The Politics of Black Empowerment in Urban America

Reflections on Race, Class, and Community

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Since the end of World War II, black urban activism has been molded by three concepts: race, class, and community, or neighborhood. Although these concepts are inseparable for understanding black political experiences in America, race has certainly been the most prominent element in black activism. This is still true to a large degree. As tensions associated with class and community have emerged in urban America, however, black activism has begun to reflect not only the racial dynamics of society but, increasingly, class and community tensions as well.

The Early Civil Rights Movement

Issues of class and community were muffled in the beginning stages of the civil rights movement because equal access to American institutions of power and influence was the major goal for blacks. Attempts to raise community and even class concerns were discouraged by a liberal-oriented coalition of blacks and whites that dominated the early civil rights movement. At least two instances illustrate how leaders of this coalition sought to underplay class and community: (1) the censoring of parts of John Lewis's speech at the 1963 March on Washington;[1] and (2) the media's deliberate disregard of Malcolm X's critique of the march, which he presented in a classic speech in November 1963, "Message to the Grassroots" (Malcolm X, 1973).

Both Lewis and Malcolm pointed to basic social and class differences

within the black community; they rejected the goals of the integrationist leadership as, at best, irrelevant for the black masses. On the basis of a racially identified politics and one that looked to the interests of poor and working-class blacks, Malcolm X and others called for a more radical political activism. They were hostile to organizations advocating integration with established white power structures.

With the emergence of "Black Power," some activists raised issues that reflected neither class nor race exclusively, but the reality of community-based, or neighborhood, interests. By the late 1960s, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton called for community-based black participation in American economic and political processes as "blacks," not necessarily as workers or as new entrants to the system (Hamilton and Carmichael, 1967). Black communities would be organized and mobilized on the basis of racial identification and community consolidation; blacks would control institutions serving their communities in order to ensure accountability. This was neither a class nor purely a racial strategy, but one of "plural nationalism," which responded foremost to blacks as occupants of identifiable communities or spaces in urban America.[2]

From Civil Rights to Empowerment: The Emergence of Class and Community Issues

A survey of community/neighborhood and class issues in urban America shows that much black political activism today encompasses goals different from those of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. As one writer has pointed out:

> While the demands of the civil rights movement were of benefit to all in the sense that they were a step toward the recognition of blacks as worthy of human dignity, it was primarily middle-class blacks, who were financially independent of whites, who led the assault and who were able to make use of its victories. (Bloom 1987, 219)

The goals and demands of the civil rights leadership were primarily intended to overcome the exclusion of blacks as a racially identifiable group in American society. The leaders' vision did not encompass either class struggle or control of land and cultural institutions at the level of community.

Black political participation and behavior essentially represented a response to racism, and therefore class and community dynamics were obscured. This does not mean that these dynamics were absent but that the pervasive impact of racism and racial hierarchy in the United States kept race per se at the forefront of the movement's concerns. In the decades following the apex of the civil rights movement, the shifting dynamic of race, class, and community has led to a black political activism that is more expressive of class- and community-based interests.

The latest stage of black political activism is referred to in this essay as *empowerment*. This term denotes a change in black America's political agenda that is beginning to emphasize *power* rather than mere "access to the powerful." Black empowerment suggests an important distinction between access to the powerful and actual power. There is a difference "between having power and being associated with those who have it, between partici-pating in the decisional process and actually influencing the outcome of that process, and between the symbolic trappings of political power and political power itself" (Jones 1978, 1). Grass-roots activists, frustrated at the incapac-ity of "liberal oriented" politics to alleviate economic and social problems in the black community, are now focusing on power instead of pursuing a politics based on mere proximity to public and private decision makers.

This suggests that black political activism is changing from an orientation primarily determined by race to one that gives class and community greater weight than in previous periods. No longer can a political program based solely on a racial agenda sustain a movement for social change in the black community. The notions of class and community (or culture) have emerged as organizing themes that are increasing in importance in defining, explain-ing, and molding black political activism in urban America. Nonetheless, race is still the major organizing theme—and it will remain so as long as African Americans as a group occupy the bottom rungs of America's social structure. The addition of the elements of class and community to the race consciousness of black political activism illustrates the movement of the black political agenda toward "radical" challenges to the American political and economic systems—as well as to the racially skewed structure and hierarchy of wealth.

