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**Beyond The Civil Rights Agenda for Blacks:  
Principles for the Pursuit of  
Economic and Community Development**

by  
James Jennings

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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This paper is based on a presentation made at a forum sponsored by the African-American Law and Policy Report, University of California at Berkeley, in January 1994. James Jennings is Professor of Political Science and Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston.



## Foreword

Through this series of publications the William Monroe Trotter Institute is making available copies of selected reports and papers from research conducted at the Institute. The analyses and conclusions contained in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions or endorsement of the Trotter Institute or the University of Massachusetts.

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This paper, *Beyond the Civil Rights Agenda for Blacks*, is based on the Black Agenda Project, a 6-year effort devoted to elevating community-based discourse on political, economic, and social challenges facing blacks in Boston and Massachusetts.

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Today the black community continues to face serious community-wide social and economic crisis. Blacks, compared to whites, are characterized by persistently greater levels of poverty, unemployment, inferior and inadequate housing, and health problems including high levels of infant mortality, homicide, drug, and alcohol addiction. Even in those places where blacks have made important political gains, major social and economic problems remain steadfast and, in fact, are intensifying in many ways. Moreover, a significant and growing racial divide continues to characterize almost all aspects of life in the United States. The nature and substance of this racially-based social and economic hierarchy have been documented and analyzed in several national studies including the study published by the National Academy of Sciences, *A Common Destiny*, and the Trotter Institute's five volume study, *Assessment of the Status of African-Americans*.<sup>1</sup> What these and other studies show in various ways is that while some individuals and strata in the black community have been able to realize certain kinds of racial progress, large sectors of this community continue to be characterized by poverty, unemployment, poor housing, high incarceration rates, and related problems. Both these studies provide a wealth of data illustrating the extent and persistence of these kinds of problems.

A racial gap between whites and African Americans remains steadfast and may be increasing in the areas of employment, housing, health, and poverty. Note, as but one example of this continuing racial hierarchy and division, that in 1939 the proportion of African Americans in poverty was at least 3 times that of whites; in 1959, the proportion of African Americans in poverty was still 3 times the proportion of whites; and in 1989, the proportion of African Americans in poverty remains as 3 times the proportion of whites!<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite significant changes in race relations in the United States, including the elimination of a multi-generational



system of legally and socially sanctioned apartheid, society is still characterized by fundamental divisions along racial lines.<sup>3</sup> This entrenched, and persisting, racial divide and hierarchy has been evident for generations, and apparently has not been impacted significantly by changing national administrations, changing family structure among blacks, or even increasing levels of schooling on the part of blacks.<sup>4</sup> The assertion of persisting racial hierarchy is not to deny, or minimize, the significant degree of racial progress that has taken place in this country. But a racial chasm, a hierarchical ordering of race in the United States, is persisting and, in some ways, widening according to many national reports.

A range of reasons have been offered for this state of racial affairs in the United States. Some have proposed that these problems reflect a moral problem, either on the part of society for maintaining or even confining large numbers of blacks to such negative living conditions, or on the part of black individuals or "leaders." Others have argued that these conditions are primarily an economic, political, or even cultural problem. Some commentators have raised questions and doubts about the effectiveness or limits of strategies of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960's as a result of this social and economic crisis. A few writers have suggested that the Civil Rights Movement actually contributed to the negative and deteriorated living conditions in the 1980s and 1990s! Still others have proposed that the Civil Rights Movement was simply too short-lived; it was an effective period of social and government activism during the mid-sixties when racism and discrimination presumably were reduced to a certain, but limited, extent.

Persisting negative living conditions have generated intense ideological discussions about the current and future status of blacks in this nation. These discussions and debates have touched upon three broad queries:



- Has the 'rights-based' model for attaining black social and economic progress outlived its usefulness?
- Can the African-American community better gain equality and empowerment by shifting from a focus on securing or enforcing basic democratic rights?
- What should be the new goals for black America and more effective strategies for economic advancement?

These queries are not new. They have been raised continuously by black people throughout the history of the United States. It is interesting to read, for instance, the opening editorial of the nation's very first black newspaper in 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, which indicates that some of the problems facing blacks in the early 19th century have yet to be resolved as we enter the 21st century. Such perennial and persisting problems include poor health, inferior education, racism, unfair media reporting, and unresponsive government.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in slightly different format the queries that are being raised today by many in the black community were also cited by the founders of this newspaper, Samuel Cornish and John B. Russworm. This editorial called for the development of a "Black Agenda" for enslaved and free blacks during the early part of the 19th century which would include strategies for political and economic empowerment, training of black youth, and a broad range of self-help initiations. Recently, the *Proceedings* of various black national and state summits held during the 19th century were collected and published by historians Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker.<sup>6</sup> These *Proceedings* also indicate that the three queries above have been posed in many previous periods by black leadership.

