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The Black Family

Old Politics & The New Orthodoxy

By Richard A. English

Three years ago *The New York Times* published a three-part series on American families with the following banner headlines: "Breakup of Black Family Imperils Gains of Decades," "Heading a Family: Stories of 7 Black Women" and "Concern for Black Family; Attention Now Turns to Men."

Although the articles were published in 1983, the headlines could have appeared more than 20 years ago. The *Times*, in its series, sharply and dramatically refocused attention on a long-standing nationwide debate concerning the structural quality and the viability of Afro-American families. The debate's reoccurrence in the 1980s can be attributed, in part, to two developments: the 1982 U.S. Population Census report which revealed that approximately 47 percent of all Black households were headed by women with about 55 percent of Black babies born to single mothers, and the impact of racism on Black economic progress.

It is not surprising that this issue has not been silenced, as some have argued, following the controversy over the 1965 report on the "Negro Family" by Daniel P. Moynihan. Some contend that report had the effect of curtailing serious research on minority problems in the inner city, as so-called liberal scholars shied away from

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researching behavior construed as unflattering to racial minorities.

This represents an inaccurate description of the state of research on Black families. In fact, research on Black families over the past 20 years has been objective and has covered a range of hypotheses and topics of interest. Moreover, the past 20 years have been the most prolific period to date in Black family research. This reflects an increased level of participation of Black social scientists and other culturally sensitive scholars committed to the study of Black family life.

Along with my colleague, Professor Walter Allen at the University of Michigan, I have identified more than 700 research publications on Black families published in a 15-year period beginning in 1965. These studies do not suggest the suppression of unflattering facts about Black families as has been argued. Collectively, they document a broader, more sophisticated and systematic portrayal of the social organization and ways of life of Black families in the U.S. These studies explore and identify environmental and historical conditions which determine critical life outcomes for Black families.

Despite more objective scientific scrutiny of the Black family during the past two decades, the politics of race continues to confound and overshadow this discussion. The alleged role of the Black family as the cause of Black economic inequality has reemerged in both the popular media and academic discussions.

Once again, poverty and inequality among millions of Black Americans is being blamed on the Black family, not the pernicious system of institutional racism. Given the continuing debate about racism and the Black family, the quest for a common understanding and national public policy agenda to address the problems of economic equality of Blacks is rendered more complicated and challenging.

The Old Orthodoxy

Questions about the stability and viability of Afro-American families have occupied center stage of public policy debate and academic inquiry throughout most of the 20th century. This debate and concern began in an atmosphere of racism and controversy.

Many scholars and social critics believed that social programs created under Reconstruction did not "fail" because of poor design or implementation, but due to deficiencies inherent to Blacks. Proponents of this view argued that social programs and public policies designed to enhance the

economic, social and political status of Afro-Americans were doomed to failure, writes George Frederickson. Social Darwinism provided an ideology of oppression, helping to sustain Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement in the political arena and racist beliefs in the academic community.

In the 1960s and 1970s, policymakers suggested that Afro-Americans could not be helped by Great Society programs because of their family structures, values and culture. These policymakers called for a period of "benign neglect" during which to evaluate existing social programs and assess petitions for more social legislation in areas of poverty, unemployment, racism and the welfare of children.

Today, the new Darwinists and proponents of the free market contend that the marketplace has not been allowed to work its benign effects because government power has been used to force affirmative action and racial quotas on employers and other institutions. They argue that Blacks have already suffered as a result of affirmative action policies.

The Moynihan Report of 1965 attributed most of the "blame" for contemporary Black poverty to past slavery and the subsequent inheritance of family "instability."

The intellectual roots of this discussion are found in the pioneering 1930s studies of Black families by the late Professor E. Franklin Frazier. The classic formulation of the relationship between Black families and the economy provided by the Frazier tradition places heavy emphasis on the destructive legacy of Afro-American families as the basis of Black poverty. Weakened by slavery, advocates of this position contended, Black families were unable to withstand the pressures of urban life. This view of the Black family prevailed until about 1965 and served as the orthodox position on the Black family.

