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The Search for Voice: Ideology and Perspective in the Black Community

by
Phillip L. Clay



During the last seven years, there has been a significant shift to the right in the ideological perspectives of American political institutions and behavior. Despite some inconsistencies, the direction is clear. The term "moderate" has acquired a conservative meaning, and liberals have been split into neo-liberal and neo-conservative camps. At this moment American society is informally declaring that it is not committed to achieving the goal of equal outcomes long espoused by a mainly liberal national political and institutional system.

The shift to the right is working changes on traditional black ideological perspectives, both among blacks and between black and white groups. The voices that in the past spoke for black interests, whether they came from black or white groups, no longer effectively present a clear or compelling vision of how we progress towards a just society. The lack of a coherent progressive ideology or voice is evident among blacks and whites. There is division and a lack of momentum. One result is a schism in the black community that has resulted in a loss of influence upon national policy. Blacks must articulate a new vision, must formulate new and progressive approaches that respond to the current social and political realities.

The American people in general, and certainly black Americans, are not particularly ideological. There is no strong passion for ideological positions in this country as there is in some European countries and in other parts of the world. Historical evidence supports this assessment. How else, for example, could a socialist be elected and re-elected as mayor of a large city, Burlington, in the rural and conservative state of Vermont? How could Massachusetts at once support arch-liberal Ted Kennedy and arch-conservative Ed King? Finally, how could conservative Ronald Reagan be elected president with the majority of voters in 49 states when only a minority of those voters identify themselves as conservative and most disagree with him on major issues in economic and social policy?

This evidence is not to suggest that Americans do not have points of view. They have "informal ideologies," for example, about the role of government versus other institutions, or the extent to which government should be ac-

tive in promoting social goals. But Americans are not passionate in those beliefs and are not bothered by inconsistencies between stated views and actions.

Does ideology in fact make a difference? Since our democracy has survived and prospered, and since blacks have moved steadily if not fully toward freedom under both nominally liberal and nominally conservative leadership, does it really matter that there is a certain raggedness and inconsistency in our belief systems?

I will argue in this essay that point of view is helpful in establishing political voice. Ideology is a definition of a group's perspectives, desires, and aspirations in relation to the rest of society and to other groups. "Voice" is the translation of this ideology into political behaviors, positions on issues, coalitions, etc.

The process by which competing interests are resolved is politics. The only people in a society who are really non-ideological and who need no separate "voice" are those who have no interests aside from the common indivisible interest of the society. There are in fact few such people in America. Groups by definition have interests different from the society at large, and most Americans have membership in some group. American history is a history of various interests being forwarded. Politics without ideology (voice) is not likely to be successful because it will not lead consistently and efficiently toward satisfying group interests in relation to those of the larger society.

In this paper I will further argue that blacks are in a state of disarray regarding the voice with which they speak to each other and to the larger society. National black politics is neither efficient nor effective in articulating or advancing blacks' claims for equality in the larger society where elements still resist such claims. As we move towards the 1988 election, this situation threatens to become even more serious as various other groups jockey for the inclusion of their agenda in both the Republican and Democratic platforms. While debate rages about whether American society is aligning with the right—turning away from equality as a goal—blacks are not involved in the debate, are not active in making the case for their interests.

Of course this has not always been the case. Early in this century, blacks such as DuBois and Washington pre-

sented voices that offered alternatives for blacks. Others — from Garvey to Malcolm to King to Carmichael — also offered coherent perspectives for social and political action. They generated great debates, and they also generated institutions and movements that shaped the politics of their day.

Presently, the civil rights movement is dead; there is no national movement or forum. Even though the organizations that were once active are still in place, they are struggling to survive and to defend past gains rather than breaking new ground. Prominent black leaders are mainly politicians grounded in local constituencies, who, if prominent nationally, have become so because they serve a broader than racial interest. The care and concern of blacks was once at the top of the nation's agenda and was in the stewardship of a single-minded black leadership. But this leadership is now scattered and scrambling for attention in a nation increasingly unwilling to take it seriously.

I sense today that we have politics without the analysis of perspectives that should precede it. Political and policy debates are strategic and in reaction rather than proactive and enlightening. More importantly, there is little formal communication within the black community about positions on the great issues of the day.

Unable to rely any longer upon the power of liberalism that benefited them in the past, blacks must develop a voice of their own that correctly represents them on a national level.

The absence of voice arising out of this lack of communication, as well as that resulting from real or imagined conflicts of interest, reflects a critical problem. The virtual absence of blacks in the intellectual debates defining or redefining the contours of America's public policy means the future is being decided with little black input. And what input there is is not being sifted through the screen of interests within the black community. Unable to rely any longer upon the power of liberalism that benefited them in the past, blacks must develop a voice of their own that correctly represents them on a national level.

The Rightward Drift and Civil Rights

For the last forty years, this nation has enacted policies generally viewed as liberal, though sometimes reluctantly and often without passion. During this time, the national government expanded the scope of services, regulations, and activities. The goal was to reduce differences between groups or regions and to protect individuals from social misfortunes, the economy, even their own personal behavior. Ending discrimination, if not the fostering of equality, was a central goal.

