

From the NAACP to the Nation of Islam: A study of Race Relations in America

by Gary Foley

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Introduction

In October 1995, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan clearly illustrated the extent of support he enjoys in the African-American community when he organised and led his 'million man march' to Washington. Why is it that Farrakhan commands such widespread black community respect while simultaneously provoking fear and loathing in the broader American community? Could it have something to do with the ongoing frustrated aspirations of a vast black underclass that has gained little since the civil rights era? Is America a racist society? These are the questions I will explore in this essay as I seek to show why Farrakhan is so popular and needs to be taken far more seriously by the mainstream media and white power structures of the United States. In the course of examining race relations in contemporary America, I will focus on the current socio-economic status of African-Americans and see what, if any, real gains have been made since the 1960s. I will also look briefly at the political organisations and historical moments for black Americans during and since WW2.

The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP)

For the greater part of this century, probably the best known organisation representing black interests in mainstream American society was the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, better known simply as the NAACP. Whilst it was later in the 1960s criticised by more radical black leaders for its conservative and

almost subservient operating mode, the NAACP had nevertheless been at the forefront of many major campaigns since it had been incorporated in 1911. Two years earlier a group of sixty prominent black and white citizens called for a national conference to renew "the struggle for civil rights and political liberty. At the subsequent conference, which included participants such as W.E.B. DuBois, it was agreed to establish a new organisation to 'work toward the abolition of forced segregation, promotion of equal education and civil rights under the protection of law, and an end to race violence'.

The Association's first major campaign involved raising consciousness about the practice of 'lynching', which was symptomatic of a broader community violence against blacks. By the 1930s lynching declined and the NAACP changed its focus to economic issues affecting the black community during the Great Depression, and as more blacks migrated to northern cities the Association gained strength and began a major campaign for black rights. During World War II it fought segregation in the armed forces and employment opportunities in war industries at home, which led to President Roosevelt issuing an executive order banning discrimination in war-related industries, but it was not until 1948 that President Truman issued an executive order banning racial discrimination in the armed forces.

In the same period, black sporting stars began to have opportunities open up with the signing of Jack Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers which broke down the 'colour bar' in baseball and was the beginning of desegregation in other major American sports. Progress remained at a snail's pace and in an overall climate of hostility as white American racial antipathy ran deep. The 1950s saw desegregation in education, race riots and the memorable Montgomery Bus Boycott, triggered when NAACP Montgomery Branch Secretary, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white man. This boycott, and others similar to it, saw the whole momentum of the civil rights struggle receive a boost which

resulted the heyday of black resistance in the US between 1961 and 1965.

In the 1960s the NAACP, along with Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality formed the mainstream of the civil rights movement. Of these groups the SNCC was the more radical, opting to direct confrontation of segregation, sit-ins and demonstrations, whilst King's SNCC was able to gain most of the media attention by virtue of its leader's growing fame. All of these groups jockeyed for financial support and media profile. Another major group that was gaining attention in the Afro-American community at that time was a quasi-Islamic organisation called the Fruit of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, of which main spokesman was the charismatic Malcolm X.

Fruit of Islam to Nation of Islam

With the large-scale mass migrations of African-Americans this century had come the 'ghettoization' of a large part of the black populace. It was in these ghettos that a new voice emerged, one Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole in Georgia 1897), who had created a movement in the 1930s called the Black Muslims. Originally called the Lost-Found Nation of Islam the group had been founded by one W.D. Fard who soon disappeared in mysterious circumstances and was deified as Allah by Elijah Muhammad, who then became Allah's messenger. Muhammad continued Fard's teachings, which have been described as, "not Islam, but a contradictory blend of Islam, Jehovah's Witness doctrine, gnosticism and heretical Christian teachings", but this did not diminish their appeal in the black ghettos of America.

