

Negroes
(1967 folder)

REAL BLACK POWER

By Arthur M. Ross

~~Address~~ Before the

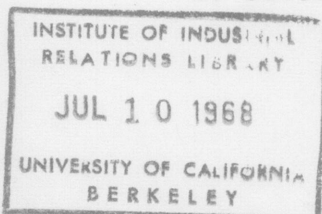
University of Michigan Sesquicentennial Conference,
Ann Arbor, Michigan, August 25, 1967,

The term "black power" is a misnomer in the mouths of the demagogues who have pre-empted it. The exploitation of powerlessness is not the exercise of power. And powerlessness is the central core of ghetto pathology.

Real power is needed to help reconstruct Negro family and community life. Demoralization and disorganization cannot be cured from the outside.

Real power is essential for a sound settlement of the conflict between the urban Negro masses and the lower-income white. These two groups are struggling over limited opportunities for good jobs, schools, neighborhoods, and recreational facilities. Since there are not enough of these opportunities to go around, they will have to be immensely expanded and great changes in social priorities will have to be made. History teaches that a group cannot expect its interests to be upheld unless that group is associated with the processes of power.

Real power will be needed to provide leadership roles for many of the intelligent, aggressive young Negroes presently obtaining an advanced education or enrolled in military service. The ghettos cannot be successfully pacified unless these young people are involved.



Washington, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1967.

The Power Vacuum

The Negro community does not have power to build satisfactory careers for a very large number of its members.

Negroes lack entrepreneurial power in the sense of capital, position in the business community, access to credit, and dominance in significant industries.

While many families have maintained solidarity in the face of incredible obstacles, vast numbers of Negro parents cannot control their children. There is much contempt for fathers who do not have steady, well-paying, dignified jobs. Unmarried, separated, divorced, and widowed mothers frequently cannot exercise effective parental authority. Thousands of young people are running wild.

Police power is not effective in the ghettos. There is constant guerilla warfare in some cities between young Negroes and white policemen. But Negro victims are largely unprotected from Negro criminals.

Religious authority has been significant in Southern Negro communities, but much of it has disappeared in the migration to the North.

The old-line civil rights organizations like NAACP and the National Urban League never gained the allegiance of the masses in the ghetto. Great numbers of ghetto residents do not belong to any organization at all--religious, labor, political, fraternal or whatever.

Much is said about "black power" in the sense of guerilla tactics of protest. Apocalyptic visions of black revolution titillate romantic radicals and intimidate fearful conservatives. The fact is that an impoverished 10-percent minority is not in any position to carry off a revolution. It can protest and rebel within American society, perhaps with considerable effectiveness, but cannot successfully revolt against it.

Rioting, sniping, burning, and looting are not a sign of real power. On the contrary, they signalize impotence and desperation. Real power is exercised rationally and strategically. Impotence and desperation are expressed in gestures and fantasies in which means and ends are dissociated. So-called "black power" tactics today are analogous to machine-smashing in the early phase of industrialism, prior to the growth of real "labor power."

Revival of the old proposal for a black republic in the South, which was espoused by the Communists in the 1920's, is not a sign of real power. Nor are the proposals to implement the tactics of Asian

peasant communism in the world's most industrialized nation. One is reminded of the romantic delusions currently being voiced in Cairo and Damascus.

The Elements and Uses of Power

Real black power might be developed in various ways, but in any case there would be certain essential elements:

Negroes would be organized for group representation and betterment.

Leadership would be exercised by intelligent, aggressive young people holding the allegiance of Negroes in the urban ghettos.

Basic social and economic gains would be secured as a matter of right and justice, not benevolence and "welfare."

The Negro community would develop the capacity to impose discipline on its own members and meet the standards of performance required by the larger society.

Here are some of the things which real black power might accomplish, and which are not likely to be accomplished otherwise.

First, power can bring stability to the emotionally overwrought young Negroes of both sexes, the huge new generation which will increasingly dominate the scene in the black community. Typically these young people have no one to trust, nothing to believe in, no program, no ideology. Urging them to stay in school and learn a trade does not attack this basic demoralization.

