New book traces dynamics that shaped Black intelligentsia

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BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

With the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, former slaves and their children were left to fend for themselves. In their quest for equal rights and opportunities, African-Americans depended to no small extent on the leadership of an intelligentsia.

The formation of an elite class committed to the betterment of the race, however, was hampered by the exclusion of Blacks from politics, the professions, and higher education.

In "The Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia," Martin Kilson, an emeritus professor of government at Harvard University, traces the dynamics, including intra-Black color hierarchies, that shaped the intelligentsia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And he assesses the prospects for a revival of a "communitarian" Black elite.

Kilson claims, as have many scholars and activists before him, that the triumph of progressive Black elites, led by W.E.B. DuBois, over those, like Booker T. Washington, who advocated accommodation to the racist status quo, paved the way for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

DuBoisian leadership, he adds, a bit more controversially, set "above all else," a goal of enlisting the capacities of the "Talented Tenth" in behalf of the needs of the Negro masses.

Kilson's autobiographical reflections add passion to his argument. The son of the pastor of an African Union Methodist Church in a factory town in Pennsylvania, who had a penchant for telling tales about African-American history, Kilson had formative experiences at the Wissahickon Boys Club (the kind of institution no longer available to many Black youth) and graduated from Lincoln University, an all-Black school, in 1953, one of many influential "college-bred Negroes."

Who else?
He does not hide his convictions about the roles and responsibilities of a Black intelligentsia in the...
advancement of poor Blacks. Responding to an assertion that 20th-century Black intellectuals devoted too much time to the subject of race, Kilson writes, “Who else, pray tell,” were the offspring of former slaves to turn to as leaders to help them navigate the “rugged terrain of the White supremacist modern American society? Who?”

**Encouraging stats**
In his concluding chapter, Kilson assesses the likelihood of the emergence of post-civil rights leaders committed to assist Blacks in the context of evidence of persistent racism and a two-tier class system of “black haves” and “black have-nots.”

The presence of almost four million African-Americans in white-collar top tier occupations, some of them holding executive positions in major corporations, and some 10,000 Black-elected officeholders, one of whom is president of the United States, is encouraging.

That said, Kilson acknowledges that there are reasons for concern.

**More “underclass poor”**
Although the comfortable and “middle classes have grown, the number of “underclass poor” has skyrocketed. As a consequence, the attitudes of some middle class and professional Blacks have shifted.

In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2007, 61 percent of Black respondents said that the values of poor and middle-class Blacks have grown more dissimilar in the past 10 years.

In a manifestation of what Kilson calls “I’m all right Jack” conservatism, 53 percent agree that “Blacks who have not gotten ahead in life are mainly responsible for their own situation.”

**Shared values**
Kilson remains optimistic. A belief in shared values among poor and middle-class Blacks, he points out, is strongest among the best-educated African-Americans. And a very high percentage of Blacks retain liberal political views and allegiances to the Democratic Party.

Nonetheless, you have to wonder whether there is a will, and, given current political realities, a way, to mobilize the resources available to today’s African-American elite to substantially improve the lives of two-fifths of the Black families in the United States.

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