In 1948 the Nation of Islam (NOI) had its greatest boost when a young man in prison in Norfolk was converted. His name was Malcolm Little

and at 23 became Malcolm X on joining the NOI, and by the late 1950s was the leading spokesman for the group. Malcolm X pursued a hard-line, separatist position in relation to white America, who he portrayed as 'Devils'. He also took a strong stance against the black bourgeoisie and black professionals who he saw as 'sell-outs'. Massey and Denton observed,

Malcolm X summed up this attitude with his sardonic quip, "What do you call a Negro with a Ph.D? A nigger."

By the mid-1960s Malcolm had become disillusioned with the personal integrity of Elijah Muhammad and his hard-core racist beliefs, and after a series of disputes he left the NOI and created two new organisations, the Muslim Mosque Inc., and the Organisation of African Unity. Malcolm took the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca and returned a man who no longer espoused racial hatred, which made him a threat to the Nation of Islam. Members of the NOI duly assassinated Malcolm on Sunday, 21st February 1965.

Soon after Malcolm's expulsion from the NOI, a former cabaret singer called Louis Walcott (who Malcolm had introduced to NOI in 1955) now called Louis X had replaced him as the leader of Temple n o. 7 in Harlem. When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975 and his designated heir, his son Wallace, led the organisation onto a path different to his father's teachings, Louis Farrakhan took over the abandoned name Nation of Islam and became its leader. In the decades since, Farrakhan has established himself as one of the foremost African-American leaders, but has continued to evoke fear in the white and Jewish communities.

Why Does Farrakhan Evoke Strongly Divergent Views?

In the late 1960s there was a general diminution of black political power. Whereas earlier that decade the civil rights movement was able to make significant political gains, and in 1965 Gallup opinion polls 52 percent of

people surveyed identified 'race relations' as the country's most important problem, just six years later a mere 7 percent said the same thing. This loss of external community political and financial support hit the mainstream African-American organizations hard, but the NOI, with its strong advocacy of self-reliance gained ground as it developed successful community programs to combat poverty, violence and drugs whilst preaching black self-pride. At the same time as society was turning away from black community problems and dismantling welfare programs and assistance to the poor, the NOI was one of the most visible groups in caring for the community. As Pement notes,

Its members are active in jails and prisons, recruiting men behind bars and dissuading them from a life of crime...They have a strong emphasis against drugs, against prostitution and pimping, violence and gang involvement. They urge blacks to set up black-owned and black-operated businesses, thus working to raise the standard of living in poor neighbourhoods.

Contrast that with the grim reality that faced US unskilled workers over the past two decades whereby between 1969 and 1976, 22.3million jobs disappeared due to factory closures, downsizing and/or relocation of production offshore. In New York by 1995 there were roughly seven jobless people for every vacancy, and in Harlem 40 percent of people lived below the poverty line and nearly half of all people aged above 18 are unemployed or underemployed. Massey and Denton argued that the cultural and social isolation of the ghetto has further marginalised a vast black underclass. They say,

The high degree of residential segregation imposed on blacks ensures that their social and economic isolation from the rest of American society...Such high levels of racial isolation cannot be sustained without creating a profound alienation from American society and its institutions.

But while Massey and Denton contend that segregation undermines the social and economic well being of black ghetto families, the NOI and Farrakhan argue the opposite. Whilst Massey and Denton's claims are predicated upon a decaying urban landscape and economy as the

middle class move to the suburbs taking their capital with them, Farrakhan's argument for racial segregation sees the development of black pride, self-reliance and economic independence as the means of enabling black communities to maintain cultural as well as economic well-being. One of the ironies of white America's fear of Farrakhan and the NOI is that if white capital were forthcoming in co-operating with some of NOI programs it might well find it profitable to co-operate with a group that has done more to bring peace and stability to many former violent and hostile communities than have the official agencies funded for that task.

Furthermore, the US black underclass (defined as those below the Poverty Level) in 1979 constituted 27.8 percent of the black populous, but by 1993 had grown to 31.3 percent. At the same time in white America in 1970 those below the poverty line made up 6 percent while in 1993 were still only 9.4 percent. By 1996 approx. 9.7million African-Americans were living in poverty, and by 1998 the number had dropped a minuscule amount to 9.1 million, but at 26.5 percent remained an increase on a decade before.