There are at least two fundamental differences in the social-economic and national context in which blacks struggle today compared to earlier periods. One difference has to do with the demographic changes which are taking place in the country. In short, the nation's demography is



such that it is becoming increasingly and rapidly less white and European, and at the same time reflecting a broader and florentine racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>7</sup> This is occurring while communities of color such as Asians, blacks, and Latinos are also becoming more ethnically diverse. One implication of this development is that a discussion on black social and economic crisis cannot be confined to the concerns and needs, solely, of *African Americans*. This is due to the fact that many different ethnic groups (i.e., Africans, Brazilians, Haitians, Jamaicans, and Panamericans) now make-up what could be referred to as the black community.

Another implication is that, as in earlier periods, the black community's struggles for social redress must be approached in ways that are also beneficial to other groups in society, including poor people, as well as other communities of color. America's black struggle for justice, as a matter of fact, has historically represented the moral foundation for social change for all people in this society. This means that attempts to build an understanding of black strategies for racial redress and economic quality must be based on principles that democratize society not only in terms of broadening political and cultural participation, but social and economic justice as well.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to demography, another major difference between current and earlier periods is the reduced capacity of the national economy and government to respond to growing social and economic needs of its citizenry. The U.S. national economy is no longer expanding as in earlier periods. Therefore, it may not be able to manage, or assuage, social and racial tensions and conflicts fueled by inequality.<sup>9</sup> Current characteristics of the U.S. economy reflect greater class cleavage, increasing poverty, growing numbers of persistently unemployed and unnecessary workers, and declining real wages and family income. Furthermore, the new jobs that are created cannot make significant dents in resolving these problems because they tend to be part-time,



temporary, and low-paying.<sup>10</sup> The nation's economy is constricting in many ways and generally losing its capacity to grow as rapidly as it did in earlier periods.

Within a new context molded dramatically by these kinds of demographic and economic developments, black America no longer has a clearly defined social agenda that represents a philosophical map facilitating a degree of concerted political, economic, and cultural strategies aimed at mobilizing significant numbers of black people. Moreover, the absence of such an "agenda" has permitted debates about important challenges and problems in the black community to dwindle repetitive arguments between "liberals" and "conservatives." But, within a context of rapidly changing demographic and economic conditions, the continuing social and economic crisis in black America highlight the failures and limitations of "liberal" and "conservative" policy paradigms.

Over the last several decades, this country has experimented with economic development and social welfare strategies and programs molded by liberals and conservatives, and embodied in the policies and politics of both Republicans and Democrats at the national level. However, given the continuing social and economic crisis, and gaps between African Americans and whites, it seems the approaches of both liberals and conservatives have been inadequate.<sup>11</sup> Due to the failure of current policy strategies, in terms of black living conditions, debate in the black community should move from disagreements between liberals and conservatives, or Democrats and Republicans, towards the question of what kinds of new or philosophical principles and mobilization should guide political, educational, and economic activism.



## **Towards A Renaissance Black Agenda**

A number of black activists have argued that what's lacking as a response to social and economic crisis today is a degree of consensus regarding a "Black Agenda"; that is, a *philosophical* map that could facilitate the conceptualization of strategies and tactical initiatives for improving living conditions.<sup>12</sup> Such a philosophical framework facilitated the mobilization of masses of blacks to pursue a broad range of individual and collective strategies aimed at political and economic advancement in earlier periods of American history.