The lynchpin of the old orthodoxy is the contention that the persistence of poverty

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and patterns of blocked mobility among Black Americans in the face of expanding occupational opportunities for Blacks was the legacy of slavery which destroyed the family. This doctrine contained the following four arguments:

- The family is a critical and underlying factor in Black poverty.
- The weaker and shadow role of Black men prevents them from playing effective roles as providers, parents and spouses.
- The extensive role of women in family matters erodes the effectiveness of families.
- The prevalence of households headed by women with young children sustains biographies of welfare dependency and generations of poverty.

While the *legacy of slavery* as a cause of these conditions has been discredited by social science research, a new orthodoxy has now emerged about the position of Blacks and their families in U.S. society.

The New Orthodoxy

Today's version of the old arguments attempts to explain the persistence of pov-

erty among millions of American Blacks by treating the family as the major source of the problem. The legacy of slavery as the primary destructive force of Black families has been replaced by a series of other factors. These factors have had a similar effect: the creation of a weakened family system that is unable to adequately care, protect, and provide for its members. These factors include:

- *The welfare system*, which, it is argued, encourages families to split up, thereby resulting in the development of a welfare dependency for generations of Blacks.
- *The "culture of poverty,"* which, it is argued, causes welfare dependence to become so entrenched that it creates its own subculture with values that encourage poverty and discourage self-reliance.
- *Teenage pregnancy*, accompanied by low marriage rates and low utilization of contraception, including abortion.
- *The poverty programs*, which destroyed incentives and created an underclass of welfare beneficiaries.
- *Joblessness amongst Black men*, especially young adults.
- *The media*, which conveys sexually charged messages.

Ironically, the proponents of the new orthodoxy, David Featherman, Robert Hauser, Thomas Sowell and William Wilson, for example, virtually discount the role of racial discrimination as a causative factor in Black poverty. Also, there is no existing research which explores the relationship between any of these variables and their presumed contribution to Black poverty.

Declining Race Exploration

The contention that race is no longer relevant as an inhibiting factor in securing jobs and social mobility for Blacks has supplanted the legacy of slavery hypothesis. There has emerged the position which resonates with William Wilson's thesis that race is "declining in significance" in U.S. society. This position essentially argues that social change spawned by civil

rights legislation, executive orders and affirmative action programs removed the last traces of discrimination from the marketplace. Hence, affirmative action programs, race-related federal legislation and the like are no longer necessary to ensure equality of opportunity.

Further, this argument assumes that meritocracy or "universalistic" considerations have become the prevailing criteria for the labor market and social mobility. Racial discrimination per se in this formulation is no longer a deterrent to economic advancement and occupational mobility.

A number of scholars have taken issue with the new orthodoxy proponents' emphasis on the declining significance of race. Melvin L. Oliver (UCLA) and Mark A. Glick (New School for Social Research) in 1982 analyzed data collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1962 and 1973 on occupational changes amongst Black and white men. They found that there were occupational gains during the 1960s for Black males. However, these gains were not very significant compared to those of white males. While Blacks were able to show an improvement in the ability to inherit the status of their upper white-collar fathers, they still lagged behind whites in this important social stratification process. Both investigators reached two critical conclusions:

1. "Present rates of Black mobility are woefully inadequate in moving blacks and whites toward occupational equality. Present rates of black and white mobility, if held constant, would change occupational inequality only slightly. The only means of effecting genuine movement towards parity would be if blacks had mobility rates similar to whites." (If this were the case, it would require two generations in order for Black-white occupational equality to occur. Given present mobility trends, it would roughly take another 200 years of striving with the same commitment and determination that Blacks showed in the 1960s for America to achieve occupational equality between the races.)

2. In finding no evidence to support a key policy implication from the new orthodoxy — namely, that so-called "affirmative action" programs directed at economic equality for Blacks are no longer needed, Oliver and Glick concluded that stronger government policy is needed if U.S. society is to honor its commitment to racial equality.

