

**Affirmative Action: A Time for Change?**

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## Affirmative Action: A Time for Change?

By Caleb Rosado

**ABSTRACT:** The author suggests that a great deal of the controversy over the affirmative action debate is a failure to distinguish between “fair play” and “fair share.” America is caught up with justice as fairness, which raises questions in the minds of many who are not familiar with the original purposes of affirmative action, which was focused on fair share, or justice as need. Debunking the whole meritocracy argument, Rosado goes on to show that the current attack on affirmative action is not just another manifestation of institutional racism but emerges from conflicting deep-level value systems. He then suggests a more workable model of affirmative as one based on individual need rather than on group traits such as race or color. What is really needed in society, however, is a shift to a new social ecological paradigm of interconnectedness and interdependence for the 21st century.

The current debate over affirmative action, like all other hotly contested issues such as multiculturalism, bilingual education, immigration and the like, often ends up disseminating more heat than light. This is largely due to the polar perspectives that people tend to take, in a desire to undermine the other’s position. The result is often a failure to see that the truth may lie somewhere in between. There is thus much need for illumination on the subject for an understanding beneficial to both sides of the issue.

Affirmative action emerged in the 1960s as a result of efforts by the civil rights movement to get America to honor its *original contract*, that “all [people] are created equal.” In addition the Pledge of Allegiance promises “liberty and justice for all.” This idealism is a promise of equal opportunity for all individuals regardless of color, national origin, race, religion, and sex, which up to this point in history had not been honored for people of color. While first addressed to the needs of African-Americans, later on the needs of American Indians, Asian-Americans, and Latinos were added. For this and other “unalienable rights,” the founders and followers of the civil rights movement marched and died, and finally obtained the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

However, such action by itself, prohibiting discrimination in the present and in the future, did not necessarily correct past inequities. So what if people now had equal access, the advantage would still go to those who had benefited the longest and most from past discrimination. I may have equal access to get in the same boxing ring with the likes of a Mike Tyson, but that’s no guarantee of an equal opportunity of winning. The odds are stacked in favor of failure. Therefore, in order to correct for such inequities, especially in the areas of housing, education, and employment, steps were taken to ensure that those *groups* that historically had been excluded or given limited access to societal rewards, were now given an opportunity to catch up. Thus, affirmative action refers to social policies encouraging favorable treatment of socially disadvantaged groups, especially in employment, education, and housing, without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, in order to reverse historical trends of discrimination and to create equality of opportunity for qualified persons. Keep in mind that “equality of opportunity”

is not the same as “equality of outcome.” The law should guarantee first, but no one can guarantee the second, nor should they, for that depends on individual initiative to take advantage of the opportunities made available.

Affirmative action is essentially a “race/gender solution” to a “race/gender problem,” with middle class white women as the greatest beneficiaries. The latter have benefited most as a result of a “minority” status, which gives them a decided advantage over African-Americans and Latinos in obtaining contracts, entitlements, set asides and executive positions, when the concern of those in power is to keep access to privilege in the hands of “Whites.” This is why the term “people of color” emerged in the late ‘80s early ‘90s, to differentiate white women from racial/ethnic groups, since both are designated as “minority.” There is no such thing, however, as a race/gender solution to a race/gender problem, since “race” and “gender” are not the problem. If they were then all one would need to do is to change one’s race and/or gender. The problem is *racism, the outward manifestation of an inward system of values deliberately designed to structure privilege by means of an objective, differential, and unequal treatment of people, for the purpose of social advantage over scarce resources. This values system justifies power of position by placing a negative meaning and value on perceived or actual biological/cultural differences.*

The key element in understanding racism is to focus on the undergirding values and beliefs system out of which racist action emerges (Rosado 1999). This deep-level values system gives biological differences, such as skin color, texture of the hair, physical features; or cultural differences, such as language, religion, ethnicity, or accent, a negative value and meaning. This negative meaning then legitimizes treating the other as inferior to oneself or one’s group. The result is an objective (visible, measurable, tangible), differential (there is an obvious difference between groups), and unequal treatment (the difference in treatment is not the same), where one groups gets consistently short-changed. The working definition for both racism and sexism is the same. Both refer to evil perpetrated against others. The only difference is that in racism color is the excuse for oppression, while in sexism it is gender. But racism has nothing to do with color, just like sexism has nothing to do with sex or gender. Biological differences are not the problem; they are merely the excuse for oppression.

