

Hardship, Hard Times and Hard Hearts

by Tom W. Smith

In his seminal examination of race relations in this society, Gunnar Myrdal noted a Swedish proverb: "When the feed-box is empty, the horses will bite each other." Since Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* appeared in 1944, most research has confirmed the link between individual hard-

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ship and racial prejudice; people lower on the socio-economic ladder are more likely to hold prejudiced opinions, use derogatory language, and participate in racist groups and racist violence. But American history shows little link between general hard times and racial intolerance.

Evidence comes from studies of membership in racist organizations and political movements. "You think the influential men belong here?" asked an observer of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920's. "Then look at their shoes when they march in parade. The sheet doesn't cover the shoes." Studies of the Northern supporters of racist politicians and of lynch mobs show disproportionate membership from lower socio-economic groups.

Since prejudice is more prevalent among those groups, one might suspect it would be highest when the economy was depressed. But, as said previously, our country's past reveals little connection between hard times and prejudice. The anti-Catholic and anti-black riots in the urban Northeast during the Jacksonian period have often been linked to early industrialization and participation by the working class, but their timing had little to do with economic peaks and slumps. The anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing party of the 1850s flourished during prosperous times, not depression. Klan activity peaked in the 1870s, 1920s and 1960s, not generally times of economic decline; the 1870s saw significant depression, but Reconstruction is a better explanation for the rise of the Klan than is the Panic of 1873. The Great Depression of the 1930s spawned no obvious upsurge in racist activity, and there is little if any historical tie between the state of the economy and racial lynchings.

(There is a possible connection between hard times and sexism. The 1977 General Social Survey conducted by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center asked a national sample, "Do you approve or disapprove of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her?" Only a third disapproved. But when the phrase, "If there is a limited number of jobs," was added to the question, disapproval doubled to two-thirds.)

Much of the relationship between prejudice and hardship is caused by education, upbringing and personality—none of which is much affected by declining real income or increasing unemployment. Also, while people are worse-off during economic slumps, they may feel no worse off than anybody else, possibly lessening prejudice. And rather than blaming minorities for hard times, Americans tend to blame the gov-

ernment and "elitist business": railroads in the 1870s, trusts and gold speculators in the 1890s, the stock market and capitalists in general in the 1930s, government big spenders and oil sheiks more recently.

While it is difficult to link hard times with prejudice, the connection between prejudice and hardship is clear. In part, prejudice is simply a product of ignorance. As a student in Eugene Hartley's classic study *Problems in Prejudice* remarked, "I don't know anything about them; therefore I would exclude them from my country." Education can erode such narrow-mindedness by helping people form a more sophisticated world view. Educated people are less likely to see the world as a simplistic place where "bad" leaders or groups are to blame for misfortune. They also take impersonal forces into account. Education can further reduce prejudice by explicitly teaching tolerance, pluralism and fairness, as well as by bringing people of different backgrounds together in friendly social settings. And by strengthening self-esteem, educational achievement can reduce psychological stress and make people less likely to use minority groups as scapegoats for personal failures.

To the prejudiced, racism can seem almost "logical." Low

status whites and blacks often compete for the same unskilled jobs and the same inner-city housing, as well as for use of parks and recreational resources, public works services and control of schools. Such direct, intense competition leads to hostility and prejudice; as one white stated in the 1940's, "If both whites and niggers get laid off, that'll be bad. I'm gonna eat. I know how to use a gun."

Economic insecurity creates psychological distress that can manifest itself in racism. People with little education and few job skills face the perennial threat and periodic reality of long unemployment. Even when employed, they can barely afford basic living expenses. Illness, old age and other calamities can only be worried about or ignored. This insecurity causes frustration and pressures, which sometimes lead to alcoholism, child abuse, and the like—and sometimes to racism. "You just have to have something to aim at," in the words of one prejudiced individual. Minority groups may be blamed for economic distress, as the Nazis blamed the Jews for the hyper-inflation of Weimar Germany, or they may simply be a target for displaced hostilities, as Southern blacks traditionally were.

