

Martin Kilson

The New Black Intellectuals

THE NEGRO INTELLIGENTSIA in the United States has recently faced several critical points in its evolution. These crises have been both sociological—including a new social composition, shifting intellectual activities, a changing relationship to whites—and indirectly political, as the Negro lower classes express their violent estrangement through urban riots and demand black separatism or nationalist political leadership.

These two dimensions are intimately related; for it is the addition of persons from the lower classes that has changed the social composition of the Negro intelligentsia and led to the pressure for nationalism or separatism. As this composition changes, there are new claimants to Negro leadership, who transform traditional emphases within the black intellectual community. Formerly, activities were carried out through the NAACP, the Negro Medical Association, or other professional groups; at Negro colleges; and in closely knit groups of middle- to upper-class literati (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 20s and 30s). Now, intellectual activity is found more and more on the street corner, among popular groups with charismatic leaders, or in community organizations—often funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity. This shift is not complete; but it already indicates a major change in the character of the black intelligentsia.

A black intelligentsia first appeared in the United States during the late 19th century. From then until almost the present day, the middle and upper class of the Negro community formed the main social base of this group.¹ An illustration is the data we have

on 40 Negro writers who were members of the Harlem Renaissance movement: 55 percent came from professional homes and 45 percent from solid middle-class, white-collar families.² Persons of similar background dominated law, medicine, college teaching, and other professions. Because the social structure of the Negro intelligentsia conditioned its intellectual style and ideology, an establishmentarian intellectual style and political outlook prevailed. Because of the racism in American life, Negro professionals practiced largely within an all-Negro context: lawyers and doctors, for example, had their own law and medical associations, which serviced their members in dealing with white society. As a rule, these associations were viewed as stopgap or transitory agencies, for Negro doctors and lawyers hoped ultimately to integrate, both as professionals and members of the middle class, into white institutions.

Only a few significant tendencies toward deviant or antiestablishment behavior could be found among the Negro intelligentsia during the years between the world wars, and these were displayed almost exclusively by writers, artists, and a few college teachers. The lawyers, doctors, dentists, engineers, clergymen, and other professionals remained unaffected by these trends. Dependent upon and accepting the roles provided by the white establishment, they were less free to participate in oppositional movements. Writers and artists, on the other hand, were quite independent of the establishment for their livelihood. A few had independent means—often provided by fathers who were lawyers, doctors, engineers—others earned enough

¹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1949).

² Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, 1958), p. 56.

from published works and artistic performances. Some had lucrative patrons: wealthy whites, or white radical movements, for example, the Communist party.³ As a result, they could experiment with new, and self-determined, intellectual trends. From the 1920s through the 1940s the most important of such trends was the movement toward a race-conscious literature and art—the objectives of the Harlem Renaissance movement, also known as the New Negro Movement.⁴ Through the folkways of blacks the New Negro Movement sought to redefine the meaning of Negro life in particular and human existence in general. Intellectually, it owed much to Paul Lawrence Dunbar, whose novels and poetry drew heavily upon Negro folk material, in speech, lore, humor, and wit.⁵

Politically, the New Negro Movement was inarticulate, if not altogether indifferent, though a few writers participated in both the Communist and Socialist movements. Rather curiously, the New Negro Movement remained independent of another racialist movement, formed by Marcus Garvey during World War I, which *was* political. There were several reasons: the Garvey movement, officially called the Universal Negro Improvement Association, depended heavily on a charismatic leadership that was not disposed to let intellectuals play an independent or critical role. Garvey, who designated himself Provisional President of Africa, possessed a strong ego and nursed intellectual ambitions of his own. Though he had little formal training, Garvey wrote numerous pamphlets and articles on historical, cultural, and political issues relating to Negroes.⁶ To leaders of the New Negro Movement, Garvey seemed like something of an upstart, gifted but half-literate, who had chanced upon an

important cause. Alain Locke, the finest theoretical thinker in the New Negro Movement, remarked in 1926 that “Garveyism may be a transient, if spectacular, phenomenon, but the possible role of the American Negro in the future development of Africa is one of the most constructive and universally helpful missions that any modern people can lay claim to.”⁷

Conflicts in social outlook and style also kept the New Negro Movement at a distance from Garveyism. The Garvey movement was led by small businessmen. It was pretty much a petty-bourgeois phenomenon, and far less interested in the intellectual claims of black nationalism than in using black awareness in order to achieve concrete economic gains.