This foregoing research strongly supports the position that "race" still remains important in American society, and that it is a critical determinant of Black life chances and mobility in the U.S. The intellectual task is not to explain its decline, but its enduring or inclining significance. The results of this debate are critical in that they will serve to restructure the social perception and social policy concerning the interventions created for the nation's neediest families.

Role of Government Programs

Affirmative action policies and programs have no place in the firmament of the new orthodoxy. In fact, such programs are considered superfluous and counterproductive as public policy. It is argued that Blacks who are unskilled and uneducated are unable to benefit from affirmative action programs. It is further argued that the problems confronting this ever-increasing group of compartmentalized Blacks, labeled as the underclass, are classbased and not ultimately racial. Hence, public policy should address inequality on a broad class front.

The evidence does not support this thesis. In fact, wherever there are gains by Blacks, there is a close connection between these gains and the presence of strong affirmative action.

Theodore Cross in 1984 summarized a broad range of evidence and research from reports of the U.S. Census Bureau, other federal agencies and universities, supporting the contention that affirmative action has not been a deterrent to Black mobility. Rather, it has served as an effective public policy in combating racism. He notes:

- "In the four years following the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, black voter registration in the southern states increased by nearly 50 percent. By 1976, the potential black vote had doubled."

- "During the 1970s, many law firms established affirmative-action plans in the employment of associates. In that decade the number of black attorneys nearly tripled, and from 1970 to 1979 the percentage of black members of the bar increased by 67 percent."

- "Under court or administrative orders, many city fire departments instituted affirmative-action employment plans during the 1970s. From 1970 to 1980 the percentage of black firemen increased 132 percent from 3.4 to 7.9 percent."

- "In the mid 1960s, business and professional organizations implemented affirmative-action programs in various professional occupations. From 1968 to 1980, the percentage of blacks holding professional or technical jobs increased by 63 percent."

Thus, there is strong evidence that affirmative action has helped Blacks to advance. The gains Blacks can point to during the 1970-1979 period — when Black families' incomes were losing ground compared with whites' — are specifically associated with areas of employment and opportunity where intense affirmative-action policies prevailed.

Death of the Extended Family

This argument contends that the extended Black family is in a weakened position based largely upon the rising proportion of households headed by women, mainly unwed and in their teens. The alleged death of the extended family in the new orthodoxy changes the time of death from slavery to some unspecified period during the last 20 years. Some proponents of the new orthodoxy blame Great Society programs.

Research in this area over the past 20 years has been ignored by the new orthodoxy scholars, who show familiarity with literature supporting their positions of overwhelming pathology in the Black com-

munity, but who exhibit a disdain for the literature which shows its strengths. This literature demonstrates the following:

- The viability and widespread presence of extended kinship patterns among Black Americans of all social classes. (Joyce Aschenbrenner, 1973; Demitri Shimkin, Edith Shimkin and Dennis Frate, 1978; Harriette McAdoo, 1978).
- When there has been an absence of kin based upon blood, marriage or adoption, poor Blacks in particular have invented fictive kin. (C. Stack, 1974).
- Extended kinship systems have been and are critical sources of help-giving and support for many Black families. (Richard English and Walter Allen, 1983; Lawrence Gary, 1978; R. J. Taylor, 1981; Richard English, 1984).

Rather than exhibiting demise, the Black family's survival in America over the last 300 years is quite remarkable. The issue is not its death, but the extent to which it can sustain its viability as a critical source of support for millions of Black men, women and children.

Future Directions

Implications of this analysis suggests three directions for public policy:

- The highest priority be given to the enactment of a nationwide income maintenance plan for families and individuals, especially the working poor and intact families.
- The enactment of federally guaranteed employment programs, a policy initiative overwhelmingly supported by a majority of American people as shown by some national public opinion surveys.
- The reaffirmation and strengthening of affirmative action in all areas of public life, including use of time tables, numerical goals, and employment plans for rectifying past discrimination. □

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