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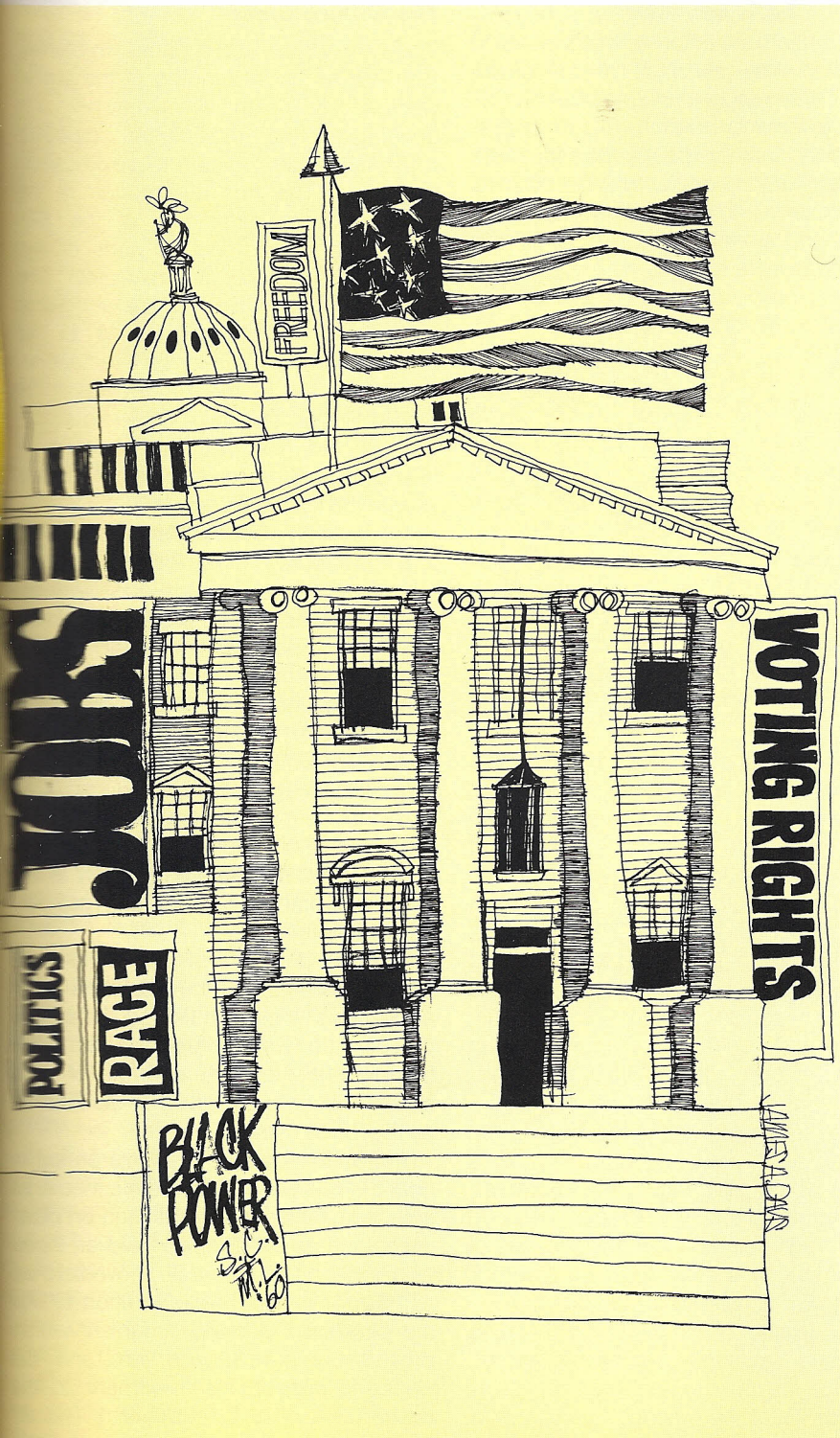
Race and Politics

Reflections On the '60s

By Mack H. Jones

A superficial analysis of the consequential events, situations, and individuals of the last decade reveals a seemingly contradictory—if not inexplicable—set of social fragments. The dominant circumstance of the decade, of course, was the series of social currents, referred to loosely as the Civil Rights Movement—CRM.

