Oscar Handlin and the Problem of Ethnic Pluralism and African American Civil Rights

TOURÉ F. REED

AS THE NATION grappled with African American civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, historian Oscar Handlin, like many scholars of his generation, set out to make sense of the role of race in American democracy and to determine the proper path of black liberation. Handlin, already a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of immigration, viewed both civil rights and the experiences of American blacks through a lens of ethnic pluralism. Like many historians and social scientists following the Second World War, Handlin rejected race as an analytical category, asserting in *Race and Nationality in American Life* (1957) "that there is no evidence of any inborn differences of temperament, personality, character, or intelligence among the races." Instead, he argued that ethnicity was "the only meaningful basis on which one can compare social and cultural traits."

The notion that American society was composed of disparate ethnic groups with their own particular cultural affinities resonated with liberal social scientists and historians of the 1950s and 1960s for a number of reasons. Ethnic pluralism was, of course, consistent with models of interest group politics that had gained primacy following the New Deal. More to the point, in identifying culture as the nexus of group identity, ethnic pluralism constituted a formal rejection of eugenics and other biological metaphors of race. Handlin's identification of African Americans as an ethnic rather than racial group would ultimately lead him to draw fairly optimistic conclusions about the future of American race relations. In 1959, for example, Handlin's *The Newcomers* assessed the character and consequences of Puerto Rican and black migration to New York City. The study, which was commissioned by the nonprofit Regional Plan Association, Inc., of the greater New York metropolitan area, rejected the charge that these groups were uniquely prone to social ills such as crime, vice, and family dissolution. Instead, Handlin argued that many of the problems associated with African Americans and Puerto Ricans generally paralleled those of previous immigrant
groups—the Irish, the Germans, and the "New Immigrants." Blacks and Puerto Ricans, Handlin claimed, were therefore likely to follow a path toward acculturation similar to that taken by white ethnics, provided the nation continued along the road to racial equality. To be sure, Handlin’s analysis in *The Newcomers* was not without problems. Since African Americans were not actually new to New York City, for example, his contention that their experiences paralleled those of previous immigrants necessarily diminished the impact of race prejudice on blacks’ socio-economic status. Nevertheless, Handlin’s ethnic pluralist paradigm presumed that African Americans and other groups possessed an adaptability that had been denied by proponents of biological determinism.

Its compatibility with Cold War liberalism notwithstanding, ethnic pluralism’s formal rejection of genetics as the source of group difference belied a fundamental problem with the construct. As Oscar Handlin’s assessment of the African American civil rights movement reveals, in practice, ethnic pluralism’s emphasis on group identity often understated the dynamic function of culture and the related fluidity of racial/ethnic status. As I will discuss below, Handlin often sidestepped the political and material issues shaping black as well as white interest group claims in struggles over access to employment and housing. He likewise imputed rigidity to ethnic identity that occasionally led him to take inequality if not prejudice for granted. Finally, Handlin’s discomfort with the greater social significance attached to race as opposed to ethnic group membership—in other words, the connotative difference between the two categories in the context of American political economy—sometimes blinded him to the historical underpinnings of civil rights activists’ demands.

Between the late 1950s and middle 1960s, Handlin authored a number of reflections on the growing militancy taking hold of the black liberation movement. Although he believed that efforts to dismantle the South’s Jim Crow regime represented the fulfillment of America’s democratic ideals, he was circumspect about the movement’s turn toward the North and the related assault on de facto segregation. Handlin was particularly exercised over civil rights activists’ pursuit of policies intended to engineer “integration”—which he defined as efforts to ensure equal outcomes—rather than calls for “desegregation.”

According to Handlin, proportional representation posed a number of problems. Quotas and other measures intended to force integration in employment and housing threatened freedom of association. He warned that
quotas would trigger a backlash among whites, including potential allies, thereby curtailing the political impact of civil rights. Handlin likewise contended that the focus on outcomes glossed over meaningful differences between individuals and even groups. Efforts to ensure racial parity washed away the meritocratic principles that most Americans reflexively embraced. By contrast, laws seeking to desegregate society by extending the right to "personal security, the ballot, and decent schools" to blacks were not only consistent with the American creed, but they afforded African Americans the tools necessary to build strong communities and to establish themselves as constructive members of civil society.

