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NEWSLETTER
Afro Scholar BOOK REVIEW #1:

THE NEW BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Bart Landry

Berkeley: University of California Press
1987 250 pages, $22.50

The Black middle class has been a controversial subject of study since 1957 when E Franklin Frazier published his groundbreaking study Black Bourgeoisie. Frazier emphasized the particular development of the Black middle class within a segregated social world, with its objective basis in "a world of reality" and its subjective self-image in "a world of make believe."

In 1980, a major shift in analysis was initiated by William Wilson in The Declining Significance of Race, in which he asserts that the Black middle class had achieved a new objective equality of life chances with middle class whites. Frazier had criticized the Black middle class for its false visions of equality with whites, while Wilson's argument is that the Black middle class must relinquish its claims for special treatment in that it has achieved equity. It is curious that the Black middle class attempted rejections of both arguments.

A new study of the Black middle class helps to clarify the overall debate by responding to both Frazier and Wilson on the basis of a national survey of Blacks and whites in the middle class of 21 metropolitan areas. This study makes three major comparisons: the old versus the new Black middle class, white versus Black middle class experience, and within the above gender differences. This is a major study that deserves serious attention.

Landry argues that the Black middle class is essentially a 20th century socio-historical development, and must be understood in terms of status and class. After the Civil War the first social hierarchy was topped by a small mulatto status elite whose social function was service to white elites. This was followed by a social elite rooted within Black social institutions and dependent upon Black patronage. The emergence of a Black social class is dated after World War II.
Middle class is defined in terms of occupation, including all white collar jobs and a few service jobs particularly policeman and fireman. This position is useful and practical for empirical comparisons, especially because it fits how the census data is organized. However, it does not adequately grasp class as a function of the social division of labor based on power and control in society. This reflects Landry’s siding with Weber in the debate between Max Weber and Karl Marx.

Landry argues that the new Black middle class emerged in the context of economic prosperity and liberal laws. "If the 1950s demonstrated the futility of prosperity without laws mandating equal employment for the growth of the Black middle class, the 1970s revealed the insufficiency of laws without prosperity." The 1960’s brought about the birth of the new Black middle class. In the 1960’s the Black middle class increased by 107%, while increasing only by 561% in the 1970's.

Compared to whites, the new Black middle class relies more on education, is less likely to maintain class position from one generation to the next, is more likely to be employed in government in lower paying jobs, and works in an integrated setting but otherwise continues to live in a segregated social world. This analysis indicates that for all of the variables studied whites gain more income than Blacks. For example an additional year of education for a white male brought an increase of twice as much as for Blacks ($611 versus $306). Also, becoming a supervisor had little effect on the salary of Black males whereas it brought an increase of $2,375 for white males. For women, Blacks gained from education while whites gained from seniority and experience.

In general, Landry provides interesting and important comparative data indicating that while the Black middle class has expanded in unprecedented ways, it has lagged behind whites. Further, he indicates that in times of recession the Black middle class is attacked first and hardest. The major suggestion of change hinges on the fact that the Black middle class has recently tended to vote in greater numbers than their white counterparts. But even here, the issue is what can Black power in the cities accomplish for the Black middle class without general economic prosperity.

One major conclusion from this analysis is that the Black middle class cannot be discussed without basing the discussion of the political struggle of the majority of Black people, most of whom are not in the middle class. Further, all class differences fit into the overall social and economic developments. Therefore, it is necessary to have an analysis of the entire society if one is to fully understand a significant part of it such as the Black middle class.
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Inscoe, J.C. "Faulkner, Race, and Appalachia," South Atlantic Quarterly 66:3, Summer 1987, 244-253.


Orkin, M. "Othello and the Plain Face of Racism," Shakespeare Quarterly 38:2, Summer 1987, 166-188.


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