

## THE NEW AMERICAN DILEMMA

While the objective position of the Negro Americans has improved dramatically, their expectation level has increased even more sharply and consequently so has their sense of relative deprivation. Those who have risen economically are embittered because their advance on other fronts has not been correspondingly great. For those who have not advanced economically, the relative progress of their fellow Negroes provides additional basis for alienation, above and beyond their generally deprived situation vis-a-vis the white community. This kind of "crisis of rising expectations" has, of course, been the seeding-ground for many protest and revolutionary movements throughout history. There is, in addition, this special dimension: The Negro population is the only group - besides the American Indians - who have been depressed by the American society rather than by the countries of their origin. This not only adds a special edge of bitterness - but also leads to demands for immediacy of remedy; and reparations rather than just progress.

Meanwhile, the white workers participate in the generally affluent economy only to experience many of their hard-earned dollars going for taxes for programs to aid the Negroes; and to see their long-sought-for position of affluence and comfort threatened by urban riots. The reasons for the greater participation in the George Wallace movement by white trade union members as compared with members of the middle class are inherent in the fact that the former are more likely to live inside the central cities relatively close to black ghettos. Hence, they are also more likely to be directly and personally concerned with the consequences of efforts to integrate schools and residential neighborhoods.

But beyond that, Pete Hammill has drawn a poignant picture of the strains on the white working man in New York City in 1969:

"The working-class white man is actually in revolt against taxes, joyless work, the double standards and short memories of professional politicians, hypocrisy and what he considers the debasement of the American dream...any politician who leaves that white man out of the political equation does so at very large risk. The next round of race riots might not be between people and property, but between people and people. And that could be the end of us."

A Congressman from one of New York's white working class districts is quoted as saying:

" The average working stiff is not asking for very much. He wants a decent apartment, he wants a few beers on the weekend, he wants his kids to have decent clothes, he wants to go to a ballgame once in a while, and he would like to put a little money away so that his kids can have the education that he could never afford. That's not asking a hell of a lot. But he's not getting that. He thinks society has failed him and, in a way, if he is white, he is often more alienated than the black man. At least the black man has his own organizations, and can submerge himself in the struggle for justice and equality, or elevate himself, whatever the case may be. The black man has hope, because no matter what some of the militants say, his life is slowly getting better in a number of ways. The white man who makes \$7000 a year, who is 40, knows that he is never going to earn much more than that for the rest of his life, and he sees things getting worse, more hopeless.

This disaffection of members of the white lower middle class and working class is inevitably set against what they feel is not just the rise of the Negro population, but a rise which is taking place at their inordinate expense. Hammill says that "a large reason for the growing alienation of the white working class is their belief that they are not respected."

The nativist bigotry of such whites finds its genesis not so much in hatred of Negroes - but in the felt diminution of their own status. This is the crucial nature of backlash which feeds rather than is fed by racism. And here is revealed what might be called the New American Dilemma: how to square America's promise with the reality of life for Negro Americans without at the same time seeming to withdraw that promise from other relatively disadvantaged sections of the population. Discussing this dilemma from the point of view of the white working-class youth, a group of sociologists have pointed out that the weight of the "establishment" seems to be against these youths:

"Part of the problem has been the failure of the society's cultural middle men, its intellectuals, even to begin to recognize this population... These anti-establishment intellectuals may be hard to distinguish from the establishment itself....for working-class populations, particularly the young, these anti-establishment groups have become the establishment, at least to the degree that they set the tone for the surface imagery of our times. For example, much is said of the crisis of the colleges and the ghetto schools, both apparently requiring growing investments of society's resources. Does anyone for a moment think that the quality of education in the working-class schools in this country - both public and parochial - is any better? That the slaughter of human potential and sensibility is any less severe? Or that a crisis of identity equal in magnitude to that of the children of the affluent middle class or those of the ghetto is not going on among the youth of the working class? ...For him (the working class youth) racial integration (and the disruption of community life that he feels, not without justification, must follow) is part of an organized effort within which agents of government the mass media and even the church are co-conspirators. Thus he too becomes anti-establishment, but for him it is a liberal establishment, and before it he feels increasingly powerless."

A Pennsylvania steeltown clergyman noted that prejudice had always existed in "seed form" among the workmen, but something else had been added to bring that prejudice into full bloom: "... alienation - as severe, disorienting and thingifying as that felt by the black, the young and the poor."

"They" is a familiar word in the lexicon of a steel valley worker. It comes into play in a variety of settings. "They" are the company which is to blame when the mill is shut down for lack of orders, or when a new piece of automated equipment is introduced that eliminates old jobs, or when an explosion occurs and kills a man in furnace 6. But "they" can also be the union when a strike drags on interminably, or when things appear to be decided by "the clique" who regularly attend the meetings at local 1273. There are times when "they" are the government - national, state, local - that presides over one's destiny in the matter of meat prices, gun ownership and downtown parking space. And "they" can be the big hospital where one is merely "the ulcer in 306." "They" can even be the church where the priest "runs things as he pleases" and the minister thinks of you as a name on a file card....

To be human includes the power of self-determination and the opportunity to participate in relationships of care. From these comes the capacity to love. But the worker is overcome by a sense of powerlessness, and by an awareness that the fabric of personal community has been shredded...

In the mind of the blue collar worker, the black citizen had "gotten to" the effective centers of cultural change. In fact, as far as he could see from changes in his own existence, "they" were in cahoots with the blacks. As he saw it, strings were pulled that took Negroes off sweeper jobs, and put them on the line next to him or, miracle of miracles, in foreman and executive jobs above him. He even heard rumors of preferential hiring which, according to bar room talk, would put him out on the streets in favor of the black man. And when he came home from the frustrations of work what did he find? "They" were pushing black faces at him through the TV screen which was supposed to be his escape hatch from the harsh realities of daily life. Furthermore "they" were rearranging his neighborhood so that these "outsiders" could move in, and "they" were conducting social experiments with his kids,

moving things around in the schools so that the blacks could "take over" there too. In all these cultural shifts, it seemed clear to the white worker, "they" were at it again. And, of all things, "they" were giving the Negro the decision-making power and personal recognition he so desperately craved."

In the Spring of 1969, three municipal elections took place in New York, Minneapolis and Los Angeles - which seemed to embody the revolt of the white working class majority caught in this "New American Dilemma". In all cases, those seen as "law and order" candidates pointedly won over those seen as "liberal" candidates. In Minneapolis it was a policeman who won. Commenting on this aspect of the "revolt", Gus Tyler wrote:

"To ask people to be fearless when they have every reason to be afraid is to ask normal folk to act abnormally. They couldn't do it even if they wanted to. They will seek safety - no matter what political ribbon is wrapped around the prized package of survival. Castigating these people as stupid (some are) or racist (others are) does not solve the problem. They will in the end simply conclude that the lofty lecturer who thus looks down on them is himself either stupid or a racist, or both."

In short, it is necessary - if our society is going to hold together - to make social advances and at the same time, to include the white man in - to redress his sense of powerlessness, of non-participation in decisions, of non-attention to his real and legitimate concerns. This cannot be done just by talking to him -- any more than it could be done by just talking to the black man -- but by building new methods of participation -- by finding common objectives -- by trying to build new coalitions.

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