The absence of such an "agenda" represents a critical political and cultural disadvantage for the black community today. It also represents a fundamental philosophical crisis reflected in the absence, or lack, of theoretical clarity regarding the major principles and values that incorporate the meaning of the historical and social experiences of blacks, and which should be the basis of political, economic, and cultural strategies for community empowerment. I am suggesting that an understanding and review of the principles and values that have characterized earlier struggles for black political and economic progress are still germane for building and pursuing a Black Agenda today. During slavery, clearly the agenda was abolition. Abolition was the fulcrum for facilitating black protest and mobilization to focus on strategies and tactics directed at the system of slavery. Certainly a range of tactical responses to this agenda were offered; many chose protest, others preferred emigration, but the bottom line was that slavery had to be abolished and challenged in some way by the African-American community.<sup>13</sup>

For 70 or 80 years after so-called "emancipation," the major item on the Black Agenda was physical and cultural survival within a legally-sanctioned, oppressive, and segregated society, and thus anti-lynching campaigns were prominent but so were the building of cultural and



economic, albeit forced "separatist" institutions, including businesses, hospitals, and schools.<sup>14</sup> In the decades of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, it was clear that for many in the black community the major item on the racial and political agenda was de-segregation. Thus, many black leaders and activists could develop strategies directed against a common enemy: official and de-facto segregation. Such a strategic umbrella, if not tactical unity, made it easier to mobilize greater numbers of blacks for specific actions.

It seems that we should re-examine the principles and values that are historically and experiential-based and which should be part of a "Black Agenda" today. Such a Black Agenda could provide the symbolism and theoretical direction that would reflect the principles and values that masses of blacks have historically endorsed. This could lead to general strategies and specific public policies by which to organize and mobilize people more effectively, whether at the voting booth, the local public school or community agency, or other venues of activity.

National and local organizations in the black community should begin sponsoring forums and broad-based meetings, town halls, and summits to discuss the state and future of race relations. Activists must involve young people, religious institutions, educators, and health workers, in a plethora of meetings to begin enunciating the needs of the black community and its political and economic responses. These local summits must be numerous and representative of the various ideological strains in the black community. The agendas should define the philosophy and values of what should be on a Black Agenda today, and pinpoint concrete actions upon which to pursue mobilization efforts in local communities.

Efforts at developing a Black Agenda, both nationally and locally, could be utilized in order to accomplish the following:

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- 1) developing a platform representing the policy principles, values, and views of blacks engaged in attempting to resolve social, economic, and educational problems;
- 2) exploring what kinds of public policies and recommendations might be effective in responding to some of the educational, social and economic problems in the black community, and how such public policies could be effectively implemented;
- 3) utilizing such a process to hold accountable elected leaders and governmental officials regarding the kinds of policies and recommendations which are, or are not, adopted and how such policies impact on the well-being of black communities; and,
- 4) facilitating such a process to include the black community as an integral part of the making and implementing of public policies which impact on the well-being of blacks.

The development of a Black Agenda, incorporating a set of philosophical principles and values that are democratically-determined, can lead to more effective strategies for mobilizing people at a grassroots level and generating greater support for public policies that would be beneficial to a broad range of poor and working-class people in the United States.

This proposed Black Agenda is neither liberal nor conservative. As a matter of fact, these two schools of thought are but different sides of the same face of power that has been utilized to maintain the black community, as well as poor and working-class people, in a politically-weak and economically-tenuous status by the perpetuation of a racially-defined hierarchy. While the liberal school, sometimes represented by the Democratic Party, has been more reformist than the conservative school, at times reflected in the Republican Party, policies and strategies for both are still limited and defined by the well-off and corporate sectors. It is precisely due to the political fact that both Republicans and Democrats, conservatives or liberals, are unreliable in terms of racial and social justice that the black community must again develop and advocate for a vision of society that does not sacrifice equality and justice. A historically, and culturally-relevant, Black Agenda can provide the symbolism that serves to unite and mobilize large numbers of blacks to



focus on tactics directed at social change today in the United States.

In reporting what I believe are key principles and values for black community advancement, particularly ideas that are especially important for economic development, I have relied on several sources of information. In the last 15 years I have collected, read, and analyzed the speeches of a broad range of black leaders and activists. Studying the content of these speeches has allowed me to note some of the principles and values that have been espoused and supported in black America, historically and in the current period. I have participated in organizing a number of Black Agenda meetings sponsored in the 1970s and 1980s, and I have reviewed the proceedings and deliberations of several Black Agenda summits that have been held throughout the history of the United States.

There are several principles and values related to black economic advancement that emerge from these sources and that are relevant for responding to black urban crisis today. Some of these principles are:

- The development of political power, rather than mere access to such, is a fundamental requisite for black social and economic advancement.
- The cultural strengthening and preservation of the black community is fundamental to the economic well-being of black people.
- The pursuit of economic development needs to be planned and implemented in ways which benefit significantly, and directly, the poor and working-class sectors in the black community.
- The pursuit and conceptualization of education must be expanded beyond the concept of schooling or training.