Second, power can instill pride and self-respect. Concededly there is a strong possibility that Negro self-regard, so greatly needed, will be combined with hatred of whites. One can only hope that as Negroes acquire more genuine power in American society, their hatred of whites will diminish. (Industrial workers, having acquired economic and political power, no longer have the pervasive and bitter hatred of employers which characterized them in the 19th century.)

Third, power can protect peaceable Negroes from the hoodlums and criminals who are largely unrestrained by civil authority. I am not suggesting that Negroes will police the ghettos with their own vigilante squads. But a group with social power will be on the side of authority because it has a share in authority. It will move to rid itself of exploitation by criminals along with that of credit gougers and other parasites.

Fourth, real black power can counteract the appeal of irresponsible demagogues. Again we can take an analogy from labor history. The Communists were eliminated from the CIO only after the unions had become strong enough to offer effective alternative leadership and to expel the Communists without jeopardizing the life of the organization.

Fifth, power can uphold the interests of Negroes vis-a-vis the lower-income whites with whom they are competing for employment, housing, educational, and recreational opportunities.

Sixth, power will provide leadership roles for young persons with drive and potential.

Seventh, power will permit the Negro to work and fight for himself--with all the help that society ought to be giving him--instead of remaining so often a passive object of charitable concern.

The Legitimacy of Ethnic Power

You may feel that this line of argument smacks of racism. "What about the Irish?" you may ask. "What about the Jews, the Italians, and the Japanese? They fought prejudice and discrimination as individuals. They sweated out the first generation in the slums, motivated and educated their children, moved up into business and the professions, and moved out to the suburbs. Why can't the Negroes solve their problems as individuals?"

Even if the Jews, the Irish, and the others had really made it as individuals, this would not be very pertinent. The white and Oriental ethnic minorities came to the United States with strong cultural supports--a variable mixture of individual initiative and ambition, family and group solidarity, respect for education and self-confidence.

The culture of slavery provided none of these assets but systematically destroyed them. Other ethnic minorities have had to cope with prejudice but not slavery. The deeply ingrained racial attitudes of many white Americans--arrogance, condescension, physical aversion combined with a prurient absorption in Negro sexuality--were

nurtured in the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon version of slavery that became established in the United States. Those aspects of personality which most seriously impede the social and economic progress of many Negroes--improvidence, apathy, self-hatred, and family disorganization--are equally the product of slavery and its aftermath.

In any case, it is incorrect to suppose that the other minorities have fought their way out of the slums as individuals and families. There has been much assimilation, to be sure; the Jews, the Irish, etc., are Americans first. But there is also cultural diversity and pluralism. Minorities have a rich cultural life within the larger American society. They have a predominant position in certain trades, businesses, and professions. They have certain recognized prerogatives in politics. And they have ethnic power structures.

Although the Jewish power structure is normally relaxed, it can be readily mobilized by a development such as the recent crisis of Israel. The Italian power structure operates through the Democratic Party machines in some of the large eastern cities, including Newark. The Irish power structure involves the Catholic Church, the building-trades unions and other institutions in many communities.

An ethnic power structure provides "connections." If all opportunities, rewards, and punishments were distributed in a strictly impersonal fashion, connections might not be so important as they are. We can look forward to the day when everyone will be judged in all respects solely as an individual, but meanwhile it helps a struggling minority group to have some connections of its own. Labor market studies all indicate, for example, that good jobs are generally filled

by so-called "informal methods"--i.e., through connections, rather than formal processes such as employment service referral. Perhaps this is one reason why 25 percent of young Negro jobseekers were unemployed in the summer of 1967 despite the emphasis in hiring disadvantaged youth.

I am not suggesting that the same mixture of individual effort, collective action and outside assistance is suitable to the needs of all minorities. As compared with other minorities, Negroes will need a particularly strong measure of group support. Individualism is not a strong tradition among the Negro masses. Financial resources, family solidarity, and self-confidence are notably insufficient.