Thus the new activism cannot be understood within a framework formu-lated exclusively in terms of race, class, or community. The social reality of black America prohibits using an either/or perspective (either class *or* race *or* community). The increased salience of community or class issues does not diminish the significance of race, or vice versa.

The particular relationship between these concepts has generated much debate. While the new populists have tended to emphasize community and neighborhood, those utilizing a Marxist perspective have argued that class is more important as an explanation of social change in American society. Writers supporting both orientations have many times overlooked or underemphasized the significance of race; this has produced major conceptual and theoretical problems for both populist and Marxist theory and activism.

Some of the literature from these two schools of thought represents pathbreaking analyses but often the analyses are incomplete. Many times, works representing the major ideas of Marxists and populists are built on assumptions and frameworks that exclude the significance of race, racism, and America's racial hierarchy; that is, they exclude a social situation where, for whatever reasons, most blacks do not enjoy the kinds of socioeconomic benefits available to white citizens. This conceptual weakness makes some of this work useless, either for understanding the full spectrum of black political activism and how it is changing or as a guide for building effective coalitions between the black community and potential white allies. Given the social position of the black community within the "metropolitan establishment," the demography of this community, and the historical vanguard role of blacks in movements for social change, this weakness is serious.

Alinsky, the New Populism, and the Organizing of Black Neighborhoods

The life and work of Saul Alinsky, whose practice is discussed in Chapter 3 of this volume, is an outstanding example of an activism that misses the significance of black empowerment. Although Alinsky's theoretical and practical work was very important, his model at times has been implemented in ways that have maintained a racial hierarchy, despite the objective of change based on community agendas. In some settings, his model has been criticized by black activists engaged in "community" struggles because it has allowed, or has excused, a certain degree of racial chauvinism on the part of white activists. In an interview for this essay, for example, Eugene ("Gus") Newport, the former black mayor of Berkeley, California and a long-time activist in Rochester, New York, argued that during the 1960s, Alinsky, working in Rochester, actually hindered the development of a black-led struggle against the city's corporate leadership.

According to Newport, the Alinsky model had the effect, in Rochester, of confining black activists to issues considered by whites as acceptable for blacks. It discouraged black activists from broadening their struggles to public policy issues that encompassed the entire city and its political economy. In 1965, after a series of riots in the city, the Council of Churches funded Alinsky with $75,000 and then followed with a grant of $100,000, basically to pacify the black community. Newport described Alinsky as condescending to blacks who urged a community struggle with a focus broader than localized black issues.[3]

In the early 1980s several black political activists in Brooklyn, New York—among them State Assembly Representatives Al Vann and Roger Green and U. S. Congressman Major Owens—found themselves at odds with white activists who were utilizing the "Alinsky approach" to organize poor people in that borough. According to an article in *In These Times* on May 25, 1982, proponents of the Alinsky model did not readily support the broad-based electoral efforts of these black activists, choosing instead to attempt to mobilize blacks outside the electoral arena and around single issues.

In Boston, several white leftists and populists refused to support Mel King's mayoral bid in 1983 because they felt that it was not realistic to expect a black to get the votes of white citizens. While these activists generally acknowledged that King was the most progressive candidate, and the most consistent in relation to neighborhood empowerment issues, they insisted he could not win because of his color. This argument alienated many black and white progressives, who saw it as but another excuse for racism in Boston. The conclusion that King could not win among white voters, these progressives believed, should have led to a strategy of openly confronting the problem of race rather than accommodating to it (Green 1984, 13).

There are two basic characteristics of American society that white populist and leftist thinkers and activists often refuse to acknowledge. And their refusal is one cause of the friction between activists utilizing the Alinsky approach and those seeking black empowerment. The first, often unacknowledged, characteristic is that blacks have been historically forced to see their political and social realities, to use Manning Marable's term, through the prism of race (Marable 1983). Blacks, exploited as workers, have also been exploited as blacks. The second characteristic is that both history and the current demography of American society combine to create a situation in which white leftists and populists usually cannot be effective in black or

Latino communities; yet because of the social position of blacks and Latinos, this is precisely where the struggle for social change in America begins.

