

Demagoguery in America: Wrong Turns in the Politics of Race

Jim Sleeper

In the late 1930s, Irving Howe and his generation of democratic socialists concluded, to their dismay, that they would have to spend some of their best energies not on building a more decent, socialist world, but on defeating Stalinism—on trying, that is, to rescue the very hope of socialism from those who, starting from wholly legitimate grievances and rage, had bloodied its vision virtually beyond recognition.

Inevitably, this decision put democratic socialists on the same "side" as right-wing anticommunists in certain disputes. They were all too easily condemned as apologists for economic royalism and even fascism. The condemnation came not only from Stalinists but also from seemingly more moderate, honorable Americans who had chosen, out of elite guilt, naive idealism, or stubborn loyalty to the original vision, to excuse or even celebrate the Communists' brutality. Now that the peoples of the Soviet Union have spoken for themselves, we know that Howe and his colleagues had no morally or politically defensible choice but to risk the contempt of the parlor Left and the condescension of the Right. Democratic socialists may feel exhausted, but, in large measure, they have been vindicated.

The time has come for black activists and all who support civil-rights struggles to face up to a more modest, yet in some respects equally daunting, mission: that of isolating and defeating much of what now passes for black protest leadership in New York City and some other parts of America. Now more than at any time in recent memory, progressive politics must dedicate itself to building an electoral coalition strong enough to reverse the federal abdication of responsibility for cities and the poor; destructive economic practices hypocritically justified as part of the workings of free markets; and, amid the devastation caused by these forces, a deepening of racial and ethnic hostilities that blights lives and forecloses coalition politics.

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Instead of helping to build such coalitions, black demagogues have embraced a series of disastrous misjudgments and destructive tactics, which I want to describe with reference to the events of August and September in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. Exploiting deep fault lines in what is now called "identity politics," these pretenders to serious leadership have conned other black leaders who should know better into systematically burning their community's bridges to feminists, Asians, liberal Jews, Hispanics, and, more importantly, to everyone who aspires to share the obligations and rewards of a just, pluralist society.

The Reverend Al Sharpton, the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, and street activist Sonny Carson, the attorneys Alton Maddox, Jr., C. Vernon Mason, and Colin Moore, and other highly visible demagogues, are not the only ones responsible. So are a host of apparently more moderate leaders, white as well as black, who have indulged them. Together, these groups have overshadowed and often intimidated a third group of black leaders: those who have been working in neighborhood organizations, churches, labor unions, and electoral politics to reweave the black community's devastated civic and political fabric, amid deepening economic depression and white contempt. The eclipse of these constructive activists has dimmed the prospects for the reemergence of the kind of black leadership provided by A. Philip Randolph or E. Franklin Frazier—leaders who, faced with the much more intractable poverty and white racism of fifty years ago, managed to forge true movements for justice.

Because such leaders are not emerging in New York and some other areas, the period of black moral dominance within the liberal and civil-rights communities in those places is ending. We can argue about the reasons, but we cannot turn back the clock. Others must take up the initiative, much as Dennis Rivera, a Puerto Rican socialist, saved New York's Local 1199 of the Hospital and Health Care Employees Union from extensive damage by Doris Turner's pseudo-black-nationalist demagoguery a few years ago.

Drawing the line against a black misleadership that trades in lies, vilifies innocent parties, silences dissenters, and dehumanizes real and putative opponents

will require soul-searching and courage on the part of black progressives and those of us who would join them. We will have to endure being miscast as accomplices of such racists as New York's Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato, who seldom misses a chance to bait black demagogues. As we try to hammer out a new progressive consensus capable of touching mainstream America, we will sometimes be vilified as Uncle Toms or racists. And just as democratic socialists had to struggle not only against Stalinists but also against Stalinism's fashionable, sometimes eloquent apologists, so we will find ourselves challenging many blacks and whites whose naive deference to the misplaced agendas of identity politics empowers the demagogues.