The following are brief explanations of these four principles.



## **I. The Development of Political Power is a Fundamental Requisite for Black Social and Economic Advancement**

A general theme emerging from a review of historical documents is that many of the problems facing the black community require the political strengthening or "empowerment" of this community. The political muscle and respect of the black community must be enhanced. The collective political consciousness of the black community, especially among young people, must be raised, addressing the role of power in the American society and its history, and how it is used to depress the well-being of the black community. This kind of political consciousness is far more important than mere electoral influence or access to the powerful, by the way. The latter implies the ability and capacity to challenge interests with wealth, as well as the processes that determine or mold the ownership, accumulation, management, and distribution of wealth.

This principle suggests that political and economic development cannot be separated; the effective pursuit of one goal cannot be accomplished without the other. In fact, there is an historical synthesis of two philosophical trends in the black community, one calling for economic power, the other for political power. Generally, while liberals would argue that an expanding economy and a responsible government would take care of the needs of blacks, poor people, and working-class people, conservatives believe that it is an expanding economy via "free market," but non-interfering government, that would actually accomplish these objectives. Both these perspectives presuppose a politically passive black community. Blacks, however, must be highly politicized, and continuously, whether liberal or conservative administrations are in control of government.



This theme is developed by Harold Cruse in *Plural, But Equal*.<sup>15</sup> He critiques the traditional bias of mainstream civil rights organizations to pursue political rights outside of a context of economic empowerment, or to assume that liberal administrations will be qualitatively better for black means. Martin Luther King, Jr. certainly realized the importance of utilizing political rights as a means for economic advancement and empowerment as is illustrated in one of his later essays, "MLK Defines Black Power".<sup>16</sup> Here, he argued that the struggle for democratic rights in the Civil Rights Movement can only be viewed and approached effectively within the context of economic advancement and political power for blacks.

This principle implies that while black people certainly have a responsibility to develop and assert leadership regarding social and economic problems facing the community, government is not excused, or dismissed, in ignoring deteriorating living conditions for vast numbers of blacks, Asians, or Latinos. Blacks must continue to insist, as is the right and expectation of all groups, that government be responsive to their needs and concerns. This principle can be utilized to evaluate, and thereby hold accountable, elected and appointed leaders, as well as governmental policies and actions. For instance, if we accept this principle, i.e., that black political strategies and tactical decisions should be aimed at the development of power, rather than merely access to the powerful, then this provides a guide by which to critique or applaud the specific actions of individuals and groups. This acknowledgement shifts discussion and debate from simply personal or emotional disagreements about the decisions made by individuals, to a more focused discussion on whether the action taken reflects movement towards power for the black community. This also "forces" a discussion on what is power and its manifestations. Actions by individuals representing the black community must be justified in terms of greater movement towards power.



Within the context of a Black Agenda that has allowed many in the community to discuss the principles that should be reflected in public life, particular action taken can be evaluated in terms of how it reflects, if at all, its effect in leading to a greater level of power for the black community.

## **II. The Cultural Strengthening and Preservation of the Black Community Is Fundamental to the Economic Well-Being of Black People**

Another principle expressed and reflected in these historical documents as well as in contemporary experiences, is the preservation of the cultures and historical knowledge of the black community. Cultural efforts in the black community must be expanded and strengthened for this community to realize significant economic progress. Many have pointed to the economic progress of groups like Koreans, Cubans, and others in poor and working-class communities, and have queried why blacks have not progressed similarly. There are many systemic reasons for this uneven progress. But perhaps one explanatory factor is the cultural basis upon which some of the successful efforts of other groups are built. It seems that groups reflecting acknowledgement or appreciation of their cultural context, and utilizing it as a base for mobility, have advantages over blacks who pursue economic initiatives as culturally-disconnected individuals. This does not mean that blacks are culturally deficient as suggested in the writings of Edward C. Banfield, Thomas Sowell, and others.<sup>17</sup> It does mean that in the pursuit of integrating into mainstream America, some blacks rely on meritocratic and individualistic approaches, rather than utilizing their group as part of the base for advancement.

Additionally, greater efforts to involve youth in cultural activities must be pursued as an accompanying strategy for economic survival. Youth should be taught how to use their culture as



a springboard for social advancement. Unfortunately, too many of us have allowed schooling, whether public or private, elite or plebeian, to become the substitute for cultural education in the black community. The black church can play a particularly important role in this area. As a matter of fact, the black church can probably play a far more effective role in the cultural education of youth and adults, than most other kinds of institutions.

