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### Review of *The Content of our Character*. Shelby Steele. Reviewed by R.L. McNeely, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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## Book Review Essay:

*THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER*, by Shelby Steele. New York, N.Y.: HarperPerennial, a division of HarperCollins, 1991 xii + 175 pp. \$11.00 (paper).

My intention when assigned to review Steele's *The Content of our Character* was to produce a more-or-less standard review essay suitable for publication in a refereed social science journal. I realized, however, even before completing the volume's first ten pages, that the review I would ultimately produce was unlikely to conform to that intention.

The overarching reaction generated by those first few pages was one of *deja vu*: It was as though I was back in 1968 or 1969 (I cannot recall which) reading the Grier and Cobb sizzler, *Black Rage* (1968). In my estimation, at that time, the Grier and Cobb volume was, indeed, a sizzler, but a sizzling and unfair indictment of a people. There was virtually nothing in my background, at least my conscious background, that prepared me for the volume's self-defeating landscape of Black people; a landscape of a people immobilized by their feelings of race-based inferiority and insecurity. "But these are psychiatrists writing about clinical populations" I cried to those as I vented the *rage* that reading *Black Rage* spawned in me. "These are not people typical of the race; they are people victimized by some form of insanity!"

I found the book, frankly, to be an embarrassment, as well as a lie. I certainly was not to be tarred (no pun intended) by the same brush that painted Blacks as consumed by thoughts of race, eviscerated by self hatred, and, consequently, unable to, in warrior-like fashion, wrest what was needed from a hostile environment in order to achieve their fullest possible potential, *and* their full humanity. As I would later say often—a statement that succinctly summarized feelings I had in 1969, and before—"We are going to prosper, regardless of the adversity, because we have no other choice!" Neither I, nor the people closest to me, were to be or had ever been Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1969), nor would we ever find ourselves subsisting in accordance with Fanon's existential views of the effects of racism as noted in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967).

Little did I know at the time that I was in for some rather shocking revelations. As I matriculated from university life into the occupation of my choice, that of being a community organizer of the social action ilk, I began to see that some of the afflictions described in *Black Rage*, and later, less sizzingly, in *The Content of Our Character*, indeed were borne by some Blacks who were not insane, nor ostensibly in need of psychiatric assistance. Some community people with whom I worked, as well some co-workers, in fact, did seem to bear an eviscerating hostility to self. My reaction, at the time, to this awareness, was rather meager: My thinking about the issue was engaged almost exclusively around the dimension of disappointment. Nor did I go much further in my thinking about this (the images produced by the revelations were too ugly to contemplate), although the disappointment that was generated was profound enough to shorten my career as a community organizer.

So, here we are, in 1994, and it would seem that there is little possibility of escaping these images: Twenty-five years after the appearance of *Black Rage* they are still pervasive enough, and powerful enough, to produce in *The Content of Our Character* a National Book Critics Circle Award Winner, and a *New York Times* Best Seller. As a reaction of "burying one's head into the sand," given some of the experiences I have had during the interim years, was less possible this time around, I began my inquiry by personalizing my thinking rather than, as was the case originally, distancing myself from the topic. Thus, I thought, it makes more sense to use the assignment of this book review, at least in part, to serve me as an exercise in self examination, as opposed to merely producing a standard essay suitable for publication in a journal.

"Why is it that I am not, as apparently many of my brethren are, consumed by thoughts of race?" I asked myself. What a waste it is, I said, to have one's consciousness preoccupied by issues associated with race, or at least to have race issues always "running in the background." "What must it be like to have a cosmology (i.e., way of looking at the world) that is so dominated by race and feelings of racial inferiority?" "Why is it that I feel I have nothing to prove to whites?" "Why is it that my feelings are so unequivocal that the question of personal race-related worth is never posed within myself?" "Could it be that I am in denial?"