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But it is precisely because racism, economic injustice, and conservative politics are such formidable enemies that leaders groping for an alternative politics cannot afford to indulge fantasies of ethnic or racial destiny that fracture potential coalitions for social change. They must learn to distinguish between group psychodramas, which have their place in communal theaters or churches, and the more farsighted interracial organizing and discourse, based on transracial truths, that are so desperately needed in pluralist arenas—in workplaces and courts, at the polls and in the streets.

Progressive politics simply can't make headway in a pluralist society without keeping certain commitments. One is to rational analysis—that is, to the primacy of admittedly provisional, evolving public truths over the mythic, communal ones enshrouded in racial narratives. Another is to the defense of individual over group rights in a context of civic and moral obligation to people across race lines—the right, for example, to dissent from one's own community, without fear of material harm, in order to protest a clear injustice. Yet, even on college campuses, where it is at its most benign, identity politics too often mystifies and divides. It too often mischaracterizes rational analysis and individual dissent

from group norms as “Eurocentric” impositions simply because, by accidents of history, they come to us most directly from the European Enlightenment. Intending to mount liberating Afrocentric and other narratives against “hegemonic” racist ideas, practitioners of identity politics often draw their targets too broadly, attacking the very underpinnings of their own freedom in what is, after all—as they themselves insist—a diverse society. In so doing, they play into the hands of those who have been huckstering separate racial scenarios of truth to consolidate an illusory and destructive power.

“Who controls the past, controls the future,” Orwell wrote in 1984. We all know that history written by its “winners” works in this way. What this bloody century ought to have taught us is that the narratives of “losers” have a similarly destructive potential, that the oppressed can fight as blindly and as brutally as the oppressor. Serious history always struggles to escape this dilemma by resisting the service of ideological or ethnic ends. Its truths are written from the vantage of both “winners” and “losers” in communities of scholars who have the courage and the wisdom to balance tragedy and desire through an evolving discourse among peers. Even as we struggle to enrich and correct that never-completed consensus, we need the courage to defend it, in all its imperfection, against any self-proclaimed purity that masks brutality, whether it comes wrapped in a “great white male” theory of history or in a mythos of noble black and brown insurgency against domination. Counterintuitive though it may seem, we must sometimes speak truth to powerlessness, which can become as blind as power itself.

The public debate about slavery that was ratcheted up recently by City College professor Leonard Jeffries's allusions to Jewish control of the trade made this point well. International slavery turns out to have been an ecumenical business, the commodity market of its day. It was invented largely by Arab Muslims; instituted legally and financially in the West by Christians; enthusiastically adopted by Africans who sold their brethren; and bankrolled in part by Sephardi Jews who cornered much of the capital behind the sugar processing industry, which brought black slaves to the West Indies. Jeffries exaggerates the role of the Jews in slave trading for purposes closer to home and to his own personal experience (which, in keeping with the premises of identity politics, he conflates with racial truth). His identity-driven version of history is about as truthful as that of a white racist or black nationalist historian of the future looking back on the New York of the 1990s, seeing a black mayor, a black Ford Foundation president, a few black CEOs, and scores of black

vice presidents for community affairs—and concluding that blacks had shaped the urban capitalist agenda.

This is just the kind of distortion identity politics flirts with all the time. And it is in the streets and hard-pressed institutions of urban America that such distortions have taken truly ominous—I would say tribal—turns. There, as on campus, champions of identity politics claim to counterpose racial memories and truths to liberal society's insidious lies. But in the hands of a demagogic leadership, the intended social reform degenerates into a tit-for-tat recapitulation of the very wrongs it seeks to undo.

What protections do those who would carry their personal and racial narratives, unsullied by rational criticism, into academic and legal discourse offer against such a disaster? What do they say to Jeffries, and to the Reverend Al Sharpton and to Sonny Carson when they carry Jeffries's theories into shakedowns of Korean stores or riots in Crown Heights? How do they counter George Bush's cynical use of the Voting Rights Act in order to create legislative-district apartheid—and to increase the number of all-white, potentially GOP seats—by packing minorities into racially gerrymandered districts in the name of black or Latino empowerment? How, indeed, when civil-rights groups driven by identity politics are already jumping at the bait? (In New York, some Hispanic activists are willing to contemplate a bizarrely shaped, nominally Latino district, which would throw Democratic representatives Stephen Solarz and Charles Schumer into the same electoral arena, thereby costing New York City one of these men's legislative clout.)

