

Cornel West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,”
Critical Quarterly 29 (4) (1987), 39-52.

The peculiarities of the American social structure, and the position of the intellectual class within it, make the functional role of the Negro intellectual a special one. The Negro intellectual must deal intimately with the white power structure and cultural apparatus, and the inner realities of the black world at one and the same time. But in order to function successfully in this role, he has to be acutely aware of the nature of the American social dynamic and how it monitors the ingredients of class stratifications in American society. Therefore the functional role of the Negro intellectual demands that he cannot be absolutely separated from either the black or white world.

Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967)

The contemporary black intellectual faces a grim predicament. Caught between an insolent American society and an insouciant black community, the African American who takes seriously the life of the mind inhabits an isolated and insulated world. This condition has little to do with the motives and intentions of black intellectuals; rather it is an objective situation created by circumstances not of their own choosing. In this meditative essay, I will explore this dilemma of the black intellectual and suggest various ways of understanding and transforming it.

On Becoming a Black Intellectual

The choice of becoming a black intellectual is an act of self-imposed marginality; it assures a peripheral status in and to the black community. The quest for literacy indeed is a fundamental theme in African-American history and a basic impulse in the black community. But for blacks, as with most Americans, the uses for literacy are usually perceived to be for more substantive pecuniary benefits than those of a writer, artist, teacher, or professor. The reasons some black people choose to become serious intellectuals are diverse. But in most cases these reasons can be traced back to a common root: a conversion-like experience with a highly influential teacher or peer that convinced one to dedicate one's life to the activities of reading, writing, and conversing for the purposes of

individual pleasure, personal worth, and political enhancement of black (and often otheroppressed) people.

The way in which one becomes a black intellectual is highly problematic. This is so because the traditional roads others travel to become intellectuals in American society have only recently been opened to black people—and remain quite difficult. The main avenues are the academy or the literate subcultures of art, culture, and politics. Prior to the acceptance of black undergraduate students to elite white universities and colleges in the late sixties, select black educational institutions served as the initial stimulus for potential black intellectuals. And in all honesty, there were relatively more and better black intellectuals then than now. After a decent grounding in a black college, where self-worth and self-confidence were affirmed, bright black students then matriculated to leading white institutions to be trained by liberal, sympathetic scholars, often of renowned stature. Stellar figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and John Hope Franklin were products of this system. For those black intellectuals-to-be who missed college opportunities for financial or personal reasons, there were literate subcultures—especially in the large urban centers—of writers, painters, musicians, and politicians for unconventional educational enhancement. Major personages such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin were products of this process.

Additional Obstacles

Ironically, the present-day academy and contemporary literate subcultures present more obstacles for young blacks than those in decades past. This is so for three basic reasons. First, the attitudes of white scholars in the academy are quite different from those in the past. It is much more difficult for black students, especially graduate students, to be taken seriously as *potential scholars and*

intellectuals owing to the managerial ethos of our universities and colleges (in which less time is spent with students) and to the vulgar (racist) perceptions fueled by affirmative-action programs which pollute many black student-white professor relations.

Second, literate subcultures are less open to blacks now than they were three or four decades ago, not because white avant-garde journals or leftist groups are more racist today, but rather because heated political and cultural issues, such as the legacy of the Black Power movement, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the invisibility of Africa in American political discourse, have created rigid lines of demarcation and distance between black and white intellectuals. Needless to say, black presence in leading liberal journals like the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times Book Review* is negligible—nearly nonexistent. And more leftist periodicals such as *Dissent*, *Socialist Review*, the *Nation*, and *Telos*, or avant-garde scholarly ones like *Diacritics*, *Salmagundi*, *Partisan Review*, and *Raritan* do not do much better. Only *Monthly Review*, *the Massachusetts Review*, *Boundary 2*, and *Social Text* make persistent efforts to cover black subject matter and have regular black contributors. The point here is not mere finger-pointing at negligent journals (though it would not hurt matters), but rather an attempt to highlight the racially separatist publishing patterns and practices of American intellectual life which are characteristic of the chasm between black and white intellectuals.

