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# Book Review: Race, Class & Conservatism. by Thomas D. Boston.

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**RACE, CLASS & CONSERVATISM.** By Thomas D. Boston.<sup>1</sup> Boston: Unwin Hyman. 1988. Pp. xix, 172. Cloth, \$34.95; paper, \$11.95.

*William A. Donohue*<sup>2</sup>

Professor Thomas Boston thinks that he has forever discredited the work of conservative social scientists, especially those concerned with the subject of race and poverty. I have bad news for him: he is wrong. He hasn't even laid a glove on them.

*Race, Class & Conservatism* is an attempt to challenge five major books: William J. Wilson's *Declining Significance of Race*, Thomas Sowell's *Markets and Minorities* and *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?*, George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty*, and Walter Williams's *State Against Blacks*. All but Gilder are black and all but Wilson can fairly be called conservatives.

If there is one argument that unites the five books analyzed by Boston, it is that class plays a more important role than race in determining black upward mobility. None of the five authors maintains that discrimination has disappeared altogether. They simply argue that social and cultural factors such as family, education and values, together with political factors such as minimum wage legislation and licensing practices, are better explanations of the white-black income disparity than discrimination. If they are right, then efforts that concentrate on anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action are likely to have little effect. It is this which Professor Boston seeks to challenge.

Boston is good at prediction: "Beneath the surface of free market Darwinism, a growing disenchantment has emerged. Jobs, peace, poverty, the homeless and racial justice are themes of the 1990s." (Somehow this sounds familiar. Will folk singing return as well? How about a war?) Boston concludes his book with a remark that not even Deng and Gorbys would believe: "Freer markets have not reduced poverty but worsened it."

Not only does Boston believe that conservative public policy hurts the poor, he believes that conservatives *want* to punish the poor. For example, he states that by focusing on the dimension of class, instead of race, conservatives are simply looking for "a fresh camouflage to hide their antipathy for social policies" designed to help the poor. "To a person, conservatives *pretend* to have a great

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compassion for the black underclass . . . ." (My emphasis.) Worse still is "the amount of suffering Gilder and other supply-siders are willing to inflict upon the poor in the name of helping the poor." In short, conservatives hate the poor, and seek to create human suffering. Why they aren't shot, instead of being elected to the White House, is surely a mystery. Must be false-consciousness.

Boston explains that middle class black conservatives such as Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams suffer from a "social, cultural, political and organizational alienation from mainstream black society and black public opinion." Furthermore, Boston argues that the masses of black people are "the most liberal and left-leaning stratum of black society," though no evidence is forthcoming for either assertion. In fact, there is good reason to believe that on many issues most blacks are more conservative than Boston alleges and that Sowell and Williams better represent black public opinion than people like him. In 1985, the Center for Media and Public Affairs surveyed 105 black leaders from major civil rights and political organizations, including the NAACP, Urban League, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Operation PUSH, National Conference of Black Mayors and Congressional Black Caucus. Their responses were compared to those of six hundred black Americans, chosen randomly in a national survey. The results were enlightening. Though a majority of black leaders held liberal positions on affirmative action, busing and capital punishment (pro on the first two, con on the last), only a minority of black laymen felt the same way. While two-thirds of the leaders called themselves liberals, only a quarter of the laymen chose that label.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the divergence was striking; it suggests that on these issues the liberal black leadership is more out of tune with black public opinion than scholars like Sowell and Williams.

Boston argues that the real problem with black conservatives is that they have an impoverished understanding of the meaning of class. To that end, he seeks to recast our thinking on class by offering a synthesis of the works of Marx, Weber, Poulantzas and Giddens. For Boston, there are three classes in contemporary American society: a capitalist class, a middle class, and a working class; each has its own subdivisions. He contends that the black capitalist class is "miniscule," only about fifteen percent belong to the black middle class, and everyone else is a member of the working class, which means that approximately eighty percent of blacks are members of the working class.

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3. Lichter, *Who Speaks for Black America?* PUBLIC OPINION, Aug./Sept. 1985, at 41, 42.

Like many of those on the Left, Boston prefers to see reality in the worst possible light. Why? So that others will be convinced that a major overhaul is urgent. For example, he rejects out of hand those studies which put the black middle class at about forty percent. On what basis does he decide that this figure is too high? Intuition. That's right, "some studies estimate the black middle class at 40 percent of the black population—a figure which seems by intuition much too high." Never mind that in the early 1970s Ben J. Wattenberg and Richard M. Scammon concluded that a *majority* of blacks were middle class,<sup>4</sup> Boston's intuition tells him it's only fifteen percent.

Sociologists who study social stratification usually differentiate between the working class, the lower class and the underclass. Not Boston—he prefers to lump them all together. As a matter of fact, he says that high school teachers (who belong in the middle class), janitors (typically of the lower class) and welfare recipients (many of whom are underclass) are all members of the working class! Furthermore, Boston writes that "marginalized workers" are part of the black working class. "By marginalized," he explains, "we mean an involuntary situation where an individual does not have a full-time attachment to a job." He never explains what he means by "an involuntary situation," and chooses to conjoin unemployed workers with welfare recipients, as if they were essentially alike.

Boston divides the working class into three strata: the upper stratum, the masses and the lumpen stratum. This enables him to place the lumpenproletariat (whom Marx called the "scum of the earth") in the same class with health technicians. Again, it is hard to say what they have in common. Do health technicians have the same values and lifestyle as street bums? Does even Boston believe they do? By confusing class distinctions Boston does nothing but hide the nature of the problem.

