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The "New" Black Neo-Conservativism: A Critique

Cover Page Footnote

This article is the edited transcript of a presentation made in the Distinguished Lecture Series, University of Massachusetts Boston on May 5, 1987.

The “New” Black Neo-Conservatism: A Critique

by
James Jennings



Although I had some hesitation about [making this presentation], ultimately I decided that this would be an excellent opportunity to respond to a growing mythology about black life experiences in America. The debates regarding lack of black social and economic progress are not esoteric; in fact, the historical and on-going discussions of interpretations of black life experiences in America have major social, educational and political implications for all the citizenry of this society.

In this presentation, I will examine some of the general ideas, explanations and logic regarding black life conditions offered by a group of intellectuals who have come to be described as “Neo-Conservative.” I will not concentrate my critique on particular individuals, however; my focus will be primarily on the ideas and proposals that they have offered, especially those ideas that have been associated with public policy proposals.

In my opinion, the media and the scholarly community have focused too much on individuals, rather than examining closely and analytically the public policy ideas associated with Neo-Conservatism. I will seek to critique some of these Neo-Conservative ideas or notions and show how they are ahistorical. I think I can show, furthermore, how sensational and popular rhetoric have been used by Neo-Conservatives to discourage thorough analysis of their ideas and proposals.

The ideas associated with these Neo-Conservatives usually go like this:

1. Race is no longer a significant variable in explaining the socio-economic mobility or living conditions found in the black community.
2. A growing black “underclass,” with self-destructive values, is the major culprit and cause of continuing high levels of unemployment and poverty. As Peter Steinfels describes this sector in his book, *The Neo-Conservatives*, “they are to a large degree uneducable, unemployable, and alien to middle class norms

of behavior. They are — to bring it all down — ‘shiftless.’ ”

3. Civil rights legislation of the 60’s was effective in transforming American society into an egalitarian one; but a series of court decisions, according to Neo-Conservatives, also overstepped the intent of this legislation by dictating “equality of result.” In any case, America is now in a ‘Post Civil-Rights’ era.
4. Blacks of comparable educational achievement have reached income parity with whites and a vibrant black middle class has now emerged in American society.
5. The welfare state or government cannot, and should not, attempt to be overly responsive to the social and economic problems in the black community. This is because many conditions of social depression are a reflection of inferior culture and attitudes rather than causes that government can control. Neo-Conservative polemic posits that attitudes of individuals are a dominant factor in determining socio-economic status. Low-income groups are characterized by negative attitudes towards work and entrepreneurship and family responsibility. This suggests that people are poor and poverty-stricken due to cultural attitudes. Some Neo-Conservatives go further than this: as Nathan Glazer argued, blacks do not even have a culture, and therefore may not be able to advance themselves as was the case with other ethnic groups. As Glazer stated in his classic work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, “it is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because — and this is the key to much in the Negro world — the Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect.”

There are several variants of these ideas, but these are the major ones.

Many kinds of social and economic indicators point to an increasingly poverty-stricken, crime-ridden, economically-tenuous and growing black America. Note, for example, that one third of all blacks in this country live below the poverty income level of \$11,000 for a family of four. In many older cities, blacks occupy the worst housing; buildings declared unfit for human habitation decades ago are still occupied in many neighborhoods of America. It is no wonder that although comprising 12% of the U.S. population, blacks account for 45% of all deaths by fire. One out of every five black children in America live in officially classified substandard housing; the figure for whites is one out of ten. Black males make up 46% of the U.S. prison population. Fifty-one percent of all black children live in a female-headed family. And while 28% of all white female-headed families are poverty-stricken, more than half (54%) of all black female-headed families are poverty-stricken.

