

Racial Justice and Equity: Challenges for the American South

By Hayes Mizell

The ethical concept of equity is not unfamiliar to the South, but it is infrequently a topic for discussion, or action. Equity is the recognition that people's needs differ and that it is necessary to respond to their needs differently. The needs of some people are greater than others and to meet these needs adequately, disproportionate responses are necessary. This is particularly true when needs arise from unjust circumstances or those over which people have no control.

Inequity occurs when people in these circumstances must bear greater burdens than others to achieve a benefit society declares good for all. For example, citizens in low-wealth communities must tax themselves at high rates to obtain public services that fall short of those that citizens in high-wealth communities enjoy at substantially lower tax rates. Citizens of the wealthier communities reap relatively higher quality services at less cost not because of their effort, but because of the communities' property wealth as vacation destinations or centers of business and industry.

Equity also implies taking action that goes beyond equal treatment. If there is broad societal agreement that all children need quality health care, it is not enough to enact legislation that makes health care more available. To be equitable, the legislation must take into account that some groups of children are more at risk of some diseases than other children, or fewer of their parents understand the basics of preventive care, or they live in remote areas without adequate transportation to regional health facilities.

It is necessary to address the South's problems from an equity perspective because the region's history of slavery, discrimination, and poverty created groups of citizens with sharply disparate needs. These groups can only take full advantage of new opportunities the South offers if citizens and policymakers understand and act on principles of equity.

Issues Facing the South

Today, civil rights in the South is an issue most people discuss using the past tense. In the years following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Southern resistance and the civil rights movement sparked the federal government to enact a spate of civil rights laws and fund administrative agencies to enforce them. Over several decades, the hard-won implementation of these laws slowly shifted public and private behaviors so that systemic, overt acts of racial discrimination are now more often the exception than the rule. One striking result is that thousands of descendants of African-Americans who fled the South during the twentieth century are choosing to move back to the region. Whereas between 1965 and 1970 Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina were among the 10 states with the greatest net loss of African-Americans, between 1995 and 2000 they were among the top 10 states that attracted African-Americans. By the end of the century, the South had become the region with the "lowest degree of regression-adjusted racial wage inequality."

These indicators of progress do not mean, however, that there is no racism in the South or that the region does not continue to suffer from the self-imposed burdens of its historic treatment of African-Americans. Fifty-five percent of African Americans in the United States live in the South. In comparison to previous generations, their economic circumstances are improving dramatically, but there is a significant subgroup that continues to labor under the legacies of the Old South. Among all African Americans who are poor and live in non-metro areas, 70 percent live in six Southern states: Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina. Forty-six percent of all African Americans in the United States live in the historic Black Belt of the South that includes portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Black Belt counties constitute the bulk of the 280 nonmetro persistent poverty counties in the South which in turn represent 25 percent of the region's nonmetro population.

Ironically, many of the poor, rural counties with significant African American populations are also those where a large proportion of the economy has been in manufacturing. Whereas between 1965 and 1990 low wage rates in these counties provided a competitive advantage in attracting manufacturers, in recent years the global economy has spurred many of these same companies to relocate to pursue even lower costs. The counties are having little success in attracting new companies because the counties' education and training has not kept pace with employers' demands for knowledge workers.

Further complicating this picture are increasing numbers of Hispanic immigrants who are competing for low-skilled, low-wage jobs. In 2000, four Southern states were among those with the largest growth in Hispanic population: North Carolina, 394%; Arkansas, 337%; Georgia, 300%; and Tennessee, 278%. In North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, undocumented workers largely constituted the growth in foreign-born populations. This growth in the Hispanic population will continue. Georgia expects its Hispanic population to increase by 143% between 2000 and 2015 while the African American and White populations will each increase by about 25 percent. On the most recent U.S. Census, 46% of foreign-born persons identifying themselves as "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" also indicated they were "some other race," the only category they could select other than "white." These Hispanics are likely to be poorer, less educated, and less likely to speak English exclusively than Hispanics who chose to identify themselves as "white."

As increasing proportions of Southerners benefit from the region's development and prosperity, African Americans in Black Belt counties and the South's growing Hispanic populations are often out of sight, out of mind. They are representative of the growing gap in personal contact between Southerners with the knowledge and skills to participate in the region's new economy and those who lack them. In some of the South's expanding metropolitan areas, residential segregation slowly declined between 1980 and 2000, but during the same period the South accounted for all of the United States' seven metropolitan areas with the greatest increase in residential segregation. The decline in contact between races and classes is compounded by public school resegregation in some communities and private schools. Between 1989 and 2001, the South was the only region where there was an increase in the private school share of total student enrollment in elementary and secondary schools.