Some of identity politics' most serious assaults have been against the criminal courts, which the demagogues, with some justice, say are permeated with racism. But it is one thing to uncover and denounce racism in the criminal-justice system. It is quite another to concoct perversely comforting racial case narratives that falsify evidence, twist testimony, and intimidate witnesses, all in order to "prove" to blacks that the system will never work for them. That is precisely what black protest leaders have done in the cases of Howard Beach, Tawana Brawley, Bensonhurst, Central Park, the Korean boycott, and Crown Heights. But once they've stymied justice in order to dramatize racism, what next? Having whipped their followers into a frenzy, they have no answer. And they offer no alliances, for they have alienated people of other colors—and, indeed, many blacks—who desperately seek a criminal-justice system free of lies and intimidation.

There is, of course, a signal and profound difference between Stalinists and the black misleadership I am describing: Far from controlling the state and its means of



Crown Heights after Gavin Cato's death: Can New York's blacks and Jews reclaim civic political debate in a climate of hatred and demagoguery?

imposing terror, as the Bolsheviks eventually did, black demagogues will never win such power in America. Like Stalinists, they have managed to silence black dissenters and ruin the lives of innocent whites against whom they bear false witness. But they have not been able to prevent black voters from repudiating their strategies, again and again, in the privacy of the polls. Aren't they really too marginal and powerless, then, to worry about? Anyway, aren't they just the media creations of racists who seek a foil for their own depredations?

At best, these rhetorical questions embody half-truths, unsatisfying not only to those Jews who have abandoned such speculations since the killing of Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights, but to all decent people. The demagogues' tactics have so completely foreclosed any possibility of interracial coalitions in New York that Sharpton and his cohorts may as well have been working for D'Amato and Bush. And since New York City's two black weeklies and the talk shows on its premier black radio station, WLIB, relentlessly indoctrinate tens of thousands of readers and listeners in special racial truths, this brand of identity politics substantially chills debate within the black community itself.

When, for example, state Assemblyman Roger Green denounced Sharpton during the Brawley affair for likening New York's attorney general to Hitler, Green's chairmanship of the Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus was immediately contested by a black state senator whose district overlapped his. (She withdrew her candidacy after a few days, not wanting, she said, to project to the public an impression of black division.) Ordinary blacks who challenged the veracity of

Brawley's story were vilified by talk-show hosts and newspaper polemicists. It took a black reporter widely respected in his community, *Newsday's* Les Payne, to expose the hoax in terms that made black dissent possible.

After a brave black civil-rights attorney, Michael Meyers, warned publicly during the Jeffries affair that black leaders were failing to speak out because they wrongly, obsessively fear being cast as tools of the white establishment, he was deluged with hate mail. In the rest of the country, black political discourse has become greatly diversified through the work of such disparate figures as Cornel West, Shelby Steele, *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry, law professors Randall Kennedy and Stephen Carter, and many others; but there has been no such flowering in New York. Too many people are afraid. Similarly, blacks whose politics is at odds with that of the demagogues have learned to "work around" them, not confront them, when their carnivals are running at fever pitch.

For all these reasons, we must fight a two-front battle, against black demagogues (and those who indulge them), as well as against racists (and those who indulge them). Nowhere was the case for doing so clearer than in the Crown Heights story.

"Here we go again," groaned a late-August front-page *New York Post* headline when Sharpton announced that Yosef Lifsh was driving while intoxicated. Lifsh, a chasidic Jew, had run a red light; his car bounced off another car, and then crushed to death Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old black boy in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood. The *Post's* sense of déjà vu was prompted, of course, by memories of the wildly false charges circulated by Sharpton and some other black protest leaders in the criminal-justice cases I have mentioned.