No person of color has ever suffered discrimination because of the color of their skin. If color were the problem then the solution would be a change of skin color, an action which persons of color have often attempted, because of the wrong assumption that the problem was the color of their skin. Yet, the problem is not skin color, but value systems that perpetrate evil against others and then justify that evil by focusing on outward differences. These outward differences, such as color, gender, language, religion, are just that, differences. In and of themselves they contain no positive or negative value; there are merely biological or cultural necessities. Thus, there is nothing wrong with the color black, brown or yellow. It is not skin color that forms the basis for discrimination, but the *negative meaning and value* given to the color of skin, which meaning is not inherent in the color nor the skin but in the culture.<sup>1</sup>Roger Bastide (1967) grasped this very well when he declared: “Color is neutral; it is the mind that gives it meaning.” Neither are women discriminated against because of their gender. If gender

were the problem then the solution would also be to have a sex-change operation. But the problem is not gender but value systems which benefit men at the expense of women and then justify the evil perpetrated by putting the blame on gender. Women are discriminated against because of the *negative meaning and value* given to their gender. It is not our gender or skin color that we have to change, but value systems of oppression that benefit some groups at the expense of others. This whole process is what William Ryan (1976) calls “blaming the victim” It is an ideological process that justifies inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality. The logical outcome of analyzing social problems in terms of the deficiencies of the victim is a simple formula for action: Change the victim, rather than one’s value system.

### **Genuine Justice:**

Here is where justice comes in. *Genuine justice is not based on fairness!* In fact, a preoccupation with justice as fairness lies at the root of most problems in our society and in the world today, whether between individuals, groups or nations, and is at the center of the affirmative action debate. At the heart of “justice as fairness” lies *equal* treatment, which wrongly assumes everyone is the same and thus the need for “fair play,” which we all learn from childhood. But socio-historical circumstances preclude equality. This is why in some track and field events, the starting blocks are staggered, so that everyone will have an equal opportunity. Affirmative action, then, is equitable measures—short of restructuring society—which seek to make for a level playing field. Why? Because as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “There is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals.”

There are many people today in America’s class-divided society that, because of socio-historical conditions or merely accidents of birth, find themselves on the “inside track” and don’t always realize that circumstances are stacked in their favor, but think they are playing on a level field. When they see the starting blocks being staggered, to give those on the “outside track” an equal chance, they cry out, “unfair,” “reverse discrimination,” “preferential treatment,” not realizing that the playing field of American society is stratified, by class, race and gender. Short of totally redesigning the playing field of socioeconomic, political structures, affirmative action becomes essential in righting societal inequities. It is based on the “principle of redress,” that undeserved inequalities call for rectification. Since inequalities of birth are undeserved, these inequalities are to be somehow compensated for. Thus in order to treat all persons equally and provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those born into or placed in less favorable social positions (Rawls, 1971). This “fair share” approach is a particularistic and not a universal action, since it is an attempt to place particular groups in the position that they would have held had there been no barriers in their paths to success (Willie, 1991).

However, this approach places affirmative action in a catch-22 situation. Created on the idealism that the rights of *individuals* should be respected without regard to color, national origin, race, religion, or sex, it ends up in the dilemma of contradicting this very premise by giving a perceived “advantage” to underrepresented *groups*. (Keep in mind that since the playing field of our American class-structured society is not even, what affirmative action is doing is not really an “advantage” but an effort to make for a more equitable field.) How then does one solve this supposed “dilemma” at the heart of the

current debate? The solution is found in the essence of justice. *Genuine justice is based on need, not fairness.* And since people's needs differ, due to differing socio-historical circumstances, true justice does not spring from what people deserve, but from what they need. It is not fair play but fair share, based on individual need.

Many people are opposed to affirmative action because they believe it violates a sense of *fairness*. This is a result of the "Just World Phenomenon." Stanley Coren (1992) explains the concept this way:

People tend to feel that the world is, with a few bumps here and there, pretty much a fair place, where people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get. This notion of a just world results from our training as children that good is rewarded and evil is punished. A natural conclusion can be drawn from that kind of reasoning: Those who are rewarded must be good, and those who suffer (even from our own discrimination and prejudice) must deserve their fate.