I asked: After all, Steele and others have concluded that such feelings are impossible to avoid.<sup>1</sup> As I considered this prescription of Steele and others the thought came to me that "I must be very fortunate" in that, comparatively speaking, I need use very little of my life energy consumed in thoughts and/or behavior designed to prove something to myself, to people, *or* to whites, or even merely thinking about whites, i.e., "The White Man." Indeed, one of my biggest irritations in Black social settings is that so much conversation and energy is devoted to diatribes about "The White Man." How is it that as far back as I can remember, while being acutely aware that something was amiss and that whatever was amiss was race-related, that I have been so fortunate not to have to bear this cross?

Why was it, for example, that when my grandmother used to urge me to "tuck in my lips" to make them more thin, i.e., more "white," that I stuck them out to make them fuller, even as a four- and five-year old? I think, possibly, that the cosmology I carry may have to do most with my mother (the child of that grandmother to which I just spoke), and to several somewhat random childhood experiences.

Our family moved at the time I entered public school to a neighborhood that was in racial transition. Consequently, at four years of age, I had playmates of both races: In fact, my primary playmates, as these were the children who lived closest to me, were white. And, unlike children elsewhere, our play did not occur within a framework of inequality.

Too, because my parents sought to provide me with the best public school education they could, they enrolled me via a fraudulent address into a white elementary school, not the school that rapidly was becoming an all-Black school (which was the neighborhood school in which I should have been enrolled). I was not required when entering this school to contemplate the possibility of my inferiority because there was no inequality with respect either to aptitude or knowledge. I remain eternally grateful for this fact to my mother who, unlike the parents of most of my Black playmates, read to me while I was a toddler, took me to the public library in a way that made me think of the library as a resource rather than an alien environment, and, later, took me

to movies after which she sat me down to discuss those movies upon our returning home.

I recognize that in these remarks is one area where Steele's decrees and proclamations bear a bit of fruit because without my having benefitted from this "initiative" (what Steele refers to as a middle-class value) on my mother's part, who can say what cosmology I might be carrying around today? And Steele's remarks are buttressed further by the fact that my mother, because she was nearly blind in one eye, was never more than an average student in a Deep South segregated rural school. A la the logic of Steele, if my mother could do it, so could other Black parents.

But I cannot arrive at this latter conclusion: My mother was not the product of a sharecropper existence, for example, and she attended a school with Black teachers who had vision, knew everyone in their community, and cared about the community's children. She also benefitted by having a father whose resolve was so strong that every person, including the whites, who lived in their small Louisiana town, referred to him as "Mr. Bradley." She never had to work in the kitchens of white people, nor did any of her siblings, and her father was so accomplished at farming that when the federal government (through the Resettlement Administration) made land available for purchase by Blacks he paid off a forty-year mortgage in six years. Can it be that I am the beneficiary of a continuing legacy from my grandfather (a legacy of a sort not shared by most Blacks)? As important as this legacy must have been and continues to be for me, it does not entirely satisfy, nor do the other things I have mentioned. In other words they do not seem to measure up as a complete explanation of how it is I have come to escape the presumably pervasive power of race in adversely shaping my consciousness.

There is another element I must note as I am convinced it is a significant component in my freedom from, among other things, as Steele puts it, "race holding" (holding up race as a shield to keep us from seeing what we do not want to see in ourselves), and from "Being Black and Feeling Blue" (diminishing one's ambitions to avoid "integration shock," i.e., the shock of being personally accountable on strictly personal terms). My mother is a warrior. Engage her in a fight and it will be a fight to the death, especially if the object of that fight is related to her children.

I grew up witnessing, from elementary school through high school, my mother's battles with a racist, Flint, Michigan, school system. Indeed, one teacher resigned early as a result of my mother's efforts, and another was dismissed. The early resignation occurred because my mother understood process with respect to the local school board and was effective in proving her case against that teacher of being racist (among other things the teacher always failed the brightest Black students and passed those who were least capable). Perhaps more importantly, she was able to get a teacher dismissed who was not simply mean, but viciously mean, to children. I say that this may be a more important case because the teacher who was dismissed was Black,<sup>2</sup> which must have emphasized in my mind that it was the victimization that was not to be tolerated, regardless of the race of the offender. It had to have been significant to me that while we were aware of the school system's racism, and of the accompanying discrimination, that it was the victimization, regardless of the racial hands of the perpetrator, about which there was to be the fight: Thus race and victimization did not become inseparably entangled for me. This is in sharp contradistinction to Steele's assertion that it is our victimization at the hands of whites that, "more than any other variable," (p. 101) forms our personal identities as Blacks.

