

Has the Black middle class abandoned the poor?

By Joel Dreyfuss

NEW YORK -- They are shallow, callous, conspicuous consumers. They could care less about their poor relatives. They are not interested in the political process and decline to use their political clout. When they take a stand on issues, they always look out for themselves and alienate potential allies.

This portrait of the Black middle class is getting increasing attention in the mass media. In television, magazines and newspapers, a deep divide has been drawn recently between the success of Blacks who join the mainstream and those who still languish in poverty.

At the same time, middle class Black were viewed as a buffer between the Black poor and the white majority. Blacks who succeeded were held up as models for the poor to emulate.

But as white disillusionment with the Black middle class came to a head during last summer's Miami riot when it was realized that middle class Blacks have little control over the Black poor and make no impact upon urban problems such as crime and unemployment.

In a recent article for the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, white social scientist Carl Gershman blamed many of the ills of the Black poor on "a new class of Black political leaders and federally funded anti-poverty workers who became...power brokers between the government and the Black poor. These workers had a stake in preserving the underclass as a political base from which they could threaten -- and extract concessions from white society," he wrote.

A year ago, another *Times* magazine cover story lambasted the Black middle class for its consumerism and suggested that successful Blacks had more in common with the white middle class than with the Black poor.

The argument that the objectives of the Black middle class no longer serve the interests of the Black poor is useful for a broad variety of political groups, from neo-conservatives to liberals.

The change of heart has its motive in the fear of competition. Not only do middle class Blacks compete for jobs; they also challenge the political views of the white intellectual class, whose influence corporate and government policies.

White intellectuals now converge in the belief that racism is no longer a major issue. They cite the work of UCLA economist Thomas Sowell and University of Chicago sociologist William J. Wilson, both Black, who argue that Blacks have divided along two economic paths: one with mobility for the middle class, the other a dead end future of menial jobs for the poor.

Few "experts" have ever bothered to ask middle class Blacks how they view themselves. Thus a recent poll of *Black Enterprise* magazine readers (with a median income of \$25,000) is especially revealing. The poll showed that three out of four respondents did not believe that "racism is less prevalent than it was a decade ago." And 95 percent said they believed that "whites harbor some form of racism towards Blacks." They clearly have not joined whites in turning their backs on the issue of racism.

Another common white criticism of middle class Blacks is that they lack broad-ranging political interests and that the political positions they do take are self-serving. The *Black Enterprise* poll suggests otherwise. Nine out of 10 readers polled oppose "high unemployment as a tradeoff to control inflation." Like the majority of their white counterparts, they express concern that America has lost its military superiority to the Soviet Union. But 58 percent believe "that some of the money for defense should be channeled for social programs."

One reason for this continued support of social programs is the finding that many members of the Black middle class are barely removed from poverty themselves. Four out of ten of the magazine readers had a relative or family member on public assistance. A similar study of the Black middle class published in 1979 in *Psychology Today* found that 85 percent of the sample came from working class origins, and that only 15 percent were second generation middle class.

In other *Black Enterprise* findings, almost 77 percent favored a

pull-out of American firms from South Africa and 85 percent supported more Black involvement in Africa liberation struggles. On the Middle East conflict, nearly a third of *Black Enterprise* readers sided with the Arabs, 8.4 supported Israel, and 57.9 percent favored neither side.

A majority said they understood the SALT II issues, felt they were affected by Watergate and overwhelmingly opposed President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon.

These studies suggest a very dif-

ferent reality for the Black middle class than the one currently offered by the white intellectual mainstream. Middle class and working class Blacks (the majority of whom vote) remain solidly committed to the politics of compassion that many white intellectuals have abandoned. They believe that social progress is possible, that government intervention is necessary to prod the free enterprise system, and that good relations with the Third World will eventually pay off for America. Many Blacks have also decided that a redistribution of

wealth is the only solution to economic inequity.

In trying to avoid being used as pawns by the ideological left and right, Blacks face tremendous difficulties as they attempt to develop strategies for advancement. Within the Black community, some of the interesting -- and most ignored -- intellectuals have begun to look outside the country for solutions to their problems. They see parallels between the under-development of the Third World and the under-development of America's Harlem.

Some believe an independent

Black economic base must be developed again with the short-term intervention of government. Few believe that all the problems of the underclass will be solved by Black capitalism. But they also understand that financially independent Black institutions could be powerful advocates of the Black poor.

Rather than reject all government programs across the board, they would prefer to strengthen the ones that have worked like Head Start and Food Stamps, and to develop new ones for specific needs.

The relative powerlessness of the

Black middle class is due largely to its small size, and its almost non-existent economic clout. The impact of middle class Black leaders in the 1960s was based on a consensus of white liberal support. The problem in the 1980s is for the Blacks to find ways of leveraging the majority when their former allies have gone to protect their own interests.

By refusing to concede that all is well, middle class Blacks continue to serve the interests of the poor and to challenge the convergence of mainstream ideologies on the maintenance of the status quo.

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SENIORS OPPOSE P.U.D.

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DEAR FELLOW OREGONIANS:
THE OREGON STATE COUNCIL FOR SENIOR CITIZENS (OSCSC), A STATEWIDE ORGANIZATION REPRESENTING MORE THAN 35,000 OREGON SENIORS, TOOK A FORMAL STAND AT THEIR QUARTERLY MEETING IN SEASIDE TO OPPOSE NEW PEOPLE'S UTILITY DISTRICT (P.U.D.) PROPOSALS WHICH WILL BE PRESENTED TO VOTERS IN 12 DIFFERENT COUNTIES THROUGHOUT OREGON.
THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO SHOW THAT THE RATEPAYERS OF THE 12 AFFECTED COUNTIES WOULD BENEFIT FROM SUCH DISTRICT FORMATION. THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT RATES WOULD GO UP WITH A P.U.D., AND THAT PROPERTY TAXES WOULD ALSO GO UP TO PAY FOR THE GOVERNMENT TAKE-OVER OF THE ELECTRICITY SYSTEM.
THOSE ATTENDING THE MEETING WERE CAUTIONED AGAINST "BUYING A PIG IN A POKE" THROUGH CREATION OF A NEW AND COSTLY GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY (P.U.D.). A P.U.D. WOULD BE RUN BY FIVE POLITICIANS WHO WOULD HAVE THE POWER TO TAX OUR PROPERTY, CONDEMN LAND AND OBLIGATE OUR RATES AND TAXES BY ISSUING BONDS. AND THEY WOULDN'T HAVE TO ANSWER TO ANY STATE REGULATION AUTHORITY.
THIS COSTLY GOVERNMENT AGENCY MAY NEVER EVEN DELIVER ONE KILOWATT HOUR OF ELECTRICITY.
WE'RE VOTING NO ON P.U.D.S. WE URGE YOU TO DO THE SAME.

SINCERELY,
Jack R. Barnes
JACK R. BARNES
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN
OREGON STATE COUNCIL FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

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