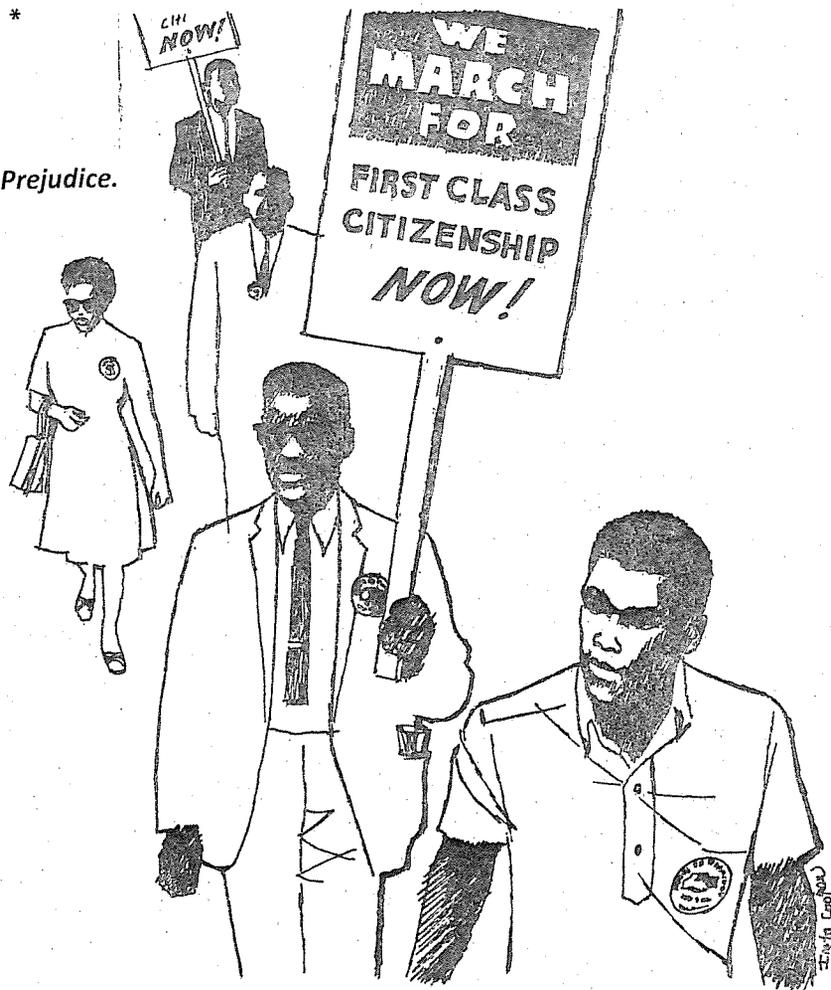


Black Protest *

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Gary Marx

Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well, work him moderately, surround him with physical comfort, and dreams of freedom intrude.

—Frederick Douglass

■ THE REACTION of oppressed groups to domination varies within and between time and place—from the placid acceptance of the Indian untouchable to the violent revolutions of the Caribbean slaves, and from the “white is right” attitude of the traditional “Uncle Tom” to the vibrant militancy of the young civil rights worker. Today, protest is probably more in evidence than at any other time in history. This is confirmed by emergence of the new nations and by contemporary news events where Africans in Rhodesia, aboriginal tribesmen in Australia, Pakistanis in Great Britain, and even homosexuals in America are demanding an end to discrimination and subjugation.

In response to a reporter’s question about the antecedents of the Watts revolt, a young Negro said, “Man, it started 400 years ago.” And in the case of the black American, various types of protest have gone on continually since the first slaves jumped ship over three centuries ago. The historical record reveals numerous attacks on slave owners, arson, other property damage, legal efforts on behalf of manumission, runnings away, and infrequent armed rebellion and revolt. Protest was also expressed in less direct ways—suicides, self-maimings, the slowing down of work, pretended illness, and petty thievery, as well as in praying for deformed children, in humor, song, and in folklore such as that which glorifies the tradition of the “bad Nigger.”

