

Buffalo Law Review

Volume 14
Number 1 *Toward Equal Opportunity in
Employment: The Role of State and Local
Government—Proceedings of the Conference in
Memory of Honorable Philip Halpern, April 24,
25, 1964*

Article 24

10-1-1964

Crisis in Black and White. By Charles E. Silberman.

Herman Schwartz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Herman Schwartz, *Crisis in Black and White. By Charles E. Silberman.*, 14 Buff. L. Rev. 189 (1964).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview/vol14/iss1/24>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

CRISIS IN BLACK AND WHITE. By Charles E. Silberman. New York: Random House, 1964. Pp. xii, 370. \$5.95.

Crisis in Black and White is an attempt to survey and analyze the racial problem in the North. It is a fine book—balanced, perceptive, extremely informative and always absorbing.

Mr. Silberman's major theme is that slavery and racism are still the dominant force in American society. In the North, this has caused ". . . every urban problem . . . [to be] bound up in some way with the problems of race and racism" (p. x). In part, this is because our cities are becoming more and more Negro, as the Negro migration from the South and the white migration to the suburbs both continue, and as the Negro birth rate remains high. In part also, this is because of the dead hand of slavery which lies heavy on both Negro and white.

Some of these problems, notes Mr. Silberman, are in fact common to all immigrant groups; newcomers almost always account for a disproportionately high percentage of the crime and other troubling statistics of an urban community. Up to now the great function of the cities has been to change these statistics and to "equip [the newcomers] to take their places as fully participating members of United States society" (p. 19). In view of this, some observers have concluded that the problems faced by Negroes are not too different from those faced by other immigrant groups and that in time the cities will succeed in "acculturating" the Negro just as cities have acculturated earlier newcomers. It is simply a matter of time.¹

Mr. Silberman rejects this thesis. Although some of the problems are indeed similar to those of earlier immigrants, the American Negro has experienced hundreds of years of dehumanizing slavery and subordination. The ravages of our "peculiar institution" were unchecked by any legal or other institutional protections, as in Latin America. In the South, Negroes were treated not like men and women but like living chattels; in the North, the Negro fared somewhat better. Mr. Silberman briefly sketches some appalling items of this history.² The purpose was always the same in both sections: to keep the Negro inferior thereby justifying and perpetuating slavery. He concludes:

1. This theory is ascribed to Professors Philip M. Hauser of the University of Chicago and Oscar Handlin of Harvard. The former is quoted as saying: "The problems which confront the Negro today although perhaps differing in degree, are essentially the same kinds of problems which confronted our migrant groups in the past" (quoted at p. 36).

2. Mr. Silberman quotes the following advertisement in a New Orleans newspaper (ca. 1830):

NEGROES FOR SALE—A negro woman, 24 years of age, and her two children, one eight and the other three years old. Said negroes will be sold SEPARATELY or together, as desired. The woman is a good seamstress. She will be sold low for cash, or EXCHANGED FOR GROCERIES. For terms, apply to Mathew Bliss & Co. (p. 90)

It would be hard to conceive a system better designed to create the submissive, infantile, incontinent, undisciplined, dull, dependent "Sambo" of Southern legend. The results seem to justify the system: no one looking at the slaves could doubt their inferiority; to argue otherwise was to deny the evidence of one's senses (p. 91).

But slavery hurts the master as well as the slave—it has so imbued the American white with racist fears and prejudice that he is often fearful of helping or even allowing the Negro to achieve a place in society. Put shortly, he has refused to treat the Negro as a human. This is today's white man's burden—to rid himself of his fears and prejudices and to accept his responsibility for injustice. Nevertheless, many whites continue trying to perpetuate most of a status quo which treats the Negro as something less than a man.³

Mr. Silberman's exposition also serves to effectively refute the thesis that the problem is primarily economic—that if the widespread poverty, unemployment and lower class burdens under which Negroes suffer so much, are alleviated, the Negro problem will be a long way toward resolution.⁴

To this observer, this argument for the primacy of the economic factor mistakes effect for cause. Negroes suffer because they are black, regardless of how much money they have, although because they are black, they have less money. Like every society, America denies to those it represses a fair share of the material goods of life as well as the spiritual. But even if our unemployment and poverty problems were satisfactorily resolved tomorrow, our race problems will remain so long as racist fears and attitudes persist. This is not to say that improvement in material status would not improve racial attitudes, at least by removing the tinder box of competition for scarce jobs. Such economic improvement would also eliminate at least some of the ills of poverty common to all poor people, such as mental and physical illness, overcrowded housing and malnutrition. But so long as discrimination and prejudice continue, we will remain a society ridden with injustice, social and economic. For example, during the full employment of the late forties and early fifties, Negroes did not experience the staggering unemployment they now face. This led one union leader to declare at a meeting in Buffalo in November, 1963, that unemployment and automation are the only real problems—"when we had full employment, Negroes and whites all worked together." Not quite.

3. Although the Northern white's prejudice is less overt than the Southerner's, it has been equally effective in keeping the Negro subordinate. See Mr. Silberman's discussion at pp. 48-54.