The issues of racial justice the South faces today are different than those of the past. The distinction between "discrimination" and "neglect" is not as sharply defined as it once was, but the effects are often similar. Too many African Americans and Hispanics, particularly those in rural areas, experience serious disadvantages not of their making that significantly limit their potential to advance their interests and those of the region. A corresponding danger is that as more Southerners prosper, they choose residences, schools, and social venues where they have less contact with African Americans and Hispanics generally, but almost no contact with those at geographic and economic margins. As metropolitan areas of the South expand, giving rise to suburbs with increased political power, their residents know little about the needs of African Americans and Hispanics who do not share their good fortune. Their limited perspectives then translate into policies and laws that their elected representatives enact. Thereby, the obstacles African American and Hispanics confront become even more daunting, and the chances of their resolution even less likely.

But the issues of ineffective education, inadequate health care, limited economic mobility, poor housing, and marginal civic engagement are not exclusive to African Americans and Latinos. These conditions also afflict many of the South's white citizens. In the rural South, the poverty rate for whites is 11 percent and in a 10-county area that includes Atlanta, the most recent Census found that five percent of whites, many living in first ring suburbs, were in poverty. For nearly fifty years, opportunistic political leaders have mobilized voting blocs of these citizens by exploiting their resentment of federal initiatives benefiting African Americans. This will continue so long as governments and the private sector fail to address the legitimate needs of low-income whites. Their neglect fuels resentment and alienation. The South knows all too well the costs of special treatment for some at the expense of others and it is important act on these lessons. Initiatives to advance "racial justice" must be big enough, in vision as well as financial support, to embrace Southerners of all races whose circumstances prevent them from taking full advantage of the region's new opportunities.

The Role of Philanthropy

Philanthropy in the United States enjoys certain advantages over other institutions in addressing social problems. Unlike state and local governments, philanthropy can act without waiting for either constituent readiness or a majority of votes. Its strategies do not suffer compromises comparable in either degree or result to those of public agencies. In contrast to for-profits, a financial return on investment is not an imperative for philanthropy. It differs from most non-profits because it has the capacity to fund its own program initiatives almost at will.

These advantages can also constitute an occupational hazard for philanthropy. There have been notable cases when the insularity of philanthropies has caused them to fall in love with their own ideas, ignoring the vagaries of real world contexts in which grantees attempt to apply the ideas, or the capacities of grantees to apply them effectively. Other funders have become so focused on staking out a unique place on philanthropy's landscape that they have shied from collaborating with other foundations, even when such relationships have potential to yield greater impact. Some philanthropies fail to make full use of their privileged roles, proclaiming their commitment to address a major social problem but timidly mounting programs that reflect their intention to avoid at all costs the controversies at the heart of the problem.

What, then, is the appropriate role of philanthropy in addressing the South's social problems? The region is conservative not only in its politics, but also in its culture. States and communities are slow to tackle difficult issues that affect marginalized individuals and communities. In many quarters, advocating on behalf of the less powerful can still jeopardize an individual's political or business advancement or social standing. Philanthropy, on the other hand, has much greater freedom to give visibility to and help address complex issues affecting African Americans and Hispanics. This freedom, in turn, imposes on funders a moral responsibility to provide aggressive leadership, and encourage and enable others to do so. Certainly, support for scholarships, food banks, and medical centers helps many people, but it does not constitute leadership that moves states and communities to address equally serious but less popular issues.

There are, of course, practical limitations to the leadership philanthropy can and should provide. As institutions not held accountable by either defined constituencies or profit-loss statements, funders worry about their legitimacy. Yet, exercising the privileges of philanthropy requires considerable intestinal fortitude, a willingness to act without waiting for popular support. As much as funders might seek to understand and anticipate potential pitfalls before taking action, dealing with difficult social issues requires a resolve to proceed even knowing that the answers to some questions will come only after hard-won experience.

