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Who is Qualified?

"[Poverty] is no longer associated with immigrant groups with high aspirations; it is identified with those whose social existence makes it more and more difficult to break out into the larger society. At the same time, the educational requirements of the economy are increasing."

—MICHAEL HARRINGTON, *The Other America*

Lowndes County, Alabama

I wouldn't be the first to point out the American capacity for self-delusion. One of the main reasons for the criticism of American society by the Students for Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other groups is that our society is *exclusive* while maintaining that it is *inclusive*. Although automation has prompted some rethinking about the Alger myth and upward mobility, few people are realistic about the ways in which one legally can "make it" here — or who can make it.

The real ways are three: by having money, by knowing the right people, and by education. The first two methods cannot be acknowledged by most of our citizens or our government because they are not available

to everyone and we want to think that everyone has equal opportunity in the United States. Therefore, Americans compensate themselves by saying that at least there is education, and that is available to anyone who cares enough.

The panacea for lack of opportunity is education, as is the panacea for prejudice. But just how available is it? If every 16-year-old in the nation was motivated to attend high school, he could not: there are not enough schools, not enough physical space. As for college, less than one-quarter of the population ever gets there. The financial barrier is too high; even the cheapest state college charges fees which are impossible for the poor. Scholarships serve only the gifted. To make matters worse, many universities and colleges are already fighting off the mob by making entry more difficult: City College in New York, for example, has raised the academic average required for acceptance by several points. It is getting harder, not easier, for the poor to be included here. For the Negro, there is an additional problem. He is not psychologically attuned to think of college as a goal. Society has taught him to set short sights for himself, and so he does.

Hard work was once considered a fourth way to climb the ladder, and some Americans still see it as a possibility. Automation should have buried that once and for all: you can't start as an elevator operator and move up to be the president of the company, because there are — or soon will be — buttons instead of operators. Actually, the hard work method was finished off before automation — but until today only a handful of social critics had the nerve to say that ours was a nation of classes. You have to start ahead of the pack to make that climb.

Think now of the Southern Negro, driven off the land in increasing numbers today, coming to the Northern

city. He can hardly be compared to previous immigrants, most of whom brought skills with them. Others took menial work until they could save up and open "a little shop." The Southern Negro arrives; is he to pick cotton in Manhattan? He finds the menial work automated and the "little shop" gobbled up by supermarkets. He is, in fact, unemployable - from the Mississippi Delta to Watts. As for finding work in the new factories of the "changing South," he can forget it; if anything, those factories will be more automated than others. As for education, he probably cannot even read or write because Southern Negro elementary schools are that bad. You have to pass tests to get into college; he doesn't even have the education to get an education. Civil rights protest has not materially benefited the masses of Negroes; it has helped those who were already just a little ahead. The main result of that protest has been an opening up of the society to Negroes who had one of the criteria for upward mobility. Jobs have opened up, but they are mainly the jobs on Madison Avenue or Wall Street - which require education. Housing has opened up, but mainly in the "better neighborhoods." In a sense, the Negroes helped by protest have been those who never wanted to be Negroes. Americans who would point to the occasional Negro in his \$30,000 suburban home or his sports car and say, "He made it," should have met the Mississippi lady of color who said to me in 1962: "The food that Ralph Bunche eats doesn't fill my stomach."

The South is not some odd, unique corner of this nation; it is super-America. The Negro is not some "minority group," but a microcosm of the excluded. A white boy may sit with me watching the President on television, and think: "I could be President." No such thought would have occurred to this black boy or any other. In fact the white boy is wrong: he doesn't have

much chance either of becoming President. Unless he has money, the right contacts or education, he too will be excluded. Racism is real enough in the United States, but exclusion is not based on race. There may be proportionately less Negroes than whites among the included; and Negroes are, of course, "last to be hired, first to be fired." But the number of excluded whites is vast. The three criteria for upward mobility apply brutally to black and white everywhere.

Let me make one thing clear: I am not saying that the goal is for Negroes and other excluded persons to be allowed to join the middle-class mainstream of American society as we see it today. Aside from the fact that at least some Negroes don't want that, such inclusion is impossible under present circumstances. For a real end to exclusion in American society, that society would have to be so radically changed that the goal cannot really be defined as inclusion. "They talk about participating in the mainstream," said a Brooklyn College faculty member recently at a teach-in on the antipoverty program, "when they don't realize that the mainstream is the very cause of their troubles."

Education is one major form (and means) of exclusion; politics is another. Who plays politics in this country? People who have one of the three qualifications for inclusion. They tell us: "Register to vote and take over the political machines." But this is farcical; the only people who take over the machines are other political mechanics.

If there is doubt about the existence of exclusion from politics, the passage of the 1965 Voting Act should have established it. That legislation passed only because most Americans had finally recognized that such exclusion did exist. Readers familiar with the congressional challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party will remember the exclusion - politi-

cal and even physical - experienced by that group of Southern Negroes. But most Americans do not see that the Voting Act hasn't solved the problem. Recent reports of the Civil Rights Commission and other groups point up the need to send more federal examiners and to inform Negroes of their rights if the Act is to be meaningful. Yet the attitude of the Justice Department suggests that the government is not yet willing to take the initiative necessary for registering Negroes who are not already free from fear and aware of their rights.