That some white leftists and populists have resisted accepting these conditions may have to do with beliefs they hold about theories of social change and questions of leadership around community-based struggles. For the continuing presence and weight of America's racial hierarchy implies that the black struggle for equality, and its leadership, do hold a *vanguard* position in the movement for change. This situation undermines the priestly and missionary function of white activists who, sometimes unknowingly, seek to define for the black community the parameters and style of social change in American society.

Harry Boyte's *The Backyard Revolution* (1980), despite its strengths in alerting the reader to community as an important factor in explaining the urban political economy exhibits the limitations of new populist analyses that do not specifically address the significance of race. This work is path-breaking in showing how neighborhood organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s challenged the interests of the wealthy and powerful that were seeking to dislodge and disrupt the stability of communities. But here, too, the black and Latino urban experience is basically tokenized within this "revolution." One of the most dynamic and important movements for neigh-borhood stability and citizen control within a broadly defined democratic and constitutional setting, for instance, was the "community control" move-ment in New York City at that time. This episode was precisely about black and Puerto Rican citizens challenging the power and arrogance of giant bureaucracies and insensitive politicians, yet this major episode in the political history of New York City is not even mentioned in Boyte's volume. Luis Fuentes, one of the leaders of the movement and New York City's first Puerto Rican district superintendent, expressed frustration at the conspicu-ous absence of white populist and leftist groups in the struggle, despite the rhetoric of social change.[4]

In another "populist" work, *Washington, D.C.: Inner City Revitalization and Minority Suburbanization* by Dennis E. Gale, the author spends most of his time describing racial politics in the nation's capital. Somehow he concludes that neither race nor class politics reflects the major political and social issues in the city (Gale 1987, 83). He argues, instead, that in urban planning politics, the battle lines are between white elites debating the city's "environmental fabric." One leaves Gale's work with the impression that the major political confrontation in Washington, D.C., is between white homeowners and community activists seeking to preserve historical

landscapes on the one hand, and greedy real estate speculators, on the other. Gale's is another example of a progressive analysis deemphasizing the significance of race, racism, and society's racial hierarchy—and in Washington, D.C., of all places!

Empowerment: A New Policy Question

Black empowerment activism refers to public policy positions or approaches that are different from those that traditionally have called for greater access or equality for minorities within American institutions. The political orientation, substance, and style associated with "black empowerment" differ from patterns associated with both the politics of white ethnic groups in the American city and black electoral activism, which have been based on participation within political and economic mainstream processes. Many of these differences are based on how power and influence are sought, the particular public policies emphasized, the role of the "politically divorced," and the political posture of certain black groups toward the structure and distribution of wealth in American society.[5]

Black empowerment activism seeks to strengthen the black community institutionally, rather than focus on public policies the effects of which may primarily benefit black individuals or improve individual black mobility within the American economic system. It tends to be "redistributive" rather than "developmental" or "allocational" politics, to utilize Paul Peterson's classification (Peterson 1981, 41). But this classification is conceptually limited. The classification of public policy into these three categories does not appreciate that black urban political activism may move beyond a transfer of resources from better-off sectors to poorer ones in society. Black empowerment focuses on *the control of land in black urban communities*. This immediately distinguishes it from traditional white ethnic political activism and from a black political agenda that focuses on integrating blacks into white residential areas. Its emphasis is the economic and cultural strengthening of black communities, not simply more resources taken from middle-class taxpayers.

The political issues generated by activists under black empowerment cannot be neatly confined within Peterson's categories. Issues such as the Mandela movement's call for an independent Roxbury in Boston or the call for an autonomous black school district in Milwaukee not only seek

"redistribution" but a fundamental change in the social position of black vis-à-vis white power structures.

Although, in the initial stages of ethnic mobilization, white ethnic politics was based on territoriality and neighborhood turf, eventually, as a result of economic and cultural integration in the American social structure, it moved away from the question of land control. Donald Warren (1975) has pointed out that "white ethnic groups are different not only in the likelihood that many become indistinguishable members of the anonymous majority 'community,' but also that in structural terms territory no longer need be a basis of organization and power" (p. 10). For the emerging black political activism described here, however, the control of land and community is critical; according to several activists interviewed for this essay, it surpasses affirmative action, job discrimination, or school integration as a priority on any black empowerment agenda.

