

Toward a future that has no past— reflections on the fate of Blacks in the Americas

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T HE claim that there is an underlying unity in the New World black experience has been made so often that most people now take it for granted. And yet, in spite of the frequency of these assertions, few have taken the trouble to examine exactly how they may be justified. What is it in the experience of Blacks throughout the Americas (and according to some, the entire world) which establishes the claim that they constitute, in any meaningful sense, a distinct group?

For many, the answer is that the New World black experience deserves to be treated as a unit simply because those who share it are black. This view may not be as spurious as it appears at first sight. But what is extraordinary about its unqualified acceptance is the fact that the most cursory examination of New World black peoples presents us with an overwhelming impression of diversity rather than uniformity. I do think that there are important uniformities in the black experience—that, indeed, the trend is toward complete uniformity—and these uniformities I shall consider later at some length; for the moment, however, in order to place these later comments clearly in perspective, let us examine some of the more important differences among the Blacks of the New World.

Historically, there have been tremendous differences in the con-

ditions of Blacks and in their responses to these varying conditions. True, there was the common experience of slavery. But slavery took many forms in the New World, ranging from the highly capitalistic, large-scale, mono-crop plantation systems of the West Indies to the secondary slave system of the United States and 18th-century Brazil (where slavery was merely one of the important bases of the economy and society) to the marginal slavery that existed in places such as Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Northern states of the United States. These varying conditions produced, naturally, varying responses on the part of the black slaves. In the large-scale, capitalistic slave systems, where Blacks comprised the large majority of the population, they were unable as a group to reproduce themselves (due to the small proportion of women, the masters' discouragement of child rearing, brutal treatment, and the high rate of infant mortality), and therefore these societies always contained a high ratio of immigrant Africans to Blacks born in the New World. And where members of the white ruling class cared little for the society they ruled, except as a place to make or restore their fortunes prior to a life of absentee leisure, the possibility of slave revolts and the survival of aboriginal African cultural elements was relatively great. On the other hand, where (as in the United States) the opposite set of conditions prevailed—Whites outnumbering Blacks; a stable white and black population, with a low immigrant ratio; a large, free population having little to do directly with slavery; and a highly developed local culture—there could be few revolts, and the pressures towards accommodation and acculturation were well nigh irresistible.

There is also the popular, though largely erroneous view that cultural differences between the white slave owners of the New World—in particular, those between the Latin and non-Latin masters—were significant in determining the kinds of opportunities open to Blacks and the responses they were likely to make to their oppression. While such cultural differences are not to be neglected, it seems to me that what may be called “the Tannenbaum-Elkins interpretation” of New World slave systems has not stood up to recent scholarly criticism. The Latin master was no more humane than his Anglo-Saxon counterpart, and the view that in the Latin areas the status of the slave did not become identified with the status of black people is sheer nonsense. True, laws existed in the Latin areas which, on paper, offered greater protection to the slave; also true, is the fact that the Catholic Church took a moral stand against slavery. But laws are only as good as the men who administer them,

and the facts speak against the rosy picture of Latin humanity implied in the letter of their slave codes. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, all that need be said is that in many Latin slave systems the Church was often the largest and the harshest of slave owners.

In one important respect, however, the slave system in Latin areas did significantly differ from those in non-Latin areas. This was in the greater opportunities offered for manumission. But the consequences of the more liberal manumission policy for black slaves in Latin America have been exaggerated. It did mean that there was a larger and more "loyal" freed black group during the period of slavery; but this has had little lasting consequence except, perhaps, that the more elite segments of the black communities in the Latin areas today are actually more alienated from the mass of the black community than they are in the non-Latin areas of the New World.

The post-emancipation and modern eras of black history saw the crystallization of regional autonomy and national boundaries in the New World, and added perhaps the most important basis of division among Blacks of the hemisphere. Today, black peoples have cultural, social, and modal personality traits that are peculiar to that section of the race living within specific national and/or regional boundaries. These peculiar traits are of two types in those cases where Blacks constitute a minority group: traits which Blacks share with all their fellow nationals, and those which are peculiar to fellow Blacks of the same nationality. Thus, U.S. Blacks are different from other Blacks in the New World by virtue of their Americanness—their commitment to certain kinds of values and modes of behavior which are typical of an industrial society. This is particularly true of a substantial number of middle-class Blacks in the United States. But of course, black Americans also have their own subcultural peculiarities, which they do not share with other Americans—but which they also do not share with non-American Blacks. Many black American intellectuals are prone to insist on the universality within the black race of precisely these traits; this is understandable, and under some conditions, as we shall see later, the claim might become true.

Drawing racial lines

Let us, however, look at some of those areas where such an assertion of universality is clearly false. First, both the racial experience and the response to this experience—ideologically and psycho-

logically—of black Americans differ from those of their Caribbean and Latin American counterparts. America has what may be called a “*classificatory*” racial system—anyone who is not completely white and has the slightest trace of black ancestry is considered black. This has had important social and psychological consequences for the U.S. black community. Socially, it has meant that the elite section of the black community was forced to identify with the mass of black people. Until a decade or so ago, of course, there were many among the light-skinned middle-class Blacks who resented this forced identity, and would have preferred a closer relation with the white group with whom they had more in common genetically. Yet the fact remains that they were obliged to offer their social, educational, and leadership skills, such as they were, to the black community. While this was beneficial in many ways for the mass of Blacks, politically—as Martin Kilson has shown—this leadership was essentially conservative and self-serving. More recently, this group has thrown in its lot with the mass of black people, and although the major base of black political leadership is today proletarian, at least in origin, the fact that the educationally and socially more favored brown-skinned elite now fully identify with their black brothers has been of tremendous significance.

In the West Indies and Latin areas, on the other hand, racial categorization has been “*denotative*” rather than classificatory—that is, an elaborate racial terminology exists to describe and differentiate shades of color, ranging from pure Negro to pure Caucasian. This racial terminology accurately reflects actual social relations and, more important, is accepted and used by all groups. To complicate matters, and further increase the divisions among the New World Blacks, a distinction must be made between two subtypes of denotative racial systems; one we shall call “continuous denotative categorization,” the other, “discontinuous denotative categorization.” Continuous denotative systems of racial categorization are found mainly in the West Indies and especially in the English and Dutch areas. In these societies, the precise gradation of shades includes the white group and, indeed, penetrates it, so that some gradations are found within what in other areas would be simply Caucasian or white. Nowhere in the West Indies are Portuguese considered as white as, say, English Caucasians; and Syrians, Lebanese, and other Middle Easterners hardly make it within the white group at all—rather, they have to be satisfied with some such classification as “high color” or even “high brown.” At the same time, very light-skinned mulattoes may well be considered more “near-white”

than such South Europeans or Middle Easterners. On the other hand, those pure North European Whites who have low social status are rarely classified as Whites, even where, as in Barbados, St. Vincent, and Grenada, they may have blond hair and blue eyes. In such cases special terms are invented for them, the best example being the description of Barbadian poor Whites as "red-legs." Indeed, the designation "red" is often used in the West Indian system of racial terminology to describe all white or approximately-white groups whose racial type does not match their expected social status. Thus, a light-skinned person who is a manager of an estate is sometimes designated white, possibly even "Buckra"—the highest socio-racial term; but a man of identical somatic type who is middle-class or lower is "red."

There is a difference between this rather complicated, continuous system and the one prevailing in South America (especially Brazil), which, while it is linguistically more elaborate, is socially less complicated. We call this system "discontinuous" because the group at the very top is exclusively white (unlike in the West Indies, where a significant segment of the upper elite is now black) and self-consciously preserves its Caucasian racial identity. Thus Latin America closely approximates the United States in the total and exclusive domination of the elite by Caucasians. But it differs radically from the United States in the fact that below the elite a color-class gradation similar to that in the West Indies exists, and the same kind of color-class interpenetration takes place. "Money whitens," as they say in Brazil, but only to a point. A rigid racial caste barrier excludes all but pure Caucasians from top positions.

Another way in which the Latin system differs from that of the United States is in the fact that the all-white elite members accept the rules of the racial color-class game as it affects other segments of their society. In the United States, where the color-class hierarchy within the black group also exists, or existed to a great extent until recently, the white elite as well as other members of the white majority remain aloof from this system, seeing it as something internal to the black community. Thus, white employers, when they do decide to employ Blacks, rarely discriminate on a color basis among Blacks; such discrimination is automatic in Latin America. Or, to take a more telling example: In Latin America, a lower-middle-class Caucasian father may object strongly to his daughter marrying a black person of equal class standing; he would object less to a son-in-law who is mulatto; even less to one who was a quadroon; he might even give his grudging approval to a wealthy upper-class

mulatto; and quite probably he would strongly approve a match between his daughter and a wealthy quadroon. In the United States, a lower-middle-class White would consider any match with any person classified as black (even where the "black" person was phenotypically similar to him) a disaster.