However, there were, historically, serious obstacles to widespread effective protest involving the masses of black people. It is only with the emergence of a sizable Negro middle class, the greater inclusion of the masses of Negroes into American society, in part related to their being gathered together in great urban centers, and the presence of

a more favorable national and international milieu that effective, organized protest involving a relatively larger segment of the Negro public has surfaced.

While the civil rights struggle is widely discussed and written about, careful inquiries into the nature of Negro protest are strikingly rare. In their place we are often offered sensational pronouncements, reports of personal experience, educated (and sometimes not so educated) guesses, and vivid journalistic descriptions of riots and demonstrations. As a result, popular notions are formed with scant knowledge of social and psychological factors associated with black militancy. A recent Survey Research Center study based on interviews with a nationwide sample of black Americans challenges many popularly held notions about the Negro's outlook on civil rights issues.

On the basis of questions dealing with various dimensions of civil rights protest (such as impatience over the speed of civil rights change, support of demonstrations, opposition to discrimination, and perceptions of barriers to black advancement) those interviewed were classified as *militant*, *moderate*, or *conservative*. What follows dwells on conventional civil rights concern among Negroes, but not the kind manifested by the black nationalists. The reason for neglecting separatist black nationalism is that support within the black community for this program has been greatly exaggerated. For example, although acceptance of the Muslims' indictment of the white man is given some currency, only about one black American in 25 consistently supports the Muslims' program.

Many people regard activists with "causes" such as the civil rights struggle as likely to be severely deprived and alienated misfits. Often the activist is depicted as a man of rigid thought processes, who dislikes himself as well as out-groups, one who is trying to remake the world in order to compensate for his own failings. Eric Hoffer, for one, has developed a body of scholarly thought supporting such a perspective. No doubt there are some rigid alienated messiahs among those concerned with civil rights. However, the vast majority of the militants don't fit this picture. They tend to be almost an elite group within the black community, better educated and informed, more involved in voluntary organizations and with friends, endowed with a positive self-image and a high morale. Among them there is less hostility toward whites than among those who don't care about civil rights.

James Vardaman, a Negro-baiting politician of another era, once said of Northern aid to Negro education, "What the North is sending South is not money but dynamite, this education is ruining our Negroes, they're demanding equality." That was a perceptive observation. For as it turned out, the single most important factor in understanding attitudes of protest happens to be education. Survey figures reveal that only about three out of 100 of those with no formal schooling scored as militant and this increased steadily up to 70 out of 100 among those with some post graduate training. With each increase in education there was a concomitant increase in degree of civil rights concern.

■ THIS DOES NOT MEAN that all educated black Americans are militant. The fact that a segment of the Negro middle class profits from a segregatory status quo and in no way identifies with the struggle of the Negro masses is well known. But one of the interesting things about the civil rights movement is the extent to which it is truly a mass movement drawing support from all segments of the black community. Our findings suggest, however, that a militant orientation and participation in civil rights organizations are more likely to be found among the more educated than among the less educated.

It may seem surprising that as education increases so does militancy. Yet, historically, this has often been the case. Social theorists have long questioned the notion that concern for radical social change is likely to be greatest among those most disinherited. In discussing the French Revolution, de Tocqueville noted that, "The French found their condition the more unsupportable in proportion to its improvement." In other words, the appetites of the more privileged had been whetted and as a consequence they were less willing to accept the status quo. At the same time the mental and physical energy of the very deprived is used in simply staying alive. Since Karl Marx stated, "Our desires and pleasures spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which (previously) served for their satisfaction," social scientists have realized that a crucial factor in understanding behavior is not so much an individual's objective condition, but that of the "others" with whom he compares himself. The better educated Negro with his broader perspective is more likely to compare his position to the more privileged segments of white society rather than the depressed segments of the ghetto world. This perspective comes from the ability to look horizontally at whites in similar positions and from the possession of greater knowledge of how these whites live and are treated. Thus the better educated may be much more conscious of lack of acceptance on the racial dimension because they come so close to being accepted in every other way.

