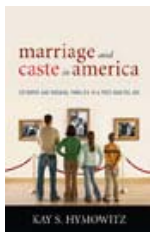
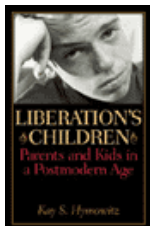


Winter 2007
Table of Contents

NEW BOOK
Marriage and Caste in
America: Separate
and Unequal Families
in a Post-Marital Age
by Kay S. Hymowitz



Liberation's Children:
Parents and Kids in a
Postmodern Age
by Kay S. Hymowitz



The New Black Realism

Kay S. Hymowitz

A new generation sees opportunity in America—and seizes it.

What if someone gave a convention called "Black America Today" and Barack Obama, Harold Ford, Cory Booker, Bill Cosby, and Juan Williams starred as the marquee names? Right now, these are some of the black "It" guys (along with Diddy, of course)—yet they don't fit the typical idea of "Black America," do they? In his new book *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—And What We Can Do About It*, NPR and Fox News commentator Williams plays Boswell for Cosby's straighten-up-and-fly-right message that the comic has delivered to cheering crowds in cities across the land. Obama, Ford, and Booker are political stars who are touting old-fashioned American self-reliance and ingenuity, with nary a hint of racial resentment. Remember Obama's 2004 Democratic Convention speech, when he told the audience that people don't want government to solve all their problems, that they expect to work hard to get ahead? "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America, . . . a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America," he urged. "There's the United States of America." Take that, Jesse Jackson!

This may not seem the best time to make the case for the End of the Jackson Era. After all, Harold Ford, not to mention Republicans Michael Steele of Maryland and Ken Blackwell of Ohio, lost their statewide elections. In fact, you might well argue that, if anything, we are seeing a revival of Kabuki race theater, with the actors of yesteryear appearing in a return engagement. As I write, Al Sharpton is going "a-shopping for justice" (and photo ops), calling for demonstrations and the resignation of a police chief after the fatal police shooting of an unarmed black man on the eve of his wedding. (See "[No, the Cops Didn't Murder Sean Bell](#)," page 84.) Jackson himself is doing his part to bring back racial politics as we knew it by seizing on actor Michael Richards's bizarre racist breakdown at a Los Angeles comedy club to demand that entertainment executives meet with him to discuss the use of the n-word (and, doubtless, the financial needs of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition). As if that weren't enough déjà vu all over again, John Conyers, the congressional point man on slavery reparations, is about to step into the chairmanship of the House Judiciary Committee, and Charlie "George-Bush-is-our-Bull-Connor" Rangel, who has been on the Hill since 1971, when he replaced Adam Clayton Powell, is set to helm the Ways and Means Committee. So many veteran African-American congressmen are now in leadership positions that Rangel chuckled recently: "I don't want to scare the hell out of people, that blacks are now in charge of the committees and so, therefore, watch out."

Still, if you read the tea leaves carefully, you'd have to conclude that Rangel's kind of comment—with its pitting of us against them, its air of gloating (if jocular) menace, its assumption of racial homogeneity—is growing as obsolete as its speaker. Though blacks still lag behind whites educationally and economically, and though a predominantly African-American underclass continues to languish in the inner city, there's a tidal shift away from the black grievance and identity politics of yesterday. No, police brutality,

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racial profiling, welfare spending, and affirmative action are not going to vanish soon from the nation's political discourse. And no, blacks are not about to flood into the Republican Party; Obama, after all, has a Senate record that only Americans for Democratic Action could love. But with a surging, confident, and varied black middle class, blacks are talking a more positive American language of self-empowerment and middle-class virtue and marking a significant turning point in America's ongoing race story.

The familiar narrative of race politics has always evoked the epic vision of the civil rights era: a battle between good and evil, between justice and racism, peopled by heroes like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks on the one side and monsters like Bull Connor and George Wallace on the other, supported by honorable institutions like the NAACP and the black church. For older black leaders—a John Lewis with scars from Selma, or a Jackson, present when Martin Luther King was assassinated—the narrative was no metaphor. Growing up in a segregated world, they found their only route to power was to become ministers and rights activists, and to try from there to get onto school boards, city councils, state legislatures, and, with special luck, Congress. Never mind that in recent decades the heroic epic often degenerated into farce in the antics of a Sharpton or a Cynthia McKinney, or that its reverent symbolism increasingly congealed into the cynical orthodoxy of a Jesse Jackson; the narrative still kept its powerful hold on the nation's politics and the black imagination.

