

Contributions in Black Studies

A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 1 *Inaugural Issue*

Article 4

January 1977

Black Sociologists: A Critical Analysis

Douglas Davidson
Amherst College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs>

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Douglas (1977) "Black Sociologists: A Critical Analysis," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Douglas Davidson

BLACK SOCIOLOGISTS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

I should state at the outset that I do not consider myself to be an expert on Black sociologists. I have not read all of their works; nor am I familiar with their personal histories. The following comments are based on a familiarity with some of the research they have published. The fact that I am not an expert and that my knowledge of their contributions is limited reflects the subordinate status they occupied in the profession. In addition, it reflects the professional chauvinism and covert racism rampant within the profession. That is, it is a gross contradiction of sorts that I, a Black sociologist, am relatively ignorant of the contributions of the preceding generation. I am more familiar with the works of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Parsons, Merton, Homans, etc., than I am of Ira Dea Reid, Charles S. Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Oliver Cox, E. F. Frazier, etc. This is due primarily to the type of training sociologists receive during their tenure as undergraduate and graduate students. This reflects who the profession or “science” considers important—that is, who made a significant contribution to the field. It is obvious from my university experience, that Black sociologists were insignificant for I rarely, if ever, encountered their works as part of any instructor’s reading lists. In race relations courses, some of their works may have been included as a part of the “supplemental” reading list, but it was not required. These practices led me and other young Black sociologists to conclude that our predecessors were second-rate, mediocre members of the profession. I am certain that they had a similar effect on young white sociologists also. As my knowledge and understanding of the profession increased, I became convinced that this was no oversight. That is how Black sociologists were perceived and treated and consequently indicated how I and other younger Black sociologists could expect to be treated. However, the fact that Cornell is sponsoring this series of colloquia on Black sociol-

ogists, and the fact that other institutions and prominent professionals in the discipline are currently expressing a great deal of interest in them might be viewed as an indication that the discipline is attempting to rectify some of its past crimes of omission. At any rate, this paper is not supposed to present a critical analysis of the discipline, but of a racial segment of the discipline. Thus, I shall attempt to do that based on my admittedly limited knowledge of its subject matter. However, it will become apparent as I proceed that it is impossible, as I see it, to assess critically the impact and influence of Black sociologists without assessing critically the larger society and the politics of the discipline which purports to study that society.

Cruse argued quite persuasively in his book, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, that past Black creative artists and intellectuals suffered from the lack of a cultural ideology. Consequently, they usually embraced ideologies, theories, and philosophies which were not reflective of the realities of the Black community. That is, they did not develop unified, systematic, theories and ideologies based on the historical experiences and current realities of their racial group. Cruse noted further that they tended to embrace a liberal integrationist ideology and methodology without critically assessing the implications of such a commitment. Cruse asserted that Black intellectuals and creative artists accepted this ideology because it was consistent with their own experiences. That is, as Milton Gordon and others have noted, a considerable amount of racial integration on a social level occurs among intellectuals and artists. In essence, they tend to form their own sub-community. Gordon asserted that this phenomenon occurs as a result of the marginal status intellectuals from racial minorities occupy vis-à-vis their own ethnic/racial worlds. Since they find the experience stimulating and interesting, they tend to assume that this type of cultural ethnic "democracy" would be good for the country as a whole.

Gordon observed further that although Black intellectuals were not fully integrated into this intellectual-artistic class, they did become alienated from their communities. This detachment, Cruse argued, led to Black creative intellectuals and artists' acceptance of integrationism as the dominant concept of what the social order should be about. In essence, they believed that what was relatively good for them could be good for everybody. In so

doing, according to Cruse, they contributed to the fragmentation, stagnation, exploitation, and cultural paralysis of the Black community.