Seventy-eight percent of all white men of working age are employed; the corresponding figure for black men is 55%. Sixty percent of white workers who were laid off between 1979 and 1983 were rehired by the same company; but only 42% of black workers were thus rehired. According to one study the "proportion of black children below the standard grade level is 40%, compared with 23% of white children." Illiteracy among black adults is estimated to be 44%, compared to 16% among whites. Forty-seven percent of all black seventeen-year-olds are functionally illiterate. Black children drop out of school at almost twice the rate of white children. In 1984 27% of black U.S. graduates enrolled in college, down from a high of 32% in 1975. Only 8% of all public school teachers are black; by 1990—in three years—this figure is expected to drop to 5%. For many blacks these kinds of problems are growing in intensity. Note, further, that:

- Between 1970 and 1981 the number of black individuals living in households below the poverty level increased from 8 million to 9 million.
- Since 1975 the level of black median income compared to white median income has declined to between 55 and 57%.
- Unemployment rates for black males and females in all age categories have increased significantly in the last 20 years.

At the same time that the black and Latino population is growing significantly in America's largest cities, life conditions for these groups are rapidly deteriorating. The social conditions under which most blacks live are worse today than 15 years ago. Blacks make up a larger portion of the nation's poor today than they did at the close of the 1950's. In 1959 blacks comprised 25% of the total poor in America; by 1979 blacks comprised 34% of the total poor. Since the mid-sixties, the gap between black family and white family median income has been increasing. In 1964 the gap was \$3,724; in 1979 it climbed to \$8,876. The black teenage unemployment level has increased in recent years to between 50–70% in many American cities. This unemployment level is considerably higher than it was 10 or 15 years ago. Generally speaking, social and economic indicators reflect a black America significantly poorer and more alienated and separated from "mainstream" America than a few years ago.

Why? What are we to turn to in seeking explanations for this condition? Is it a result of lack of education? Is it a result of attitudes reflecting dependency or even laziness on the part of blacks? Is it a vestige of slavery? Why are life conditions worsening so rapidly in black America today? Some of this country's leading intellectuals and opinion leaders have argued or suggested that the state of black America is a reflection of the ineducability of blacks, or group irresponsibility, or sexual recklessness, or dependency on government largesse, or the general cultural backwardness of low-income people. There has emerged a small but vocal and highly-paid group of black intellectuals described as "Neo-Conservatives" who are proposing these kinds of explanations. This group of Neo-Conservatives have a particular function or role in various national and international political arenas. Generally speaking it is to provide a black face for ideas and public policies that would produce major resentment among most blacks and Latinos, and many whites, if proposed in certain forums by white intellectuals or opinion leaders.

The black community has never been monolithic in terms of ideas or philosophical approaches to the problems faced by this community. What is different today, however, is that these black Neo-Conservatives are not structurally or institutionally accountable to the black community.

I have titled part of my presentation the "new" black Neo-Conservatives; in fact the ideas of these Neo-Conservatives are basically a rehash of the proposals and discussions of white conservatives in the 50's and 60's. Black Neo-Conservatives may be "new" as far as individuals are concerned, but not in terms of their proposals or ideas. I would point to the work of Edward C. Banfield, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer and other white intellectuals.

There is something novel about the "new" black Neo-Conservatives, however. Let us not forget that the black community has always had healthy debate between radicals, liberals and conservatives; this is not new. We are certainly familiar with the more famous historical debates regarding political and economic strategies in the black community. In the 1850's and 60's we had Frederick Douglass "debating" Martin Delaney; in the early 1900's we had Washington debating DuBois and Trotter; in the 1920's we had DuBois and Garvey, and Asa Phillip Randolph and DuBois; in the late 60's there was the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The black community has never been monolithic in terms of ideas or philosophical approaches to the problems faced by this community. What is different today, however, is that these black Neo-Conservatives are not *structurally or institutionally accountable* to the black community.

The new crop of black Neo-Conservatives . . . are hired and groomed by predominantly white institutions and right-wing foundations.

In earlier periods blacks who espoused what might be described as conservative or militant ideas and proposals were grounded in religious or educational institutions in the black community, and thus, they were institutionally and programmatically accountable to black people. This meant that they had to practice or try to put into action what they preached or espoused. The new crop of black Neo-Conservatives, however, are hired and groomed by predominantly white institutions and right-wing foundations. This means that many of these new black Neo-Conservatives can propose the most outlandish ideas or proposals without the burden of having to prove them in practice in the black community.