The origin of this struggle for group improvement, for advancing the general welfare, for balancing liberty and equality, is as old as the Constitution; but it was not con-

sistently pursued until the administrations of Franklin Roosevelt put executive leadership, legislation, and regulatory muscle into the service of these goals. Since that time — between the Great Depression and 1980, under presidents who were both Democrat and Republican — the federal span of activist public policy grew steadily.

Blacks benefited substantially from this expansion in government. Indeed much of the expansion between 1960 and 1980 was directly related to the claims on government by blacks and their supporters advocating greater civil rights and economic justice.

America generated a surplus that was shared with the world at large and which contributed to making the least well off in this country better off. While the poor were still with us in the 1980's, their numbers were reduced by half compared to the pre-welfare era.

Since the late 1970's, and especially in the 1980's, a variety of events have combined to shift white public opinion toward the right and away from civil rights support. What are some of the features of this trend?

Since the mid-70's our society has been aging. A society that seemed to be dominated by youth in the 60's and early 70's is increasingly dominated by baby boom adults. In contrast to their parents and grandparents who experienced the Depression and World War II and who wanted the government to provide security against the vagaries of the market and to help their children move into a secure place in the middle class, this current young adult group takes a different view. The present concern is for consolidating middle-class status, for increasing wealth and opportunity in a competitive context. This trend is inconsistent with the strong redistributive ethic that once ran through American politics.

The young middle-class population has two principal traits that are important for understanding the rightward shift. First, their education and training support the domination of ideas and analysis over populist or liberal sentiment, those romantic feelings based on a sense of solidarity among the oppressed or the aggrieved. The young middle class brings a mind set of technical rationality to the formation of political perspectives. Few in this group ever experienced poverty or the fears associated with it. Theirs was a relatively comfortable life, and they have had education and experience that shows them the possibilities of increasing that comfort. Compared to earlier generations, they have obtained status and comfort without much blood or sweat, and they believe, subliminally at least, that everyone can obtain it. While there have been economic downturns (three recessions in the last 10 years, for example) and some marginal losses in real income, the safety net for the white middle class is a tight mesh through which few middle-class people fall.

There are two other societal trends that help explain the shift to the right: economic restructuring and demographic change. The economic restructuring that has occurred over the last twenty years is characterized by the decline of the heavy industrial and unionized sectors, by the rise of small business, high tech, service and professional occupations, and the organizations that support them. Deficits, trade imbalance, and manufacturing decline underscore the frailties in the economy. Career advancement is less certain for many, and the chance to advance as fast as their parents and to obtain as much cannot be taken for granted.

Economic restructuring and demographic change have combined to change dramatically the character of the liberal alliance that had been influential in recent decades. Unions are weaker, more suspect; the family farmer has virtually disappeared; the black population is scattered over many more states and concentrated within the larger cities, not the suburbs where most of the new white middle-class population grew up and resides.

Old ethnic and immigrant groups have been assimilated and have moved away from the urban core. The shared interests and shared plight on a common turf (the city) that characterized traditional political organizations and unions no longer applies. Today individuals are in a position to be and are encouraged to be far more independent in their judgments and their alliances. They rely less on gatekeepers, on opinion leaders, on moral arbiters. Fewer institutions manage their relationship to the larger society. It is now “in” to be an Independent rather than a Democrat or Republican.

As these developments occurred, blacks shared in some of them and not others. Economic restructuring has been a major factor in the advancement of some blacks and the falling behind of others. The black middle class has grown in an expanded industrial and service economy, but the number of unemployed blacks has grown still more rapidly as that economy shifted from low-skilled jobs. The result is the evolution of an unemployable “underclass” of the permanently poor, even as a black middle class emerges. Yet middle-class blacks remain stalwarts in the liberal alliance that is under siege from the right. Blacks are also beginning to be affected by the dominance of ideas over sentiment and indeed that shift explains, in part, the growing schism in the black community that I will discuss below.

The increasing competition in society has also affected the black community by raising tensions between black and white peers in professional and work environments over such issues as affirmative action and seniority. While whites are rushing to assert independence and eschewing “special interests” in their personal politics, blacks continue to feel obliged (but not without increasing dissent and personal tension) to rely on race politics—a political stance that blacks should reflect solidarity around the race issue to the substantial exclusion of other issues.

These trends at least partially explain the rightward political movement. How are these sentiments organized in political terms, how have they changed, and where do blacks stand with respect to them?

The Nature of Ideology

In speaking of ideology, I have several specifics in mind. I am interested in attitudes concerning the role of government, interested in the extent to which racial interests are included in government policy. I am also interested in the extent to which the complex interaction between race, class, and other features is addressed. I am interested in the extent to which the public process is open and the degree to which democratic values prevail. I will look at attitudes towards justice and the extent to which economic injustices, pure market outcomes, are accepted.

Finally I am interested in how the conflict between liberty and equality is resolved. This is the question of the extent to which individuals are free to pursue their own interests and to enjoy their own winnings (liberty) versus the extent to which public policy intervenes on behalf of the less well off, the vulnerable, or the public generally (equality.) When we look at the major ideological perspectives on these several dimensions, we find substantial shifts among moderates and liberals to more explicitly conservative notions. Those shifts have important meaning for blacks.