Third, the general politicization of American intellectual life (in the academy and outside), along with the rightward ideological drift, constitutes a hostile climate for the making of black intellectuals. To some extent, this has always been so, but the ideological capitulation of a significant segment of former left-liberals to the new-style conservatism, and old-style imperialism has left black students and black professors with few allies in the academy and in influential periodicals. This

hostile climate requires that black intellectuals fall back upon their own resources—institutions, journals, and periodicals—which, in turn, reinforce the de facto racially separatist practices of American intellectual life.

The tragedy of black intellectual activity is that the black institutional support for such activity is in shambles. The quantity and quality of black intellectual exchange is at its worst since the Civil War. There is no major black academic journal; no major black intellectual magazine; no major black periodical of highbrow journalism; not even a major black newspaper of national scope. In short, the black infrastructure for intellectual discourse and dialogue is nearly nonexistent. This tragedy is, in part, the price for integration—which has yielded mere marginal black groups within the professional disciplines of a fragmented academic community. But this tragedy also has to do with the refusal of black intellectuals to establish and sustain their own institutional mechanisms of criticism and self-criticism, organized in such a way that people of whatever color would be able to contribute to them. This refusal over the past decade is significant in that it has lessened the appetite for, and the capacity to withstand, razor-sharp criticism among many black intellectuals whose formative years were passed in a kind of intellectual vacuum. So besides the external hostile climate, the tradition of serious black intellectual activity is also threatened from within.

The creation of an intelligentsia is a monumental task. Yet black churches and colleges, along with white support, served as resources for the first black intellectuals with formal training. The formation of high-quality habits of criticism and international networks of serious intellectual exchange among a relatively isolated and insulated intelligentsia is a gargantuan endeavor. Yet black intellectuals have little choice: either continued intellectual lethargy on the edges of the academy and

literate subcultures unnoticed by the black community, or insurgent creative activity on the margins of the mainstream ensconced within bludgeoning new infrastructures.

Black Intellectuals and the Black Community

The paucity of black infrastructures for intellectual activity results in part, from the inability of black intellectuals to gain respect and support from the black community—and especially the black middle class. In addition to the general anti-intellectual tenor of American society, there is a deep distrust and suspicion of black intellectuals within the black community. This distrust and suspicion stem not simply from the usual arrogant and haughty disposition of intellectuals toward ordinary folk, but, more importantly, from the widespread refusal of black intellectuals to remain, in some visible way, organically linked with African-American cultural life. The relatively high rates of exogamous marriage, the abandonment of black institutions, and the preoccupation with Euro-American intellectual products are often perceived by the black community as intentional efforts to escape the negative stigma of blackness or are viewed as symptoms of self-hatred. And the minimal immediate impact of black intellectual activity on the black community and American society reinforces common perceptions of the impotence, even uselessness, of black intellectuals. In good American fashion, the black community lauds those black intellectuals who excel as *political activists and cultural artists*; the life of the mind is viewed as neither possessing intrinsic virtues nor harboring emancipatory possibilities—solely short-term political gain and social status.

This truncated perception of intellectual activity is widely held by black intellectuals themselves. Given the constraints upon black upward social mobility and the pressures for status and affluence among middle-class peers, many black intellectuals principally seek material gain and

cultural prestige. Since these intellectuals are members of an anxiety ridden and status-hungry black middle class, their proclivities are understandable and, to some extent, justifiable. For most intellectuals are in search of recognition, status, power, and often wealth. Yet for black intellectuals this search requires immersing oneself in and addressing oneself to the very culture and society which degrade and devalue the black community from whence one comes. And, to put it crudely, most black intellectuals tend to fall within the two camps created by this predicament: "successful" ones, distant from (and usually condescending toward) the black community, and "unsuccessful" ones, disdainful of the white intellectual world. But both camps remain marginal to the black community—dangling between two worlds with little or no black infrastructural bases. Therefore, the "successful" black intellectual capitulates, often uncritically, to the prevailing paradigms and research programs of the white bourgeois academy, and the "unsuccessful" black intellectual remains encapsulated within the parochial discourses of African-American intellectual life. The alternatives of meretricious pseudo-cosmopolitanism and tendentious, cathartic provincialism loom large in the lives of black intellectuals. And the black community views both alternatives with distrust and disdain—and with good reason. Neither alternative has had a positive impact on the black community. The major black intellectuals from W.E.B Du Bois and St. Clair Drake to Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have shunned both alternatives.