The CRM was clearly the crucial social development of the decade and as it unfolded it made indelible imprints upon the political culture of the United States. These imprints will remain important social determinants for the future. While one can be reasonably assured that the legacy of the '60s will be an important factor for decades to come, the nature of its effects cannot be determined so easily. This is so, because in its wake CRM left a disparate set of social fragments whose meanings cannot be understood until the whole era is placed in its proper historical and systemic context.

The overall objective of the CRM was to create enough social tension to persuade those who held power in the United States that accession to Black demands represented a lesser threat to social peace than trying to maintain the status quo. Perhaps somewhat ironically, representatives from ruling class-dominated structures, the multi-national corporations, the national government, organized labor, major colleges and universities, philanthropic foundations, church organizations, and diverse professional associations supported the CRM in one way or another.

Indeed, the support of these entities was instrumental in the success of the CRM in removing practically all legal impediments to Black participation in the political and economic life of America. Moreover, the much ballyhooed Kerner Report, which proclaimed white racism to be the critical disease afflicting the society, was the product of persons representing ruling class interests. Yet it could not then, nor can it now, be denied that these very same institutions and individu-

4 als occupying pivotal positions in them are responsible for, and realize material benefits from, the economic and cultural imperatives which sustain Black oppression and against which the CRM was arrayed.

Another contradictory fragment growing out of the '60s is the fact that in spite of the comprehensive legal gains during the '50s and '60s, by the late '70s the gap between Blacks and whites on practically all accepted indicators of socio-economic well-being remained a wide and growing chasm.

Yet in the face of this objective reality, the unfolding of contradictory fragments continued. Many of the Black activists who played leadership roles during the '50s and '60s have become "responsible" leaders dispersed throughout the government and private sectors from where they have joined the ruling class in perpetrating the counter-revolutionary notion that the important battle has been won and that all that remains to be done is to consolidate the gains of the '50s and '60s by working within the system.

Transformation Process

The behavior of white liberals constitutes still another fragment in need of an interpretation. In the face of overwhelming evidence that the substantive changes promised by the legal victories have in no way been realized, the liberal establishment has joined with the avowed enemies of progress to oppose programs which would convert the promises into reality.

The attacks upon affirmative action and equal opportunity programs have not been led by the proverbial redneck, but rather by the liberals. The intellectual justification for this onslaught has not come from the Mississippi States or Georgia Techs, but rather from the Harvards and MITs, the Glazers and the Moynihans.

The transformation of the Black leadership class of the '60s presents still more fragments. Many of the leaders who started out as liberal reformers became self-styled revolutionaries—unencumbered by

a sense of history—who slipped into naive military adventurism as a prelude to affiliation with one mystical cult or another. Others sought refuge in narrow cultural movements predicated upon the assumptions that the people had lost their culture and that cultural rejuvenation was a necessary and sufficient condition for liberation. Parenthetically, it might be said that the peoole showed no signs of recognizing their lost culture in the facsimiles reconstructed for their benefit.

Finally, one other fragment, and a most disturbing one, growing out of the '60s deals with the destruction of a whole class of Black leaders by the intelligence apparatus of the national and local governments and by the various and sundry vigilante groups. In addition to the outright assassination and the illegal incarcerations, one of the most heartrending developments of the '60s is the story of how scores of dedicated activists were driven to the brink of insanity by the machinations of the state intelligence apparatus.

These developments are all fragments of a social whole—a social whole which has been made more obscure rather than more intelligible by the self-serving and system maintenance reductionism of contemporary scholarship and commentary.

Black scholars of the '70s, therefore, have the task of beginning to reconstruct holistically the social history of the past decade or so, so that these seemingly disjointed and contradictory fragments can be understood in their historical and systemic context. They must provide the conceptual framework that goes beyond the superficial in understanding the basic forces which gave rise to the fragments. The nature of the relationship between these fragments and the basic values of the American society must be clarified. An answer is needed for the basic question of whether or not the rise of these reactionary responses represents aberrations or are they logical and necessary outgrowths of the American politico-economic system.

The Wallace Group

There are two key assumptions which may facilitate an understanding of the social whole of the '60s and which may help one understand the experiential calculus which links quite logically these disparate fragments. The first assumption is the notion that developments of the '60s should be understood as parts of two concentric dialectical processes. The broader dialectic involved the worldwide struggle of exploited peoples to rid themselves of domination by international capitalists, led by the ruling class in the United States. The more limited dialectical process involved the struggle of Blacks to rid themselves of racial oppression in the United States.

