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Who Needs the Negro?

*From the economics of exploitation
to the economics of uselessness*

A discontented, restless generation of American Negroes, anxious to abandon a history of enslavement for equal participation in our society, has abruptly ended centuries of seeming lethargy. But is their demand for "Freedom NOW" a genuine Negro revolt? Is there actually a civil rights struggle? Is the fundamental conflict between black and white?

The tendency to look upon the racial crisis as a struggle for equality between Negro and white is too narrow in scope. The crisis is caused not so much by the transition from slavery to equality as by a change from an economics of exploitation to an economics of uselessness. With the onset of automation the Negro is moving out of his historical state of oppression into uselessness. Increasingly, he is not so much economically exploited as he is irrelevant. And the Negro's economic anxiety is an anxiety that will spread to others in our society as automation proceeds.

The tremendous historical change for the Negro is taking place in these terms: he is not needed. He is not so much oppressed as unwanted; not so much unwanted as unnecessary; not so much abused as ignored. The dominant whites no longer need to exploit him. If he disappeared tomorrow he would hardly be missed. As automation proceeds, it is easier and easier to disregard him.

After Them the Tempest

The Negro movement is merely the advance turbulence of a general tempest. At the moment that the Negro passes a major milestone in his struggle for full citizenship our society shifts from an industrial to an automated economy. He is like the breathless runner in the nightmare who, no matter how he strains, can only see his goal recede farther in the distance. Even if he won his demands for civil rights he could not keep up with the spreading effects of the introduction of total machine production. The "Negro Problem" therefore is not only one of civil rights but is also one

of economic and human rights: How are we to re-arrange our social life in response to the rapid alterations in economic production?

On the face of it the idea of a "Negro Revolution" is absurd. The Negro is not challenging basic American values. He wants to join the white man's system, not upset it; he wants to come into the house, not bomb it. Rather than being engaged in a revolution to overthrow an oppressive system, the Negro is being disengaged by the system.

Negro Removal

The Negro flees the South—one region to another. He abandons the country for the city. And the white's response? He flees the Negro, abandoning the city to him. The usual explanation is that the Negro leaves his rural birthplace because the city needs his labor, especially after the cutting off of European immigration. But if this is so, why is the Negro's unemployment rate in urban centers so high?

Basically, 20,000,000 Negroes are unwanted. Our values inhibit genocide—so we discard them by establishing new forms of "Indian reservations" called "Negro ghettos." We even make them somewhat economically self-sufficient through an "Indian hand-out." One out of every four Negroes in Chicago, for example, receives some form of public welfare assistance. Is it an exaggeration to suggest that the deteriorated city has now become the junk heap upon which the economically worthless are thrown?

Urban renewal is often offered as a remedy, a medication which can help check the spreading blight of slum neighborhoods and slum lives. But what in fact has urban renewal brought about? Isn't the Negro simply being shuttled around—turned over to the onward rush of economic interests as the Indian was? Reservation lands were once thought worthless—so they were given to the Indian; when this turned out to be wrong economically, they were taken away again. So with Negro

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slums as they become less profitable than middle-class urban renewal. The Negroes—and the slums—are being moved from one part of the city to another, while their old neighborhoods are converted into bulldozer wastelands (“Hiroshima flats” as one famous project has been nicknamed) until more prosperous tenants finally arrive. Presumably the bulldozers can then move to the “new” Negro neighborhoods, by then probably sufficiently blighted to require a new urban renewal project. One writer comments: “Planners endeavor to improve city life by property improvement: to upgrade property values rather than human values.” “Urban Renewal” becomes “Negro Removal.”

- *Migration.* In 1940, 59 percent of the Negro population lived in the South while only 22 percent lived in the North. By 1960, the share of the Negro population living in the South dropped to 40 percent while that in the North had grown to 34 percent. The border states remained constant at around 25 percent. Between 1950 and 1960 the twelve largest United States cities lost over 2 million “Anglos” and gained nearly 2 million Negro residents.

- *Urban Renewal.* *Fourteen years after the adoption of urban renewal by our federal government, only a handful of racially integrated new neighborhoods exist although many old integrated neighborhoods have been razed.* “There is, if anything, more rigid housing segregation today in our cities than there was a decade ago,” declares one writer. And of the people relocated by urban renewal 72 percent are non-white and of these most are Negroes—another source claims 80 percent of the families are Negroes. Moreover, one-half of the land cleared through urban renewal goes to autos as highways and parking lots, so that at most one-fourth of the land area is used for housing. *Urban renewal thus provides fewer housing units than it supplants.*

- *Employment.* In the late 1940’s, the non-white unemployment rate was about 60 percent larger than that for whites—in 1948, the unemployment rate for non-whites was 5.2 percent and for whites, 3.2 percent. By 1954, the non-white rate of unemployment was twice that of whites—8.9 percent for non-whites compared to 4.5 percent for whites. In 1962, it was almost 2½ times greater—11 percent against 4.5 percent. This disproportionate growth in Negro unemployment

took place in spite of a narrowing difference in education. Further, three out of four non-farm Negro male workers are in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations compared to one out of three for Anglos.