This situation has resulted in the major obstacle confronting black intellectuals: the inability to transmit and sustain the requisite institutional mechanisms for the persistence of a discernible intellectual tradition. The racism of American society, the relative lack of black community support, and hence the dangling status of black intellectuals have prevented the creation of a rich heritage of

intellectual exchange, intercourse, and dialogue. There indeed have been grand black intellectual achievements, but such achievements do not substitute for tradition.

I would suggest that there are two *organic* intellectual traditions in African-American life: *the black Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance*. Both traditions, though undoubtedly linked to the life of the mind, are oral, improvisational, and histrionic. Both traditions are rooted in black life and possess precisely what the literate forms of black intellectual activity lack: institutional matrices over time and space within which there are accepted rules of procedure, criteria for judgment, canons for assessing performance, models of past achievement and present emulation, and an acknowledged succession and accumulation of superb accomplishments. The richness, diversity and vitality of the traditions of black preaching and black music stand in strong contrast to the paucity, even poverty, of black literate intellectual production. There simply have been no black literate intellectuals who have mastered their craft commensurate with the achievements of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, or Reverend Manuel Scott—just as there are no black literate intellectuals today comparable to Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughn, or Reverend Gardner Taylor. This is so not because there have been or are no first-rate black literate intellectuals, but rather because without strong institutional channels to sustain traditions, great achievement is impossible. And, to be honest, black America has yet to produce a great literate intellectual with the exception of Toni Morrison. There indeed have been superb ones—Du Bois, Frazier, Ellison, Baldwin, Hurston—and many good ones. But none can compare to the heights achieved by the black preachers and musicians.

What is most troubling about black literate intellectual activity is that as it slowly evolved out of the black Christian tradition and interacted more intimately with secular Euro-American styles and forms, it seemed as if by the latter part of the twentieth century maturation would set in. Yet, as we approach the last few years of this century, black literate intellectual activity has declined in both quantity and quality. As I noted earlier, this is so primarily because of relatively greater black integration into postindustrial capitalist America with its bureaucratized elite universities, dull middlebrow colleges, and decaying high schools, which have little concern for or confidence in black students as potential intellectuals. Needless to say, the predicament of the black intellectual is inseparable from that of the black community—especially the black middle-class community—in American society. And only a fundamental transformation of American society can possibly change the situation of the black community and the black intellectual. And though my own Christian skepticism regarding human totalistic schemes for change chastens my deep socialist sentiments regarding radically democratic and libertarian socioeconomic and cultural arrangements, I shall forego these larger issues and focus on more specific ways to enhance the quantity and quality of black literate intellectual activity in the U.S.A. This focus shall take the form of sketching four models for black intellectual activity, with the intent to promote the crystallization of infrastructures for such activity.

The Bourgeois Model: Black Intellectual as Humanist

For black intellectuals, the bourgeois model of intellectual activity is problematic. On the one hand, the racist heritage—aspects of the exclusionary and repressive effects of white academic institutions and humanistic scholarship—puts black intellectuals on the defensive: there is always the

need to assert and defend the humanity of black people, including their ability and capacity to reason logically, think coherently, and write lucidly. The weight of this inescapable burden for black students in the white academy has often determined the content and character of black intellectual activity. In fact, black intellectual life remains largely preoccupied with such defensiveness, with "successful" black intellectuals often proud of their white approval and "unsuccessful" ones usually scornful of their rejection. This concern is especially acute among the first generation of black intellectuals accepted as teachers and scholars within elite white universities and colleges, largely a post-1968 phenomenon. Only with the publication of the intimate memoirs of these black intellectuals and their students will we have the gripping stories of how this defensiveness cut at much of the heart of their intellectual activity and creativity within white academic contexts. Yet, however personally painful such battles have been, they had to be fought given the racist milieu of American intellectual and academic life. These battles will continue, but with far fewer negative consequences for the younger generation because of the struggles by the older black trailblazers.