The implications of these subsystems of racial categorization for the various segments of Blacks in the Americas are striking. In the United States, as we have already noted, while until recently the classificatory system has been the source of much pain and resentment on the part of the light-skinned elite, it has, ironically, had a beneficial effect on the mass of Blacks. For one thing, it has meant that the number of people designated "black" or "Negro" has been far greater than it would have been in a denotative system of racial classification. Secondly, the rejection of all non-Whites by the white majority has meant that all shades of the black group have been forced to find a common meeting ground among themselves. Since this meeting ground could not be purely physical, it had to be cultural and social—hence the strong emphasis on cultural nationalism in the drive towards racial solidarity on the part of the Negro population in the United States. For this cultural nationalism to be meaningful, however, it had to emphasize precisely the life style which was peculiar to the black community; and the traditional cradle of this peculiar life style has always been the black lower class. Thus, once they decided to throw in their lot with the black masses, it was imperative that the black middle classes emphasize and celebrate the lower-class patterns of the community and reject their own middle-class life style. The lower-class bias of the present wave of black activism, therefore, is partly explained in terms of the classificatory system of racial categorization which prevails in the United States. We shall return to this matter later on.

"Money whitens"

The situation is quite different in the other two areas of the hemisphere, Latin America and the Caribbean. In Latin America, the discontinuous denotative system has had a conservative and politically crippling effect on the mass of the non-white population. In the first place, "Black" means primarily what it says in these areas; all other shades between pure somatic Black and White consider themselves separate groups, and are so considered by other groups. Thus, there is no pressure to establish solidarity with other non-white groups—indeed, quite the contrary. There is a fair degree of

mobility in this region, but it is all directed towards "lightening the group," mainly through intermarriage. The expression "money whitens" in fact means two things: First, money whitens in the social sense, or more precisely, in its effect on social perception of color. But more dramatic is the way in which money literally whitens, from one generation to the next. This real change in color derives from the rules of marriage, which invariably operate along the principle of marrying lighter when marrying up. What all this means for the genuinely black or Negro population is that there is a constant, almost literal, creaming off—both within and between generations—of its most talented, ambitious, and motivated members. At the same time, downwardly mobile men invariably marry darker women. An unsuccessful mulatto will often find it much easier to select a darker woman than one of his own color type; and since the mobility of progeny invariably is more strongly determined by the father's status than by the mother's, it is more than likely that the darker progeny (from the father's point of view) will, in turn, find it easier to marry yet further down the color-class ladder. Thus, the pure black group finds itself in the unfortunate situation of having an upward out-migration of its most successful members, and at the same time a downward in-migration of the failures of the other groups. The genetic implications of this weird pattern of mobility would doubtless be fascinating to many, but I, for one, have neither the aptitude nor the taste for exploring this matter. It is enough to say that, purely from the social and political points of view, this is a most undesirable state of affairs for the mass of black people in Latin America.

The great irony of this miserable system of socio-racial mobility is that the Latin American countries, especially Brazil, have prided themselves on their so-called "harmonious" and fluid racial systems. If by harmony we mean a lack of violence and tension, then one must admit that the system is indeed harmonious; but it is the harmony of the damned, of a mute, leaderless people trapped in one of the most ingenious systems of racial and caste oppression that has ever existed. The sad thing is that North American sociologists, anthropologists, and journalists are largely to blame for the perpetuation of this myth. And we can now at least partly begin to understand how North American scholars and observers were deluded by this system. It was clearly a confusion brought about by a clash of two modes of racial categorization: North Americans, with their classificatory system, continued to see all non-Whites as "Blacks" in the American sense of that term, and were therefore highly impressed by finding

Blacks (so defined), in all but the elite segments of the society. It never dawned on them, until recently, that within the context of Brazilian society, with its denotative system of racial categorization, such high-status Blacks were in no way "black" and that a set of attitudes expressed towards a mulatto would simply not apply to a pure Negro.

The West Indies

In the non-Latin West Indies, the situation is again quite different. True, as in the Latin areas, there is the same pattern of marrying lighter with upward social mobility; there is also the same variation of racial perception with varying class positions. However, several factors make this system radically different from that of the Latin areas.

First, these are all overwhelmingly black, or at any rate non-white societies; the white population is nowhere above three per cent of the total population, and is often less than one per cent. Thus, the elaborate class-caste distinctions simply could not exist. There were just not enough people of mixed blood to make it work. Even during the colonial period of the present century, as these societies became more and more complex, and as the occupational structure became more specialized, there were simply not enough brown- and light-skinned people to fill all the lower-middle-class and middle-class vacancies. From as early as the turn of the present century, genuine Blacks were dominating the teaching profession and the lower echelons of the civil service. With political independence, this pattern has gained momentum. While the post-War industrialization has not so far been a success, the economic policies of the new governments of the area have considerably expanded the number of middle- and upper-middle-class vacancies. Combined with the withdrawal of the colonial elite and the establishment of immigration quotas, this has created a situation where elite expansion, if not replacement, can only be filled by upwardly mobile Negroes.

Another important difference in the West Indian situation, of course, is the peculiar political development of these societies. Unlike Latin America and the United States, they remained European colonies until the 1960's (Haiti and the Spanish islands excepted). The attainment of political independence has meant, not just an expansion of middle-class roles and individual black mobility, but also the replacement of the former British governing elite by a new-

ly emerged group of native, predominantly black politicians. However "Marxist" or "Third World" one's analysis of these systems may be, however marginal the control of their economies by these new leaders, and however "bourgeois" the new nationalist elite (matters to which we shall return later), the fact remains that Blacks now control the political system and that this has had significant effects—at least on the social and psychological levels—on these societies. Most West Indians pass their childhoods in communities where they never once come in contact with a white person, or where all the "significant others" of their social universe are black or brown people. Teacher, preacher, lawyer, policeman, judge, civil servant, politician—these are now almost all black or at least non-white.

This is not to say that one grows up in the West Indies without an awareness of Whites. The white presence in the society, however, is mediated almost entirely through the cultural system: It is through such agencies as the school, the church, and the mass media, as well as through the value system acquired from one's parents, that one learns the status and meaning of being white. Thus, in the process of his socialization the West Indian acquires both an extraordinary amount of knowledge about white or European customs and a deep sense of the superiority of these patterns of behavior and of the status of those who share them. But there are few, if any, white role models. European values are reinforced not by the crushing presence of the carriers of the alien "superior" culture, but mainly by fellow black and brown role models who have mastered the art of performing in accordance with the "superior" cultural patterns.

Black culture as peasant culture

The black American is both culturally and socially overwhelmed by the presence of the white majority. The West Indian is only in part culturally-dominated and grows up free of any crushing white physical or social presence. And yet, ironically, it is a fact that today the black West Indian—especially if he is middle-class—has a stronger sense of the "superiority" of white European culture than does his North American counterpart. How do we explain this paradox? Why is it that in spite of a greater African heritage and a more distinctly "black" culture of his own, as well as the shelter of a more exclusively black community, the West Indian is now less "liberated" in his view of European culture?

The paradox is only partly explained by recent developments in the United States. To be sure, the intense and sustained growth of

racial consciousness and solidarity in recent years among black Americans must figure in any explanation of their greater sense of racial and cultural pride. However, a more important factor explaining this paradox is the peculiar bifurcation of values which the West Indian inherits. This cultural bifurcation is typical of all peasant peoples. Like peasants everywhere, the West Indian acquires as his most immediate and workable heritage a subculture which is essentially his own, based on the exigencies of tropical rural life and on surviving elements of the disintegrated cultures of West Africa brought over by his slave ancestors. For all practical purposes, it is this culture which directs and guides his actions: He normally speaks the language of this culture, whether it is the Afro-French Creole of Haiti and Martinique, or the Afro-English Creole of Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad; he worships in the religious cults of this culture—Voodoo in Haiti, Cumina and Pocomania in Jamaica, Shango in Trinidad; he learns and uses the folklore of this culture, its dances, songs, and magic; he learns the love and reverence of the soil and the values necessary to survive on it; he acquires the dogged pride, the aggressiveness, the suspicion and envy, and the biting, earthy humor characteristic of all peasant peoples, but culturally flavored by the remnants of his half-remembered African past.

But like all peasant peoples, his society is only a part of a wider social system which includes the metropolis and the "civilized" people of the city. He has to participate in the economy of this wider social system when he goes to market to sell his cash crops or buy the goods he cannot produce. He has to pay his taxes, go to court, reckon with the bureaucrats. He has to vote, and he is shrewd enough not to pass this by, however skeptical he may be of the city politicians. Like peasants everywhere, he realizes that the urban center also has its own way of life, its own "high-culture"—and he grudgingly concedes the superiority of this culture, as peasants do in China, India, and all other parts of the world where an urban elite must support its higher standard of living with the sweat and surplus of the rural masses. The only difference between the West Indian and other peasants is that the social system of which he is a part extends beyond the boundaries of his own nation—there is not one, but two levels of urban domination: the capital city of his own country and the metropolis of "the mother country" of the empire within which he is a subject. And, similarly, there is not one but two levels of cultural domination—two high-cultures: the creole high-culture of his own country, the carriers of which are mainly the

successful members of his own race, as well as the creolized native Whites; and the pure high-culture of the imperial metropolis, the carriers of which he meets rarely, if at all, in the form of governors, top-level bureaucrats, and capitalists.