The factor of self-confidence is crucial where economic advancement is concerned, and lies at the heart of the much-discussed problem of motivation. This problem is misconceived if one seriously doubts that most Negroes really want to get off relief, hold good jobs and join the mainstream of American society. The real question is whether they can afford to try. The persistence of passive docility among some Negroes, the voicing of erratic and unreasonable demands by others, the oscillation between romantic ambition and premature discouragement are not valid symptoms of indifference. On the contrary, they represent a vast yearning combined with a lack of self-confidence. What is missing is the internalized cultural support for participation in a highly disciplined, competitive economic order and the requisite long-range career planning and preparation. The many Negroes who have made this long journey on their own have indeed displayed almost incredible fortitude. The majority of people need the encouragement and assistance which group support can provide.

Ethnic Power and the Struggle for Opportunity

It is not difficult to understand why the racial crisis reached unparalleled severity in 1967.

There has been a real accomodation between middle-class Negroes and affluent, well-educated whites during the past decade. But the lower-income strata have not been reconciled and are involved in a progressively bitter confrontation.

Middle-class Negroes and their white allies dominated the civil rights movement. The high point, perhaps, was the great assemblage at Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963 with its impressive dignity, discipline, and good humor.

Affluent, well-educated whites were able to comprehend the need for change. As legislators, they enacted civil rights and fair employment laws. As educators, they worked to make it possible for Negroes to obtain a high school diploma and go on to college. As administrators, they developed counseling, job training, and related social services. White college students displayed warm sympathy for Negroes and actively involved themselves in the civil rights movement so long as they were welcome.

Negroes in a position to profit from these opportunities gained considerably. About 11 percent of young Negroes were enrolled in college in 1966 as compared with 8 percent in 1956. During this decade there was a net increase of 325,000 Negroes in professional and technical

occupations, 400,000 in clerical occupations, and 250,000 in skilled-labor jobs.

The Negroes who gained the most were those with enough motivation to stay in school or take part in job training programs. They had enough self-confidence to venture out as pioneers among white students, white workers, and white householders. They were able to hold their families together and discipline their children. They could dress, talk, and behave acceptably. Therefore I characterize them as middle-class Negroes even though many were poor by white standards.

The whites who took the lead in striving to improve Negro opportunities were not only affluent and well educated, but what is equally important, they had little or nothing to lose. They could welcome a Negro physician on the block without having to worry that the whole neighborhood might be taken over. They could support equal employment opportunity without any real danger that their own jobs might be jeopardized. If the quality of schools should deteriorate, they could move out into high-priced suburbs, or if worst came to worst they could send their children to private schools.

Meanwhile, the lower socio-economic groups in the black and white communities were not fooled. They believed the race war was real; they continued to fear each other; instinctively they knew that,

notwithstanding the reconciliation going on at higher social levels, sooner or later they would confront each other directly. This direct engagement has now been going on for about two years. Prominent episodes include the violence and looting in the ghettos, pitched engagements between Negroes and the police, and white backlash in the 1966 elections, the defeat of fair housing legislation, etc.*

The warfare between lower-income whites and Negroes is being fought over some real and vital stakes. The fact is that if Negroes were permitted to compete freely and share equally in a fixed supply of the good things of life, in many cases there would not be enough to go around. This, of course, is not an argument against equal opportunity. It is merely a statement of an essential dimension of the race problem.

*The warfare between the young ghetto Negroes and the police is a revealing aspect of the more general struggle. White policemen are generally recruited from lower socio-economic ranks, including second or third generation immigrants. In some cities the Police Department is part of the Irish power structure. In others, many policemen have been brought up from Appalachia or the deep South. Even where the great riots have not occurred, there is incessant quiet warfare between the Negroes and the police. Attempts to enforce the law are met with cries of "police brutality" and false rumors that the arrested individuals have been beaten to death. At the same time, a great deal of police brutality is in fact going on. In some cities it is common for policemen in prowl cars to pick up militant or troublesome Negroes, take them into the park and beat them up, and drop them in a side street back in the ghetto.

Suppose you have a single public golf course in a city. Even before integration, it is already crowded. After desegregation, there is no enjoying the game because of the crowds. The wealthier whites can always establish a country club, but the poorer cannot.

Or take a city which spends 50 percent more to educate a white child than a Negro child. This city is already having a desperate time meeting its bills. When the authorities decide to eliminate educational discrimination, it would be absurd to claim that white parents have nothing to lose. Likewise when the authorities decide to invest in remedial programs for the culturally deprived.