Conrad Worrill, chairman of the National Black United Front, suggested in the *Chicago Defender* on January 13, 1988, that

> the expanding African-American population in the United States' inner cities has been a major concern of white decision makers since the passage of the 1949 Urban Renewal legislation. Since that time, strategies have been attempted to hold down the pattern of African-Americans becoming the majority, or close to the majority, population in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Washington D.C., New York, Detroit, Cleveland, Kansas City, etc. . . . The question for the African-American community in Chicago and other inner cities of the United States where this trend exists is, why should we again be maneuvered from the land we occupy? Our history in America has been one of forced and manipulated migration. It's obvious that we need a massive organizing strategy to reverse this trend of Black removal.

Chicago offers another example of how racial, class, and community conflict intertwines with an expanding black population and with attempts to control this group's physical expansion. In 1988, a group of white homeowners in that city introduced a "home equity" proposal for the purpose of maintaining "racial integration" in some of the city's neighborhoods. Several black aldermen criticized this program in the *Chicago Defender* on May 10, 1988, calling it nothing more than a way to keep blacks from moving into certain white areas of Chicago.

In Newark, New Jersey, the long-time community activist Amiri Baraka

described the struggle over control of land taking place in that city in *Unity* on June 20, 1988:

> By now it is no secret that low income housing is being leveled and eliminated. For the last eight years, the local politicians and the housing authority let $300 million intended for the upgrading of existing public housing sit unused. Why? So finally they could carry out the heinous scam they intended in the late '60s—wipe out the central ward, drive the residents out, and gentrify the area, put up high cost efficiency apartments and coops and condos and attract the yuppies and buppies. Rutgers, NJIT, Seton Hall, St. Benedict's could all serve to remove old housing and residents and turn the central ward into a largely white middle-class area, transforming the politics of the area as well.

Chuck Turner, a long-time community activist in Boston, phrased this issue even more dramatically:

> We are in the midst of a fierce fight over land in Boston. While there are a number of aspects to this struggle, the one that concerns us most is the one between the relatively low income population in most of Boston's neighborhoods and higher income people who desire to move in . . . there is also the issue of institutional expansion, the competition between industrial and commercial uses of land. (Turner 1988)

Dennis Gale also sees the control of land and space as key to urban conflict; he points to the "existence of a fundamental process of competition for space in the nation's capital" (Gale 1987, 43). Policies and economic proposals associated with black empowerment will thus focus on land control and racial and physical consolidation of a community, rather than on integration or dispersal.

Changing the Rules

Another characteristic of black empowerment activism represents a new political development since the 1960s. Black nationalist-oriented and perhaps separatist sectors, which were integral parts of the protest activities of the 1960s, were not fully integrated or institutionalized into the electoral arena; electoral participation on the part of these sectors occurred only sporadically and temporarily. This separatism led Martin Luther King, Jr.,

to urge the coming together of these two kinds of black leaders, suffering from a "unique and unnatural dichotomy" (King 1967, 149).

This dichotomy has begun to blur in the current black political activism and protest; interestingly, many of the new actors in the electoral arena include black activists who did not trust electoral mobilization. Several successful campaigns have been conducted at the local level (in addition to the Jesse Jackson campaigns) as a result of the marriage between this group and the sector traditionally oriented toward electorally based mobilization. This means that the dichotomy between community and electoral politics that some observers pointed to in earlier periods is no longer appropriate as an analytical tool for understanding black politics in the American city.

Yet another characteristic of black empowerment activism, reflecting a changing relationship between race, class, and community, is the role of the "politically divorced" in the black community. Sectors so described in the literature, or as "alienated" or the "underclass," are being organized by activists in order to encourage their participation in electoral arenas of major urban centers. This is illustrated by the participation of gang members in the successful mayoral election of the late Harold Washington in Chicago, and by the endorsement and participation of the Nation of Islam, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, in the 1984 presidential campaign of Jesse Jackson, as well as this organization's growing attraction to the electoral arena. Recently, for example, the Nation of Islam also endorsed a gubernatorial candidate in Missouri's Democratic party primary. These endorsements are noteworthy not because of the controversial figure of Minister Farrakhan but because they represent a new development on the part of a sector in the black community that until now has rejected the utilization of electoral activism as an effective tool for black social advancement.

These developments raise broad questions and problems of governance and the effectiveness of government responses to the needs of blacks in urban settings. Until now, government institutions could respond to a racial agenda that demanded some measure of access to influential and powerful sectors of the social structure. But this becomes more difficult as the racial agenda changes and incorporates more clearly class and community interests of blacks.

