A Renewed Perspective on Urban Problems

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"The appalling thing about war," said Georg Brandes," is that it kills all love of truth." The war on and about urban problems is no exception. Few people who are acquainted with the truth are saying quite what they mean. Programs of action and research about urban problems have largely fallen out of perspective.

It should be clear to start with that the "problems of the city" today are really the problems of the Negro in the city. There are, of course, various Spanish-speaking counterparts here and there, but the Negroes can stand as the archetypal problem. Problems of housing, employment, welfare, crime, and education could all be dealt with if there weren't the Negro dimension. Indeed, so could problems of traffic and air pollution.

The initial question is whether this is a new problem, or a familiar old American problem with new complications. We have had constantly emerging ethnic populations in the cities, for example, the Irish, the Italians, and the Jews. Typically, they have emerged from abject poverty. Typically, they have emerged from crime-producing, dependency-producing ethnically segregated urban slum ghettoes. Typically, they have emerged from a state of low skill and low education. Typically,

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they have been a scandal and a threat to the older populations of the cities.

Now, we have a new mass migration to the cities: the Negroes, whom a perverted history is finally bringing to a state of emergence. The special complications that exist for this new population, as against the others, are obvious enough. For example:

1) Color is more difficult to overcome than ethnos—in the initial bars of discrimination, and in the latter processes of cultural merger.

2) The economy is a more difficult one into which to emerge. In the older eras it was more possible to move into the economy with lower skills and lower education. (In 1900, about 20 percent of the nonfarm jobs were unskilled, in 1950 about 8 percent. In 1900 about 6 percent of the American population were high school graduates; in 1950 about 60 percent).

But both of these complications are matters of degree. There are enough indications that color *qua* color can fade as a factor in America. Negro college graduates can now compete with white college graduates on the larger job markets. The white daughters of upper-class Brahmins are about as likely to marry Negroes today as they were to marry second generation Sicilians at the turn of the century.

And the differential problem of entering the economy is something less—or different—than it seems at first glance. There are fewer unskilled jobs by far in a manual training sense, but the number of service and white collar jobs which really require no specific skills or parental traditions is increasing. On the face of it, the economy is not that much more impenetrable for the 25-year-old Negro population in the city today, given its pattern of capabilities, than it was for the 25-year-old immigrant population a half century ago.

Black Attributes

But there are other complicating differences between the two immigrant eras having to do not with white attitudes or the economy, but with the developed stance, and mood, of the Negro community itself. First of all, there may be much corre-

spondence between the problems of the Negro immigrant population in the cities today and those of the older ethnic immigration populations; but, on another level, it is specious to call them both immigrant populations. Negroes are old Americans, sixth-generation Americans. First- and second-generation Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants imported their depressed state from Europe, and could only blame Europe. Negroes, as far as memory wanders, were deliberately and artificially depressed by America, and can only blame America. Indeed in the last 20 years, the official American society has repeatedly and unprecedentedly proclaimed its own guilt. There wasn't Irish Anger (at least, not at America), or Italian or Jewish Anger. There is Black Anger.

There is also, uniquely, Black Pessimism. The old immigrants came hopefully from hopeless societies looking for gold in the American streets. It took a backbreaking generation or two, but they found it. Negroes have awakened sharply to the fact that they have lived in a highly mobile society for longer than anyone, and they haven't seemed to do much moving. They are wary about high expectations.

There is something else, even less tangible: The old immigrants moved from one system into another. They had been depressed but not so alienated in the Old Country, where rigid economic and social stratification was normative. In their own fashion, they had been part of that system. They came to America, and, living on their cultural capital, were a restless interim population until they entered the American system on one acceptable level or another. But the Negroes, Americans only, were embedded in an American subsystem for generations without any sense of having an interim status preparatory to entering the main American system. There developed a *stable* Black Isolation, cultural and intellectual, of a kind ethnic immigrants didn't experience.