Sharpton's intoxication charge and Carson's claim that Lifsh didn't have a driver's license were designed to justify black demands for the arrest and indictment of Lifsh under New York's remarkably lax laws governing criminal liability in traffic accidents. But the accusations immediately blew up in the activists' faces—and only partly because Lifsh did have a driver's license and had been tested negatively for intoxication immediately after the crash. The activists' scenario collapsed when the press found that the same lax traffic laws that protected Lifsh had also protected errant black motorists who had killed Chasidim, one a young boy, in the same neighborhood in the preceding five years. Besides, as the *Post's* headline suggested, most of the city had by now caught on to the demagogues' tactics.

Then, too, in the minds of most decent New Yorkers, the accident, while tragic, had already been eclipsed

by the fatal, apparently retaliatory stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum, who was surrounded just hours after Cato's death by a crowd of black youths as he walked home from the subway. His killing was indistinguishable from that of Yusuf Hawkins by a white mob in Bensonhurst in 1989—though one wouldn't have known it at first from the press coverage of the event, which doted eerily on the demagogues' every word about the auto accident and about the grievances of young blacks hurling bottles, rocks, and anti-Semitic epithets at cops and at the supposedly privileged Chasidim. Allegedly, Lifsh's bad driving had compounded blacks' long-standing grievances because he was bringing up the rear of Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson's police-escorted motorcade at the time.

The media soon recovered their balance; an exhaustive investigation by *Newsday* reporters Jennifer Preston and Michael Powell showed that Chasidim had not received disproportionate city aid for some years. Mayor David Dinkins, who had muted his criticisms of Sharpton and Carson in order to sit down and negotiate with them as the rocks and epithets flew, finally declared that Rosenbaum had been "lynched" as surely as Hawkins had been.

None of this stopped Sharpton, Carson, the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, and attorneys Moore, Maddox, and Mason, all veterans of past scams, from succoring the rioters. It didn't stop black *Amsterdam News* editor Wilbert Tatum, who had flamboyantly printed the name of the Central Park rape victim and characterized her assailants' trial as a lynching, from running headlines on the Crown Heights story such as "Many Blacks, No Jews Arrested." Nor did it stop the demagogues from turning Cato's August 26 funeral into a carnival of hatred so obscene that his bewildered, grieving parents were all but forgotten. "Rather than be scorned," wrote veteran activist Sam Pinn, the rock-throwing youths "should be recognized as freedom fighters. . . . The young people who are alleged to have murdered the rabbinical student Yankel Rosenbaum were striking a blow—not only a blow of revenge, but, in their view, a blow for justice." Cato family attorney and city-council candidate Colin Moore said the rock-throwing mob was "justifiably angry because Lifsh left the children to die." But, according to Police Commissioner Lee Brown, cops ordered a Jewish ambulance service to spirit Lifsh away because the crowd, instead of helping Lifsh lift the car off Gavin Cato and his injured sister Angela, stole Lifsh's watch, wallet, and car phone, and beat him (he received eighteen stitches at the hospital).

And yet, on Labor Day, the rioting and invective temporarily spent, decent opinion began to assert itself within the black community. Crown Heights hosted

whites, black political rhetoric tended (with some notable exceptions, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglass) to be flamboyant precisely because the words were weightless, of no consequence, unable to move the walls of white ignorance and indifference. For all the difference Powell, Baldwin, King, and their successors have made, the older tradition echoes even in Jesse Jackson's claim to be a "tree shaker, not a jelly maker."

It echoes, too, in a recent statement by the Reverend Calvin Butts, senior pastor of Powell's old Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, that he "can understand" Leonard Jeffries's claim that Jews and the Mafia conspired against blacks in Hollywood. "Can understand"? No one expects Butts to be a historian; still, a leader owes his listeners something better than a sly, polemical appropriation of wild charges. It is as if Butts (who campaigned in the streets for C. Vernon Mason in the council races) and Jackson were saying: It is our duty to evoke and provoke; it is somebody else's duty—the real grown-ups?—to determine the truth and set matters to rights. We will spin our pain into webs of narrative and metaphor. Someone else, always someone else, will turn them into politics and policy.