State of Siege

On the other hand, the state of siege raging in the black community requires that black intellectuals accent the practical dimension of their work. And the prestige of the status, as well as the skills and techniques provided by the white bourgeois academy, render it attractive for the task at hand. The accentuation of the practical dimension holds for most black intellectuals regardless of ideological persuasion—even more than for the stereotypical, pragmatic, American intellectual. This is so not simply because of the power seeking lifestyles and status-oriented dispositions of many black intellectuals, but also because of their relatively small number, which forces them to play

multiple roles vis-à-vis the black community and, in addition, intensifies their need for self-vindication—the attempt to justify to themselves that, given such unique opportunities and privileges, they are spending their time as they ought— which often results in activist and pragmatic interests. The linchpin of the bourgeois model is academic legitimation and placement. Without the proper certificate, degree and position, the bourgeois model loses its *raison d'être*. The influence and attractiveness of the bourgeois model permeate the American academic system; yet the effectiveness of the bourgeois model is credible for black intellectuals only if they possess sufficient legitimacy and placement. Such legitimacy and placement will give one access to select networks and contacts which may facilitate black impact on public policies. This seems to have been the aim of the first generation of blacks trained in elite white institutions (though not permitted to teach there), given their predominant interests in the social sciences.

The basic problem with the bourgeois model is that it is existentially and intellectually stultifying for black intellectuals. It is existentially debilitating because it not only generates anxieties of defensiveness on the part of black intellectuals; it also thrives on them. The need for hierarchical ranking and the deep-seated racism shot through bourgeois humanistic scholarship cannot provide black intellectuals with either the proper ethos or conceptual framework to overcome a defensive posture. And charges of intellectual inferiority can never be met upon the opponent's terrain—to try to do so only intensifies one's anxieties. Rather the terrain itself must be viewed as part and parcel of an antiquated form of life unworthy of setting the terms of contemporary discourse.

The bourgeois model sets intellectual limits, in that one is prone to adopt uncritically prevailing paradigms predominant in the bourgeois academy because of the pressures of practical

tasks and deferential emulation. Every intellectual passes through some kind of apprenticeship stage in which she/he learns the language and style of the authorities, but when she/he is already viewed as marginally talented she/he may be either excessively encouraged or misleadingly discouraged to examine critically paradigms deemed marginal by the authorities. This hostile environment results in the suppression of one's critical analyses and in the limited use of one's skills in a manner considered legitimate and practical.

Inescapable Model

Despite its limitations, the bourgeois model is inescapable for most black intellectuals. This is so because most of the important and illuminating discourses in the country take place in white bourgeois academic institutions and because the more significant intellectuals teach in such places. Many of the elite white universities and colleges remain high powered schools of education, learning, and training principally due to large resources and civil traditions that provide the leisure time and atmosphere necessary for sustained and serious intellectual endeavor. So aside from the few serious autodidactic black intellectuals (who often have impressive scope but lack grounding and depth), black intellectuals must pass through the white bourgeois academy (or its black imitators).

Black academic legitimation and placement can provide a foothold in American intellectual life so that black infrastructures for intellectual anxiety can be created. At present there is a small yet significant black presence within the white bourgeois academic organizations, and it is able to produce newsletters and small periodicals. The next step is to institutionalize more broadly black intellectual presence, as the Society of Black Philosophers of New York has done, by publishing journals anchored in a discipline (crucial for the careers of prospective professors) yet relevant to

other disciplines. It should be noted that such a black infrastructure for intellectual activity should attract persons of whatever hue or color. Black literary critics and especially psychologists are far ahead of other black intellectuals in this regard, with journals such as the *Black American Literature Forum*, the *College Language Association*, and the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

Black academic legitimation and placement can also result in black control over a portion of, or significant participation within, the larger white infrastructures of intellectual activity. This has not yet occurred on a broad scale. More black representation is needed on the editorial boards of significant journals so that a larger black intellectual presence is permitted. This process is much slower and has less visibility, yet, given the hegemony of the bourgeois model, it must be pursued by those so inclined.