On the other hand, the intellectuals in the New Negro Movement, though mainly from middle-class families, were antibourgeois in outlook: some sympathized with the anticapitalist sentiments then widespread among American intellectuals, and others looked down upon economics and politics as too mundane. The latter group of black intellectuals saw it as their mission to help their fellow-blacks alter their self-image. As James Weldon Johnson put it in his poem “To America”:

How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear,
Our eyes fixed forward on a star,
Or gazing empty at despair?

When members of the New Negro Movement did occasionally assume a political posture they did so through white radical politics rather than Garveyism or its offshoots.⁸

By the end of World War II the first two major deviant racialist movements among Negroes had no effective links. It is this failure of the New Negro Movement to connect with the more popular and political nationalism of the Garvey movement that sharp-

³ See the autobiography of Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York, 1940).

⁴ Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, pp. 53ff.

⁵ Paul L. Dunbar, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1930).

⁶ Garvey was fond of appearing in academic garb at public rallies. Cf. Edmund Cronon, *Black Moses* (Madison, 1955).

⁷ Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York, 1925), p. 15.

⁸ Cf. Harold W. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967).

ly distinguishes the prewar Negro intellectuals from their present equivalents. Today a sizable segment of the Negro intelligentsia is at the center of, or at least responding to, a popular black nationalist movement that often releases xenophobic attitudes toward white society.

IN THE PAST decade there has been a powerful thrust toward a fusion of the two currents of black racialism inherited from the pre-World War II era. The basis of this tendency has been a revolutionary change, which was both sociological and ideological, in the Negro intelligentsia. The ranks of the Negro intelligentsia have been extended, almost willy nilly, to include a new set of persons, men and women who hitherto would hardly have been called "intellectuals." They may be described, for want of a better term, as "paraintellectuals": self-made intellectuals, lacking for the most part formal education in literature, the expressive arts, and the liberal and technical or scientific professions.

These "paraintellectuals," now a major force in the Negro intelligentsia, are largely upper-lower-class, though sometimes lower-middle-class in background. They possess at best secondary schooling, and more commonly are drop-outs from high school. But they are usually persons of high talent, and they display a high degree of motivation within the context of Negro lower-class culture. In general, they are adept at verbal and other skills, which enables them to become what may be called "cultural celebrities" within the Negro lower class.⁹

Their occupational careers before their debut as "paraintellectuals" are quite varied and carry high prestige within the Negro lower class. These occupations include "hustling" roles: pimp, numbers writer, narcotics pusher, etc. Other occupations of Negro "paraintellectuals" are rather more conven-

tional: petty shopkeeper, poolroom operator, storefront preacher, etc.¹⁰

The entry of these paraintellectuals into the ranks of the black intelligentsia is mainly the direct result of the urban riots of 1964 and, later, an expression of Negro outrage against racist restrictions in American society. Though a handful of paraintellectuals had surfaced before these events (e.g., Malcolm X, Louis X, and others who were transformed into paraintellectuals by way of the Black Muslim movement),¹¹ they were exceptions. Only after the first flush of urban riots in 1964 did a large stratum of persons distinguishable as paraintellectuals emerge. Every American city with a sizable Negro population (say 10 percent or more) has experienced the rise of such a stratum. In Boston, Guido St. Laurent emerged as founder and leader of NEGRO (New England Grass Roots Organization); in San Francisco there was Eldridge Cleaver, a leader of the Black Panther party. These two newcomers to the black intelligentsia had occupational careers like others of their group, and as a result of these careers had spent time in prison.¹²

The revolutionary implications of the entry into the Negro intelligentsia of men like Malcolm X., Louis X, and Eldridge Cleaver are clear enough. Until recently, if movement of lower-class blacks into the intelligentsia occurred at all, high school education was the minimum and college education the usual requirement. Thus the rise of what I have termed black paraintellectuals represents a hitherto unknown stratum not only within the black but also within the white intelligentsia.