Unfortunately, much of what passes for racism in America today is not regarded as such by Whites, because they buy into this Just World Phenomenon. The result is that they tend to see situations from their own perspective—as fair and just—and seldom from the perspective of the Other, the victims of evil. If women and people of color see themselves as victims it is often believed they bring it on themselves or are making a bigger issue of things than there really is need for. The end result is that when it comes to injustice in American society, most Americans "naturally" gravitate to the role of bystander and do nothing. Yet, where was the fairness in slavery? in the genocidal destruction of American Indians? in "stealing" half of Mexico from Mexico? in placing 120,000 Japanese-Americans in concentration camps? in our cities operating segregated school districts within the same area with vastly disparate budgets for each? in congress passing laws that benefit the richest one- percent of the U.S. population while denying basic survival rights to the poorest twenty percent? Why is it that many conservative Americans are loudly silent on these forms of injustice or preferential treatment based on class? Can it be that this obsession with strict fairness tends to manifest itself only when there is a danger of someone else getting more than what we think she/he deserves, especially when what they get is precisely what we want?

### **The Concern With Meritocracy:**

Such a question raises three concerns when it comes to affirmative action hires. First, many people—some minorities included—are opposed to affirmative action because they perceive it as some kind of "social charity" program or government "handout" which makes people feel inferior. But this is merely a case of perception. Veterans from the various wars have been receiving economic and educational benefits as a result of the G.I. Bill of Rights, whether or not they had experienced combat duty, were draftees or had enlisted. Yet none of them or society at large has perceived this as unfair, preferential treatment, or sees it as a program that makes people feel inferior for accepting such benefits. Prior to the 1960s White males did not have to compete with persons of color nor women for the best jobs or academic positions in this country. Strangely, none of them felt inferior for such preferential treatment. Most welfare money in this country goes to the rich in the form of entitlements, economic incentives, tax

breaks, and corporate pork (Carney, 1995; Alterman, 1995). Yet, none of them feel inferior for taking such government dole outs. As Bernie Ward, of KGO Talk Radio in San Francisco, asks, “Why do politicians feel that if we give money to the rich it is good for the economy, but if we give money to the poor it is bad for the economy?” The truth of the matter is that if it were not for affirmative action most women and persons of color would not be in positions of leadership, no matter how qualified they are. This is because the purpose of affirmative action is to broaden the pool of qualified candidates. Thus, the perception of affirmative action as charity making people feel inferior needs drastic revision.

Second, all this talk about quotas is crass hypocrisy. While people are objecting to 10%, 15%, or 20% set-asides for minorities at academic institutions or in the workplace, they are totally silent about the 80%, 85%, and even 90% set-asides for Whites. It is the same line of reasoning that decries welfare for the poor, but is loudly silent with welfare for the rich. As Frank Trelease, former Dean of the Law School at the University of Wyoming, reminded Gerry Spence in conversation about the purpose of the law: “The law is designed to deprive the people of justice. It is designed to protect the manufacturer, the employer, the banker, and the businessman. It is designed to protect the rich and powerful. To hell with the ordinary citizen!” (Spence, 1996:404). It is for this reason that the Supreme Court of the United States, in ruling in favor of the University of Michigan on a lawsuit brought against the university for its admissions policies that gave preferential treatment to underrepresented minorities, “upheld the right of universities to consider race in admissions procedures in order to achieve a diverse student body” (News Service, 2003). In this 2003 decision the court upheld a similar ruling made 25 years earlier in 1978 in the Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke.

Third, is the concern with that word “qualified.” The objection is often raised that a more qualified person was turned down. Thus behind affirmative action is an underlying assumption that any person hired through such efforts is not really qualified, and would not have made it through normal channels except for affirmative action. While some may find a few extreme examples as evidence to support this argument, why is it that the person eliminated—usually a white male—is always seen as the more “qualified” candidate? Why is it that unqualified white people never seem to come up in these discussions? Have people not heard of “The Peter Principle,” that in every hierarchical organization people tend to rise to their level of incompetence? The late Dr. Laurence J. Peter published his principle in 1969, before minorities were ever a factor, because of the overwhelming number of white males in key positions who had risen to their level of *incompetence* [read “without qualifications”]!