There is a vast difference between the working class, the lower class, and the underclass, and it is a difference that cannot be whisked away with new social constructs. Those in the working class include high school educated laborers such as policemen, firemen, construction workers, bus drivers, etc. The lower class is comprised mostly of uneducated (less than high school) persons who work in low skill and low income jobs. The underclass, by contrast, have no work skills. Unlike the lower class, who progress when the economy is doing well, the underclass are unaffected by increasing prosperity. Therefore, to lump all these together is to

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4. See Wattenberg & Scammon, *Black Progress and Liberal Rhetoric*, COMMENTARY, April 1973, at 35.

ignore the very serious problems that the underclass have. They will not be helped by affirmative action, for they have no skills to offer in the workplace. They are, as their label accurately conveys, literally under, or outside, the class system.

Boston devotes what in many ways is the most interesting chapter in the book to an alleged debunking of what he calls "conservative gospel." It is in this chapter that his own analysis breaks down, under the weight of the data that he thinks discredits the conservatives.

Central to Boston's argument is the contention that "if one controls for occupational distribution while examining income differences, one is actually controlling for discrimination because one of its primary forms is the relegation of blacks to low status occupations." But if this is true then how does he account for the existence of a new black capitalist class and a new black middle class? Why are they different from the masses? He responds by saying that their "greater achievement is due to the smaller impact that racial discrimination has upon their life chances." But how does he know this? No proof is forthcoming. Does he really believe that the underclass suffers more from racial discrimination than from the absence of middle class values? If all of them were to wake up white tomorrow, would they naturally find their way into the middle class?

Boston goes after Sowell, but without effect. For example, to demonstrate that blacks do not suffer racial discrimination in higher education, Sowell cites the incomes of a sample of white and black Ph.D.'s in the same area. The blacks, Sowell reports, earn slightly more than the whites, thus rebutting the charge that racial discrimination is holding back that group. Boston replies that "nothing can be concluded for blacks whose doctoral education was prevented by discrimination because they are not in the sample." This is true, but it is also true that we have no way of knowing how many affirmative-action blacks received their Ph.D.s largely because they were black, an obvious methodological problem that Boston ignores. Alternatively, are we to conclude that those blacks who did receive Ph.D.s were wholly unaffected by discrimination? Isn't it possible that some persevered and are today doing better than their white cohorts, as the data suggest? More important, how does Boston's contention dispute the point being made by Sowell?

Sowell also stresses that one reason why blacks earn less than white ethnics is the fact that the average age of blacks is several years younger than that of whites. Sowell's contention is that—excluding retirees—an older person will usually earn more than a

younger person. Boston thinks he's refuted this when he uncovers data indicating that the median age of black employed hourly workers is two years older than that of their white counterparts, yet their hourly wage is lower. But as Boston must know, to play the game of statistics fairly, one must pit apples against apples. Sowell's point is that "all things considered," age differences help to account for income disparity. But all things are not equal between black and white hourly workers: blacks on average have less education than whites. The way to test whether Sowell or Boston is right would be to disaggregate the figures on hourly workers. This Boston did not do.

Boston is most slippery when he analyzes the income gap between blacks of West Indian origin and other American blacks. Sowell has argued that if race, instead of cultural factors, is the principal reason why blacks do not do as well as whites, then why do West Indians earn almost as much in America, on average, as whites? To this Boston replies by speculating that the West Indians who have migrated to the U.S. are better educated than the average West Indian. Assuming *arguendo* that this hunch is correct, what follows? It certainly follows that blacks—including West Indians—may be suffering from discrimination by whites and might do better relative to whites if discrimination were eliminated. But Sowell does not deny this. Sowell's point is that well-qualified blacks generally succeed in America, despite whatever discrimination exists, so that discrimination should not be regarded as the major current cause of black poverty. Boston's theory, even if true, does not rebut this argument.

Boston blames racial discrimination for every instance of white-black income disparity, except when the disparity favors blacks. For example, whites have a higher average hourly income in six of the nine regions of the country for which he presents data. Of course, Boston blames racial discrimination for this disparity. Concerning the three regions where blacks earn more than whites he has absolutely nothing to say. Yet if blacks sometimes earn more than whites, for reasons that are not invidious, why presume that whites are not equally capable of deserving higher average incomes in some areas?

Boston provides evidence that in four of six major occupational groupings, whites earn more than blacks. It is clear from the data that in three of these the disparity is due to the fact that whites on average have more years of experience than blacks. Their higher incomes are what we would expect in a just world. To be sure, in the occupations of farming, forestry, and fishing whites earn more

even though they have less experience. Perhaps discrimination is the explanation. But of the two occupational groupings where blacks do better than whites, only one (services) can be explained on the ground of greater experience. The data show that blacks who work in the area of technical, sales, and administrative support earn more but have less experience than whites. Again, Boston offers no explanation.

Boston's regression analyses control for all the major variables mentioned in the literature by Sowell, Williams, Wilson, and Gilder. As presented by Boston, the data make the case for the conservatives, not for him. "Once accounted for in the equation," he admits, "the discrimination coefficient is reduced significantly." That is, the figures demonstrate that discrimination plays a relatively small role in explaining racial income differences. So what does Boston say to that? "But does this mean that racial discrimination in wages has disappeared as contended by conservatives? *Absolutely not!*" And why not? Because "the equation says nothing about the comparative earnings of two million black workers who are disproportionately unemployed or the disproportionate share of black workers who are discouraged and therefore no longer in the labor force." Here we go again. When the data don't prove what Boston wants, he blames the research for not including factors that, by definition, were extrinsic to its purpose.

Despite what Boston wants to believe, there will be no significant progress in solving America's racial problem until we figure out what to do about the black underclass. Such conditions as high rates of welfare dependency, illegitimacy, illiteracy, drop outs, homicide, drug abuse, AIDS, prenatal child abuse and low rates of labor force participation among young black males must be addressed. It's too bad that Boston could write an entire book about race and class and never discuss any of these problems.