BOOK REVIEW

RACE, CLASS & CONSERVATISM

By Thomas D. Boston


As the debate continues concerning whether the economic opportunities of many African Americans remain restricted by persistent racial discrimination or their subordinate class position, Race, Class and Conservatism is one book that cannot be ignored. It ranks among the more theoretically and methodologically informed studies to date in its contention that racial discrimination in the job market still remains as the fundamental obstacle to socioeconomic gains by African American workers.

Written by Thomas D. Boston, as associate professor of management at the Georgia Institute of Technology, this work is, in part, a major refutation of four contentious books by neoconservative economists and social policy analysts, including Thomas Sowell’s Market and Minorities and Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality, Walter Williams’s State Against Blacks, and George Gilder’s Wealth and Poverty. It rejects their thesis that free markets are incompatible with racial discrimination and that differences in job skills, education and other measures of productivity are the main factors that assign African Americans to a disadvantaged position in the labor market. Nor does the book accept the sociologist William J. Wilson’s widely discussed argument presented in The Declining Significance of Race and more recently in The Truly Disadvantaged that economic class is more significant than race in determining the life chances of African Americans. Unfortunately, in this regard, Boston perplexedly interprets too narrowly Wilson’s thesis when he suggests that the latter provides “the foundation of neoconservative ideas on race.” Some of Wilson’s ideas are not beyond criticism, but in the opinion of this reviewer Wilson is miles apart from the neoconservatives both in terms of his explanation of the causes of racial inequality and the policy prescriptions he has offered.

Insightfully, to demonstrate why race is antecedent to class, Boston provides a model of class and racial stratification which explains how the African American class structure both past and present is a product of the historical dynamics of racial conflict and discrimination in conjunction with larger social, political
and economic forces. In doing so, he draws attention to several major issues contested by class and race relations theorists: the problem of defining and determining unambiguous boundaries between classes in a population, making connections between objectively determined classes and subjective forms of political and social consciousness, and analyzing the interaction between racial subordination and class composition and their impact on the advancement of the African American community.

Thus, synthesizing aspects of the contributions of Marx and Weber's class theory, along with Nicos Poulantzas's concept of class fractions (which Boston refers to as class segments), and Anthony Gidden's notion of the new middle class as a class possessing scarce forms of labor, there are three key classes in Boston's formulation of the class structure: the capitalist class, the middle class and the working class. Each major class boundary is determined by its relation to the means of production. Class segments of each major class (the old and new capitalist class and the new middle class) are defined as subgroups or status groups of individuals with "similar 'life chances' derived from common locations within the division of labor and similar patterns of income distribution."

Class strata, on the other hand, are based on the social and political consciousness likely to be reflected by each class segment and are "significantly correlated with a particular segment."

Corresponding to the above, race is incorporated into Boston's tripartite class model to reflect the unique history and classification of the African American class structure, focusing on such events as the era of slavery, Reconstruction, the Civil War, the collapse of cotton tenancy in the South, African American migrations to the North, and the modern civil rights movement. Three key classes are established. The black capitalist class (and its associated class segments, the old and new black capitalist class), which Boston believes is often ignored because of its small size and the fact that most studies often merge the black capitalist class with the black middle class. The class strata of the black capitalist class are further subdivided into the indigenous and dependent strata. Secondly, in a similar fashion, the black middle class and its class segments, the old and new black middle class and its respective class strata, the independent, dependent and assimilated strata are delineated. Thirdly, the black working class and its class segments, drawn from labor market segmentation theory, are delineated into primary, secondary and marginalized segments, which are then further subdivided into the upper, masses and lumpen strata. This examination of each class, class segment and strata from a historical and contemporary perspective generates some valuable insights into the internal class structure of African Americans and offers possibilities for future research, particularly in examining conflicts and struggles within various class segments from the standpoint of African American social, political and economic development.

Further, Boston examines singularly and in a regression and logit analysis, a