What is behind this push for a “qualified” person is a disingenuous belief in *meritocracy*—the notion that a position should go to the most capable person who has earned it. It is disingenuous in that the push for meritocracy only rises when those who have claimed a privileged status in American society now see it threatened. The means by which to defend this elitist position is by changing the rules. Meritocracy is merely an ideology by which the elite seek to preserve their privileged status. No one is questioning the fact that people should be qualified for a job or position. But don’t change the rules in order to maintain privilege and power through a system that denied people not only access but also the qualifications by which to compete on an equal basis. Such a system is called “institutional racism.” *Institutional racism is the conscious manipulation of the*

*structures of society's institutions so as to systematically discriminate against people of color by their prestructured practices, policies and power arrangements. Merely conforming to the institution's mode of operation frees individuals from personal discrimination, as the institutions now do the discriminating for individuals* (Knowles and Prewitt, 1969). It is the most pervasive and powerful expression of racism in American society, or any society for that matter that alters the rules of employment in order to benefit a small privileged group at the expense of others deemed undeserving.

Our society is so structured that most people, especially Whites, buy into this institutional racism without personally having power or being personally aware that they have power or that they are in a situation of privilege. As Peggy McIntosh says, "As a white person I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, *white privilege*, which puts me at an advantage . . . I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring domination on my group" (McIntosh, 1988).

Audrey Smedley (1993), in her outstanding book, *Racism in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, brings out the force of White privilege and its expression in institutional racism, in the following statement.

Race in the American mind was and is tantamount to a statement about profound and unbridgeable differences. In whatever context race comes to play, it conveys the meaning of nontranscendable social distance. This sense of difference is conditioned into most individuals early in their lives and becomes bonded to emotions nurtured in childhood. In the United States, it is expressed in all kinds of situations and encounters between peoples. It is structured into the social system through residential separation, differential education, training, and incomes, and informal restrictions against socializing, intermarriage, and common membership in various organizations, including, most visibly, the church. It is reflected in virtually all media representations of American society and in institutional aspects of culture such as music, the arts, scientific research, educational institutions, politics and political forums, businesses, the theater, television, music, and film industries, and recreational activities. It provides the unspoken guidelines for daily interaction among persons defined as of different races, especially black and white. It sets the standards and rules for conduct, even though individuals may not always be conscious of this fact (p. 21).

Such institutional expressions of privilege are not readily perceived by Whites as "privilege" but as the "given" day-in and day-out opportunities of life, to which everyone has access. However, when, as a result of demographic and political changes, Whites see their status and the landscape of social power changing, this heretofore unseen privilege now becomes most visible. "We are probably never so aware of phenomena and objects as when we are about to gain or lose them. Conversely, we never take them so much for granted as when we are assured in their possession" (Smith, 1986:7). When threatened, this previously unseen privileged status becomes something to be protected at all costs. Blacks tend to do the same when they sense Latinos and Asians encroaching on their hard-fought gains and privileges. This seems to be the case now that Latinos have

surpassed African Americans as the largest emerging majority group in the country. This kind of exclusive behavior cuts across all race groups, not just Whites, and is correlated with a sense of a loss of power and privilege. Langdon Gilkey puts it this way. “When [people] give their ultimate devotion to their own welfare or to the welfare of their group, they are no longer free to be completely moral or rational when they find themselves under pressure. Whenever the security of the object of this commitment is threatened, they are driven by an intense anxiety to reinforce that security” (Gilkey, 1966:231).

It is under such conditions that people tend to riot, both Blacks and Whites. People riot when they feel frustrated. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that, “A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard” (King, Jr., 1968:112). This is usually the experience of persons of color, who due to their state of powerlessness will often burn, loot and destroy. But White people riot also, just in a different way. Whites riot, not by burning and looting, for one does not burn down what one owns, but by using the system over which they have control to pass laws and ordinances which limit the opportunities of others in order to secure their “rights”. These legislations, in the long run, are destructive of more lives than any riots, which loot and burn. The two propositions passed in California, Proposition 187 in 1994, the Save Our State Initiative, which sought to protect the rights of legal U.S. residents by not granting the same rights to undocumented immigrants; and Proposition 209 in 1996, the Civil Rights Initiative, which eliminated affirmative action programs, were both examples of the way white people “riot”. When you have control of the socioeconomic and political system, you will use this power to retain your privileges when you see these being eroded. Thus, both Blacks and Whites riot, just in different ways: one as an expression of powerlessness, the other as an expression of power. This latter mode is what defines institutional racism. The current attack on affirmative action is a manifestation of this form of institutional racism.

