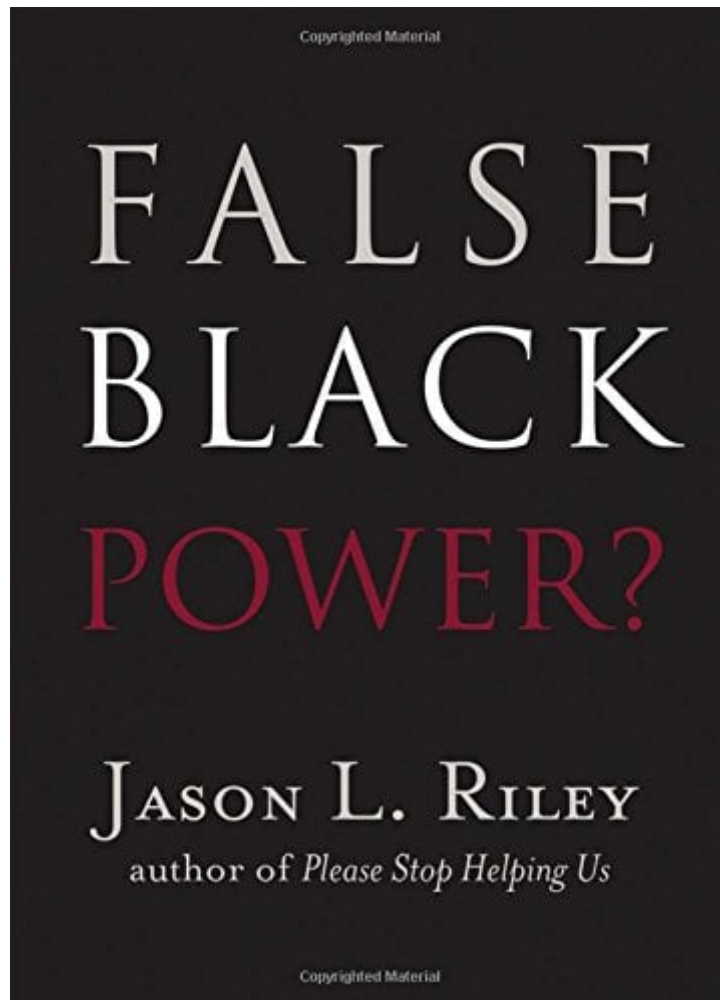


# Seek ye first the political kingdom

by Theodore Dalrymple



Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, was known to have said, "Seek ye first the political kingdom." Nkrumah sought and found it, and within a few years his formerly prospering country was bankrupt, obliged to spend several decades trying to recover from his short reign.

Within quite a range of circumstances, purely political action, however necessary it might sometimes be, does not produce the happy economic results expected of it. Prosperity for whole nations or large groups of people cannot simply be conjured by political fiat from a total economic product that

already exists. The people themselves must have the attributes necessary to prosper; and no amount of political posturing by their leaders, whether they be self-appointed or democratically elected, will give them those attributes.

It is the thesis of Jason L. Riley's short, bracing and eloquent polemic [False Black Power?](#) that America's black political leaders, and their white liberal allies, have hindered rather than advanced the progress of America's black population. Initially well-meaning policies have actually undermined the self-help ethos that was a striking characteristic of black culture in the century between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the so-called Great Society.

What these well-meaning policies caused is a culture of dependence, entitlement, and irresponsibility that certainly did not exist before, and is inimical to progress, to put it mildly. Yet black political leadership and their white political allies persist in believing, or at least in pretending they believe, that this disastrous culture is the direct and inevitable consequence of an apostolic succession, so to speak, of slavery, Jim Crow policies, and contemporary racial prejudice. Their prescription has therefore been political action to destroy not only the practical effects of prejudice (for example, through positive discrimination in employment and the establishment of quotas) but prejudice itself, through a reform of both language and thought. A New Man, long the dream of utopian totalitarians, will have to be created.

Against this, Riley, a columnist at the *Wall Street Journal*, succinctly marshals historical evidence. Riley counters the marked tendency to suppose that if event B occurred after event A, the former occurred because of the latter. Thus it is supposed that, if the proportion of blacks living in poverty, however defined, declined after the installation of the Great Society, and the numbers of middle class blacks increased,

these had to be benefits accruing from the Great Society.

This argument reminds me of the almost universal assumption that if the homicide rate rose during Prohibition, it did so because of Prohibition. I have never seen any reference to the fact that the homicide rate rose as fast in the years preceding Prohibition as during it, which suggests a less simple explanation of the rise. In other words, if Prohibition is to be condemned, it must be on other grounds.

Riley cites evidence to demonstrate that black progress was swifter before the mid-1960s than after it. This does not by itself show that the slowdown was caused by the politically inspired policies after the mid-1960s, but there is at least a plausible causative connection to account for it, and therefore in Riley's case the argument is not just *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

Though the black population was advancing in the years before the beginning of the Great Society, it was still poorer and less well-educated than the white population, and there was a considerable section to whom a life on welfare must have been a temptation and even an opportunity. At the same time, ideological attitudes to family life were changing in the wider society, even if, in practice, they were taken more seriously in the lower than the higher echelons of society in which they originated. Thus, the scene was set for a self-reinforcing culture (if that is the word for it) of economic dependency and family disintegration.

In a sense, however, Riley's argument does not depend crucially on the historical evidence that he adduces. While I believe his evidence to be in essence correct, it will always be open to dispute, for no historical interpretation is ever final or so conclusive that it can never be challenged. It is always possible that new statistics will show that the reduction in the gap between black and white that Riley says occurred in the century between the end of the Civil War and

1965 did not actually occur.

But one is always where one is, not where one ought to have been if things in the past had been better. What remains indisputable is that the culture that has emerged, grown up, and been encouraged (or at least not discouraged) in the black neighborhoods of cities such as Chicago, Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia, is inimical to progress of any kind. It follows from this that efforts to conjure progress or improvement by purely bureaucratic, administrative, or redistributionist fiat are doomed to time-wasting and expensive failure. In raising expectations that cannot be met, these efforts actually stoke the fires of conflict.

What is needed is something more akin to a religious revival than a government program, and this is only likely to happen if black leadership changes tack. The problem is, as a U.S. senator once said, that you can't get a hog to slaughter itself.

Unfortunately, the liberal political establishment is like a stuck record (in the days of vinyl records). It cannot change without having to admit that its originally well-intentioned prescriptions were mistaken, for to do so would destroy its *raison d'être* and its whole outlook on the world. What started as a desire to do good has ended as a desire to feel good—a much stronger and more durable motive. In the process, liberals have duped millions into waiting for Godot.

The author is fair to President Obama, whose term in office was a great disappointment from the point of view of race relations. Being a politician, he had to please more than one constituency at a time, and therefore veered between cultural and structural explanations of the black malaise. Probably he was himself unsure. If he had gone all out for one or the other of the explanations, he risked losing votes. Unfortunately, truth does not lie halfway between itself and error.

Jason Riley has compressed a complex argument into a book of commendable brevity. One can only hope that it will be widely read.