Mayor Allen.

The Social Power of the Negro

by James P. Comer

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The concept of "black power" is an inflammatory one. It was introduced in an atmosphere of militancy (during James Meredith's march through Mississippi last June) and in many quarters it has been equated with violence and riots. As a result the term distresses white friends of the Negro, frightens and angers others and causes many Negroes who are fearful of white disapproval to reject the concept without considering its rationale and its merits. The fact is that a form of black power may be absolutely essential. The experience of Negro Americans, supported by numerous historical and psychological studies, suggests that the profound needs of the poorest and most alienated Negroes cannot be met—and that there can therefore be no end to racial unrest—except through the influence of a unified, organized Negro community with genuine political and economic power.

Why are Negro efforts to achieve greater unity and power considered unnecessary and even dangerous by so many people, Negro as well as white, friends as well as enemies? I believe it is because the functions of group power—and hence the consequences of political and economic impotence—are not understood by most Americans. The "melting pot" myth has obscured the critical role of group power in the adjustment of white immigrant groups in this country.

When immigrants were faced with discrimination, exploitation and abuse, they turned in on themselves. Sustained psychologically by the bonds of their cultural heritage, they maintained family, religious, and social institutions that had great stabilizing force. The institutions in turn fostered group unity. Family stability and group unity—plus access to political machinery, jobs in industry and opportunities on the frontier—led to group power: immigrants voted, gained political influence, held public office, owned land and operated businesses. Group power and influence expanded individual opportunities and facilitated individual achievement, and within one or two generations most immigrants enjoyed the benefits of first-class American citizenship.

The Negro experience has been very different. The traumatic effects of separation from Africa, slavery, and the denial of political and economic opportunities after the abolition of slavery created divisive psychological and social forces in the Negro community. Coordinated group action, which was certainly appropriate for a despised minority, has been too little evident; Negroes have seldom moved cohesively and effectively against discrimination and exploitation. These abuses led to the creation of an impoverished, undereducated, and alienated group—a sizable minority among Negroes, disproportionately large compared with other ethnic groups. This troubled minority has a self-defeating "style" of life that leads to repeated failure, and its plight and its reaction to that plight are at the core of the continuing racial conflict in the U.S. Only a meaningful and powerful Negro community can help members of this group realize their potential, and thus alleviate racial unrest. The importance of "black power" becomes comprehensible in the light of the interrelation of disunity, impotence, and alienation.

The roots of Negro division are of African origin. It is important to realize that the slave contingents brought out of Africa were not from a single ethnic group. They were from a number of groups and from many different tribes with different languages, customs, traditions, and ways of life. Some were farmers, some hunters and gatherers, some traders. There were old animosities, and these were exacerbated by the dynamics of the slave trade itself. (Today these same tribal animosities are evident, as in Nigeria, where centuries-old conflict among the Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba tribes threatens to disrupt the nation. A significant number of slaves came from these very tribes.)

The cohesive potential of the captives was low to begin with, and the breakup of kinship groupings, which in Africa had defined people's roles and relations, decreased it further. Presumably if the Africans had been settled in a free land, they would in time have organized to build a new society meeting their own needs. Instead they were organized to meet the needs of their masters. The slaves were scattered in small groups (the average holding was only between two and five slaves) that were isolated from one another. The small number and mixed origins of each plantation's slaves made the maintenance of any oral tradition, and thus of any tribal or racial identity and pride, impossible. Moreover, any grouping that was potentially cohesive because of family, kinship, or tribal connections was deliberately divided or tightly controlled to prevent rebellion. Having absolute power, the master could buy and sell, could decree cohabitation, punishment or death, could provide food, shelter, and clothing as he saw fit. The system was engraved

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in law and maintained by the religious and political authorities and the armed forces; the high visibility of the slaves and the lack of places to hide made escape almost inconceivable.

The powerless position of the slave was traumatic, as Stanley M. Elkins showed in his study of Negro slavery. The male was not the respected provider, the protector and head of his household. The female was not rearing her child to take his place in a rewarding society, nor could she count on protection from her spouse or any responsible male. The reward for hard work was not material goods and the recognition of one's fellow men but only recognition from the master as a faithful but inferior being. The master —"the man"—became the necessary object of the slave's emotional investment, the person whose approval he needed. The slave could love or hate or have ambivalent feelings about the relationship, but it was the most important relationship of his life.