These items seem separate. But for the Negro they come together and spell out: *unwanted*.

For the Negro knows what is happening to him. He knows that the main problem is unemployment—and that he is being removed from economic participation in white society. He recognizes that urban renewal is Negro removal. He sees that he embarrasses even white liberals—that he contaminates what many whites consider to be conducive to pleasant urban life. He is aware of the attempt to wall him off, out of sight and out of mind. And he also knows that he cannot let this happen to him.

Arise and Conform

In one shameful sense the Negro demands *are* revolutionary. The Negro is so disadvantaged economically and socially that any real attempt to bridge the gap nationally (not to single out the South) would involve a tremendous, even “revolutionary” re-allocation of financial resources—particularly in light of the cry “Now!”

But there is no real revolution. Our basic institutions are being appealed to, not overturned. Except for a loud minority, what Negroes even actually demand the massive remedy—to which they are certainly entitled? “Freedom NOW!” is an inspirational myth. How little most Negroes demand in comparison with what many whites already have!

- In 1960, the median money wage was \$3,058 for Negroes compared to \$5,425 for whites: 71 percent of Negro families earned less than \$5,000 while only 39 percent of the white families had incomes below \$5,000.

- The relative gap between Negro and white family income has been increasing since the mid-fifties, indicating that Negro family income has not kept pace with whites’. Since 1952 the Negro level has been faltering.

- Of 280,000 new houses constructed in Chicago between 1950-1960 less than ½ of 1 percent were occupied by Negroes.

- Only ½ of 1 percent of people with an income below \$5,000 per year have received FHA assistance.

- A Negro boy has about half the chance to complete high school as a white boy; one third as much to complete college or become a professional man; one seventh as much of earning

\$10,000 a year; twice as much chance of becoming unemployed. His average life expectancy is seven years shorter.

- The average Negro with four years of college will earn less in his lifetime than the average white who never went beyond the eighth grade. The figures differ little between North and South.

Quest for Identity

As the Negro becomes an outcast he seeks to reorient himself through the civil rights struggle. The civil rights movement is a *quest for identity* by the Negro minority. Eminent Negroes participating for the first time in racial demonstrations have discovered that they can be proud to be Negroes. Through the civil rights movement the Negro announces to others, and thus to himself, his identity and worth. Without the struggle, the Negro would be left alone in an agony of isolation, in despair over his insignificance—an entity without identity.

The Negro's anguish does not rise only from brutalities of past oppression; in a system of exploitation the most humble can lay claim to an identity. The Southern Negro knew himself because he "kept his place" as required. Now there is no place to keep. The vast social changes in our society expose him to new experiences. The Negro, acutely aware of his unworthiness *to himself*, rebounds in frustration, extremely conscious of his insignificance as never before. As he becomes irrelevant to the white, he fears his relevance to himself. Martin Luther King writes in his letter from a Birmingham jail that Negroes "are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'." Ralph Ellison writes of the "Invisible Man." James Baldwin declared during a television interview:

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I know how my nephew feels, I know how I feel, I know how the cats in the barbershop feel. A boy last week, he was sixteen, in San Francisco told me on TV . . . He said, "I got no country. I got no flag." Now, he's only 16 years old, and I couldn't say, "You do." I don't have any evidence to prove he does.

Baldwin notes that in the rural South the whites think of the Negro constantly; but in the great Northern urban areas they seldom think of him. Of these two conditions the second may be the more terrible.

The Overground Railway

Even the flight from the South is a manifestation of irrelevance rather than exploitation or rejection. The Southern Negro was once a powerless cog in an established system of exploitation; he flees his birthplace for Northern cities with thoughts of freedom. The South responds to this exodus not as a loss but as a beneficial "drainage" of the discontented. And the Northern white reacts to the Negro's arrival by fleeing to the suburb. Black and white both share the endeavor to avoid one another rather than make attempts to resolve differences. The Southern white is mistaken in thinking that the "Negro problem" has departed with the Negro; and the Northern white is now learning his error in fleeing the city. In this geographical relocation, the Negro becomes an orphan—forsaken, ignored, denied.

