

# The Seventh Generation

## The South

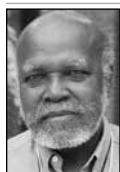
### *The Race Culture Sustained*

William M. Harris

**W**E BLACK SOUTHERNERS KNOW. We know the significance of skin color. We know that standard of human worth has not changed over four hundred years of living with European Americans. We know that W.E.B. DuBois was right in 1903 to offer that, “The problem of race in America is the color line.” We know that little has changed for us in the attitudes of white Southerners.

It is in this context of white Southern attitudes and actions that this essay presents views of progressive planning responses to the issues of white Southern attitudes and behaviors. It is essential that we attempt some level of clarity on what constitutes *progressive planning* as envisioned by African Americans in the South. In setting forth the invitation to contribute to this special issue of *Progressive Planning Magazine*, the editors provided descriptors of progressive planning. Their presentation is helpful. However, for blacks living in the South, greater clarity is required. For us, progressive planning is to be defined in addition to described.

*We see progressive planning as the aggressive, non-compromising agent for sustained social change that will redistribute all levels of wealth (jobs, economic development, property ownership, education, etc.), public policies that will protect and preserve the African American quality of life in the present and future, and establish guidelines and strategies for reparations in the social, economic, political, and environmental spheres.*



William M. Harris, Sr. is Martin Luther King, Jr. Visiting Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”*

*—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy*

In this essay, the presentation centers around the roles and strategies that planners *should* play in addressing the factors offered in my definition above. No effort is devoted to what planner roles have been in the past. Such discussions lead too heavily to the blame game. Thus I am not going to present and address here the known history of abuses by whites against African Americans in the South. As planners, we are first futurists. As progressive planners we are strategists who value at the highest level the quality of life for all citizens, giving the priority of our attention to the oppressed.

#### **Change Intensity**

Working in the South to bring about sustained social change that benefits the black community has been (and remains) a very high risk undertaking. The risks have taken many forms: violence to persons and property, political isolation, social exclusion, and economic ostracism. These risks hold for all, independent of race and gender. We progressive planners know that risk taking must be measured in terms of benefits and costs. Where Southern blacks are concerned, costs usually outweigh the benefits, especially in the short term. We also know that involvement must be sustained over the long term in the face of these costs if positive goals are to be realized.

#### **Attack Violence**

In the South, African Americans, especially males, remain targets of violence. Recent instances in

*continued on page 4*



## *Seventh Generation The South: The Race Culture Sustained*

By William M. Harris

*continued from page 2*

Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, and other states demonstrate the concern. The Southern Poverty Law Center continues to report cases of violence committed by whites against blacks. Although these instances are troubling, the situation becomes dire when white police violence against blacks is added. White racial violence toward African Americans in the South is present and pervasive. What is to be the role of progressive planners in addressing this issue?

There are two immediate avenues available to confront the problem. Research and data analysis are mainstream activities of planners. Progressive planners must exploit existing data and also create new research into the types of violence, levels of damage (to persons and property), locations, and frequency of violence that will provide evidence to challenge and support legal redress. The second step is to be visible and involved advocates for the oppressed. Appear in court, speak before elected officials (local, state, and national) in support of the oppressed black community being attacked. The research and reporting are very low risk activities. However, participation in public arenas requires courage to withstand the sure-to-come critical challenges by white Southerners.

### **Public Policy Intervention**

The “Separate but Equal” legal doctrine is no longer applicable. The subsequent “Black Codes” are no longer applicable. However, these antecedents continue to raise their heads in public policy in the South and elsewhere in the nation. Currently nearly all the Southern states have passed laws that are designed to restrict suffrage for African Americans. These new voting regulations require identification mechanisms that target the black poor, elderly, and underemployed as unqualified to vote. Second only to the denial of travel (a primary condition of maintaining slavery), denial of suffrage is central to the welfare and security in a representative republic.

What should be the appropriate role of the progressive planner in this context? Here the prescription is not complex. Get involved. There are three immediate roles that may be identified for the progressive planner. On the legal side, progressive planners must take the initiative to bring suit in courts at local, state, and national levels, challenging these regressive political renderings. Second, progressive planners must appear in every media available to expose the racism inherent in these laws. And third, the progressive planner must join coalitions with the NAACP, SCLC, civic advocacy groups, and African American congressional leadership to produce policies that repeal or limit the effectiveness of anti-suffrage laws in the South. There can be no alternative to this necessary direct action involvement.