In this situation self-esteem depended on closeness or similarity to the master, not on personal or group power and achievement, and it was gained in ways that tended to divide the Negro population. House slaves looked down on field hands, "mixed-bloods" on "pure blacks," slaves with rich and important masters on slaves whose masters had less prestige. There was cleavage between the "troublemakers" who promoted revolt and sabotage and the "good slaves" who betrayed them, and between slave Negroes and free ones. The development of positive identity as a Negro was scarcely possible.

It is often assumed that with the end of the Civil War the situation of the free Negroes was about the same as that of immigrants landing in America. In reality it was quite different. Negroes emerging from slavery entered a society at a peak of racial antagonism. They had long since been stripped of their African heritage; in their years in America they had been unable to create much of a record of their own; they were deeply marked by the degrading experience of slavery. Most significant, they were denied the weapons they needed to become part of American life: economic and political opportunities. No longer of any value to their former masters, they were now direct competitors of the poor whites. The conditions of life imposed by the "Black codes" of the immediate postwar period were in many ways as harsh as slavery had been. In the first two years after the end of the war many Negroes suffered violence and death at the hands of unrestrained whites; there was starvation and extreme dislocation.

In 1867 the Reconstruction Acts put the South under military occupation and gave freedmen in the 11 Southern states the right to vote. (In the North, on the other hand, Negroes continued to be barred from the polls in all but nine states, either by specific racial qualifications or by prohibitive taxation. Until the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in 1870, only some 5 per cent of the Northern Negroes could vote.) The Reconstruction Acts also provided some military and legal protection, educational opportunities, and health care. Reconstruction did not, however, make enough land available to Negroes to create an adequate power base. The plantation system meant that large numbers of Negroes remained under tight control and were vulnerable to economic reprisals. Although Negroes could outvote whites in some states and did in fact control the Louisiana and South Carolina legislatures, the franchise did not lead to real power.

This lack of power was largely due to the Negro's economic vulnerability, but the group divisions that had developed during slavery also played a part. It was the "mixed-bloods" and the house slaves of middle- and upper-class whites who had acquired some education and skills under slavery; now many of these people became Negro leaders. They often had emotional ties to whites and a need to please them, and they advanced the cause of the Negroes as a group most gingerly. Moreover, not understanding the causes of the apathy, lack of achievement, and asocial behavior of some of their fellows, many of them found their Negro identity a source of shame rather than psychological support, and they were ready to subordinate the needs of the group to personal gains that would give them as much social and psychological distance from their people as possible. The result was that Negro leaders, with some notable exceptions, often became the tools of white leaders. Throughout the Reconstruction period meaningful Negro power was being destroyed, and long before the last Negro disappeared from Southern legislatures Negroes were powerless.

Under such circumstances Negro economic and educational progress was severely inhibited. Negro-owned businesses were largely dependent on the impoverished Negro community and were operated by people who had little education or experience and who found it difficult to secure financing; they could not compete with white businesses. Negroes were largely untrained for anything but farm labor or domesti work, and a white social structure maintaining itself through physical force and economic exploitation was not likely to provide the necessary educational opportunities. Minimal facilities, personnel and funds were provided for the "Negro schools" that were established, and only the most talented Negroes were able—if they were lucky—to obtain an education comparable to that available to whites.

As John Hope Franklin describes it in *Reconstruction after the Civil War,* the Reconstruction was ineffective for the vast majority of Negroes, and it lasted only a short time: Federal troops had left most Southern states by 1870. While Negroes were still struggling for a first foothold, national political developments made it advisable to placate Southern leaders, and the Federal troops were recalled from the last three Southern states in 1877. There was a brief period of restraint, but it soon gave way to violence and terror on a large scale. Threats and violence drove Negroes away from the polls. Racist sheriffs, legislators, and judges came into office. Segregation laws were passed, buttressed by court decisions and law enforcement practices, and erected into an institution that rivaled slavery in its effectiveness in excluding Negroes from public affairs—business, the labor movement, government, and public education.

At the time—and in later years—white people often pointed to the most depressed and unstable Negro and in effect made his improvement in education and behavior a condition for the granting of equal opportunities to all Negroes. What kind of people made up this most disadvantaged segment of the Negro community? I believe it can be shown that these were the Negroes who had lived under the most traumatic and disorganized conditions as slaves. Family life had been prohibited, discouraged or allowed to exist only under precarious conditions, with no recourse from sale, separation, or sexual violation. Some of these people had been treated as breeding stock or work animals; many had experienced brutal and sadistic physical and sexual assaults. In many cases the practice of religion was forbidden, so that even self-respect as "a child of God" was denied them.