### **III. Economic Development Must Be Planned and Implemented in Ways Which Benefit Significantly Broad Sectors in the Black Community**

This too, as we are reminded by W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a long and cherished principle in black history.<sup>18</sup> Progress must be documented in terms of the social and economic well-being of the entire black community. The black community has a rich history and many potential resources that could be tapped via enlightened public policy. Concomitantly, the black community should be conceptualized, and strategies must be developed which approach this community as a "community." The alternative would be to approach the black community as a collection of economically depressed individuals and families, as scholars and public policy decision makers have done in urban America.

### **IV. Education Is a Broader Concept Than Schooling or Training**

Education for black people cannot rely on 'deficit' models which presuppose that some children are born with learning or cultural deficiencies. Additionally, education must be delivered in various ways, using a variety of pedagogical models and in different settings in the community. The guiding idea that should underpin efforts to expand education in a range of pedagogical



settings is the proposition that every child is a potential genius and everyone can make important contributions to the black community and the broader society. Any kind of response aimed at improving the quality of education for black children and youth should reflect this principle. This idea, or value, should be endorsed broadly by leaders and activists and utilized to evaluate programmatic suggestions about improving the quality of schooling.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, black America must again reconsider how to advance socially and economically, but at the same time help to mold and push the nation's public and moral agenda. It can do this by re-examining the principles that have been used as reference points for determining timely and appropriate strategies for social change in earlier periods. Black leadership and grassroots sectors, including churches and temples, community-based organizations and neighborhood groups, and especially student and youth organizations, can begin to do this by planning and sponsoring a wide range of forums and town halls where public issues could be presented to residents. The black community—and again, especially its youth—must become inundated with forums to discuss public life as well as black history and culture in their neighborhoods. This kind of medium must become as accessible to black people as radio and television is today. Such Black Agenda forums can present opportunities for people to discuss and analyze the challenges facing the neighborhood, city, or region as well as the kinds of strategies and actions that should be pursued for black and social economic progress into the 21st century.



## Notes

1. See Gerald D. Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, Jr. (Eds.), *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1989); and Wornie L. Reed, *Assessment of the Status of African Americans*, Vols. 1-5 (Boston, MA: W. M. Trotter Institute, 1992).
2. James Jennings, *Understanding the Nature of Poverty in Urban America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), p. 64.
3. For discussions of what I refer to as legally and socially sanctioned apartheid in the U.S., see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974).
4. See James Jennings, "The Foundation of American Racism: Defining Bigotry, Racism, and Racial Hierarchy" *Trotter Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 1990), pp. 12-16.
5. See "Editorial from the First Edition of Freedom's Journal (1827)" in Kenneth Estell (Ed.), *The African-American Almanac*, sixth edition, (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1994), pp. 138-141.
6. See Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).
7. See William P. O'Hare, *America's Minorities: The Demographics of Diversity* (Washington DC: Praeger Publishers, 1994).
8. Several scholars and activists discuss coalitions and the demography of the U.S. in James Jennings, *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians: Status and Prospects for Activism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994).
9. A wealth of statistics illustrating the lessened capacities of the U.S. economy are provided in Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (New York, NY: Random House, 1990).
10. James Risen, "Temporary Employment Industry Working Overtime" *Los Angeles Times*, (July 5, 1994), Section A1, p. 10.
11. For examples and critiques of such approaches see James Jennings, *Race, Politics, and Economic Development: Community Perspectives* (London: Verso Press, 1992).
12. I provide a summary of the views of contemporary black activists regarding a "Black Agenda" in *The Politics of Black Empowerment: Transformation of Black Activism in Urban America* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992).



13. For an overview of these various ideologies and strategical perspectives see, Howard Brotz (Ed.), *Negro Social and Political Thought, 1850-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).
14. For a historical overview of segregation and how it molded various institutional arrangements in the black community, see John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* ( New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).
15. Harold Cruse, *Plural, But Equal: Blacks and Minorities in America's Plural Society* (New York: Morrow and Co., 1987).
16. *New York Times Magazine* (June 11, 1967), p. 26.
17. I provide a summary of these neo-conservative views in "The New Black Neo-Conservatism: A Critique" *Trotter Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 1987).
18. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903).