The interplay of race, class, and community is reflected in the kinds of issues that are today salient in black urban communities, as well as the kinds of leadership and political mobilization that is emerging in black America. For example, "black nationalism" is more frequently utilized as an organizing foundation for these issues, as are black cultural appeals.

Salim Muwakhil, a long-time observer of black politics, has noted a growing trend for blacks to organize around political and economic issues shrouded in the terminology of self-determination and empowerment. On November 11, 1987, he wrote in *In These Times*:

> Boston and Milwaukee are just two of several cities that have experienced major encounters with this developing black strategy. Others—including East Palo Alto, California, Brooklyn, New York, and Columbia, Maryland— have had similar, though less publicized, encounters. The details vary in every situation, but the theme of self-determination is constant. And the rationale grows increasingly compelling as the economic picture bleakens.

Another example of black empowerment politics may be the Philadelphia Money for Neighborhoods Coalition described in the *Final Call* on July 10, 1988. It has challenged the Wilson Goode administration to spend a larger proportion of the Urban Development Action Grants on neighborhood revitalization. This community organization also has demanded that the corporate leadership of the city share some of its resources with neighborhood groups. As community activist Michael Blackie has argued in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, "The developers have gotten tens of millions of our tax dollars to build commercial properties downtown, but our neighborhoods are going ignored." The coalition is utilizing electoral processes to seek a "city ordinance that would link downtown commercial development to neighborhood revitalization." This suggests another characteristic of black empowerment activism that involves the relationship between black politics and the corporate sector. As the issue of the politics of land becomes more prominent, black community activists will also begin to challenge the leadership of the private sector in terms of the city's agenda.

In Milwaukee, one community activist involved in pressuring black elected officials stated that "downtown interests don't give a damn about the Black community here." Andrew Walker, chair of the NAACP's Discrimination Committee in that city, suggested in an interview that blacks begin to confront the corporate sector, since so much housing and land use is affected by their decisions. He argued that downtown businesses—and Marquette University in particular—should be forced to give back the housing that it eliminated for both black and white working-class citizens of Milwaukee.[6] The gentrification set in motion by Marquette University's decision to take over YMCA facilities to house its students led to the formation of the Task Force on Emergency Shelter and Relocation. As reported in the *Milwaukee*

Courier on June 8, 1988, the task force then called for a boycott of all Milwaukee YMCA health clubs.

Community-based groups and coalitions that attempt to use local government as a means through which to extract benefits from the private sector, or stop the private sector from taking land away from black poor and working-class residents, exist in other large American cities with sizable black populations. These kinds of issues tend to be more responsive to community concerns, and, in many instances, transcend race and class.

The Organization for Black Struggle, which recently held its eighth annual celebration in St. Louis, is one more example of a renewed, and perhaps more radical, local black political activism. This organization was described in February 1988 by Jamala Rogers, a *Unity* journalist, "as a grassroots mass organization whose primary focus is on community empowerment." The political agenda of this group illustrates, in part, the movement away from public policy positions that could be described loosely as "liberal"—positions focusing on access to predominantly white institutions—toward those demanding control of those institutions on the basis of land in a community.

In December 1987, in an instance of reemerging protest and a changing political agenda in the black community, several activists in New York City planned a major political and economic campaign against the city's business community for its general insensitivity to the living conditions of blacks. The Committee for Economic Sanctions Against Racism in New York targeted the giant Macy's department store; picketing and boycotting continued there until store executives agreed to contribute funds for nonprofit, cooperative housing for low-income families. On March 5, 1988, one of the organizers of the campaign proclaimed in the *Chicago Metro News* that "we must let the captains of industry of New York know that there will be no more business as usual." In Chicago, the Citizens United for Better Parks protested to gain more resources in low-income areas of the city. The group protested not only the inequitable level of funds targeted for black and low-income areas but also the lack of citizen input into decisions affecting the management of local parks and recreational facilities. An account of the protest appeared in the *Chicago Defender* on April 3, 1988. Both of the Chicago efforts are being carried out in conjunction with black elected officials.