Except for running away (and more tried to escape than has generally been realized) there was nothing these slaves could do but adopt various defense mechanisms. They responded in various ways, as is poignantly recorded in a collection of firsthand accounts obtained by Benjamin A. Botkin. Many did as little work as they could without being punished, thus developing work habits that were not conducive to success after slavery. Many sabotaged the master's tools and other property, thus evolving a disrespect for property in general. Some resorted to a massive denial of the reality of their lives and took refuge in apathy, thus creating the slow-moving, slow-thinking stereotype of the Southern Negro. Others resorted instead to boisterous "acting out" behavior and limited their interests to the fulfillment of such basic needs as food and sex.

After slavery these patterns of be-

havior persisted. The members of this severely traumatized group did not value family life. Moreover, for economic reasons and by force of custom the family often lacked a male head, or at least a legal husband and father. Among these people irresponsibility, poor work habits, disregard for conventional standards, and anger toward whites expressed in violence toward one another combined to form a way of life—a style—that caused them to be rejected and despised by whites and other Negroes alike. They were bound to fail in the larger world.

When they did fail, they turned in on their own subculture, which accordingly became self-reinforcing. Children born into it learned its way of life. Isolated and also insulated from outside influences, they had little opportunity to change. The values, behavior patterns and sense of alienation transmitted within this segment of the population from generation to generation account for the bulk of the illegitimacy, crime, and other types of asocial behavior that are present in disproportionate amounts in the Negro community today. This troubled subgroup has always been a minority, but its behavior constitutes many white people's concept of "typical" Negro behavior and even tarnishes the image many other Negroes have of themselves. Over the years defensive Negro leaders have regularly blamed the depressed subgroup for creating a bad image; the members of the subgroup have blamed the leaders for "selling out." There has been just enough truth in both accusations to keep them alive, accentuating division and perpetuating conflicts, and impeding the development of group consciousness, cooperation, power, and mutual gains.

It is surprising, considering the harsh conditions of slavery, that there were any Negroes who made a reasonable adjustment to freedom. Many had come from Africa with a set of values that included hard work and stability of family and tribal life. (I suspect, but I have not been able to demonstrate, that in Africa many of these had been farmers rather than hunters and gatherers.) As slaves many of them found the support and rewards required to maintain such values through their intense involvement in religion. From this group, after slavery, came the God-fearing, hardworking, law-abiding domestics and laborers who prepared their children for responsible living, in many cases making extreme personal sacrifices to send them to trade school or college. (The significance of this church-oriented background in motivating educational effort and success even today is indicated by some preliminary findings of a compensatory education program for which I am a consultant. Of 125 Negro students picked for the program from 10 southeastern states solely on the basis of academic promise, 95 per cent have parents who are regular churchgoers, deeply involved as organizers and leaders in church affairs.)

For a less religious group of Negroes the discovery of meaning, fulfillment, and a sense of worth lay in a different direction. Their creative talents brought recognition in the arts, created the blues and jazz, and opened the entertainment industry to Negroes. Athletic excellence provided another kind of achievement. Slowly, from among the religious, the creative, and the athletic, a new, educated, and talented middle class began to emerge that had less need of white approval than the Negroes who had managed to get ahead in earlier days. Large numbers of Negroes should have risen into the middle class by way of these relatively stable groups, but because of the lack of Negro political and economic power and the barriers of racial prejudice many could not. Those whose aspirations were frustrated often reacted destructively by turning to the depressed Negro subgroup and its way of life; the subculture of failure shaped by slavery gained new recruits and was perpetuated by a white society's obstacles to acceptance and achievement.

In the past 10 years or so the "Negro revolt"—the intensified legal actions, nonviolent demonstrations, court decisions, and legislation—and changing economic conditions have brought rapid and significant gains for middle-class Negroes. The mass of low-income Negroes have made little progress however; many have been aroused by civil rights talk but few have benefited. Of all Negro families, 40 per cent are classified as "poor" according to Social Security Administration criteria. (The figure for white families is 11 per cent.) Low-income Negroes have menial jobs or are unemployed; they live in segregated neighborhoods and are exploited by landlords and storekeepers; they are often the victims of crime and of the violent, displaced frustrations of their friends and neighbors. The urban riots of the past few years have been the reaction of a small segment of this population to the frustrations of its daily existence.

Why is it that so many Negroes have been unable to take advantage of the Negro revolt as the immigrants did of opportunities offered them? The major reason is that the requirements for economic success have been raised. The virtually free land on the frontier is gone. The unskilled and semiskilled jobs that were available to white immigrants are scarce today, and many unions controlled by lower-middle-class whites bar Negroes to keep the jobs for their present members. The law does not help here because Negroes are underrepresented in municipal and state legislative bodies as well as in Congress. Negroes hold few policy-making positions in industry and Negro small businesses are a negligible source of employment.