The bourgeois model is, in some fundamental and ultimate sense, more part of the problem than the solution in regard to black intellectuals. Yet, since we live our lives daily and penultimately within this system, those of us highly critical of the bourgeois model must try to subvert it, in part, from within the white bourgeois academy. For black intellectuals— in alliance with nonblack progressive intellectuals—this means creating and augmenting infrastructures for black intellectual activity.

The Marxist Model: Black Intellectual as Revolutionary

Among many black intellectuals, there is a knee-jerk reaction to the severe limitations of the bourgeois model (and capitalist society)—namely, to adopt the Marxist model. This adoption satisfies certain basic needs of the black intelligentsia: the need for social relevance, political

engagement, and organizational involvement. The Marxist model also provides entry into the least xenophobic white intellectual subculture available to black intellectuals.

The Marxist model privileges the activity of black intellectuals and promotes their prophetic role. As Harold Cruse has noted, such privileging is highly circumscribed and rarely accents the theoretical dimension of black intellectual activity. In short, the Marxist privileging of black intellectuals often reeks of condescension that confines black prophetic roles to spokespersons or organizers; only rarely are they allowed to function as creative thinkers who warrant serious critical attention. It is no accident that the relatively large numbers of black intellectuals attracted to Marxism over the past 60 years have yet to produce a major black Marxist theoretician with the exception of C.L.R. James. Only W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* (1935), Oliver Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* (1948), and, to some degree, Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) are even candidates for such a designation. This is so not because of the absence of black intellectual talent in the Marxist camp but rather because of the absence of the kind of tradition and community (including intense critical exchange) that would allow such a talent to flower.

In stark contrast to the bourgeois model, the Marxist model neither generates black intellectual defensiveness nor provides an adequately analytical apparatus for short-term public policies. Rather the Marxist model yields black intellectual self-satisfaction which often inhibits growth; it also highlights social structural constraints with little practical direction regarding conjunctural opportunities. This self-satisfaction results in either dogmatic submission to and upward mobility within sectarian party or pre-party formations or marginal placement in the bourgeois academy equipped with cantankerous Marxist rhetoric and sometimes insightful analysis

utterly divorced from the integral dynamics, concrete realities, and progressive possibilities of the black community. The preoccupation with social structural constraints tends to produce either preposterous chiliastic projections or paralyzing pessimistic pronouncements. Such projections and pronouncements have as much to do with the self-image of black Marxist intellectuals as with the prognosis for black liberation.

It is often claimed "that Marxism is the false consciousness of the radicalized, bourgeois intelligentsia." For black intellectuals, the Marxist model functions in a more complex manner than this glib formulation permits. On the one hand, the Marxist model is liberating for black intellectuals in that it promotes critical consciousness and attitudes toward the dominant bourgeois paradigms and research programs. Marxism provides attractive roles for black intellectuals—usually high visible leadership roles—and infuses new meaning and urgency into their work. On the other hand, the Marxist model is debilitating for black intellectuals because the cathartic needs it satisfies tend to stifle the further development of black critical consciousness and attitudes.

The Marxist model, despite its shortcomings, is more part of the solution than part of the problem for black intellectuals. This is so because Marxism is the brook of fire—the purgatory—of our postmodern times. Black intellectuals must pass through it, come to terms with it, and creatively respond to it if black intellectual activity is to reach any recognizable level of sophistication and refinement.

The Foucaultian Model: Black Intellectual as Postmodern Skeptic

As western intellectual life moves more deeply into crisis and as black intellectuals become more fully integrated into intellectual life—r into "the culture of careful and critical discourse" (as the late Alvin Gouldner called it)—a new model appears on the horizon.

This model, based primarily upon the influential work of the late Michel Foucault, unequivocally rejects the bourgeois models and eschews the Marxist model. It constitutes one of the most exciting intellectual challenges of our day: The Foucaultian project of historical nominalism. This detailed investigation into the complex relations of knowledge and power, discourse and politics, cognition and social control compels intellectuals to rethink and redefine their self-image and function in our contemporary situation.