### **Construct Housing**

The issue and intent here is not focused upon actual or physical manufacturing of housing or the built environment. To construct housing is to make “fair housing” a reality. We progressive planners know the historical and continuing racial discrimination in housing. We are aware of the racial segregation at the neighborhood level that brings about intensive racial segregation in our public schools. We are knowledgeable of the race-specific practices in home lending by banks and mortgage institutions. These data are readily available and most have been reported in the press and white papers. This area is of critical importance. Housing remains a major ingredient in the building of wealth. With African Americans owning only about one-percent of the nation’s wealth, it is clear that housing discrimination is a major deterrent to the building of wealth in the black community.

There are productive roles for progressive planners in the fair housing milieu. One thing is clear; the answer is not more research and academic publications. What is needed is action, the responsibility of progressive planners. Four actions must be taken by progressive planners. The first is to demand a congressional

audience to lay out the issues, consequences, and future hazards of continued racial discrimination in housing. The second is to develop public policies that do more than articulate a principle of fairness, but rather limit decision-makers' options to skirt the law. Third, progressive planners must work with grassroots advocates in the black community who struggle on a continuing basis to bring about equity in housing opportunities. The fourth intervention takes place at a personal level; to identify and work successfully with African Americans, live near us and share our challenges to life and living.

### **Treat Health Inequalities**

When the nation's health issue is raised, again African Americans are clearly oppressed. African American women receive less effective medical care for similar diseases than their white cohorts. The incidence of HIV/AIDS is much more severely present in the black community than elsewhere. Black childhood poverty is triple that of whites. Death from the major killer diseases affect African Americans adversely more than whites. Of course, many factors contribute to these disparities. However, some are clearly race-specific. Since the early work of Benjamin Chavis and subsequent efforts by Robert Bullard, we progressive planners know the devastating impacts of environmental racism (the siting of hazardous wastes facilities, brownfields, etc.). Even when the current administration has moved to expand the health care of the oppressed, many states continue to resist and even refuse to advance the quality of health care for their citizens, especially the poor, inner city and rural African Americans, and the unemployed/underemployed.

Health planning is no longer the narrow domain of health planners. Health planning is a national issue that immediately (and long term) affects the quality of life for all in the environment. What, then, are roles to be played by progressive planners? There are three roles that demand immediate involvement by progressive planners. First, progressive planners must present forcibly in every available public forum the case for national health insurance that will target oppressed and marginalized groups such as blacks in the South. A second responsibility for progressive planners is to join African

American advocate groups that seek to change public health policy, present cases of treatment disparities by the medical profession toward women and children, and educate the black public about health dangers that negatively impact them. The third area of intervention must target and expose policies, institutional failures, and racist practices by individual physicians. There can be no easy solution to a problem that has had negative impacts upon blacks and has been neglected for so long.

### **Blacks in the South**

White racism is part of the DNA of American culture. A social-political-economic-environmental disease itself, eradication will prove to be challenging and enduring. For progressive planners this is a difficult arena. Few white planners see themselves as racist. Few believe their efforts in projecting the nation's future development as inherently racist and exclusionary. Few discuss openly the ethical and practical consequences of their actions as professionals. But progressive planners are NOT excluded from this group.

A major first step in successfully solving a problem is the identification of boundary conditions (bias, limitations, etc.). The first boundary condition for progressive planners is to identify and openly admit their own racism. Once the problem is identified, efforts can be made by ethical people to seek solutions that are beneficial to all. As progressive planners work to build a better, safer, and more fair and just community, they must analyze themselves and be open to the observations and criticisms of those affected most by their practices.

White Americans easily point to the need for African Americans to bail themselves out of their second-class citizenship. Reference to shoe strings, learning to fish, and removing the chip on your shoulder are examples. Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all recognized and pronounced that power concedes nothing without struggle. Vincent Harding posited that the most salient contribution of African people to the Western Hemisphere has been their struggle against oppression. Surely white progressive planners must know or acquire the knowledge of this fact and move with dispatch to address the terrible continuing wrongs put upon blacks. **P<sup>2</sup>**