

BY CLARENCE FUNNYE

## *The Militant Black Social Worker and the Urban Hustle*

■ *Black social workers are urged to develop militant and special professional responses to the problems of black people and to resist the diversionary urban repair and antipoverty programs and the social work theories and practices that are institutionalizing a new urban hustle, which exploits not only blacks, but all poverty-stricken minority groups.* ■

CLARK ONCE SAID, in alluding to certain ghetto poverty programs, that they were institutionalizing the hustle. His inference was that everyone was making something out of poverty, but that the poor were not getting any closer to being nonpoor.<sup>1</sup> Clark's comment, made in 1964, was ahead

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of its time; the urban hustle was then just a bud. Now it is a full-grown tree shading an ever expanding array of programs, projects, studies, and research centers all busily engaged in developing solutions for the problems of the inner city, the deprived, or the disadvantaged—terms used to denote the yet-to-be-urbanized black residents of the nation's urban ghettos. It is instructive to review briefly some of the forms the hustle takes. The three major groupings are (1) the urban research or study project, (2) the community development project (including

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Model Cities), and (3) the neighborhood manpower training project.

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The urban study or research project is normally accomplished in or under the umbrella of a university (usually white), but may also be farmed out to special consultants who are themselves on leave from a university—the bigger, more prestigious, and most removed from inner-city problems the better.

Perhaps the most blatant example of this is the Urban Center at Columbia University, which was given \$10 million to "relate itself" to the Harlem community. One shudders in attempting to fathom the motive of the foundation that gave the grant—in light of the university's less-than-spectacular record in dealing with the black and poor citizens who used to live in the spacious rent-controlled buildings now owned by Columbia University—or when one considers the less-than-sensitive approach to community relations represented by the (some say abortive) effort to fence in a portion of Morningside Park for a university gymnasium in the face of weak but plaintive objections by the deprived Harlemites.

The second form of hustle—the community development project—is usually ad hoc in initiation, varies from city to city, and may or may not be related to Model Cities, but the central ingredients always include a gigantic community committee organized to rubber-stamp the flow of federal or foundation funds into portions of the urban ghetto. Typically, these efforts are conceived, planned, and executed by white political or social service interests that in turn employ large white urban services firms (city planners, architects, economists, and the like) as consultants to the community committee. Most often blacks are employed as staff directors with indefinite responsibilities; their major job is to explain the objectives of the development effort to the community and to absorb the puny flashes of residual opposition.

The much-heralded effort in Brooklyn, New York, once under the partial supervision of the late Senator Robert Kennedy, is probably the best-known example of this form of hustle. With what can no doubt be described as "all good intentions," Kennedy, a kind of folk hero in black communities, facilitated the flow of an estimated \$5 million in federal and foundation funds into the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto. Part of the all-black area of some one-half million people was to be redeveloped as a national demonstration of what could be done by "men of goodwill," and, in all fairness, it must be said that this effort did start with a fresh promise. The intention was to rehabilitate a number of buildings and bring industry into the area to provide jobs for the inhabitants.

Four years is perhaps too short a time to evaluate the projects fully, but aside from some four hundred brownstones that were spruced up on the outside, one small IBM assembly unit (some optimists still call it a plant) that employs under three hundred low-skilled persons, and the partial reconstruction of an abandoned milk factory to be used as a community service center, nothing has really been built or even begun. However, the urban hustlers have profited—the planning and architectural firms have submitted their plans; the sociologist and social consultants have made their reports; and all have collected their fees, basked in the sunshine of a job well done, and moved on to accomplish like "miracles" in other ghettos.

The third form of hustle—the neighborhood manpower training project—is most often sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor (sometimes additional funds are provided by private or other public sources) and is usually concerned with harnessing the energies of ghetto youths and young adults who still have enough hope to enter the job market at any level, no matter how low. In 1968 it was reported that "Negroes training for work in hospitals, hotels and restaurants make up 40% of the institu-

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tional trainees and 34% of the on the job training . . . trainees." <sup>2</sup> These jobs were on the lowest level available. Furthermore, blacks and some National Alliance of Businessmen officials complained that the Labor Department was providing reimbursement to large corporations for training for such jobs as busboys, porters, maids, parking lot attendants, laborers, housekeepers, and airline baggagemen.<sup>3</sup>

The urban disturbances (low-grade riots) and the heightened public interest in the inner city have spurred a massive urban industry in which the urban poor (especially the blacks) are the raw material but receive little from these efforts. Because of the urban poor, the future of social workers and other social scientists has brightened considerably.