Now while this peasant relationship in the West Indies is necessarily more complex than that of other rural folk throughout the world, the fact remains that it is qualitatively no different; in the same way that peasants the world over maintain their own sense of personal and cultural dignity while conceding the "superiority" of the high-culture and paying their respect to those who share it, so does the West Indian. And like peasants the world over, his cultural dualism is in no way abnormal. Many Western social scientists, and quite a few West Indians, their conceptions distorted by their ethnocentric biases and by that crudest of psycho-anthropological concepts—the notion of "internalization"—have argued that the West Indian has an abnormal split modal personality and a negative self-image, as the result of the internalization of two sets of values. This is sheer nonsense. That there are problems in the modal personality of the West Indian, there can be no doubt; but these spring from other sources. The West Indian handles the high-culture of his social universe in much the same way that all other peasant peoples have done since the dawn of the urban revolution. He makes a distinction between private and public values; between his everyday experience and the special occasion; between the intimate "us" and the formal "them." For his ordinary, everyday, intimate, and private existence, he brings into play one complex of cultural patterns, with its own scale of values, its own ideas concerning good and evil, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong. But he must also live in the wider world of which he is a part—the world he learns about mainly in school, but also from his peers. In dealing with this world, he "moves up" to its requirements. He will go to the Church of England or a Roman Catholic Cathedral on Sunday mornings to pay his respects to the state religion and rub shoulders with bureaucrats in much the same way that Chinese peasants worshipped at the state shrine hundreds of years ago; and, like his Chinese counterpart, on Sunday nights he changes from his Sunday-best into something more practical and attends the more emotionally satisfying and communally organic (Afro-West Indian) cult, where he works himself up to an ecstatic pitch of possession by an African "power." Similarly, he will make a desperate effort to learn and speak the Queen's English on all important and formal occasions, whereas ordinarily he speaks his own creole language or dialect.

"Making it" in the high-culture

As long as he remains a peasant, the West Indian faces no problem in conceding the superiority of the urban high-culture; for it is a concession that will hardly affect his own sense of dignity and security, in view of the remoteness of the high-culture and his highly specialized interaction with it.

The situation is different, however, for the upwardly mobile peasant or, more commonly, the son of the peasant who "makes it" in the urban high-culture. The middle-class West Indian continues to accept the superiority of the urban high-culture—indeed, it is precisely those who are most impressed with the superiority of this culture and its values who "make it." Unlike his peasant kinsmen, however, he no longer has the cocoon of the folk culture to fall back into when the culture he adopts begins to assault his dignity. The West Indian who throws in his lot with the high-culture goes through a terrible process of deliberate spiritual exile and re-culturation; for he soon learns that what little knowledge the peasant has of the high-culture is of a highly specialized nature, only enough to get him by in his limited contact with it. He learns, too, that the peasant's grasp of the content of this culture is essentially that of the "bumpkin," the butt of every urban sophisticate's humor during the ritual of the cocktail. Soon the awful truth descends on him that the peasant hasn't really learned anything of the high-culture at all; in his doggedly parochial and creative way he has merely reinterpreted the high-culture in his own terms, so that even those specialized, formal areas of the high-culture which he thought he knew are really more peasant than urban. Thus, cut off from the bosom of the mountain village, he must not only learn a new way of life, but first unlearn an old one. The only thing that keeps him going is the one asset—if indeed it is an asset—he acquired from his peasant upbringing: the respect for, and the deep sense of, the superiority of the metropolitan high-culture.

Most West Indians fail in this extreme cultural effort, but not entirely. To the degree that they fail, they fall from the high promise of the urban grammar schools down the social ladder, like so many drones failing to mate a queen bee, till they settle at their own level of social and cultural competence. Together these "failures" make up the potpourri of semi-peasant, semi-creolized-European statuses that sociologists call the "native middle classes." For those few who pass this first test of re-culturation, a final hurdle remains—the second level of the urban high-culture found in the imperial or ex-imperial metropolis itself, in Holland, France, or Britain.

In the process of learning this final and highest level of the European high-culture, something strange takes place in the experience of the Westernized West Indian. Ironically, it is usually only when he is in the European metropolis that he becomes deeply conscious of his race. This comes about through the simple experience of living in the full glare of the imperial high-culture, through the sudden, overwhelming experience of being in a racial minority, and through the pedestrian but utterly catastrophic encounter with the European working classes. A British or French colonial administrator caught up with his own eccentric version of the white man's burden, the West Indian soon learns, is one thing; a London or Parisian landlady is quite another.

But the social shock of the metropolis, it must be noted, also takes place at precisely the same time that his vision of the world is being broadened, at the same time that he is becoming politically and socially aware. Thus, just when he reaches the peak of cultural achievement, the West Indian intellectual also begins to worry about the problem of national and racial identity. It is at this point that he takes up writing, the peculiar cultural reflex of the West Indian abroad; and in truth, there has never been a West Indian living in the metropolis—suddenly fired with a sense of racial and cultural outrage, shocked at the hypocrisy and lies of imperial trusteeship, betrayed by the myth of the mother country, and yet inspired by it all—who does not fancy his true calling to be that of a writer. From this point, a clear path follows; the need for intellectual emancipation is met through a deliberate agonizing over race and nationality. The West Indies is now seen from the viewpoint of the metropolis as a warped colonial hell-hole which must be liberated. Ideologically, a "Third World" stance follows in which—together with willing (though always more sober and skeptical) African students—the problem of the race all over the world is seen as one. There is a public confession of lack of racial pride, a strident condemnation of the cultural and racial oppression of the West Indies, and often, after a course or two in sociology, grand theories about the split personality of the West Indian peasant and the national neurosis of the West Indian.

Alienation at the top and the bottom

Objectively, of course, this is all totally unrealistic. But since the most articulate West Indians have made a profession of insisting upon its truth, it was not long before the rest of the world, not to

mention West Indians themselves, came to believe it all. Much of the interpretation of the problems of racial identity offered by West Indian intellectuals and scholars is, in truth, largely a projection of these intellectuals' own problems. The peasant West Indian does not have an identity problem; nor does the middle-class West Indian or local elite member who never attempted to acquire the metropolitan high-culture. The local, non-intellectual West Indian bourgeois has no identity problem, for he is thoroughly convinced of the superiority of the local creolized version of the European culture he has adopted, and is well satisfied with things as they are. He is annoyed by people who raise uncomfortable questions about the excessive white domination of the economy and by his own pro-European biases, and prefers not to discuss them. But if forced into a corner, he is likely to admit his biases and to defend both the right of Europeans to control the economy and the superiority of creolized European culture. At the same time he becomes violently offended if accused of having a racial inferiority complex—a complicated, tough-minded, and quite incomprehensible person, the West Indian bourgeois.

There is, however, a third group of West Indians who, curiously, have much in common with the alienated intellectual elite. These are the recently urbanized peasants—the growing mass of aimless, unemployed men and women who live in the cramped hovels of the shanties. This is the only segment of the masses with a sense of loss and of isolation. Having come to the city and been rejected by it, they now spurn this urban culture. As in the case of the elite in the imperial metropolis, their awareness of being cut off from their roots is accompanied by an acute sense of the white domination of the economy. Like the intellectuals abroad, they seek for “dis-alienation” by evolving a mystique of Blackness and a political ideology of black unity. Like the intellectuals, too, they reassert their identity with Africa; indeed, Africa figures as paradise in the recently evolved millenarian religion of the Ras Tafari cult in Jamaica, a religion in which Haile Selassie is God, the Whites are Lucifer and his fallen angels, and Africa is heaven.

We find, then, that the most successful and the least successful of West Indians end up having most in common, in their shared sense of loss and alienation and in their search for a re-identification with Africa. These two groups are also the most race-conscious elements of the society. The remaining peasants, who are most secure in their sense of racial identity and who have the strongest links (in terms of cultural continuities) with Africa, care least about racial consciousness and have little contemporary interest in Africa. The

middle classes, the most thoroughly West Indian of all, spurn racial consciousness and have no sense of historical loss or discontinuity because history does not exist for them—it is truly “bunk”; all that is important is the material present and the images of the future seen and coveted nightly on canned American television programs.