⁹ Cf. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, 1966). See also Thomas Kochman, "'Rapping' in the Black Ghetto," *Trans-action*, February 1969.

¹⁰ For accounts of the occupational and cultural roles held by "paraintellectuals," see Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods in the Metropolis* (Philadelphia, 1944); St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (New York, 1945); I. Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles, 1967).

¹¹ See Malcolm X (and Alex Haley), *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1966).

¹² See Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York, 1968).

TENSION AND CONFLICT are unavoidable in this kind of structural change. Unlike the established elements in the Negro intelligentsia, the paraintellectuals share a cultural experience similar to that of the black lower classes.¹³ They share too the lower classes' brutalizing experience with the coercive arm of white-controlled cities, especially the police power.¹⁴ These common experiences enabled the paraintellectuals to be spokesmen for the Negro masses as they emerged into a militant politicalization through riots. The paraintellectuals came onto the scene as legitimate and *natural* leaders. Moreover, they advance the politicalization of the black urban masses, after a fashion, by formulating descriptions of black-white relations, past and present, and policies for altering these relations that the Negro lower class finds meaningful. Few of the established elements among the black intelligentsia have, until very recently, had such success.

As a result, the paraintellectuals pose a major crisis for the established Negro intelligentsia. Several resolutions of the crisis are available to the established intelligentsia:

- (1) It could leave the emergent militant politics in the hands of the paraintellectuals, concentrating instead on broadening and consolidating traditional roles made available through the moderate politics of the civil rights movement.
- (2) It could compete with the paraintellectuals for leadership of the new nationalist militancy, adopting or fabricating a lower-class oriented black militancy of its own.
- (3) It could join forces with the paraintellectuals, more or less on the latter's terms.

These strategies, with one or another variation, have characterized the responses of the established Negro intelligentsia. In general, the upper strata of the black intelligentsia (e.g., lawyers, doctors, dentists, college teachers, large-scale entrepreneurs) tend to

avoid competing with the paraintellectuals in manipulating nationalist or antiwhite militancy and violent rhetoric. Instead, they persist in a commitment to nonracialist approaches to political and social change for Negroes.¹⁵

Yet the upper strata of the Negro intelligentsia also increasingly display interest in the nationalist militancy of the paraintellectuals, insofar as they hope such militancy will impress upon the white power structure the need to open greater opportunities to blacks.¹⁶ Indeed, some members of the established Negro intelligentsia (notably businessmen, city civil servants, and others whose careers may be readily advanced through politics) have gone so far as to adopt or simulate a nationalist militancy of their own. They hope thereby to bring their own needs and interests more forcefully to the attention of the white power structure.

Furthermore, when the white power structure concedes new roles and benefits to the politically active segments of the established Negro intelligentsia as a result of antiwhite militancy, these segments perceive an additional use for militancy: it enables them to appear legitimate in the eyes of the urban black lower class.

Such legitimacy is necessary in view of the paraintellectuals' new role as the *natural* leaders of the black city-dwellers. The paraintellectuals virtually control the terms according to which legitimacy in the urban black community is defined, and it is very difficult for other black leadership groups to ignore these criteria. It can therefore be expected that the politically active segments of the established Negro intelligentsia will continue for some time to utilize a variant of antiwhite militancy as one of their political weapons.

Other groups among the established Negro intelligentsia have also assumed a militant antiwhite posture, and one more genu-

¹³ Cf. Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner* (Chicago, 1967).

¹⁴ Cf. Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York, 1965).

¹⁵ Cf. Floyd McKissick, *Three-Fifths of a Man* (Toronto, 1969).

¹⁶ Nathan Wright, *Black Power and Urban Unrest* (New York, 1967).

ine than that of the paraintellectuals. This militancy is displayed most often by school teachers, writers, and artists, and it results partly from the intellectual persuasion of paraintellectuals like Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver.¹⁷ Some black writers and artists also have utilitarian ends in mind when they convert to militancy: new opportunities are more readily conceded by the white power structure in artistic and literary fields, particularly among liberal whites, when confronted by Negro militancy.

