

NYT. May 16, 2004. Black, White and Brown by Sam Tanenhaus

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the Book Review, moderated a discussion of the historic ruling between Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Unintended Consequences of the Brown Decision

Gates. I was born in 1950. Brown v. Board's in 1954. Schools in Mineral County, W.Va., which is about three hours west of D.C., integrated in 1955. I started school in 1956. So my entire life, because of Brown v. Board, I went to integrated schools. My town had 2,100 people in 1950, 386 of whom were black. So you can see just from the stats why integration occurred so quickly. It was inefficient to have two separate school systems. [So] they fired all the black teachers except one from the elementary school and one, the principal, from the high school and integrated them into the white staff at the white schools. For me the most problematic aspect of Brown was the fundamental premise that separate inherently spelled unequal. Curiously enough, I find myself agreeing with Clarence Thomas when he argues that there was a perverse aspect to the logic of Brown v. Board.

West. But I think it's really important to keep in mind what the vital options at a particular historical moment are. Given America's vicious legacy of white supremacy, [the Brown legal team] had to argue against separate but equal because that's already inscribed in Plessy v. Ferguson.

Gates. You're absolutely correct. In their time they had no choice. But they also happened to have believed that all-black institutions were inherently inferior and that many of them would disappear very quickly, and all the better for it. In 1937 Richard Wright wrote that once the goals of a nation's civil rights movement are realized, Negro literature as an institution would disappear. We would produce a new kind of integrated society. And we see that legacy in many of the reform movements that abound today trying to address the problem of resegregation.

West. There's a certain complication here. When Charles Hamilton Houston takes over the deanship in 1929 at Howard, he tries to Harvard-ize it. He realized Howard could not even begin to compete with Harvard. But he also knew that after a decade or two Howard would be better than many white law schools, though maybe not Harvard. Now in that sense he doesn't believe that the black folk by themselves are inferior vis-a-vis white institutions, only the elite white institutions. They're going to outcompete a lot of the white law schools. Why? Because he's bringing in some top-notch black professors, and white professors too.

Brown 1 Versus Brown 2

West. We have to keep in mind what the dominant response was in 1954. It was white resistance. It was white backlash. We don't have any substantive remedies. So there was a "Brown 2" in 1955 having to do with the remedy, "all deliberate speed." [The decision was to leave it to] the federal district judges, [who] over and over again affirmed local control. And local control meant you're going to follow the de facto segregation patterns in residence, in property taxes and so on.

Gates. What we're talking about really is how to deal with the conflict between quality and community. Many of our friends on the left would have us believe that all black people want their kids bused out of the inner cities. [But] what they want from busing is quality. If we could make predominantly black schools excellent, would that be a satisfactory goal? I say yes, because I don't think there's anything magic about being around white people. I think it's good for a multicultural society to have integration. But unless we have economic integration, we're not going to have residential integration. And unless the schools have quality, we're not going to have economic integration. We [also] need a revolution within the African-American community insisting on a change in attitude, behavior and morals. Deferred gratification, staying in school, doing your homework, reminding people in a programmatic way that the blackest thing you could be historically was an educated man or an educated woman within the African-American community.

From Brown to Affirmative Action

Gates. At Yale, the class of 1966 had six black boys. The class of 1973, which I entered in September 1969, had 96 black men and women. What was there, a genetic blip in the race and all of a sudden there are 90 smart black people who exist in 1969 who hadn't existed in 1966? Of course not. [Before affirmative action] you couldn't just show up in the black community and apply [to Yale]. You had to go through filters within the race. You had to know somebody. There were these mechanisms. It's the same [with] Rosa Parks. She did not spontaneously sit down on that bus. She was chosen for the role. She was trained. The way the mythology is perpetuated, she was tired, she was poor, she was black, and she sat down. Well, no, that's not how it happened.

West. This is why the conservative appropriation of Brown 1 is phony. We all agree with the affirmation of the principle of equality. Now Brown 2 says the remedies for this injustice are going to be left up to local custom, local courts. The 1960's came along and we had to come up with more aggressive strategies [to integrate] institutions of higher learning. Unfortunately, as we know -- and this is where I think some of the conservatives are right -- so much more time needs to be spent with K through 12, but it's precisely because of the conservative support of policies that made it difficult for grade schools to be adequately supported that affirmative action became a kind of third wave to deal with injustice.

Is There Segregation Today in the Ivy League?

West. There are certain social patterns of what I call soft segregation. Many of the faculty of all colors at Princeton encourage the students to be multicontextual. There's nothing wrong with black students spending time with black students, Catholic students spending time with Catholic students and so forth. But you don't want to get locked into that one context.

Gates. It's the difference between enforced segregation and willing association. I give all these speeches for the Harvard Alumni Association. Invariably, there is a question -- it's always a white person, and they put it in a euphemistic way: Do all the students still sit together in the cafeteria? Yes, it's so sad. Every time I walk into the dining hall, I shake my head -- all those white students sitting together. I say, man, look at all these white kids and a handful of black people. Harvard is not like Harlem. I don't know if we went through a period of great desegregation and I missed it. I mean it was great for me, it was great for you. I don't have the historical statistics, but I certainly have the statistics at hand for the situation today. In the Boston metro area, 7 in 10 white students attend schools in the outer suburbs, schools that are over 90 percent white. By contrast, more than three-quarters of black and Latino students attend schools in the city or in one of the urbanized satellite cities. Segregated minority schools in metro Boston are also high-poverty schools. The black middle class has moved out, moved into the suburbs. What it means is that these all-black-and-brown schools not only are all-black-and-brown but they are poor.

West. One has to say this almost in a comic mode, but if it becomes a matter of national security, then there will be equality of opportunity across the board. That is to say, you're telling folk, your whole democratic experiment is going to go under if you don't provide at least more economic opportunity. It's almost like Iraq, the war against terror; this is national security. When it comes to the plight of poor children, especially poor black and brown children, it's difficult for many citizens to conceive of them as being integral to the public interest.

Gates. The identification of interests, the sharing of common interests between the black middle, upper middle classes and the black people stuck behind, is [more] important than shared class identification between white members of the upper middle class and black members of the upper middle class. Why? Because if the black middle class abandons the black underclass, there will be no hope. People are not willingly going to redistribute wealth. It's just against human nature. You have to persuade them that it's a good idea.

West. What you're saying, though, is that it's not in the name of one citizen's status that one tries to enhance the situation of the most vulnerable, but [only] in the name of some communal ethnic racial identity. Why? It's up to the black middle class to save the black poor because the other citizens in the larger democratic republic don't have a major interest in that. Now if that's the case, it's a very sad commentary.