



Social Knowledge, the Rhetoric of Public Policy, and Black Progress in America

Lessie Branch, Saint John Fisher College

Black people and members of other minority groups are often optimistic about their economic and social prospects, even when they face real economic deprivation and social marginalization. Why is this? In my research on the topic, I find that members of marginalized groups often subscribe to dominant narratives and ideas about their own deficiencies and how people need to behave to get ahead.

Dominant narratives also serve as foundations for policy prescriptions. Policies directed at marginalized groups typically emphasize austerity and try to change people's behavior. They ignore or downplay structural barriers faced by the poor, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups. Despite the fact that such groups have often believed dominant narratives and tried to comply with behavioral standards set by public policies, research shows that social and economic outcomes have not improved much for these groups. Nevertheless, many marginalized individuals have internalized the idea that their failure to improve their lives is due to their own deficiencies.

My work highlights and critiques the ways in which policy discussions about Black socioeconomic stagnation privilege ideology over substantive issues and counterproductively and unjustly punish marginalized people for not being successful. Although my research focuses specifically on Blacks, it is readily applicable to other marginalized groups as well.

Understanding the Power of Rhetorical Criticism

My research is informed by critical discourse analysis, which examines how written and spoken words covertly and overtly support abuses of power, domination, and social inequalities. At the same time, analysis can also illuminate the ways in which speech and texts may resist such structures. In this framework, power means access to or control of public discourse. Control of discourse requires social resources such as wealth, standing, fame, knowledge, information, means of communication, or the ability to coerce. These features of communication allow elites to influence the thinking of less powerful people. Elites can not only shape the content of individuals' beliefs about the world, but also influence how people decide whom to trust and what to believe. Alternative ideas can be limited in elite-controlled public discourse.

Members of marginalized groups may lack the understanding to resist the power of public discourse, allowing elites to influence Black beliefs about their current and future economic standing, relative to their actual economic standing. When elites control the structure, content, and context of public discourse, they limit possibilities for the less powerful. In other words, by controlling public discussion about the experience of and causes of marginalization, elites not only prevent objective improvements; they also influence marginalized people's beliefs about possible and even desirable changes.

Inequality persists, in part, thanks to the way elites shape the public discussion and propose policy prescriptions that fail to honestly portray the reality of inequality in America. Public discussion and narratives that do not reflect reality prevent progress towards true equality. These false narratives allow elites to tacitly hold biased views while espousing an egalitarian ethos, requiring the marginalized to espouse those same views. Behaviorally focused, “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” policies ignore hierarchical contexts of marginalized identities.

This control is not absolute, because of the inherent complexity and instability of power and social communication. At issue is the power of language to constitute and reinforce social structures and the relationships of individuals within them. That is where rhetorical criticism comes in. Such criticism of dominant forms of public discourse and the realities they obscure reveals the possibility of breaking socially constructed constraints. Communication of critiques can change, expand, and improve possibilities for egalitarian social changes. Social movements can broaden public discourse and thereby help people imagine and fight for a more equal and inclusive society.

Dominant Rhetoric and Ways to Overcome Limitations

During Obama’s presidency, uprisings happened in many major U.S. cities. Collective protest began in earnest in 2011 with the Occupy Wall Street movement as a response to widening economic inequality. Dominant rhetoric in response to these protests about the crushing economic burden carried by the 99 percent stressed that certain industries are “too big to fail.” In turn, policy remedies involved financial bailouts for powerful financial interests. Meanwhile, policies supposedly meant to address Black social and economic stagnation continued to be rhetorically framed in terms of “individual responsibility” and the need for deprived people to work harder. Ironically, even under an African American President, elites continued to preach individualism and self-sufficiency to marginalized groups, telling them to abandon collective action; yet at the same time, elites used their collective power, interest groups, and political action committees to push policy agendas that reinforced their power and magnified their wealth.

Such unsatisfactory policy responses laid the foundation for resistance from the Black Lives Matter movement and other recent movements to address the needs of minorities and the poor. As such movements have pressed for new policies they have also re-framed public debates about what is wrong, who is to blame, and what can be done. Black Lives Matter, for example, has put the spotlight on systematic prejudicial assumptions about Blacks and the ways they encourage public authorities to deploy force indiscriminately.

In sum, U.S. public discourse about social and economic inequality in general, and about Blacks in particular, has supported abuses of power and contradict the realities experienced by marginalized groups. But it is possible to resist and overcome such entrenched power. Marginalized groups can build new stories, reframing their understanding of the current predicament with a greater emphasis on the reality of their experience. The history of social movements suggests that a sense of common fate and the envisioning of new possibilities is a powerful part of the ongoing fight for social equality.

Read more in Lessie Branch, “*Optimism At All Costs: Black Attitudes, Activism, and Advancement in Obama’s America*” (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).