Another important characteristic of that portion of the Negro intelligentsia inclines toward the nationalist rhetoric of the paraintellectuals and is a sociological tie with the black lower classes. During the past decade we have had a sizable increase of college-trained black teachers, writers, and artists; they belong to the Negro intelligentsia, yet their roots in the black lower-class community remain strong. It was largely among such persons that men like Malcolm X first found their audience, for it was among them that a sense of outrage could be articulated with some freedom and coherence. They were drawn to the readiness of Malcolm X to say things that they might feel too but hesitate to express. And as urban riots became a regular feature of the political expression of the black lower classes, the teachers, writers, and artists were the first within the Negro intelligentsia to welcome this mode of attack on the white power structure.

Indeed, antiwhite violence in general is celebrated by growing numbers; it is seen as serving a dual function: validating Negro manhood and forcing concessions from white institutions. In several cities, especially New York, some teachers, writers, and artists have joined forces with the paraintellectuals in disseminating a veritable cult of violence.¹⁸ Negro teachers, moreover, will have an increas-

ingly important role in this development: for as ghetto school districts come under Negro control through administrative decentralization, a cult of violence might well be enshrined in the curriculum of many black ghetto schools.

RIGHT NOW we are too close to the processes of change and crisis in the Negro intelligentsia to know precisely what future trends will be. Patterns of militancy that appear immutable might well turn out to be merely ephemeral or tactical postures. Some paraintellectuals, the catalytic agents of black militance and violent rhetoric, have already modified their militancy in exchange for concessions from the white power structure. As they are coopted into the power structure by assuming influential and well-paying roles in the plethora of community organizations funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity or on governing boards of the Model Cities program, the propensity of some paraintellectuals toward militancy and violent rhetoric seems to diminish. This is especially true in cities where the paraintellectuals feel secure about cooptation into the power structure. Whether this sense of security prevails depends upon the intensity and form of competition both among paraintellectuals, and between them and the established Negro intelligentsia.¹⁹

Most questionable here is the assumption of many black nationalist students that the validation of Negro manhood and culture through black-controlled Afro-American studies programs on white campuses is more "relevant" than the acquisition of professional skills.²⁰ What, then, will be the long-run outcome of this development? At best the nationalist linkage of Negro self-identification and militance on white campuses will produce a generation of college-trained

¹⁷ Cf. two plays by LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (New York, 1964).

¹⁸ LeRoi Jones's Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in New York is part of this development. See Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones, eds., *Black Fire* (New York, 1968).

¹⁹ For insights into this issue and its dynamics, see Charles Jordan Hamilton, "Changing Patterns of Negro Leadership in Boston," Honor's Thesis, Harvard University, 1969.

²⁰ See Ernest Dunbar, "The Black Studies Thing," *New York Times Magazine*, April 6, 1969.

blacks who will be highly motivated to return to the urban black community to advance its fortune. At worst, this development will produce, for many college-educated blacks, a vicious psychological dependence upon antiwhite violent rhetoric. Moreover, their perception of the black community's basic needs (which are, mainly, more skills and resources in order to participate effectively in our society) will be pathetically distorted.²¹ And such faulty perception will in turn help perpetuate black nationalist political posturing and sporadic unrest as substitutes for serious politics.

The worst, however, need not occur. The new Negro intelligentsia will no doubt be militant in racial outlook and political style: but its use of militancy will probably be tempered by practical considerations. Like it or not, the militants' goal of black social and economic advancement—even along black separatist lines—can be realized only through such structures as political parties, pressure groups, trade unions, professional associations, and the like. As the new militants in the Negro intelligentsia adapt their aims to institutionalized structures and processes, the therapeutic and normless features of black militancy will be filtered out or neutralized; they will, in a word, be reduced to mere trappings of the political process, though symbolically important ones.