Funders' experiences in recent years provide useful guideposts for philanthropy's role. Models conceived in-house or adopted from idiosyncratic experiences may have limited resilience in more diverse and challenging settings. Partnerships with grantees that require their financial investment, not just their rhetorical commitment, are more likely to produce serious effort. Funding strategies that seek to leverage public investments can yield greater systemic results than charitable gifts. Philanthropic initiatives that depend on higher education institutions as intermediaries may lack the urgency and intensity required to impact issues of racial justice. Identifying and publicizing best practices does not necessarily result in their wide application in the near term.

To address issues of racial justice effectively, philanthropy needs to constantly move against the social and cultural grain, not with it. This calls for philanthropy to stake out, attack, and stick with issues that are not front page news or subjects of daily direct mail solicitations. More importantly, it requires philanthropy to engage directly and personally the people affected by those issues. Those are not only African Americans and Hispanics, but also people whose agendas, influence, and decisions shape the discrimination and neglect that impede African Americans and Hispanics in their efforts to participate in and prosper from the South's development. With philanthropy's advantage of a relatively broad and objective vision, the opportunity to proceed deliberately and thoughtfully, and the independence to go where others fear to tread, its leadership can engage Southerners in understanding and addressing justice issues affecting African Americans and Hispanics. Ultimately, all Southerners either benefit from or pay for the region's treatment of its racial and ethnic minorities.

Philanthropy's Impact on Equity in the South

One can argue that had it not been for philanthropy, the civil rights revolution would have been even slower in coming to the South. Philanthropy provided African Americans the only hope

they had for obtaining the education and job skills necessary for some measure of economic security and independence. In the decades following the Civil War, the concept of "uplift" drove philanthropy's view and support of African Americans' aspirations. Education was the dominant concern, both because African Americans wanted it desperately and because Redeemer state governments and their successors were determined to provide as little as possible. The Rockefeller Foundation sought to fill this gap by creating the General Education Board (GEB) and joining in a virtual conspiracy for good with the Peabody Fund, the Slater Fund, and the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation to finance schools for African Americans and train educators to staff them. In the 1920s, the GEB became a major funder of African American colleges and universities. These initiatives occurred in the context of the virulent racism of the times that was so powerful it even infected the noble efforts of the funders, but without their efforts the education of African Americans in the South would have been abysmal during the first half of the twentieth century.

A notable example of philanthropy's adoption of the "self-help" philosophy of improving opportunities for African Americans in the South was the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Operating from 1917 until 1948, it provided support for African American communities to have decent school facilities. During an era when Southern states grudgingly provided only rock-bottom financing for the education of African American children, the Rosenwald Fund awarded grants that stimulated the construction of 5,357 schools. However, a condition of the Fund's school building program was that African American communities had to secure an amount equal to or greater than the Rosenwald grants to help finance the construction. Communities so valued education that they organized school construction campaigns to solicit land, building materials, and cash to build the new schools. One result was that African American communities organized, took ownership of the educational destinies of their children, and demonstrated impressive entrepreneurial skills. Ironically, the sense of ownership was so strong that decades later when many "Rosenwald schools" closed in the wake of school desegregation, some African American communities again organized to save the buildings as community centers or as monuments honoring the sacrifices of previous generations.

The poor health of African Americans was also a concern. The Rockefeller Foundation, the Rosenwald Fund, and the Duke Endowment supported efforts targeting both races in the South. Rockefeller was responsible for a major effort to eradicate hookworm while the Rosenwald Fund awarded major grants for African American hospitals, the training of their doctors, and rural health programs for African Americans. The Duke Endowment provided major support to build and operate 22 African American hospitals in the Carolinas.

One example of a foundation's modest investment that helped pave the way for the development of the civil rights movement was the Schwartzhaupt Foundation's support in 1953 for the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Highlander provided training and otherwise nurtured the development of many civil rights workers who emerged in the 1960s.

When the civil rights movement began to hit its stride in the early 1960s, foundations also played a critical role. Early grants by the Taconic, Stern, Field, Norman, and New York foundations helped launch the Voter Education Project (VEP) that operated under the Southern Regional Council. The VEP coordinated and financed the voter registration and education efforts of

various civil rights organizations throughout the South. The Field Foundation also awarded grants to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's citizenship training program, as well as the Southern Student Human Relations Project of the National Student Association. The latter organization played a key role in supporting the development of the student-led civil rights movement in the South.