Although sensitive to the political and economic frustrations that had inspired calls for racial proportionalism, Handlin ultimately attributed the demand for forced integration to irresponsible black leaders who, in his view, appreciated neither the implications of such policies nor the historic underpinnings of the economic and social crises afflicting black Americans. Indeed, Handlin claimed that the appeal of forced integration rested on the erroneous presumptions that blacks not only faced unique challenges, but that racism was so ingrained in American culture that statist intervention was the sole remedy. As he had argued in The Newcomers, Handlin traced contemporary problems afflicting black Americans not to slavery, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan had, but to the Great Migration. Migrants' transition from comparatively static rural communities to industrial cities characterized by fluidity and individualism undermined traditional institutions of social control, setting the stage for ills such as family dissolution and delinquency. Black migrants likewise had difficulty adjusting to the political and economic opportunities and responsibilities of urban life. Many of the problems faced by African Americans thus, according to Handlin, paralleled those encountered by previous immigrant groups.

The similarities between the experiences of African Americans and other ethnic groups were important to Handlin partly because they offered a blueprint for appropriate civil rights policy. Handlin believed that direct challenges to de jure segregation and some government intervention were warranted, as the South's Jim Crow regime was intended to ensure black subordination. The urban North, however, presented a more complex situation in his view. Handlin ultimately argued that blacks required not "preferential treatment," but the creation of strong civic organizations. Specifically, he claimed that the black leadership class had failed to develop voluntary associations comparable to those created by their white
ethnic counterparts because African Americans’ recent arrival led them to rely on New Deal and other government programs instead. For Handlin, the absence of strong black civic organizations was problematic largely because it foreclosed ethnic-specific tutelage, which had been pivotal to the acculturation of previous generations of ethnic immigrants.7

Handlin’s characterization of blacks as the last immigrants is, as I have already stated, incorrect. African Americans lived in Northern cities even before the nation’s founding. Nevertheless, there is some merit both to the parallels Handlin draws between the immigrant and black migrant experiences and to his identification of the impact of the Great Migration on African American life. Indeed, Handlin offers a trenchant critique of Moynihan that—despite Moynihan’s rehabilitation in the 1980s—is buttressed by half a century of scholarship on slavery.8 Still, Handlin’s framework suffers from a number of significant problems.

First, African Americans had begun to develop organizations intended to acculturate black migrants even before the Great Migration. As I have argued in my own work, the National Urban League (NUL), established in 1910, adopted an approach to racial uplift that mirrored the Americanization projects pursued by white ethnic groups such as the Jewish Educational Alliance.9 Influenced by models of assimilation pioneered by the Chicago School of Sociology, the NUL traced the social ills associated with migration to a collective alienation arising from the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. The Urban League therefore set out to facilitate migrants’ adjustment to the industrial city by addressing the very problems of social disorganization with which Handlin was concerned.10 To be sure, groups such as the NUL and NAACP would turn to the federal government for assistance by the New Deal; however, they and scores of other voluntarist associations of the era looked to the government partly because the challenges posed by the Great Depression far exceeded the capabilities of charitable organizations.11

The second and more significant problem is the impact of Handlin’s embrace of ethnic pluralism on his analysis of “integrationist” policies. Although Handlin formally rejected the notion that the so-called races were biologically distinct, he nonetheless believed that ethnic/racial groups maintained particular cultural identities that warranted policy makers’ attention. Ethnic voluntarist groups, according to Handlin, were better suited than government both to mentor their unacculturated brethren and to represent them as coherent interest groups. A fundamental problem with forced integration then was that such efforts obliterated cultural distinctiveness. Handlin ad-
hered to an essentialist framework that presumed that culture transcended proximate material influences. As a result, he failed to consider the impact of political, economic, and regional diversity among blacks on "black identity," which necessarily undercut the capacity of race/ethnicity to serve as an effective organizing tool. Indeed, successful civil rights campaigns generally centered on specific policies rather than amorphous racial identity.