Certainly it is not implausible that white residents in the suburbs of Chicago and white workers in the craft unions could suffer losses if required to share a fixed amount of housing and employment opportunity. Thus there is an economics of prejudice as well as a sociology and a psychology.

In the opposite trenches from the lower-income whites are the Negro masses, whose conditions have still not been remedied. About three-quarters of employed Negroes are still in low-status jobs. The incidence of unemployment and underemployment is well known, and there is no need to dwell on the insufferable living conditions of the ghetto.

These are ancient evils, but the difference is that desires and hopes have been aroused--by the powerful influence of TV commercials, by the launching of the War on Poverty, and by all of the

rhetoric of the civil rights movement with its emphasis on "jobs now," "freedom now" and "justice now." Here we have the familiar revolution of rising expectations in which desires run far ahead of accomplishments. Has the gap between promise and fulfillment ever been greater?

It seems clear that there will have to be a vast re-ordering of priorities in the United States. Unless the Negroes can exercise effective social and political power, what is going to bring this about? I am not referring solely to the relative priority of the War in Vietnam and the War on Poverty. Even if there were no war in Vietnam, it is not at all clear that America would be prepared to devote extraordinary attention to an immense expansion of opportunity for quality education, decent jobs, good housing, and adequate recreation. I do not think the necessary changes in national priorities will be forthcoming without the sustained pressure of real black power.

The Need for Leadership Roles

I have been emphasizing the need for authentic, legitimate leadership in the Negro community. Potential leaders are not lacking. As in every group there are intelligent, ambitious young people who urgently require adequate outlets for their energies. If these roles are not available, they will continue to turn against themselves and against society.

The aggressive young men are a crucial factor in any protest movement. Anti-colonialism, for example, was led by young intellectuals who had been educated by missionaries and colonial authorities and had absorbed the value systems of the British and French. They pitted themselves, as equals, against the masters who had trained them. Leadership roles in the new nations are providing outlets for many of these men. Where feudal institutions are still intact, the greatest threat is from the unemployed, uninvolved intellectuals.

The history of the American labor movement furnishes another example. Thousands of aggressive young men found roles as union leaders, and many moved on into politics at a later date. Labor protest never could have been "integrated" into American society if these young men had not taken charge of it.

It is a commonplace that young people in the United States--and particularly young men--are experiencing a severe identity crisis. The core of the identity crisis is the problem of finding acceptable roles and functions. If this problem is serious for young whites, it is tragic for many young Negroes.

The aggressive young Negroes to whom I refer are only a minority, to be sure, but they are a strategic minority. They are going to establish the tone of the Negro community. It will make little difference, in the long run, what the middle-aged Negroes may presently think.

The importance of adequate roles for young men is magnified by three current developments. First, the absolute number of young men has greatly increased in line with the population trend. Second, more of them are obtaining a college education. They are more assertive, more articulate, better informed; and of course nothing so stimulates discontent as does education. Third, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are in military service, many of them in Vietnam. By and large they have had good food, decent treatment, and jobs which they consider important. They will not wish to settle for less when they return to civilian life. Many will find leadership roles, good or bad.

You may answer that if the young men acquire adequate education, there will be plenty of opportunities in the professions, in business firms, and in government.

While the bulk of the able young Negroes may move into business and professional life, this will not be a satisfactory outlet for many with political skills and a strong power drive. For such persons, the opportunity to take charge of Negro discontent and convert it into organizational power is a headier challenge than a traineeship in business. On the other side of the coin is the great need for organization and leadership in the Negro community.

I do not have time to set out in detail the media through which true black power can be developed and black leadership exercised. But a few possibilities can be mentioned. They would include local and State political blocs within the Democratic and Republican parties;

elected Negro officials in local, State and national governments; a corps of Negro lobbyists. They would include mass membership organizations working for the poor Negroes in the same way as the Urban League and the NAACP have served middle-class Negroes. (If the old-line civil rights groups are able to broaden their program and clientele, so much the better.) They would include Negro labor caucuses analogous to the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and Jewish Labor Committee. They would include the Community Action groups established by the War on Poverty; other community organizations combining the functions of improvement associations, parent-teacher associations, etc; organizations of welfare recipients; Negro business organizations, consumer cooperatives, urban renewal organizations. The Negro attorneys would have a central role.