Police treatment of Negroes in the North is an example of this: Negroes are not only subjected to more police brutality and arbitrariness than whites, but Negro communities also get less police protection than white areas. Although this lesser police protection may result, in part at least, from police fears of violence against them, it also seems partly attributable to less official concern with the lawlessness that exists among Negroes, so long as they keep such conduct within the Negro ghetto.

4. Cf. Kaplan, *Segregation Litigation and the Schools—Part II: The General Northern Problem*, 58 Nw. U.L. Rev. 157, 207-11 (1963). ("Despite certain specifically racial problems, it seems that the problem of de facto [school] segregation is in the main a class problem . . . what lower class Negro children need is integration with middle class children of any race.")

They may all have worked in the same plant, but the Negro was locked into a Negro job—menial and dirty—whereas the white had a chance to become a supervisor. Years of this have deprived Negroes of a chance to develop qualifying experience so that now, as Dean Ferguson has pointed out elsewhere in this issue, supposedly fair and objective standards preclude his advancement.

Slavery then is the “congenital defect” under which this nation suffers. We are “stained with prejudice.” Although both North and South, Negro and white have suffered from it, it is obviously the Negro who has been the chief victim. Continually humiliated and debased, the Negro suffers from a stultifying apathy derived from self hatred. This self hatred and apathy in turn are a direct consequence of the servile dependency which the white masters, North and South, before and after 1863, have imposed. The result is a sense of being nobody. With numerous quotations from Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killens, W. E. B. DuBois and others, Mr. Silberman brings out this sense of being nobody, of not counting, of being an “invisible man.”

This self hatred is now declining but what is to replace it and how? This Mr. Silberman considers a problem of identity. Who is the Negro? What is his role in America and his relationship to white America? Why does he want and what does he propose to do with integration? Mr. Silberman concludes that these problems of identity must be resolved before the Negro can take his place in American society.

Mr. Silberman’s focus on this issue of identity seems somewhat misplaced. In the first place, if American racism is to be eliminated or substantially reduced, there is no single or even a particular number of “redefinition[s] of what it means to be a Negro in the United States.” For this reason, there is probably no one way or set of ways in which Negroes can or should relate to whites. Indeed, one would suspect that different Negroes want to relate in different ways. Few of these relationships must necessarily be determined predominantly by the fact of color, although it is unlikely that color be eradicated from American life, or even that it should be.

Moreover, if Mr. Silberman is right in his premise that the Negro’s great problem is his destructive sense of identity, then the main task may be to eliminate the causes of this, so that the constructive and creative aspects of the Negro, whether individually or as a group, can develop. Thus, the problem is really not so much finding a new group identity as it is to eliminate the sources and ill effects of the old.

Mr. Silberman then discusses and rejects some of the proposed solutions to the northern racial problem. In some of his best pages, he notes that the achievement of civil rights is not enough, for this deals only with the white man’s problem—discrimination by whites. The Negro’s task is to take the initiative and, *by his own efforts*, to grapple with the social and political problems of jobs, schools and political organization. He must not only demand that

society make available to him the skills indispensable to modern urban life, but he must try to use them effectively. In this connection, Mr. Silberman comments favorably on the achievements of the Black Muslim movement while deploring its racism in reverse; he sympathizes with the Negro's disenchantment with the white liberals, who are "in" society and therefore urge a gradualism which will not excessively upset the status quo. He comments acidly on the whites who have suddenly developed a devotion to the "neighborhood school," a devotion which seems to grow proportionately to the Negro's opportunities to go to such a school; he is particularly taken with Saul Alinsky's organizational work in Chicago which broke the pattern of "welfare colonialism" whereby whites and some unrepresentative Negro leaders impose their plans for "improvement" on the Negro community. Alinsky's work in Chicago with The Woodlawn Organization is the primary support for one of his basic themes: the Negro will not win his fight for freedom and equality unless he overcomes his apathy and fights for his own interests. "If Negroes are to gain a sense of potency and dignity, it is essential . . . that they take the initiative in action on their own behalf" (p. 215). The Negro must use the power of numbers which he is developing to better his own lot for only in that way will he escape the pattern of having things done *for* him—badly—and not *by* him.

This is not to say that the Negro can do the job all alone. Ours is still predominantly a white community, especially in business and politics. Although in some cities Negro voters may soon be able to influence the balance of power, by and large, Negroes cannot achieve justice and equality without some help from white friends and some sympathy from white leaders. Nevertheless, the lead must be taken by Negroes, with white support, not white direction.

Mr. Silberman does not restrict his criticism to the white community. Indeed, much of his book documents the many weaknesses and shortcomings in the Negro's efforts to cope with his problems. These include the sorry performance of most Negro political and other leaders on behalf of their people, the "floundering" phenomenon among young Negroes, and the weakness in the Negro family structure. All these are, of course, directly traceable to the heritage of slavery; indeed, as Mr. Silberman notes at one point in commenting on the Negro family: "Negroes raise families and live out their lives under conditions that would destroy a white middle-class family. . . . What is amazing . . . is not that so few Negroes have risen out of the slum, but that so many have . . ." (pp. 228, 229).