Economic desperation, ignorance, and profound marginalization may also explain why some people do not assume responsibility. But blacks in the Jim Crow South showed the world that even poor, uneducated, and marginalized people can shoulder great burdens, and some of this country's greatest black leaders have arisen amid conditions far more dire than those that obtain today. These explanations are inexcusable, in any case, in those who call themselves leaders. Calvin Butts is not desperate; nor are City College president Bernard Harleston and New York NAACP chief Hazel Dukes; nor is Percy Sutton, multimillionaire owner of WLIB; nor are Wilbert Tatum of the *Amsterdam News* and Andrew Cooper, publisher of the city's other black weekly newspaper, *The City Sun*, which also parrots the demagogues' lies. Even Sharpton, Daughtry, and Jeffries are not under siege, except by conscious choice; these three leave New York City's ghettos every evening for their homes across the Hudson in suburban Teaneck, New Jersey. They have the room and hence the responsibility to rethink their strategies.

A deeper answer to the question of why they don't was offered in September in a compelling *New York* magazine article about events in Crown Heights. Joe Klein described the use of Gavin Cato—like Brawley before him—as a figure in "black martyrology," a system that misappropriates current events to dramatize historic truths about racism. That may mean, as we have

seen again and again, altering the facts and slandering innocent whites: Howard Beach motorist Dominick Blum became in the rhetoric of black protest a racist accomplice of Michael Griffiths's assailants, even though he was a young amateur actor who'd played in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*; and Dutchess County Assistant District Attorney Steven Pagonis was publicly accused by Sharpton and Mason of raping Tawana Brawley.

This is a theme I explore at some length in *The Closest of Strangers*. Brawley's account of her violation by white authorities, for example, brought to the surface an archetype, seared into black memory, of the most intimate, passionate sort of exploitation—the illicit, coerced master-slave liaisons of the Old South. Even the discovery that Brawley's own story was a hoax became a justification, in the minds of Sharpton and company, for another ancient script: For centuries, whites had falsely accused blacks of raping white women. Now, the tables would be turned; whites, too, would taste victimization by lie, and this seemed to give any number of otherwise intelligent people a certain satisfaction. Recall, too, the black and Latino youths who, having raped and bludgeoned the Central Park jogger, became, in the minds of editor Tatum and other black leaders, the victims of a "lynching," like the Scottsboro Boys.

It should not surprise Jews that the historic hurts of racial and ethnic groups are released periodically from communal amnesia by the grindings and proddings of current events. These traumas rise to the surface of group consciousness, demanding to be interpreted and reworked—much as the hurts individuals carry within them from childhood surface, sometimes unpredictably, for renegotiation. The 1963 trial of Adolf Eichmann, for example, unleashed a torrent of emotions that many Jews had repressed immediately after the Holocaust and kept down for nearly twenty years.

But because Eichmann was actually guilty, because he was tried by institutions that Jews had constructed in the real world according to essential and universal principles of justice, his trial did not pervert and dehumanize his accusers. Black interpretations of the Brawley, Central Park, and other cases, too, reflect a community's intense need to renegotiate historic hurts of monstrous proportions. But, in the hands of Sharpton and his ilk, they have come to resemble a neurotic individual's reenactments of old grievances using the wrong targets. Such behavior brings only fitful, temporary release; one is condemned to repeat it, again and again.

There are, of course, mythically unsatisfying but practical ways to reduce racism in the criminal-justice system and in society at large. One is to apply a community's

more than a million Caribbean blacks in the annual West Indian Day Parade without incident; a chasidic spokesman even marched with Dinkins as a grand marshal in a gesture of reconciliation. Carson pronounced himself so disgusted that peace had broken out on the site of young Cato's demise that he was thinking of leaving town forever; "white" talk shows and newspapers were deluged with offers to pay his one-way fare to anywhere on the globe. Sharpton flew to Israel, where he stayed just long enough to leave a civil summons for the driver Lifsh, who had fled there after giving the grand jury his testimony. Senator D'Amato, meanwhile, came to Crown Heights to condemn Sharpton and declare that Dinkins, who was planning a trip to Africa for November, shouldn't bother to come back. Yet less than two weeks after the rioting stopped, Colin Moore and C. Vernon Mason were defeated in their own race for City Council seats by white incumbents who garnered more black votes than they did (albeit in contests where more than one black candidate was running).

