

African Americans Today:

Torn Between Unity and Diversity

Does group identity still mean anything as far as the African-American community is concerned?

Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry analyses the question of class division within the community and racial disparity within American society.

Fifty years ago, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, thus violating the state's segregationist laws. This started a long, successful boycott and ultimately led to the end of segregation in the southern city's public transportation. It was also a highlight of the civil-rights movement, which triumphed with the passage of major laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Legal segregation was thus dismantled, and African-American citizens officially gained equal rights and full citizenship.

It would be erroneous to consider the 1960s Black community as homogeneous. Social and economic disparities existed between southern sharecroppers, ghetto dwellers and members of the Black bourgeoisie, and there were regional differences between the system of Jim Crow in the former slave states and an apparently more open society elsewhere in the country.

There were also divisions and diverging ideologies between the nonviolent movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Power movement that grew after 1965 in urban ghettos in the North and Midwest and on the West Coast. Still, Blacks in the U.S. shared common bonds from the prevailing racism, a history defined by slavery, segregation, legal and economic inferiority, and from resistance to these debilitating forces. Some of these trends have persisted or been exacerbated since.

Black Republicans

The progress registered by African Americans since 1955 is undeniable, and has, in large part, exceeded the expectations of many at the time: more Blacks than ever graduate from high school and have access to university, close to three-quarters now belong to the middle class, and many live in integrated neighborhoods. Striking symbols of their integration into the larger society include the rising number of intermarriages (illegal in many states well into the 60s), and the growing presence and visibility of African Americans in sports, the arts (especially music and cinema) and politics, as exemplified by the influential positions of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice in the Bush administrations and the growing number of black elected officials, which increased between 1970 and 2001 from 1,469 to 9,061¹. These trends indicate not only a transformation in the political, economic and legal status of African Americans, but also a change in the attitudes of many Whites, who are now more willing to accept Blacks as equals.

A telling change can also be seen in the way African Americans vote. After the Civil

War, Blacks favored Republican candidates (such as Lincoln), but in the 1960s they began to support Democrats, as Kennedy and then Johnson pushed for desegregation and showed some sympathy toward the goals of the civil-rights movement, including enfranchisement of Blacks in the segregationist South. Black voters chose candidates for their stand on the problems and status of their group as a whole: their priorities were racially based.

The situation is now somewhat different. The black middle class has grown since the 1960s, thanks in large part to Civil Rights Acts, including the Fair Housing Act of 1968, but also to affirmative action (starting in 1965), which favored the hiring and admission to college of a certain percentage of minority people. Middle-class Blacks have had access to higher paying white-collar positions and to better neighborhoods outside dilapidated black ghettos. They do not necessarily vote as 'Blacks' anymore.

The 1980 election of Reagan was a strong indication of this change: for the first time since Kennedy was elected, a small but significant number of African Americans voted Republican, favoring Reagan as the best person to defend their class or religious interest rather than for his position on specifically Black issues. Since then, some Blacks have continued to vote Republican, and the Black electorate has become increasingly divided politically and economically, especially in local elections. Nationally though, the vast majority of African Americans still favor Democrats (almost 90% voted for Kerry in 2004).² These choices are indicative of the integration of the black community in the larger society and of growing disparities within

the group as a whole: the goals of middle-class black voters are no longer based solely on racial logic.

The African-American community is also increasingly divided as regards residential location. Integration is not a general phenomenon. There has always been a black bourgeoisie, but when segregationist laws and practices made it impossible for African Americans to reside outside black neighborhoods even if they could afford to do so, the black bourgeoisie once lived alongside poorer Blacks. Only since the 1970s has moving out of the ghetto been possible and even accepted in many areas. Those who can afford to choose to live in wealthier neighborhoods, and the black middle class has joined its white counterpart in the suburbs, as have other more affluent ethnic communities. Middle-class Blacks still tend to reside closer to the city though – in the inner suburbs of large metropolitan areas. There are also regional disparities: suburban areas in old rust-belt cities such as Detroit are far less integrated than coastal metropolises like Los Angeles or New York.³