Up until now, at any rate. For a younger generation of blacks, the symbolic, I-marched-with-Martin politics, not to mention the Jackson-style cronyism that it often degenerated into, doesn't cut it—and not just because this generation is too young to have felt the billy clubs at Selma. Instead of rights activists and ministers, many of these newcomers are lawyers or businessmen. Even though a few grew up poor, they've all spent their formative years swimming in the mainstream, including major universities, corporations, and law firms, and they are now solidly middle class. "These politicians are comfortable in a post-civil rights world," explains Vanderbilt political science professor Carol Swain, author of *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*. "They've had white friends; they've had white girlfriends. They may still be frustrated by racism at times, but they're functioning fine in the world they're living in."

By now, most people have heard of examples like Michigan Law School grad Harold Ford; Harvard Law grad Obama; Newark mayor Cory Booker, a Yale grad and Rhodes scholar; and Massachusetts governor-elect Deval Patrick, also Harvard Law. But others who aren't national figures, a striking number of them from the South, are also changing the tenor of black politics. There is Ron Kirk, the former mayor of Dallas—Dallas!—who was reelected in 1999 with 74 percent of the vote: Dallasites swear that race wasn't even an issue during the campaign. (He lost his 2002 Senate bid, though.) There are 39-year-old Artur Davis of Alabama (and Harvard Law), widely seen as one of the most promising newcomers, who is reportedly weighing a Senate run in '08 against Jeff Sessions; and Denise Majette, a Yale and Duke Law School grad, who in a piece of perfect symbolism ousted race-monger Cynthia McKinney in 2004. (McKinney won back her seat when Majette ran for Senate in 2004, but perhaps because of her highly publicized smacking of a Capitol policeman for asking her to show her ID before entering the building—"the inappropriate . . . stopping of Me, a female black congresswoman!," she sniffed about the incident—voters ousted her once again.) Also adding to the air of change are Georgia congressmen David Scott (a Wharton MBA) and Sanford Bishop (law degree from Emory), who, though middle-aged, are both members of the Blue Dog coalition of conservative-leaning Democrats.

Like most people with elite resués, the new generation is ambitious, impatient to move beyond the Congressional Black Caucus ghetto into the Senate, the State Capitol—or further. Up until now, when just about all black politics has been local, that would have been an exercise in frustration. If a black politician had national stature, it was largely symbolic. As activist and radio talk-show host Joe Madison puts it, people like John Conyers or Adam Clayton Powell weren't elected simply to represent a district in Michigan or New York: "They were black America's congressmen." But, of course, to be "black America's congressmen" meant representing black majority congressional districts, courtesy of gerrymandering—which may have assured you virtually a lifetime position but also kept you in your place. African-Americans in statewide office have been as rare as orchids; 50 years after civil rights, there have only been three post-Reconstruction black senators, and before Deval Patrick's victory, one governor: Virginia's Douglas Wilder.

In old-think, what do you expect in a racist country? But the new generation doesn't see it that way. Yes, racism lives on, but these young black pols also blame black failure to win national stature on outdated and self-limiting race-based politics. As political consultant Sam Riddle told the *Washington Times*, black politicians are acutely aware that Hispanics now have three senators—Florida's conservative Republican Mel Martinez, Colorado's centrist Democrat Ken Salazar, and New Jersey's liberal Bob Menendez—to their one, and those three don't speak with a unified voice that you could label "Latino." The new generation sees the old racial politics as counterproductive in both ways that matter: it doesn't really help the people it's aimed at, and it doesn't get you elected to statewide office. Douglas Wilder won because he favored balanced budgets and was tough on crime, not because he promised to end white injustice. Artur Davis recounts the story of a black constituent who accused him of not looking out for their kind. "I told him point-blank: What about my white colleague in the Third District who has a 35 percent black population? Do you want him to just represent white people? . . . We're not going to win that game. We're the minority in most places."

Still, it would be a big mistake to assume that the generations differ only because the younger guys hope to become Senator Muckety-Muck. Young and old diverge seriously in their policy views as well. Jackson-era pols and their followers revert to the civil rights narrative to explain almost any domestic problem. The achievement gap between black and white students? A racist society too dismissive of black children to fund their schools adequately. Too many black men in prison? The racist drug policies of white politicians and judges. Bureaucratic incompetence in the face of a natural disaster? "A modern-day lynching," NAACP chairman Julian Bond thundered about the feckless government response to Katrina. "A deliberate attempt to dispossess black landholders!"