For most blacks there is a clear starting point on each of these questions. Blacks have traditionally assumed that government would play a substantial role in society and that the federal government’s intervention on their behalf was more dependably favorable and subject to their influence than state and local intervention. They depended on the federal government to protect their particular interest, mainly the reduction of segregation, racial inequality, and discrimination, through civil rights legislation in particular, and through legislation in other areas such as social welfare and administrative regulations.

Blacks have traditionally viewed justice as a first obligation of government and believed that economic injustice without mitigation is unacceptable. Government responsibility in this regard was to protect individuals from private or market outcomes that operated to sustain or increase racial inequality. Blacks have typically experienced liberty negatively, as reinforcing or increasing their inequality, as when liberty is used to support segregated neighborhoods and workplaces or to support discrimination in public or business settings.

Blacks have traditionally aligned themselves with the politicians or parties that best reflected these activist points of view. This has generally meant the Democratic party since Franklin Roosevelt, but in particular states and particular elections, there have been exceptions. Even black conservatives accepted this broad view, saving their conservative views for strictly economic, religious, or other non-race related matters.

Black conservatives have emerged recently to join in the debate, but they are out of step with black traditionalists, even conservative black traditionalists, who are for the most part liberal on matters related to race. These new black conservatives, speaking largely from white institutions and isolated from blacks and from any political accountability, find suspicious ears in the black community. Black radicals who call for an end to the capitalist system are and have been even less regarded.

It is perhaps important to note that some of the difficulty we have noted above and will be exploring more in the sections below arise from the changing nature of the status of the “black problem” in America. We have moved from a problem that had at its core legal barriers to participation to problems that have economic inequality at their core. Fighting racial barriers that were specifically illegal was easy compared to challenging the distribution of socio-economic outcomes which are not constitutionally guaranteed. A major reason for the evolving non-role of blacks in American politics must be attributed to this change and the failure of black politics and politics in general to factor in the different issues involved.

Varieties of Belief

In the sections below I shall discuss the varieties of liberal, conservative, and radical points of view and the issues raised in each of them on the matter of race.

Liberals

The liberal tradition goes back to the age of reform that had its origins in the 19th century, flourished in the progressive era, and triumphed with the election of President Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. The liberal ideology is founded on the belief that humans are perfectible and that a more perfect and humane society can be achieved. Liberals believe they understand society and understand how to make society more perfect. Blacks have been the beneficiaries of liberal reform attention.

In their treatment of blacks, liberals tend to be democratic, but they reserve for themselves the status of senior partners in the institutions and movements.

This notion of the good society is best obtained, according to the liberal point of view, through a strong central government and through regulation of the economy and such areas of personal behavior as are deemed important for the general good of society, especially for the good of those less well off. Liberals accept the market, accept capitalism, but not how it sometimes works imperfectly for protecting or uplifting the poor. They acknowledge that the market will not eliminate poverty, but they feel that redistribution can substantially reduce the suffering in society and make it possible for most people to gain access to the expanding economic pie that the free market promises. They favor government policies that are compensatory or partly redistributive as an antidote to economic injustice. Perfect equality was never a liberal goal.

Liberals have advocated intervention in both public and private spheres. The liberal view is that government should act positively to achieve outcomes rather than to simply set a tone. On busing, for example, even though it violates the liberty they espouse, liberals believe that the result to be achieved (integrated education) justifies government action. They have a similar view with respect to group versus individual treatment. Given their belief in the possibility of a more perfect society, they are inclined to promote public policy that benefits groups rather than policies that focus on individuals.

Given this view, the liberal attitude towards blacks is not hard to detect. It is reflected in the use of the central government and other institutions to benefit blacks as a group, activities to produce results rather than simply opportunities for results. The tactical approach of the liberals has been to create and support various interest groups and special organizations that are a part of their coalition. Such groups exist for blacks, as they do for labor,

public education, health, progressive farming, and other interests. Liberals have never been a homogeneous group, but rather a collection of special interest groups that had in common only the notion of actively creating a better society. Inconsistencies between the interests of these special groups were sublimated, and their overarching goals of a just society were emphasized.

In their treatment of blacks, liberals tend to be somewhat democratic, but they reserve for themselves the status of senior partners in the institutions and movements. In some cases paternalism characterizes the liberal's relationship with blacks. The pattern is present in personal relationships and most especially in institutional ones. While liberalism was the dominant influence between 1930 and 1980, liberals have never really been in full command or confident about their power. Even during the depths of the Depression, liberals were on the defensive. This was in large part because their view of social engineering is inconsistent with American society's espousal of individual traditions and values. Liberals have often been forced to camouflage their social engineering motives and even adopt some of the platitudes of the conservatives.

In recent years, as the conservative assault has broadened and increased, liberals have been even more on the defensive. Their confidence has sagged under the weight of several electoral losses going back to 1968. No liberal has been elected president since Johnson, and some of the more dependable and eloquent liberal politicians have been defeated. Many surviving liberals are taking steps to the center of the political spectrum.

Black voices in liberal circles have been mainly political rather than intellectual. As liberals have had to face challenges to their point of view and policies, blacks have lent political and moral support but little in the way of revision or revitalization of the intellectual underpinnings. In the last five years, during which many books, studies, and papers have been written as part of the public policy debate, there have been very few black entries. It is as though blacks are the non-commissioned officers in the liberal core. This second-class citizenship, this intellectual isolation, is a source of real tension, especially to young blacks, even though the "black power" rhetoric that first gave voice to this tension has subsided.