Rampant Xenophobia

The Foucaultian model and project are attractive to black intellectuals primarily because they speak to the black postmodern predicament, defined by the rampant xenophobia of bourgeois humanism predominant in the whole academy, the waning attraction to orthodox reductionist and scientific versions of Marxism, and the need for reconceptualization regarding the specificity and complexity of African-American oppression. Foucault's deep antibourgeois sentiments, explicit post-Marxist convictions, and profound preoccupations with those viewed as radically "Other" by dominant discourses and traditions are quite seductive for politicized black intellectuals wary of antiquated panaceas for black liberation.

Foucault's specific analyses of the "political economy of truth"—the study of the discursive ways in which and institutional means by which "regimes of truth" are constituted by societies over space and time—result in a new conception of the intellectual. This conception no longer rests upon

the smooth transmittance of "the best that has been thought and said," as in the bourgeois humanist model, nor on the engaged Utopian energies of the Marxist model. Rather the postmodern situation requires "the specific intellectual" who shuns the labels of scientificity, civility, and prophecy and instead delves into the specificity of the political, economic, and cultural matrices within which regimes of truth are produced, distributed, circulated, and consumed. No longer should intellectuals deceive themselves by believing—as do humanist and Marxist intellectuals—that they are struggling "on behalf of the truth; rather the problem is the struggle over the very status of truth and the vast institutional mechanisms which account for this status. The favored code words of "science," "taste," "tact," "ideology," "progress," and "liberation" of bourgeois humanism and Marxism are no longer applicable to the self-image of postmodern intellectuals. Instead, the new key terms become those of "regime of truth," "power/knowledge," and "discursive practices."

Intellectuals' Self-Identities

Foucault's notion of the specific intellectual rests upon his demystification of conservative, liberal, and Marxist rhetorics which restore, resituate, and reconstruct intellectuals self-identities so that they remain captive to and supportive of institutional forms of domination and control. These rhetorics authorize and legitimate, in different ways, the privileged status of intellectuals, which not only reproduces ideological divisions between intellectual and manual labor but also reinforces disciplinary mechanisms of subjection and subjugation. This self-authorizing is best exemplified in the claims made by intellectuals that they "safeguard" the achievement of highbrow culture or "represent" the "universal interests" of particular classes and groups. In African-American intellectual history, similar self-authorizing claims such as "the talented tenth," "prophets in the wilderness,"

"articulators of a black aesthetic," "creators of a black renaissance," and "vanguard of a revolutionary movement" are widespread.

Postmodern Skepticism

The Foucaultian model promotes a leftist form of postmodern skepticism; that is, it encourages an intense and incessant interrogation of power-laden discourses in the service of neither restoration, reformation, nor revolution, but rather of revolt. And the kind of revolt enacted by intellectuals consists of the disrupting and dismantling of prevailing "regimes of truth"—including their repressive effects—of present-day societies. This model suits the critical, skeptical, and historical concerns of progressive black intellectuals and provides a sophisticated excuse for ideological and social distance from insurgent black movements for liberation. By conceiving intellectual work as oppositional political praxis, it satisfies the leftist self-image of black intellectuals, and, by making a fetish of critical consciousness, it encapsulates black intellectual activity within the comfortable bourgeois academy of postmodern America.

The Insurgency Model: Black Intellectual as Critical Organic Catalyst

Black intellectuals can learn much from each of the three previous models, yet should not uncritically adopt any one of them. This is so because the bourgeois, Marxist, and Foucaultian models indeed relate to, but do not adequately speak to, the uniqueness of the black intellectual predicament. This uniqueness remains relatively unexplored, and will remain so until black intellectuals articulate a new "regime of truth" linked to, yet not confined by, indigenous institutional practices permeated by the kinetic orality and emotional physicality, the rhythmic syncopation, the protean improvisation, and the religious, rhetorical, and antiphonal repetition of

African-American life. Such articulation depends, in part, upon elaborate black infrastructures which put a premium on creative and cultivated black thought; it also entails intimate knowledge of prevailing Euro-American "regimes of truth" which must be demystified, deconstructed and decomposed in ways which enhance and enrich future black intellectual life. The new "regime of truth" to be pioneered by black thinkers is neither a hermetic discourse (or set of discourses), which safeguards mediocre black intellectual production, nor the latest fashion of black writing, which is often motivated by the desire to parade for the white bourgeois intellectual establishment. Rather it is inseparable from the emergence of new cultural forms which prefigure (and point toward) a post-Western civilization. At present, such talk may seem mere dream and fantasy. So we shall confine ourselves to the first step: black insurgency and the role of the black intellectual.

