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Why Do They Hate Us

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West Indian Americans: Why Do They Hate Us?

This week Americans celebrated the nation’s Independence Day in many different ways. I also spent most of last week away in Barbados, vacationing and reveling with old friends and colleagues, many who had migratory experiences with America, England and Canada going back generations, and had chosen, voluntarily, to return to their native lands. As we reminisced on our varied experiences in America a number of my friends hastened to discuss an article published in the New York Times on June 24, in its front page, entitled: Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones? In our animated discussion on race and ethnic relations, majority/minority relations, identity dilemmas and challenges facing immigrants in America, and the nuanced competitive, and at times overtly antagonistic, relationship between West Indians and native African Americans, one colleague suddenly, but pointedly, posed the question: But why do they hate us?

First, what is the gist of the article? Briefly, the columnists— one the education columnist for the NY Times, indicated that at a recent reunion of Harvard University’s black alumni, there was much rejoicing at the increase of Blacks. However, there was concern raised by some, especially two professors of note—one Henry Gates, chair of African American studies, and the other Lani Guinier, the first African American female to be tenured at the Law School. It should be noted that Guinier has Jamaican parentage, in part, but seemingly considers herself an African American. What seemed to be of major concern was that West Indian and African immigrants and, to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples, are predominant among Harvard’s tiny 8 percent of undergraduate students.

The article stated that Professors Gates and Guinier were not immigrant bashing but were concerned that Blacks, who made up approximately 13 percent of the population were not benefiting from affirmative action and, seemingly, were losing their “rightful” places to these immigrants (foreigners). Others commentators accused the elite universities of playing to the ethnic (migrant) “Horatio Alger” myth, and forgetting the civil rights struggles of African Americans by neglecting to “reward” and compensate their ancestry. And while noted West Indian Sociologist Orlando Paterson, also at Harvard, urged that “we should let sleeping dogs lie”, some white Sociologists Andrew Beveridge, Queens College (CUNY); Douglas Massey, (Princeton); and Mary Waters, (Harvard); did try to place the success of West Indian Americans and other Blacks in a sociological and psychological context, which one would have expected a Chair of African American studies to have appreciated, comprehended and expounded.

Unfortunately in many Colleges and Universities in the USA, African American studies do not have a wider diasporic thrust and suffer from a myopic vision in relation to any serious comparative, historical and sociological analyses. Professor Gates, who now plans to do a study on what to many are fairly transparent and already grounded theses in solid academic research, now muses that he wishes to study this social and historical phenomenon “to understand and bottle it for use by many native African Americans”. The late John Ogbu, a Berkeley anthropologist, had already done such a study, in which he found that even when he “controlled for class” African American students from privileged backgrounds were underperforming when compared with other groups such as Whites and Asians; and that those who tried to focus on the academic essentials, were labelled as “acting White” and thus limiting their endeavors so as to retain their peers’ approval. Surely Professor Gates should have been familiar with Ogbu and Professor Steele’s, (Stanford), work on African American students self esteem or lack thereof.

Further, there was little distinction made for second generation immigrants, native to this country, or the fact that many of “these students” had achieved extremely high scores on SAT and other objectives tests, and, as was reported, coming from what Sociologists describe as “a highly motivated and self selected group”; what was important was the paucity of the correct “Blacks”-those with the right ancestry. Coming at this juncture in our nation’s history, with the rising xenophobia toward the immigrant population generally after 9/11, and an African American population lagging behind many other groups- Whites, Asians etc -on many major socio economic indices, while predominating in those of dysfunctionality—such as incarceration and economic dislocation— one wonders why two gifted academics would even raise such a nuanced and multi faceted issue such as this in the limited and
confining context and confines of a newspaper article. Contextually, the relations between African Americans and its other immigrants—especially those of color, and particularly from the West Indies—have been undulatingly contentious for generations. West Indian Americans have not engaged in much endogamy with African Americans and politically, intellectually, academically and otherwise these groups have had their periods of conflict and cooperation, with name calling and bitter recriminations on both sides. This has led, unfortunately, to some bitterness and social distance between the groups.

