As a result of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement, overt de jure racial discrimination has disappeared in this country. Once widely used signs designating separate “colored” and “white” restrooms and water fountains are now found in museum exhibits. Nevertheless, more than a generation after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a disproportionate number of African Americans remain unemployed, undereducated, or incarcerated. One of the pioneering works that sought to address this disturbing discrepancy in American life was Alphonso Pinkney’s *The Myth of Black Progress* (1984).

Written during the Reagan presidency, Pinkney’s book reflected the dismay and anger that many African Americans felt toward the fortieth president of the United States. Because of the enormous cost associated with the US military’s dramatic buildup during the 1980s, domestic programs, especially those associated with African Americans, were given extremely low priority. This “dismissal” of African American interests appeared linked to the fact that the vast majority of blacks had not supported the successful Reagan presidential campaign of 1980. Moreover, President Reagan surrounded himself with such neoconservative black advisers and appointees as Thomas Sowell and Clarence Thomas, who themselves rejected giving special consideration to African Americans. Consequently, African Americans, from entrepreneurs to welfare recipients, saw government support of their activities diminish. Even before Ronald Reagan took office, an increasing amount of scholarly research during the 1970s suggested that government programs aimed at ameliorating the plight of African Americans were no longer necessary. In an important section of his book entitled “Social Scientists and the Myth of Black Progress,” Pinkney criticized the tendency of such scholars to both exaggerate the extent of black progress, and to blame any lingering instances of African American social and economic deprivation on the moral and intellectual deficiencies of blacks themselves.

Two of the works cited by Pinkney that reflected this disturbing trend were Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s two-volume book, *Time on the Cross* (1974), and William Julius Wilson’s monograph, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Fogel and Engerman, two economists who used computer-generated data to analyze the institution of slavery, concluded that American slavery was not as horrific as most had been led to believe. Wilson, an African American sociologist, stated that class rather than race was now the primary factor in determining people’s life chances in America.
From Pinkney’s perspective, *Time on the Cross* was dangerous in that it suggested that affirmative action programs (which were instituted to redress past racial discrimination and oppression) were unnecessary since alleged historic racial discrimination and oppression (exemplified by slavery) were not as bad as people thought. Similarly, *The Declining Significance of Race* incorrectly implied that historic discrimination based upon race had quickly vanished in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. It bears noting that, while Pinkney characterized Wilson as a black conservative scholar, Wilson’s later works, most notably *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1987) and *When Work Disappears: The Work of the New Urban Poor* (1996), clearly convey his liberal/social democrat inclinations. It appears plausible that Pinkney’s (and others’) criticism of *The Declining Significance of Race* helped prompt Wilson’s later clarification of his ideological predilections.

For his part Pinkney, rather than solely react to the work of conservative scholars, sought to analyze the status of African Americans in the post-civil rights movement United States. To do this, his analysis stressed the dichotomy between “equality in principle” and “equality in practice.” Although African Americans after the passage of 1960s civil rights legislation achieved equality in principle, they by no means had achieved equality in practice. As one of the many statistics contained in *The Myth of Black Progress* revealed, in 1970, African American families earned 63 percent of the median income of white families; by 1980, this figure had dropped to 58 percent. According to Pinkney, this and other disparities between black and white economic and educational achievement could be attributed to ongoing American individual and institutional racism.

One of the ways to measure a book’s importance is whether its basic thesis is substantiated by subsequent scholarship. Among the later works that echoed Alphonso Pinkney’s book were Fred R. Harris and Roger Wilkins’s co-edited volume, *Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States* (1988), and Andrew Hacker’s *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992). Harris and Wilkins’s *Quiet Riots*, compiled to survey race relations in the United States twenty years after the Kerner Commission Report of 1968, confirmed Pinkney’s thesis of “the myth of black progress.” While some African Americans had indeed improved their socioeconomic position between 1968 and 1988, a significant number of blacks had not materially benefited from affirmative action and other 1960s civil rights legislation. Similarly, Hacker’s *Two Nations* reaffirmed the persistence of white individual and institutional racism (which limited the extent of African American socioeconomic mobility). Yet, while Harris, Wilkins, and Hacker employed Pinkney’s paradigm, neither *Quiet Riots* nor *Two Nations* makes any reference to *The Myth of Black Progress*.

Despite its significance, the relegation of Alphonso Pinkney’s book to (undeserved) obscurity may be attributed to the fact that some of his published works, before and after *The Myth of Black Progress*, contained unmistakable elements of black nationalist and radical sentiment. For instance, after citing black militant H. Rap Brown’s famous quote, “Violence is as American as cherry pie,” Pinkney’s *The American Way of Violence* (1972) proposed a clear historical linkage between the massacre of Native Americans, the brutal enslavement of Africans, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atrocities perpetrated against Vietnamese peasants during the war in Vietnam, and the extermination of the Black Panther
Party. Similarly, his *Lest We Forget: White Hate Crimes: Howard Beach and Other Racial Atrocities* (1994) documented more contemporary instances of racial violence against African Americans.

Although Ronald Reagan has been out of the White House for several years, the conservative reverberations of the 1980s remain alive and well in the United States. In this climate, Alphonso Pinkney and other black nationalist and radical scholars, while not silenced, have been marginalized. Although “political” considerations have contributed to the marginalization of *The Myth of Black Progress*, the book can be justifiably criticized for occasionally crossing the line that separates scholarly discourse from polemics. Pinkney, clearly, is an impassioned critic of the Reagan administration and the conservative academic genre that helped form the ideological basis of the so-called “Reagan Revolution.” Yet, even this perceived weakness can be instructive for students. Although the Reagan presidency, in many circles, is portrayed as an extremely positive period in recent American history, there is an alternative viewpoint. Alphonso Pinkney eloquently articulates this contrarian position regarding the Reagan years. More important, until the majority of African Americans (and not just a relative few) are provided the opportunity to fully realize their potential in the United States, the title of Pinkney’s book will remain a reasonable assessment of their condition.

**REFERENCES**

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