Institutional Networks

The major priority of black intellectuals should be the creation or reactivation of institutional networks that promote high-quality critical habits primarily for the purpose of black insurgency. An intelligentsia without institutionalized critical consciousness is blind, and critical consciousness severed from collective insurgency is empty. The central task of postmodern black intellectuals is to stimulate, hasten, and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers. This can be done only by intense intellectual work and engaged insurgent praxis.

The insurgency model for black intellectual activity builds upon, yet goes beyond, the previous three models. From the bourgeois model, it recuperates the emphasis on human will and heroic effort. Yet the insurgency model refuses to conceive of this will and effort in individualistic

and elitist terms. Instead of the solitary hero, embattled exile and isolated genius—the intellectual as star, celebrity, commodity—this model privileges collective intellectual work that contributes to the communal resistance and struggle. In other words, it creatively accents the voluntarism and heroism of the bourgeois model, but it rejects the latter's naïveté about the role of society and history. From the Marxist model it recovers the stress on structural constraints, class formations, and radical democratic values. Yet the insurgency model does not view these constraints, formations, and values in economic and deterministic terms. Instead of the a priori privileging of the industrial working class and the metaphysical positing of a relatively harmonious socialist society, there is the wholesale assault on varieties of social hierarchy and the radical democratic (and libertarian) mediation, not elimination, of social heterogeneity. In short, the insurgency model ingeniously incorporates the structural, class, and democratic concerns of the Marxist model, yet it acknowledges the latter's naïveté about culture.

Lastly, from the Foucaultian model, the insurgency model recaptures the preoccupation with worldly skepticism, the historic constitution of "regimes of truth," and multifarious operations of "power/knowledge." Yet the insurgency model does not confine this skepticism, this truth-constituting and detailed genealogical inquiry to micronetworks of power. Instead of the ubiquity of power (which simplifies and flattens multidimensional social conflict) and the paralyzing overreaction to past utopianisms, there is the possibility of effective resistance and meaningful societal transformation. The insurgency model carefully highlights the profound Nietzschean suspicion and the illuminating oppositional descriptions of the Foucaultian model, though it

recognizes the latter's naïveté about social conflict, struggle, and insurgency—a naïveté primarily caused by the rejection of any form of utopianism and any positing of a telos.

International in Outlook

Black intellectual work and black collective insurgency must be rooted in the specificity of African-American life and history; but they also are inextricably linked to the American, European, and African elements which shape and mold them. Such work and insurgency are explicitly particularist though not exclusivist—hence they are international in outlook and practice. Like their historical forerunners, black preachers and black musical artists (with all their strengths and weaknesses), black intellectuals must realize that the creation of "new" and alternative practices results from the heroic efforts of collective intellectual work and communal resistance which shape and are shaped by present structural constraints, workings of power, and modes of cultural fusion. The distinctive African-American cultural forms such as the black sermonic and prayer styles, gospel, blues and jazz should inspire, but not constrain, future black intellectual production; that is, the process by which they came to be should provide valuable insights, but they should serve as models neither to imitate nor to emulate. Needless to say, these forms thrive on incessant critical innovation and concomitant insurgency.

The Future of the Black Intellectual

The predicament of the black intellectual need not be grim and dismal. Despite the pervasive racism of American society and anti-intellectualism of the black community, critical space and insurgent activity can be expanded. This expansion will occur more readily when black intellectuals take a more candid look at themselves, the historical and social forces that shape them, and the

limited though significant resources of the community from whence they come. A critical "self-inventory" that scrutinizes the social positions, class locations, and cultural socializations of black intellectuals is imperative. Such scrutiny should be motivated by neither self-pity nor self-satisfaction. Rather this "self-inventory" should embody the sense of critique and resistance applicable to the black community, American society, and Western civilization as a whole. James Baldwin has noted that the black intellectual is "a kind of bastard of the West." The future of the black intellectual lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent nor in a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of this black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world.