For example, the psychology center of the University of the City of New York, a relative novice in the urban hustle game, is initiating a program to sensitize housing authority policemen in Manhattan. The program uses graduate students who are supervised by two white first-year doctoral students called group leaders. When a black third-year doctoral student with two years' work experience in the black community gently questioned the qualifications of the group leaders and wondered if the task might not be better accomplished by a black professional aided by less-experienced blacks, he was told by the supervisor that he should write a proposal that could be considered at a later time by some other group. Thus the project, developed without any input from the black or Puerto Rican community, is to be a training ground for white students while the supervisor and his aides collect consultants' fees and continue to deplore the lack of qualified black consultants.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Impact of Housing Patterns on Job Opportunities* (New York: National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> "Dissidence Mounts in Job-Aid Alliance," *New York Times*, October 27, 1969, p. 45.

## MODEL CITIES

The aforementioned programs have been described as nonsolutions aimed at diverting pressure to change society and eliminate discriminatory practices into harmless activities that do not threaten the Establishment. The reasons become obvious when one considers the Model Cities programs.

Model Cities was devised as a co-ordinating vehicle for the innovative rejuvenation of inner cities. It was also designed to involve inner-city residents by providing for their participation in the planning of "their own communities." Of course, the catch is that the option to control was left to local municipal officials who in nearly all cases are members of the white power structure.

In almost every city in which the black community is busy tinkering with the participatory devices of Model Cities, the established agencies who do the real planning and building are carrying out their functions without the direct involvement of black directors, especially city planning directors and urban renewal and housing commissioners, or senior or junior planners. Moreover, there are no significant black institutions or organizations actively challenging these patterns.

New York City is an excellent example of this not unintentional oversight. The City Planning Commission, established in 1937, steadfastly resisted pressures to include even one black person on the seven-member body that plans for the entire city. In the last weeks of his desperate bid for re-election in 1969, Mayor Lindsay finally placed one black on the commission. Significantly, the appointee was not included in any of the lists of blacks recommended by black organizations and community institutions.

Schorr has noted that urbanization of ghetto residents requires that they be converted into citizens of the city.<sup>4</sup> In order

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<sup>4</sup> Alvin Schorr, *Slums and Social Insecurity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, 1964).

to obtain a share of urban political bargaining power, blacks must know what can be traded—which presupposes a familiarity with the entire city, not only a special neighborhood—and the relative importance of what is being traded. Turning inward on one's own community precludes the kind of vision essential for participation as citizens, as opposed to wards of the city.

Programs such as Model Cities effectively cultivate the ward psychology among the urban blacks and poor. Black citizens are encouraged to turn to the Model Cities director, for example, for relief of community ills. They are advised to ignore or bypass the city council, mayor, and governor, not to mention the secretaries of Health, Education, and Welfare and Housing and Urban Development or their regional representatives. The ward is therefore removed from the continuing contest required of and exerted by citizens as citizens. This ward status is readily perceived and appreciated by the established institutions that facilitate urbanization and accounts in large part for the nonparticipation of blacks in the following benefits of urbanization: the college degree, craft union card, professional civil service ratings, and so forth.

### LABOR UNIONS

In 1964 the liberal leadership of the AFL-CIO gave unequivocal support to the Civil Rights Act. However, when the act became law, the euphoric mood of brotherhood evaporated. In 1969, four years after the Civil Rights Act, seven hundred complaints were filed with federal authorities and some sixteen hundred complaints were filed against employers and employment agencies by the NAACP. The case against the unions is as follows:

The refusal of all but a few of the eighteen building trade unions to open their ranks to qualified Negroes; most of the highly paid skilled construction jobs are held by whites.

Industrial-union seniority systems that relegate Negroes to menial jobs. In many plants the senior Negro employees have less desirable jobs than the most junior of the whites.

The systematic exclusion of Negroes from apprenticeship programs (mostly the building trades); only 3 percent of registered apprentices are Negroes.

