

BLACK AMERICANS, SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

by Robert F. Haswell

American society is in the throes of a rapid and substantial conceptual change, which has significant implications for other heterogeneous and plural societies, such as South Africa. Many social scientists, particularly urban anthropologists, now recognise the existence of a black American culture or at least a modified value system which might be described as subcultural, and, many of these scholars see it as a part of their responsibility to help alert the nation to the danger-filled dynamics of the American socio-economic system. South African social scientists can follow this lead and contribute towards the lessening of intergroup conflict which springs from a lack of appreciation of differences in life style.

In order to fully comprehend the magnitude and significance of this changing view of American society, it is necessary to review the writings of social scientists on Black Americans, and, it is useful to classify and label the viewpoints as being mainstream or minorstream. The essence of the traditional mainstream view is that Black American culture is simply a crude imitation of, or an improperly learnt, White culture. A Negro sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, in his book on **The Negro Family in the United States** (1939, revised 1966) was responsible for a highly influential version of the doctrine of the cultureless Black American. In a clear exposition of the mainstream scholarly outlook Frazier maintained that "African traditions and practices did not take root and survive in the United States" (Frazier, 1939, pp 7–8) and that "The Negro has found within the patterns of the White man's culture a purpose in life and a significance for his strivings" (Frazier, 1966, p 367). Furthermore, he stated that "... the institutions, the social stratification, and the culture of the Negro minority are essentially the same as those of the larger community..." (Frazier, 1957, pp 680–681). Such pronouncements have been the sources of nearly universal images of Black people in America.

Many social scientists regard Gunnar Myrdal's **An American Dilemma** (1944 and 1962), as the authoritative work on the Negro in the United States. This volume, of more than

1 500 pages contains only two brief chapters on "The Negro Community" and contains an emphatic summary: "American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture" (Myrdal, 1962, p 928). Myrdal lists the following traits as pathological: "the instability of the Negro family, emotionalism in the Negro church, unwholesomeness of Negro recreational activity, narrowness of interests, provincialism, the high Negro crime rate, superstition and personality difficulties." The string of disparaging adjectives makes interesting reading in a book whose author describes his own work as "wholly objective and dispassionate" (Myrdal, 1962, p 11).

Other scholars have also been guilty of an uncritical acceptance of Frazier's doctrine. The historian Kenneth Stampp presented Black Americans as "white men with black skins" (Stampp, 1956, p. vii), while the sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan in **Beyond the Melting Pot** assert that "it is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because—and this is the key to much in the Negro world—the Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect" (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963, p. 53).

model. This model built to explain the experience of the European immigrant groups in the U.S., postulated the modification and then giving up of old country institutions and values as the generations followed one another. The propulsion was provided by occupational mobility and increasing contact with American institutions, especially education. Very little of this fits the cultural experience of the Africans shipped to the New World as slaves, subjected to segregation after emancipation, faced with the mechanisation of agriculture and the decline of low-skill industrial employment, able to afford only the older, inner-city, housing areas while manufacturing employment follows the 'white flight' to the suburbs, and, above all, having to continuously contend with racial

discrimination. Because of the way American institutions operate—from schools to employment to the housing market or the judicial system—most Black Americans have not been treated as equals, and consequently assimilation rarely took place.

Notwithstanding, and despite the search for African cultural “survivals” conducted by anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, Frazier’s mainstream viewpoint held sway until the decade of the sixties. During this period scholars began to follow up the leads uncovered by Herskovits some twenty years earlier. Herskovits launched what we can label as the minorstream viewpoint, by exploding the myth that the Negro was a man without a past (Herskovits, 1941). He emphasised that because the Black people of the New World had an African background, their culture is a product of the interaction between African and Euro-American patterns. Furthermore, he asserted that there were meaningful cultural differences between Blacks and Whites of the United States. Moreover, Herskovits contended that all ways of life are inherently worthy of respect. This position of cultural relativism, contrasted sharply with the ethnocentric mainstream outlook, which assumed that the White American way of life is inherently preferable, and that distinctiveness or divergences from mainstream norms constitute inferiority. Above all, however, Herskovits’s main legacy, in the context of this essay, was the stimulus which his scholarship provided for a considerable number of anthropologists. This stream of writers have succeeded in broadening the previous conceptions of Black culture in America.

Most of the recent writings which will be cited in the following paragraphs appear as chapters in two recent volumes: **Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives** (Whitten and Szwed, 1970); and **Black America** (Szwed, 1970). Erika Bourguignon (1970a and 1970b) has reasserted that African-derived faiths and rituals are a distinctive cultural heritage of New World Blacks, and that there is a continuum which ranges from the more purely African congregations, on some of the Caribbean Islands, to the more diluted Africanisms, such as the call-response preacher-audience relationship, which one may find in some churches in most Black communities in the United States.