Equality was well served in the years of liberal dominance. Hardly anyone would dispute that progress has been made in bringing blacks into the mainstream. But success has been far from complete. Many of the problems that we have always complained about are still with us. In recent years the tensions and conflicts among various liberal interest groups have dominated political dialogue and public discourse: disagreements on affirmative action, seniority, community control, Democratic party rules. This has engendered a good deal of disenchantment among those who still profess to be liberals, and it has also led to the emergence of both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. The disenchantment with the shifting agenda and the disaffection (or perceived disaffection) of once-faithful friends is the source of much anguish in the black and liberal communities.

While some liberals have sought to reassess their policy perspective in light of new realities and have as a result come up with new proposals that are still consistent with the liberal ideology (Governor Cuomo may be considered

an example in this regard), many others have taken detours from the traditional liberal path. Hence we have the emergence of the neo-liberals and the neo-conservatives.

The Neo-Liberals

Neo-liberals are liberals who took a look at the traditional approaches, alliances, and perspectives on public policy issues that they regarded as automatic and obligatory and decided that they should be subject to critical review. Charles Peters, author of *Neo-Liberal Manifesto*, writes:

. . . if neoconservatives are liberals who took a critical look at liberalism and decided to become conservatives, we are liberals who took the same look and decided to retain our goals but to abandon some of our prejudices. We still believe in liberty and justice and a fair chance for all, in the mercy for the afflicted and help for the down and out. But we no longer favor unions and big government or are opposed to military and big business. Indeed for our solutions to work we have come to distrust all automatic responses—liberal and conservative.

The neo-liberals have some points of view that put them at odds with the liberal mainstream and with blacks. For example, they do not favor industrial policy that seeks to revive or protect the old industries (in which lots of blacks work and to which access has been recent), but rather Neo-liberals seek to promote growth-oriented entrepreneurship and small business, not simply to shuffle assets as in speculation, mergers, and the like. They believe in being pro-defense but not pro-foreign intervention, and they accept social program cuts as necessary and acceptable in the current effort to control deficits. They favor the use of economic sanctions but not military intervention. They oppose protectionist policies. They are against big labor and big government but they are not opposed to unions or government intervention.

They believe that government should be strong but not big, that government should figure out what government should do and do those things efficiently and well. They believe that government should avoid those things it cannot do effectively even if attention to them is clearly merited. They are more excited by government as public entrepreneur and regulator of incentives for development than as big-muscled social engineer.

Neo-liberals specifically reject “special interests” and favor government as an agent of the public interest. They regard as “special interests” those groups that make up the liberal alliance—unions, gay rights, the education lobby, trade protectionists, etc. Blacks resent the “special interest” prejudice as it is attached to civil rights and anti-poverty activists, arguing that seeking justice is hardly the same thing as seeking a tax loophole, exclusive subsidies, trade protection, or other such economic benefits at the public’s expense.

While neo-liberals assert they have an interest in enforcing civil rights laws, they do not believe that they have an obligation to accept demands for equal outcomes. They do not regard equal outcomes as fundamentally or reasonably achievable, and they are committed only to making opportunity equally available to the extent possible and to do so by “expanding the pie.”

Neo-liberals are empathetic with social issues raised by conservatives where liberals often are not. For example, they oppose mandatory prayer in schools but they might not object to a nonsectarian “moment of silence.” They favor desegregation but do not feel obliged to support busing. In short they want to update liberalism, making it appeal to the young middle-class constituency. They are not sentimental about, nor defensive about, having abandoned the old liberal stand on the side of the down-trodden.

While some of these departures from traditional views are matters of degree and emphasis, some shake what might be called liberal articles of faith. Neo-liberals fought liberals on aid to Chrysler. Neo-liberals are more positive on tuition tax credits. They are not as protectionist as liberal union advocates. Gary Hart, their presidential standard-bearer in 1984, got few endorsements from traditional liberal or black groups, who considered his technical, rational approaches cold. Bradley, Gephardt, Babbitt, and Nunn face similar skepticism.

Neo-liberals seem uncomfortable dealing with racial issues and in working with or being politically collegial with those who don’t share their middle-class background. Indeed blacks are suspicious of neo-liberals because neo-liberals object to “special interests” and to traditional litmus tests blacks might apply. It is not surprising, therefore, that between the two leading white Democratic contenders, blacks overwhelmingly preferred Walter Mondale, the traditional liberal, to Gary Hart, the neo-liberal. Among current contenders, Dukakis, Simon, and Biden—along with Jackson—should get a sympathetic audience from blacks.

Conservatives

What do conservatives believe? The primary tenet that conservatives bring to the table is the belief in the free market as the primary arbiter of interests, ideas, and values in American society—and the principal allocator among competing groups. They believe that the market left alone will provide the greatest benefits to the most people. Conservatives favor self-reliance and individual effort rather than group strategies to achieve the benefits of the marketplace.

Where social policy is necessary, they favor attention to individuals and not to groups. In fact, they deplore the idea of group interests. And the treatment of group interest has always been central to blacks. Conservatives also believe that a strong central government is inimical to the interests of the majority. They favor action at the lowest level of government with fewer functions provided at the central or national level.