Failure to eliminate locals that are confined to a single race. There are over 150 all-Negro AFL-CIO locals.

The use of hiring halls and referral systems to prevent qualified, non-union Negroes from bidding for jobs.

The deliberate exclusion of Negroes from unions in some industries.

Union attempts to evade federal law by accepting a token number of Negroes.<sup>5</sup>

The economic and social consequences of this discrimination are immense. For example, if blacks were employed in the building trades in proportion to their numbers in the work force, they would hold 27,000 more jobs as carpenters, 45,000 more as general construction workers, 97,000 more as mechanics, 82,000 more as metal craftsmen, and 112,000 more as construction foremen, at a low estimate of \$10,000 a year per worker.<sup>6</sup> Merely forcing this one institution to obey the law would mean an additional \$3.3 billion per year poured into the black community, as compared to the estimated \$900 million that filters down to the black community from the diversionary manpower training, Model Cities, and poverty programs combined.<sup>7</sup>

The nation is unlikely to achieve an equitable redistribution of income or provide urbanization benefits to the black com-

<sup>5</sup> Thomas O'Hanlon, "The Case Against the Unions," *Fortune*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (January 1968), p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> The sum of \$3.3 billion applies only to the building trades industry. If all the other industries were required to act responsibly in regard to equitable redistribution or urbanization benefits, the nation could dispense with welfare, poverty supplements, and so forth.

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munity as long as the social work profession embraces the updated revisions of welfare paternalism. Unfortunately, many factors—not excluding the momentum of institutional racism—cast doubts on the ability of the profession to throw off old ways.

### ROLE OF BLACK SOCIAL WORKERS

What is the role of black social workers in this rather questionable environment? Black social workers, like other blacks, are largely products of white institutions or black-run institutions with white values and orientations. Accordingly, they suffer from nearly all the deficiencies of their white colleagues. However, the racist character of the society exacts an extrapsychic penalty from blacks who "succeed."<sup>8</sup> These black social workers tend to exaggerate the lack of involvement and dispassionate unconcern for blacks that they perceive in the vast majority of their white colleagues. Thus they have split almost evenly between detachment (working in traditional social work agencies dedicated to salving the ills of the society or making the burdens more palatable to the bearers) and absorption into various parts of the urban hustle game. They have bought the entire package of diversionary programs.

Black social workers can make a sizable and unique contribution to their profession and simultaneously to their race. The author will discuss how this can be achieved in terms of philosophical concerns and the detailed components of what the white society calls the "urban crisis."

### PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS

The term "black community" is used broadly to refer to all American blacks, including those who still feel more comfor-

table with the word "Negro." It refers to those who live in the suburbs or mini-ghettos as well as the inhabitants of the wretchedly poor urban ghettos. All are linked by their unique past and the present nature of the American experience as they view it. It must be noted that the existence of a special black community is dependent neither on geographic considerations nor even on the wishes of blacks themselves. For many blacks this is difficult to accept. One still hears the feeble protest: "I am a professional first and a black professional second," which implies a built-in color blindness unrelated to the color consciousness of the whole environment.

This wishful self-deception is obviously inconsistent with the clearly observable fact of institutional racism in America but accounts no doubt for the nonexistence of any real black input into the study or practice of social work in America. Indeed until four years ago there was not even an organization of black social workers. The insidious nature of this self-delusion is brought crashingly home when one considers that black intellectuals had for years been defining the American society as racist in institutional as well as broad attitudinal terms.<sup>9</sup> Yet they were largely ignored until white "Presidential commissions" said essentially the same thing and it became acceptable to admit to racism.

One hopes that it is no longer necessary to justify the establishment of a separate black professional response to the conditions besetting the black community and affecting the nation as a whole. Black social workers should not have to wait several more years for some "white commission" on social work education to document the fact that the social work schools

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962); and Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Clark, *op. cit.*; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963); Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Books, 1968); and Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

still ignore or at best only give lip service to the existence of the unique and desirable strengths of the black community.