True black power will not substitute peace and quiet for the violence and bloodshed now being experienced. Centuries of repression and inequality will yield a harvest of resentment one way or the other. But there is a world of difference between mindless destruction and rational conflict. Our best hope for the handling of Negro protest is that it be pulled into the orbit of social and political struggles from which resolutions and solutions are capable of emerging.

The Negro as Subject and Object

The development of true black power will not lessen the need for manpower training, job development, and other social programs. Knowledgeable people are all aware that the second stage of the War on Poverty will have to be immensely larger than the first stage has been.

But these essential programs cannot substitute for self-reliance. Negro community life cannot be reconstructed in an urban setting by an occupying army of welfare officials. The government cannot cure the weaknesses of the Negro family, although it can cease and desist from cultivating them. Motivation cannot be instilled from the outside as though motives were vitamin pills.

The Negro is still often regarded as a charitable case, an object of benevolence. This tendency is reflected even in supposedly far-sighted concepts such as the negative income tax, the concept of government as the employer of last resort, and proposals to rebuild the slums.

A minimum income guarantee for families without a potential breadwinner could revolutionize the social welfare system and permit social workers to engage in social work rather than gumshoeing. But a permanent dole for thousands of employable persons is something else altogether even though we call it negative income tax. Putting the poor on a dole is simpler and easier than providing decent work

opportunity. Perhaps it would minimize riots. The country could afford it. But if you believe there is no substitute for work as a source of self-respect, this is a nightmarish possibility.

The concept of government as the employer of last resort sounds suspiciously like a WPA for unemployed Negroes. I am not referring to the once-popular stereotypes of leaf-raking and boon-doggling; the fact is that WPA performed many essential tasks. We can assume that the government, in its role as employer of last resort, would employ the rejected and the disadvantaged to accomplish essential work. But there is still a considerable hazard that projects undertaken by government will constitute a poorly regarded and unprogressive dual economy, operating in the shadow of all the popular misgivings about creeping socialism, the welfare state and the undeserving poor.

Proposals to rebuild the slums often seem to leave the slum-dwellers in a passive posture. Billions of dollars would be appropriated. Major construction firms and building trade unions would be lined up to perform the work. Tenements would be levelled and replaced by high-rise apartments. Rent supplements would be provided so that the former slum-dwellers can afford to pay the rent.

I do not underestimate the value of decent plumbing and the elimination of rats. But this procedure will not break the cycle of

passivity and dependency. It will not prevent the vandalism and neglect which are so common in public-housing developments.

How different it might be if the ghetto residents, through their own organizations, with all necessary help from specialists and experts could be actively involved in planning and procurement; if they could be employed to perform a substantial amount of the work themselves; and if they were to end up owning the properties either as individuals or through cooperatives, condominiums, or corporations. This would be a real Marshall Plan for the ghettos; for while the United States supplied resources under the Marshall Plan, the European countries did their own work and rebuilt their own economies.

The End of Pathos

In the history of any reform movement, there is an initial phase of pathos, troubled conscience, and sweet charity. But this phase cannot go on forever. Eventually sympathy dries up, the troubled conscience has been squeezed for all it is worth, and the charitable theme is more costly than beneficial. Then the disadvantaged group moves from wardship to maturity, or "from pathos to parity" as Richard Hofstadter puts it.

This point was reached many years ago in the career of agrarian protest and labor protest. I think we are fast reaching it in the career of Negro protest.

If Negroes think of themselves, and are thought of, as active proponents rather than passive clients, a good deal of confusion can be dispelled. Techniques of protest will be evaluated critically in accordance with what they actually produce. Negroes will not be encouraged to wallow in self-pity as some do. Whites will stop expecting Negroes to be so grateful when they get what they are entitled to. Whites will not be so shocked when some Negroes become pushy like other people who are beginning to feel their oats. There will be fewer sanctimonious homilies and a more candid confrontation of the real issues involved in equal opportunity.

In the Federalist Papers, James Madison made the classic statement of interest-group politics. He defined a "faction" as "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or interest." He said that "the latent causes of faction are . . . sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society." And he observed that "the regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government."

True black power would integrate the Negro into this classical tumult of American politics.