In race relations, conservatives believe that government should support equal opportunity but not require or even encourage equal results. They believe that market dynamics will disclose what results ought to be and that market generated results ought to be accepted as the most efficient and most fair. Anyone who feels unsatisfied by the market result ought, therefore, by individual action seek to change the results for themselves. Conservatives generally are opposed to policies that are race-conscious, including strong affirmative action plans.

Conservatives argue that social programs sponsored by liberals substantially failed and interfered with the incen-

tives blacks would otherwise have had to take advantage of market opportunities and incentives. In that vein, they conclude that the programs were harmful, or wrong, or both. They feel that the economic tide will, in fact, lift all boats and that for blacks to get into the mainstream is their only opportunity for equality.

Conservatives would argue that discrimination is not a serious problem, since in the free marketplace discrimination is irrational. Personal preferences, they argue, are acceptable. While conservatism is not by definition racist, it does provide an umbrella under which racial discrimination dressed in institutional rules and personal preference can hide.

A growing number of blacks are articulating conservative points of view. This is new as a journalistic phenomenon but is not new in fact. There has always been a conservative streak among blacks. What sets the traditional black conservatives apart from newer ones such as Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, and Walter Williams, is the latter group's opposition to certain civil rights laws and their belief that social and economic policy ought not explicitly be designed to reduce racial equality or give special attention to race. They assume what is good for the economy is good for blacks. Indeed black conservatives have become some of the most impassioned critics of race-conscious public policy, including affirmative action. White conservatives and young black conservatives have joined to argue that advocacy on a racial basis and on the basis of group membership is fundamentally wrong.

The Neo-Conservatives

Neo-conservatives are former liberals who looked at the liberal political traditions and chose to become conservative rather than becoming updated or neo-liberal. They reject the core of liberal beliefs. They react to many of the same issues and concerns that prompted neo-liberals to make their switch. Examples of neo-conservatives include: Irving Kristol (editor of *Public Interest*), Nathan Glazer (*Affirmative Discrimination*), and Edward Banfield (*The Unheavenly City*). The neo-conservatives are for the most part intellectuals. They are in research institutions and universities. They are mostly older men. Some are former radicals as well as former liberals.

They share the neo-liberal's reactions to the automatic sentiments of liberals and the conservative's respect for the power and fairness of the market as social arbiter and economic allocator. They also believe strongly in traditional social values. They interpret the shortcomings of social programs and the rise of the black middle class as proof that the traditional liberal approach to social engineering is fundamentally wrong, ineffective (for those still in need), and unnecessary (for blacks who are now middle class).

Unlike neo-liberals, who are essentially positivists and rational analysts, neo-conservatives are in simple terms fed up with social engineering. They are uncomfortable with civil rights and racial advocacy, and indeed many of them have made declarations that have in effect trivialized race. For example, Patrick Moynihan, more than a decade ago, suggested that the issue of race would benefit from a period of "benign neglect." Nathan Glazer has described many of the traditional social programs advo-

cated by liberals and blacks to be clear examples of "affirmative discrimination" in addition to being misguided and counter-productive.

Blacks find neo-conservatives far more unapproachable and insensitive on matters of race than the traditional conservatives, who often can be convinced to be race interventionists for a variety of reasons (related to "social stability" or "corporate responsibility"). Neo-conservatives are disenchanted and unsympathetic with racial and social activism. There is little hope that they will seek partnership with the black masses. They are not generally key actors in institutions and, with few exceptions, they are "national critics," political actors without any base at the state or local level.

While neo-conservatives are not politically active as a group, their influence should not be underestimated. They write books and appear on television. They are highly literate and as such are effective in the media. Especially important is the fact that they create "ideas in good currency" and provide analysis that has the effect of giving voice to ideas that the political conservatives and neo-liberal actors share. The influence of Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* is illustrative in this regard. They are also influential in institutions that play an important role in society, especially the university.

The fact that blacks are not involved in these discussions and are not present when the arguments are made in scholarly and institutional settings means that the social policy revisions in government are developed often without black input at critical stages. Congress, which used to be a forum for the debate of domestic social policy, has been reduced to a forum for Reagan's fiscal and economic approach to undermining liberal social policy.

Radicals

In European countries, the ideological fringe often has influence and presence. Such is not the case here. The various radical critiques are important, however. For example, radicals have cogent, if not always compelling, explanatory models that speak to the old and continuing sources of inequalities between the races. Radicals generally argue against concentrated private power and wealth, lack of public control, repressive restrictions on self-determination and self-definition. While they are often naive about what can be done in various areas of public policy, their diagnostic insights are sharp.

They argue that New Deal liberalism and more recent liberal policies failed, and that the market has failed to bring about the economic redistribution that is their definition of social justice. They are perhaps most critical of liberals because they argue that liberals are fundamentally cowards — recognizing and agreeing with the social-political dynamics that radicals assert but unwilling to accept the implications of this knowledge.

The declining influence of radicals (black or white) in the black community is not surprising. Black intellectuals have long been disillusioned with radicals, who they believe used blacks as victims on display and had more interest in the class than, in the racial aspects of inequality. Since class inequality is still the principal interest of radicals, there is likely to remain a significant distance between blacks and radicals.

