

BOOK REVIEW

Healing our divided society: investing in America fifty years after the Kerner Report, edited by Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2018, 488 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4399-1603-2; US\$99.50 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4399-1602-5

America is marking an unhappy 50th anniversary. Half a century after the proposal of a national reckoning with our social and economic woes, the country should take stock of what's gone awry all these years. The 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Report, was supposed to identify the factors afflicting American society so deeply that it was tearing itself apart. Boldly, and accurately, the commission's authors concluded that although civil disorder had boiled over in black America, it was white America that had always been the flame, even when it would not admit to the fact. 'What white Americans have never fully understood,' the report stated, 'is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it' (5). The ensuing 50 years should have been dedicated to dismantling the structures of white racism and remedying its effects. Instead, a new assessment suggests, we better start planning for the next 50.

For Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, editors of *Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years after the Kerner Report*, the challenges of 2018 are nearly the same as those of 1968, but we should, they posit, be better prepared to meet them at this juncture. In preparing the book, Harris, the last surviving member of the Commission, and Curtis, the president and CEO of the Eisenhower Foundation, an organization dedicated to continuing the project, assembled a team of public policy luminaries to assess our current situation and map the path forward. An anniversary publication like this could easily be a dry academic exercise or mere retrospective, but Harris and Curtis choose a bolder, more urgent tact. 'This is not another study', they write in the introduction. 'It is a call to action. We know what works. Now, we must build the will to do it' (8). Since 1968, developing that will has been the challenge – and it remains so according to this volume.

In Part I, Harris and Curtis collect the evidence-based policy lessons of the last half-century. Across four core topics – economy and employment, education, housing, and criminal justice – the editors detail what we ought to do about the persistent divisions within American society. They also offer a few pages on how to propel and pay for this new policy program. Part II contains a deeper dive into each of those topics – plus special sections on 'Equality and Inclusion' and 'New Will and the Media' – composed of short essays by eminent scholars and practitioners. As a whole, the volume comprehensively catalogs America's comprehensive failures – and does so in short, readable segments. Many of the contributors' essays are successful standalone briefs on America's lasting problems and serve as useful capsule lessons on the dimensions of our (still) pressing racial divide and socioeconomic crises.

The book is also laced with biting and concentrated evidence of our lack of progress, the collection of which, alone, gives the project merit. This is, still, an undeniably divided society: white non-Hispanic households have a median net worth nearly 15 times that of black households (Abello, Grzwinski, Melkonian, 252); black children are three times as likely to be poor as white children and four times more likely to be suspended from school (Wright Edelman, 228, 231); wage disparities are persistent and growing, with white college graduates earning an hourly wage nearly 50% higher than African American college graduates

(Stiglitz, 131); young black men age 15–29 are 18 times as likely to be murdered than white men of the same age (Currie, 304). What’s more, as the conditions of American life continue to splinter due to persistent residential and educational segregation, wealthy (and white) Americans are no closer to encountering and facing the effects of the country’s longstanding racial injustices. In fact, as education advocate and scholar Diane Ravitch notes,

Because housing is segregated schools are segregated. ... [T]he outlook for racial integration in the schools is probably the worst that it has been in the last fifty years. The Kerner Commission’s hopes for integrated schools seem less likely than ever. (216)

The volume hopes to prove that despite this bleak assessment, there are ways forward – if we choose them. The editors state that ‘the answers are not single, narrow, and categorical. The solutions are creative, comprehensive, and interdependent’ (74); the contributors provide a multitude. To fix education, for example, we ought to equalize resources and expand the functions of schools; to fix housing, look to inclusive zoning, a new Office of Neighborhoods, and public support for affordable rental housing. On criminal justice, promote the Youth Safe Haven model, invest in anti-recidivism programs, and reform sentencing.

While there are dozens of proposals for remedying the effects of institutional racism – from specific youth mentoring interventions to grand policy designs – the volume is disappointingly vague about how we can confront the institutional racism itself. In this respect it replicates the emphasis of the original, offering more recommendations on how to change discriminatory policy than on how to change a discriminatory society. Readers may finish the book convinced that we now know what to do and understanding the need for a new public will to do it, but will probably find themselves unsure of how to move forward in those endeavors.

In other words, *Healing Our Divided Society* offers plenty of tactics, but little strategy to bind them together. There is no consensus presented on how to uncouple American racism from American policy and practice: a challenge at the time of Kerner that remains so today. The strongest essays in the book recognize the intractability of that obstacle and offer the most useful analysis and proposals for next steps. As Michael Jeffries, of Wellesley College, suggests,

[t]he catalyst of political consensus and redress when it comes to matters of racial injustice is not sound research or common sense. It is a widespread commitment among ordinary people to live citizenship out loud, even in the face of repression. (321)

Gary Orfield, professor and director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, offers ‘basic assumptions’ – essentially core guiding principles – to focus the struggle and an analysis to move from small to big things (240). Celinda Lake, a strategist and consultant on progressive campaigns, describes how to adopt a ‘vocabulary that offers a clear origin story for our current problems’ (355). Importantly, Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz offers possibilities for transformative action to unite society. ‘Changing laws may not necessarily on its own be as effective as we would like unless we change attitudes and norms,’ he writes.

Changing norms, though, is difficult, and there needs to be a concerted effort in early education and in public discourse, through television, the media, and films. Perhaps there should be a nationally mandated course in civil rights. At the very least, the federal government should provide massive funding for summer schools and research programs advancing a broader understanding of racism in America and what can be done about it. (136–137)

This type of argument – as well as serious engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement (which gets only passing mention in essays here) – should have been central to any ‘call to action’ for addressing America’s 50-year failure. There are tools for engaging legacies of

racism, from anti-racism training for organizations and reconciliation processes between police and communities to nationally supported educational curricula. If America builds a new will to care for all of its citizens equitably, it will be because the American people finally decide that all citizens deserve equitable treatment, not because a program or policy has been implemented. This collection contributes a useful summary of what has gone wrong since 1968. But this reckoning doesn't quite answer how the next 50 years will be any different. What's needed, but absent, is a plan to root out racial and other prejudices that have prevented substantive and sustainable gains since the civil rights era. Without that, I fear we'll find ourselves in 2068 with the same sort of sorry disbelief, or as journalist Gary Younge puts it, 'a collective pretense that we have no idea where it came from' (391). This type of book gives us an idea. But we'll need far more than that if the next major anniversary is going to be a happy one.

Stephen Lurie
Research and Policy Department,
National Network for Safe Communities,
John Jay College of Criminal Justice,
New York, NY, USA
 slurie@jjay.cuny.edu

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