There is no possibility of resubjugating the Negro or of jailing 20,000,000 Americans of varying shades of "black". Thus the real frustration of the "total society" comes from the difficulty of discarding 20,000,000 people made superfluous through automation.

Out of the anonymity of our automating society the Negro will be attracted to organizations which can endow him with identity. It is doubtful that existing moderate organizations—NAACP, CORE, Southern Christian Leadership Council, and the rest—will meet his need for identification. Moderates strive for equality in the civil rights struggle so that the Negro might assimilate into the dominant white society. Equality, however, means the loss of identity through making all people into one homogeneous group. Actually, the moderate seeks to promote the Negro's escape from insubordination by eradicating the Negro—by making him a dark white man. But the Negro cannot establish his identity by erasing himself.

The organizations most capable of elevating him as an identifiable entity will in the long run have the greatest attraction. The extreme groups do

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not arise, as many writers claim, solely because the moderates fail. They arise because the moderate is likely to succeed—this success is not enough. The extremes persist because—untried—they still offer a hope, a dream, and identity.

Although an immigrant to the city, the Negro is not, as liberals hopefully assume, still another wave of the same sort that left Europe for America. The differences are too great for such analogy. The Negro's past is an American experience of subordination in a system of exploitation. It is no simple matter in our society for the Negro to shed his past as the European rid himself of his alien ways. Moreover, the Negro enters an urban setting at a time when the economy operates at a national rather than a local level. Corporations have replaced community-bound business interests and demand educated skills and knowledge. Negroes cannot become like early European immigrants, a large, unskilled, and poorly paid labor force. Urban growth today demands just the opposite. The Negro is as unprepared for today's cosmopolitan and automating society as he is unnecessary for the mechanizing Southern farms he flees.

Even Keynesian economics offers little hope. The consumption strategy for economic prosperity of the Keynesian school is already provided through our vast military expenditures. The "effective demand" is generated through the "institutionalized waste" of the arms race. Indeed, it was during World Wars I and II that the Negro made his greatest strides toward racial equality precisely because his labor was deemed essential to the war effort. But the military now needs missiles, not men; scientists, not soldiers. Our society prospers without a redistribution of income in favor of the lower brackets—despite liberal slogans. In the military system we have an impersonal, omnipotent consumer of tremendous proportions that, in effect, supplants a mass purchasing power that could have been placed in the Negro's hands.

Booms: Babies to Unemployed

There is a vital point that is seldom, if ever, noticed when scanning the unemployment figures along racial lines. It is quite correct that the unemployment rate for the Negro has been twice that of the white; but whites, too, are unemployed. If civil rights were the issue, why should a white displace a white? A common cause of unemployment, apart from race, apart from civil wrongs, exists.

Harold Baron, Co-Director of the Research Department of the Chicago Urban League, writes:

The decade 1960-1970 is witnessing a tremendous increase in the labor force as the progeny of the post-war baby boom enters the labor market. Twenty-six million new youths will hunt jobs, making a net addition of 15,000,000 to the total. If we make a projection based on recent rates of job increase (and even allow for a lesser loss in the number of agricultural jobs), we arrive at an increase of 3,500,000 jobs. *This leaves a staggering addition of 11,500,000 unemployed.* Add the 4,000,000 currently unemployed, and we will have 15,500,000 persons out of work. Even assuming a return to the higher rate of job increase of the 1947 to 1957 decade, there would still be an increase of 5,000,000. (*New University Thought, 1963*).

The civil rights myth actually perpetuates the economic status quo. As long as the issue is split along racial lines, divide and rule prevails, and we do not question the economic ideology that justifies prevailing production and consumption. If the contention can be presented as racial strife rather than economic dislocation, then the economic interests stand to gain a decided advantage: serious questioning of the merits and demerits of our production and distribution of wealth will not take place. The evil will be defined as Southern bigotry overflowing into the North rather than the economics of displacement.

In short and in summary, the historical transition for the Negro is not occurring in a civil rights context; it is instead a movement out of the Southern cotton fields into the Northern factories and then to the automated urbanity of "nobodiness." The issue becomes a question of human—not only civil—rights and involves white and Negro alike. For the Negro is merely a weathervane for the future. *His* experience will be a common one for many whites now deprived of some sort of usefulness; *his* frustrations will become those for many others the longer we hesitate to confront the meaning of human dignity in an automated society. As more of us become unnecessary—as human energy and thought themselves become increasingly unnecessary—the greater will be our social anxiety. Then perhaps we will become aware that racial strife today is not between black and white, but is instead a search for human rights in a world of machines that makes so many human beings utterly dispensable.