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have more negative views of society and other individuals, to be alienated, cynical, and pessimistic. They see strangers as especially untrustworthy and hostile. Lack of trust in democratic institutions and values is also typical in such people. Their troubled view of the world, sometimes called "working-class authoritarianism," fosters prejudice.

In eight surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center from 1972 to 1980, prejudice has been measured with the Treiman scale, which gauges attitudes of whites on intermarriage, school desegregation, interracial socializing, neighborhood integration and black activism. The results in the accompanying charts show that people in higher socio-economic classes were consistently more likely to hold tolerant opinions on at least four of the five issues.

Job security appears to be the one exception—those who have been unemployed for a month or more in the last ten

years are *more* tolerant. But this is actually not an exception. A disproportionate number of those who had been unemployed were young, and younger respondents were less prejudiced overall. Their youth, and not their unemployment, accounts for their greater tolerance.

All of the anticipated connections between hardship and prejudice get some support from the data. Education has the single largest impact on reducing prejudice. The connection between income and prejudice confirms that economic insecurity also contributes to the association. The role of competition is not directly addressed by the Treiman results, but other data show a connection. People who strongly supported social welfare spending were asked about their support for government spending to aid blacks. Those with less than a high school education slightly favored increased support. But among the college educated, support was more than three times higher. Whites from lower socio-economic groups seem likely to view blacks as competition for government dollars, while better-off whites see spending for blacks as a social necessity.

Social alienation is much higher among the less educated, lower income earners and the less prestigiously employed, according to the survey results. Alienation is thus a link among the various causes of prejudice, as well as a cause of prejudice itself. But alienation is produced by the factors that shape a lower-class person's life over many years, and not by the short-run performance of the economy.

Percentage Giving Non-Prejudiced Response to Treiman Scale Issues (Broken Down by Aspects of Socioeconomic Status)

| Education: | % |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|
| Less than High School | 28.2 |
| High School Graduate | 50.1 |
| Some College + | 70.0 |
| Occupational Prestige: | |
| Low | 39.0 |
| Low-Middle | 45.2 |
| Middle-High | 52.7 |
| High | 65.3 |
| Family Income: | |
| Bottom Third | 39.3 |
| Middle Third | 48.3 |
| Upper Third | 61.2 |
| Extended Unemployment During Last 10 Years: | |
| Yes | 58.1 |
| No | 48.1 |
| Perceived Social Class: | |
| Lower | 37.0 |
| Working | 46.3 |
| Middle | 53.4 |
| Upper | 58.4 |
| Degree of Social Alienation: | |
| Low=1 | 70.2 |
| 2 | 60.4 |
| 3 | 48.2 |
| High=4 | 35.4 |

Education has the single largest impact on reducing prejudice.

While the tie between status and prejudice has been demonstrated repeatedly, the lower socio-economic group has not remained a repository of intolerance. All groups have become steadily more tolerant over the last forty years; the lower group of today is less prejudiced than the upper group of only 15 years ago. And while status-related differences in prejudice have remained stubbornly present, this situation can change. In 1944, when only 40 percent of whites believed in equal job opportunities for blacks, those with less than a high school education were much less willing to grant equal employment rights than the college educated. By 1972, when 97 percent of whites endorsed equal job opportunities, the difference between the less educated and the college educated had fallen from 27.5 to 6.9 percentage points.

In the last 20-odd years, business, labor, schools, governments and other institutions have actively encouraged racial harmony. These efforts, together with increasing friendly contact among all white and black groups, could further diminish the gap in tolerance between the upper and lower classes.

As Myrdal suggested, hungry horses tend to bite each other. The association between economic distress and racial prejudice, however, is a bit more complex than our hungry horse parable. We might instead coin an American proverb: hardship, but not hard times, make people hard-hearted. ♦