How the United States is different

In contrast, the black American experience is both simpler and more terrifying—simpler in that there is not the same degree of sub-cultural variation, nor the same elaborate love-hate relationship with European culture; and more terrifying in the all-pervasive presence of the white group and white culture, and the crushing sense of racial isolation and despair. Thus, the recent drive towards solidarity and social equality has not been restricted to certain segments of the black population, but concerns the whole group, and the sense of racial solidarity envelops everyone. The more polarized nature of the black American experience, as well as the lack of racial middlemen or of any significant number of Blacks with a vested interest in the American system, has led of necessity to a more militant political consciousness. Black Americans now lead the rest of the hemisphere in the intensity of their commitment to a sense of racial identity and to a black cultural revival.

In addition, the quality of intellectual leadership among Blacks in the United States differs radically from both its Latin American and its West Indian counterparts. The black American intellectual is increasingly an activist; he comes to the world of ideas and reflections often after a lifetime of racial awareness; he frequently is not formally educated, has rejected the higher levels of white culture without attempting to learn it, and, most recently, is often from the ghetto. The West Indian intellectual, as we have seen, becomes racially conscious only after he has entered the elite, and discovers “Blackness” only after he has been irrevocably ensnared by European culture. It is the culture of what later becomes “the enemy” which has radicalized him to the point where he can begin to conceive of it as alien; and, inevitably, it is with the intellectual tools of the alien culture that he seeks to reject it and to reform his own identity—a truly impossible task. Yet it is this impossible pursuit which explains the remarkable yet somehow fey vitality of West Indian art and literature. “Negritude” was a West Indian movement, and its failure was a West Indian failure. Césaire and Damas could only have been West Indians, and so too Fanon, the wandering, tragic apostle of

violence. The same is true for V. S. Naipaul, an Indian version of the West Indian tragedy, whose elegant, obsessive, and ironic condemnation of his West Indian homeland is, no doubt to his own disgust, so very, very West Indian. Then, on another level—one most immediately understandable to black Americans—there is the case of Marcus Garvey, who, even as he led the black American masses towards his bizarre vision of African repatriation and racial consciousness, never once ceased being a West Indian—in his arrogance, in his ignorance and patronage of Africa, in his grand imperial vision regarding that continent, in the poetic absurdity of his politics, in his quiet death in Great Britain (where else?), and, most recently, in his posthumous elevation to the rank of national hero in Jamaica by the very bourgeois elite who, while he lived, spurned him.

II

So far, I have dealt with the enormous differences among Blacks of the New World. I must now move on to those elements which they share, a few of which have already been anticipated.

Historically, Blacks of the New World all had a common area of origin—the West Coast of Africa. While there were numerous social and linguistic groups within this area, recent scholarship strongly supports the view that certain structural and cultural uniformities underlie the outward diversity of the region. Similarly, almost all Blacks, with the exception of those few who came from the Iberian Peninsula in the early 16th century, share a history in which their ancestors went through the shattering horrors of the middle passage, of detribalization and culture loss, and of the shock of re-culturation in the slave camps of the New World.

Now we have already seen that beyond this point, the slave systems of the New World differed considerably in the kinds of environments they presented the slave, and that the response of the Blacks varied with these varying conditions. Socially, culturally, and politically it is the differences rather than the similarities of the Black experience during slavery that are most impressive, differences that speak eloquently of the remarkable ingenuity and adaptability and capacity for survival of the race.

The "Sambo" syndrome

However, there is one respect in which the black response to the sustained horror of enslavement was strikingly similar: the psycho-

logical adjustment to the system. My own position on this matter, let me make it clear at the outset, is diametrically opposed to that of Stanley Elkins in his work, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional Life*. Elkins' thesis, it will be recalled, is the strikingly simple—one might say simple-minded—one that, in response to the peculiar conditions of Southern slavery, the black slave developed a personality syndrome which was fairly accurately reflected in that complex of Southern lore relating to a Negro personality known as "Sambo." He writes:

The characteristics that have been claimed for the type come principally from Southern lore. Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing. His behavior was full of infantile silliness, and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and child-like attachment. It was, indeed, this child-like quality that was the very key to his being. Although the merest hint of Sambo's manhood might fill the Southern breast with scorn, the child 'in his place' could be both exasperating and lovable.

The burden of Elkins' thesis is that there is more than a core of truth in this stereotype. However, being a liberal historian, he rejects racist biological explanations of this phenomenon and, instead, attempts to explain it by a superficial and somewhat confused appeal to various social-psychological theories, and by a plausible, but completely irrelevant analogy with the inmates' experiences in the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany.

Supporting Elkins' major thesis is his view that this Sambo syndrome was a peculiarly American phenomenon: "One searches in vain through the literature of the Latin American slave system for the Sambo of oral tradition, the perpetual child incapable of maturity. How is this to be explained? If Sambo is not a product of race and not simply a product of slavery in the abstract, then it must be related to our own peculiar variety of it." Not content just to create a new intellectual myth of his own—namely, the myth that Southern racist stereotypes of Black modal personality are not a myth—Elkins also totally accepts and adapts to his own purposes the myth of the friendly Latin master.

The truth is that there was something of the "Sambo" in the personality of the Black American slave—but far from being peculiar to the U.S. slave, such traits were found not only in all areas of the New World, but among *all slaves of all times*. No one who has read the classical Greek and Roman plays, especially the tragedies of Euripides, the later comedies of Aristophanes, and the comedies of

Terence and Plautus, can be in any doubt concerning the existence of a "Sambo-like" dimension in the personality of the ancient slave. But the Ancients were neither so foolish, nor so clouded in their perception by half-digested psychological theories, that they did not see through the "Sambo" aspect of their slaves' behavior. The *servus bonus* was always balanced by the *servus callidus*. Moreover, to the realistic Ancient slaveholder, no slave was to be trusted completely, however "good." This view comes across clearly in the very earliest extant Latin work, the *De Agricultura* of the elder Cato. Plato, too, was in no doubt concerning the inherent propensity of the slave to revolt, given the right conditions. But it was Seneca who said it all in one of the most succinct and telling remarks ever made about slavery: "*Quot servi, tot hostes*" ("As many slaves, so many enemies").

Master and slave

The master-slave relationship is best seen as a form of psychic warfare. The Sambo personality syndrome was merely the outward manifestation of one aspect of this warfare. Sambo could, indeed, be exasperating; he could surely be lovable and humorous and lazy. But the clowning, the laziness, the childish adoration were all part of a deadly serious game, a game which the master saw one way and the slave another, but in which the slave always had the upper hand, since this differing perception of their relationship was precisely what he wanted.

In this relationship, if the slave is to salvage his dignity, if he is to preserve an ounce of pride and humanity, he must do two things: First, he must find a way to protect his person from the merciless onslaught of the master; and second, he must, in the act of protecting himself, find a way of hitting back. He must rebel, occasionally openly, but for the most part covertly, subtly—indeed, so subtly that the perfect stroke of rebellion must ideally appear to the master as the ultimate act of submission.

Thus, it is in the slave's interest that the master does not know or care what he thinks or feels. In this non-interdependent relationship, the satisfaction of psychic vengeance comes, not from directly hurting the master, but from knowing that what one feels and thinks is not what one is expected to feel and think—indeed, would be the source of outrage for the master should he have been in a position to know what is going on. It is a private vengeance, one occurring almost involuntarily—the vengeance of the witch, rather than the sorcerer.

It is in this context that one must seek to interpret the slave's behavior, rather than in an appeal to naively ethnocentric psychological theories. Let us take one example: the notorious propensity of the slave to steal. For the slave, stealing is first a symbolic declaration of absurdity. A fellow human being claims you as his own property, seeks to petrify you and make you a thing, a chattel. This is absurd, and the absurdity is revealed not only in the act of stealing but in the universal justification offered for it by all slaves from the dawn of antiquity—that it is not possible for one part of a man's property to steal another part, any more than a man's overheated pot can be accused of stealing his potatoes. In punishing the slave for stealing, the master, by his very brutality, is forced to acknowledge the humanity of the slave; you don't beat your horse for stealing your hay, or your pot for burning your potatoes.

But stealing involves more than a declaration of absurdity and a forced acknowledgement on the master's part of the slave's humanity. It is also an act of insurrection. The master's property is a sacred thing, the *raison d'être* of slavery. Indeed, as Marx has so convincingly argued, the specific individualistic slavery of classical antiquity evolved from the "latent," "general" and sporadic slavery of Oriental despotism only after the emergence of private property.

In claiming the master's property as his own, the slave undermines the whole basis of his social order. It is to stab the foe from inside the belly: property stealing from property. Sometimes this is merely symbolic; often, however, it indeed becomes a threat to the entire economic system. In the Caribbean, for example, masters routinely wrote off 10 per cent of their entire output as a result of the stealing of their slaves, and this 10 per cent was often the critical margin of profit that would have averted financial disaster.