Alan Lomax (1970) has presented elaborate evidence that Afro-American music closely resembles typical African song styles, and Charles Keil, in his celebrated book **Urban Blues** (Keil, 1966), demonstrated that the entertainment component of Black culture was not stripped away by slavery. Consequently, the sound and feel of the Black ghetto sharply demarcate it from the White world, and, “perhaps future books regarding black behaviour ought to be **recorded** as well as **written**” (Jones, 1972, p. 17).

Linguists have presented a convincing case that Afro-American speech patterns have their own distinctive structure (Stewart 1970, Dillard, 1970). The culmination of this research is Dillard’s fascinating study of **Black English** in which he documents that the language of about eighty percent of Americans of African ancestry differs

from other varieties of American English. Black English is now seen as a fully-fledged dialect with its own phonetics, vocabulary and a distinctive grammar (Dillard, 1973).

Other authors have pointed out that language functions differently within different cultures and subcultures. Black Americans with their African oral heritage, and often blocked from exercising any real power, place a premium on ‘rapping’. According to Watkins, ‘rapping’ may be defined as conversation “. . . but not the facile, witty and objective conversation of the British upper class; nor is it the impersonal small talk common in America. Instead it is gut-deep, salvation-oriented, ego-meshed, and ultimately directed toward the one-on-one confrontation of individuals . . . It is so highly regarded by blacks that a youth who has not acquired a moderate facility is normally ostracised” (Watkins, 1971, p. 36).

The power of the spoken word is clear in the verbal contest known as ‘sounding’ or ‘playing the dozens’ in the United States, and commonly called ‘rhyming’ in the West Indies (Abrahams, 1970). Kochman (1970) has defined ‘sounding’ as a game of verbal insults and retorts, while Roberts (1973) has identified this performance pattern as a continuation of the West African songs of derision. While on this subject it is interesting to note that Blacking (1961) has documented that the Venda use riddles in the course of a competitive game for young people.

Muhammad Ali is perhaps the most well-known ‘rapper’ but it is seldom appreciated that it is as natural for him, as a Black American, to ‘sound out’ his opponents, as it is for a White Anglo-Saxon athlete to conform to the concept of the humble athlete. A glaring example appeared recently: “it seems he (Ali) has to talk to gear himself up for fighting. So perhaps he should give up fighting (The Natal Witness, Viewpoint, Oct. 2, 1975). This is tantamount to a request that Ali should refrain from behaving like a Black American, and overlooks the fact that Ali’s banter is open to refutation. In fact, the inability of his opponents to ‘cap his rap’ leaves Black Americans in no doubt as to who is the only BLACK man in the ring.

In summary, the minorstream scholars have produced sufficient evidence to indicate that Black American culture is a subculture which features ethnic characteristics. It is overwhelmingly the product of American experience, but this is an experience unique to Black Americans. Thus, their African heritage—primarily some aesthetic and linguistic principles, has been molded by slavery, the American South, and the ghetto conditions of the urban North.

C. L. R. James has asserted that a new community was formed under slavery with “. . . its own Christian church . . . its own system of communication . . . its own value system . . . its own language patterns” (James, 1970, p. 133).

The Swedish anthropologist, Ulf Hannerz, has ‘illuminated the ghetto lifestyle of Black Americans. In **Soulside** he identifies the following as characteristic of “ghetto-specific culture”: female household dominance; a male role focused on toughness, sex, and alcohol; and a hedonistically oriented lifestyle. Apart from overlooking the fact that music,

language, and dress are far more consciously cultivated in the Black ghetto than one would find in other lower-class neighbourhoods, Hannerz was content to document only the evidence of a distinctive lifestyle. He avoided recognising the harsh realities which condition any lifestyle development in Black ghettos.

More light has been shone on the Black ghetto by Lee Rainwater in his appropriately entitled book **Behind Ghetto Walls**. Rainwater attributes many of the lower-class characteristics of Black ghettos to the marginal economic and social position to which a racist society has assigned dark skinned people. People barred from participation in mainstream institutions develop substitutes.

An even more revealing anthropological treatise is Elliot Liebow's **Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men**. This study reveals that Black males, who aspired to be successful husbands and fathers, are overwhelmed: by the surrounding failure of his father; by his unskilled and semi-literate status; by his lack of self-confidence and above all, blocked by virtue of being BLACK. In humiliation the man increasingly seeks refuge on the streetcorner, where he can conceal his failures among other streeters. Of course, these generalisations apply only to certain sectors of any Black community—a community whose culture is far more complex.

Much of the best available insight into Black American culture, appeared in earlier form from the pen of William E. B. DuBois. In one of his best known books, **The Souls of Black Folk** (1903, 1965) DuBois used the concept of "double-consciousness" in order to elaborate on the relationship of Black people to White America. He maintained that "one ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideas in one dark body . . ." (DuBois, 1965, p. 215). Valentine (1971 and 1972) regards the process of biculturalisation as crucial in defining and understanding the Black experience in America. Black Americans, thus, regularly draw upon both an ethnically distinctive repertoire of values and customs and, at the same time, utilise behaviour patterns from the White American mainstream.

