

## Revisiting this Proverbial Question of Equal Opportunity

A review of *No Citizen Left Behind* by Meira Levinson (Harvard University Press, 2012).

By **Moorel Bey**

And what I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all, the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead in America. (Applause.)

President Barack Obama, 2014 State of the Union address

**I**n the very same State of the Union address where he spoke of our “profound belief in opportunity for all,” President Obama also acknowledged that women still earn seventy-seven cents to every man’s dollar; inequality has deepened; upward mobility has stalled; wages have barely increased; and many are still unemployed. So how do we begin to level the playing field for the youth in this country unfortunate enough to be born into circumstances where they have to ascend a treacherous mountain, instead of skipping along a freshly paved road, to reach the land of opportunity? In *No Citizen Left Behind* Meira

Levinson argues that the answer lies in bridging the “civic empowerment gap” that exists between “ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens on the other.” Levinson never explicitly defines her term “civic empowerment gap,” but she does explain its implications. According to her, this gap prevents those in the less-enfranchised group from being politically and civically engaged, which in turn reduces their civic and political power, and thus their ability to influence elected officials and improve their own social condition and society as a whole. She writes, “People who vote regularly, contact politicians and other officials, speak up in public meetings, join civic organizations, and donate money to both candidates and civic organizations invariably have more civic and political power in the United States”. She refers to research by Larry Bartels who has written, in *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, about how “political influence seems to be limited entirely to affluent and middle class people. The opinions of millions of ordinary citizens in the bottom third of the income distribution have no discernable impact on the behavior of their elected representatives.”

In Levinson’s opinion, “One important battleground for attacking the civic empowerment gap is the network of mostly urban schools serving a de facto segregated, poor, and minority student population.” The fact that these students also live in segregated, poor, urban neighborhoods increases the size of the civic opportunity gap they face.

Levinson’s perspective on the solution to the civic empowerment gap is that of a political theorist, education scholar, Harvard associate professor, and most importantly, a former teacher in segregated middle schools in Boston and Atlanta, schools that have been comprised of mostly poor students of Black or African-American heritage, and immigrants. While teaching at the basically all-African-American Walden Middle School in Atlanta,

Levinson began to question the district's honorable objective of empowering young African-American students with an "African-American infused curriculum." She says, "[I]t was clear that our teaching limited students' imaginations in certain directions as much as it expanded them in others. Students had learned an impressive amount of Black history . . . but they had little context in which to put these achievements." Moreover, during an eye-opening National Academic League quiz bowl in which her students went up against students from a more affluent White middle school, Levinson realized that her students could not identify "cultural references that might matter when they [were] trying to write a college entrance essay, apply for a scholarship, or get a job." More and more Levinson came to believe that the answer to helping her students get ahead was not an education focusing on the achievement gap targeted by the federally mandated No Child Left Behind initiative, but instead a civic education that encourages civic engagement, political participation, leadership, and collective action. Such an approach would also teach the importance of perspective when it comes to historical and cultural events and prepare students to be "competent and responsible students throughout their lives." The students become competent by being well informed and having an appreciation and understanding of history, democracy, and community issues. They would become responsible by participating in their communities and acting politically. Levinson writes, "Good citizens, may not, however, merely keep to themselves; simply not being a burden to others is not sufficient for good citizenship." In this regard, Levinson supports acts of civil disobedience like boycotts or protests that aim to improve social conditions.

**A**lthough I understand Levinson's rationale and agree that a civic education is important, I am not convinced that civic empowerment is "the solution," the way

to give the disadvantaged in this country greater economic and social opportunities. I will expand on this later, but I first want to talk a little bit about perspective. In a prologue Levinson takes pains to lay out her perspective so that she is transparent about her influences and motivation. As previously mentioned, these include the fact that she is a political theorist, education scholar, Harvard associate professor, and upper-middle class White female who has taught in two segregated public middle schools. In reviewing Levinson's book, my perspective is that of a Black female who grew up in a poor/working class, segregated neighborhood in North Philly and attended a basically all-Black elementary and middle school. My perspective also includes an educational background in psychology and the humanities and work experience in the field of social services.

Of the all-Black schools I attended, I admit, I have both fond and nightmarish memories. The nightmarish memories I have about being bullied aren't specific to attending segregated schools, however my fond memories are particular to this environment. They include, for example, our assemblies. Prior to beginning we would always sing the national anthem, of course, but then we followed it with my favorite, the Black national anthem. It wasn't until I attended a multicultural high school where the Black national anthem was absent that I realized how much I enjoyed the song. It wasn't until I was in my first graduate program in humanities that I realized how much the song meant to me. It was then that I found out that most non-Black Americans did not even know of the existence of the Black national anthem.\*

My high school education experiences in multicultural and multiracial settings have made me appreciate that my early education was grounded in African-American history and

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\* I took the opportunity to play the Black national anthem for my classmates, and I here offer readers this link to a performance of the song: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyS3HPInHtI>.

culture. However, I now know that had I been limited to this perspective, my opportunities would have been limited as well. My experiences in high school, college, and graduate school expanded my worldview significantly, allowing me to somewhat successfully navigate within the dominant culture and thus increase my opportunities.

De facto segregation brings up complicated and controversial issues relating to race, social structure, diversity, class, mobility and opportunity. I believe Levinson does an outstanding job in providing an overview of these issues. She discusses the problem of de facto segregation with surprising insight and frank acknowledgement of the factors that helped create it. She is thoughtful in her reflections on this segregation, continuously weighing both pros and cons. But despite all this, I still think Levinson's proposal to focus on a civic education is not enough. It is just one tool to begin to address the disadvantages that non-Whites face. Some of these stem from the fact that non-Whites have been *purposefully* segregated—not so much by laws, as by intentional actions on the part of Whites who have chosen to flee areas that non-Whites had chosen to integrate, leaving many non-Whites to struggle in “ghettos” across the nation. Some of the disadvantages stem from the non-Whites' minority status. But in calling for minorities to participate more fully in civic and political activities, I don't think Levinson fully comprehends what she is in support of, or rather those who she is in support of.

