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# Political Freedom and the Widening of Group Consciousness among Middle and Lower Class Black Americans

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## Introduction

Isaiah Berlin, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century social critic, argues that the need for individual recognition is a universal need that is the catalyst for the creation of social support networks (1958; 1970). Being recognized as a rational human being that is capable and involved in making one's own decisions, has great importance on how persons view their personal choices. Individuals who are members of groups that go unrecognized and have their personal choices restricted are likely to forego some of their political freedoms so to be part of a group that grants them recognition and involvement in governing themselves (Berlin, 1958). Moreover, unrecognized persons are likely to enter into a social contract with an alternative civil society (e.g., the subgroup) principally for individual and/or group recognition, which often fosters a political group identity and consciousness (Berlin, 1958; Miller et al. 1981; Durant & Sparrow, 1997; Callhoun-Brown, 1996; Reese & Brown, 1995; Dawson, Brown, & Allen, 1990). However, recognition and the granting of political freedom to an oppressed group may lead to the unraveling of a collective political identity as persons are able to more freely associate with persons of common economic interests.

It is my argument that a racialized group consciousness among Blacks has changed in the post-Civil Rights era as they were granted increased recognition and subsequent political freedom. Increased political freedom through the implementation of radical federal laws during the 1960s contributed to the perception among middle class Blacks that the mutual recognition fostered within the confines of the Black community was of lesser value than the need be recognized and afforded the privileges of functioning within the broader mainstream American society. Thus, as political freedoms expanded, the Black community became increasingly fragmented along class lines, and the notion of a common racial group consciousness became increasingly difficult as the social and physical distance between these groups widened. This point is illustrated in my examination of the Black church and impact of the Civil Rights Movement on racial group identity and consciousness among Black Americans.

## Church, Race, Class Identity and Consciousness

A history of racial stratification has produced a sense of group identity and consciousness among Black Americans that links the fate of the group to the fate of the

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individual (Reese & Brown, 1995; Dawson, Brown, & Allen, 1990). The Black church has played a critical role in fostering a collective belief system that serves as a mechanism to cope with and combat racial oppression (Dawson, Brown, & Allen, 1990; Reese & Brown, 1995). In doing so, the Black church has provided insight to Black Americans on the meaning of life, which defines obligations, responsibilities, and expected behavior of members toward themselves, their families, and their community (Frazier, 1963; Dubois, 1968; Arp III & Boeckelman, 1997; Taylor, Thornton, & Chatters, 1988; Clayton, 1995). Furthermore, the Black church has provided a formal structure of acceptance that acknowledges and respects members of the Black community by providing them with valued roles within the church, which contributes to feelings of self-worth (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998). Feelings of self-worth are related to feelings of closeness to and a shared common fate with church members, which are key components of identity and consciousness formation that, in turn, motivates persons to take on roles that improve the lives of church and community members (Reese & Brown, 1995; Brown & Wolford, 1995).

Research indicates that racial identity and consciousness among African Americans is attenuated in Black churches where political messages (e.g. awareness of social issues, information on public officials) are heard (Brown & Wolford, 1994; Dawson, Brown, & Allen, 1990; Reese & Brown, 1995; Tate, 1991). Political churches tend to endorse a liberation theology that emphasizes the importance of mobilization and political action as avenues that God works through people to guarantee them recognition and freedom (Arp III, & Boeckelman, 1997; Clayton Jr., 1995; Brown & Wolford, 1994; Reese & Brown, 1995; Callhoun-Brown, 1996).

Interestingly, Taylor et. al.'s (1988) findings indicate that, while the overwhelming majority of Black Americans believe that the Black church has helped the condition of Blacks in America, urban respondents were more likely to believe that the church has done nothing or has worsened the condition of African Americans. Although the Civil Rights Movement is one of the best examples of Black churches helping to foster consciousness and social action among Black Americans, an unintended consequence of the Movement was the growing pessimism of the importance of the Black church among lower class Blacks. Following the Movement, the increased political freedom of Black Americans coupled with the restructuring of the national economy left poor Blacks and churches in these communities in a perilous position, as jobs and middle class Blacks emigrated from these communities. These occurrences left churches within these communities with fewer resources to provide material support for the increasing proportion of poor persons in the surrounding church community. This arguably contributed to the increasing disbelief among poor urban Blacks of the church's ability to improve their life chances and to a decline in church membership among the urban Black poor (Clayton, 1995).

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The diverging attitudes among poor and non-poor Blacks regarding the effectiveness of the Black church is indicative of the divergence of group consciousness among lower and middle class Black Americans during the post-Civil Rights era. Durant and Sparrow (1997) found that, while lower and middle class Blacks have a similar conception of the importance of racial consciousness, they differ in ratings of the importance of class consciousness. Lower and middle class Blacks also have divergent views regarding the solutions to amend social disparities. Lower class Blacks viewed class-consciousness as more important than middle class Blacks and were more favorable of redistributing wealth so that all persons have an equal opportunity to get ahead (Durant and Sparrow, 1997). Presumably, this difference in consciousness is related to the divergence in the lived experience of both groups since the Civil Rights era. As middle class Blacks experienced record economic gains during this period, lower class Blacks witnessed the increasing emigration of social capital, an increased prevalence of drugs, and increased social disorganization within their communities (Landry, 1987; Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996).