Finally, stealing was a negative assertion of moral worth. It is a curious fact that stealing is one of the most peculiarly human of all activities. Indeed, stealing occurs as a problem only in relatively advanced cultures. In a system based on private property, stealing is the most cardinal of sins. Thus, when the slave steals, steals almost obsessively, he is, more than anything else, openly flaunting the moral code of his master. He dares his master to catch him; he wants to be exposed. The legend of the Negro in the chicken coop has deep moral roots. One does not raid, of all things, a potentially clamorous chicken coop if one does not, in the depth of one's being, secretly wish to be caught red-handed. When the outraged master screams, "You are a thief," he has given away everything, for implied in his accusation is a critical judgment: You are a moral being who is

responsible for your act. Anger and its sequel of brutality and punishment expose the moral worth of the slave, even as they destroy his flesh. It is the final stroke of absurdity and moral affirmation: The master who insists that his slave is property beats and depreciates his own property for behaving in precisely the way property and brute stock is expected to behave.

In this same manner, it is possible to explain all those behavioral traits of the slave in his relationship with his master referred to as the "Sambo" complex in the United States or "Quashi" in Jamaica. It is also easy to show that such traits are to be found among all slaves of the New World. But enough has been said to show the naivety of the Elkins' thesis, as well as to give some indication of the true quality of one area of the slave experience—an experience which, to repeat, all Blacks in the New World shared.

A people without a past

The question we must now ask is: What exactly is the significance of this shared past for Blacks today? There are two responses to this question—one is philosophical in nature, the other sociological. The philosophical answer makes a certain assumption about the relationships between the past and the present; it assumes that there is always a link between the two. This assumption has deep roots in the culture of almost all peoples. For a group such as the Jews, this link between past and present is perhaps the most important single factor sustaining its identity. To be a Jew, writes Daniel Bell, "is to be part of a community woven by memory."

Now, this view has a powerful hold on most men. On one level, Blacks would seem to be no exception—certainly no black intellectual would deny the view that black people are above all a "community woven by memory." Were this true on all levels, we could leave the matter here; certainly it would fit nicely with our previous analysis of the common experience of slavery. But, alas, we cannot leave the matter here. For even though Bell's statement would be meaningful to all black *intellectuals*, it is not at all certain that it would be of any significance to all black *people* in the Americas—indeed, to any black person of the Hemisphere other than the few who happen to be intellectuals.

It is only on the normative and self-conscious level that a black intellectual can honestly accept the historical linkage of past and present, with its gift of a contemporary sense of community woven by this linkage. This is what he would like to be the case; but it is

not the case. To gloss over this important point is to miss one of the most unique and tragic features of the black experience in the New World. Blacks do not have a sense of the past. All that exists is a need—and the articulation of this need on the part of black intellectuals—to have a sense of the past. It is primarily for this reason that the study of Black History has acquired such considerable significance among Blacks today. But History is no substitute for history. To know the facts of one's past is not to be a part of that past. One is only a part of one's past when one inherits a tradition in which being a part of the past has always been a part of the past.

The black man of the New World lost his sense of the past when he was torn from the soil of Africa. He lost it as he lost the cult of the dead, the myths, the beliefs, the whole fabric of life which sustained him up to that fateful point when the middle passage began.

But, ironically, in recognizing this fact, we have come upon another basis of unity among New World Blacks: the terrible experience of a shared lacuna. The black man in the New World is unique among all men in not having a sense of the historic. A terrible wall of silence stands between him and his history. Of course, I am not saying that he is without a past in the literal sense of this term. Such a statement would be an absurdity, since everything has a past. What I am saying is that his past has no meaning for the present. The Blacks of the diaspora sit on the surface of time like deaf men staring vacantly down at the orchestral pit of a great, deep hall. They have learned (no doubt from their intellectuals) that the music of their past has been performed. Perhaps they might even be able to read the score. But between the past and the present, the performers and the onlookers, the living and the dead, there can be no concert. Nor will there ever be one.

Is there a legacy of slavery?

If this is so, does it mean that the study of the black past is of purely academic interest? Not quite. If the past is largely meaningless symbolically, it can nonetheless remain significant sociologically, to the extent that the past experience of the Blacks explains their present position. There can be little doubt that, in specific black communities, the past is of overwhelming significance in explaining the nature of present social organization. However, our concern at the moment is not with the specific experiences per se, but with the extent to which the common historical experiences of the Blacks of the diaspora account at present for shared qualities among them.

In other words, is there, as is so often claimed, a legacy of slavery among all New World Blacks?

The assumption of such a legacy is found in almost every work that has been written on New World Blacks, yet it has never been shown to be valid. There is no a priori necessity that, because a people has experienced slavery, they will all share a legacy of slavery. Indeed, a close examination of the facts indicates that this assumption is often, if not always, false. For example, sociologists and anthropologists who have studied the black lower-class family in the Caribbean have all claimed that the modern unstable matrifocal family unit found in many segments of these populations—especially on the plantations and in the urban shanty-town belts—is a direct legacy of slavery, reinforced by modern socio-economic factors. Yet my own recent study of lower-class familial patterns in Jamaica clearly indicates that, in spite of striking formal correspondences, there is no logical or substantive link between the modern situation and that which existed in the past; that indeed there was a clear break with the slave tradition in the peasant subculture, and that the modern crisis is entirely the creation of modern socio-economic factors. I suspect that the same may well be true for the Negro lower-class family in the United States. It is highly questionable whether there is any continuity between the patterns of life in today's ghetto and on Southern plantations of the last century—in spite of an almost universal assumption that there is such a link.

Even if it were true that there were continuities between the epoch of slavery and the present, there is no reason to believe that the slave tradition developed and was adapted in the same way to the highly varied conditions under which Blacks now live. I won't go so far as to say that there are no elements of the slave experience which would justify speaking of a shared experience of the legacy of slavery; however, I know of few such cases. We must conclude, therefore, that while certain critical features of the slave experience were shared by all who suffered it, this experience has little relevance for the present, either as a collectively shared memory binding all the black peoples of the Americas, or as a socio-historical continuity shared by them all. Of course, this is not to deny the relevance of this experience in the development of specific black communities.

Remnants of African culture

There is, however, one important area of the black past which does have meaning for black communities throughout the Americas

today. This concerns the survivals of the African cultures from which the slaves came. These fragments, reinterpretations, remnants, syncretisms of the half-remembered, disintegrated African cultural past survive today in varying degrees throughout the New World, and until recently constituted the most important shared features of black life.

If we were to rank all of the black communities in the New World in terms of the degree of survival within them of African cultural fragments, at the top of the list, we might find some community such as the Bush Negroes of Surinam, while the Blacks of the United States would undoubtedly come out at the bottom. The easiest way, then, of isolating the least common denominators of African culture shared by all New World black peoples is simply to examine the United States black community. True, Herskovits, in his well-known work on the subject, tried to make the case for a considerable number of such survivals in black American culture. His conclusions, however, have never been taken seriously by students of Afro-American life. It is both ironical and unfortunate that today, long after his conclusions have been rejected by serious scholars, they should now have been revived by black nationalists and pseudo-intellectuals of the black movement who are only too willing to accept at face value Herskovits' quite untenable views on this question.

Briefly, those least common denominators of African culture shared by all Blacks in the Americas are to be found mainly in the evaluative and expressive components of their culture. In traditional African societies, high value was placed on certain central institutions, such as religion, kinship, the rituals associated with death, dance, song, and folklore. Throughout the New World, these high valuations continued to survive, although the content of the institutions so valued changed radically. Thus, one may see the relatively high value still placed on religion by black Americans as an African survival—though not, of course, their actual religious practices and beliefs, which are either wholly Christian or peculiarly black American. Similarly, the emphasis on death and the ritual of death is a survival of an African valuation, one found among Blacks throughout the New World—although, here again, the content of these rituals varies from one part of the New World to the next. Some communities retain bits and pieces of aboriginal African ritual, especially in Brazil and the West Indies; elsewhere such rituals are wholly European in nature. Blacks throughout the New World also seem to value the spoken word in a special way that can reasonably be described as characteristically African. There is an intensely oral quality in the

communicative patterns of the Blacks of the Americas, a love of talk or "rapping" for its own sake which, while undoubtedly shared with other groups, is distinctive in its emphasis and social import among Blacks. Blacks throughout the New World, far more than other groups, also typically place a high value upon dance and music and song. For the average Black person music has a social and emotional significance which strikes more deeply at the heart of a wider area of life.

In addition to the common retention of these valuations, a case can be made for certain common substantive survivals in some of the institutions and life styles of Blacks throughout the Americas. Thus, all over the Americas, black music and dance has certain underlying shared qualities which clearly indicate an African origin, even where the forms differ as widely as the blues, the calypso, the samba, and the Jamaican reggae. Lomax has argued fairly convincingly that, as far as the folk song is concerned, all black music in the Americas must be seen as part of a common cultural pattern with West African music.

More controversial is the view that black dialects or creole languages throughout the Americas share certain common linguistic features. There is certainly no doubt on this matter concerning the creole languages in the Caribbean and South America; the problem really is whether there are any linguistic least common denominators which black American speech shares with these creole languages. Certainly in a few isolated black communities, such as the Gulla of the sea islands and Louisiana, there are certain linguistic features which are shared with other black communities in the New World; but for the mass of black Americans, and especially urban Blacks, it is doubtful whether their speech patterns still retain any significant linguistic continuity with Africa.