These black attributes have created time-bearing complications. They depress motivation and educational standards. They probably have a specific relationship to job entry. Perhaps the job market of the 1900s and that of the 1960s are not differentiated as much by the new requirement for skilled workers as by the new requirement for socialized and acculturated workers. Employers of the 1900s were receptive to deviant immigrant language, habits, clothing, and mien, partly because of their ultimate reliance on the immigrant labor market,

partly because of the kinds of jobs, partly because of the kinds of expectations they had, and partly because they had not yet invented personnel officers and testing procedures. In this sense, because of their longtime isolation, a segment of the Negro population is "immigrant" in their deviant cultural characteristics of language, habit, clothing, and mien, without even the clarifying grace of being foreign. This sizable segment of the Negro population is probably shut out of the effective job market not so much because of the lack of specific work skills as because of the lack of specific social skills. This is the same segment of the Negro population which is a square peg in the round hole of the American school system because of characteristics resulting from Black Isolation, compounded by Black Pessimism.

These unique black community attributes are not irreversible, any more than are the attributes of the white community or its economy. The stability of the intellectual and cultural isolation of the Negroes has broken down at a number of points. The surveys indicate that at least three quarters of the Negro population, while wary, expect to make substantial gains in the coming years, and they count those gains in terms of entering the main American system. And the Black Anger, except as evidenced in the ideology of a few, still hangs on that eventuality.

The indications are that the Negro population is beginning to emerge and move into American society in the traditional pattern of past immigrant groups. If this generation in the ghettoes can be called, shamefully, a first generation—perhaps on the grounds that it has now substantially transformed itself from the dimensions of a caste to the dimensions of a submerged and emerging ethnic group—then second- and third-generation advances resembling those made by earlier Irish and Italian groups, for example, can be made. The signals are in the upward mobility indices: rising rates of educational achievement, of occupational advancement, of home ownership.

There are several heavily qualifying points that have to be made about this prognostication. First, there may not be time for second- and third-generation advances similar to those of earlier immigrant groups. Black Anger (like "black nationalism") is still a fragmented phenomenon. Specifically, there is *the* Black Anger of the educated or sophisticated young ideo-

logues who are essentially radical, with a more or less black twist, in their approach to the total American system. This shades off into the ghetto anger of the less educated and less sophisticated young men on the streets, many of whom may be backing into the ideology after finding that their anger is more potent when it is Black. They are the spearpoint of the larger, older ghetto population whose frustrations can turn at any given point to anger, if the divisions are made sharp enough, to Black Anger. This population is the revolutionary's dream. In the 1930s, the revolutionaries failed because they couldn't engender a discrete enough lower class polarization, partly because of their own internal ambiguities. The black radicals have no such ambiguities (unlike the middle-aged and middle-class Negroes and whites who echo Black Anger)—and they see the necessary polarization at hand. Stokely Carmichael sees the polarization depending on a chain of white action and Negro reaction. He speaks openly of his hope of goading the whites into the kind of police action that will mobilize a more cohesive Black Anger.

There is another aspect of black attributes that denies the applicability of the traditional pattern of immigrant advancement. Partly because of the deep cultural isolation, there prevails among the critical mass of angry young Negroes—those who are not ideological and not upwardly mobile—an exaggerated sense of white happiness. There is a strong tendency to believe that white lower middle-class life is easier, more glamorous, and more affluent than it is. This in part accounts for the frequent dissatisfaction with entering the system at what seem to be low and grubby rungs. But coupled with that is the staple of Black Anger: if the American society did it to us deliberately, and admits having it done to us, then reparations are due, and now, not opportunity but reparations. Such reparations don't call for some "natural process" of advancement, but for a compensatory "leap forward" of a kind that has never taken place in the American society.

In the reparations demand, it has been noted that, while absolute statistical progress has been made by the Negro community in occupational status, education, and so forth, there has not been enough *relative* progress with respect to the whites who have also been progressing. It is likely, however, that second- and third-generation Irish and Italian immigrants never "caught up" with the native white population of the cities. They probably still haven't caught up economically, oc-

cupationally, educationally. As groups, they became a stable part of the system, in some relatively lower pattern, and progressed as the entire system progressed, making *relative* advancement as more and more individuals "trickled upward" in the system. That road to equality is a multigenerational one, but it's the only one that America or any society had ever offered to new, formerly depressed, population groups.