Self-image is another factor in attitudes toward protest. Slave owners consciously worked at developing an unfavorable self-image among their slaves. The slave was encouraged to believe that bondage was his natural condition, that African ancestry stigmatized him, and that his color was a mark of inferiority. To believe, as one female domestic in our study put it, that "Most Negroes are so lazy they don't deserve equal rights" is to be inhibited. Conversely, the more positive an individual's self-image the more likely he is to be militant. As education increases so too does the likelihood of a positive self-image.

Morale also plays an important role in protest attitudes. A sustained militant orientation requires at least some degree of hope about the possibility of beautiful tomorrows. One can be "down" but he must not believe that he is "out." A sense of futility would seem to preclude a militant vision. The sense of despair and hopelessness that characterizes certain segments of the ghetto community may lead to occasional random outbursts of violence, as in the case



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of Richard Wright's protagonist in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, but they are not likely to lead to the type of organized militancy manifested by civil rights groups. Thus, there is a strong relationship between an individual's morale and his degree of civil rights concern. And the more educated the man, the more likely a positive morale.

Intellectual sophistication is also relevant to greater civil rights concern. This involves a realization of the arbitrary victimization of Negroes as a group and the view that in the collective struggle rather than individual achievement one finds the solution to many of the Negro's problems. To think otherwise is to shift the blame away from an unjust social order onto the failure of individual Negroes. The better educated Negro has greater knowledge of Negro history and current civil rights events, and hence greater concern.

Education supports psychological orientations conducive to militancy which in turn is realized through social involvement. The more educated visit more frequently with friends, are more likely to belong to voluntary organizations, and to vote. Furthermore, they are more likely to read general and protest-oriented newspapers and magazines. The various psychological factors taken together form a pattern of social involvement and concern not found among those who do not participate. Almost half of those highest in participation demonstrated a concern (and with each increase in social involvement the percentage showing civil rights concern also increased).

Those higher in social participation live in a less constricted social environment and have mentally escaped the ghetto without necessarily leaving it. As a result of their greater involvement, distant events of a civil rights nature are given more meaning. Negroes who participate are plugged into this world and are more aware of what is happening (in a social and historical sense). Lack of involvement, on the other hand, isolates the individual from

channels of communication that make possible a broader view of the world. Living in the narrow homogeneous ghetto environment, untouched often even by newspapers or magazines, belonging to no organizations, not voting, and interacting only occasionally with friends is likely to lead to resignation or despair. It means a narrow view and almost total concern with the problems of daily existence.

■ THIS SOCIAL participation and militancy pattern is similar to that which historians have noted in analyzing Negro protest during slavery. Elkins has used differences in the degree of social involvement between the Brazilian and North American slave to account for the much greater frequency and success of the slave revolts of the former. In addition, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner (leaders of the three most noteworthy slave revolts in the United States) all had the chance to play a variety of social roles denied to the average slave of the time, and are presumed to have been literate. While the conditions of the social system are fundamentally different now than under slavery, the effect of social involvement seems to be the same.

To some extent age, sex, type of community and region also influence social involvement.

The color line in America, despite periods of regression, has slowly been shifting since the turn of the century and each successive generation is born into a social milieu where less and less consensus exists over the traditional inferior position of the black man. It is thus not surprising that as age decreases militancy increases.

Men are generally less insulated from society than women and less traditional; hence they are more likely to be exposed in a sustained way to values which would lead to rejection of the status quo. Men are somewhat more likely to show strong civil rights concern than women.

Rural areas, in the South and elsewhere, have tradition-

ally been bastions of conservatism, although also the source of occasional populist reform. Today it is the cities of the South where the traditional social structure has crumbled most rapidly. The anonymity of the city, its more cosmopolitan and sophisticated atmosphere, and its greater integration into the national life all help account for the fact that those raised on farms and in small towns are much less militant than those raised in large urban centers. Not surprisingly those raised in the Deep South turned out to be the least militant and those raised in the North the most militant.