Employment opportunities exist, of course—for highly skilled workers and technicians. These jobs require education and training that many Negroes, along with many white workers, lack. The training takes time and requires motivation, and it must be based on satisfactory education through high school. Most poor Negroes lack that education, and many young Negroes are not getting it today. There are Negro children who are performing adequately in elementary school but who will fail by the time they reach high school, either because their schools are inadequate or because their homes and subculture will simply not sustain their efforts in later years.

It is not enough to provide a "head start"; studies have shown that gains made as the result of the new preschool enrichment programs are lost, in most cases, by the third grade. Retraining programs for workers and programs for high school dropouts are palliative measures that have limited value. Some of the jobs for which people are being trained will not exist in a few years. Many students drop out of the dropout programs. Other students have such self-defeating values and behavior that they will not be employable even if they complete the programs.

A number of investigators (Daniel P. Moynihan is one) have pointed to the structure of the poorer Negro family as the key to Negro problems. They point to an important area but miss the crux of the problem. Certainly the lack of a stable family deprives many Negro children of psychological security and of the values and behavior patterns they need in order to achieve success. Certainly many low-income Negro families lack a father. Even if it were possible to legislate the father back into the home, however, the grim picture is unchanged if his own values and conduct are not compatible with achievement. A father frustrated by society often reacts by mistreating his children. Even adequate parents despair and are helpless in a subculture that leads their children astray. The point of intervention must be the subculture that impinges on the family and influences its values and style of behavior and even its structure.

How, then, does one break the circle? Many white children who found their immigrant family and subculture out of step with the dominant American culture and with their own desires were able to break away and establish a sense of belonging to a group outside their own—if the pull was strong enough. Some children in the depressed Negro group do this too. A specific pull is often needed: some individual or institution that sets a goal or acts as a model.

The trouble is that racial prejudice and alienation from the white and Negro middle class often mean that there is little pull from the dominant culture on lower-class Negro children. In my work in schools in disadvantaged areas as a consultant from the Child Study Center at Yale I have found that many Negro children perceive the outside culture as a separate white man's world. Once they are 12 or 14 years old—the age at which a firm sense of racial identity is established—many Negroes have a need to shut out the white man's world and its values and institutions and also to reject "white Negroes," or the Negro middle class. Since these children see their problems as being racial ones, they are more likely to learn how to cope with these problems from a middle-class Negro who extends himself than from a white person, no matter how honest and free of hostility and guilt the white person may be.

Unfortunately the Negro community is not now set up to offer its disadvantaged members a set of standards and a psychological refuge in the way the white immigrant subcultures did. There is no Negro institution beyond the family that is enough in harmony with the total American culture to transmit its behavioral principles and is meaningful enough to Negroes to effect adherence to those principles and sufficiently accepted by divergent elements of the Negro community to act as a cohesive force. The church comes closest to performing this function, but Negroes belong to an exceptional number of different denominations, and in many cases the denominations are divided and antagonistic. The same degree of division is found in the major fraternal and civic organizations and even in civil rights groups.

There is a special reason for some of the sharp divisions in Negro organizations. With Negroes largely barred from business, politics and certain labor unions, the quest for power and leadership in Negro organizations has been and continues to be particularly intense, and there is a great deal of conflict. Only a few Negroes have a broad enough view of the total society to be able to identify the real sources of their difficulties. And the wide divergence of their interests often makes it difficult for them to agree on a course of action. All these factors make Negro groups vulnerable to divide-and-conquer tactics, either inadvertent or deliberate.

Viewing such disarray, altruistic white people and public and private agencies have moved into the apparent vacuum—often failing to recognize that, in spite of conflict, existing Negro institutions were meeting important psychological needs and were in close contact with their people. Using these meaningful institutions as vehicles for delivering new social services would have strengthened the only forces capable of supporting and organizing the Negro community. Instead, the new agencies, public and private, have ignored the existing institutions and have tried to do the job themselves. The agencies often have storefront locations and hire some "indigenous" workers, but the class and racial gap is difficult to cross. The thong-sandaled, long-haired white girl doing employment counseling may be friendly and sympathetic to Negroes, but she cannot possibly tell a Negro youngster (indeed, she does not know that she should tell him): "You've got to look better than the white applicant to get the job." Moreover, a disadvantaged Negro—or any Negro—repeatedly helped by powerful white people while his own group appears powerless or unconcerned is unlikely to develop satisfactory feelings about his group or himself. The effects of an undesirable racial self-concept among many Negroes have been documented repeatedly, yet many current programs tend to perpetuate this basic problem rather than to relieve it.