This development, however, will depend upon the emergence within the new Negro intelligentsia of political leaders skilled at re-directing into viable political channels the enormous energy now wasted by black nationalists in political posturing or role-playing. Fortunately, such politicians are already surfacing. The paraintellectuals, particularly those organized in the Black Panther party, represent one type of Negro leader potentially capable of facilitating the political institutionalization of black nationalism. Based in West Coast cities like Oakland and San Fran-

cisco and rapidly spreading to Midwestern and Eastern cities, the Black Panther party (BPP) is mostly a secular variant of the Black Muslim movement. Like the Black Muslims, the BPP seeks the transformation or rebirth of the Negro personality. But it shuns the religious forms of the Black Muslims, seeking legitimacy instead through assertive or violent political action. Violence, rhetorical or actual, had a special role in the early phase of the BPP because the idea of black renaissance was rooted in the paraintellectuals' need to link Negro self-identification with violence. Thus the BPP's early political acts invariably entailed confrontation with such features of the white power structure in urban ghettos as the police and the courts.²²

Currently, however, the BPP is entering a second phase of political development, including organization among Negro workers, community development activity, campus organization, and some electoral activity. But it is doubtful that the limited educational and technical skills possessed by the paraintellectual leaders of the BPP will allow it to evolve very far in this new direction without outside aid from more skilled groups. This is already recognized by some BPP leaders who have sought the assistance of middle-class white radicals and their organizations, such as the Progressive Labor party and the Peace and Freedom party. But inasmuch as the BPP is sensitive to the need to remain legitimate in the eyes of the growing segment of lower-class blacks who are hostile to whites, it must obtain a large part of the skills required by its new political development from Negroes themselves.

At this point enter the established Negro intelligentsia as the source of the second type of black politician able to facilitate the political institutionalization of black nationalism. A new crop of professionally educated black politicians is now emerging in urban ghettos—and the growth of this group seems

²¹ See Martin Kilson, "Black Power: Anatomy of a Paradox," *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs*, II, 1 (1968).

²² Cf. Bobby Seale, "Selections from the Biography of Huey Newton," *Ramparts*, October 26, 1968.

certain as more Negroes enter and complete college. Lawyers currently predominate in the new group of Negro professional politicians; Hatcher in Gary, Stokes in Cleveland, Thomas Atkins in Boston, Conyers in Detroit, and Tom Bradley in Los Angeles are among the best. These men are fashioning a black militant style of their own, within the established framework of urban politics: and as they perfect the assimilation of a black ethnicity to the basic patterns of American politics, they may prove legitimate recipients of alliance with such paraintellectual elements as the Black Panther party.

Such an alliance could well be mutually

beneficial: the paraintellectuals will derive from it the professional skills and relationships they badly need; the professional politicians will acquire greater legitimacy in the eyes of the black lower class, as well as valuable political workers. It is an alliance that will not, of course, proceed without conflict, either between the parties to it or between them and the white power structure. (Hatcher's experience in Gary illustrates both forms of conflict.) But it is a feasible alliance, with political possibilities, not the least of which is lending political order to the Negro intelligentsia's endeavor to offer new leadership to the crisis-ridden black ghetto.

Stanley Pacion

Soul Still on Ice?

The Talent and Troubles of Eldridge Cleaver

THOUGH IT IS little more than a year since *Soul on Ice* was published, Eldridge Cleaver has been assimilated so rapidly by popularizers and professional reviewers that it is almost impossible to grasp the book in its original meaning. By emphasizing certain passages one can make him out a spokesman for fascism, Communism, or egalitarian democracy, a skilled psychoanalyst of black identity, a party propagandist, or a harsh critic of American civilization. Cleaver excites every possible emotion from love to hate. For the conservative he may be anathema, but he also represents more attractively black economy, decentralized schools, and local autonomy *vis-à-vis* the federal bureaucracy. For a wing of the New Left Cleaver is the armed revolutionary who will level the capitalist structure.

Cleaver himself must be held accountable for much of this misunderstanding. He writes an inspired and wild prose that tends to subvert rational judgment. His short declarative sentences forge a frenetic mood, an orgiastic trance. Soon one reads Cleaver not for argument or program, but for the affective experience. In the end, rhetoric blurs thought.

But while he engages strong feelings, Cleaver in no way succumbs to them. The great achievement of Cleaver's book, distinguishing it from much of black literature, is a relative freedom from self-intoxication. Rage, disillusionment, prejudice, fear, love, all passions are purposely marshalled; but none is vented freely. For all their apparent candor his words and materials seem highly calculated.