Since 2003, the Z. Smith Reynolds and Warner Foundations have been the North Carolina partners in a national philanthropic collaboration that includes the Rockefeller, Ford, Levi Strauss, and JEHT Foundations, and the Open Society Institute. Known as the Racial Justice Collaborative, the funders support innovative partnerships between lawyers and community-based organizations to use litigation in addressing issues faced by minorities and immigrants. These issues include education, voting rights, environmental and land use policies, immigrant access to welfare benefits and labor rights for immigrants and low-wage workers. Grants total approximately \$2 million a year and the initiative will continue through 2006; the collaborative is no longer accepting proposals.

Southern Philanthropy's Agenda to Close the Equity Gap

Before acting to address current issues of equity and racial justice, Southern funders need to acknowledge and remedy certain limitations under which they have been working. For many years, a relatively small number of foundations in the South have carried the burden of supporting issues of equity and racial justice. Perhaps this was understandable in the era proceeding, during, and immediately following the South's historic social changes, but those years are rapidly receding into the past. There are now 17,430 foundations in the South with assets of more than \$100 billion, but there has not been a proportionate increase in funders' interest in and support for issues affecting the futures of African Americans and Hispanics. In fact, they may believe there is less need to address such issues than in past years, or they may simply be unaware of what the issues are. This calls for leaders of Southern philanthropy to launch a systematic effort to engage the region's other funders in learning about and considering equity issues that merit foundation support. This may require creating a venue where funders convene several times a year to identify and take stock of equity issues that are surfacing throughout the region, educate themselves about those issues, and assess the potential for Southern philanthropy to take initiatives that have potential for major impact.

However, more foundation activity to advance racial justice will not necessarily result in grantmaking that is more focused or that achieves greater equity. To have impact, a critical mass of Southern philanthropies will need to agree to focus on one or two major equity issues that impede both the opportunities of African Americans and Hispanics and the development of the region as a whole. Then at least the discrete foundation initiatives across the region will potentially accrue towards achieving more significant results.

But the best hope for the region's funders to affect equity issues is for them to commit a minor portion of their respective grants budgets to a common, sustained, collaborative philanthropic venture. The South has very few large foundations that can mount initiatives comprehensive and intensive enough to have regional impact. So long as hundreds of philanthropies spread their resources across the region in myriad small projects, it is unlikely they will ever impact major

equity issues or know whether their grants had a cumulative effect. Certainly, funders will continue to focus most of their resources on the states, communities, and institutions they know best, the ones closest to them. They may also, however, be able to agree that there are a few intractable issues that are so pervasive and so beyond the reach of a single funder, that they deserve a collaborative response from a large number of Southern philanthropies. Developing, governing, administering, and evaluating such a major initiative would be challenging, but it would also provide new opportunities for leverage and results that no foundation could hope to accomplish alone.

Conditions of the Black Belt sub-region continue to pose major equity problems for African Americans and others who live there. Many are in persistent poverty. In spite of periodic declarations of concern and support by governors, legislatures seem to lack the political will and financial capacity to promote major improvements of the Black Belt counties' economic, education, health, housing, and cultural infrastructures. African Americans who live there suffer the rolling consequences of previous generations of discrimination and, at the same time, inequities caused by intra-state shifts in economic development and political power.

This is an issue ripe for the attention of Southern philanthropy, preferably through collaboration or at the initiative of individual funders, if that is the only alternative. Foundations can change the prevailing paradigm that the inequities of the rural South are an unfortunate legacy of a plantation past but now the region must focus on the compound development of new economies in metro areas. There are abundant opportunities for action ranging, for example, from seeding the development of "Gramin Banks" in Black Belt counties, to staffing substantive local literacy campaigns and evaluating their results, to fostering civic engagement. There is potential to support community organizing and advocacy within and across counties of persistent poverty to assist African Americans and Hispanics in framing issues of concern to them and developing their leadership to communicate and advance those issues more effectively. Also, there are a number of university-based research and development centers in the South that have information about past and current efforts to strengthen rural communities, and they should be able to identify successful approaches that have been applied to only a limited extent. It is important for Southern philanthropy to identify these approaches systematically, understand the reasons for their limited replication or adaptation, and determine how funders could bring their approaches to wider audiences and support their use.