Now, one may legitimately ask, how is all this related to Black sociologists? It is my contention that they too accepted the ideology/goals/tactics of integrationism. As such, they were guilty of the same mistakes as the creative intellectuals and artists Cruse discussed in his provocative analysis of the Harlem Renaissance. That is, they did not develop a viable cultural identity that adequately and accurately defined the Black community's political and economic existence in the United States. As Cruse so cogently pointed out:

. . . without a cultural identity that adequately defines *himself* (emphasis Cruse), the Negro cannot even identify with the American nation as a whole. He is left in the limbo of social marginality, alienated and directionless on the landscape of America, in a variegated nation of whites who have not yet decided on their own identity. The fact of the matter is that American whites, as a whole, are just as much in doubt about their nationality, their cultural identity as are Negroes. Thus, the problem of Negro cultural identity is an unsolved problem within the context of an American nation that is still in process of formation. (Harold Cruse, 1967), pp. 12-13.

Cruse's observation concerning white America's cultural ambivalence is especially true of white intellectuals, including white sociologists. This phenomenon manifests itself most clearly among the white sociologists who had the greatest influence on Black sociologists-liberals and Marxist-socialists. White liberal sociologists and Marxist oriented sociologists maintain a similar position regarding the issue of cultural and racial identity. That is, both groups accept the concept of universalism or the theory that regional, ethnic, or racial differences must be eliminated or absorbed in order to create a harmonious, rational, smoothly functioning social system. For those committed to the liberal ideology, the existence of ethnic subcultural identities, religious identities, or racial identities are inductors of "cultural lags" within society. Liberals and Marxists are committed to the notion of evolutionary social progress. Groups within the society which identify with traditional values, religion, their local community, and the like

are viewed as the source of social problems because their emancipation from the past is incomplete.

In dealing with the issue of race, the liberal ideology asserted its bankruptcy. It argued that color was an accident of birth. In the truly rational, liberated progressive social order, color and race would have no empirical correlates. The advocates of the liberal ideology, including Marxist oriented sociologists and non-Marxist liberals, acknowledged the gap between reality and their desired norm, but they actively opposed reality. The corollary of the white liberal ethic which asserted that white sociologists should negate Black culture and Black identity was the proposition that Black sociologists should negate themselves and their communities also. Obviously, the advocates of the liberal ideology understood the relationship between science and ideology which was so cogently stated in an article by Brother Abd-al Hakimu (alias Gerald McWorter):

“Science is inevitably a hand-servant of ideology, a tool for people to shape, if not create reality.” (Abd-al Hakimu, 1969), p. 28.

In all fairness to Black sociologists, one must emphasize the fact that their acceptance of the liberal ideology evolved out of the racial climate of their time. The preceding generation of Black sociologists had to contend with the realities of the United States during the late '20's, 30's, and 40's. This was the period of legal Jim Crow segregation in the South, and illegal Jim Crow segregation in the North. It was a period characterized by Ku Klux Klan lynching of Blacks in the South, the mass migration of Blacks to urban ghettos in the North, and race riots in major northern urban centers. It was a period of intense labor agitation and the Communist Party was quite strong and active in the Black community. As a friend of mine once remarked: “At that time, the Communist Party was the most active and concerned group which appeared to be focusing on the needs of our people.” Black sociologists also had to contend with the Social Darwinist theoreticians whose “scientific” efforts were directed toward justifying and rationalizing the subordination and subjugation of Blacks on the grounds of their alleged biological inferiority. Given these realities, Black sociologists' acceptance of liberal ideology was a radical, progressive stance even though the implications and po-

tential consequences for the Black community were not well thought out.

The consequences of accepting the liberal ideology—the Marxist or non-Marxist version—is most vividly reflected in the works of E. Franklin Frazier and Oliver Cox. Although Frazier and Cox differed in their political-economic analysis of the Black community, both saw integration/assimilation as the only viable goal for Blacks. In essence, both accepted the liberal ideological premise that there was no viable Black culture worth retaining. Frazier lamented over the demise of Black folk culture in his *Negro Family in the United States* and in *Black Bourgeoisie*. He was concerned that the Black migration into the Northern and Western urban centers was destroying that authentic folk culture. He seemed to assume that culture was something people could discard as they do old clothes. He failed to realize that as Black people moved to the Northern urban centers, they brought their culture with them. This was most vividly revealed in Claude Brown's excellent biography—*Manchild in the Promised Land*. Frazier failed to detect this phenomenon because he had accepted the non-Marxist liberal ideological perspective which saw only social pathologies within the urban ghettos. Thus, the "culture of poverty" thesis had its genesis in the works of Frazier and other Black and white non-Marxist liberals studies of the Black urban ghetto.