The “black power movement” was a case where blacks sought to make their own radical critique of American and black society. It is not a coincidence that a major part of this effort was that it sought to present a black radical critique separate from the white radical perspective. Because it largely addressed issues only touched by the civil rights movement, the black power movement was important not so much for its political impact as for its creation of a disposition among blacks to acknowledge the importance of the questions we propose in this essay.

The black power movement did not produce an effective and enduring progressive voice or leadership at the national level. It is true that a new generation of politicians – Mayors Young, Goode, etc. – have succeeded. But they were bogged down in their own personal and political balancing act – between the race politics that elected them and the political mainstreams through which they must swim if they are to survive. Jackson is different, but only in the sense that as a national candidate he is reaching for the rainbow and not articulating a voice and developing an institution for black Americans.

The Schism in the Black Community

The failure of voice in the black community is not an academic matter. There is every evidence that we are at one of those critical points in history where we are not clear about what our problems are or how to address them. We are under siege even with respect to past “victories.” There are widely divergent suggestions from others about what we should do, and there are discordant demands within the community. Do blacks believe that affirmative action really is a good idea or does it place a stigma on blacks? Is busing an effective way to equalize educational opportunity or would some approach not focusing on integration be better? Should we get “tough” with crime or wait until “causes” are addressed? Does welfare promote “dependency?” What should be done about teenage pregnancy? About gentrification?

Our leadership seems incapable of mounting either an effective defense or a credible offense. While the old divisions in the black community continue, new divisions are emerging, especially between the interests and perspectives of the expanding black middle class and the even more rapidly expanding “underclass.”

History of the Schism

The history of the schism in the black community is tied to changing economic conditions in the country. At the turn of the century, more than 90% of the black population lived in the South. They provided the muscle for the largely unmechanized agrarian system. Starting with the Depression, the old agrarian society went into a steep decline. Mechanization forced many blacks off farms; those who stayed had an increasingly marginal existence.

Starting with the mobilization for World War II, large numbers of blacks headed North. By the end of this exodus (in the mid-1960’s), half of the black population lived outside the South, concentrated in two dozen large industrial cities in the North. The move mainly involved low-income blacks with limited education and training. Huge gaps existed between blacks and whites in education. In

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the last two decades, that gap in education has narrowed considerably, and among younger black families so has the gap in income. Those who made the most progress in this regard became the new black middle class – either by getting a “good job” in unionized industry or by education.

Blacks found cities less effective as engines of opportunity than did those immigrants who moved to American cities in large numbers. The shifting economic structure of the country meant that over time there was a declining number of manufacturing jobs that could provide middle-class status to blacks as it had provided for generations of white working-class families. Increasingly, the city as a lever for upward mobility seems stuck for all but the well-educated who can take advantage of the growing number of white-collar-job opportunities. When large numbers of young blacks came of age and lower-paid service jobs dominated, the trend set in motion in the 60’s became even more apparent in the 80’s.

Finally, because race is a special and indelible mark of oppression, blacks were not able to melt into the urban stew. The mounting racial tension, highlighted by the “unrest” of the 1960’s, meant that every effort blacks made to improve their position set them up for conflict with whites who were left behind or who had come to feel entitled to their exclusive but shrinking prerogatives. Jobs that could help the black poor advance were increasingly unavailable over the last 20 years and especially in the most recent years. High rates of unemployment, especially for young black workers, seemed to remain whatever the state of the economy as a whole.

By 1960 the contours of status differences, blacks versus whites, was already clear. While some cities such as Atlanta, Washington, New York, and Chicago were able to develop a large black middle class that could in fact generate its own growth, this was the exception. In no metropolitan area is the black population like the white population – mainly middle class.

What does it mean when there are significant changes in the two ends of the distribution of families within the black community? I come to the conclusion that this schism heightens the divergence of interests that the groups have; and this divergence, in addition to producing our blurred policy visions, complicates the search for an articulate and effective progressive voice. We explore these two groups in the sections below.

The Underclass

This group is the approximately one-third of black families who earn less than \$10,000 a year. The 18% of black families who earn less than \$5,000 are of special

concern. Half of this group is not in the job market and therefore does not benefit from economic growth. They are, and this is an important part of the definition of the underclass, outside of the mainstream. Some do succeed and work their way out of poverty, but this is increasingly the exception.

They are not simple carbon copies of their parents who were typically poor. Each generation is structurally poor for different reasons. The current young adult poor person has education and skills that in another generation would have been sufficient for steady employment and decent pay. But at the same time they had gained a little more education than their parents, their greater education came to count for less.

While the majority of all poor individuals are children, their future turns on the extent to which these youngsters get leverage in terms of educational preparation. They arguably are not getting it in the big city school systems. Racism is partly to blame, but there are economic and perhaps cultural explanations as well. Our efforts at helping the underclass have been substantially unsuccessful in lifting them out of poverty. We have not conquered racism. The economic system reinforces class divisions, and we have been unwilling to devise a cultural technology that all groups, including blacks, could use when facing big obstacles.

What is important is that the number of poor blacks continues to expand, and permanence rather than instability characterizes this status. They are increasingly not being given, and to some extent are not taking advantage of, opportunities for upward mobility.