Some people object, however, that affirmative action has not really worked. Yes it has, and some of us minorities would not be where we are today if it were not for affirmative action. Yet, it could be more effective if it were not attacked at every step. “Americans are, indeed, in the habit of vigorously resisting civil rights initiatives and then pronouncing them failures” (Cose, 1997:174). Prior to affirmative action women and people of color were kept out of the playing field of economic and academic competition. As a result of affirmative action they have been given access to the track. But in the race to success and achievement, one group has been given the inside lane with no obstacles, while the other has been given the outside lane with high hurdles. White males, for example, comprise just 43% of the workforce, yet hold 95% of all senior level positions in Fortune 500 companies (Good for Business, 1995). In view of the disparity of outcomes in some situations, politicians, educators and some researchers, all blame the hampered runners and fail to recognize the obstacles that have been thrown in their path. Among these are: the glass-ceiling, unequal funding of school systems, treating first-generation college students the same as second and third-generation students, the presence of few mentors and role models.

But some will counter. How do you explain the Asian-American success story? They too are first-generation, especially the recent comers from Southeast Asia? And also come out of poverty conditions? A survey of most schools will show that most Asians will gravitate to the sciences—math, physics, chemistry, and engineering. Why? These are disciplines in which English is not a crucial factor. Research by Caplan, Choy,



and Whitmore (1992) shows that in the liberal arts Asians don't do as well as in the sciences. Another factor, one which Caplan and company regard as "one of the most powerful independent predictors of academic performance," is retention of their own culture, traditions and values, while being open to American ways. These serve as anchors under conditions of social upheaval. The cultural values of groups that do place a high value on education will result in higher educational achievement than among those groups who do not make education a top-drawer value. But this is the topic for another body of research.

Paul Kivel suggests that, "one indication that attacks on affirmative action are part of a white backlash against equality is that affirmative action in the form of preferences that primarily benefit white people is not being questioned" (1996:172). Kivel shows the way people deny the existence of racism and why affirmative action is not needed, through an illustration of how men deny responsibility of violence against women and seem unable to acknowledge such violence. The tactics used and the typical statements made to justify the actions taken have a progressive character, that go from total denial to outright justification. The following table is an extension of ideas drawn from Kivel (pp. 40-48) to include affirmative action.

**RETAINING BENEFITS OF RACISM, WHILE AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY**

TACTIC	TYPICAL STATEMENT	
	VIOLENCE	RACISM/ AFFIRMATIVE ACTION
1. Denial	“I didn’t hit her.”	“It’s a level playing field.”
2. Minimization	“It was only a slap.”	“Achievement mostly depends on personal ability.”
3. Blame	“She asked for it.”	“Look at the way they act.”
4. Redefinition	“It was mutual combat.”	“People of color are also racist.”
5. Unintentionality	“Things just got out of hand.”	“Hey, discrimination is a fact of life.”
6. It’s over now	“I’ll never do it again.”	“That was a long time ago, things are different now.”
7. It’s only a few men	“Most men wouldn’t hurt a woman.”	“Most people aren’t racist.”
8. Counterattack	“She controls everything.”	“It’s reverse discrimination.”
9. Competing Victimization	“Everybody is against men.”	“White males have rights too.”
10. Justification	“She deserved it.”	“They bring it on themselves.”

As long as racism continues to be a structural reality of American society, all talk of affirmative action as reverse discrimination is an “in-your-face” form of hypocrisy, since racism is nothing less than preferential treatment based on affirmative action *for* Whites. First get rid of racism then come and talk about removing affirmative action and creating a color-blind society. Racism is so much a part of the social fabric of American society that, as Claud Anderson suggests in *Black Labor, White Wealth*, “The only way America will ever be color-blind is if everyone literally lost their sight” (1994:55).