What, on the other hand, I did internalize, was the value of my mother's tenacity, her perseverance: She always "brought her lunch" and so I learned to bring mine too, meaning that I learned the value of being prepared. Put in the vernacular of Steele, being "prepared" means subscribing to what he refers to as the middle-class values of hard work, education, and initiative.

I do find it difficult to accept Steele's social class dichotomy with respect to these values. He also lists deferred gratification, stable family life, and property ownership, as values peculiar to the middle-class. I am aware of studies done in the fifties and sixties indicating that lower-class individuals, generally speaking, have less ability and/or willingness to defer gratification, but Steele appears to be unaware that there were many contradictory studies, resulting in inconclusive findings on this point.<sup>3</sup> At the same time it seems to me that the lower-classes have no monopoly on the desire for immediate gratification: Witness the inability and/or lack of willingness of children, young adults, and others

from affluent backgrounds, for example, to defer their gratification [The works of Coles, *Children of Crisis* (1978), and Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (1985), are particularly pertinent here.] Too, I don't think one can argue the fact that it is often the poorest among us who work the hardest, and the wealthiest who work the least. I make this point fully recognizing that a current ethic, especially among big-city young Blacks, is that work at wages commensurate to their skill is beneath them. Yet lack of initiative is often not a problem in the lower classes: The problem, more accurately, with respect to initiative, is that a lot of enterprising ghetto Blacks, because of joblessness, and the effects of joblessness on family disruption, turn their initiative into criminal or quasi-criminal careers.<sup>4</sup>

Stable family life, desire for property ownership, and a stress on individual achievement, are not solely middle-class virtues. Studies have shown consistently that lower-class parents want no less for their children than other parents. But, in actual practice, conformance to these virtues means having income that is sufficient to realize them.<sup>5</sup> The fact of the matter is that we do not have an economy that can employ everyone, regardless of what we, as individuals, do. Another fact is that a lot of this country's poverty is the result of conscious social policy designed to maintain a pool of available cheap labor,<sup>6</sup> and that racial discrimination, versus other factors, are key in explaining poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Steele notes that:

By many measures, the majority of blacks —those not yet in the middleclass— are further behind whites today than before the victories of the civil rights movement. But there is a reluctance among blacks to examine this paradox, I think, because it suggests that racial victimization is not our real problem. If conditions have worsened for most of us as racism has receded, then much of the problem must be of our own making. (p. 15).

But has racism receded? Many of our cities are more segregated now than they have ever been, and acts of personal violence against Blacks have been rising. There is abundant evidence of disparate treatment in consumer contracting transactions, lending transactions, insurance transactions, and the delivery of medical care. It is true that the legal structure supporting discrimination

has been eroded substantially, but this is de jure, rather than de facto, discrimination. It might be useful also for Steele to contemplate the fact that Blacks have made significant gains during the Great Society and Affirmative Action eras, and that the reason these gains are not evident in aggregated Bureau of Census data is because they are masked by another phenomenon: The increase in Black unwed teenaged mothers. If one were to disaggregate the data, i.e. eliminate this cohort of mothers from the analysis, we would find that Blacks have made substantial economic gains during the past thirty years. I am referencing this time period specifically because it is this period that Executive Orders 11246 and 11975 (affirmative action orders) appeared.