Some analysts now contemplate labor shortages in some cities. Their studies also show that, so far, little mobility out of poverty has resulted from this economic resurgence. Analyses of job opportunities suggest that blacks are being locked out of the recovery growth at increasing rates; jobs are being taken by process changes and automation, by suburbanites, and in some locations by immigrants. What is left that poor blacks can get are more “dead-end” than the manufacturing jobs that have been lost in recent years — jobs that pay less and offer less hope for mobility.

All of this reinforces the notion of permanence of the black underclass. It also underscores the point that the present crisis of the underclass is not entirely historical but, in important ways, contemporary.

The Black Middle Class

Approximately 18% of black households are middle class. Using the cutoff of \$25,000 per year in 1979, this is up from 13% in 1970 and compares with a shift from 31% to 37% for whites in the same time period. The black middle-class population that we are talking about is a working middle class. Only 1% of black families (versus 6% for whites) earn as much as \$50,000.

This black middle-class status is disproportionately achieved by having a working spouse and is concentrated in heads-of-household under age forty. Much of this middle class is new, therefore, and arrived through salaried employment in the professions and not self-employment or business enterprise.

There are several points about this group that inform our current debate, and I will discuss them in turn. The first is that historically the black middle class has not been able to be secure in its middle-class status. Unlike middle-class whites whose children are almost all certain to be middle class when they grow up, blacks experience no such certainty. Many older blacks experienced an unstable career trajectory that sometimes included downward mobility or stunted growth. As a result there is concern among the black middle class about how they can secure their own status as well as about how to pass it on to their own children.

This new black middle class has moved to suburbs in the last several years at a greater rate than whites. This, combined with regional mobility, means that a growing physical isolation is developing: the middle class is the suburbs (and middle-class city neighborhoods) and the underclass is the ghetto. The natural alliance cemented by propinquity and kinship is now broken by regional mobility and segregated housing. This segregation makes “us” and “them” easier and more concrete.

There is also within the black middle class a substantial amount of stress. The evidence for this is anecdotal but substantial. The popular black press, once consumed with interpreting and advocating civil rights and “black power,” now focuses on black middle-class family, professional, and business issues — not just the petty bourgeoisie or “yuppie” issue, but investment, relationships, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Another theme in the black press is the anguish over the underclass: how to solve the still serious problems, how to use black institutions which themselves reflect the class issues, how to relate politically and socially to the underclass, and how to protect them from the moral cutbacks they sense among whites. There is sympathy, anger, and embarrassment in good measure, directed both at whites and at their underclass brothers and sisters.

Another point to be made about this group is that they are disproportionately concentrated in the industrial sector and the public sector where the rate of future job growth is not expected to be substantial. There are relatively few blacks in the middle class who are employed in engineering or technical fields or who are in the executive levels of growth-oriented service or corporate organizations. The question of the opportunity for security and mobility among middle-class blacks depends critically on their moving quickly to consolidate their personal and class position and to make appropriate lateral and/or vertical exits to more growth-oriented sectors.

Despite the middle-class status, this group is more than twice as likely to experience unemployment as their white peers. While their unemployment rate is not high, typically 5% or so, the fact that it is twice as high as their white peers and that upward mobility is a problem reinforces the point that discrimination and separate treatment are important even at this level.

What is the significance of this class division between black groups compared to a normal difference in perspective and experience between the “haves” and “have nots?” The evidence seems to suggest there is a growing division of interest within a group that traditionally had interests that were indivisible and monolithic. The tradition of solidarity grounded in social victimization was formerly not

complicated by class. The objective evidence of class was insignificant compared to the brutal and common victimization as members of a racial group. Both classes now have major concerns that require a different kind of attention. Our language, institutions, and forums do not reflect this fact or facilitate a solution. How is this phenomenon of class schism related to the present political and ideological issues?

There are several areas where these two worlds collide with the larger world of policy politics. The language of that discussion (or the lack of one) and the balancing of interests and advocacy in the black community are themes of this essay. There are issues of public policy where the battle is not only strategic, but also ideological, especially regarding help for the underclass. These issues include: interdependence of interests, the role of local institutions versus government, the nature of the “safety net,” government intervention to promote a class standard (read: middle-class standard), spokespersonship for blacks in political and institutional arenas. The latter three issues are of primary importance in this discussion of the balancing of interests and advocacy in the black community.

As regards the nature of the “safety net,” it goes without saying that the underclass is in need of government benefits—both for immediate survival and to obtain mobility out of the ghetto. Children, the major beneficiaries (along with the elderly) of social programs, need them merely to survive. Yet we are in a period where there are serious budget problems and a legislative mandate (Gramm-Rudman-Hollings) to reduce spending over the next several years. Choices will have to be made among existing programs. There is little momentum to launch major new programs. In addition, the Reagan administration has commissioned a major study of the welfare system that may in fact force the question more directly than would occur otherwise. What’s at stake?

The second point takes the issue of standards of behavior a step further by asking what standards apply in setting local institutional policies within communities. Up to now even middle-class blacks have resisted the notion that the black community should be required to adopt middle-class standards (read: white middle-class standards). While it is never made clear what standards are being talked about, the notion is that there are cultural differences among racial and ethnic groups and that blacks need not make wholesale changes simply to conform. Variety is both acceptable and a statement of group self-determination.