As a growing segment of the region's population, Hispanics are unfamiliar to Southerners in general and to philanthropy in particular. Southern funders need to know a great deal more about these immigrants and whether, how, and to what extent they experience discrimination because of their national backgrounds, language, and "race." Obtaining such information is difficult because many Hispanics in the South are undocumented workers who speak little or no English, and outside their work environments they do not frequently interact with non-Hispanic Southerners. However, because other regions of the country have experience with previous waves of Hispanic immigrants, the South can potentially tap and learn from that experience. Philanthropy can play an important role in supporting Southern organizations that over time collect, analyze, and report practical information on the employment, education, health, and civic participation experiences of Hispanics in the South. This may require capacity building of some organizations because few in the Deep South can effectively communicate either linguistically or

culturally with Hispanics, and they may lack the field orientation necessary to engage Hispanics in interviews, focus groups, case studies, and other types of qualitative data collection. It is equally important to build the capacity of policy-oriented organizations to reach out to Hispanic communities to determine issues of concern to them and their experiences in utilizing public systems and programs.

Because most Southerners and their elected representatives are reluctant to support what is outside their experience, many inequities affecting African Americans and Hispanics remain unaddressed. There are very few opportunities for meaningful communication and understanding between advantaged whites and disadvantaged African Americans and Hispanics. As more white Southerners acquire the economic wherewithal to distance themselves from social, residential, and educational settings where they might have regular contact with African Americans and Hispanics who are unable to be equally mobile, they understand less about equity issues and are less empathetic with those affected by them.

Southern philanthropy should support efforts by regional organizations to document and analyze these trends, and forcefully bring the findings to the attention of policymakers and education, religious, and civic organizations. More importantly, foundations should identify and support organizations committed to bringing together Southerners of different racial, cultural, and social classes to work on equity issues. Some organizations will claim that is their purpose, but over the years it has faded from their agendas as they have become more focused on issues and less on developing and utilizing cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-class relationships to address those issues.

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to remind them of this need. It can begin with the organizations' boards of directors. Because all non-profits struggle to raise funds, many now want board members who can make significant contributions or have business or social relationships that enable them to solicit contributions from others. One result is that boards of directors are increasingly homogeneous in terms of social class if not race. This denies boards important opportunities to learn, and it restricts their understanding of issues they should address. Philanthropy should not only insist that organizations it supports have "diverse" boards, but also provide levels of support that make it possible for the boards to include African Americans and Hispanics with experiences that broaden the boards' understanding of equity issues.

As philanthropy grapples with how best to advance equity in the region, there is the danger it will become bogged down in debates about whether to support institutions or foster regional and community movements. Philanthropy often chooses to work through established institutions because, in part, foundations have confidence in the institutions' expertise, judgment, and management. For some of the activities described above, institutions may provide the most effective means for having impact. In other cases, the institutions themselves are badly in need of reform, and it may be appropriate for philanthropy to support some institutions with the will and capacity to reform themselves. However, many of the issues impeding the progress of African American, Latino, and low-income white citizens are beyond the reach of institutions, as least as most of them choose to carry out their work. There is a need to engage directly the people who experience the discrimination and neglect that has profound societal as well as personal effects. There is a need to engage them directly in issue and leadership development,

action research, organizing, and problem-solving they can apply personally as well as for the benefit of their communities and region. It is community-based and faith-based organizations, rather than large institutions, that have or can develop relationships with citizens whose experiences can help shape solutions to the region's problems of equity. While there are considerably more such organizations than just 20 years ago, to sustain themselves many have become service providers and lack the capacity to engage, enlarge, and support their constituencies to learn about and address fundamental issues that negatively affect their lives. This is an opportunity rather than a problem, and it is an opportunity philanthropy should not ignore.

Conclusion

In the past, most Southern philanthropies chose not to address equity issues directly. As a result of heavy lifting on that front by the federal government and Northern philanthropies, the South changed dramatically and many of its citizens and communities are reaping the benefits. Currently, the South faces the twin challenges of unattended equity issues from the past, and emerging issues that are more complex, less understood, and often unacknowledged. One would hope that the South's hard-won lessons and maturity would drive its people and institutions to address these issues out of self-interest as well as moral obligation. Unfortunately, there is little evidence this is the case. More than ever, the region needs the leadership Southern philanthropy can provide in helping communities, states, and organizations understand issues of equity and racial justice, and mobilize to address them effectively.

Hayes Mizell is a South Carolina-based author and consultant working on school reform and social justice issues. He previously served as director of the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

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