost entirely in the low-wage sector. In the groups of recent immigrants, Asians predominantly entered the FTE sector while Latino immigrants joined African Americans in the low-wage sector. The choices made in the United States include keeping the low-wage sector down through mass incarceration, housing segregation and disenfranchisement.

- Peter Temin

In the wake of urban rioting that had taken place in areas such as Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Watts, and more recently the city's of Newark and Detroit, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in July of 1967. Also known as the Kerner Commission, after Illinois Governor Otto Kerner who served as its chair, the commission's notable declaration was that "Our nation in moving toward two societies, on black, one white – separate and unequal."

That this assertion was somehow news to anyone, particularly African Americans, was at best dubious and at worst an out-and-out insult. De jure segregation and the doctrine of "separate but equal" had previously been deliberated in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 as well as 1954's *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education*. And, the enduring experience of de facto segregation in both the north and the south cemented the reality of separate and unequal in the minds of Black America.

A quarter of a century after the Kerner Commission Report, and just weeks before the civil unrest that engulfed South Central Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, political science professor Andrew Hacker published *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. Hacker's text, which was widely praised, carefully explored the role of racial bias in the arenas of income equality, education, employment, and the criminal justice system. And while it provided compelling and often frightening evidence in support of its argument, the book didn't necessarily tell us anything we didn't already know.

Another full twenty-five years after Hacker's *Two Nations*, economist Peter Temin has published *The Vanishing Middle Class: Prejudice and Power in a Dual Economy*. Temin, who is currently Gray Professor Emeritus of Economics at MIT, contends that America has evolved into two distinct and decidedly unequal classes, which he identifies as the FTE (finance, technology, electronics) sector and the low-wage sector where the overwhelming majority of Americans are found.

Again, this might not be considered entirely groundbreaking scholarship as the soaring gaps in American income and wealth over the last half-century have become well documented. Still, Temin provides a context for how these socio-economic trends and conditions came into existence and how they are maintained. Most Americans, regardless of race, are relegated to the low-income sector. Still to his credit, Temin does not diminish the role that race has always played in the disparate politics and economics of this nation.

In *The Atlantic's* review of *The Vanishing Middle Class*, senior associate editor Gillian B. White underscores how the advanced economic models that Temin

employs suggest that in general “escaping poverty requires almost 20 years with nearly nothing going wrong.” While that might seem like a rather abstract notion, Temin stresses that inadequacies in education, transportation, housing, healthcare, employment opportunities, and other critical infrastructure make it exceedingly difficult for low and moderate income households to rise above their circumstances.

Notwithstanding the gloomy outlook he depicts, Temin believes that it is possible for America to be better than this. But that, as he argues would require some dynamic shifts in systems, policies, and attitudes.

Some may consider this an impossible task. But in describing what he called “this dreadful storm,” the legendary James Baldwin once wrote “I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand.”

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