

The Affirmative Action Complex

by Mitchell Bard

Racism and sexism are serious problems in this country. Ironically, the solution that has been devised for these ills is blatantly racist and sexist. Affirmative action calls for decisions to be made solely on the basis of race and sex—which is the very definition of racism and sexism.

Nevertheless, the government has decided that it is necessary to use this means of discrimination to redress past discrimination, and this procedure has been ratified by the judiciary. The impact of affirmative action, its supporters say, is that it has provided minorities and women with opportunities they otherwise would have been denied. This is the beneficial side of the policy, but there is also a negative side which is being ignored.

The focus of the debate on this issue has been on whether affirmative action is justified given the past discrimination and current biases in our society. There has been little or no attention, however, to the psychological consequences of this palliative. Those consequences, in fact, may be quite grave and involve the erosion of the values of individualism and personal responsibility.

The explicit message of affirmative action is that everyone should have an equal opportunity



to health, education, and employment, but the implicit message is more sinister. That message is that all evils which befall an individual are the fault of society rather than the individual. Affirmative action has ratified the proposition that the historical and cultural prejudices of our society are the cause of problems encountered by individuals. This is something quite different, however, from the premise that affirmative action is needed because of the impact of these prejudices on certain groups.

Dr. Bard is a policy analyst in Washington, D.C.

This affirmative action complex is probably most prevalent on the nation's campuses where these programs have been most liberally applied. Thus, for example, students who are not qualified to be in the university in the first place quickly find themselves unable to do the required work and, rather than take personal responsibility for their difficulties, blame society for failing to prepare them adequately. They say that the education they received in high school was not good enough or that they are not getting sufficient tutoring on the campus.

Those things may indeed be true, at least partially, but few students seem willing to accept, even as a possibility, that it may be their own inability or failure to study that is responsible. It is even more disturbing to find students who *are* qualified who believe that the burden of responsibility for their problems should be laid on someone other than themselves.

There is a saying that no one owes you a living, but affirmative action has created the perception that someone owes disadvantaged members of our society not only a living but a virtually problem-free existence. The only thing society should owe them, however, is an

equal opportunity to become educated or employed. If the beneficiaries of that opportunity fail to make the most of it, then it is no more society's fault than if a white male fails to take advantage of his opportunity.

The problem could be solved by eliminating affirmative action. However, that is not going to happen so long as policy-makers believe that affirmative action programs are necessary to redress inequalities in our society. That being the case, it is important that we begin to recognize that the consequences of these programs are not benign and that affirmative action legitimates societal responsibility for personal failure.

At some point, and it may be nearer than some people think, the government will have to say that it cannot do any more for people. When that point is reached, the disadvantaged members of our society will have to stand on their own feet. In the meantime, we would be well advised to begin to condition the current beneficiaries of preferential treatment to the fact that they must accept responsibility for their lives. □

IDEAS
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Education vs. Egalitarian Politics

If we give way before the force which now menaces higher education and our society as a whole, we are not only opening the door to second-rate standards and a new and more vicious and permanent form of injustice. We are also passing control of tomorrow's leaders and tomorrow's dominant ideas from the privacy and independence of the academic community to the realm of egalitarian politics. If Affirmative Action gains the final say in curriculum, faculty, and admissions throughout higher education, effective control of society will have passed to the social engineers and the politicians, and America will have lost one of her greatest resources in the struggle to remain an open and effective society.

—GEORGE C. ROCHE III
The Balancing Act

Defending the Market

by Tibor R. Machan

One of the greatest benefits many Western political systems bestow upon their citizens is a substantially free market economy. In this system individuals are not legally prevented from seeking their economic advantage in the company of others who may be counted on to do the same thing. While there is no purely free economic system anywhere, surely the main difference between Western liberal democracy and other political systems is the presence of the economic opportunity afforded by a relatively free market.

There are those who dispute this. However, even these critics usually do not deny the presence of greater economic opportunity in the West. Rather, they frown on the value of this opportunity. Critics from Left and Right have alleged the corrupting influence of a political system that does not hinder the pursuit of commercial prosperity.

These critics tend to see the free market as catering to base human inclinations—self-interest, greed, lust, and so on. When one is not much hindered, let alone prevented, from pursuing wealth, one will, the critics say, focus all one's attentions on this pursuit. Thus, we are told, free market systems give us the commercialization of everything from religion to art. Doctors do not worry so much about medicine as about prospering economically. Lawyers, evangelists, educators, scientists, artists, politi-

cians—members of all vocations and professions with talent and skill concentrate predominantly on the bottom line.

Now there is something to this charge, if we look only at the evidence before us in most Western societies. But it is unfair to judge the matter from a narrow empirical framework. For example, it needs to be stressed that economic liberty is a recent phenomenon, following centuries of repression and oppression during which prosperity was out of the question for most people in the world. It is therefore not surprising that for a few centuries people would focus their attention on attaining reasonable material prosperity, besides a number of other goals that are important to them.

In any case, my concern here is not so much with defending the free market system but with discussing one of the prominent ways in which it is defended against a persistent indictment. Professor Paul Samuelson, a critic of the free market system, has made the following serious charge against the free market: "The Invisible Hand will only maximize total social utility *provided the state intervenes so as to make the initial distribution of dollar votes ethically proper.*" (*Collected Scientific Papers* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966], p. 1410 [emphasis in original])

In other words, the justice of such a system is predicated on the presence of a strong government that first distributes wealth equitably. If we start out with some people having much

Tibor R. Machan teaches philosophy at Auburn University, Alabama.