In short, there are indications that the Negro population is now on that road, that an appreciable number of Negroes are moving stably into the system, and that the individual trickle upward has begun. But there are also indications that there is not enough time for the traditional process to take place. The Negro stance is understandably not the stance of the old immigrant groups. The bulk of the Negro population, especially the youth, are not enchanted by historical prospects or sociological processes. There is a war on for the Negro mind. No one can be sure what would happen if black radicalism won that war, or at least acquired enough strength to wage it seriously. The chances are that, joined with extremist white backlash and the state of the world, the consequences would be considered disastrous by all reasonable men.

But for whatever reason, the fact remains that there is great urgency in many quarters to engineer a drastic hastening of the integration of Negroes into American society. There has been an outpouring of programs and an even greater outpouring of proposals for programs. A couple of billion dollars have been invested.

These questions then deserve to be raised: *Is* there any way in which a depressed population group can be propelled by an automated leap forward into the center of the system? Even if the two billion were fifty billion? Is there any way to accelerate the current Negro trickle upward into the system? Are the couple of billions being spent most profitably toward that end? Can we—and by what means—hold the society together while that process is going on? Why do so many of our current programs seem to be failing?

"The System" and the Cinderella Myth

If there is a single key to these questions, it lies in the nature of "the system" which is under such constant reference.

The system has two prime characteristics. In the first place, it describes the web of correlations, of dense mutuality, that exists among the agenda items called "urban problems": Income-education-occupation-housing-welfare-crime-health-family-tone-participation-status. For any given group this is a constellation of interacting factors, but the complex nature of the interaction is crucial. It is often taken for granted that if one can engineer changes in one accessible part of this system, it will affect the other parts. Thus, if educational achievement is advanced, then occupational status will be advanced, and so forth. If housing is improved, or health, then all other conditions will respond.

But the formula simply doesn't work. It certainly doesn't work well enough to solve any speedup problems. The research indicates that the significant causal factors related to group educational advancement are those considered the *end* products of education: the occupation and the educational traditions of the family. A few groups came to America already equipped with such traditions, notably the Jews and the Chinese. Others didn't. Their group educational status tended to rise *after* their group occupational status rose.

Of course, if educational achievement could be accelerated spectacularly, it undoubtedly would affect occupational and other patterns. The fallacy seems to lie in the belief that single elements can be torn out of the system and massively altered by direct remedy. This is the Social Engineering Fallacy, the Cinderella myth as rendered by social reformers. In the current era, for example, the indications are that direct educational remedies, whether better school plants, or smaller classes, or more funds, don't help all that much. The other unadjusted elements of the system that bear on education are too powerful.

Housing provides another kind of example. The assumption is often made that better housing means less delinquency, better health, and so forth. The evidence does not point to this result. If the same families in the same situation live in better housing, they produce substantially no less delinquency and enjoy no better health. But, more than that, better housing typically becomes deteriorated housing when the other life conditions of the tenants do not change.

Occupation is obviously the operational key to this system, and even it is not exempt from the Social Engineering Fallacy.

For example, day after day around the country, jobs are offered unskilled young people who want jobs but don't take them, or who take them and then drop out.

Of course, the system does spiral upward. It has for all the other emerging groups, and it is even doing so for the Negro. But the spiral has always seemed to be "spontaneous," the result of some "natural" social process.

Obviously, the appearance of spontaneity is somewhat exaggerated. Social planning and government intervention have played a significant role in the system's spiral at various times. The creation of a free secondary and higher educational system is an example. But typically these interventions have worked slowly and indirectly in effecting any group metamorphosis, by meshing in with, rather than disrupting, the natural rhythm and dense mutuality of the system. The provision of a free secondary educational system did not directly advance academic achievement as much as it accommodated favorably and progressively to the spiral already in existence. The expansion of free education was at once the result of the preceding entry of new groups into economic prominence and an opportunity for them to further extend that entry.