Handlin's ethnic pluralist framework likewise led him to sidestep the implications of housing and economic policy, resulting in an analysis that often rationalized certain types of segregation if not prejudice. He believed that *Brown v. Board of Education* was warranted—although he rejected the notion that segregation inflicted psychological damage on blacks and whites—because de jure segregation in education buttressed, by design, the South's system of racial hierarchy. By contrast, Handlin claimed that segregation in education in the North was emblematic of residential patterns, rather than policies intended to disadvantage blacks, and required no meaningful intervention. While he was clear that racial/ethnic patterns were evident in residential neighborhoods, he asserted that such demographic trends arose organically from residents' desires to establish communities of their own making. To be sure, Handlin conceded that race prejudice was often a facet of this process. Still, the core issue, he claimed, was the basic desire of the middle class to maintain a distinct communal life. Demands for housing integration thus not only ran afoul of community, but ultimately missed the mark. Blacks, Handlin contended, needed quality housing in their own communities.¹²

Handlin's characterization of neighborhood formation as an organic process was, of course, far removed from reality. As subsequent generations of urbanists have shown, residential segregation was the product not simply of personal predilection but of policy. Suburbanization and the related concentration of blacks in cities in the throes of deindustrialization were fueled, at least in part, by FHA and VA mortgage policy, which excluded African Americans from eligibility for long-term mortgages. Urban renewal likewise razed even vibrant black communities in pursuit of business-oriented pro-growth policies, further ghettoizing African Americans in moribund central cities by housing a large share of the dislocated in apartment projects. Even the notions of community integrity that Handlin holds as sacrosanct were contrived by the alliance between government and the real estate and banking industries. As historian David Freund has demonstrated, realtors, housing economists, and planners had constructed racialized notions of homeownership and community as justification for restrictive covenants as early as
the 1910s and 1920s. During the era of FHA mortgages, the relationship between race and community had become policy as the presence of blacks and other undesirables formally threatened neighborhood integrity and, by extension, property values. So while the language of homeownership may have centered on community cohesion and market-imperatives, the concept of community was hardly race-neutral with respect to public policy.

None of this is to suggest that Handlin was numb to the relationship between policy and cultural identity. Handlin’s critique of affirmative action in the workplace, for example, presumed that quotas would construct artificial identities. As Handlin asserted in 1966, “demands for preferential hiring, for assigned quotas of desirable jobs, and for a Black Man’s Marshall Plan are sometimes presented as if they were the means of attaining racial balance and therefore of furthering integration.” According to Handlin, however, such demands actually called “for recognition of the special character of the group; and to the extent that they are heeded, they strengthen this identity.” Handlin claimed that affirmative action would do little to elevate blacks’ economic standing because, as mentioned above, he believed that African Americans’ marginality stemmed largely from their late arrival to the Northern cities. Although Handlin conceded that the majority of black workers had been confined to unskilled and poorly paid occupations, he argued that race was not the sole culprit. Family influences and other environmental factors shaped an individual’s occupational choices. Handlin would stake out a similar position on affirmative action in his 1994 *Liberty and Equality*, where he and his wife, Lilian Handlin, argued that affirmative action blurred lines of socio-economic distinction among blacks and created a group mentality that identified preferential treatment as a right.

