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The Failure and the Challenge

BLACK INTELLECTUALS AND THE AMERICAN SOCIAL SCENE

BY BILL STRICKLAND



"Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."

—Frantz Fanon

BLACK AMERICA does not exist in a vacuum, but in a land bounded on all sides by white people and American institutions. Analyzing the condition of Black people in America, therefore, cannot be separated from the task of analyzing America itself. And the American condition, some 10 years before George Orwell's prophetic *1984*, is one of brooding apocalypse.

Indeed, the smell of apocalypse rises, like a stench, from every corner of the land. The cities teeter on the edge of bankruptcy; the hospitals maim and kill rather than heal and cure; the schools no longer even pretend to teach; and the economy feeds, like some Bela Lugosi vampire, on the ever-shrinking income of the citizenry. Politically, the so-called "two party system" reveals itself to be little more than a second-rate Abbott and Costello comedy, while administrations past and present surface daily as skin-tight accomplices of the Mafia, the CIA, or both. Like Humpty-Dumpty, the American social order is tumbling down.

This breakdown in the American social order poses a particular challenge to Black intellectuals because it reveals, at the same time, a parallel breakdown of American intellectual life. Most American intellectuals, having dedicated their

lives and their careers to huckstering for "the greatest system the world has ever known," are totally unprepared to admit the meaning of the deep and searing faults which now bubble up in scandal after scandal from the nation's "democratic" depths. So, at precisely the moment when new social answers are required, American intellectuals, because of their blood-knot commitment to already failed political, economic, and cultural systems, and their inability to conceive of structures, forms, modes of thought and action outside of those systems, are unable even to pose the proper questions. They are trapped in the fabrications of yesterday, enmeshed in a time which shall not come again.

Black intellectuals, on the other hand, have a different legacy to draw upon, one which makes it impossible for most of us to join the anvil chorus of self-celebration which is the substance of the American intellectual tradition. We belong to the tradition of America's victims, a tradition which has given us a particular angle of vision largely at odds with America, a tradition which has led to the repudiation, ridicule, exile and assassination of our prophets by a society determined to deny the validity of their vision and the truth of our history.

Yet the Black vision has survived. It has sustained us through-

out the years, anchoring us in a reality far different from Dick and Jane's, and protecting us, when we have let it, from the most dangerous of the fantasies America has had about itself.

America *has* looked different through Black eyes, and our internalization of that difference, which defined our alienation but also illuminated our identity, was a central part of the meaning of our Blackness. We were in but not of America, unwanted witnesses in a land which called itself "democratic," and "Christian," and "law-abiding," but gave us, so gratuitously, so many dead to bury.

But a curious thing has happened on the way to 1984. That special difference which made the Black vision unique is no longer either special or unique. Nowadays, the evidence of America the unjust, America the corrupt, and America the imperialist-bully-boy is there for all to see—making yesterday's Black perspective today's common knowledge.

Elements of the Black perspective, though not identified as such, are now, with self-serving variation, international property and routine news. The Third World proclaims them, the op-ed pages of The New York Times publishes them, and Eric Sevareid, on CBS, occasionally echoes them when he speaks, heart-rendingly, of "the palpable decline of our civilization." So in a milquetoast kind of way, the Black critique of America has been appropriated. On some levels it has even

been rendered superfluous by the unending revelations of misdeeds which have burst the country's fictive bubble like a pompous and overripe grape.

History has now overtaken white and Black America and white and Black intellectuals, diluting that special racial knowledge which has been the source of our vision into the trendy American mainstream. Almost everyone, in whatever part of their being truth resides, knows that the country is a dreary fake. That insight by itself, consequently, can no longer be the defining purpose of Black intellectuals, nor can it pass itself off as a direction for Black people. The tradition of protest/criticism is necessary but not sufficient.