At one point in the book Levinson discusses how she and other teachers are hesitant to install a “smart, mature, high achieving and very sociable,” but nonetheless pregnant 14-year-old eighth grader as class president. The teen rightfully won the position through the school's own free and fair official election process, however the teachers are concerned about what her pregnancy might mean to her classmates. Does it mean the school condones teen pregnancy? Is the girl the best role model or the right person to represent the school? I

take issue with Levinson's concern, not because I was once myself a "smart, mature, high achieving," but nonetheless pregnant 14-year-old, but because Levinson fails to realize that in the population she's dealing with, there will be an abundance of imperfect and less than ideal role models. This is not because the people of segregated communities are inherently flawed, but because crime, poverty, abuse, and neglect, among other things, are not unusual in these neighborhoods. Everybody in "the hood" knows someone who's been arrested, or been to jail or prison. In many situations it is the person's own family member who has gotten in trouble with the law. (This is why psychology assessments that ask if a person knows someone who's committed a crime are unfairly biased against people of color and/or the poor.) It's not unusual for the children themselves to have been involved in the criminal justice system, or for them or their parents (or relatives) to have issues with drug or alcohol abuse. If Levinson is hesitant about a smart, mature, and high-achieving but pregnant teen being the right person for a leadership position, how will the rest of society feel about collective action taken by a whole group of these societal misfits? Will society be willing to accept an ex-con, an ex-drug addict as a member of Congress? Would they, say, elect as governor a drug-free, high achiever, who has an uncle in jail and a dad who is addicted to crack?

Of course there have been White people with these problems who still managed to be elected to high-profile government jobs. For example, George W. Bush had a drinking problem, and there's the infamous Canadian "crack mayor" Rob Ford. But the advantage that White people have in these situations is two-fold. First, the action of one White person does not reflect back on the entire race. The second is that their transgressions are more easily forgiven and forgotten. During the 2008 presidential debates, the fact that Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin had a pregnant teenage daughter was virtually a nonissue.

The fact that Palin was a woman may have helped soften the public response, but George W. was a male running for the top spot in the nation, and his checkered past did not significantly impact his chances of being elected.

Black people just don't get that same pass. For Whites a transgression is seen as something that can be overcome because it is not attributed to their nature. Black people, unlike White people, are born having to prove over and over again that they are not like the negative stereotypes associated with their race. For centuries, Blacks were believed to be and portrayed as inherently criminal and immoral, and this, unfortunately, is a stereotype that has not yet been fully eradicated.

Levinson largely places the solution to the problems raised by de facto segregation on the shoulders of the disadvantaged youth by focusing on their empowerment through a civic education. She believes it is critical that they learn to use the "language of power"—the language and ways of the dominant social group, the White middle class—in order to get ahead. She acknowledges there are ethical concerns about reinforcing minority students' view of themselves as outsiders. In essence, this teaches them that they are not good enough to make it as they are and they need to behave like someone else to get ahead. Levinson questions if it is fair to put this burden on these youth. But the fact remains that they are the ones in a position of disadvantage and they are the ones who need to be empowered so that their chances of social and economic success improve.

Although I can understand Levinson's position, I would argue that it is just as important to educate Whites, particularly well-to-do Whites, as it is to empower non-Whites. I can agree that, to improve their circumstances, non-Whites need to learn "code-switching"—how to behave and express themselves like those in the majority group in order to gain respect. But, I would argue, Whites, for their part, have to be taught about the

experiences, perspectives, and contributions of non-Whites—so they can give respect. It is said that White America has no idea how Black America lives. I find this ironic because even while growing up in racially segregated communities, Black Americans learn a good deal about how White America lives. With regards to the “White privilege” that blinds Whites to the experiences of others, Levinson writes, “Power is often invisible to those who have it; it is so naturally woven into the fabric of their existence that those with power are able to exercise it unintentionally and even subconsciously.” Furthermore, it “blinds Whites to how their own and others’ experiences have been shaped by their race.” For instance, the absence or diminished appearance of Blacks and other minorities in history books is not apparent to Whites, even while it is glaringly obvious to Blacks and other minorities (who come to see the history they have to learn as not being their own).

The history taught to young people needs to include the contributions and experiences of African Americans, women, and other minorities. This history shouldn’t be segregated to special courses that diminish the history’s importance. It needs to be taught as part of the standard curriculum.

To combat the advantage linked to White privilege, Levinson suggests that young people be taught to recognize the “particularity of their own perspective, including the ways in which their ethnoracial and cultural identities help shape those perspectives.” For example, Whites might learn about how the very names that some minorities carry—Levinson’s student Laquita for instance—puts them at a very real disadvantage. In President Obama’s 2014 State of the Union address he said, “The best measure of opportunity is access to a good job,” however studies show that résumés from jobseekers with ethnic and Afrocentric names like Laquita are more likely to be passed over. Young people need to be made aware of this type of bias, but more importantly, taught to question why a name like

Laquita should be subject to less respect than a name like Mary. They should in time come to respect Laquitas as much as people who have been given any other name.

I believe an education focused on mutual respect, where members of the majority group are taught to respect the cultural and social capital of minorities, could eliminate the need for civic empowerment entirely. Instead of focusing on fighting for rights, perhaps society could focus on evolving to a higher level. Perhaps this is a naïve and optimistic outcome for something as simple as mutual respect, but it is what I hope for nonetheless.

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