Handlin cast ethnic political identities engendered by affirmative action as artificial, but his ethnic pluralist framework did not permit him to see that such constructs were no less “organic” than notions of community fostered by homeownership. Handlin’s reification of ethnic communities likewise led him to look past the intimate relationship between race and other environmental factors, such as family connections, that shaped an individual’s economic prospects. The combination of workplace and housing discrimination limited African Americans’ access to skilled trades and professions, allowing only a select minority to pass on connections or meaningful skills—both technical and soft—to their offspring. One consequence of race discrimination then, as social scientists ranging from Mercer Sullivan to William J. Wilson have shown, is that it generally limits the social capital of the disadvantaged.
Perhaps what is most striking about Handlin’s critique of affirmative action, however, is his failure to consider the history of anti-discrimination policy over the two decades preceding the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Specifically, civil rights activists’ calls for affirmative action were shaped by experiences with state-level Fair Employment Practices Committees (FEPC). The non-discrimination guidelines issued by state FEPCs, which were essentially outgrowths of the World War II-era federal Fair Employment Practices Committee, focused on disparate treatment—employers’ explicit refusal to hire blacks and other groups—rather than disparate impact—proportional employment. By the early 1960s, civil rights activists and many policy makers realized that simply outlawing explicit racial bars in employment did not necessarily end discriminatory employment practices. While Handlin’s contention that affirmative action in itself was incapable of redressing black poverty is correct, the demands for proportional representation were far from irrational or even ignorant. Experience with what Handlin would describe as policies intended to bring about “desegregation” ultimately inspired black workers, activists, and even liberal policy makers’ pursuit of racial parity, whatever its limitations.

Handlin’s emphasis on group culture draws attention to the conservative implications of ethnic pluralism. While the culturalist framework formally departed from notions of biological determinism that drove American race relations from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, ethnic pluralism failed to break fully from notions of group distinctiveness. Indeed, Handlin’s assessment of the black liberation movement revealed a tendency to view civil rights politics through the lens of tribalism rather than power. Although he was clear that race discrimination was a significant obstacle to black civil rights, Handlin nonetheless believed that desegregation required that African Americans earn equality through cultural development. This, as I have already discussed, would lead Handlin to dismiss calls for “integration” as artificial forcing. It would likewise lead him to arbitrarily distinguish between black ethnic and political identities—as in the calls for affirmative action—with Handlin casting the latter as inauthentic.

Handlin’s culturalist framework was illustrative of the triumph of Boasian anthropology and Chicago School race-relations theory over eugenics—a victory cemented by the horrors of the Holocaust. Still, the pluralist turn in the social sciences and history following the Second World War would simply substitute cultural hierarchy for biological determinism. As literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels has shown, as early as the 1920s, pluralists’ discussions of national character and ethnic identity presumed that groups
maintained a cultural integrity that transcended proximate environmental influences. So while culture was a more plastic concept than heredity, in the age of the affluent society, cultural hierarchy functioned to explain inequality by looking past its structural and political origins. Indeed, the ambiguous relationship between culture and environment that Michaels points to diminished the analytical importance of economic class to pluralists during the Cold War. Racism and even poverty were no longer seen as products of class exploitation—as they had been during the New Deal and World War II. Instead, pluralists, such as Oscar Handlin, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Nathan Glazer, traced the origins of such ills to the cultural deficiencies of the disadvantaged and the attitudes of the privileged.

NOTES

2. The Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Brother Fund also provided financial support for Handlin's *The Newcomers*.
7. Ibid., 283–84.
8. While Handlin rejected Moynihan's contention that the so-called crisis of the black family was rooted in slavery, he shared the view that family dissolution contributed to high rates of aberrant behavior among blacks. Specifically, Handlin claimed that the importance of female wage earners undermined the authority of black men/husbands, setting the stage for increased rates of sex and drug offenses among African Americans. Discrimination likewise, Handlin claimed, undermined blacks' commitment to thrift and education, further complicating blacks' acculturation. Handlin, *Newcomers*, 74–78, 98–102.
Handlin's account of the impact of race prejudice on the housing market was more nuanced in *The Newcomers*, which made plain that housing policy buttressed race prejudice. Still, Handlin identified black entrepreneurialism in the form of African-American-owned Carver Savings and Loans as key to opening up housing opportunities to blacks by demonstrating the potential profitability of black homeownership. He likewise suggested that African Americans were themselves to blame for their low rates of homeownership insofar as too many were reluctant to enter new housing markets for fear of conflict. Group-specific uplift was therefore pivotal to black progress. Handlin, *Newcomers*, 86–90.


17. Pursuit of parity became more meaningful as federal action to address economic inequality through universal employment and income policies was pre-empted.