One of Mr. Silberman's best and most balanced chapters is on education. With a sense of perspective all too rare, he sees both the indispensability and the inadequacy of school integration. He documents the total failure of most northern school systems to grapple with this problem, noting that

To a degree that is only now beginning to be seen and understood, the schools have built their curricula on the quite unconscious assumption that children will enter with certain skills and attitudes—skills

BOOK REVIEW

and attitudes which the middle-class child in America tends to imbibe with the air he breathes, but which the lower-class child, white or black, all too frequently fails to acquire (pp. 267-68).

He is enthusiastic about the pre-school learning experiments of Dr. Martin Deutsch and is extremely dubious about integration which does nothing more than put white children next to Negroes.

He concludes that the only way to achieve integration which leads to genuine understanding is to bring

. . . the schools in Negro neighborhoods—and the schools in white slum areas as well—. . . to the level of the very best schools in each city; until the schools do their job so well that children's educational performance no longer reflects their income or their social status or their ethnic group or their color. To say this is not to suggest indefinite postponement, but to demand that the public schools stop dithering with projects and demonstrations and turn immediately to their most pressing task; neither the large cities nor the nation as a whole can afford a public school system which fails to educate between 50 and 80 per cent of its Negro students (p. 304).

Mr. Silberman's comments on the job problem are especially relevant to the conference which comprises the occasion for this issue. After first pointing out the magnitude of the problem of Negro unemployment, he explores some causes and possible solutions. He rejects the argument that "Negro unemployment is due in only small measure to racial discrimination . . . [and that] the more important reasons are the handicaps of education, training and experience which Negroes share with other important groups" (p. 239).⁵

The fact is that the Negro problem is unique. As Mr. Silberman points out, our entire economy is shot through with discrimination, past and present. For example, Negroes are not qualified because they have been deprived of the opportunity to qualify. Even when Negro unemployment was proportionately less than today Negroes were kept in "Negro" jobs and prevented from rising. Moreover, "virtually every study of how people find jobs has indicated that the most common method is recommendation by a relative or friend . . . but painfully few Negroes have relatives or friends working for corporations in anything but menial capacities"⁶ (p. 243). Also, modern industry requires highly educated personnel but Negroes have too long been deprived of adequate education because they are Negroes.⁷

For these and other reasons, talk of competing on individual merit, no matter how fine in principle, dooms the Negro for our society has deprived the

5. This view is attributed to Professor Eli Ginzburg of Columbia University (p. 239).

6. *Lefkowitz v. Farrell*, C-9287-63 (N.Y. State Comm'n for Human Rights 1964), discussed *supra*, indicates how this pattern has excluded Negroes from apprenticeship in the sheet metal trades.

7. In a recent address at the State University of New York at Buffalo on July 16, 1964, Professor Kenneth Clark commented that prejudiced employers need not go out of their way to discriminate any more. They need simply apply their normal qualifying standards, for inferior Negro schools have taken care of the rest.

Negro of the chance of ever winning such a competition. As Mr. Silberman says, there is only one solution: "to hire unqualified Negroes and to train them on the job" (p. 245). So-called special preferences and quotas represent the only way in which Negroes can force those who actually have the hiring responsibility to do something tangible to reduce Negro unemployment. The inertia in the system and the centuries of discrimination ensure that unless employers and unions are forced to make special efforts on behalf of the Negroes, the same old discriminatory pattern will continue.

To some this smacks of discrimination in reverse and is said to be insulting to the Negro. As to the insult, this seems to be largely a white concern, for few Negroes have taken offense. And as to the discrimination in reverse, how else does one compensate for handicaps? Surely the insistence on "color blindness" whether in employment or education, amounts to an insistence on inaction. True, some whites may lose jobs they might otherwise have gotten and no one can view this with equanimity. But government and social order have always involved redistribution; a case in point is the system of veterans' preferences in government employment.⁸ A grateful nation tried to compensate those of its citizens who had lost time by serving their country, often at the expense of others who, for good and sufficient reason, did not serve. Surely, a penitent nation may do the same. The key question is not *whether* there should be such preferences, but *when*. In this case, it is highly unlikely that a great social problem affecting the health and welfare of the nation will be solved otherwise. Furthermore, as Dean Ferguson has pointed out, it is not too likely that too many white men will be displaced, especially since even among our unemployed, it is still easier for a white man to find alternate employment than it is for a Negro. Indeed, there is a very definite tactical necessity for the demand for preferences: the system of hiring and firing is still shot through with racist inertia; the Negro is still unqualified by the ordinary standards imposed; our schools are still doing a poor job in preparing the Negro youngster for the job market. Thus, the only way the Negro can wrench anything approaching a fair share of the job market is by demanding what would ordinarily be considered an unfair share.

There is much, much more in this book, including many little known facts about the Negro condition in America. Its great value lies in its balanced attempt to see the problems in their bewildering complexity, in its refusal to accept glib panaceas proposed by either whites or Negroes, and in its honesty and detachment. Hopefully, it will have the very wide audience it deserves.

HERMAN SCHWARTZ

8. 5 U.S.C. §§ 851-869 (1958); see especially § 853, providing experience credits for time spent in service.