Returns in another council election proved equally revealing. Crown Heights's own long-time councilwoman Mary Pinkett, a lackluster, union-friendly black politician of the sort that progressives find useful but uninspiring, spoke out for reconciliation and against demagoguery. She was overwhelmingly reelected, in an overwhelmingly black district, against a strong challenger, Pete Williams, a young black activist more congenial to practitioners of today's putatively progressive "identity politics." Williams, a staff member of the Medgar Evers College Center for Law and Social Justice, had assisted a council redistricting commission in drawing districts along racial lines, under cover of the Voting Rights Act. He proved sympathetic to the Crown Heights rioters and insensitive to a more pluralist understanding of the tragedy, which would never have rationalized Rosenbaum's killing as an acceptable expression of grievance. It is precisely people like Williams about whom progressives need to think twice; their confusion about the uses and abuses of racial identity widens the rifts we need to close.

Notwithstanding these electoral reversals for the demagogues, many Jews are enraged and appalled that virtually no "responsible" black leaders, except Dinkins, Councilwoman Pinkett, and the New York Civil Rights Coalition's Michael Meyers, publicly deplored the Crown Heights spectacle, let alone faced down the demagogues. Equally appalling was the silence or barely audible response of such liberal Jewish politicians as City Comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman, State Attorney General Robert Abrams, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, and most mainstream

Jewish organizations. Angered by this default, even some liberal Jews are succumbing to the stirrings of a tribal militancy. Yet for all their anguish and rage, Jews have emerged from the crisis not more isolated but closer to other communities: feminists already embittered by the black activists' treatment of the Central Park jogger; Asians infuriated by their anti-Asian rhetoric and lies in the Korean boycott; and Hispanics angered over city-council redistricting that, they feel, was a power grab by blacks to facilitate the candidacies of Mason and Moore. If there is any coalition aborning in New York today, it is one against blacks.

If such a new coalition could transcend its members' parochial grievances and take itself seriously enough to hammer out a public, civic consensus that condemns demagoguery from any source, it would deserve to win some victories. Black leaders who have accommodated the demagogues would have no one to blame but themselves—not white racist conspirators, not economic royalists, not George Bush's abdication of federal responsibility for cities and the poor. To repeat, it is precisely because racism, economic injustice, and Republican irresponsibility are so virulent that black protest leaders, backs to the wall, cannot afford to alienate potential allies with the self-indulgent, bunker-like, conspiratorial mentality they have displayed in Crown Heights and earlier cases. And it is precisely because they chose that course that they must be fought, not on behalf of a countervailing Jewish or Korean nationalism but on behalf of progressive values and civic justice. Either that, or we will descend into Beirut.

Why have so many black leaders taken their followers over a precipice—or stood by, watching the disaster unfold without finding heart and voice to warn of it? Why hasn't the cynical strategy of manipulating the criminal-justice system with false charges exhausted itself? Time after time, multiracial juries have rebuffed the scenarios of race hatred. Time after time, ordinary blacks, working in neighborhood organizations and churches, cooperating with whites in schools, political groups, and workplaces, quietly put such scenarios aside. The demagogues never do well in the polls, though there is some troubling evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is rising. What, then, drives these self-destructive beliefs and tactics forward?

One obvious answer is that the black community has a long, undeniable, often irresistible tradition of rhetoric divorced from responsibility. It's not hard to understand why. Under slavery and Jim Crow, and, indeed, until the 1950s, when Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., began to write and speak politically in ways that truly got under the skins of

whites, black political rhetoric tended (with some notable exceptions, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglass) to be flamboyant precisely because the words were weightless, of no consequence, unable to move the walls of white ignorance and indifference. For all the difference Powell, Baldwin, King, and their successors have made, the older tradition echoes even in Jesse Jackson's claim to be a "tree shaker, not a jelly maker."