Civil rights activist Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., has also pointed to an emergence of activism based on the idea of empowerment. In the December 30, 1987, issue of the *Guardian*, he cited the campaign of blacks in Keysville, Georgia, who organized to hold an election: "the first in 55 years

and the first in which African Americans—80% of the population—voted.
. . . Administration of Keysville had been turned over to the county during
the Depression. African Americans want it back." This is an indication of
the significance of race *and* community as organizing themes for blacks.

The election of the late Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago, and the
policies of his administration, also illustrate a politics different from the
politics usually associated with the liberal public policy agenda for urban
America. Abdul Alkalimat points out that "Washington summed up his
reform package as having three points of attack: the structure of government,
development of the city, and the general mood and direction of government"
(Alkalimat 1988, 48). Mayor Washington began to introduce public and
governmental policies that would not disadvantage neighborhood groups
and, in particular, the black community, as had been the case with previous
administrations in that city. Gregory Squires and his associates point out
that Washington's approach was especially evident in the area of urban
development:

> Viewed in the context of past city administrations' attitudes toward urban
> redevelopment, the Washington administration's 1984 Chicago development
> plan represents a substantial shift in course. Principal among its objectives
> are job creation as the central criterion for assessing the worth of particular
> projects, and the balancing of downtown and neighborhood groups as agents
> for development activities. (Squires et al. 1987, 177)

The political activism that propelled Harold Washington to power began to
generate an agenda that was different from previous city agendas in terms
of blacks and poor people.

Recently, a broad range of black activists held a one-day meeting in
Boston to discuss what a black public policy agenda would entail. The
discussion had two central concerns: (1) how to make such an agenda more
responsive to conditions in the black community; and (2) what kind of
agenda would force local government to put greater pressure on the private
sector to deal with issues affecting the quality of life in the black community.

Lloyd King, an organizer of the conference and president of the Black
Political Task Force (a ten-year-old grass-roots organization in Boston),
stated in an interview that such an agenda would be a first step in allowing
black leaders to challenge the role of the city's private sector, particularly
its political behavior and practices in the black community. King specifically
pointed out that until now, the politics of some elected black leaders had

not been responding to the needs of poor and working-class blacks, or to the question of who controls the land on which black people live. It was his hope that the development of a black political agenda would begin to formulate issues and activism responsive to blacks, not only as blacks, but also as poor and working-class people whose presence on certain parcels of land is threatened by urban restructuring.[7]

Race, Class, and Community: Implications for Activism

This brief overview of black grass-roots activism around the country offers a picture of the kinds of issues and approaches that are emerging today. These issues are certainly not confined to, or totally defined by, race. At the same time, it is naive and misleading to approach these issues— pregnant with implications for the politics of entire cities—without reference to race. In each of the instances cited, grass-roots activists and organizations have attempted to build alternative public policy agendas that they consider more effective than the agendas put forth by black interest groups aligned with traditional urban liberal coalitions. But equally important, these efforts have also been based on expanding the racial agenda of the civil rights movement and incorporating responses to class and community needs.

The emergence of class and community dimensions in black urban activism does not mean, as several liberal and neoconservative researchers and observers contend, that racism or America's racial hierarchy has been eliminated or even weakened.[8] The racial hierarchy in America remains very much an integral part of the nation's political economy. Historically, black protest after the Civil War focused on access to the prevailing economic and political system rather than any fundamental change in that system.[9] The goals and subsequent legislation adopted as a result of the civil rights and Black Power movements focused on access and enforcement of equal protection of the laws. While black political activism organized on the basis of challenging prevailing economic and social structures—rather than on the basis of access or integration or participation in any such arrangements—has only episodically commanded the allegiance of significant numbers of blacks, it nevertheless has always been an important component of black protest in this country.[10] But demographic and social developments in America have led to a situation in which systemic, not access or participatory, demands, are coming increasingly to characterize urban black political activism.

Not even the many electoral victories of blacks have been able to arrest the growing deterioration of life conditions for poor and working-class sectors in the black community. This is because most of the black electoral victories have concentrated on winning elections and replacing white politicians with black politicians. That is, they have followed a strictly racial agenda. These electoral campaigns have too often been detached from the development of any base of power—rooted in class and community aspects of black life— that could be used to challenge powerful interests that are unresponsive to the needs of blacks.

