

The Theory Of The Black Middle-Class; Part II

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

The 'Law of unintended consequences' finally caught up with me last week: "The Theory of the Leisure Class" is the classic book written by Thorstein Veblen. Though I inadvertently omitted the title, readers did make a connection with the author's value judgements of "conspicuous consumption" and "pecuniary emulation (white population, 1899).

What 'was' intended was to follow on with a demonstration that today's black middle-class could not be described as a population at "leisure", not by anyone's standard. Not even when compared with that hard-driving, "upward mobility" crowd that took over Los Angeles' Baldwin Hills suburb early in the "Black Revolution." That frenzied mob of overachiever also is not a suitable model for an evaluation today. Your parents were great, but the world is in a flux.

Nor, as I advised one 'nostalgic' caller, could we meaningfully employ

that famed "Harlem Renaissance" model. It is true that just this very phrase evokes bitter-sweet memories of a stationary moment in time -- a cultural snapshot of the brilliant ebony expatriates (in their own country) who, in their Harlem bantustan; indulged themselves in an intellectual ferment as productive as Europe's offerings. That writers, poets, painters, sculptors leaders and teachers were forged in their own fiery furnace. An interesting aside here, concerning Harlem, is how a process thought to have a gradual and orderly beginning turns out to have been pure serendipity. Among the many successful African American inventors who empowered early entrants to the black middle-class was Granville Woods whose electrical inventions so greatly influenced the development of America's railways. For one fall CD-ROM, I have focused my research on Woods and subways.

Woods patented the so-called "Westinghouse" Air Brake, the Railway Telegraph and scores of other

inventions. But, particularly we cite here his "Electric Railway" systems (Patents No. 383,844,463,020,509,065,ect.), including the "Third Rail" which made modern subways possible. In 1888, the 'American Catholic Tribune described Woods as "The greatest electrician in the world."

Shortly afterwards, serendipity took over when New York's new "Interurban Rapid Transit Co." found its expansionist dreams expedited by the black engineer's inventions. But much too fast when the company's real estate division greatly over-built great tracts of fashionable upscale apartments at the most distant terminal. They stayed empty at any price.

Facing bankruptcy, Raid Transit was bailed out when a black man by the name of Pickens came up with "an idea that will make all of us rich." And that he did, recruiting middle-income black tenants from many near by areas of New York and New Jersey in the greatest 'upward mobility'

movement seen to that date. "Harlem" was established, and the "Renaissance" was assured. It seems that I've opened up some 'terra incognita' and have two interested scholars coming here this summer.

There was great interest in the overall concept, and callers offered models and parameters ranging from classic studies like "The Philadelphia Negro" (W.E.D. Dubois) and "The Black Bourgeoisie" (E. Franklin Frazier), to a dozen essays and polemics by contemporary observers; Cornel West, Haki R. Madhubuti, Harold Cruse, Lincoln Frazier (the Negro Church In America), Nathan Hare, Jawanza Kunjufu, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Alvin Poussaint and others.

A more practical view of matters at hand would suggest that constraints of space would not permit an in-depth critique, but on the other hand we would not want to be so breezy and anecdotal as to exclude hard information which could enhance the

quality of life. For instance, both my local and national sources described a new "black landed-gentry" that drove Subarus and Audis, sent the little ones to Montessori schools -- but were also employed in "middle-management," the most endangered species among job sectors (especially the last hired).

Then, again, I was hearing of the growing number of black investment clubs, the popularity of Wendy

Kaminer's book, "I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional," and that the 'in' comic strips were Dilbert, Over The Hedge and Cathy. Many of their older teenagers are driving/building "Bad Dude" type ground-hugging cars. Their younger progeny were calling each other "dweebs, nerds" and not satisfied with Sony Play Station and Sega Saturn, wanted equal time on World Wide Web. Continued next week.

Ceasefire Oregon

Continued from front

guns in your home may be used against you."

What of the National Rifle Association argument that people, rather than guns, kill people, that a mechanical device is being blamed for human nature? Both Canda and Irwin concede the point.

Irwin notes that Ceasefire does not advocate for legal restrictions on gun ownership, only voluntary action. Canda says, "When our entertainment is violent and our media is violent, should we expect anything less than violent confrontations?" He adds, however, "Certainly it's people that kill people, but guns make it a lot easier."

Irwin can attest to this. According to statistics, she says, violent assaults involving guns end in death 60 percent of the time, as compared to four percent of assaults with knives and one percent of assaults with clubs, feet or fists. When young people attempt suicide with guns, they succeed 76 percent of the time, as compared to 35 percent for poison gas, less for other methods.

"Changing violent behavior requires a radical change in society, and that takes time," she says. By contrast, she says, "If we destroy 100 guns it may seem like a drop in the bucket, but it will probably save five or six lives."

Sometimes you can get both things at once. Irwin says that last year a man took his ten year old son with him when he turned in a hunting rifle. "When I was his age my father took me hunting," she quotes him as saying, "but I'm going to bond with him by having him see me turn in my gun."

Oregon Ballet Theater Programs

Oregon Ballet Theater will present two programs as a part of its sixth annual "American Choreographers Showcase," May 10-12, 15-19 and 21-24 at the Intermediate Theater of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts. Nine works were selected from the company's repertory.

Program A features ensemble works at the beginning and end of the program -- Paul Taylor's "Clovien Kingdom" and Bebe Millers "A Certain Depth of Heart, Also Love." The center section of the program features Val Caniparoli's "Hamlet and Ophelia Pas de Deux," Dennis Spaight's Crayola, and James Canfield's "Drifted in a Deeper Land." It will be performed May 10, 12, 15, 18, 21, and 23 at 7:30 p.m. There will be two matinee performances May 12 and 18 at 2 p.m.

Program B also begins and ends with ensemble works with James Hampton's "Wild Man" and Donald Byrd's "Cracked Narrative." Three pas de deux's will be performed in the middle of the program including two classical works with Shakespearian



themes -- James Canfield's passionate "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet and Ophelia" -- separated by Josie Moseley's "With." May 11, 16, 17, 19, 22 and 24 at 7:30 and matinees May 11 and 19 at 2 p.m.

A Certain depth of Heart, Also Love will be performed during sixth annual ballet showcase.

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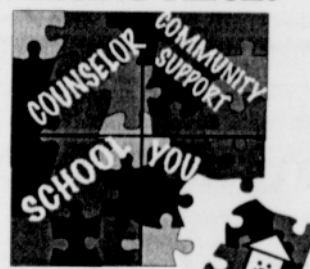


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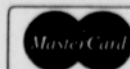
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