Finally, black folklore, insofar as it remains a constituent element of black life, may be seen as another important least common denominator. The trickster-hero cycle of tales found in West Africa survives throughout the New World, the only remnant of the African folkloristic tradition to do so. It survived, first, because it was functionally most adaptable—both psychologically and socially—to the needs of plantation and rural life in the post-emancipation New World. A folk cycle in which a small animal—a rabbit, spider, or tortoise—survives by outwitting the larger animals of his world obviously has high survival potential in any condition of oppression. It seems, however, that the moral significance of these tales changed radically in the New World. In the West African versions, the trick-

ster-hero nearly always outsmarts himself by his trickery; it is he who is the buffoon, and the moral of the tale invariably preaches the evils of trickery, dishonesty, and cunning. But in almost all New World black communities, trickery and cunning became virtues to be admired and inculcated, not evils to be admonished. Thus, we find throughout the New World a dramatic ethical transformation in which the trickster-hero wins out in the end, and his adversaries, however outrageously tricked or however dishonestly outwitted, nonetheless remain the butt of the tale's humor.

To sum up, then, we find that in the evaluative and expressive areas of their culture, Blacks throughout the New World, in a limited way, share certain common remnants of the aboriginal West African cultures. At the same time, however, we must point out that these remnants constitute only a small segment of the total culture of any black community in the New World; and, more important, *it is precisely these cultural features which have been the first to disappear as a result of modern developments among Blacks in the New World.*

"Soul"

There is another way in which the black communities of the New World may be said to possess a certain underlying unity. This is, quite simply, in their growing commitment to the idea of unity. A strong case may be made for this view on the grounds that merely thinking themselves to be a group is enough to make a people a group. A significant element of all group identity and cohesiveness is what may be called the will to community. People often make groups by willing them; the content—norms, values and beliefs—then evolves afterwards as a result of continued mutual association. In the beginning, all that is necessary is the will to exist, reinforced by what may be called the myth of cultural unity. Thus, if Blacks believe themselves to be a single group, as they increasingly do, and if a myth of cultural unity exists, as it certainly does, then in one important sense a basis of group identity has been forged. Of course, here the myth of cultural unity is not entirely a myth, as was recognized in our earlier enumeration of the least common denominators of black culture in the Americas; these elements, however, are now important mainly in the role of sustaining the growing myth of cultural cohesiveness. They constitute the core of truth which gives some weight and support to the claims of unity made by intellectuals and leaders in black communities throughout the New World.

The myth of black cultural unity has a focal concept which has been growing in intensity ever since the 1920's: This is the concept of black "soul"—the view that Blacks, by the simple fact of being black, possess a certain quality of being, a certain way of relating to the world and to living, which either defies explanation or is something that only Blacks can be expected to understand. In its most sophisticated form, the concept of "soul" expands into a form of racial mysticism, best exemplified by the West Indian literary movement known as "Negritude" and by certain artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. But whatever form it takes, it is a notion that has rapidly caught on among the Blacks of the Americas, and it informs the growing self-awareness of these groups that they are part of a single and distinctive people.

III

So far, we have been looking at black life in the Americas in a fairly static way, isolating those features which Blacks share, or those more important areas in which they differ from each other. At this point, I want to examine the situation dynamically, concentrating on certain common trends in the black community. These are more marked in some areas, especially the United States, than in others, such as Latin America; but even in the most backward areas, the signs are clear that certain developments are inevitable. These trends are similar because of a growing convergence of certain determining structural factors in the environment of all New World Blacks. Blacks, in short, have most in common in their future, in their largely predictable fate.

These converging trends are emerging on two levels—the intranational and the international. I shall begin by examining these processes intranationally in the light of the U.S. black experience, since this case presents the most advanced stage of the unfolding patterns which I hope to examine, and, as such, offers an image of the future of other black communities in the New World. I shall then examine these other black communities, showing parallel developments, or the early indicators of such developments.

Migration to the North

Seen dynamically, the U.S. black community during the present century has developed in three stages, each an immediate response to certain critical changes in the structural bases of black life in the

United States. The first stage began with the tremendous increase in the demand for labor during and immediately after the First World War, accompanied by the temporary collapse of Southern agriculture occasioned by the boll weevil epidemic and a succession of poor crops. This stimulated the first major movement of Blacks from the rural South to the industrial North. For Blacks, the critical fact during this time was the simple act of migration. A migrant, of necessity, is always a more socially and personally conscious individual. In his classic work on the migration of European peasants to the United States, Oscar Handlin writes: "Immigration has transformed the entire economic world within which the peasants had formerly lived. From surface forms to innermost functionings, the change was complete—a new setting, new activities, and new meanings forced the newcomers into radically new roles as producers and consumers of goods." In this respect, the experience of the Southern black migrant coming to the North was identical with that of the white peasant coming from Europe; but in all other respects the experiences and responses differed radically. For the Southern Black was still less than a full generation from the horrors of slavery. His was not an uprooting since no roots had been possible in the Southern wilderness from which he fled; his migration was not induced by the pull and hope of a better life, but largely by the push of the chain-gang, the lynch mob, and the boll weevil. And however harsh and agonizing was the experience of the European migrant, however tragic the individual agonies of a world lost and of families broken, the white migrant could still hope, still nourish his dreams. The world he met, if chaotic and strange, was nonetheless ultimately sympathetic, a world which, if not he, at least his children could hope to master. Thus, the white peasant migrant could react conservatively to his new setting, both because he had the essential ingredients of a religious and cultural tradition which he could fall back upon, and because a conservative posture best suited his own emotional and social ends.

Not so the black migrant. For him, too, an ordered pattern of life had been lost, but it had been the order of tyranny. The world he now found was a lonely and strange one also, but to loneliness and racial isolation he was no stranger; and after the sustained horror of the familiar, anything strange was welcome. The critical element in the early Northern migration of the Blacks was their breaking away from the crippling impotence of the plantation and the sharecropping farms and small towns of the South. The South had disabled not just the body but the soul; a race lived together but did not

—could not—know itself. The South had developed socially and culturally mediated techniques of thought control and surveillance to too fine a degree for any kind of black racial solidarity to take place. This ruthlessly efficient police state did not need a specialized policing agency, for every poor white person had a vested emotional and social interest in setting himself up as a policeman; nor did it need a specialized agency of propaganda and thought control, since the assumption of racial superiority was instilled in every white citizen and expressed in every inter-racial contact.

In the North of the 1920's, however, the Blacks found a world still unsophisticated in the techniques of racial exploitation, even if it had already lost its racial innocence—a world as yet untroubled by the urban problem, too busy with its own wars and later its own prosperity to worry over a straggling band of strange-looking rustics. Thus, for the first time, the black American found it possible to look inward upon himself; this had never been possible in the South, where the daily task of sheer survival overwhelmed all of his psychic and social energies. For individual and group introspection to take place, a breather from the daily struggle to survive was necessary, and such a breather—meager, grudging, hard won, but a breather nonetheless—the North offered.

The culmination of this racial introspection had two dimensions: On the bourgeois level, it resulted in the first stirrings of organized racial protest, the appeal to white morality and law, and pacific demands for integration, equal rights, and full participation in the total fabric of the society. On the level of the newly emerged urban masses, however, such demands were meaningless. From the very earliest stage, the black urban masses had an instinctive grasp of the situation which made them highly skeptical of any possibility of integration in the society as it then existed. Rejecting integration, they had only two alternatives: a revolutionary attempt to change the system or a withdrawal from it. At that time it was clear to all that the first alternative was suicidal. Instead, the newly emerged urban lower classes chose a strategy well-trodden by similarly oppressed groups during their first phase of mass mobilization and political awareness—the pursuit of the millennium. In the United States, a somewhat secularized form of Black millenarianism crystallized into the Marcus Garvey movement, with its view of Africa as the promised land, and its goal of mass emigration back to the lost continent.

Although the paths chosen by the bourgeois intellectuals and the urban masses were different, their achievements were ultimately

similar. Neither group made any significant dent in the social order; neither attained any significant gains for its members, and each was as unrealistic as the other. What both did achieve was a heightened racial consciousness as an oppressed group and a sense of outrage at their situation. Without further underlying structural changes in the black community, however, nothing further could have been achieved.