The new race-moderates are far more pragmatic and flexible, "looking to change the culture, to adapt, to evolve, and reexamine," as Cory Booker has put it. So Booker is exploring charter schools and even vouchers. Artur Davis is known—and scorned by the orthodox—as being pro-business. Obama-watchers haven't made much of his post-civil rights politics, but that is surely part of his appeal to a country tired of rehashing the old narrative. "Claims based on the history of race discrimination in this country," and policies that "dissect into 'us' and 'them' . . . can't serve . . . to transform America," he writes in his bestselling *The Audacity of Hope*. "Most white Americans figure they haven't engaged in discrimination themselves and have plenty of their own problems to worry about."

A similar change in tone may also be afoot at some of the major black organizations. Juan Williams, whose recent book is a blunt

attack on Jackson-era politics, notes that for the first time in its history, the NAACP has chosen someone outside the civil rights movement to be its leader. Bruce Gordon, who succeeded Kweisi Mfume in 2005, is a former Verizon executive determined to recruit young people to the aging organization. Another sign of change: the outgoing branch president in Hillsborough County, Florida, a 77-year-old who demonstrated at lunch counters in the 1960s, is turning his gavel over to a 38-year-old Republican banker. The NAACP has not entirely changed direction, of course; it is still in the slavery reparations business, for instance. But Williams believes that Gordon is guiding the organization onto a more moderate path. "He has to play to the crowd, but he's much less about defending crazy behavior," Williams judges. "He wants common ground." President Bush probably had reached the same conclusion when he accepted Gordon's invitation to speak at the NAACP's convention last summer.

One thing is for sure: Gordon has taken the NAACP's helm at a time when black politics is thick with Oedipal drama. The young sons reject the relevance of the narrative that brought many of their elders to office and, more than that, explained the world as they understood it. For their part, the fathers show no sign that they'll go gently into the Old Politicians' Rest Home. *BlackCommentator.com*, an online weekly magazine whose board includes Julian Bond and whose goal is to advance "social and economic justice," calls the upstarts "Black Trojan Horses, . . . nominal Democrats who consciously collaborate in the rightwing and Republican mission to destroy existing Black political structures."

Adding to the resentments of the veterans is that the newcomers aren't just running for office; they're running—and winning—against them. Fighting for their political lives, the fathers have reverted to the very divisive race consciousness that the sons want to transcend, and they have taken to dissing the boys as Uncle Toms and traitors to their race. "We don't have time to teach you how to be black," 66-year-old, street-savvy Newark mayor Sharpe James snarled when he found himself in a tight race in 2002 with Cory Booker, who would finally defeat him four years later. In 2002, Artur Davis unseated Esa Hilliard, then 60—and not what you would call gracious in defeat. "I was a foot soldier in the civil rights movement," Hilliard huffed to the *Black Commentator*. Davis is one of those "New Blacks" who are "black in skin tone, but philosophically they are not," Hilliard said; they are supported by "Republican operatives and Jewish operatives." And then he reached for the old rhetoric in a way that, at this point, rings as desperate as it does hollow: "Even during slavery we had those who were used to keep other slaves in line."

It's not just the younger politicians who want to get past Hilliard's Jackson-era rhetoric. The old talk doesn't sit well with younger black professionals and intellectuals, either. Debra J. Dickerson, in her provocatively titled *The End of Blackness*, argues that it's time to throw off the crude groupthink that defines "real blacks" as disenfranchised victims of white power. "Blackness is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, just as overt racism did," Dickerson writes. In the same vein, John McWhorter of the Manhattan Institute argues in *Authentically Black* that a conception of identity that dismisses middle-class blacks as inauthentic is fatally limited. After all, both authors agree, it hardly makes sense to imagine a single identity for almost 40 million black Americans living, as they do, in geographically, culturally, and economically diverse circumstances. Certainly more blacks are living in Obama's America than in Hilliard's: according to a 2004 Harris poll, 61 percent say that they are "very satisfied with their lives," more than half indicate that their lives improved last year, and—get this—86 percent are optimistic about the next five years.

Michael Bowen, 44, an engineer and married father of three living near Los Angeles, reflects the strong though wary optimism of

younger middle-class blacks. Bowden grew up lower middle class in Southern California, where his parents were both civil servants. His father's generation, he says, looked to black fraternities and rights groups for a sense of community and identity; theirs was the era of the protest march. His own formative moment came in college in the 1980s, when he traveled from California to a Boston meeting of the National Society of Black Engineers. "I saw 3,000 black students, all on the tech track," he says; and although the group had neither the size nor passion of a march on Washington, it was in his eyes an inspiring sight. Living in Boston later on, he went to First Fridays, networking get-togethers for young black urban professionals held nationwide.