It is my impression that the media has given free rein to the so-called black Neo-Conservatives to express themselves without offering similar opportunities to others with alternative proposals in the black community, or without challenging Neo-Conservatives to offer concrete programs responsive to the issues they raise. As sociologist Alphonso Pinkney has written in his book, *The Myth of Black Progress*, these Neo-Conservatives

. . . present an erroneous picture of the status of black people, and all too often influence public policy ostensibly aimed at alleviating problems and powerlessness among Afro-Americans and other people of color. When not making exaggerated claims on the question of black progress, these social scientists tend to blame Afro-Americans for their lack of progress rather than the forces in the society that serve to maintain their oppression.

Black elected officials or community-based leaders have not had ample opportunities to respond to the small group of black intellectuals who have become the "hired guns" of conservatives and right-wing interests in this country. Again, as Pinkney asserts,

Blacks, unable to marshal broad ideological or strategic attacks on conservatives, have waged an ineffective battle as the Reagan administration weakened action programs and reduced funds for social programs that had benefited many blacks. . . . The challenges posed by neo-conservatives have until now gone unanswered by blacks. (p. 45)

In an important book, *The Changing Mood in America*, Faustine Jones of Harvard University argued a few years ago that those black intellectuals who do tend to be comprehensive and analytical about social problems simply

. . . do not receive the same publicity as . . . [Neo-Conservatives] . . . their writings do not trickle from the scholarly and professional journals to the popular magazines in the same degree as those of the neo-conservatives, nor does one hear these as

referents on televised newscasts and issue-oriented programs to the same extent as the neo-conservatives. (p. 42).

This reflects, in my opinion, America's continuing resistance not only to black equality but also to the very call for equality. Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out that America fantasizes about racial harmony. Many white Americans do not want to accept that racism is alive and well; many whites refuse to believe that America is really two societies when it comes to race. There are continual attempts to hide a black America that makes whites uncomfortable and that they fear. White America needs television programs like "Different Strokes" and "That's My Mama" because they assuage racial fear and guilt. Concomitantly, white America also needs periodically a few black intellectuals to tell them that blacks really are culturally inferior and unappreciative of all the things that whites have given to blacks. And, therefore, if blacks are not making it, it is their own fault!

The growing popularity of black Neo-Conservatives in the media also reflects the needs of powerful economic and cultural interests in this country to keep black people "on the defensive" politically. As Peter Steinfels pointed out, Neo-Conservatives are definitely linked to political office holders and big business interests. He writes, "The answers the Neo-Conservatives provide are congenial to powerful forces, . . ." (p. 12)

Intensifying negative living conditions in the black community are primarily a consequence of political decisions on the part of the national administration and the lack of leadership and concern on the part of local government. Between 1981 and 1984 the federal government reduced expenditures for 25 programs servicing children and young adults; job training was reduced by 53%, mental health services by 26%, child abuse prevention programs by 12% and aid to families with dependent children by 18%. Lester M. Salamon, reporting for the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., stated recently that these cuts "translated at local levels into losses in a number of fields, principally employment and training, housing and community development, health care outside of medicare, and social services. Especially hard hit were programs targeted on the unemployed, on families and on children." These cutbacks have especially hurt black people and particularly black children. These cutbacks, impacting negatively on black life, were not "caused" by the evolving black family structure or the attitudes of young blacks. The cutbacks, and their social consequences, were a result of political decisions on the part of the national administration.

It is the public policies of the national administration that have caused an increase in the number of black children living in poverty. Black unemployment has increased under political and economic policies pursued by the national government. The black and Latino infant mortality rate has increased dramatically recently; there are today more births out of wedlock in communities of color than five years ago as a result of cutbacks in educational and human service programs. The income gap between black families and white families has increased as a result of political decisions, not as a result of black attitudes or the particular educational levels of blacks.

Despite a systematic political onslaught against the black community, apologists for the racial and economic status quo continue to offer several specious arguments suggesting that the state of black America is not a reflection of discrimination, or powerlessness, but rather of attitudes and irresponsibility on the part of individuals and black leadership. Several individuals described as black Neo-Conservatives have boldly suggested, therefore, that struggles for civil and human rights are no longer useful or relevant. We now live in or are moving rapidly towards, they claim, a just and equal and color-blind society. They argue that the problem is not the economy or particular public policies, but rather inherent psychological and cultural inadequacies in blacks and poor people.