But as Steele would point out, the rise in the Black unwed teenage (and that of older Black females) pregnancy phenomenon has occurred during that same era he depicts as one of unparalleled opportunity. We as Blacks, thus, have not exploited the abundance of opportunity now available to us. But, is this really the case? The cornerstone of Black family stability, and of upward mobility, since WWII, has been the abundance of high-paying, union-protected, fringe-benefit bearing, industrial jobs. Some studies have shown that the percentage of Black teenagers getting pregnant has not differed dramatically from the percentage getting pregnant during the fifties (although many are getting pregnant at younger ages and more are keeping their children in independent households). What has changed is the ability of young Black males to secure those good-paying industrial jobs with which to form an economic foundation for stable family life.

Another phenomenon, which has received very little attention in the literature of the social sciences, is the fact that Black males are being displaced, by Black females, at a dramatic rate from those traditionally male unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled industrial jobs that do remain in our economy.<sup>8</sup> As study after study since the Great Depression has taught us, if there is one sure way to fragment families, create conditions where the male is unable to secure gainful employment. Indeed, more recent studies have shown that differences in area unemployment rates even *within* financially strapped industrial "rust bowl" states are directly predictive of the ability of individuals in Black communities to form stable families; i.e., Blacks in low-unemployment



areas are much more likely to marry and form stable families.<sup>9</sup> Considering the fact that we have an economy that cannot employ everyone, and that the present-era basis for stable broad-based Black family life—industrial jobs—is disappearing rapidly, can we characterize accurately the present day, as Steele does, as one of unparalleled opportunity?

Could it be said that Steele's failure to acknowledge this, or his statement that "the barriers to black progress are clearly as much psychological as they are social or economic" (p.34) are forms, as William Ryan put it, of *Blaming the Victim* (1971)? Using concepts such as "race holding," the "anti-self," and "race anxiety," all Freudian in character, he concludes that "the unconscious replaying of our oppression is now the greatest barrier to our full equality" (p. 49), and that "somewhere inside every black is a certain awe at the power and achievement of the white race" (p. 53). I am not quite sure how to characterize or how to think about these two statements. Could they be due merely to ignorance? Particularly with respect to the latter statement, which implies that other races have not achieved on a par with the white race, is Steele ahistorical? Is he rooted only in contemporary Western Civilization? Is his vision so limited he can see no further back than the Industrial Revolution (which some consider the achievement hallmark of the white race)? Does Steele know nothing of the great achievements of past African civilizations, and those of other races? [perhaps he should read Basil Davidson's *The Lost Cities of Africa* (1959), among other volumes].

Steele also is ahistorical with respect to his views on individualism, a view that harkens to the "rugged individualism" that has been part of this country's most sacred folklore. As Steele notes, "We are most strongly motivated when we want something for ourselves" (p. 29), that "racial development will always be the effect that results from individuals within the race bettering their own lives" (p. 158), and "from this point on, the race's advancement will come from the efforts of individuals" (p. 16). Steele's remarks notwithstanding, most of what been achieved in this society, as in all societies, has been the result of cooperative activities, not the efforts of individuals engaged in a "rugged individualism" form of competition against others within the species or the collective. As Kropotkin has demonstrated, and his

examinations go back further in time than even that of Europe's Barbarians, and include examinations as well of animal species, that "the practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development, (species practicing it) invariably (are) the most numerous, the most prosperous, and the most open to further progress."<sup>10</sup> Too, in this country, the vast majority of great fortunes have been made via monopolistic and oligopolistic cooperatives, acting in concert with a collusive federal government.<sup>11</sup>

Steele also assails the educational under-achievement of Blacks, but fails to note that there are pervasive class-structured inequalities in public education,<sup>12</sup> and that we have the technology, should we choose to use it, to improve dramatically the performance of Black pupils in low-income ghetto schools.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, he refers to the fact that there are more Blacks in the criminal justice system than there are in higher education, without any mention of the significant relationship of race to charging decisions and sentencing disparities.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most revealing passage of Steele's volume is one in which he recounts his feelings following discriminatory treatment he experienced as a youth. As he noted:

When I would stray into the wrong restaurant in pursuit of a hamburger, it didn't occur to me that the waitress was unduly troubled by guilt when she asked me to leave. I can see now that possibly she was, but then all I saw was her irritability at having to carry out so unpleasant a task. If there was guilt, it was mine for having made an imposition of myself. (p. 77).

