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A Tale of Two People: Black Immigrants and Black Americans

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Despite being the greatest experiment in the history of the world, the United States possesses plenty of stains on its coat of arms. Be it the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II or “No Irish Need Apply” signs plastered across American cities, a diverse array of groups has fallen victim to prejudice and oppression. But no other ethnicity had it worse than black Americans, whether it was in the eras of slavery or Jim Crow. It has been a struggle for scores of generations of black U.S. citizens. Is this because America is a racist nation, or is it a result of both execrable and feel-good policy interventions that have eroded the living standards of so many black people of the last 50 years? Perhaps the answer is to study the prosperity of black immigrants.

Are Black Immigrants Thriving?

Suppose the assertions are correct and the United States is a systemically bigoted place. Should black immigrants be suffering the same fate as so many black citizens who might be fourth-generation Americans? And, if so, why are minorities migrating to the Land of the Free in immense numbers?

As of 2020, the median U.S. household income is \$61,937. For white households, the median income is around \$66,000, while black homes earn around \$44,000. It is a massive gap between the two races. How about households comprising immigrants that come from predominantly black nations? Here is a look at their median incomes:

- Ghanaian Americans: \$69,021
- Nigerian Americans: \$68,658 (25% enjoy incomes north of \$100,000)
- Trinidadian and Tobagonian Americans: \$62,120
- Jamaican Americans: \$62,044
- Haitian Americans: \$57,451

Other studies also have compared immigrants and people with the same skillset who did not emigrate. Again, the results were astonishing: Relocating the average worker from his or her home country to the United States without any additional education or training immediately and significantly raises that person’s wages, whether that individual is from Ghana or Haiti.

Even on the education file, black immigrants take full advantage of America's higher education system. A 2004 report highlighted that most of the black students attending Harvard University were not native-born Americans. In 2013, 25% of the 120 black students at the Harvard Business School were Nigerian. As *The Economist* noted in 2015: "Nigerians abroad are generally keen on education."

Many measurements point to an inconvenient truth for the left: Black immigrants are ahead of American whites on a broad array of fronts, including economically and educationally. But if someone coming from West Africa or the West Indies can thrive under American institutions, why are American-born blacks falling through the cracks of these same pillars of U.S. society?

Legendary economist Thomas Sowell asked a critical question in his book, *Wealth, Poverty and Politics*, "If white racism is the cause of lower educational and economic outcomes for black Americans, why are black Nigerians exempt?" Could it be the inept century-old record of the government that has substantially hindered black Americans' growth?

How Statists Devastated the Black Community

Slavery in America and throughout the globe already has been well-documented. It is an established fact that slavery is an abhorrent practice that has no place in a civilized society. It will forever be a scar on American history. But government policies of the last 100 years, from redlining to hourly compensation, have also inflicted pain and crippled multiple generations of black Americans. Measures with benevolent intentions manufactured a generational paralysis for a substantial portion of the native black population. Even when black families succeeded independently without a handout from bureaucrats and politicians, it was the state that put a stop to their flourishing lives, either directly or indirectly.

The history of minimum wage laws is not as gracious and munificent as progressives would pontificate. Labor wages – at home and abroad – possess sour histories.

For example, as the Cato Institute noted, "the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act, requiring 'prevailing' wages on federally assisted construction projects, was supported by the idea that it would keep contractors from using 'cheap colored labor' to underbid contractors using white labor." Sowell's research with Stanford University's Hoover Institution spotlighted that the province of British Columbia approved a minimum wage law in 1925 that would price Japanese immigrants out of jobs in the lucrative lumber industry. During the era of apartheid, South Africa's white labor unions pushed for a minimum wage law to be applied "to keep black workers from taking jobs away from white unionized workers by working for less than the union pay scale." In 2010, South African workers complain about local labor laws that price them out of employment opportunities, according to *The New York Times*.

Fast forward to the present, and the wage floor is still disproportionately hurting black youth. By 1948, most places in the United States had a minimum wage law due to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Incidentally, this was the last time that the unemployment rate for black youth (16- and 17-year-old males) would be below 10%. From 1953 to 1970, the jobless figure for this demographic was never below 20%. From 1971 to 1994, black youth unemployment was above

30%. From then, it has been on an upward trajectory. Advocates of minimum wage laws might not consider this to be a component of systemic racism, but it is a policy that unintentionally impacts an inordinate amount of black people.

Economist Milton Friedman famously opined:

“The effects have been concentrated on the groups that the do-gooders would most like to help. The people who have been hurt most by the minimum wage laws are the blacks. I have often said that the most anti-black law on the books of this land is the minimum wage law.”

Over the years, the government has attempted to rectify its actions. Welfare, affirmative action, and, at the present moment, reparations are just some of the remedies that have turned out to be nostrums for native blacks. Once again, these efforts only further inflame their plight, whether welfare dependency through multiple generations or poor performances in the top universities.

The empirical data often point to a disastrous trend of academic miscarriages for minority students. Or, as Sowell calls it, “the human tragedy.” Instead of focusing on achievement, too many post-secondary institutions emphasize race. When black students who score high marks in mathematics in secondary school and are admitted to MIT or Stanford under the pretense of affirmative action, a substantial number were unable to graduate, despite the likelihood of graduating with honors at most other post-secondary facilities.

The unintended consequences of the panoply of progressive goodies have been on display for the last century.

The Failure of the Welfare State

Welfare acolytes refuse to concede that their public benefits have unsuccessfully delivered social justice. Instead, the welfare state has served millions of Americans – and not only native blacks – with an abundance of cruelty. Malcolm X routinely stated that the white liberal, who had posed as an ally, failed the black community. But it is leftist orthodoxy that has failed native blacks and America as a whole.

Be it a booming Black Wall Street or a rising middle class in 1940s Harlem, when black Americans are left to themselves without the oppressive boot of the state or the Faustian bargain of the progressives, they do remarkably well. The same applies to every other group that had faced adversity throughout time, whether it was the Jews or Asian-Americans. The struggle of black Americans should be a cautionary tale for government, either as a friend or foe. When black immigrants come from broken and corrupt lands, they know well enough to refrain from trusting the authorities.

As former President Ronald Reagan quipped, “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: “I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.”