Colin Powell put it best in his autobiography, My American Journey, (1995), in describing his father in law’s reaction at his marrying his daughter Alma: “All my life I’ve tried to stay away from those damn West Indians and now my daughter is going to marry one!” But this process of differential assimilation was not always linear. There were some political and social incorporation as early immigrants such as Pan Africanists Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey, and poet activist Claude McKay became enmeshed in the African American struggle and quest for identity, respect and empowerment. From the 1930’s to the 1960’s, West Indian Americans politicians were elected with the help of African American votes; many West Indians seeing themselves as sojourners in the USA did not become citizens and thus were unable to vote. Today the situation has changed and congressional districts with heavy concentrations of West Indian Americans in New York City are now represented by African Americans.

Further, in New York city with its large concentration of West Indian Americans none has been selected by the CUNY Board of Trustees to the Presidency of any of the colleges in its large university system— and that is not because of academic merit and/or administrative preparation. The recent trend in resurgent ethnic politics and political awareness, and the rise in acquiring citizenship due to fears resulting from 9/11, may yet succeed in sending members of this group to Congress. West Indian Americans are not a racial group, but an ethnic one, whose derivates are from many and varied racial stock—African, European, Amerindian (Native American), Asian for example and focus on the migrant ideology of deferred gratification, hard work and due diligence. Generally, West Indian Americans have been perceived as models of achievement for their frugality, emphasis on education, and ownership of homes and small businesses. Economists such as Thomas Sowell argue that the group’s success, including Secretary Powell’s, derive from a distinctive cultural pattern and an aggressive migrant ideology, much emanating from their native lands. This acquired trait of exceptionalism has acted as a self fulfilling prophecy for many West Indian Americans and cause the ire of many African Americans, and the exhortation and laudatory praise of other Americans—Whites especially—who contend that this group’s reputed success relative to African Americans, demonstrates the error in attributing the economic and social plight of some African Americans, to exclusively racism.

Parenthetically, Bill Cosby has been making the same nuanced argument now, loudly, cogently and repeatedly to the dismay of some who relish in what Justice Clarence Thomas describes as wallowing in the paradigm of the perennial helpless victim, and foregoing the realm of personal responsibility and dogged individualism. Many West Indian Americans are caught in an identity crisis, unsure whether they should be West Indians with a strong ethnic orientation, African Americans with a focus on their racial identity (many West Indian Americans came originally as slaves from Africa), or West Indian Americans with a more hybrid identity. Clearly, class pressures also play significant roles in this identity dilemma. With structural shifts in the US economy growing, segments of this community are facing severe psychological adjustments to migration, coupled with constricted assimilation to American society.

Pressures against full assimilation are greater for lower class West Indian Americans. Typically, middle and upper class professionals alternate between a more inclusive West Indian American and particularistic African American identity; with the lower /working class choosing a more narrowly ethnically focused West Indian identity. And so in this week of reflection and cogitation on what true independence means for us as an ethnic group, and even against the backdrop of those who would overtly or covertly wish us harm, seek to fragment us or otherwise deny us our hard won gains; we persevere by our West Indian-ness and its strong affiliations with our ethnicity, ethnic community and its cultural symbols as a “structural shield” in our coping repertoire. Facing and coping with racism and ethnic rivalries, but overcoming and not being overwhelmed by those social processes; making strategic alliances when necessary, but realizing that as Americans the true test of our incorporation in this society will depend not on hating or whining, but rather on preparing fully, rising and surmounting the obstacles that present themselves in the years to come.

So to Professor Gates I state that there is no need for another study, rather, he should read the voluminous works of Professors Patterson (Harvard), Hintzen (UC Berkeley), Bryce La Porte (Colgate), Holder, Green, and Wilson, (CUNY ),Palmer (Howard) and my own—among other West Indian American Social Scientists— for a nuanced and interpretive analyses of this phenomenon. As I said to my old “bajan” friend, we are not “hated” but rather caught in the process of a regenerative nation, itself facing new challenges which will call for centripetal and forward looking leadership for a more “other
directed” America—internally more united and robust, while externally providing the model for what Secretary Colin Powell describes as multilateral partnerships built on lofty principles of freedom and democracy. The trick is to continue to make the “American Dream” still attainable for all of our citizens, not relegate any to caste like conditions, and to elect a national leader, (President), that forges us in that direction.

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