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Thirty Years Later, Two Societies

Three decades ago, the Kerner Commission gave a call of alert that made history: racial divisions were giving rise in the United States to two different societies, separated simultaneously by skin color and access to material well being. Whites and blacks, the authors of this mid-century crude portrait recognized, lived "separate and unequal" in the same nation. In those days of civil rights activism, the gestating abyss showed explosive elements that had already come to the surface, in 1965, in the Watts riots.

Thirty years after the diagnosis of the Kerner Commission, a new report, unveiled this week, indicates that the prediction has already materialized. The rich become richer every day and the poor become even poorer. The abyss between the two becomes wider and the country does not know how to narrow it. With few exceptions, minorities are more oppressed by poverty, particularly in large cities in the United States.

A new white paper, prepared this time by Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private entity of liberal leanings, is full of statistical data. A socioeconomic abyss separates the average income of minorities from that of whites. Thirty percent of the African-American and Latino families live below the poverty level. The average income of Latino and African-American workers corresponds to 55 percent of that of their white counterparts. Conservative critics question the conclusions of the new report. They find it is unilateral and old hat to use race to explain poverty.

But statistically as well as empirically, the trends announced by the Kerner Commission in 1968 - and that the new study confirms with abundant data - are hard to refute.

The exceptions to the rule do not deny what is obvious, and that is that in a country where political equality is an axiom; the concentration of great amount of the collectively produced wealth in a few hands has a dangerous tendency to persist.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century the writer and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, in discussing the situation of her contemporaries, lamented that the physical and spiritual impoverishment of women took away from the human race half of its potential. The same argument holds in this case.

A member of the Kerner Commission, senator Fred Harris from Oklahoma says it well when he states that society must understand that its own interest is at stake. The existence of an "underutilized" group means an unforgivable waste for the country, doubly unjustified in a time of wealth as the one that is being proclaimed officially. The report from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation identifies programs that can help to close the gap, among them Head Start, targeted to low-income children, as well as other programs that aim to provide employment incentives, job training and public instruction among the poor.

But what is most important is the revision of the course taken that the document calls for. It is time to begin to build bridges.