A solution is suggested by the fact that many successful Negroes no longer feel the need to maintain psychological and social distance from their own people. Many of them want to help. Their presence and tangible involvement in the Negro community would tend to balance the pull—the comforts and the immediate pleasures—of the subculture. Because the functions of Negro organizations have been largely preempted by white agencies, however, no Negro institution is available through which such people can work to overcome a century of intra-Negro class alienation.

Recently a few Negroes have begun to consider a plan that could meet some of the practical needs, as well as the spiritual and psychological needs, of the Negro community. In Cleveland, New York, Los Angeles, and some smaller cities new leaders are emerging who propose to increase Negro cohesiveness and self-respect through self-help enterprises: cooperatives that would reconstruct slums or operate apartment buildings and businesses providing goods and services at fair prices. Ideally these enterprises would be owned by people who mean something to the Negro community—Negro athletes, entertainers, artists, professionals, and government workers—and by Negro churches, fraternal groups, and civil rights organizations. The owners would share control of the enterprises with the people of the community.

Such undertakings would be far more than investment opportunities for well-to-do Negroes. With the proper structure they would become permanent and tangible institutions on which the Negro community could focus without requiring a "white enemy" and intolerable conditions to unify it. Through this mechanism Negroes who had achieved success could come in contact with the larger Negro group. Instead of the policy king, pimp, and prostitute being the models of success in the subculture, the Negro athlete, businessman, professional, and entertainer might become the models once they could be respected because they were obviously working for the Negro community. These leaders would then be in a position to encourage and promote high-level performance in school and on the job. At the same time broad measures to "institutionalize" the total Negro experience would increase racial pride, a powerful motivating force. The entire program would provide the foundation for unified political action to give the Negro community representatives who speak in its best interests.

That, after all, has been the pattern in white America. There was, and still is, Irish power, German, Polish, Italian, and Jewish power—and indeed white Anglo-Saxon Protestant power—but color obviously makes these groups less clearly identifiable than Negroes. Churches and synagogues, cultural and fraternal societies, unions, business associations, and networks of allied families and "clans" have served as centers of power that maintain group consciousness, provide jobs and develop new opportunities, and join to form pressure and voting blocs. The "nationality divisions" of the major parties and the balanced ticket are two reminders that immigrant loyalties are still not completely melted.

The idea of creating Negro enterprises and institutions is not intended as a rejection of genuinely concerned white people or as an indictment of all existing organizations. White people of good will with interest, skills,

and funds are needed and—contrary to the provocative assertions of a few Negroes—are still welcome in the Negro community. The kind of "black power" that is proposed would not promote riots; rather, by providing constructive channels for the energies released by the civil rights movement, it should diminish the violent outbursts directed against the two symbols of white power and oppression: the police and the white merchants.

To call for Negro institutions, moreover, is not to argue for segregation or discrimination. Whether we like it or not, a number of large cities are going to become predominantly Negro in a short time. The aim is to make these cities places where people can live decently and reach their highest potential with or without integration. An integrated society is the ultimate goal, but it may be a second stage in some areas. Where immediate integration is possible it should be effected, but integration takes place most easily among educated and secure people. And in the case of immediate integration an organized and supportive Negro community would help its members to maintain a sense of adequacy in a situation in which repeated reminders of the white head start often make Negroes feel all the more inferior.

The power structure of white society—industry, banks, the press, government—can continue, either inadvertently or deliberately, to maintain the divisions in the Negro community and keep it powerless. Social and economic statistics and psychological studies indicate that this would be a mistake. For many reasons the ranks of the alienated are growing. No existing program seems able to meet the needs of the most troubled and troublesome group. It is generally agreed that massive, immediate action is required. The form of that action should be attuned, however, to the historically determined need for Negro political and economic power that will facilitate Negro progress and give Negroes a reasonable degree of control over their own destiny.

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"My interest in race relations," h says, "developed at an early age, in par from both troublesome and satisfyin experiences as a Negro youngster in low-income family in a racially integrated community."

He adds that work as a voluntee in an agency concerned with social rehabilitation of families with problem influenced his decision "to train in psychiatry and to focus on preventive an social aspects."

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The photographs accompanying th article are by Joel Katz. The picture were taken in Mississippi and Connecticut in the summers of 1964 and 1966 The Mississippi photographs are from Scholar of the House project which wo the Strong Prize in American Literature in 1965.