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The Role of Black Political Leadership in Economic Development

by Curtis Stokes

A Crisis of Development

One of the most striking things about the United States is the degree to which racial inequality remains a pervasive fact of life. Indeed, since the end of the 1960s the black-white gap in life chances (for example, jobs and income) has worsened for large segments of the black community. To persistently face high unemployment and declining income is especially troublesome in a capitalist economy like that in the United States, where goods and services are rationed by a harsh market and where there is, at best, a very modest social safety net. The United Nation's *Human Development Report 1993*, which measured the quality of life not merely between countries but among population groups within countries, found that white Americans, as a group, possess the best life chances—in terms of life expectancy, education, purchasing power, and other factors—among 173 countries in the study.¹ Blacks and Latinos ranked 31st and 35th respectively, which puts their quality of life among impoverished Third World countries.

The black middle class remains fragile and small, especially when compared to its white counterpart.

Certainly there have been some gains since the civil rights movement; for example, we can point to the continued growth of a black middle class. Today some 30 percent of black families have incomes of at least \$35,000 per year; the comparable percentage for 1970 was 24 percent.² Also, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, there are some eight thousand African-American elected officials today; in 1965, the year the Voting Rights Act was adopted, there were 250. Clearly some blacks have benefitted from the civil rights movement. Even here, however, one must be cautious. The black middle class remains fragile and small, especially when compared to its white counterpart. For example, blacks tend to be disproportionately represented in especially vulnerable government employment, lack wealth to cushion their middle-class status, and continue to endure racial indignities whatever their income, education, or occupational status.³ It should likewise be noted that black elected officials still only constitute about 1.5 percent of all elected officials, and, with few exceptions, blacks tend to be electable only in majority or



near-majority black districts.

Whatever the problems of the black middle class, the broad masses of blacks are being left behind. One-third of the black population is officially classified as poor by the U.S. government and perhaps half or more of the other one-third not in the middle class are barely surviving. Not surprisingly, a year ago a national magazine referred to these African Americans as “losing ground,” noting that “black America’s outlook grows bleaker.”⁴

What are the sources of the problems confronting African Americans? How do we explain this continuing and pervasive racial inequality in America? The answers to these questions require an analysis animated by a critical historical and theoretical perspective and a willingness to speak bluntly to both the black and white communities.

Leadership and the Crisis

While there is a degree of clarity on the nature, and perhaps even the extent, of the social and economic crises affecting the African-American community, there is considerable confusion among both blacks and whites as to the sources of the problems. Given the disinclination of Americans toward systemic assessments—especially under the socializing impact of intrusive bourgeois-centered civil institutions—this is not surprising. Yet, the starting point for any thoughtful analysis of the sources of the problems plaguing black Americans should be understanding and acknowledging the complicated interfacing of both external and internal factors in the black community, with primacy attributed to external factors in this explanatory model.

Both historically and currently, the intersecting of institutionalized white racism and economic subordination has been pivotal in providing the basic foundation for the continuing and pervasive racial inequality in the United

United States. Thus, historian Manning Marable rightly observes that “capitalist development has occurred [in the United States] not in spite of the exclusion of blacks, but because of the brutal exploitation of blacks as workers and consumers. Blacks have never been equal partners in the American Social Contract, because the system exists not to develop, but to underdevelop black people.”⁵ Yet, this is not the whole story. Sadly, “internal” factors in the black community—such as the cultivating of an ethic of governmental or white dependency and the general failure of mainstream leadership in this century—play an important role in the continuing racial and economic subordination of black people.

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When discussing modern mainstream black leadership in the United States it is useful to distinguish between traditional leadership, running roughly from the post-Civil War period to 1965, and contemporary leadership. Traditional African-American leaders were typically anchored in the church, often charismatic and authoritarian, and usually male. They were disproportionately light-skinned, driven by a bourgeois world view (i.e., reformist, valuing monied culture, and socially conservative), and rarely envisioned any solution to the racial and economic subordination of blacks that was not centered on some kind of liberal or conservative economic program. Historian Nathan Huggins is partly right when he says that “three characteristics marked the (traditional) black leader: he did not derive his power from a democratic source, he was a self-styled exemplar, and his position was tenuous and vulnerable.”⁶ To varying degrees, mainstream black leaders throughout most of this century could be called “traditional,” including Booker T. Washington, the early W.E.B. Du Bois, and the early Martin Luther King, Jr.

Contemporary African-American leadership, which essentially originated in the aftermath of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, is more secular, diffuse (it is typically younger and includes more women, conservatives, and business and professional people in its rank), and increasingly driven by elected officials, who value electoral over protest politics. The Congressional Black Caucus and the some three hundred black mayors are quintessentially representative of this group. While the differences noted are important, the basic values of this wing of mainstream black leadership are remarkably similar to those of its “traditional” predecessor. This is important because the

black community, America, and the world have undergone radical changes since the early decades of this century. Yet, to an extent, this leadership group remains locked in a turn-of-the-century mindset. Rather than looking to the future, it remains enmeshed in old debates about racial politics in America. The larger concern, however, is that contemporary African-American leadership, against the backdrop of an increasingly class-stratified black community since the 1960s and the influential weight of middle-class black votes, might, in a manner typical of middle-class politicians, openly abandon the broad masses of blacks in their quest for coalition politics between middle-class black voters and “crossover” white middle-class voters so as to be more “electable” and advance within the Democratic party establishment.

A New Black Politics for Economic Development

Rather than embracing the narrow racial politics of the past, engaging in effete bourgeois politics, simply-mindedly blaming others or the “system,” or some combination of these, black leaders must recognize that the nation and the world are at crucial historical junctures. If black people are to survive, black leaders must evidence the requisite vision and courage necessary to position the community to play its role in the coming radical transformation of America. To do the latter, a new black politics is required. Fortunately, in recent years, grassroots activists—often inspired by the 1972 Gary Convention and the challenges of a multicultural America—have begun to recognize the value of intersecting racial, class, and gender politics in any progressive agenda for transforming America.

Though not without its problems, a good example of this was Ron Daniels’s Campaign for a New Tomorrow during the 1992 presidential campaign in which he combined electoral with protest politics, Black Nationalism, and progressive internationalism, and openly sought to align the black community with other communities of color and oppressed groups on the basis of independent politics that challenged both capitalism and the Democratic party and sought to exploit the transitional character of American politics. Thus, it appears that the general failure of mainstream African-American leadership to seriously confront the forces of institutionalized white racism and predatory capitalism has established the foundation for a new, progressive, grassroots-oriented leadership to emerge in the black community in the next century.

Notes

¹United Nations, *Human Development Report* 1993.

²*The State of Black America 1993* (National Urban League, Inc., 1993), 160.

³Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, Jr., eds., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (National Academy Press, 1989), 49–50.

⁴*Newsweek*, 6 April 1992, 20.

⁵Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 2.

⁶Nathan Irvin Huggins, "Afro-Americans," in *Ethnic Leadership in America*, edited by John Higham (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 97–98.

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