It echoes, too, in a recent statement by the Reverend Calvin Butts, senior pastor of Powell's old Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, that he "can understand" Leonard Jeffries's claim that Jews and the Mafia conspired against blacks in Hollywood. "Can understand"? No one expects Butts to be a historian; still, a leader owes his listeners something better than a sly, polemical appropriation of wild charges. It is as if Butts (who campaigned in the streets for C. Vernon Mason in the council races) and Jackson were saying: It is our duty to evoke and provoke; it is somebody else's duty—the real grown-ups?—to determine the truth and set matters to rights. We will spin our pain into webs of narrative and metaphor. Someone else, always someone else, will turn them into politics and policy.

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There are, of course, mythically unsatisfying but practical ways to reduce racism in the criminal-justice system and in society at large. One is to apply a community's

electoral muscle, in concert with other communities that share at least some common goals, to elect judges and district attorneys who feel a political as well as moral obligation to racism's victims. This strategy has already elected people such as Brooklyn D.A. Charles J. Hynes, who won in 1989 with a strong black vote due to his success as a special state prosecutor in Queens in convicting the Howard Beach assailants in 1986. And there are ways other than Sharpton's to organize public protests; there can be demonstrations that embarrass whites into decency by embracing them in the process of confronting them, as the civil-rights movement did so brilliantly in the South in the 1960s.

Doing that means assuming a public responsibility that transcends tribal memories and myth-making agendas. It means rising above a neurotic attachment to victimhood in order to display a disarming magnanimity and to affirm universal principles of human dignity. It means, in short, having a larger vision. Just as some Jews, whose goodwill has been curdled and deformed by the horror of the Holocaust, are incapable of sustaining that vision, preferring instead to find genocidal anti-Semitism in every untoward encounter, black demagogues and the writers and politicians who indulge them are incapable of practicing a serious, healing politics of justice. Their intimations of a common human enterprise are blocked by their pain, which they embroider endlessly, almost lovingly. Every trial that they cast in black and white against all the evidence becomes a psychodramatic reenactment of that pain, not a constructive reworking of it tied to real-world consequences and rewards. In Crown Heights, black protest leaders turned on D.A. Hynes, even after he took the unusual, propitiatory step of impaneling a grand jury to investigate whether there were any grounds for indicting driver Lifsh. After the grand jury concluded there were no grounds, Hynes was vilified for his trouble.

As long as protest leaders lie about evidence while prosecutors and juries stick to the truth, demagoguery will continue to be rebuffed. But in the minds of these charlatan leaders and their followers, the rebuffs only confirm the existence of a racist cover-up. Perversely, that warms them and gratifies them because they find it more satisfying to hurt than to hope. They anticipate pain, savor it, eroticize it, historicize it, and project it onto situations where it is inappropriate. This confirms the old, familiar inner coordinates of the demagogues and their adherents. It gives them marching orders, the sheen of embattled heroism. It spares them disorientation, risk, and the fear of the unknown, which come with hoping and with reaching out. People trapped this way cannot lead movements for racial justice, only movements for revenge.

Jews, too, have had demagogues, such as Meir Kahane, who elaborate and embellish visions of endless embattlement and pain. But, seductive though their appeals can be in moments of genuine communal peril, we have, in America, at least, found the security and psychic freedom to hold them at arm's length. The Jewish community made City College professor Michael Levin a pariah after his ideas about black inferiority were publicized; unlike his colleague Jeffries, with whom he is often compared, Levin was not followed around by adoring throngs of Jewish students or deluged with speaking invitations. Only journalists seeking to "balance" their stories about Jeffries call him. Otherwise, his phone never rings.

For reasons at once obvious and profound, the black community in America is far less secure, its psychic margin of freedom much narrower. America is, historically and even now, the locus of blacks' violation, the land of their enslavement and humiliation. Without question, our society's endemic racism continues to subject countless blacks to relentless psychic assault. What is appalling and tragic about the New York black community's need for martyrological narratives and fantasies of revenge is that it has become so intense, so unrelieved, that it silences even those blacks who clearly see the political and cultural costs. If identity politics offers a way out of this trap, let its defenders show us the way.

The genocidal brutalities that went into the building of the United States are roughly on a par with those of every other civilization in human history. What is unusual and potentially redemptive about America is that, as a self-conscious and deliberate human creation, it is the first truly multi-racial civilization since ancient Rome to nourish the seeds of its own transcendence. People of all colors, believing this, have watered those seeds with their blood, sweat, and tears to make them grow, again and again. When the otherwise disappointing Mario Cuomo says, "We are the sons and daughters of giants," that is what he is talking about.