Part of the problem is the number of conservative Christians in this country that don’t always see the connection between the gospel and their politics (Rosado, 1995a,b). The result is often an unbalanced approach that, while rightly concerned with saving the lives of the unborn, does not show the same compassion for the countless others who suffer “social” deaths as a result of political policies of neglect and negation. Thus what they “preach” on Sunday is not matched by what they vote on Tuesday, in the name of “legal fairness.”

**The Solution:**

The solution to the affirmative action debate or debacle is to base the program, not on *group conditions* but on *individual need*. Just because one is Black, female or of Latino heritage does not automatically mean that one is at a disadvantage. Many an African-American person, or Asian-American, or Latino is doing quite well in this country, and should not be judged as disadvantaged and automatically deserving of affirmative action programs, simply because of their color, race, national origin or gender. There are many Whites in this country that are worse off than most. But because they are “white” are they to be deemed not worthy or deserving of special treatment? If the measure for equity is *need* rather than race or gender than the apparent problem is resolved. Affirmative action then becomes a program to help the socially disadvantaged—of any hue—based on individual need and not on arbitrary group factors of race, national origin or sex. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. had in mind, as Coretta Scott King reminds us, when “he spoke out sharply for all the poor in all their hues, for he knew if color made them different, misery and oppression made them the same” (King, 1967:vii). Affirmative action, or more correctly “compensatory action,” will then come in line with the idealism of our constitution, benefiting individuals and not merely groups. Obviously those who have been most socially disadvantaged because of their race, ethnicity, or gender, will also be the individuals greatest in need.

In situations where there is a *representational need*—for greater color, gender, or ethnic balance—color, gender and ethnicity will continue to be factors in correcting for such inequities. Yet even with all this, because of “colorism”—discrimination based solely on color—people of color outside of their professional context will continue to experience rejection, such as having difficulty in catching taxi cabs or followed in stores. Thus, color can never be completely set aside in addressing issues of affirmative action. But again, the focus is on need—the need for greater balance—and not just on race or gender. Yet, in the end, the issue is not really one of color but one of deep-level operational value systems, from which emerge racist ideologies, policies and practices (Rosado, 1999).

Such a plan can be easily implemented by using as a measure the vast social science data already available which show people’s socioeconomic status in society: income, occupation, schooling opportunity, quality of life and influences in the neighborhood, quality of education received, per student expenditure, family life, whether from a single-parent or a dual-parent home. All these factors are good indicators of socioeconomic need.