During the turbulence of the sixties Steele did make a transition wherein he began to react more harshly to racism. One case occurred when one of Steele's undergraduate college professors sought Steele's sympathy after being "forced" to reject a Black couple seeking to rent a flat because the white couple downstairs would have been offended. But even here Steele offers us reflections that possibly are conflicted and are almost apologetic in tone:

I might have found the means to a more dispassionate response, the response less of a victim attacked by a victimizer than of an individual offended by a foolish old man. I might have reported

this professor to the college dean. Or, I might have calmly tried to reveal his blindness to him, and possibly won a convert. (p. 105).

In fairness, Steele's remarks here are partly those of one who can see more clearly, due to maturation, than was possible for Steele as a young student in his junior year of college. The episode was recounted also because Steele was seeking to press forward with his analysis of the adverse effects of "racial vulnerability," a condition Steele links to the need of some individuals for Black nationalism. But one of Steele's points is that adherents to the ideology of Black nationalism are likely to damage themselves more than they are likely to be damaged by white racism.

This sort of analysis on Steele's part, though I follow the course of his thinking, was and is puzzling for me. This is notwithstanding my recognition that there is substance to a lot of what Steele has to say. One, for example, can indeed use Black nationalism as a shield to hide conscious or unconscious feelings of racial inferiority. On the other hand, can one so cavalierly fail to acknowledge the contributions Black nationalism has made to the psychological and economic well-being of many Blacks, and still be scholarly?<sup>15</sup>

Reflecting further on this I decided to phone, for a quick consultation on some of Steele's views, a person whose vision and judgment I respect highly. The urgent question I posed was something like this: "Bob, to what extent do you think the behavior of Black people is influenced by feelings of racial inferiority?" Much to my surprise, Bob (who many consider to be absolutely brilliant) replied that it was the dominant motivation of his life. I said "What?" Bob then said that nearly everything he does is the result of trying to prove to whites that he is not inferior. I then talked with Bob about my own, if you will, cosmology with respect to race, recounting stories about my grandfather, my mother, and of my experiences at the integrated elementary school. Bob commented that he, too, played with whites while growing up in Virginia, but that he "always had to drink from the cup *after* the white kids." This introduced another element into the equation: Perhaps there was something to growing up in Flint, Michigan during the fifties and sixties, as opposed to growing up in a place like Newport News, Virginia, during the thirties

and forties. But, ultimately, this was not an entirely satisfactory answer, either. After all, many of those same Black children I grew up with are afflicted with a "content-of-our-character" problem, some of them severely.

So, returning to the exercise in self discovery that I sought when starting this essay I find that I have no satisfactory answer as to why I am bereft of some of racism's abiding effects, namely those associated with feeling inferior to whites. At the same time, it is possible to make some summarizing remarks about Steele's *The Content of Our Character*.

First, I do not like the fact that one profound result of an analysis such as Steele's is that it provides an intellectual basis for federal and state policies of benign neglect. As noted by Steele, who believes that "preferential" programs result from the magnanimity of white guilt: "The point . . . is that the implication of inferiority that racial preferences (such as affirmative action) engender in both the white and black minds expands rather than contracts doubt" about Black competence (p.117). Can Steele not see that policies such as affirmative action result less from the largesse of whites than from the recognition by whites that such policies help to promote social stability by creating and expanding a Black middle class, of which Steele, himself, is a member?

Second, Steele cannot be dismissed out of hand as there appears to be much substance to what he is saying. (One point, to buttress his contentions, he likely would make were he speaking to me is that I witnessed, as a child growing up, the values of individual hard work and perseverance in my own home.) Too, he seems earnestly engaged in a search for truth, regardless of where that search may lead. Because of this, and because his remarks should serve as a call to arms on the part of those not active in their own interests, we must embrace Steele, regardless of whether we agree with him. At the very least he is opening up issues for discussion and analysis that may lead some disillusioned Blacks to act affirmatively (no pun intended) in their own behalf. For this, I applaud him.