It is interesting that these kinds of suggestions arise during a period of increasing attacks upon, and continual backsliding in, the commitment to the political participatory rights of blacks. The suggestion that we now live in a post civil-rights era ignores, for example, that there has been harassment of black voters in this nation's black belt in the South recently by the FBI — not the KKK, but the FBI. This may sound shocking to some of our liberal ears. This was confirmed by the "Alabama Black Belt Defense Committee" in a documentary film titled, "I'll Vote On." Black voter registration efforts in the South are threatening to Reagan supporters and right-wing sympathizers in the U.S. Senate. The more blacks that are registered in some sections of the South, the less chance ultra-right conservatives have of being elected to office in the South. It has been documented that the Department of Justice is protecting conservative elected officials by harassing black elderly voters in the South. In the black belt counties of West Alabama, 80 FBI agents were sent by the Department of Justice in 1984 to interrogate and fingerprint 2000 elderly black rural voters. How can it be argued that we live in a post civil-rights era when basic political rights for blacks and other people of color are still not fully accepted even by the federal government of the U.S.?

The victims of racism, discrimination and mis-education have become their own scapegoat. But even if one explains black teenage pregnancy and the growth of black single parents as a reflection of irresponsibility, or certain attitudes, the fact remains that the black infant mortality rate is increasing in cities across America; and the nutritional status and health of black and Latino infants and children is declining. Are we to blame the poor nutritional status of an increasing number of four-year-olds on their attitudes towards work or sex in the "post civil-rights" era? The claim that we live in a post civil-rights era callously and immorally ignores hard evidence showing that hunger in America is now more widespread than ten and fifteen years ago. How is it that we can proclaim seriously or sincerely that we live in a post civil-rights era when minority infant mortality and documented hunger is increasing in America? And when more and more black children are falling under poverty? It is meaningless to argue that America is in a post civil-rights era when the majority of black children in this country have a most despairing future based on socio-economic indicators.

I believe that worsening conditions for significant numbers of blacks are a direct consequence of two factors: (1) a major political, cultural and economic assault against blacks by private interests and the U.S. government; and (2) a concomitant lack of political power on

the part of blacks. It is this lack of power, the ability to reward and punish individuals and groups, which prevents the black community from responding effectively and quickly to our teenage pregnancy crisis, the crime crisis, the unemployment crisis, the education crisis and so forth. H. Edward Ransford, in his work *Race and Class in American Society* (1977), has identified the absence of power as the major explanation for deteriorated life conditions for the majority of blacks in this country. He argues that power inequality is the "key variable for distinguishing strata" in our society. As he states, "... power inequality comes first and is the prime mover of the system, and determines the distribution of economic privilege and prestige. From this viewpoint, better economic chances or prestige for minority persons are only likely to occur when basic institutional arrangements are changed by the exertion of power." (p. 35) Theodore Cross has written similarly in his recent voluminous work, *The Black Power Imperative*, that "... for all groups in a given society, the prospect for improved income, greater holdings of property, and more favorable life chances generally is profoundly influenced by the group's relationship to the instruments of power." It is the level of power that blacks can wield that determines the quality of life. The actual quality of life for the masses of blacks has as little to do with attitudes of young blacks as it does with the benevolence of whites.

What we will find in surveying the popular literature reflecting the thoughts of black Neo-Conservatives is that "power" is hardly ever mentioned.

Unfortunately, as Theodore Cross argues, too many black leaders have surrendered power for protection. Rather than developing political power, some of our liberal-minded leaders have sought to maintain government-based protection. This approach is not viable — and it never was! Black Neo-Conservatives have correctly pointed this out; black people cannot rely on the good intentions of government for arresting or reversing negative living conditions. We should not forget, however, that many in the black community have been saying this consistently — and for a long time. Martin Luther King, Jr., devoted his life to struggle because he understood that this was a necessary price for black progress. Malcolm X certainly did not ask blacks to rely on government. As far as warning black people not to rely or wait on government, black Neo-Conservatives are not saying anything with which there is major disagreement among blacks. The media makes it seem as if there were major disagreements. What we will find in surveying the popular literature reflecting the thoughts of black Neo-Conservatives is that "power" is hardly ever mentioned; it is the lack of realization of the role of power in society that convincingly separates the black Neo-Conservatives from Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and others, who also warned blacks about over-relying on government or the good intentions of whites.

