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EDITORIAL DESK

The New Cosby Kids

By BARBARA EHRENREICH (Op-Ed) 767 words

It was such a dog-bites-man story that I almost skipped right by: Billionaire Bashes Poor Blacks. The only thing that gave this particular story a little piquancy is that the billionaire doing the bashing is black himself. Bill Cosby has been attacking the poor of his race, and especially the youthful poor, for a range of sins, including using bad words, "stealing poundcake," "giggling" and failing to give their children normal names like "Bill." "The lower-economic people," Cosby announced, "are not holding up their end in this deal."

They let me down, too, sometimes -- like that girl at Wendy's who gave me sweet iced tea when I had clearly specified unsweetened. She looked a little tired, but, as Cos might point out: How hard can it be to hold a job, go to high school and care for younger siblings in all your spare moments while your parents are at work?

But it's just so 1985 to beat up on the black poor. During the buildup to welfare "reform" in 1996, the comfortable denizens of think spas like the Heritage Foundation routinely excoriated poor black women for being lazy, promiscuous, government-dependent baby machines, not to mention overweight (that poundcake again). As for poor black youth, they were targeted in the 90's as a generation of "superpredators," gang-bangers and thugs.

It's time to start picking on a more up-to-date pariah group for the 21st century, and I'd like to nominate the elderly whites. Filial restraint has so far kept the would-be Social Security privatizers on the right from going after them, but the grounds for doing so are clear. For one thing, there's a startling new wave of "grandpa bandits" terrorizing rural banks. And occasionally some old duffer works himself into a frenzy listening to Cole Porter tunes and drives straight into a crowd of younger folks.

The law-abiding old whites are no prize either. Overwhelmingly, they choose indolence over employment -- lounging on park benches, playing canasta -- when we all know there are plenty of people-greeter jobs out there. Since it's government money that allows them to live in this degenerate state, we can expect the Heritage Foundation to reveal any day now that some seniors are cashing in their Social Security checks for vodka and Viagra. Just as welfare was said to "cause poverty," the experts may soon announce that Medicare causes baldness and that Social Security is a risk factor for

osteoporosis: the correlations are undeniable.

And the menace posed by the elderly can only get worse, as ever more of them sink into debt. What's eating up their nest eggs? In many cases, drugs. How long before the streets are ruled by geezer gangs mugging us to support their insulin and beta-blocker habits?

All right, before the AARP issues a fatwa against me, could we please acknowledge that the demonization of welfare recipients wasn't based on reality either? Contrary to the stereotype, welfare moms in 1996 averaged two children per family, not six, and in surveys always expressed a desire to work, should child care become available. Incidentally, only a minority of them were African-American.

As for the black youth who so exercise Cosby, their pregnancy rates aren't "soaring," as he reportedly claimed; in fact, they're lower than they've been in decades. Ditto with crime rates. And if Cosby's worried about poor grammar and so forth, why isn't he ranting about the Bush 2005 budget, which would end a slew of programs for dropout prevention, recreation and school counseling?

Or, if he's looking for tantrum fodder, what about the fact that a black baby has a 40 percent chance of being born into poverty? You can blame adults for their poverty -- if you're mean-spirited enough - - but you cannot blame babies, and that's, in effect, what we're talking about here.

As the sociologist Michael Males, who monitors youth-bashing outbreaks, told me: "Younger black America today is struggling admirably against massive disinvestments in schools, terrible unemployment, harsh policing and degrading prejudices, and they're succeeding amazingly well. They deserve respect, not grown-up tantrums."

But it must be fun to beat up on people too young and too poor to fight back, or the elderly rich wouldn't do it. Cranky old rich people: now there's a demographic group that qualifies as a genuine Menace 2 Society.

Thomas L. Friedman is on leave until October, writing a book.

CAPTIONS:

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