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## Notes

1. Cf: Stephen L. Carter, "A Dilemma of Identity," *The National Law Journal*, Vol. 14 (3) September 23, 1993: 15–16.
2. Ironically, I now think, years later, that this teacher was so mean because he was victimized by what might be termed as the Black Rage syndrome, or by what might be called a Content of Our Character problem: In despising his race-related lot in life, and, therefore, himself, he was neither able to control his rage against his own person, nor against other Blacks.
3. Vernon L. Allen, "Personality Correlates of Poverty," pp: 242–266, in V.L. Allen (ed.), *Psychological Factors in Poverty*, Chicago: Markham Publishing Co. (Univ. of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph Series), 1970.
4. Robert J. Sampson, "Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (September 1987): 348–382.
5. Other resources, of course, are necessary. Focusing on the fact that Blacks must take responsibility for their own self development, Steele points out, referring somewhat to himself, that: "A Ph.D. must be developed from preschool on. He requires family and community support. He must acquire an entire system of values that enables him to work hard while delaying gratification" (p.122).

Speaking as a Black person with a Ph.D., and as one unusually advantaged by the role model of my mother (and by a father who made a good income), I think it is important to note that while my mother went to the limits of her ability with respect to her children, she could not prepare her children for experiences she could not imagine. Consequently, even with my comparatively advantaged background I found myself entering college purely by accident, had virtually no conception of the structure of university life, had no idea of what an advanced degree was until the second semester of my sophomore year, and could not imagine what people with briefcases did work-wise in their offices until I was in graduate school. More than that, I had virtually no conception of the notion of a career (versus getting a job), and for most of my young adulthood, even following having the Ph.D. degree, I was lost in the miasma/complexities of professional life, for which my parents simply were unable to prepare me. What would have been my lot if I had been unable to benefit from the Great Society and the Affirmative Action eras? What about those countless Black children whose parents were even less able than my parents with respect to how one negotiates and navigates the institutions and processes that lead to professional or any other kind of job-related success, now that the good-paying unskilled, and semi-skilled jobs with which they were familiar, are largely gone? To what extent can they be blamed for their deficiencies, and to what extent can one assume reasonably that they can, within the limits of their own experiential

- resources, set out their children on the pathways to take advantage of those abundant opportunities to which Steele refers?
6. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, New York: Vintage Books, 1971.
  7. Oscar Ornati, "Poverty in America," pp: 24–39 in Louis Ferman, et al., (eds.), *Poverty in America*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972; Paula L. Dressel, "Gender, Race, and Class: Beyond the Feminization of Poverty in Later Life," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 28, no. 2, (1988): 177–180.
  8. R.L. McNeely and Melvin R. Kinlow, *Milwaukee Today: A Racial Gap Study* (monograph), A Research Publication of the Milwaukee Urban League, 1987: 73 pp.
  9. Andrew R. Gatewood, *The Social and Economic Status of Young Black Males and the Impact on the Formation of Detroit Area Black Families* (monograph), United Community Services of Metropolitan Detroit, August, 1989: 34 pp.
  10. Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, 1902 (first edition); Boston, Mass: Porter Sargent (Extending Horizon Books Series: 362 pp.), no date of publication indicated: p. 293; subsequent edition (400 pp.) published by Porter Sargent in 1976.
  11. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books (1967); cf: Mark J. Green, et al., *The Closed Enterprise System*, New York: Bantam Books (1972).
  12. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*, New York: Basic Books (1976).
  13. Ronald R. Edmonds, "Some Schools Work and More Can," *Social Policy*, (March/April) 1979: 28–32.
  14. Coramae Richey Mann, *Unequal Justice: A Question of Color*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1993); Wm. Feyerherm, "Juvenile Court Dispositions of Status Offenders: An Analysis of Case Decisions," pp. 127–144 in R.L. McNeely and Carl E. Pope (eds.), *Race, Crime and Criminal Justice*, Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications (1981).
  15. cf: John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), *Black Nationalism in America*, Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company (The American Heritage Series), 1970.

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