

## Moving Beyond the Isolated Self

The Political and Spiritual Project for the 21st Century

By john a. powell

**T**he Western self, and especially the American self, is particularly isolated and separate. This self has a history, and a large part of that history is its construction in conjunction with the ideals of rationality, of objectivity, private property, market capitalism, and race – all schemas that posit a radical separateness. This self is very much the core of the American dream of liberty and opportunity for all, of a pure meritocracy, but also the core of exclusion and domination. Certainly we can see this view of the self active in the conservative movement today, and in those we would identify as “hard red-staters.” The visceral fear of terrorists, the tightening of national borders, racial profiling, tough rhetoric on crime – all of this would make Hobbes proud – the authoritarian state protecting us all from each other. However, the liberal worldview, especially its dogmatic adherence to secularism, rationality, and the strict separation of church and state is based on the same isolated and autonomous self.

In his new book *The European Dream*, Jeremy Rifkin asserts that the American Dream is in decline and we should look to Europe instead for an alternate vision. While I’m not convinced that Europe is the only place (or even the best place) to find this vision, it does provide an important starting point. Rifkin points out that Europe is increasingly looking at a transnational, interconnected view of the future – a shared destiny that extends beyond nation-states, a focus on quality of life over amassing wealth, and perhaps most importantly, a radically different view of freedom and security. He writes that “[f]or Europeans, freedom is found not in autonomy but in embeddedness. To be free is to have access to many interdependent relationships. The more communities one has access to, the more options one has for living a full and meaningful life. It is inclusivity that brings security – belonging, not belongings.”

Dreams are not enough, however; these visions must be reflected in our social structures and institutions or they remain deferred dreams. Rifkin points to the increasingly inter-connected infrastructure of Europe (currency, transportation systems, easy movement of people for work and leisure) as an example of this dream starting to be realized and supported by institutions.

It is clear to me that we must move forward into this view of shared vulnerability and shared yearnings to actualize justice in a globalized world. However, it is also clear to me that in order to do so we must move beyond the self, in all its egoist separateness. This project cannot be thought of as strictly political. It is clear that this ‘moving beyond’ implicates spirituality. The liberation from the separate egoist self is itself one of the grand goals of most religious traditions, whether through union with God or by realizing our inherent interconnectedness. In every major religious tradition the ideal is unity, and separation leads to suffering.

Even before this election, I asserted that the progressive movement in this country, with its public focus on strict secularism, was not speaking to the hunger for meaning that many people feel. Whether it is articulated or not, it is clear that a large number of Americans are interested in moving beyond a vision of politics fundamentally separate from spirituality, and our interests extend beyond just material concerns. If progressives don’t act on this understanding, the fundamentalists – the imperialists – will lay claim to values and spirituality with its radical promise of liberation from the separate self and selfishness. Cornel West reminds us of the tradition of prophetic Christianity in this country, of Daniel Berrigan, of Dr. King, of William Sloan Coffin and Dorothy Day. Roberto Unger, social theorist and law professor at Harvard, goes further and rejects any spirituality that is not intertwined with the secular. He believes that our religious existential project can only be worked out

through engagement with others. We must remake the world, heal separation, and create structures and institutions that support relationships and love – the inclusivity and contextuality that Rifkin sees underlying the emerging European Dream.

If we look at racial justice, which I think certainly needs to be brought more to the forefront of a progressive agenda, we are still looking at this problematic self – in this case, how the separate self is also the white self. Racism ultimately says that not only am I not my brothers' and sisters' keeper, but that they are not my brothers and my sisters. Whiteness is a social category that has been inscribed in the separate Hobbesean self. It is defined by its ability to exclude and distance itself from the other, but especially the black other. This modern separate self came into being at the same time that modern white racial consciousness came into being. The modern separate self is a racialized separate self, or more pointedly, a white self.

Racial justice is about claiming a shared mutual humanity. It is about interrelationships. Every major attempt to achieve racial justice in the country has come up short (the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, etc.). After each, we have seen race and racial hierarchy reinscribed in different ways. For example, the explicitly discriminatory Jim Crow laws have been replaced with tacit segregation through spatial arrangements, like white suburbs that wall themselves off from the larger region they are a part of. Institutions that once served to maintain the racial caste system, such as anti-miscegenation laws, have been dismantled, yet there has been no corresponding fluidity to the racialized self. Racialized disparities still persist across all life opportunity areas and segregation persists not only in our neighborhoods, schools and businesses but also in non-competitive spheres like spirituality and music. Without an examination of the construction and presence of whiteness, specifically how whiteness has been embedded in the modern separate self, inequitable arrangements based on fear and exclusion will continue to endure despite our best efforts to remedy them.

So here we are back at the problematic self. Beyond the fears of declining property values, of the “predatory black man,” of an increase in crime, etc, that form the backbone of resistance to integration and energize much of the conservative movement, there seems to me to be a more fundamental fear, that of self-annihilation. To ask people to give up whiteness is to ask them to give up their very self. We cannot expect people to expose themselves to an ontological death, or even worse. We must provide space – institutional space, political space, and social space, for the emergence of new relationships, a new way of being beyond isolation and separation. This will not be an immediate transformation. We may be too socialized in these systems of separation to even conceive of the best solutions. This is one reason that shadows of other possibilities buried in the past or our myths become so important. We may see these vague shadows in spiritual traditions and practices that embrace our common and collective humanity. We may see signposts in other countries and cultures. We may find hope in our understanding of mutuality that shows up in some families and beloved communities.

Can we work for the transformation of the institutions that perpetuate suffering and stop focusing simply on transactional moves we find winnable? Can we speak to people's deepest needs, to feel a sense of connection, to feel love? Can we realize that working for the elimination of social suffering is an integral part of any spiritual project? Can we have a discussion about values that is grounded in hope and acknowledgement of our connected being? I not only believe we can, I believe we must, if we are to heal the self and have a future at all.

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