Vicious Circle

Black middle-class residents live a very different life from poorer Blacks confined to the ghettos of American inner cities. Changes in the economy since the 1970s have shifted many industrial jobs from the central cities to Latin America, Asia and elsewhere, where pay is lower and unions are weaker. Concurrently, employment opportunities moved from manufacturing to the service sector. Inner cities – a traditional place of residence for most Blacks – suffered greatly: they provided fewer jobs but also collected fewer local taxes, which led to diminished services (poorer public schools and transport systems, reduced local welfare services, etc.). City schools produce fewer graduates who, in turn, lack the skills to obtain better jobs: many ghetto residents are thus stuck in low-paying 'MacJobs' that offer few or no social benefits and little chance for promotion (many

American jobs in fast food, cleaning, services to the elderly, etc. provide no health insurance or retirement benefits). Part of the African-American community has thus failed to benefit from the positive changes brought about after the 60s.

Furthermore, the justice system has 'demonized' young ghetto males, who have the highest crime and imprisonment rates: 38% of all prisoners and 42% of those on death row are African Americans, while Blacks represent only 13% of the total U.S. population.^{3/5} Poverty and ghetto squalor may explain why they resort to crime, but the American justice system is still racially biased against young black males, who are arrested more often and receive stiffer sentences. In the ghetto, poverty, exploitation and political and cultural isolation also generate problems such as a higher rate of broken families, teenage pregnancy and drug use.

The black community now appears divided along class and residential lines; an affluent family living in a wealthy integrated suburb has little in common with a poor one from an urban ghetto. There are signs that African Americans still share certain common traits and values, however. The rise of a black middle class has not erased all racial biases, and, in many ways, people are still identified by skin color. Black males in particular are still often stereotyped as potential criminals, as shown in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. This alienation reinforces a feeling of solidarity in the black community, which still faces many problems.

Recent studies, for instance, show that voting remains a difficult matter for many Blacks, especially in some southern states.⁴ The scandal in Florida during Bush's 2000 election showed that voting is still racially defined. The long delay in rescuing the mostly black residents who remained in New Orleans following hurricane Katrina in late summer 2005 further reinforced the notion of racial disparity. Many middle-class Blacks, no matter where they live or what they earn, still feel directly concerned

by such issues. In the last decade, there has also been a tendency for more affluent African Americans to create Black areas in affluent suburbs, arguing they feel more comfortable living with their 'own kind' and raising their children within black culture. The 'color line' is thus still an issue in today's America in spite of differences among African Americans themselves.

Black AND Hispanic

The 1965 law on immigration has expanded and diversified the immigrant community, and this may affect the black group in the future. Blacks, no longer the largest 'minority' group, are now outnumbered by Hispanics, who numbered almost 40 million in 2003, as opposed to just over 37 million African Americans out of a total American population of slightly over 290 million. Locally, Blacks have lost some of their political clout.¹ Hispanic and West Indian immigrants also include a sizeable number of 'Blacks'. Census results from as early as 1990 showed a large proportion of Panamanians, Dominicans or even Hondurans and Puerto Ricans who self-identified as 'Black'. (The Census requests respondents to identify their race or ancestry, and finer categories show some immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries identifying as both 'Hispanic' and 'Black')³. In some ways, these developments are also changing the racial configuration of the United States and the definition of what it is to be 'Black'. Race still matters very much and still defines people in the U.S. today, but diversity (economic, residential, and with regard to national origin) may become an increasingly important aspect of blackness in the future. 'Black neighborhoods' change quickly and now comprise older African-American sections as well as West Indian or African areas. Intermarriage is growing, even though it is still limited: interracial couples comprised only about 5% of all married couples in 2000, up slightly from a decade earlier.³ The offspring of biracial couples also participate in the redefinition

of what it means to be black. This was acknowledged by the Census bureau in 2000, when it added a new category, 'other,' to its self-identification boxes. Indeed, many people did not recognize themselves as either 'black' or 'white,' but as multiracial.

In spite of undeniable progress made by Blacks in the last half century, racial problems have clearly not vanished or been solved in contemporary U.S. society. For one thing, part of the African-American community is still stigmatized in racial terms; and for another, Blacks are often identified by skin color, and most still recognize blackness as part of their heritage and identity. Blacks are increasingly diversified by class, but to a great extent remain unified by a common heritage and the weight of persistent racism in many aspects of contemporary America. ■

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Sources for Notes:

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