

before, he has rising living standards, he has a better house to live in, he may have somewhat better schooling and medical facilities. But the fact is that he does not have the same opportunities that the others have. He feels, therefore, a sense of enstrangement from the culture that denies these opportunities to him, particularly since he finds in Africa that his fellow Negroes have been able to win their freedom and set up new governments as the result of struggle. For that reason he is determined to go on.

I want to interpret this in terms of a basic concept that I have about American life. Here if you will allow me I want to get a little autobiographical. I was coming back from a trip to the Middle East about 7 or 8 years ago. I stopped off in Warsaw. I wanted to see an Iron Curtain Country--at that time I could not get into Russia. I spent a little time in Warsaw with some of the Polish journalists, intellectuals and professors. They had a meeting for me.

I remember the Chairman got up and he said, "Mr. Lerner, you have written this big book on American civilization. Could you tell us in a single word what is the essence of American civilization?" I said, "This is a book of a thousand pages and you want me to distill it into one word." He said, "That is right, in one word, what is American Civilization?" Have you ever had anyone throw that at you?

I thought hard and fast. What is it? Is it freedom? Is it equality? Is it democracy? Is it tolerance? Is it decency? Is it dynamism? Of course, it was all of these. But suddenly I heard myself saying "access." The Chairman laughed. He said, "Mr. Lerner, we have heard of American success, but we have not heard of American access." I said, "You see, we have a Declaration of Independence which says 'that all men are born free and equal'. I hope we are all born free and will remain free. But we are not born equal. We are born very unequal. We are born with unequal potential, and unequal abilities. Every school teacher knows this, every employer knows it, every Army commander knows it, every parent knows it. I have six children of my own and every one of them was born unequal. They have unequal abilities and potentials. But we have the notion in America that there ought to be equal access to equal opportunity so that everyone of these unequally born youngsters will get a chance to develop his unequal abilities to the full. In that sense access is the heart of the American experience."