Black Neo-Conservatives hardly ever mention the need for blacks to develop strategies of empowerment. For example, one leading black Neo-Conservative has stated boldly that “clearly political power is not a necessary condition for economic advance.” This is naive, erroneous and ahistorical as far as ethnic groups in America are concerned. As William Ryan writes in his work *Blaming the Victim*:

The signs are everywhere that the focus on power as the major issue is absolutely correct; the only meaningful way to . . . [eliminate inequality] . . . is through shifts in the distribution of power . . . the primary cause of social problems is powerlessness. The cure for powerlessness is power. (p. 250)

One of the more prominent ideas espoused by black Neo-Conservatives is “self-help.” This is interesting precisely because “self-help” is one of the most cherished values among blacks. The idea or value of “self-help” is not in dispute among blacks. Yet Neo-Conservatives speak of self-help efforts—this is ridiculous. As Dorothy K. Newman, author of *Protest, Politics and Prosperity*, has written, “The gains by black Americans since 1940 have been truly theirs, with relatively few outside champions who have spent a lifetime in their struggle. If ‘the Lord helps those who help themselves,’ black Americans would long since have achieved equality with white Americans.” The suggestion that blacks have not reflected interest nor support for self-help is ahistorical and simplistic. Those who suggest nonsense like this merely show their ignorance of the history of black people in the U.S.

The black Neo-Conservative call for self-help, furthermore, is contradictory with their defense of Reagan and his policies. The President of the U.S. has undermined seriously the black thrust for self-help. His policies have had the effect of increasing poverty and the sense of hopelessness in the black community by destroying vital tools for black self-help. The President’s policies have weakened those very elements necessary for effective self-help strategies in the black community. President Reagan has done this by attacking the presence of blacks in higher education at both the faculty and student level. By trying to weaken affirmative action, the President has undermined the presence of a black faculty and professional sector; and by threatening to reduce financial aid, he has undermined the presence of black students in higher education. Both black faculty and black students are critical in the implementation of effective self-help strategies. The President of the U.S. has aggressively tried to eliminate the basic tools necessary for effective black self-help. While cynically calling for more self-help, some black Neo-Conservatives hypocritically defend national administration policies that undermine self-help efforts among blacks.

Unless blacks control politically their communities, self-help strategies will not work or be effective. Self-help programs will not be successful unless these same programs can be economically and politically protected. The literature on ethnic mobility in the U.S. will show this. Neo-Conservatives have virtually ignored the necessity of developing black political power. They have conveniently forgotten that no group in our society has made it without both economic influence and political power.

There is something else that bothers me regarding the Neo-Conservative call for “self-help” in the black community. Self-help is indeed a critical element in the survival of black people in America—it is fundamental. Black people will not survive in America without self-help. But let us not, under the cry for self-help, adopt the attitude that this is not *our* country or that we have contributed little to its development. At the same time that we pursue self-help, we must also continually demand that *our* government be responsive to our social and economic needs. Let us not, under the seductive call for self-help, accept the second-class citizenship that many powerful groups wish to impose on black and Latino peoples. If the rich can receive billions of dollars of government largesse in the form of tax benefits, subsidies and contracts, then other sectors should also receive government benefits without having to feel ashamed or worthless.

Some Neo-Conservatives have argued that black people should focus on broad free-market strategies to improve their life conditions. They have stated that we should support supply-side economics and free-market strategies because as the U.S. economy improves, so does the economy of black communities. This argument is simply not supported by the facts. It is almost irrelevant as far as life conditions for most blacks are concerned whether or not the U.S. economy is in a healthy, productive state. Rarely have the benefits of a healthy U.S. economy trickled down to the masses of black people; unless blacks demand a share of the benefits, struggle for those benefits and have community power, union power and electoral power to get it, trickle-down approaches are meaningless for many blacks.