Prescription of the Qualified

The three criteria mentioned here - money, who you know, and especially education - are what people mean when they use the word *qualified*. After the Watts uprising, committees were assigned to study the causes and make recommendations. These were composed of the "experts on Negroes," the "qualified." I am not opposed to the presence on such committees of intellectuals and professionals, or merely making a parallel objection to poverty boards which don't include the poor. My objection is to the basic approach, which excludes the unqualified.

Again, the Southern Negro is not unique but a microcosm. He has been shamed into distrusting his own capacity to grow and lead and articulate. He has been shamed from birth by his skin, his poverty, his ignorance and even his speech. Who does he see on television? Who gets projected in politics? The Lindsays and the Rockefellerers and even the Martin Luther Kings - but not the Fannie Lou Hamers. That is why it was so important to project her during the MFDP challenge. Sharecroppers can identify with her. She opens up the hope that they too can be projected, because she says all the things that they have been saying to themselves

- but she is heard. Mrs. Hamer's significance is very different from Dr. King's. One hears white people say of Dr. King: "He is so intelligent, so articulate." Of Mrs. Hamer they say: "What a beautiful soul" - implying, that she lacks analytical intelligence. To some extent, and sadly, Mrs. Hamer has come to accept this vision of herself. Those who know her and others like her, feel that her intelligence is just as great and her analysis as sharp. But Dr. King has one of the three qualifications - education. This is no criticism of the man, but of the society.

When SNCC first went to work in Lowndes County, Alabama, which is 80 percent Negro by census figures, I - a "qualified" person by virtue of my college education - used to say to the black people there that they should register to vote and then make their voices heard. They could assert their rights, take over the power structure. This was the prescription of the qualified. But these people said they didn't want to do that; they did not think they could; they did not even want to enter a machine headed by George Wallace. To them politics meant Wallace, Sheriff Jim Clark and Tom Coleman, who had been accused of the murder of Jonathan Daniels. To them the Democratic Party didn't mean LBJ, but a crew of racist bullies and killers. Entering politics meant, until last summer, confronting the tools of Wallace: the county registrars who had flunked Negroes consistently for years.

They asked if something different could not be created. They wanted to redefine politics, make up new rules, and play the game with some personal integrity. Out of a negative force, fear, grew the positive drive to think new.

Organized Freedom Parties

SNCC's research department provided the tool: the

possibility, under an unusual Alabama law, of a group of citizens in any county becoming a political party in that county by running candidates for county offices and getting 20 percent of the vote. Having done that, the county party can go on to become a state party by running candidates for state office and polling 20 percent of that vote. Thus, educated people (SNCC research) suggested an answer by providing the *information*. But the Alabamans had known what kind of way they wanted to take. They needed to be given confidence and to be told how to do it.

Local "freedom parties" are now being organized in 10 counties stretching across Alabama's Black Belt, with plans to do this in 12 more counties. Together, they contain 40 percent of the potential state vote. Given the Flowers-Wallace contest, which must come, the balance of power could lie with those counties. But the true excitement of this development lies in what it means for the people themselves.

The meetings of the executive committees of these county parties are open. The parties will hold county conventions and draw up platforms in April of 1966. Later, candidates will be nominated who must support those platforms. In conventional politics it is the candidates who spell out the platform (*i.e.*, make promises); in Alabama candidates won't have to out-promise each other, but simply represent.

Right now, workshops are being held to prepare for the future: 150 black Alabamans have already learned about the duties of a county sheriff and a tax assessor, with more to come. Very few citizens anywhere in this country know what such duties are.

Some say it is romantic to place faith in "the masses" as a force for radical change. But the people who say this are the "qualified." Alabama Negroes are beginning to believe they don't need to be qualified to get

involved in politics. People long accustomed to self-contempt are beginning to believe in their own voice.

Others might say we are leading the black people of Alabama down the road to frustration. Perhaps power politics will eventually overwhelm the freedom parties and the would-be Negro sheriffs. But there are reasons why this might not happen in Alabama. In counties with Negro majorities, there could be a black sheriff elected next year. Even a Governor Wallace will have to deal with him. SNCC learned from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party experience that the Southern Negro doesn't have to cast his lot with the national Democratic Party in order to be recognized as a force which must be dealt with. The Johnson Administration pushed through the Voting Act on the assumption that Negroes would automatically line up with its party. But their allegiance is not quite guaranteed. In New York they cast crucial votes for Lindsay, and in the South both Democrats and Republicans are now vying for the Negro vote.

I have hope for this nation. But it is not based on the idea of an American consensus favorable to progress; James Baldwin's idea of the Negro as the conscience of the country is closer to the truth. The majority view is a lie, based on a premise of upward mobility which doesn't exist for most Americans. They may think the government is at least dealing with basic problems (racial injustice, poverty), but it cannot solve them when it starts from the wrong premise.

The status quo persists because there are no ways up from the bottom. When improvements within the system have been made, they resulted from pressure -- pressure from below. Nothing has been given away; governments don't hand out justice because it's a nice thing to do. People must struggle and die first: Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, and, in the county where

I am working, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo and Jonathan Daniels.

President Johnson's concept of the Great Society is preposterous. The definition comes from him, as does the means of entering that society. Excluded people must acquire the opportunity to redefine what the Great Society is, and then it may have meaning. I place my own hope for the United States in the growth of belief among the unqualified that they are in fact qualified: they can articulate and be responsible and hold power.