Of course, Bowen rejects "the idea of black monolith." "We need to recognize the diversity of the African American community," he says. "My circle has had years of experience in corporate America." No race Pollyanna, Bowen doesn't buy "the facile conclusion that racism itself is defeated," he writes on his website, cobb.typepad.com. "It is not." Still, Bowen shows no trace of what Newsweek editor Ellis Cose called, as the title of his 1994 book, the rage of a privileged class. He and his circle—successful, relatively at ease with whites, and determined to be seen as individuals—are the private-sector counterpart of the new black politicians. "When we look at Harold Ford," he says, "we see ourselves."

The demographic data show that there are now an awful lot of Michael Bowens, for whom the old narrative's presumption of black oppression rings hollow. In 1960, when the civil rights movement was getting under way, only 45 percent of blacks lived above the poverty line. Today, three-quarters do. In fact, one-third of blacks make over \$50,000 a year, while only one-quarter remain poor; 16 percent of blacks earn over \$75,000 each year. Though neighborhood segregation is still a fact of life in America, concentrated urban poverty has declined noticeably. In Harlem and Bed-Stuy, young professionals, black and white, are filling former tenements with Braun coffeemakers and furniture from West Elm. Oakland, the birthplace of the Black Panthers and Black Power, is now majority white. And Watts, site of two of the country's worst race riots, is now only 38 percent black, down from 90 percent in 1970.

Why? Because black Americans are doing just what white Americans are doing: moving to places where they can afford to buy their own homes, find decent schools, and live safe from gangs and thugs. More than half of U.S. blacks—55 percent—now live in the South, and the percentage is growing. They're leaving New York, Chicago, L.A., and San Francisco not for Mississippi or Louisiana but for the New South—Dallas, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Orlando. Like whites, they're going suburban: 39 percent of blacks now live in the suburbs. "White flight is looking more and more like middle-class flight," demographer William Frey has concluded from studying minority migration trends.

Jacksonite politics doesn't begin to address the 46 percent of black households that own their own homes—far less than whites, but still more than the narrative would predict. There is now a Black Boaters Summit, a National Brotherhood of (black) Skiers, a National Association of Black Scuba Divers, and a National Association of Black Yoga Teachers. There are black astronauts manning the space shuttle. And what can old politics make of *Grey's Anatomy*, the Number One hit television show, created by black writer Sondra Rhimes? Set at a Seattle hospital, the series features a black chief of the surgical staff (who, incidentally, is having a long-term affair with a white doctor), a black female chief resident, and a brilliant black male surgeon (whose girlfriend is a Korean-American intern). No way the show reflects census percentages, but its millions of viewers don't appear to be rejecting its premise. Blacks are running the place! And it's not a car wash or a barbershop; it's a hospital!

In other words, younger blacks seem willing to believe that America really is a land of opportunity. In the past, blacks often pulled themselves into the middle class through government jobs, and, true, 24 percent of today's employed blacks work for federal, state, or local government. But the number of black-owned businesses was up a remarkable 45 percent between 1997 and 2002. More and more black movers and shakers are talking about promoting financial literacy and greater black access to capital—"silver rights," some call it. "Civil rights was about civil liberties and justice; silver rights will be about choices, mostly our own," explains John Hope Bryant, founder of an advocacy group aimed at securing those rights, Operation Hope. Dozens of websites and organizations shower an emerging black business class with advice on finding loans and networking. In the past, if black Americans became superrich, they were probably entertainers, sports stars, or popular-media moguls, like Russell Simmons, a hip-hop entrepreneur, and Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television. Today the top-grossing black-owned business is World Wide Technology, a Missouri-based information technology company whose clients include Dell, Boeing, and DaimlerChrysler.

As middle-class blacks ready their kids for today's competitive economy, they care less about honing their racial identity than about boosting them onto the meritocratic ladder. When mainstream universities first opened their doors wide to minority kids, a lot of black families nevertheless kept on sending their children to historically black colleges, which they saw as a more secure environment, steeped in African-American tradition. Today, so many of the most qualified black students are applying to big-name universities that the black colleges have had to recruit Hispanic kids to fill their classrooms. In the 1980s, Bill Cosby's TV character, Cliff Huxtable, wanted his kids to go to Hillman, the fictional black college that was supposed to be his alma mater. If Cliff were around today, his kids would be aiming Ivy, just like every other upper-middle-class family's kids.