### **Community Consciousness During the Post-Civil Rights Era**

The Civil Rights Movement, largely executed by Black professionals and college students, was a movement that extended the political freedoms of Black Americans in mainstream society (Wilson, 1978; Loevy, 1997). It also contributed to the increasing class and consciousness heterogeneity among Black Americans as middle and lower class Black Americans became increasingly physically and socially distant from one another. Given the gains of the Civil Rights Movement experienced by middle class Blacks, their voluntary existence within the Black community entailed living in communities with deficient resources and services compared to that of larger American society. This is contrary to the social realities of all Blacks before the Civil Rights era where the personal choices of Blacks were nullified in the context of the larger American society (Wilson, 1978; Landry, 1987).

Until the 1960s, there was no guarantee that Black parents would be able to successfully pass down their class status to their children (Wilson, 1978; Landry, 1987). The restriction of occupations open to Blacks limited the life chances of all Blacks. The common experience of racism among middle and lower class Blacks through the denial of or humiliating access to public facilities and services created a common racial consciousness that linked the individual fate of Blacks of varying class levels to the fate of the larger racial group. However, between 1960 and 1970, the Black middle class doubled from 13% to 25% (Landry, 1987). This gain far exceeded the gain in the growth of the black middle class during the previous fifty years (Landry, 1987). It is argued that the nation's economic prosperity during the 1950s and 1960s allowed for a more racially tolerant white society that acquiesced into the notion of equal opportunity (Wilson, 1978; Landry, 1987). Thus, the nation's economic pros-

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perity allowed for the arguments of equality under the law for all citizens to be seen as more salient among White Americans.

Ironically, as the Black middle class reaped the economic benefits of increased political freedom, the Black poor were becoming increasingly socially isolated and poorer (Wilson, 1978; 1987; 1996). The restructuring of the national economy from a manufacturing economy to a service economy led to the decline in well-paying low-skilled blue collar jobs, an increase in low-paying service jobs, an increase in the importance of a college education, and weakened the strength of unions (Fisher, 1995; Wilson, 1978; 1987; 1996). These factors contributed to the hyper-ghettoization, the emigration of human capital, particularly of middle class Blacks, and the increased social isolation of traditional black Belt communities (Fisher, 1995; Wilson, 1978; Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1996). Wilson's (1996) findings indicate that the number of Blacks in low income inner city census tracts grew by more than one third between 1980 and 1990. The number of poverty census tracts in the nation's one hundred largest central cities, which are disproportionately Black, nearly doubled between 1970 and 1990. In the ghetto census tracts of the nation's one hundred largest central cities, the ratio of employed to unemployed is approximately three times higher in poverty census tracts than in non-poverty census tracts. As the tax base declined in these communities, the government's ability to provide adequate services to its citizenry declined, and there remained no economic incentive for persons with the resources to reside within these communities.

The Civil Rights laws of the 1960s<sup>2</sup> coupled with the restructuring of the national economy largely contributed to the creation of two Black communities that are increasingly socially and physically separate. The increased physical and social distance makes it difficult for social networks to persist among lower and middle class Blacks. As such, it is the existence within different social networks between poor and non-poor Black Americans that contributes to the widening of group identity and consciousness between these groups. The increasing class homogeneity of social networks among Blacks has contributed to the divergence of interests and the importance of issues between these groups. The problems that plague the urban Black poor are becoming increasingly divergent from the concerns of the Black middle class. The Black urban poor are plagued with a lack of access to jobs that pay a living wage, the flow of drugs in and out of their communities, and deficient public institutions. On the other hand, the Black middle class experiences increased skepticism of white America's willingness to include them as a representative factor in the social political order, as exemplified in the recent challenges to the legality of Affirmative Action programs (Hochschild, 1995).

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## Conclusion

Berlin's (1958) argument that marginalized or non-recognized individuals forego some of their political freedoms so to be part of a group that grants them recognition has historically held true for African Americans. However, the widening of physical and social distance between middle and lower class Blacks has made a common identity and consciousness increasingly difficult to maintain between these two groups. This does not suggest that racial identity and consciousness is nonexistent among Black Americans. It does suggest that their conception of what group they hold membership in and are willing to demonstrate allegiance toward has become more parsimonious. That is, a common racial consciousness has become a common race-class consciousness among Black Americans.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Group identity suggests recognition of membership in a group. Group consciousness indicates the belief that one shares a common fate with the larger group and that the welfare of the larger group coincides with the welfare of the individual (Miller et al. 1983; Durant & Sparrow, 1997; Callhoun-Brown, 1996; Reese & Brown, 1995; Dawson, Brown, & Allen, 1990). A political identity and consciousness suggest that these constructs are centered on a common political interest, such as coping with oppression.

<sup>2</sup> The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 sought to eliminate employment discrimination and opened access to public services, facilities, and accommodations. The Voting Rights Bill of 1965 sought to eliminate restrictive clauses that prevented minority populations from voting. The Civil Rights Bill of 1968 sought to ban housing discrimination on the sale or rental of a home, except by houses sold by the owner him/herself (Loevy, 1997; Wilson, 1978).

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