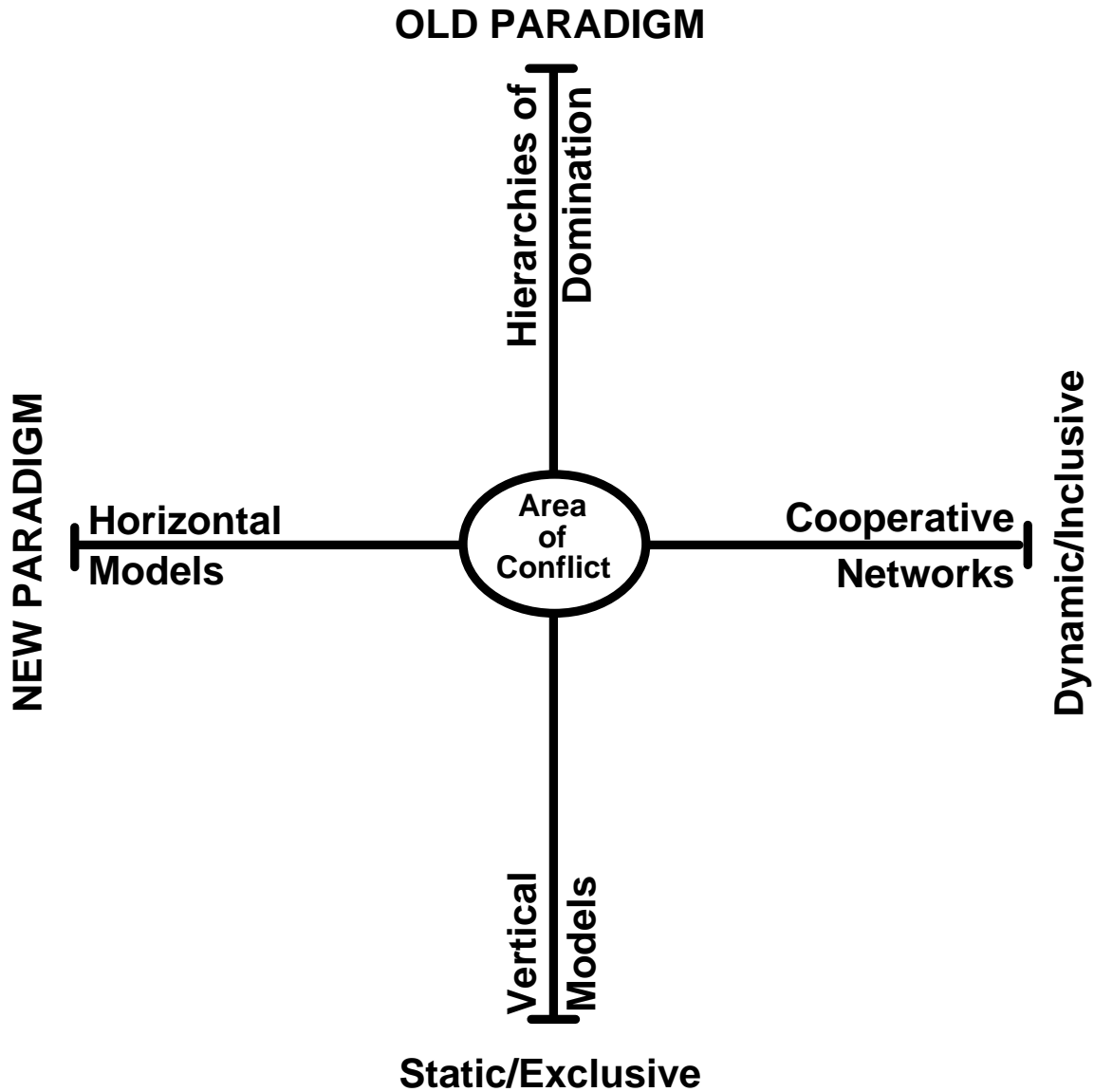
An additional way to bring effective change is to implement what Moskos and Butler call a “supply-side” model, rather than a “demand-side” model (1996). The “demand” version calls for bringing people up to fill a position whether or not they are qualified for it, because there is a “need” to fill slots or quotas. The “supply” model suggests that we first broaden the pool of qualified candidates by taking early steps, through education, training, and recruitment, to prepare people for positions of advancement. With the latter program one will then have a qualified base from which to select, rather than scampering around for anyone to fill slots. This is model followed by the military (Moskos and Butler, 1996).

Utilizing these measures, then, enables us to see the need for a new definition of affirmative action, such as the one by Anamaría Loya, attorney for MALDEF, which moves the concept from group to individual need. “Affirmative action is any measure, policy or law used to increase diversity or rectify discrimination so that qualified individuals have equal access to employment, education, business, and contracting opportunities” (1995:1). As Abdín Noboa says, “*Affirmative action is not about counting heads, it is about making heads count*” (personal conversation).

Paul Kivel raises a crucial point Whites need to ponder. “When whites attack affirmative action—if they are truly committed to American ideals of justice and equality—they should be proposing other remedies for racial inequality in our society. The hypocrisy is clear when white people who say they support equal opportunity attack affirmative action, yet want to leave intact the basic economic and racial injustices it is designed to correct. Ask people who oppose affirmative action how they propose to eliminate racial discrimination. You can learn a lot about their true beliefs from their answers” (1996:178). Andrew Hacker, in a review of five books both pro and con toward affirmative action, reminds us that, “Affirmative action has been our most successful policy for bringing citizens of slave descent into the main current of national life.” And yet, with a tone of sadness while glancing toward the future, he adds: “Further efforts to defend affirmative action will be immensely difficult; but without it, we will be taking a long step away from racial equity and parity” (Hacker, 1996).

The problem today is that most people are caught up in vertical models of hierarchies of domination—the old paradigm, while the changing times call for horizontal models of cooperative networks—the new paradigm (see graphic). Vertical models tend toward a static/exclusive worldview and mode of operation. Emerging from patriarchal, male values, they are concerned with power, independence, and control. Horizontal models, on the other hand, are dynamic, inclusive, and relevant to the changing times. Focused on networks of cooperative action, they are more reflective of female values of interconnectedness. The point where these two models meet is the *area of conflict*, where the two approaches and their proponents come in contact with each other.