A good example of this is Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Black mayor has little control over economic activities that determine the quality of life for people in the black neighborhoods that surround the multibillion-dollar casinos. Despite his power over the electoral apparatus of the city, the mayor has minor influence on economic decisions made by its next-door neighbor, the gambling industry. The industry relies heavily on cheap black labor, but black leaders and elected officials have neither the electoral base nor the conceptual framework to challenge the casinos and control them in ways that might be beneficial to poor and working-class communities.

This failure is not limited to Atlantic City. Harold Cruse, for example, emphasizes the fact that black political victories consistently fail to translate into social and economic gains for any but a black elite.

> In the game of electoral politics, black leadership has had no issues of political leverage, only numerical voting strength. However, this voting strength has never been predicated on a political power base grounded in tangible economic, administrative, cultural, or social policy issues with the viability of forcefully influencing *public policy*. Hence, merely winning public office became the one and only tangible good for black political leaders . . . with rare exceptions, they brought nothing with them into political office that bore the least resemblance to a black economic, political, and cultural program that meant much to anybody, friend or foe, black or white, beyond the politically mundane business as usual stance of the liberal consensus. (Cruse 1987, 200)

For the most part, black leadership has not sought to change the game but to make the game more accessible and fair. This can be done, as Cruse says, without bringing into the electoral arena a collective black public agenda. The development of a black power base, and the existence of a collective black political agenda, would allow Black elected officials to

offer and pursue public policies responsive to the group needs of black communities.

In summary, I have argued that, although the emergence and development of the civil rights movement could not be separated from class and community dynamics, or from the political economy of the land on which blacks lived, the early leadership basically sought participation in America's social processes without challenging the fundamental structural arrangements of those processes. During the civil rights movement, significant victories for equality were won that, as Samuel Huntington (1969) implies, democratized and modernized American society.[11] But such victories did not respond fully to the class and community tensions faced by blacks in white America. The racial agenda of black America muffled class- and community-based interests. This is understandable, given the caste conditions of blacks living in American society.

As the civil rights movement evolved into the Black Power movement, issues of class and community emerged alongside that of race. Much black activism began to concern itself with the cultural survival of the black community. Indeed, a cultural reawakening occurred, out of which grew several attempts to build alternative community institutions controlled by African Americans. These included efforts to build independent schools and engage in various economic initiatives, as well as more fundamental attempts to change the structural arrangements of decision making. The movement for community control in New York City (and other places), for example, sought political power for local neighborhoods over education, not just access to the downtown structures where decisions were made.

In many ways, life conditions for blacks seem more depressed today than they were a few years ago, despite the presence of black mayors and other high-level elected officials. This does not indict electoral participation per se as a tool of social change, although the disillusionment fostered by the continuing deterioration of life conditions for blacks in America has led some to this conclusion.

Black empowerment activists are not questioning voting as a tool; instead, they are rethinking the conceptualization and goals of electoral mobilization. Since electoral mobilization aimed at *access* to given social and economic structures has not been effective in improving the socioeconomic status of the majority of blacks, activists are suggesting that the goal should shift toward *challenging* structural and institutional arrangements that reflect and protect a system of wealth and power. Black urban activism is conceptually expanding the black agenda, and is becoming more inclusive of class and

community needs. What I have proposed in this paper is that only an agenda that seeks change in the accumulation and distribution of wealth and the power of the status quo can respond to the class, community, and race interests of black America.

Conclusion

As the black agenda changes from an emphasis on access to power, electoral mobilization, instead of diminishing in significance, becomes more important as a tool for social change. Thus, we see an increase in black political participation in the electoral arena. But it is crucial to realize that the increasing political participation of African Americans is taking place under a framework different from that suggested by today's liberal agenda or the one under which black electoral gains were made more than twenty years ago.

The guarantee of access provided in the civil rights legislative packages of the 1950s and 1960s was important in moving America toward a more modern and open political society. These advances did not confront basic economic contradictions in America, however; consequent black electoral victories have transformed the character of these contradictions. Victories based on a "politics of rights"—and the resulting breakthroughs, such as the election of black mayors and congressional representatives—were not enough to respond to the depressed economic conditions of blacks. Entry into the electoral arena spoke to aspects of the problems of racism and discrimination, but the larger public policy agendas that followed did not address class- or community-based needs of blacks.