Social work theory still insists that the sociopsychological environment of black Americans is the same as—or is certainly only a shade different from—the environment of white Americans. In spite of the continuous bombardment of hostility heaped on blacks solely because they are black (in addition to all the normal pressures of life), most social work theorists persist in contending that blacks do not develop some unique responses or do not have different needs or psychic requirements from whites. Such theorists arrogantly submit that this body of responses is not worth attention equal to that given the body of sociopsychological knowledge undergirding social work curricula for work with white clients (often called the “general public”).

The alert black social worker should readily discern the relevance or nonrelevance of social work as taught to and practiced by his white colleagues who are players in and beneficiaries of the urban hustle. However, it may be much harder for him to look inward and study himself and his community—to relate emerging insights to the larger environment and begin to develop new social work theories that are not necessarily based on social work's European heritage. It will be necessary to redefine such basic terms as “deprived,” “disadvantaged,” and “broken families.” Concepts such as “coping behavior” will take on a different and more relevant meaning when applied to the black community.

For example, a young black man may engage in a phase of “hustling,” which may be his only way of escaping (and thereby “coping” with reality) the garment district rat race that causes more feelings of worthlessness, incompetence, and depression than selling “hot” goods. Being a human horse for \$70 a week may be considered good and noble by whites. They praise this kind of

unquestioning acceptance of low status and hopelessness and decry attempts by the black poor to break out of their poverty through the acquisition of illegal “wealth.” They and their courts condone the shooting of a 7-year-old poor boy for stealing a loaf of bread or a transistor radio while they wink at executives of major corporations who conspire to defraud the public of millions of dollars. By choosing to hustle, is not the black man rejecting this dichotomy? Is it not possible that the ghetto pimp is healthier than the garment industry horse?

It is crucial that black social workers begin to posit these data and reformulate their significance in relation to black psychological development. It is their job, responsibility, and area of authentic expertise. White professionals cannot be expected to be willing or even qualified to crusade for the demise of such invalid theories—they have too much of an investment in the status quo.

Black social theorists who embark on any challenge to the profession will not be accepted by the profession, the social institutions of the black community, or the black urban hustlers who derive their status as ghetto leaders or black experts from whites. While they may receive some kind of support from ghetto separatists, the fantasies of separatist theories—at least as stated by black pseudomilitants—will not be able to embrace the vigorous adherence to reality that must attend the establishment of an entirely new social philosophy.

A new and higher form of militancy on the part of black social theorists and social workers is needed. It requires that they speak out not only against the white urban hustlers but against the many would-be ghetto spokesmen. They must constantly and consistently resist elevating clichés to the status of uncontested facts. They will have to expose the rhetoric that masks so many urban hustle programs. Furthermore, they must no longer follow the latest social theories but must become innovators and independent thinkers.

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### URBAN CRISIS

While devising a new urban philosophy, the black social theorist or social worker will need to give immediate attention to the components of the urban crisis (health, housing, economics, education, and environmental security). Here it is easier to speak of the major physical symbol of that crisis—the urban ghetto—often incorrectly referred to as the black community.

No more basic data studies of the urban ghetto need be undertaken; it has been overstudied. What is needed is an interpretation and analysis that identify system malfunctions and co-ordinate structurally appropriate responses based on the interrelationship of data. The development of an urban program related to the basic components of the community might most profitably begin with the question of how the components relate to one another.

In relation to health and mortality, for example, nearly all urban social workers have been programmed to think of mortality rates in the urban ghetto as a function of health care delivery systems. But a recent finding by a black research physician was that mortality in black communities is not related to health care systems but to such things as the enforcement of local building codes, particularly those codes relating to the provision of heat and hot water.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is the problem of lead poisoning. Hundreds of black and Puerto Rican children in New York City die or suffer brain damage each year from eating lead-base paint that falls off walls in their homes.<sup>11</sup> The source of death is rarely diagnosed correctly. But when these children survive the lead poisoning and suffer brain damage, the school system notes the symptoms as being based on the children's "inherent slowness," "mental incapacity,"

and so forth. Any social worker or social work agency that seeks a remedy by calling on the custodians of the health care delivery systems will be frustrated. Even if one lead-poisoned child were correctly diagnosed, treated, and cured, there would still be thousands of cases that would remain undetected unless a doctor or other medical technician could be placed in every apartment building.