By different roads, Black and white intellectuals have come to a common impasse, as both our traditions flounder in the morass of the decaying republic. White intellectuals are helpless because they cannot countenance the fundamental overhaul of the American system. On the other hand Black intellectuals, who have been affirming the necessity for such an overhaul for more than a century, have no specific perspective on how it should be done. Both are mired in a state of answerlessness, with white intellectuals having the edge since they can at least put forward the old and tired formulae of the past. We cannot, therefore, in good conscience lambast white intellectuals for their shortcomings since theirs are, in many ways, our own.

To our racial knowledge and the special insights about the human condition that it brings, Black intellectuals must now add a social knowledge of the very widest kind, a social knowledge which goes beyond calling attention to America's problems and then relying, perhaps unconsciously, upon America to reform itself. The truth of our time is that America cannot solve her problems or anyone else's (at least

in any way that is beneficial to mankind or the human spirit). The crisis of the American social order and the crisis of American intellectual life, taken together, pose a most precise challenge to Black intellectuals in America. And that challenge is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the challenge to create a new intellectual tradition—and practice—in these United States.

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II: The Recent Past—

"On the political level, our own reality, however fine and attractive the reality of others may be, can only be transformed by detailed knowledge of it, by our own efforts, by our own sacrifices."

—Amilcar Cabral

What stands in ruins today are America's ideas and institutions: its vaunted democracy, its free-enterprise economy. But nothing has been put in their place. The present is a time of inertia, of wailing and gnashing of teeth, but of no real coming to grips with reality. *Reality is that the American system is not working and cannot be made to work except at an ever-increasing cost of human exploitation.* That is what is real. But, for some strange reason, the country in general and Black intellectuals in particular seem to shy away from that reality. We seem to have turned inward, toward ourselves, rather than toward the people whose interest we pledged to serve in those long-ago days of the Sixties. Instead of engaging the national so-

cial reality, in recent times we have been engaged in embattled polemic. And where we once had something to say, we seem to be part of the great emptiness.

It was difficult, for example, to observe last year's debate over Pan-Africanism vs. Marxism without feeling that Black intellectuals had begun to lose their way, for in the swirl of ideological strife, the American reality seemed somehow to have been misplaced. The Pan-Africanists seemed to want to substitute the African reality for the American, while the Marxists appeared to feel that only the Russian and Chinese experiences were meaningful. The attempt to explain American social reality by reference to other countries and times is finally, however, a confession

that we have still not mastered our own specific history, nearly 10 years after Harold Cruse¹ chided us on this very point. This deficiency is especially troubling since so many of us give lip service to the political axiom that every country has its own unique and specific history whose laws must be discovered as a precondition to devising any correct theory or strategy of struggle. In that light, the headlong embrace of other people's experience without first having mastered our own, is a clear evasion of our intellectual responsibility. Our fight is here or it is nowhere, and it is a theory of United States reality that we must develop. That is the only way to fulfill our international responsibilities in the anti-imperialist struggle, as Cabral ponted out so clearly at the first Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966:

"We firmly believe that the best proof we can give of our anti-imperialist position and of our active solidarity with our comrades in the common struggle is to *return to our countries, to further develop . . . (our) . . . struggle and to remain faithful to the principles and objectives of national liberation.*" (emphasis mine)

On another level, though, perhaps we can see the debate as also part of the search for a new way, part of the recognition of the utter bankruptcy of bourgeois thought, and part of the desire to replace it

with something more relevant. Such a search, however, centered as it was outside the boundaries of the national experience and undisciplined by any accountable tie to people's needs and problems, must inevitably degenerate into subjective quarreling—telling us, ultimately, more about ourselves as a class than about the ideas bandied back and forth.



III. On Black Intellectuals—

We are intellectuals and we do intellectual work. That is neither a cause for shame nor celebration. We have a role to play in the struggle . . . if we choose to. Our task is to identify that role and then play it.