The nature of the Social Engineering Fallacy is twofold. In the first instance it supposes that an improved school system will in itself improve educational achievement, improved opportunity will improve occupational status, and so forth. This formula simply overlooks the highly correlative system embracing the total life of any population group. But there can also be the slightly more sophisticated supposition that if program assaults are made simultaneously on all accessible fronts, such as employment, housing, and education, *then* the system will automatically move apace for any group. The flaw here is that not all of the elements of mutuality in this correlative system are "objective" conditions. For example, family style, traditions, and group culture are, by nature, matters of generational transmission, respond sluggishly to changes, and are best approached by flanking rather than by direct attack.

The Social Engineering Fallacy can be stated modestly: If not as an iron law, then as a strong tendency, and admonition of moderation. The current instinct in America has been, to the contrary, that the application of more money, more programs, more services will solve each given problem. There isn't that kind of relationship between health and medical services, hous-

ing and housing services, education and educational services, or employment and employment services. These services become commodities that people desire as good in themselves, and that desire has its own legitimacy; but when a submerged group also depends on such services to produce drastic and specific results, most often what ensues is a Cinderella's coach effect—glittering promise, and then, a pumpkin.

The regular process of group advancement will take time, and if there is no irregular process that seems to work or work fast, are we then hopelessly lost? Only if we take literally the instant reparation demands emanating from the Negro community; or if we sit back and decide to let nature take its course, ignoring the symbolic and expressive aspects of those demands.

The American System

At this point it would be pertinent to extend the definition of "the system." It has already been seen as a highly correlative system, wherein group habits and styles change slowly in response to each other and to changing objective conditions, and wherein the change in objective conditions is heavily constrained by group habits and styles. Everybody is in such a correlative system of one kind or another; but not everybody is in *the* American system, which describes, in addition, a set of particular benevolent conditions existing partly in the mind, partly as a social reality. *The* American system is the main system, the spiral-upward system, and the pertinent question is whether a given population group is *in* that system at even a beginning stage, or whether it is outside in some frozen subsystem, as the Negro population has been for so long.

A chief characteristic of the perceived American system is that it is egalitarian in opportunity and upwardly mobile in fact. New population groups can enter it, prepare themselves for competition, and presumably move wherever their patterns of capability and aspirations will naturally take them. But, in fact, it has always been the mobility in itself, rather than any absolute state of economic equality, that has been critical. It has been the fact of entry and of movement, rather than of actual distribution at any point, that has always determined a

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population group's sense of being *in* the system. The criterion has been the apparent openness of the system, as symbolized by improving group stability in employment and economic status and an increasing number of individuals trickling up-ward.

As a statistical group, the Negro population is now begin-ning to take part in this process; but there is a difference created by their unique historical attributes. Because they have been excluded from the system for so long, the credibility gap for the Negro population is still immense. No other ethnic group was ever, or ever had to be, so organized for intrusion into the system; therefore, no other ethnic group was ever so literally and fervidly American in its ideological reading of the system. The demand for quota distribution throughout the economic system is unique to the Negro. Unique also is the depth of the division between those in the Negro community who are trickling up and those who still see themselves caught in a frozen subsystem. Relative position, rather than move-ment, was never so important a criterion for being *in* the system. But the quota demands are clearly hyperbole, and the overwhelming aspiration of the Negro population is still entry rather than some absolute position of economic equality. The special necessity then—and the only possibility—is to take actions that will convince the Negro population that it is in-deed now, finally, in the system, even if it is not yet going to share equally in that system.

Pertinent to that effort is the fact that there is another major characteristic of *the* American system. *The* American system is seen as a system of individual effort, individual achievement, and self-dependency. The concept of mobility is still built around this image. However managed or cozened, self-dependency is still understood as the only way of establish-ing oneself as an integral part of the society. Through the protective haze of medicare, social security, unemployment insurance, and subsidized universities, the spirit of Horatio Alger is still perceived as *the* American spirit. A man must somehow make it on his own, or he hasn't made it.

This might change, of course. And there are those who say that it should change because it hasn't worked. But for the most part, they don't mean that. Some mean that the American system hasn't worked for the Negro, which it hasn't, but the Negro is just being let in. Others, the more affluent young

critics, are really complaining that the system is too successful and has washed out more important human values. That may well be true—although one would first like to see the shape of some suggested substitute system and evaluate its implications for human values—but it's also irrelevant to the problem at hand. This *is* the American system, and *this* is the system that Negroes want to enter. In this perception as well, the Negro population is extremely American. When they say, "We don't want a handout," they mean it. Getting a handout means that you're not part of the system, you're still tacked on to some dependent subsystem. Still deep in the cotton fields.

