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Forty Acres and a Gap in Wealth

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LAST week, the Pew Research Center published the astonishing finding that 37 percent of African-Americans polled felt that “blacks today can no longer be thought of as a single race” because of a widening class divide. From Frederick Douglass to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., perhaps the most fundamental assumption in the history of the black community has been that Americans of African descent, the descendants of the slaves, either because of shared culture or shared oppression, constitute “a mighty race,” as Marcus Garvey often put it.

“By a ratio of 2 to 1,” the report says, “blacks say that the values of poor and middle-class blacks have grown more dissimilar over the past decade. In contrast, most blacks say that the values of blacks and whites have grown more alike.”

The message here is that it is time to examine the differences between black families on either side of the divide for clues about how to address an increasingly entrenched inequality. We can't afford to wait any longer to address the causes of persistent poverty among most black families.

This class divide was predicted long ago, and nobody wanted to listen. At a conference marking the 40th anniversary of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous report on the problems of the black family, I asked the conservative scholar James Q. Wilson and the liberal scholar William Julius Wilson if ours was the generation presiding over an irreversible, self-perpetuating class divide within the African-American community.

“I have to believe that this is not the case,” the liberal Wilson responded with willed optimism. “Why go on with this work otherwise?” The conservative Wilson nodded. Yet, no one could imagine how to close the gap.

In 1965, when Moynihan published his report, suggesting that the out-of-wedlock birthrate and the number of families headed by single mothers, both about 24 percent, pointed to dissolution of the social fabric of the black community, black scholars and liberals dismissed it. They attacked its author as a right-wing bigot. Now we'd give just about anything to have those statistics back. Today, 69 percent of black babies are born out of wedlock, while 45 percent of black households with children are headed by women.

How did this happen? As many theories flourish as pundits — from slavery and segregation to the decline of factory jobs, crack cocaine, draconian drug laws and outsourcing. But nobody knows for sure.

I have been studying the family trees of 20 successful African-Americans, people in fields ranging from

entertainment and sports (Oprah Winfrey, the track star Jackie Joyner-Kersey) to space travel and medicine (the astronaut Mae Jemison and Ben Carson, a pediatric neurosurgeon). And I've seen an astonishing pattern: 15 of the 20 descend from at least one line of former slaves who managed to obtain property by 1920 — a time when only 25 percent of all African-American families owned property.

Ten years after slavery ended, Constantine Winfrey, Oprah's great-grandfather, bartered eight bales of cleaned cotton (4,000 pounds) that he picked on his own time for 80 acres of prime bottomland in Mississippi. (He also learned to read and write while picking all that cotton.)

Sometimes the government helped: Whoopi Goldberg's great-great-grandparents received their land through the Southern Homestead Act. "So my family got its 40 acres and a mule," she exclaimed when I showed her the deed, referring to the rumor that freed slaves would receive land that had been owned by their masters.

Well, perhaps not the mule, but 104 acres in Florida. If there is a meaningful correlation between the success of accomplished African-Americans today and their ancestors' property ownership, we can only imagine how different black-white relations would be had "40 acres and a mule" really been official government policy in the Reconstruction South.

The historical basis for the gap between the black middle class and underclass shows that ending discrimination, by itself, would not eradicate black poverty and dysfunction. We also need intervention to promulgate a middle-class ethic of success among the poor, while expanding opportunities for economic betterment.

Perhaps Margaret Thatcher, of all people, suggested a program that might help. In the 1980s, she turned 1.5 million residents of public housing projects in Britain into homeowners. It was certainly the most liberal thing Mrs. Thatcher did, and perhaps progressives should borrow a leaf from her playbook.

The telltale fact is that the biggest gap in black prosperity isn't in income, but in wealth. According to a study by the economist Edward N. Wolff, the median net worth of non-Hispanic black households in 2004 was only \$11,800 — less than 10 percent that of non-Hispanic white households, \$118,300. Perhaps a bold and innovative approach to the problem of black poverty — one floated during the Civil War but never fully put into practice — would be to look at ways to turn tenants into homeowners. Sadly, in the wake of the subprime mortgage debacle, an enormous number of houses are being repossessed. But for the black poor, real progress may come only once they have an ownership stake in American society.

People who own property feel a sense of ownership in their future and their society. They study, save, work, strive and vote. And people trapped in a culture of tenancy do not.

The sad truth is that the civil rights movement cannot be reborn until we identify the causes of black suffering, some of them self-inflicted. Why can't black leaders organize rallies around responsible sexuality, birth within marriage, parents reading to their children and students staying in school and doing homework? Imagine Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson distributing free copies of Virginia Hamilton's collection of folktales "The People Could Fly" or Dr. Seuss, and demanding that black parents sign pledges to read to their children. What would it take to make inner-city schools havens of learning?

John Kenneth Galbraith once told me that the first step in reversing the economic inequalities that blacks face is greater voter participation, and I think he was right. Politicians will not put forth programs aimed at the problems of poor blacks while their turnout remains so low.

If the correlation between land ownership and success of African-Americans argues that the chasm between classes in the black community is partly the result of social forces set in motion by the dismal failure of 40 acres and a mule, then we must act decisively. If we do not, ours will be remembered as the generation that presided over a permanent class divide, a slow but inevitable process that began with the failure to give property to the people who had once been defined as property.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor at Harvard, is the author of the forthcoming "In Search of Our Roots."

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