Urbanization and the ghetto

The second stage in modern black history came about with the temporary collapse of the capitalist economy in the United States during the 1930's. The total depression in the South, which was the region hardest hit in many respects, jolted even the most apathetic Southern rural Blacks, and right after the depression they began anew on a massive scale the migration to the Northern cities. What was originally only a stream now became a flood. Within a matter of years, the entire demographic structure of the black population changed from predominantly rural to irrevocably urban. Thus, in 1910, only 27.4 per cent of the black population was urban (compared with a white figure of 48.7 per cent). In 1920, the proportion had moved to 30 per cent (compared to 53.4 per cent for Whites); by 1930, it had reached 43.7 per cent; by 1950, 62.4 per cent; and by 1960, fully 73.2 per cent of the black population was urban, now well ahead of the white population, whose urban segment had climbed at a much slower rate to 65.5 per cent. This startling demographic change, originally stimulated by economic forces, had now acquired a momentum of its own; by the 1980's, the black population should be almost entirely urban. The result has been the urban ghetto, with all its familiar horrors.

The urbanization and ghetto-ization of the Blacks was a movement which U.S. society could not continue to neglect, but at the same time, it was a movement that the society could not absorb or resolve. The singular tragedy of the black man's massive flight to the cities is that he arrived there at a time when the economy of the United States had grown to the stage where it no longer had much use for a large *lumpenproletariat*. Ghetto-ization was a consequence of growing economic redundancy; what is worse, it contributed to a vicious circle. Already functionally irrelevant to an economic system heading towards its post-industrial phase, the Blacks found themselves segregated into slums which were ideal environments for the creation of a race of socially and occupation-

ally incapacitated "lumpen", thus further reinforcing their irrelevance. It is at this point that awareness turned to anger, hate, and rage. The era of the urban riots began.

The Negro middle classes, which, until this time, had remained fairly clear of the urban masses, now found it in their best interests to identify with them. Why? Simply because the response of the power structure to the urban crisis made such an identification necessary for their own economic and social interests. All that the system could offer were doomed reformist measures and palliatives—the endless plans and projects of the "Great Society" and the "War on Poverty." But, as has now become patently clear, the only group to benefit from all this is the army of middle-class bureaucrats and the lower-class hustlers who man these spurious programs, and those middle-class Blacks who are co-opted into elite roles for mainly cosmetic purposes: the powerless new vice-presidents for community affairs in the business sector, the consultants and junior executives in the public sector, and the professors of Afro-American studies in the academic sector. In the meantime, of course, the situation in the ghettos grows worse. The middle classes and the rest of the leadership, as racial middle men, now have a vested interest in the anger of the masses—the louder the masses scream and the more cities they burn, the higher the salaries and the greater the number of special token jobs created for the middle men.

The culture of poverty

It is at this point that the third stage in the unfolding of the black community takes place. All remedial action having failed to halt the growing restlessness and anger of the black masses, white capital and its supporters now flee to the suburbs, leaving the empty husk of the inner cities to the turbulent black "lumpen" and their impotent leaders. This stage has just begun, of course; here and there the urban Whites are putting up a last ditch stand to save the central cities, but it is only a matter of time before they all leave. For black violence has taken a new turn. Gone now are the epic riots which at least had some meaning and reflected a certain hope, even in their flames, since they were at least spontaneous group expressions of outrage at clearly recognizable deprivations. The mood of violence has shifted from the collective to the individual level, from the socially understandable to the level of private criminality. As the screws of the vicious circle of the ghetto tighten, as hope dies, a new mood emerges. It is every man for himself. Each seeks his sal-

vation where he can find it, when he can get it, and by whatever means. Anger, hate, outrage, and violence have lost their organic integration, have now, in Durkheimian terms, become mechanical. The integration of the black masses lies in the sameness of each individual's despair, not in their interdependence. The growing proletarianization and ghetto-ization of the group leads to its increasing homogenization, and its increasing homogenization leads to its increasing atomization. From the misery, sameness, and atomization of the slave plantation, the Blacks of the ghettos are coming full circle to the misery, sameness, and atomization of the urban slums. There are, however, three critical structural differences in the present situation: First, the society is now a post-industrial one, not an agricultural society; second, the Blacks are economically irrelevant to this new society; and third, there is now a black leadership class.

To further protect their own interests, these black leaders now reinforce the theme of racial pride and dignity which, of course, is perfectly unobjectionable even to the most conservative of Whites. And, at the same time, they seek to identify in life style with the black masses. Thus, instead of interpreting the ghetto as a corrupting influence, black leadership has perversely set about condemning sociologists and all others who attempt to delineate the circle of pathology in the slums; instead, they not only idealize this life style but attempt to proletarianize themselves, to think and talk and act "black." Black culture in the United States, then, is rapidly losing its diversity; regional differences are lost in the growing sameness of the urban ghetto, and class differences disappear in the desperate self-proletarianization of the middle-class leadership. The latter process is further reinforced by the fact that, in recent years, the leadership of the black community has increasingly come from the ghettos, and, as such, is lower-class in origin.

In all this, there is yet another striking irony: A closer examination of the urban lower class reveals that there is no longer anything ethnic about its culture. Its institutions almost all stem from the imperatives of urban poverty. The "black family," "black speech," "black life styles," are in no way distinctively black, but are simply lower-class. To the extent that the middle class and those who are potentially upward-mobile identify with the masses, to that extent they proletarianize themselves. Thus, at the very point where Blacks in the United States approach a kind of cultural identity, they cease to be black in any meaningful cultural sense of that term. The culture of poverty, which is a poverty of culture, is fast becoming the lot of all black Americans, whether through necessity or by choice;

black culture increasingly is "black" only in name. In sharing, at last, a common way of life on a level of self-awareness, black Americans cease to share a peculiarly black way of life. This development, of course, is still to be fully realized. There remain vestiges of ethnicity in the black community, but such qualities seem fated to disappear soon. The trend is strong and seemingly irreversible.

Parallel developments in the Caribbean

What is rapidly unfolding in the United States is also emerging among the black people in the rest of the Americas. Both in the Caribbean and Latin America, with the latter lagging by a few decades for reasons discussed earlier, black populations are moving in huge numbers and at ever growing rates to the urban slums and shanties. As in the United States, this urban shift has been stimulated in the first place by basic economic changes—in the case of the Caribbean, the economic dislocations created by the Depression and the Second World War, and the collapse of the imperial economic system.

In the Caribbean also, this first stage was marked by growing racial consciousness, reflected particularly in riots on the plantations and in urban areas during the late 1930's and early 1940's. Since Blacks constitute the majority in West Indian societies, the middle classes, who had formerly remained aloof, were able to transform this early racial awakening into a form of national consciousness. The imperial masters responded with a package of reforms, beginning with social welfare schemes and adult suffrage, and culminating in political independence. However, the only group to have gained substantially from these reforms was the newly emerged and established middle classes.

Within recent years, the accumulated impact of soil erosion, rural overpopulation, and the false attraction of the city (partly attributable to the pitiable attempts at modernization by the new elite) has led to a massive flight of the peasant population to the major cities of the region. As the U.S. Blacks had fled the rural South, so now the peasant masses of the Caribbean flee the barren rural hills and plantations. What in America became the Northern ghettos are, in the Caribbean and in Latin America, the shanty towns and *favelas* of the coastal cities. In the Caribbean, the trend was halted temporarily when a new outlet for rural migrants was found in the cities of Britain, where black ghettos such as Brixton quickly emerged. In 1962, however, the British government put an end to this immi-

gration. Thus, the cities of the Caribbean once again have had to absorb the full impact of the migration of the rural and lower classes.

The relentless push to the cities has now attained the same critical level which the black American migration reached during and after the War years. Although they are all still poor, there are already several Caribbean societies which are more urban than rural. Within the next two decades, almost all the major societies of the region will be overwhelmingly urban, at a time when the prospect of any breakthrough in terms of industrialization still seems remote. For the newly emerged bourgeois nationalist elite, the urban drift has not only created vast, insoluble social and economic problems, but has threatened to topple the regimes they now control.

The second stage has already arrived in several of the larger islands of the Caribbean. In places such as Trinidad and Jamaica, all the well-known problems of rising expectations, social and economic frustrations, urban poverty, racial and class tensions are rapidly converging and building up to a major structural crisis.

What in the United States is a minority problem is here a national problem. The black and light-skinned elite has responded with neo-colonial economic strategies. Foreign investors are enticed by tax holidays, market concessions, monopoly rights, and the whole package of "incentives" and national auctioning which West Indian economists refer to disdainfully as "development by invitation." These plans of development, of course, have all failed, as they failed even in Puerto Rico and Ireland, with their far more favorable conditions of growth. The black bourgeois elite, caught between the unrest of its growing urban masses and the sensitivity and edginess of its foreign investors, has responded with a curious form of cultural nationalism—on the one hand, appealing to the nonexistent national pride of the masses, and, on the other hand, projecting an image of racial and political stability to foreign investors. The favorite way of characterizing this precarious ideology is by the motto, "Out of many, one people." But of course, no one believes this any more. Not the restless, dispossessed, urbanized semi-peasants who recently rioted in Trinidad and are constantly on the point of violence in Jamaica; not the wary foreign capitalists who are pulling out or refusing to accept the generous invitations and conditions of the area's development boards; and certainly not the black or light-skinned elite itself, which nervously barricades itself in iron-grilled suburban homes.

