IMPLICATIONS OF CLASS CONFLICT AND RACIAL CLEAVAGE FOR THE U.S. BLACK COMMUNITY

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For the proponents of social change, nothing is more important than to understand and make use of the dynamics of the situation within which they must function. In the case of the U.S. black community, the dynamic forces and resulting necessities and possibilities for effective progressive action are unusually complex. The black community is culturally and racially isolated within American society, kept apart by white-generated definitions of racial and other cultural attributes required for admission to the mainstream. By these definitions a line of racial cleavage is maintained. In addition, American Blacks are divided horizontally into a middle class and a working class, like the rest of U.S. society. This is the result of socioeconomic forces operating through all American institutions, except that the racial cleavage line means that the black middle and working classes are subclasses, enjoying only secondary status within each national class.

Though Blacks own little property, existence of a black middle class is possible because class membership in the modern world is not simply a matter of property ownership. The working class is inherently propertyless, and all owners of means of production are automatic members of the bourgeoisie, but a substantial and influential though subordinate part of the modern middle class now consists of professionals and technicians who by virtue of their credentials, skill, or competence are able to serve the manipulators of productive wealth and are well paid for doing so. While inheritance of a substantial block of property or wealth provides assured passage into the upper powerwielding strata of the bourgeoisie, having
parents with the requisite racial and other cultural attributes and the economic means to provide a higher education is sufficient for entry into the lower bourgeoisie. The same criteria, with appropriate qualifications, apply to membership in the black middle class. Since there are some opportunities, though circumscribed, for the acquisition of limited property, surplus income, and higher education there is upward flow of recruits from the working class, thus providing both white and black middle classes the options for dynamic growth. Since these new recruits originate at social levels which do not equip them with the cultural attributes required for upward mobility, it is a function of education, training, and other socializing processes to make good the deficiency. A few recruits escape or do not succumb to those cooptive influences, but usually find their upward progress halted at an early stage. The middle classes maintain both their cultural and socioeconomic homogeneity despite dilution from below. 1

Class is a nationwide socioeconomic phenomenon, resulting from operational characteristics of society’s basic institutions; but classes are not homogeneous. They are subdivided by many lines of major and minor social cleavage. The criteria of cleavage are primarily, though not exclusively, racial and economic. They are maintained by applying such readily stereotyped discriminators as pigmentation, facial contours, language, tastes (in dress, food, music), behavior patterns, and the like. These cleavages create intraclass hierarchies, ordered according to the scale of values by which each of the cultural attributes is measured, e.g., race and national origin. Manipulation of cultural values and employment of visible characteristics as discriminators are important tools for the management of power on behalf of the higher status subclasses. Racial cleavages help to reinforce class distinctions by providing additional barriers to mobility. Racial and cultural diversity, a purely historical and an inherently enriching phenomenon, is transformed into a tool of social management and human degradation.

There are times when historical forces and social movements blunt the edge of the tool and bring about evolutionary changes in the balance of de facto power among subclasses. New accretions of power can sometimes be used to initiate and carry through changes in de jure power and class structure which go well beyond what was inherent in the system. That is, a dynamic discontinuity may be brought about. The situation facing American Blacks today has this potential, but the actual outcome will depend on the perceptions, aspirations, strategic acuity, solidarity, and discipline of black middle-class leaders and their essential relationship with the black