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A Forgotten Black Conservative: Another Look at George S. Schuyler

In my companion article ("A Forgotten Black Conservative: A Closer Look at George S. Schuyler") I wrote about George S. Schuyler, a great conservative who also happened to have been black. Since his death in 1977, he has, unfortunately, been forgotten. It is with an eye toward rectifying this situation that I write about him.

That Schuyler could lay legitimate claim to the conservative tradition is born out by a few things, namely, his belief in the tradition or culturally-constituted character of human life; his rejection of rapid and revolutionary change; and his anti-utopianism. Though each of these ideas is conceptually distinct, in conservative thought they tend to be intertwined.

Schuyler witnessed the proliferation of a number of "Back to Africa" movements. The adherents of such movements wished to see American blacks take up residence in the continent from whence their ancestors were taken. As far as Schuyler was concerned, this was a utopian dream of the worst sort. The reason for this was simple: American blacks, by virtue of inheriting the same cultural traditions as their white counterparts, share substantially more in common with the latter than they share with non-American blacks.

Schuyler explains that while "their training and education would undoubtedly be helpful to the backward and newly-emergent states" throughout the non-Western world, "barriers of language and culture" guarantee that black Americans "would not be accepted today anywhere on earth[.]" With respect to the black American's relationship vis-à-vis Africa specifically, he writes:

"Soil depletion, desiccation and the most general impoverishment and ignorance of quarreling ethnic groups indigenous to the Dark Continent make it most unappealing to people whose standard of living is in general superior to that of Europeans, to say nothing of Africans."

Simply put, "American Negroes" have "nothing whatever in common with even the most advanced Africans [.]"

It will doubtless surprise many a contemporary reader, black and white, to learn that Schuyler also opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This legislation he viewed as another species of utopia, for like all utopian schemes, its designs could be implemented only at the cost of depriving us of much that we already enjoyed — in this case, our liberties as Americans.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Schuyler believed, would be but the latest effort "to speed social change by law [.]" This, in turn, implies that "it is possible to make people better by force," an idea that has "been the cause of much misery and injustice throughout the ages." A relatively young country like

America, overcome as it is by delusions of grandeur regarding its own character and always tempted to succumb to the "passion for novelty," is particularly disposed to suppose that rapid change can be induced through the creation of law. But, as Schuyler accentuates, this is nothing more or less than a sign of "political immaturity."

"It is axiomatic," Schuyler confidently asserts, "that it takes lots of time to change social mores, especially with regard to such hardy perennials as religion, race and nationality, to say nothing of social classes." In order for legislation to be effective, it needs to be buttressed by custom. Unless legislation accommodates the community's sensibilities — unless it seems to be a reflection or function of its customs — its enforcement will be that much "more difficult and expensive" and the government will be that much "less popular."

Schuyler was under no illusions concerning the treatment to which black Americans had historically been subjected by the white majority. This treatment has been "morally wrong, nonsensical, unfair, un-Christian and cruelly unjust [.]" Still, there a few considerations that he insisted we bear in mind.

First, America was "dealing better" in its quest for racial equality than *any other* multi-racial society on the face of the planet. Schuyler wrote that while "it was all well and good to expect more of America than any other country," we mustn't ever lose sight of the fact that what "was an American problem was also a global one from which no country was free."

Second, since blacks' emancipation in 1865, there *have been* changes in America that, however slow the rate at which they've transpired, have nevertheless "been marked." Yet "civil rights laws, state or federal, have had little to do with it." What civil rights laws were passed throughout the decades "have been enforced and accepted only when the dominant majority acquiesced, and have generally lain dormant in the law books." To state it succinctly, it has been "custom," not law, that "has dictated the pace of compliance" with the law.

The final and most important consideration that Schuyler invoked when attending to the Civil Rights bill of 1964, his "principal case" against it, pertains to the constitutional liberty that it imperils. As he said, this bill promised to be "another encroachment by the central government on the federalized structure of our society…." Schuyler continued:

"Under such a law, the individual everywhere is told what he must do and what he cannot do, regardless of the laws and ordinances his state or community." As should be obvious, this legal arrangement is "a blow at the very basis of American society which is founded on state sovereignty and individual liberty and preference."

That Schuyler possessed an abiding understanding of and appreciation for tradition, recognized destructive utopian fantasies when he saw them, and detected — and valued — the secret ("the federalized structure of our society") of our American liberties prove that he was a great conservative.

These characteristics also prove that he was a great American.

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