# TWO MODELS OF OPERATION



[Graphic by Caleb Rosado, February 1997]

Affirmative action cannot be understood, however, in isolation of other major social problems, such as racism, economic exploitation and political gerrymandering. These are systemic problems, interconnected and interdependent on economical and political policies, and cultural values that legitimize inequality. As Fritjof Capra suggests, “Ultimately these problems must be seen as just different facets of *one single crisis*, which is largely a *crisis of perception*. It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of *an outdated worldview*, a perception of reality inadequate for

dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world” (1996:4). A change of perception is needed. This is one that moves people away from the old paradigm of exclusion to the new paradigm of inclusion; one that enables people to see the Other not as a “potential predator” but as a “profitable partner”<sup>2</sup>; one that shifts our values from domination to cooperation; one that transforms our ethics from selfish disconnectedness based on greed to socio-spiritual integration based on compassion.

The 21st century will be focused on interconnectedness, not just technologically, but humanly, environmentally and spiritually. Our problem is that we live in a fragmented world dominated by a fragmentary worldview. Fragmentation is the product of thought, which breaks the world up into bits and pieces that should not be broken up and creates unity where none exists (Bohm, 1992). These boundaries that separate and unify—races, nations, cultures, classes, genders, neighborhoods, religions, with each part regarded as “independent and self-existent”—are an invention of thought and then imposed on reality, which we then believe to be “real”. The result is a fragmentary, atomistic, binary, mechanical worldview, that divides what is indivisible—the oneness of the human family; and unites what is not really unitable—groupings of people/entities separate from the whole. Academic departments, like intellectual “guilds” protecting privileged expertise, are a prime example of false divisions and false unifications. “In science, for example, every little specialty is fragmented from every other one” (Bohm, 1992:4). All of this is a product of the Newtonian mechanical view of the world with its mind/body Cartesian split of either/or, dualistic understanding of reality. All of which is an illusion.

A new paradigm and worldview is needed that sees the world and all its life forms as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts in competition. Such a framework is the worldview of “wholeness”. Emerging from quantum physics, the worldview of wholeness clearly shows that life is not linear (Western), nor cyclical (Eastern), but *spiral* with a holistic, “universal flux,” where “mind and matter are not separate substances, [but] are different aspects of one whole and unbroken movement” (Bohm, 1980). It is a holistic worldview that acknowledges the interdependent yet autonomous nature of our social reality.

Traditional academic approaches to learning begin by studying the respective parts and how they all connect. The problem with this approach, “the whole is equal to the sum of the parts,” is that it often does not move from the parts to the whole, nor does it always see their inter-relationships. The wholistic approach sees the “whole in every part,” much like a hologram, where the whole is in the parts, just a smaller version. Thus, as long as we approach race and human relations from a fragmentary worldview we will never be able to solve the problems before us. As the saying goes, “you cannot get there from here.” Only when we see society as a hologram, a holistic entity of which the parts are smaller versions of the whole, will we see the way “home,” for the parts cannot be understood in isolation of the whole. They are all interconnected. The model of affirmative action that I suggest here is a first step in this direction.

Yes, the time has come to change affirmative action. Not to get rid of it, however, but to strip it of all political barnacles weighing it down, and streamline it back to its original purpose—to safeguard an equal opportunity for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic, historical, biological or cultural circumstances, whether accidental or deliberate. Affirmative action then will be seen as an “on-ramp” program to bring people

up to social speed so that they not get run over in the socioeconomic, political highway of life, but may enter it safely in their societal journey toward wholeness in the third millennium.

<sup>1</sup>Virtually all cultures, for example, give the color black a negative meaning, symbolic of evil and death. But this meaning resides not in the color but in the culture. See F. M. Adams & C. E. Osgood, "A Cross - Cultural Study of the Affective Meanings of Color," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 1975, Vol. 4, pp. 135-156. Cf. Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich, "The Dark Side of Self- and Social Perception: Black Uniforms and Aggression in Professional Sports," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1988, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 74-85, and the special issue of *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Spring 1967, on "Color and Race."

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to Samuel Betances for this predator/partner imagery.

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