

---

# New Perspectives on Black Americans

---

Edited by Martin Kilson

---

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he conclusions of the Kerner Commission Report on the urban riots during the late 1960s have been widely accepted; namely that this angry black urban upheaval was driven by a gnawing alienation and despair among mainly working-class and poor Afro-Americans. This sector of blacks suffered not just the usual vulgarities of American racism but extensive police brutality from mainly white police forces and were blocked from paths of mobility in the emergent postindustrial society. Between 1960 and 1967 urban America witnessed a major growth in central city black population of 2.4 million (nearly 90 percent of all black population growth for this period), while at the same time there was a steady exodus of industry and whites from central city milieux. This further weakened the working-class dynamic in many urban black communities.

The roots of the marginalization of poor blacks that sparked the upheavals of the sixties extend back across the three generations following the end of Reconstruction. Orlando Patterson's article traces the slave past and the vicious 1890s–1950s epoch as well as developments since the 1960s, delineating whites' pathological need to scapegoat weak groups—blacks especially—in a greed-driven capitalist democracy. Yet even during the racist epoch of 1890–1950 forces persisted to overcome whites' racist affront to blacks' status.

For example, Henry Louis Gates's article brilliantly charts the typography of self-giving forms and meanings that Afro-Americans have fashioned—and continue to fabricate—against American society's racist grain. And as Norman Hill's article reveals, in the workplace black workers reached out to white workers whenever possible, scabbed against their white proletarian tormentors when opportunity allowed, and shaped their own trade-union alternatives whenever that was feasible. Today

the stable working class among blacks has a higher incidence of union membership than white workers and holds substantial power in many unions.

As Patterson suggests, the longstanding role of the black working class as cultural innovator and backer of community viability requires much more attention from both black and national leadership. Jerry Watts's article on the vagaries of black intellectuals' status—both within black and national patterns—shows how some black intellectuals find usefulness by turning to the black working-class as their main audience.

There is yet another crucial historical role of the black working class; namely, as wellspring of achieving individuals. This legacy of working-class blacks—of factory workers, domestics, artisans, and field hands—must be factored into the current crisis of poverty and the underclass, a crisis that now engulfs some one-third of black households, as Loïc Wacquant's article incisively reveals. But as Clement Cottingham's stunning analysis of gender-shift indicates, black women, while disproportionately caught in poverty as heads of families, have nonetheless brought about a disproportionate shift in educational achievement patterns between black males and females. The latter, now in front, are ensuring exponential shifts occupationally and status wise in the future.

A major policy implication flows from this gender-shift analysis, namely that national leadership—both private sector and public—must design poverty programs that give preference to upgrading poor women to working-class capability. They can be expected to revive the black working class's historic role as wellspring of achieving individuals—a role that will also gain sustenance from the overall feminist movement. If this special issue of *Dissent* stimulates new thinking and action in this area, it will have served a most useful purpose. □