The second assumption is the notion that developing almost simultaneously with the CRM—but nevertheless in reaction to it—was a white protest movement which was born and nurtured among white Southerners but which soon became a national movement. The white protest movement, which was led ultimately by Governor George Wallace of Alabama, though racially motivated, also reflected the more general desire to have the views and preferences of white rank and file reflected more adequately in the American political culture and policies derived therefrom.

Thus, although the CRM and the white protest movement of the '60s were polar opposites in their own limited dialectical process, they were kindred currents in the broader dialectic, the struggle of rank and file to rid themselves of domination by the ruling class.

The white movement was interpreted in both the popular and academic media as anti-establishment at times, and on other occasions as anti-Black. However, those who interpreted the white movement as anti-establishment made no effort to link the perceived personal troubles, which presumably predisposed rank and file whites to support the movement, to the basic laws of U.S. capitalism. Rather, popular discussion attempted to link the

personal troubles of white rank and file with the perceived gains of Blacks during the '50s and '60s. This, of course, obscured rather than clarified the real causes of the inequities suffered by white rank and file and made it even more difficult for white rank and file and their putative leaders to understand that in the U. S. politico-economic system the inequities are systemic conditions and that racism is used as a tool to ration the debilities and inequities disproportionately among Black citizens. The failure of opinion makers to deal with this rather obvious point paved the way for the evolution of the Southern white movement into a national phenomenon.

As a national phenomenon, the Southern white movement conceded the illegality of state sanctioned discrimination, but opposed all practical programs designed to transpose the de jure gains by Blacks into de facto reality. Since the Federal judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, had been instrumental in the legal advances, efforts were made to discredit the courts by blaming them for existing social problems, both real and imagined.

The sundry Federal agencies responsible for implementing and monitoring various civil rights efforts were assailed as powerful bureaucrats unaccountable to the public who were threatening the nation's social fiber. Affirmative action programs of all types—including those involving employment, access to educational institutions, representation on various administrative agencies—were categorized as agents of reverse racism.

In due course, the philosophical assumptions of the white movement began to have noticeable impact upon the political culture and to structure the outcomes of the political process. A deliberate effort was made to appoint to the Supreme Court persons sympathetic to the white position. The anti-Black faction is now the majority and has already begun to reverse the gains achieved under the Warren Court.

At the lower court level, preliminary rulings have upheld white plaintiffs who charged that affirmative action programs constituted reverse racism. At the Executive level, the Federal government has been accused by the Civil Rights Commission of gross failure to meet its responsibilities under the equal protection clause.

Intelligence Network

In non-governmental sectors, colleges and universities, both public and private, have cut back and eliminated outright in some cases programs developed to increase minority representation among faculty and students. White males have organized within various church groups to "protect" themselves from perceived reverse racism. The philanthropic foundations which funded activist Black groups during the '60s have diminished their support considerably.

In the area of law enforcement, enormous sums of money have been allocated to enhance the repressive capabilities of the police force. Black groups and individuals have been targeted by intelligence agencies, state, national, and local, and such information gathering has been developed to a fine point. Efforts to place greater community control over constabulary forces have been stymied.

New apologists for the status quo have come forth in arts and letters. Eminent social scientists have published works reinforcing the white counter movement. Harvard sociologist Norman Glazer, for example, published a book debunking affirmative action programs. Another group of sociologists from Midwestern universities have written in support of policies designed to diminish, and impose a low ceiling on the number of Blacks in the armed forces.

Jewish interest in the Eastern literary establishment, including heretofore friendly publications such as Commentary and Dissent, have led the charge against perceived "Black racism" and published numerous essays by Black writers who accepted their negative assessment of the Black movement.

The above incomplete recitation shows that what began as a Southern white movement did indeed become national. Once the de jure obstacles to Black fulfillment were removed, in the absence of basic changes in the U. S. economic system, the complementarity of interests among white rank and file of the North and South, the corporate world, and white socio-political institutions in general became obvious.

The parochial Southern interests were joined by their ideological brethren such as the militarists, the professional anticommunists, the monetarists, the religious fundamentalists, and antiquated proponents of laissez faire economists to not only stymie Black interest, but to arrest social progress in general.

Whether Black people will continue to retrogress or move toward a more equitable social order will be determined to a great extent by the action strategies which Blacks as a cohesive force develop over the next decade or so. □