Despite previous limitations, however, there are indications that black grass-roots activists in major cities are now attempting to use the electoral arena not only for traditional "access" to benefits but also as a direct way of challenging structural arrangements. Targets include the private sector, which continues to support public policy frameworks that have been ineffective in changing substantively racial and economic hierarchies in urban America. As but "junior partners" in the grand liberal coalition of urban America, black political actors had not yet mounted fundamental challenges to existing agendas. Black politics basically gravitated toward "piece of the pie" pluralism, its rewards determined by negotiations with the federal government, the liberal wing of big business, and City Hall leaders and their machines.[12]

While much of the electoral activism is still based on race and access, increasingly there are examples of class struggle, as well as struggles based on community dynamics. Local examples reflect developments at the national level. For example, the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson indicated increasing political activism among the black electorate along lines that looked beyond traditional pluralist politics.

The involvement of black churches in both Jackson campaigns, as well as that of the Nation of Islam in 1984, demonstrated increased black participation in the electoral arena. But what is particularly significant is that, in both presidential races, much of Jackson's support in the black community was based on his campaign's greater attention to issues related to empowerment. There are indications that if Jackson's campaigns had not stressed populist themes, but had emphasized the traditional black liberal agenda, they would not have received the extraordinary degree of black support they did. In Cleveland, for instance, Jackson won the 1988 Democratic presidential primary campaign; a survey of black voters, reported in *Call and Post* on April 21, 1988, found "that Jackson's support has moved from simply supporting him because he is the 'Black' candidate to more closely examining the issues." This sentiment echoes developments in other major cities as well.

According to Ronald Walters, there may be another illustration of a changing political activism at the national level for blacks.

> There has been a persistent attempt by some Black leaders to appeal to their colleagues not to give away the bargaining leverage of the collective Black community by making individual commitments to the major party candidates in advance of the candidate's public commitment to specific Black issues. In the past this appeal has fallen on deaf ears, largely because of the attractiveness of private incentive and the vulnerability of elected officials to the power of a potential president. (Walters 1988, 106)

Walters argues, however, that a more "independent leverage" approach is gaining wide acceptance among black leaders and activists.

This was echoed in the statement of an activist in Ohio, quoted in the August 7, 1988 *Boston Globe*, who exclaimed that for the general election, "It is like choosing to be eaten by either an alligator or a crocodile. I'm thinking about getting out of the water altogether." Another activist stated, "I've voted in every presidential election since I've had the right to vote; and I'm debating this time whether to use it or not."

These sentiments indicate some support for black political activism not based in Democratic party politics and loyalty. While the proposal for "independent leverage" has a long history, today more and more black activists are discussing this kind of strategy in relation to the Democratic party. It will be interesting to see if, as black America's racial agenda expands to include class and community interests, the Democratic party will be able to incorporate the new agenda. Preliminary indications are negative. While Democratic party politics may have been able to accommodate some of the interests of blacks in terms of a racial agenda, the issues raised by the concept of empowerment seem likely to be too "radical" for the Democrats. The implications of this will shape urban political activism in the coming decades.

Notes

1. The original speech written by John Lewis was redrafted after several coordinators of the march objected to Lewis's criticisms of the federal government's role in diluting the class-oriented demands and momentum of civil rights activists (see Grant 1968, 375).

2. The term "plural nationalism" is defined and explained by Hamilton (1973).

3. Interview with Eugene G. Newport, William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts/Boston, March 14, 1987.

4. Interview with Luis Fuentes, Harvard University, April 9, 1981.

5. The term "politically divorced" is borrowed from Lane (1965).

6. Interview with Andrew Walker, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 1988.

7. Interview with Lloyd King, Northeastern University, November 29, 1987.

8. The more popular works associated with this and related arguments include Wilson (1980, 1985); Freeman (1976) could also be included in the genre of "liberal" presentations. For the conservative school of thought, see Banfield (1974) and Sowell (1984).

9. For a brief overview of how black protest has moved from "access" to "power," see Jennings (1984).

10. See Brisbane (1969) for a historical treatment of the "radical" theme in black political activism.

11. Huntington proposed that a partial requirement for a modernized society is one in which political participation is expanding and disenfranchised groups have opportunities to join in the governance of the society. Using this paradigm, American society was modernized during the civil rights period as a result of the expansion

of political participation and the weakening of its racial caste system (see Huntington 1969).

12. For a discussion of how blacks reflected a "junior partner" status in the liberal coalition dominating urban America and the "metropolitan establishment," see Jennings (1984).

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