Political independence and the attempts at modernization have certainly changed the Caribbean, but far from improving conditions,

they have succeeded only in urbanizing and proletarianizing the mass of the population. As a result, the same socio-cultural consequences are in the process of unfolding as in the United States. The urban poor of the shanties are becoming increasingly homogenized and atomized; not only are insular differences breaking down in the slums of the different islands, but the Blacks of the growing urban belts of the Caribbean are increasingly acquiring the same socio-cultural patterns as the urban Blacks of the United States. Poverty is no respecter of national boundaries. The remnants of Afro-Caribbean culture are giving way to the culture of poverty, with all its deadening sameness. The family collapses; the personal dignity of the peasant disappears, and it is replaced by the fatalism and aggressiveness of the urban masses. The hustler replaces the shrewd farmer; unemployment becomes a way of life; crime and delinquency run rampant. It is Harlem and Roxbury and Newark all over again; only here the trend is a national one, and the setting a tropical "paradise."

The stage of economic irrelevance

It might be contended that because Blacks in the West Indies constitute whole nations, the problem must somehow be different. It used to be, as we have already argued, and in many respects it still is. But the relevant differences are diminishing in significance, for the signs are that the islands, especially the larger ones, are rapidly moving towards the third stage in the process I have outlined—the stage of economic irrelevance.

What is true of the black American minority on the intranational level is increasingly becoming true of these island societies on the international level. As the Western economies in which they developed move towards their post-imperial phase, the island economies—due to their small size, their lack of resources, the hopeless terms of trade under which they have to operate, the neo-colonial nature of their plans of development, and their complete domination by the United States, Canada, and the former colonial powers—have simply ceased to be viable and are hopelessly uncompetitive in the community of nations. As black labor in the United States was once highly relevant to an important segment of the country's economy, so the West Indian economies, based on the labor of the black slaves, were once all-important to the imperialist economies of Europe. It is a fact that two centuries ago France was prepared to give up the whole of Canada for one tiny island (Martinique) in the Caribbean.

Indeed, it has been argued that the industrial development of Britain was made possible largely by the capital accumulated from profits on the West Indian trade—from the “black cargoes” of the slave trade and the “brown gold” of sugar produced on the slave plantations. But in the highly automated and competitive post-imperial world of today, the labor of the unskilled black masses of the Caribbean has become irrelevant. Even the United States now produces sugar—for centuries considered the “natural” product of the West Indies—cheaper than they do in the islands.

Finally, one finds early signs of the third stage in the beginnings of a flight of imperial capital, accompanied by ever growing frustrations, violence, and repression. Interestingly, there are early signs, too, of the emergence of a new counter-elite—either from among the younger generation of the old non-white elite or from among the more literate section of the urban masses—who not only challenge the rule of the present nationalist leaders, but idealize and romanticize the way of life of the urban masses and interpret this way of life in black nationalist terms. In other words, there is the same confusion of lower-class culture with black culture. What is more, the diffusion of U.S. black power ideology through the powerful U.S. international media network has created an extraneous cultural reinforcement of this self-proletarianization process on the part of the new counter-elite. By seizing upon the self-deceptive fantasies of black nationalism, American style, the young, frustrated potential leaders of the Caribbean have already carried their own process of proletarianization to a stage well beyond what would have naturally evolved at this point. In this respect too, history has come full circle. We have already seen how, at an earlier period, the racial consciousness of the black American masses was initiated by a West Indian, Marcus Garvey. The West Indian peasant, with his greater sense of racial and personal dignity, when placed in the setting of the emerging American ghetto, naturally responded with a greater sense of outrage and was in a better position at that time to assume leadership of the U.S. black masses. Today, as their condition approaches that of the U.S. ghetto, albeit on a national scale, the dispossessed peasants and lower classes of the shanties in the Caribbean rely upon the ideological leadership of the black Americans.

The fate of New World Blacks

To summarize then, the entire black population of the Americas is growing alike in its urban poverty, its “lumpenization,” and its ghetto

environment; in the decline of its specific cultural heritage and in the emergence of a universal culture of poverty; and in the desperate proletarianization and self-deceptive black power ideology of its increasingly reckless and helpless leaders. If this interpretation is correct, we must conclude that the fate of the Blacks in the Americas is, indeed, bleak. The chances of their disappearance are not remote. The dismal alternatives confronting them seem to be a quick, violent death brought about by a suicidal attempt at revolt, or a prolonged death through redundancy and attrition. The only way in which this awful fate can be avoided is by both a radical reordering of American priorities and an equally radical change in the philosophical and cultural orientation of black Americans and their leaders.

Black American leadership must immediately recognize what is rapidly becoming an accomplished fact—that the black masses no longer form an ethnic group but a redundant *lumpenproletariat*. It must cease to interpret the situation in racial terms and must begin to take account of the underlying class realities. Having made this recognition, black leadership must then take the initiative in bringing about a change in American domestic and foreign policies. The only way it can succeed in doing this is by de-ethnicating and acting in concert with its natural class allies—those poor Whites, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and downwardly mobile Latins who not long from now will also face the humiliation of post-industrial redundancy. The de-ethnication of American society is an awesome, seemingly impossible task; hence our pessimism. But it is the only way out; and it is not just the fate of black Americans that depends upon it, but that of millions of Blacks in the Caribbean and Latin America as well. An America with changed domestic priorities is almost certainly an America with changed international priorities; the former, indeed, is the *sine qua non* of the latter. The Caribbean ex-colonies are incapable of transforming themselves whatever the nature of their leadership—whether bourgeois nationalist, black power nationalist, or Castroite socialist. Black Americans, as the most significant body of black people in the Americas and as the group nearest to the center of both hemispheric and world power, must act, not only in their own interests, but in the interests of fellow Blacks throughout the hemisphere.

Beyond "Blackness"

Bleak though the situation is, it also presents an awesome opportunity. The Blacks of the Americas now face a historic choice. To

survive, they must abandon their search for a past, must indeed recognize that they lack all claims to a distinctive cultural heritage, and that the path ahead lies not in myth making and in historical reconstruction, which are always doomed to failure, but in accepting the epic challenge of their reality. Black Americans can be the first group in the history of mankind who transcend the confines and grip of a cultural heritage, and in so doing, they can become the most truly modern of all peoples—a people who feel no need for a nation, a past, or a particularistic culture, but whose style of life will be a rational and continually changing adaptation to the exigencies of survival, at the highest possible level of existence.

The great irony, of course, is that, should Blacks succeed in doing this, they will indeed make themselves unique. In a world where every group still strives to be unique, to preserve its past, and to hold sacred the principle of continuity, a group which discards uniqueness and spurns tradition will by that very fact become unique in a truly revolutionary way. For it is clear that the next great cultural advance of mankind will involve the rejection of tradition and of particularism.

I do not think that I am the first person to have this vision of what is at once the black race's only path to survival and the possible basis of its future distinction. For it seems to me that this is precisely the message of Césaire's great poem, "Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal." Most critics have failed to recognize the ultimate thrust of the poem's dialectic. Césaire rejects white civilization because of its inherent parochialism and racism by retreating into a mythical black "essence," a symbolic Africa of the soul—his "negritude." But he does not end here, as most black critics seem to think; for "Blackness," having served its purpose, also is finally rejected for the same reason that white culture—indeed all parochial culture—is rejected. In transcending his "Blackness," the black man of the New World distinguishes himself by creating a new New World; and he is able to do this precisely because he is among "ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé." We can now understand the true import of the poem's most celebrated and, I contend, most misunderstood lines:

Eia pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien exploré
 pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien dompté
 mais ils s'abandonnent, saisis, à l'essence de toute chose
 ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement
 de toute chose
 insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du monde

véritablement les fils aînés du monde
 poreux à tous les souffles du monde
 aire fraternelle de tous les souffles du monde
 lit sans drain de toutes les eaux du monde
 étincelle du feu sacré du monde
 chair de la chair du monde palpitant du mouve-
 ment même du monde!

(Hurrah for those who have never invented anything
 for those who have never explored anything
 for those who have never tamed anything
 but they give themselves up, entranced, to the essence of all things
 ignorant of surfaces, but gripped by the movement of all things
 not caring to tame, but playing the game of the world
 truly the elder sons of the earth
 open to all the breaths of the world
 brotherly space for the breaths of the world
 river-bed without drainage for all the waters of the world
 spark of the sacred fire of the world
 flesh of the flesh of the world alive with the movement
 of the world!)¹

It may be objected that this is too monumental a task for any group to take on, especially one as disadvantaged as the Blacks of the New World diaspora. My reply to this is twofold: First, we might as well take on the task, since we have already made the major sacrifice necessary for its performance—the loss of our history. Second, we might as well try to do it, for otherwise we are lost.

¹ Translated by G. R. Coulthard in *Race and Color in Caribbean Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 59).