Cox, on the other hand, did not focus on the issue of culture at all. As Cruse noted, this is the usual practice of Marxist liberals. That is, they emphasize the importance of political and economic factors while neglecting or glossing over the cultural factors. Thus, while Cox was very critical of the Park liberal theories of race relations, he still concluded that Blacks would ultimately assimilate into the American mainstream in the same manner as other immigrant ethnic groups. Cox apparently ignored the fact that other immigrant groups were never totally assimilated into the mainstream since they still retained many of their cultural traditions. If Andrew Creely is correct, they appear to be experiencing a cultural renaissance of their own as a consequence of their experiences on these shores. Cox also appeared to be strangely optimistic concerning white America's ability to rid itself of the persistent racism which permeates the American social structure. The racist policies and practices inherent in the

American social order has and continues to serve as impermeable barriers to the assimilation of Black people.

The primary failure of Black sociologists, then, was their acceptance of this liberal ideology. In so doing, they contributed to the cultural negation of the Black community. They, as well as their white peers/mentors/sponsors, denied the existence of Black culture. In their efforts to convince the dominant society that Black people were human beings, they had to deny the existence of anything that made Black people different. In order to accomplish this objective, they had to indicate to the power structure that the obvious differences in the life-styles of Blacks and whites were due to the socio-economic conditions of the Black community. That is, the differences were due to inadequate, unequal, or the total absence of educational training. Their works for the most part, concentrated on demonstrating to the dominant society that by increasing the educational resources allocated to the Black community, these differences would be eradicated. After all, Black people were just white people with dark skins.

Again, in all fairness to Black sociologists, they unintentionally performed some excellent socio-cultural studies of the Black community. However, they did not emphasize the strength, beauty, vitality, and resiliency so characteristic of Black culture. Had they done this more consciously they would have made a substantial contribution to the current generation of Black sociologists and to the evolution of a Black sociological perspective.

Of course, one could argue that Black sociologists had no alternative. They were pioneers during a period when racism outside and inside the sacred walls of academe were more overt, vicious, and blatant. In addition, they had, just as we have, to conform to the standards imposed upon them by their white sociological superiors. They had to prove themselves to their white allies in the profession who were often taking a risk by assisting Blacks to enter the profession. Then, as now, there were many whites who were of the opinion that Blacks could not perform academically as well as they. Thus, they had to suffer the insults, indignities, and isolation peculiar to pioneers. In order to prove their competence, they had to demonstrate a mastery of the discipline which exceeded that of many of their white peers and colleagues. In other words, their work had to conform more to the prevailing scientific norm than that of their white colleagues. This often led to an in-

ordinate concern with methodology, formal correctness and orthodoxy of content and conclusion. As members of a subordinate, powerless, allegedly biologically inferior racial group, their status within the white academic world was a reflection and manifestation of the status of the Black community within the United States. They were, as we are, the colonized elite of their historical period.

Black sociologists were also dependent upon the largesse and liberalism of influential whites in order to acquire professional reputation and prestige. The publishing houses, professional journals and magazines, and professional associations were white dominated and controlled. In order to get anything published or to present scholarly papers, they had to conform to standards and criteria of excellence imposed by this ruling elite. One cannot minimize the effects such control has on the structure and content of their scholarly efforts. The fact that several of them survived the rigors of graduate school, obtained their Ph.D.'s and published several excellent research monographs was no small accomplishment. Thus, while I have been quite critical of their inadequacies, I am most humble and appreciative of their efforts. For had it not been for their pioneering efforts, I, possibly, would not be here, making these remarks and observations. I would like to emphasize the fact that my criticisms are not intended to convey any lack of respect. Rather, they have evolved from my contention that a people must critically assess their past and learn from their mistakes so as not to make the same mistakes in the future.