For example, only about one in ten of older Southern women raised on farms showed strong civil rights concern while among younger Northern men raised in big cities almost one-half evidenced this concern.

Another factor having important implications for protest attitudes was religion. A number of recent observers have concentrated on the positive implications of Negro religion for protest. Much has been said of the Negro church's prominent role in supplying the ideology of the civil rights movement and many of its foremost leaders, as well as its role as an institution around which struggle might be organized. However, our study revealed that rather than serving to inspire attitudes of protest, religious involvement had a decided conservative effect. The greater the religious involvement, whether measured in terms of frequency of church attendance, the subjective salience of religion, or orthodoxy of religious belief, the lesser the degree of militancy. When the combined effect of these measures is observed only about one in ten of the most religious group evidenced strong concern with civil rights while for the least religious group more than seven out of ten were militant.

The comments of those questioned clearly indicates how religion inhibits protest. An evangelist in the Midwest puts it this way. "I don't believe in participating in politics. My church don't vote—they just depend on the plans of God." A housewife in South Bend, Indiana, saw the lowly status of Negroes as an expression of God's will. "God is the Creator of everything. We don't know why we all dark-skinned. We should try to put forth the effort to do what God wants and not question." A Negro spiritual contains the lines, "I'm gonna wait upon the Lord till my change comes" and many others who desired racial change nevertheless took the position expressed in this spiritual. A Detroit housewife indicates, "I don't go for demonstrations. I believe that God created all men equal and at His appointed time He will give every man his portion, no one can hinder it." Others who desired social change more immediately, felt that since God was on their side man need not do anything to help bring it about. A worker in Cleveland said, "With God helping to fight our battle, I believe we can do with fewer demonstrations." In response to a question which asked whether Negroes should spend more time praying and less time demonstrating, an Atlanta clergyman said, "More time praying," adding, "praying is demonstrating."

About one-third of the Negroes we questioned consis-

tently expressed hostility toward whites while an additional one-third gave no signs of hostility. It is an easy but mistaken assumption that civil rights concern breeds anti-white hostility. In fact, our results indicate greater civil rights concern (excluding those few in sympathy with black nationalism) means less hostility toward whites. Not only were the social and psychological factors which made for militancy in most cases the same as those which made for tolerance but there seemed to be an ideological link between the two. Many were aware of the inconsistency in attacking white racism from the perspective of the black racist. This prompts the ironic conclusion that in order to increase friendly feelings of Negroes for whites one might work to increase Negro militancy.

■ A PROTEST song, not infrequently heard around Berkeley, says "The battle outside raging will soon shake your windows and rattle your walls for the times they are a-changing."

Black Americans have made progress in many ways and this progress will no doubt continue, and it is probable that these gains will further increase demands. Demographic trends within the Negro community suggest this. However, from a standpoint of relative progress the gap between white and Negroes may be increasing not decreasing. This combination of absolute progress coupled with relative deterioration should further serve to heighten the struggle. Between 1950 and 1960 almost one and one-half million Negroes moved from the South to the North and in the last 20 years the number of black Americans living in urban areas has more than doubled—a trend which is continuing. If it is correct that the increased militancy of the young is related to the nature of the social milieu in which they are raised (rather than because of things associated with the aging process per se) than as the older, more conservative Negroes die and are replaced by the young, the proportion of militant Negroes should also increase. The quality of education received by Americans, white and black, has steadily been increasing and should become more widespread.

This applies to social participation as well. As discriminatory barriers of various kinds are lowered (such as restrictions on membership in voluntary organizations, in the use of public facilities, in voting, housing, and employment) and as Negroes participate more fully in society, look for more militancy.

It is unrealistic to anticipate further changes in the Negro's position without intensified struggle and conflict. Social analysts now realize, moral platitudes aside, that the process through which racial injustice is eliminated is likely to be a slow one and to be incompatible with increased societal harmony, at least in the short run. ◀

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