There is now an emerging view, though not a new one, that some of the lower-class black lifestyles are pathological and ought to change. If the black middle class, whose standards are similar to their white peers, begin to share this view, we again have the basis for a conflict in point of view, as well as for a conflict about social policies to follow from it.

Then there is the issue of who speaks for blacks. This becomes more important as the differences outlined above become clearer. Will it be the race politicians who draw support from the black masses, or will it be the members of the black business and professional middle class aligned with and having a base in multi-racial constituencies and institutions?

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The black schism referred to here is in part a matter of two styles: the rational analytical style of strategic politics with policy grounded in the professions and business and the “expressive” style of ethnic politics grounded in advocacy of group interests, race solidarity, party loyalty, mass appeal, and in alliances of convenience or tradition with liberals. The former is more characteristic of the middle class while the latter reflects the political tradition of the poor. These lines will sharpen within the black community as they have already among white Democrats, who, for example, have such camps as “ethnic or urban politician” or “suburban politician”—all under the Democratic umbrella.

The reader may think that this analysis too sharply draws the divisions within the black community. While the extent of the division cannot be precisely estimated and will vary from place to place and over time, it is a real and an important source of tension. The only question is whether the interests of these groups are so mismatched that the tension cannot be made creative or redemptive, thus preventing a much needed dialogue in a black community too long dependent on ideas and initiatives from outside. I don’t believe the mismatch will be fatal. I believe that most middle class blacks want racial progress. I believe that most whites do as well. But I also believe that we are approaching a period where the permanence of the underclass and the frustrations of the rest of society may produce action before dialogue, reaction before analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that blacks lack a clear voice in the major debates over, and the ideological structuring of, those domestic policies that are central in efforts to achieve their aspirations. Because the issues affect blacks differently depending on class, and because there have been shifts in the black class structure that have altered traditional ideological positions, the lack of voice is part of, and contributes to, an emerging schism in the black community.

The present paralysis and blindness of collective will in the black community are relatively new. Leaders such as Douglass, Washington, DuBois and, most recently, King presented ideas that supported the development of the movement and changed the relationship between the private aspirations of blacks and the political and social action they undertook. Dr. King, for example, gave us a voice with which to speak. That voice was powerful in building a coalition, propelling action, and striking with efficient resonance the chords in the national heart. His loss has not been replaced, and the technology of non-violence has not been transformed to tackle present problems.

While the voice he offered would not have been good for all times, and while evolution was inevitable, we have not as a people evolved. What we have is mounting personal and community anguish and confusion about our relationship to each other and to whites, and about our personal disposition on matters in our community and individual lives. Set adrift as we are, we rely on porous ideological and political floats rather than sturdy vessels that can support navigation with and against the currents in our society.

Among whites, there is also drift. Those committed to racial equality anguish over how to be effective, helpful, and sensitive without being paternalistic, sentimental, or negligent to responsibilities in other areas such as gender or class inequality. They also want to avoid being victims of moral blackmail that plays on guilt. They listen for black voices to lead or share leadership, but hear none. They were conditioned by the black power movement to expect and to respect black self-definition that was partially developed by Carmichael and others but was never carried fully to its institutional, strategic, or personal potential. The movement was like a torch that produced heat and light as long as it burned. When the flame died, there was nothing left. The movement generated expectations among blacks and whites that have not been fulfilled.

For those whites who consider and face the racial issue only out of professional or political necessity, there is also concern. They look at problems blacks face or that society faces and wonder what to do. They sense something different needs to be done but find the language of discourse inadequate. They are alienated by strident voices. They would engage in legitimate dialogue if blacks could only develop a language, identify a forum, and create an environment where fears, suspicions, and concerns could be presented and addressed with dignity and in mutual respect. They know some of the tough questions and hard choices, and only the political requirement to build some consensus, a requirement as yet unmet, stays their disposition to "do something." There is no guarantee they will be supportive of black interests. They will have to be con-

vinced that there is an overlap of interests with blacks or that blacks can compel them to pay a cost for inattention.

Then there are whites who are not interested in black advancement, either because they are blind and cannot see its connection to anything of interest to them, or because they have an interest they feel requires perpetuation of the status quo. They have had great freedom to act in the current administration, whose bold assault on blacks has gathered momentum largely because it has not been effectively challenged. Rather than being skillful social engineers acting on a national mandate against blacks (that public opinion polls do not suggest exist), they are reckless ideologues who have commandeered an economic policy to strike at those fragile structures of justice that are the heart and soul of a democracy.

Black leadership has not met the challenge posed by the changes in ideology and has effectively placed the underclass as well as itself at risk. This need not have happened. Blacks have not had an effective offense. After all, blacks in California did better under Governor Reagan than blacks nationally have done under President Reagan. Blacks did better in the South against better led, more organized and powerful racist forces in the 60's than against less powerful and more diffuse elements in the 80's. That was possible because the moral voice raised by Dr. King was more powerful than the state and private forces mustered against him.

The difference now, I assert, is the lack of a progressive voice, the lack of which has allowed other voices, some hostile to black interests, to fill the vacuum. A new moral and strategic articulation of the just society is called for, and it is important, indeed imperative, that the black community, in all of its manifestations, create the dialogue and debate from which this fresh voice may arise.

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