Clearly, then, when one speaks of housing, one is speaking of health and physical and mental survival as well as environmental security and education. An old African proverb, "Everything relates to everything," has been downgraded to the status of a social science cliché. As a result everyone suffers.

In the case of housing for blacks, proposed solutions to the terrible conditions of ghetto tenements are the building of clean, blocklike public housing units or the rehabilitation of "superblocks" in the ghetto. In the true spirit of cliché-based programs, ghetto spokesmen often insist that housing for blacks be confined to black areas. This is against both the economic and social interests of blacks. The vast majority of new jobs in the service and manufacturing areas have been and are continuing to be developed in the suburbs, not the cities. For example, the suburbs of New York City gained 400,000 jobs while the city gained only 218,000 new jobs. The same relative pattern was documented for Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and San Francisco. These suburban jobs are the ones that form the economic base of the black community; the city jobs require long years of training not now possessed by the black working force.<sup>12</sup>

Schemes for reversing commutation are technically and economically unfeasible. Unless blacks can obtain housing in sufficient quantity reasonably near suburban jobs, they are likely to become unemployed

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Clement, MD, speech delivered to the Institute of Black Elected Officials, Washington, D.C., September 1969.

<sup>11</sup> "Lead Poisoning and the City," *Village Voice*, September 20, 1969, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Impact of Housing Patterns on Job Opportunities*.

as more and more jobs move to the suburbs.<sup>13</sup> Planners report that schemes to bring industry into the ghetto are short-sighted and technically unfeasible. In fact, there is simply not enough space to build offices and factories to provide even a fraction of the needed jobs.<sup>14</sup>

It is predicted that the present concentration of housing in the ghettos will ensure welfare status for at least half the black ghetto families by 1990 and that ghetto pathology will increase to the point that it eventually impinges on the security of the larger society and stimulates repressive measures that may include conversion of the ghettos into instant concentration camps.<sup>15</sup> Black social workers must know and understand the broad implications involved in manipulating any aspect of the urban community. They must know and continually point out that housing is not just providing adequate buildings. Properly planned and situated, housing is environmental and social security; poorly planned and situated, it can contribute to a multitude of ills including spiritual and physical destruction.

Most black social workers have accepted the separatist notion that confinement of blacks in ghettos represents power.<sup>16</sup> The insanity of this position becomes clear when one considers that the black communities of New York City contain 20 percent of the city's population (90 percent of the city's black population). Given an even distribution of power among the city's five boroughs, all-white Staten Island—with only 3 percent of the city's population—holds nearly 20 percent of the power

through its borough representatives on the Board of Estimate. Moreover, the borough has repeatedly elected the most conservative state representatives, who work against the interests of all blacks in the city. If only one-fourth of the city's blacks relocated to Staten Island, blacks would control the borough and increase their power four-fold. Moreover, the inhuman pressures of density and overcrowding in the existing ghettos would be somewhat relieved while the "powers" those areas now enjoy would not decrease.

### CONCLUSION

Black social workers will be obligated to start incorporating this kind of analytical reasoning in the development of programs to improve the black community. The author proposes a new kind of professionalism and a higher form of militancy that avoid the comforts attending approval by white colleagues in the urban hustle game or the fantasy-bound ghetto hustlers who invest a minimum amount of time in analyzing the future of blacks and urban America. They must be prepared to strike out in new directions that state emphatically the issues in terms of their benefits to blacks and construct mechanisms to acquire these benefits. A national institute staffed and directed by black social workers dedicated to the monitoring of proposals by Establishment agencies and the creation of new and innovative black-oriented proposals seem imperative. The implementation of these proposals requires much work and promises little in the way of immediate recognition or rewards either within or outside the black community. It can be anticipated that only a small fraction of black professionals will be prepared or inclined to make the intense commitment of time and energy demanded. At first their numbers will be small, but later others will follow, and this, after all, is the way substantial changes begin.

<sup>13</sup> *The Second Regional Plan* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Clarence Funnyé, "Deghettoization: Choice of the New Militancy," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 150, No. 3 (April 1969), p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Clarence Funnyé, "Brothers in Their City of Love," *Village Voice*, September 20, 1968, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> "Black People in Control of Their Ghettos," *New York Times*, October 27, 1969, p. 20.

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