The Program Implications

Programs will therefore tend to work, to help convince the Negro population that it's *in*, to the extent that the programs are geared toward, rather than away from, *the* American system. For example, neither more public housing nor rent supplement programs are, in that sense, systemic. People own their own homes in proper America. Individual home ownership payments are presumably preferable; a pattern of income that will sustain a self-dependent pattern of housing is even more preferable. This tends toward the kind of stake in society that serves to make a house a home. And, finally, it is not sheer money at all, but that symbolic stake in the society, as measured by some normative position in the perceived American system, that is all-important. It is a saving grace of the human quality that this is so; but it is also a practical point. Increased welfare payments, while necessary and humanitarian in lieu of anything else, are antisystemic and won't work for purposes of group advancement. In those cities where welfare families receive funds somewhat above the official poverty line, the situation seems no more rehabilitating than where families receive substantially lower welfare payments. Income maintenance plans, while more civilized and simply more efficient, are no more systemic.

It might seem easiest to create a stake by providing a job, but that has wide systemic variations too. Make-work job programs are obviously not systemic, and for the Negro population, now more Doubting Thomas than Uncle Tom, neither

are various manpower training programs that are not sufficiently job connected. For the critical mass of young Negro people who want to become part of the system, but who don't have the appropriate cultural attributes, only systemic jobs will do, jobs that are related to special programs of on-the-job training and supervision. And private industry, buttressed by whatever governmental incentives, can do this total job more systemically than can government welfare agencies. And if government is going to take up the slack, it will do it more effectively in this era not with a WPA, but with a PWA of a more extended and permanent stature than that of the 1930s.

"Participation" has been emerging as an intended means of increasing the Negro population's sense of being included in, but this device has its special systemic variations, too, and some special problems. *The* American system, in all of its parts, is an integrated system—or else you're not in it at all. To develop separate ethnic power within the integrated American system, as did the Catholics, the Italians, and the Jews, is one thing. To try to develop a separate Black System is antisystemic on its face. Some programs have an ideological overlay that promotes this self-defeating direction. But there is obviously opportunity for extending the simple concept of more participation to many programs which would give them a symbolic importance outstripping their substantive effect.

None of these programs, however, with or without participation, and even of Marshall Plan proportions, is going to turn a multigenerational problem into one that can be solved in anybody's four-year administration. That's truth number one and a difficult one. Understanding that truth has the limited but still considerable importance that understanding any negative truth has. The system, as it is now working, if it keeps working, will undoubtedly do more to bring the Negro fully into the society in the long run than all the special programs we can invent.

But we will still continue to invent special programs, and for good reasons. First of all, there is the simple compulsion of activity in the face of seeming disaster. The society has the need to "do something." The Negro community has the need for "things to be done." And in the latter case especially, this activity *can* be profitable in its own limited way. Long-range and progressive adjustments in our system can ensue. For example, our schools can become more flexible to individual

needs, or more oriented toward becoming full-time neighborhood community institutions as a result of some of these programs. Some of the programs, with respect to on-the-job training, for example, or special encouragement and assistance for college attendance, can actually accelerate the trickle upward for a given number of young people. But, most important, these programs can help bridge the inevitable time gap by providing some solid symbolic evidence to the Negro community that they are *in* and on the move. If that's not enough, then we *are* in trouble; it's in the nature of the problem that we can do no more than that. The current reading of the Negro community is that it *would* be enough, if we can handle the sporadic intervening problems of public order with wisdom. But the analysis strongly suggests that these special programs toward that end be devised more consciously with that end in mind, and less with panic and general program-mania. Without being oriented toward the systemic, these programs in their sum can have no effect at all, or a counter effect. It would at least seem worthwhile for the planners and policy makers, not to mention the social action groups, to understand more clearly where they're headed and why, what the priorities are, and the meaning of the alternatives. If our energies are spent too much in spinning myths and creating Cinderella's coaches, we may be exacerbating the problem we're attempting to treat.

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