The great economic disparity between black and white America are evident in these figures, and points to a significant factor in the mass alienation of African-Americans over the past two decades. Such alienation has made the black community fertile ground for the likes of Farrakhan who can give both voice and hope to the voiceless and downtrodden of black America today.

Just because the white, mainstream media and sections of the Jewish community perceive Farrakhan as being anti-Semitic does not necessarily diminish him in the eyes of his ghetto and black disaffected followers. As Bush pointed out, attacks by groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), "may increase the stature of these Black nationalist spokespersons among those who interpret them

as standing up to the white man (Jewish or otherwise)" But it must be said that Farrakhan's continuing assertions regarding matters Jewish certainly does not help his case or cause outside the black community. One of the more controversial publications by the NOI is The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews, written by 'anonymous' authors and claimed to be based on the works of 'the most respected Jewish authorities'. Among other things the book claims that the Jews 'dominated' the slave trade and that Jews were among the major slaveholders of the South. Jewish opponents of the book point out that in 1830, of the 11,000 slave owners only 4 were Jewish.

Farrakhan's perceived anti-Semitic streak is one of two fundamental flaws that will probably never see him attain the ultimate goals he seeks as a power broker in America. The other flaw, potentially much more destructive to his image, is the long term question mark that hangs over him in relation to his involvement and/or role in the death of the revered Malcolm X in 1965. But even with that albatross hanging around his neck, Farrakhan has been able to attract most of the major names in black America to his side at the "million man march" and other actions. These black notables include the likes of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Dick Gregory, Stevie Wonder, Issac Hayes and rapper Hammer. Eddie Murphy sent his apologies that scheduling conflicts prevented his attendance. So despite the demonic reflections cast on him by his enemies, Farrakhan remains one of the most important figures in black America today.

The Black Bourgeoisie

Meanwhile, there is also the Black Middle-Class to take into account. They were said in 1973 to constitute 25 percent of the black population and,

are people whose middle-class status is defined in the same terms as the middle-class status of their white counterparts. Their

opportunities are not equal to those of their white counterparts, for they may earn less money than those counterparts and even, on the average, less than white working-class persons.

This small proportion of black America has grown slightly wealthier and are more often than not the ones who are presented in US media as the "leaders" of the black community, hence the enhanced fear when confronted with a Louis Farrakhan who seems downright threatening by comparison. The black middle-class would seem to have benefited the most from jobs created by government affirmative action programs, although many of those jobs were in city services which became "racialised" as a result of concentrations of black employees in those services most utilised by blacks.

Affirmative action programs also saw an increase in African-American participation in the education system in the 1980s, but up till 1994 there had been minimal real improvement. In 1994 of the total black populace of 33million only 11 percent had gained a college degree, as compared with 22 percent of whites. But today, even with a degree, black executive, administrative and managerial workers have a median income of \$36,000 compared to the white median income for the same work of \$46,000. A significant part of the black middle-class are not the well off types ones sees on the Cosby Show, although there remains a small group which include show business personalities and sports stars who are fabulously wealthy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think it is obvious by the serious socio-economic disparities that exist in the United States today that we are looking at a racist country. That racism does not just manifest itself against African-Americans, but also Hispanics, Native-Americans and, to a lesser extent, Asian-Americans. The invisible restraints that keep most of

these groups marginalised and in poverty are as strong as they ever were in America. In fact they are probably worse than ever as the effects of corporate downsizing, globalisation, privatization and cutting of government expenditure increase. Despite claims today of a great American economic boom, the fact remains that in the current economic climate it is the rich who are getting richer and the poor who are getting poorer. As more blue collar white workers lose their jobs and are forced into labour market competition with non-white workers, racial tension can be expected to increase.

Because America has never resolved the serious flaws in its society that the civil rights era exposed, it can expect that (in the famous words of Malcolm X) the chickens will one day come home to roost. When they do, white America may find itself dealing with a man who they have spent the last two decades demonising and refusing to take seriously. The only certainty is that one day America will have to come to terms with Louis Farrakahn.

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