We are also a class with a deep affection for our ideas. We love our ideas and are often intoxicated with our words. Indeed, what we say is often what we are, making our identities indistinguishable from our ideologies. Ideas and words form the fabric of our consciousness and our ideology. But changing ideologies—which are, after all, only ideas and words—is not the same as changing reality. Moreover, since there is a great difference between our reality as a class and that of the masses of Black people, the fascination with our-

¹Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, William Morrow, 1967).

selves can be a great danger, blurring the hitherto saving distinction between Black intellectuals and white: our relation to our respective peoples.

White intellectuals have no social base. Their power, as Machiavelli noted, is derivative, rising or falling with the fortunes of the "princes" whom they serve. Their influence on society is exercised through their influence on government and government policies, and when "their" government or its policies fail, they fail. Similarly, their power can only be restored through the restoration of the rulers for whom they work. The interests of white intellectuals, for the most part then, tend to be diametrically opposed to the interests of white (or any other) people. And since only the ruling class can further their careers, *viz.* Daniel Moynihan and Henry Kissinger, it is with the ruling class that the vast majority cast their lot. White intellectuals outside of government, like John Kenneth Galbraith, who also lack a popular base, are simply isolated voices in the whirlwind, curiosities not taken seriously.

This route is pretty much closed to Black intellectuals who, like Black people in general, are not trusted by the system. Whatever our predilections, therefore, since objectively the ear of the ruling class is closed to most of us, our opportunity for self-realization as a group can only come through an alliance with our people. One may, of course, choose to be an individ-

ual scholar but, no matter how formidable the mind and overwhelming the productivity, (for example Du Bois), no single individual, regardless of how gifted, can change a social system by himself. That is the principal contradiction of the intellectual's relation to struggle. On the one hand, he does not represent the popular movement that is necessary to effect social change. On the other hand, the ideology, theory, analysis and organization which he can supply have always proved crucial to the success of such a movement.

So, if Black intellectuals, as I would argue, have lost our way, I think it is because we have tended to substitute our reality for the world's and because we have become estranged from people, our only valid frame of reference. To find our way again we must reassess ourselves and our work. But that reassessment cannot take place in a vacuum. It must take as its starting point a reassessment of America and the relation of Black people to America. The Vietnamese define this task best I think when they say:

1. understand the enemy,
2. understand yourself,
3. build a plan based on reality.

Only our own contradictions as a class-grouping stand in our way, hinder us from acting effectively. Just as, on a larger scale, the contradictions of the race—which are nothing more than the sum of the contradictions of each class within it—stand in the way of true racial

unity and effective action. We must face up to, and solve, our own contradictions as a class in order to resolve the contradictions of our relations to the masses of Black people with whom we must work in concert to solve the problems of the race as a whole. There is no other way. ▶

We must bite the bullet and also begin to communicate to Black people, and all others who will listen, that there is no human future in this country except that which the people themselves decide and determine to make; that there is no way to resolve our plight in America without revolutionizing America; that we must, in Kwame Nkrumah's terms, study the oppressor and study the oppressed in order to exacerbate the weaknesses of the former and minimize the weaknesses of the latter; that we must study and struggle, and study in order to struggle correctly; that much of our past intellectual difficulty has resided in trying to create cultural and political theories di-

vorced from the struggle to change America fundamentally and irrevocably; that the problem of creating the necessary theory, and then integrating it with the struggle for state power, can only take place in conjunction with the masses of Black people and as part of the process of correctly identifying their problems and the solutions to those problems; that the current breakdown in American society represents a new historical epoch, an epoch of transition which means that whatever America evolves to, it will never be the same again; and that Black people and Black intellectuals must decide, once and finally, whether we are going to be "part of the problem or part of the solution."²

² This phrase has, variously, been attributed to the Black Panther Party and/or Eldridge Cleaver. It should more correctly be attributed to Dr. Aaron Henry of Clarksdale, Mississippi, who uttered it in the fall of 1963 during the course of his Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party campaign for governor.



Bill Strickland, author of "Black Intellectuals and the American Social Scene," writes frequently of the relationship between Black and white America, as he also did in his December 1973 *BLACK WORLD* assessment of Watergate. A Fellow of the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, Ga., he presently teaches political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.