Between 1970 and 1980 the gross national product of this country increased by 34%. White median family income increased by 6.5%. Sixteen million new jobs were created during this period. And one million whites were able to escape poverty due to the positive health of the U.S. economy. But what was the economic fate of blacks during this same time period of healthy U.S. economic growth? According to the Neo-Conservatives there should have been significant black economic gains during this period. In fact, black life conditions deteriorated during this period of growth. The unemployment gap between blacks and whites increased, black family income as a percentage of white family income declined and 141,000 black families fell into poverty, at the same time that 185,000 white families were able to escape poverty.

Right here in Boston, we see how specious is the argument that a healthy economy helps blacks; this is only half the formula. During a period of dramatic economic growth for Boston, white unemployment declined from 5.2% in 1980 to 3.0% in 1985. During this same period black unemployment increased from 9.0% to 12.0%. In other words, before Boston’s economic boom in the early 1980’s, the black unemployment rate was almost twice that of white unemployment; but after a few years of economic growth, black unemployment increased to four times that of white unemployment. Thus, the Neo-Conservative argument that a rising economic tide lifts all boats may be true for whites, but generally does not apply to blacks. It may be true for the Mayflower, but not the Amistad!

It has become commonplace to blame negative social and economic conditions of blacks on the increase of single black women raising children. The female-headed family has become the latest and most convenient excuse for continuing racism and the economic exploitation of people who are black and poor. Neo-Conservatives have correctly pointed to the alarming increase of black female-headed families. The proportion of female-headed households among blacks rose from 38% in 1970 to 41% in 1982. This is a problem when one considers the economic and personal pressures on the single black women raising children in a white male-dominated society. But is the problem or cause of the development one of sexual irresponsibility or recklessness as claimed on national television in 1987 by George Will, a leading Neo-Conservative thinker and writer?

... Most of the growth of female-headed households among blacks is due to the disintegration of married-couple families rather than childbirth by single women.

It is hypocritical to blame single black women raising children; the general problem is rather a society with an entrenched racial and socio-economic hierarchy. Furthermore, most of the growth of female-headed households among blacks is due to the disintegration of married-couple families rather than childbirth by single women. Only about one quarter of all single females heading families have never been married. About 40% of these families are headed by single females as a result of death of the male spouse or divorce and separation, according to a study for the National Urban League by social psychologist James McGhee. The fact calls for a public policy different from that oriented to respond to the single black female-headed families. In addition to infant mortality, accidents, homicide and incarceration, another factor contributing to the unavailability of black males is unemployment. In 1982, for example, 29% of the black male population between 20 and 64 years of age was not employed. These are the factors that sincere policymakers and opinion leaders should be concentrating on to arrest the decline of married-couple families in the black community.

There is another interesting aspect. Regardless of how much of a problem we think the existence of black female-headed families constitutes, the fact is that black female-headed families are still considerably worse off than white female-headed families with the same age and educational levels and living in the same region of the country. When the level of education, age and region is controlled, only 28.3% of white female-headed families live in poverty, compared to 53.8% for black female-headed families. This suggests an analysis that is more comprehensive than the simplistic explanations put forth by Neo-Conservatives. Complete analysis will show that there must be something other than family structure that explains the poverty of some single black mothers. And this

something other may merely be the availability of a job. According to economist Robert B. Hill in a report to the National Urban League:

Only 27% of employed black women heading families were poor in 1977, compared to 75% of unemployed black women heading families. Thus, the chances of black women family heads being poor continue to be only one out of four when they have jobs, but their chances of being poor are three out of four when they are unable to obtain work.

What is the situation for black male-headed families? If the problem is black female-headed families, should we not expect black male-headed families to have economic status similar to white male-headed families? Instead, black male-headed families are 2½ times as likely to be in poverty as white male-headed families. Black families with male heads of household have income equal to approximately 80% of the median income of white families in the last few years; now this figure is used by Neo-Conservatives to show that the problem is one of family structure. But what is not pointed out when this figure is used is that there are more black married couples with spouse working (60%) than white married couples with spouse working (48%). When this second income factor is controlled, black families with male head of household have median income of only 64% of the median income of white male-headed families.