Identity politics is a fantasy for smaller people. It fears the cold truth that humans and their institutions emerge only slowly from the primordial slime. It prattles on about the fact that Thomas Jefferson held slaves and never gave the rights of women a thought when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, instead of taking what he wrote as a uniquely precious text awaiting interpretation and fulfillment, as many ordinary women and people of color have done with great courage. We can recite the inanities and inhumanities of white, patriarchal oppression, or we can be brave enough

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may be much to mourn in what we have lost, but there is also much new ground to gain.

In any case, there is no turning back. Whether through intermarriage or assimilation, tens of millions of Americans are by now generations removed from any easily recoverable ethnic, religious, or even racial identity. These new Americans may wind up drawing the lines of their communities without reference to religious inheritance, skin color, or surname. The nation has no choice but to keep faith with them. They, not the demagogues of race, are our future.

What will they affirm? That you cannot build a movement for social justice on lies and intimidation, and that people need training in these truths if they are to learn to detect and reject demagoguery from any source. That, in a diverse society, which no one of our groups can dominate and from which none of us can really secede, anyone who would lead protest politics must demonstrate the ability to build alliances across racial and ethnic lines. That we must honor individual rights and rational analysis as something more than Eurocentric ruses or impositions. That a viable progressive movement cannot be built on demands for reparation for past suffering, much less on revenge. That class is, after all, as important as race.

The more the theatrics of a debased identity politics like Sharpton's and Carson's chill internal debate among blacks and alienate other groups, the more isolated the black community will become from this larger national and global project. The more isolated it becomes, the more fertile ground it will offer for theories of conspiracy and fantasies of redemption through vengeance. As the black community becomes what the historian Fred Siegel terms "an exotic appendage to the polity," playing by special rules of evidence and entitlement, it will become also the object of increasingly awkward liberal condescension and rising mainstream ridicule.

Blacks who can see where this vicious cycle is leading have an historic obligation to break it, for the sake of their own people and on behalf of all humanity. It is our obligation to join and to prod these potential leaders, the people we share platforms and microphones with, the people we too often accommodate with a racist double standard when they rationalize the demagogues' depredations. Those who have made careers out of trading on special racial exemptions from the principles I have just listed must be read out of the progressive movement. The time for squirming and temporizing has ended. In demonstrations and elections, at panel discussions, in the pages of newspapers, and on talk shows, we must find the strength in ourselves to tell such leaders that, henceforth, among the oppressed as well as the oppressors, silence equals death. It certainly did in Crown Heights. □

to examine the paradox that only in the constitutional framework inherited from dead white men do women and minorities—and multiculturalism itself—find breathing room and footholds. Feminism and minority rights do not fare well in the Islamic world, Africa, or most of Asia.

Dinesh D'Souza is not wrong to observe that the classic texts and traditional cultures of the Third World are politically incorrect—often monstrously so. Nor was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrong to respond to a New York state social-studies curriculum committee's complaint that European colonization had eradicated "many varieties of traditional culture and knowledge" by asking: "Like infanticide? slavery? polygamy? subjection of women? suttee? veil-wearing? foot-binding? clitoridec-tomies? Nothing is said about the influence of European ideas of democracy, human rights, self-government, rule of law." One might pose similar challenges to Jewish tradition; those who are changing it do so as children of the European Enlightenment and of America.

Racial, ethnic, and religious groups tap mythic wellsprings that go back to the dawn of humanity, but they have done so only while existing across thousands of years in relative isolation and mutual suspicion—or within relations of domination and subordination. These conditions have warped them profoundly, equipping them poorly for life in the global village. New wells will have to be sunk. Americans—and, at least partly under our cultural and technological influence, all citizens of the world—now fitfully acknowledge an overlay of common claims and bonds, an emerging, universal culture linking us across the old communal boundaries on terms of increasing equality, if not mutual respect. That prospect is problematic and exhilarating. There