DuBois can be recognised as the father of Black studies, a new field in the U.S. He stressed that the cultural distinctiveness of Black Americans rested in the intricate patterns of Black religion, folklore and music. Black studies is a field which aims at documenting the strengths of Black American culture patterns, and thus providing a foil to mainstream scholarship which, as we have seen, found only weakness in Black family life, for instance. The anthropologists Stack (1970) and Young (1970), along with scholars from other fields (Hill, 1971, Billingsley, 1968) herald a constructive start in this area.

DuBois also asserted that the Black man "would not Africanize America", nor would he "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows" (DuBois, 1965, p. 215). This was certainly a prophetic statement, as the civil rights movement which began largely as a struggle for inclusion in White America, has increasingly become a quest for Black power—the power of self-definition and self-

determination. Black Americans are thus more actively rejecting the White American society at the very time when the doors are beginning to open to their participation. The period of legal equality, and potential assimilation, has coincided with the revitalisation and upsurge of an ethnic group's sense of peoplehood.

This ferment in the streets and in the writings of a new genre of social scientists, has resulted in many people now looking upon the U.S. as a heterogeneous rather than as a homogeneous, or assimilated society. This perspective deals mortal blows not only to racist doctrines, but also to the neo-racist advocates and policies of integration. The concept of integration is seen as denying the distinctiveness of America's many ethnic groups, and supporting the ethnocentric notion that mainstream culture is preferable. By contrast the multi-ethnic view of society seeks its equality in a new kind of segregation—in a pluralistic acceptance of differences.

If we now transfer our focus to South African society, it should be clear that we need to move beyond the bifocal conception of cultural relations as either a case for segregation or a need for integration. This conceptual bias is based on the premise that there is a norm against which all behaviour, and franchise qualifications, can be gauged. But we live in a heterogeneous society, in which the norms are not homogeneous, but are defined variably from culture to culture. Consequently, an immediate goal for social scientists in the South African context should be the documentation and analysis of the cultural strengths of this country's many ethnic groups. This will make possible the identification of conflicts between the various norms, and dilute those confrontations which are sparked by negative caricatures.

Social scientists can follow the lead set by the geographer, John Wellington in his classic work: **South West Africa and Its Human Issues**. This book assembles the geographical, historical and political facts which bear on the present situation in the mandated territory, and, because the author felt "... constrained to express an opinion on the rights and wrongs in the wider subject of racial issues" he produced a socially relevant study (Wellington, 1967, p.v). His conclusion has a topical ring: "We White South Africans are capable of rising to the challenge of the New Age and we shall find that in working out the destiny of South West Africa on a fair and just basis we shall have the encouragement and support of all men of goodwill. On the other hand, failure to put wrongs right will play into the hands, not only of our enemies in Africa, but of other enemies who are seeking a moral justification for an entry into Africa 'to free the oppressed'" (Wellington, 1967, p. 422).

Another eminent South African geographer, T. J. D. Fair, whose forte is the spatial evolution of the Southern African economy, has lucidly shown how economic developments and human relationships in this subcontinent are best viewed within a framework of conflicting political and economic pressures. He concluded that:

There is no simple solution to the conflict of these forces for one is born of racial prejudice and fear and the other of economic necessity. Some believe that political separation and economic interdependence can co-exist in a divided society; others that solutions lie only in a common society of Black and White.



This could well be Tally's Corner—a street scene in the Black business district of Blytheville, Arkansas.

What is of fundamental significance in Southern Africa is the universal acceptance of the **interdependence of Black and White**. As long as this continues to influence the minds of men they can adapt and move towards a common goal. (Fair, 1969, p. 376)

The historian J. S. Marais has been in the vanguard of attempts to produce an impartial history of South Africa (Marais, 1938 and 1945). His standpoint is: "that justice . . . does not allow the use of two measures, one for ourselves and our own people, and another for those who differ from us in nationality, or race, or the colour of their skins." (Marais, 1939, p.x). Other historians, social anthropologists and archaeologists have also produced refreshing studies on various aspects of the human history of Southern Africa (Thompson, 1969).

Studies of this kind have exposed the conceptual bias which has prevailed for so long in White scholarship. They have also pointed to the need for a cultural relativist position in our society, and the development of cross-cultural bridges between distinct life styles.

If we in the social sciences are to be a part of the solution—rather than a part of the problem—of this country's social dilemma, we need to espouse neither integration nor separation, but acculturation—acculturation which does not seek to cut the ties that bind South Africans together. Above all, we must recognise that acculturation is a two-way street, that the English and Afrikaner elements of our White society have much to learn from each other, and even more to learn from the Black communities, and that we too can change as a result of those learnings. □