A huge challenge to the civil rights narrative has been large-scale immigration, which has smeared the color line and made the race story less black and white, in both the literal and metaphoric sense. For most of U.S. history, blacks were America's largest minority group: when we talked about minorities, we meant, outside of California and maybe parts of Texas, one thing. The arrival of millions of Hispanics has changed all that. At 14 percent of the population, Hispanics are now the country's largest minority group, with blacks running second, at 12.8 percent. Many assumed that all those brown faces were bound to reinforce the civil rights narrative, underlining the reality of racism by expanding the white/black divide into a white/colored chasm. Natural allies, black and brown would be underdog brothers in the struggle against white injustice. Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Julian Bond all hailed last spring's Latino street demonstrations protesting any immigration restrictions as the longed-for return of the Movement—and, in fact, some marchers sang "We Shall Overcome." In a similar assumption of shared black-brown oppression, the Harvard Civil Rights Project has just announced that it will be moving to UCLA "to take on issues related to Hispanics." And newspaper stories about changing demographics, often with headlines like the coming white minority, make it sound as if whites are huddled on one side of the national identity spectrum and "people of color" are amassed threateningly on the other.

But right now, no one could reasonably argue that blacks and Hispanics are singing "Kumbaya" together or that "people of color" isn't sounding more and more like an empty phrase. Many blacks worry, with reason, that Hispanics are taking low-wage service-sector jobs that low-skilled African-Americans want—and that they are further suppressing wages in those jobs. With a black anti-immigration group, Choose Black America, demonstrating in the streets, Hispanics hardly seem ready to join a black-brown Poor

People's Campaign. The Hispanics quoted in *There Goes the Neighborhood*, a recently published study of Chicago neighborhoods in transition, by William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub, rival Louise Day Hicks in their opposition to proposals to bus their kids to black schools. Many black and Latino high school students are having *West Side Story*-style rumbles—and not in drama class, either.

Hispanics are only one demographic reason for the growing confusion in the classic black-white story, and the fact that many immigrants from Latin America are of mixed race only complicates the narrative further. So, too, do interracial marriages and adoptions. The 2000 census allowed people for the first time to choose more than one racial category, and about 6.8 million did so. Doubtless, one was Tiger Woods. When he won the Masters Tournament in 1999, commentators embraced him as a symbol of racial progress, a colored man—playing golf, for God's sake—“mobbed adoringly by a predominantly white audience in Georgia on land that used to be a slave plantation,” as the *Washington Post* marveled. But Woods, son of a black father and a Thai mother, punctured that balloon: I'm not black, he announced to Oprah—I'm “Cablinasian.” Similarly, Barack Obama is the child of a white mother, raised largely by white grandparents. His father was from Kenya. Is he African-American? Is he even black?

The future promises to deepen the muddle: almost half of those who are multiracial are under 18. Although intermarriage between blacks and whites, while higher than it was, remains rare, a Gallup poll found that 60 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds had dated someone of a different race, and 95 percent approved of interracial dating. No wonder so many malls and city streets look like a Benetton ad. Young girls are throwing away their California-blond Barbies for multiracial Bratz dolls.

When W. E. B. Du Bois pronounced that the problem of the future would be the problem of the color line, this is probably not what he had in mind.

Even considering only those whose blackness is not in question, there are fissures that complicate the civil rights narrative. Afro-Caribbeans have a substantially higher median income than American-born blacks, for example. And 8 percent of today's black population consists of recent arrivals from Africa; astoundingly, more African immigrants have arrived voluntarily since 1990 than the number who once came as slaves, according to the *New York Times*. These immigrants, too, have far higher employment and education levels than native-born blacks. In the old narrative, white racism is keeping black folks from succeeding. But while native-born blacks do indeed have a substantially lower median income than whites, what do we make of African immigrants, who on average are staying in school longer and earning more than whites?

None of this means that the country should ignore continuing black-white inequality. Black married couples have fewer assets than whites and, with poorer credit histories, have higher mortgage and car-loan rates. Black unemployment is twice that of whites. Forty-four percent of the prison population is African-American. And the one fact that, above all others, limits the future of racial equality: 70 percent of black babies are born to single mothers.

But without question, our narrative about black America—and our politics—is changing. When we ask, “Will the Real Black Person please stand up?,” will it be a Chicago punk sporting a do-rag and bling and his single mother working the night shift in the Oak Gardens nursing home? Or will it be the branch manager of an Orlando bank, with a mortgage, a Weber gas grill on the patio, and a Toyota Corolla in the garage? When we have a possible black presidential candidate who was president of the *Harvard Law*

Review and looks like a star of the country's most popular television show, when young black professionals are buying condos in Dallas, Phoenix, and Tampa, then, as Congressman Artur Davis says, "the labels don't work anymore."

And that's very good news for everyone—except maybe Jesse Jackson.

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