Based on this kind of information, I would argue that poverty and unemployment are conditions that are *imposed*, in effect, on people by economic and cultural arrangements in our society; poverty is not due to an inherent lack of motivation on the part of blacks or to a particular family structure. Blacks are economically and politically exploited; it is this, more than anything else, that is the key to understanding black life experiences in the U.S.

I would argue further that: (1) racism is still a fundamental problem and socio-economic dynamic in American society, and (2) until racism is eliminated through the development of black political power, black life conditions in this country will not improve. Black people suffer in America not because of certain attitudes or sexual irresponsibility. There are indeed instances of negative attitudes and irresponsibility among individual blacks, of course, as there are among any people, including whites, in America (even Christian fundamentalists as we witness in the recent PTL scandals); but to argue that blacks are more irresponsible or immoral than whites and that this somehow explains poverty, broken families or unemployment is another way of saying that blacks are inherently inferior to whites.

The social and economic problems of blacks in America will not be overcome until blacks control politically institutions of power such as schools, banks, social agencies, health organizations and the like. It is the lack of power that allows the continuing economic and cultural exploitation of black people. Black communities must be able to develop the wherewithal to stop or veto economic or educational processes that are imposed or are not clear about direct benefits to community residents. The ability to stop things is not a panacea, but it is a necessary first step. Any strategy of self-improvement that ignores the political development of black people will not succeed.

At least one lesson we can extract from the educational and economic struggles that blacks have engaged in throughout American history is that serious economic change, beneficial to blacks, will not occur without blacks having the power to demand it and to politically and economically punish those who stand in the way of justice and equality for blacks. Political power is the key to survival for blacks in America.

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Reel Blacks

by

Patricia A. Turner

The Good Old Days



Like most of my colleagues engaged in film studies rather than film practice, I occasionally allow myself to fantasize about the kind of films I would produce if I were a film maker. Several commercial films popular in the last fifteen years have inspired in me a bare bones scenario. My movie would have an all black “ensemble” cast. The plot would contain flashbacks tracing the events in the characters’ adolescence that solidified their friendship. These flashbacks would be punctuated by rhythmless music performed by white artists. Although no hint of “soul” would be tolerated on my movie’s soundtrack, my black characters would enthusiastically embrace it as if it were their own.

I doubt that my film would achieve any real commercial success, in spite of the fact that so many recent movies have portrayed the reverse situation. Ever since George Lucas’ classic *American Graffiti* broke box office records in 1973, white film makers have endeavored to find innovative ways of turning nostalgia for the late 1950s and early 1960s into movie making success in the 1970s and 1980s. The more notable efforts have included George Landis’ raucous view of early 1960s fraternity life in *Animal House*, Steven Spielberg’s time travel adventure in *Back to the Future*, Francis Ford Coppola’s foray into fantasy in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Lawrence Kasdan’s depic-

tion of a reunion weekend in *The Big Chill*, and Rob Reiner’s glimpse of 1950s coming of age in *Stand By Me*.

With period costumes, period cars and period sets, the producers meticulously recreate the environments of their youth. But without a doubt, the period music is the most important component of all. Each film boasts a soundtrack true to the era it reflects. Most of the musical selections are in fact classic rhythm and blues selections or early rock and roll songs. The fraternity brothers in *Animal House* dance to Otis Day and the Nights’ “Shout.” The white hero in *Back to the Future* inadvertently “inspires” Chuck Berry to develop a new sound. The married couple in *Diner* fight over the placement of rhythm and blues discs in a record cabinet. Peggy Sue is shocked to discover that her musician husband played with an R and B group in the sixties. The opening credits in *The Big Chill* are set against Marvin Gaye’s rendition of “I Heard It Through The Grapevine” and *Stand By Me* takes its name from Ben E. King’s 1957 hit record.

Although the characters in these films identify black music as a significant reminder of their coming of age, their social groups do not reflect any impulses to integrate. Neither of the competing fraternities in *Animal House* includes any black members. Nonetheless the members assume that they will be welcome in the all black