

Charles Green

Introduction

Globalization, Challenge, and the
Black Diaspora

This book is about the processes of globalization and urbanization and their impact on persons of African descent on the African continent and beyond. Economic globalization, which refers to trade and commerce between nations, is rooted in history. Current globalization trends differ from the past mainly in terms of scale and the negative impact upon significant sectors of the world's population (Mander and Goldsmith 1996). A leading argument that is developed is that as globalization accelerates, the definition of urban space and, too, the nature of the response by urban masses to their present challenge are consequently being altered.

The idea of the urban challenge and the need to address it is not a recent theme. The early industrial cities of Europe and the United States were mean streets that presented a host of challenges to factory workers and their families. Issues of inadequate housing, hazardous work conditions, and labor exploitation were prevalent. For the vast majority of European immigrants who constituted the bulk of the American proletariat at that time, it was all of these combined with the difficulties of adapting to a strange environment and learning a new language. Karl Marx, one of the most prolific social philosophers to emerge in the nineteenth century, devoted a good portion of his life to unravelling these conditions and to restructuring society on behalf of the laboring proletariat. In the midst of that great social and economic transition,

sociology was born. Sociology's special contribution would be to advocate for social change through the systematic analysis of society that emphasized the study of those forces that held societies together and those that triggered change.

During the nineteenth century, the socio-cultural and political landscape of the cities and towns in regions we now refer to as "The Third World" was quite different. The people who inhabited these societies were still very much bound to the land and their ethnic cultures. Politically, a number of these societies were still colonized, with their cities serving the immediate interests of their colonial protectors in having major ports, retail outlets, and administrative centers. However, political independence for the peoples of the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America¹ did little to change the subordinate status of their cities in the world system. Activist historian Walter Rodney understood the new role of the former colonial powers in the succeeding phase of neo-colonialism. He did not fail to overlook the puppet role adopted by many heads of state in the former colonies, which has contributed to their persistent dependency and underdevelopment. With a focus on Africa, but with implications for the rest of the developing world, Rodney observed:

The importance of this group [political puppets] cannot be underestimated. The presence of a group of African sell-outs is part of the definition of underdevelopment. Any diagnosis of underdevelopment in Africa will reveal not just low per capita income and protein deficiencies but also the gentlemen who dance in Abijan, Accra, and Kinshasa when music is played in Paris, London, and New York. (1982:27)

In the advanced societies, rapid industrialization, mechanization, and modernization were accompanied by the downsizing of their agrarian labor sectors and, hence, the rise of more towns, cities, and urban masses. In the contemporary United States, less than five percent of the labor force is engaged in farming and related activities. This is also true for other advanced industrial countries.

The majority of the world's population today is urbanized, residing in mega cities, mid-size cities, and suburban areas. The United Nations Population Growth projections indicate that the level of

urbanization for the world as a whole is expected to increase to 51 percent by the year 2000 and 65 percent by the year 2025. But it is in the less developed regions of the world that the growth factor has had the greatest impact. While the projected growth rate for the advanced regions for the year 2000 and 2025 is 45 percent and 61 percent respectively, for the less developed regions the projection is 75 percent by the year 2000 and 83 percent by the year 2025 (U.N. 1990:7–16). Moreover, by the year 2000 seventeen of the world's twenty largest cities will be in less developed countries and of the seven mega cities with a population of fifteen million or more, five will be in developing countries. Two of these are expected to be in Latin America, Mexico City and São Paulo (Gugler 1988; Gilbert and Gugler 1993).

For a significant portion of the developing world, increased urbanization has been the end product of foreign capital expansion that has taken the form of offshore assembly operations and manufacturing in those regions. Low-wage jobs have served as the catalyst for rural folk from the countryside, who were already experiencing land displacement and losses due to food importation and substitution policies, to venture into the urban areas.

A late-twentieth-century social and economic transformation is in progress. Urbanization was an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution. It is not surprising therefore to find urban areas in the eye of this late-twentieth-century storm. In the present era, commonly referred to by such phrases as “the new information age,” “the information superhighway,” and the “the age of cyberspace,” knowledge is the key resource. Some manual skills are required, but an abundance of theory and education are quintessential (Toffler 1980; Reich 1991a, 1991b; Kennedy 1993; Drucker 1994). In the introduction to their controversial new book, *The Bell Curve*, authors Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray state:

In our time, the ability to use and manipulate information has become the single most important element of success, no matter how you measure it: financial security, power, or status. Those who work by manipulating ideas and abstractions are the leaders and beneficiaries of our society. In such an era, high intelligence is an increasingly precious raw material for success. (1994:1)

It should be pointed out that what is controversial about Herrnstein and Murray's study is not their observation that a cognitive elite is rapidly emerging as the hegemonic class in American society, but their inference that those who lack intellectual savvy, whatever the reasons, suffer a misfortune of life whose amelioration should not be the preoccupation of government or its policies.

This knowledge-based cultural transformation is a major source of the contemporary urban crisis in the developed regions. The Industrial Revolution shifted the rural peasantry from the land and forced them to adapt to a new way of life in urban areas. There was ample work for those with limited skills who were willing to adjust and work hard. In nineteenth-century United States, unprecedented numbers of Europeans were admitted into the country to fill the demand for industrial jobs that required mostly entry-level skills. There was, however, a ready supply of Black labor that lay idle in the southern region; but due to naked racism, they were bypassed in favor of immigrant whites. Their turn to occupy industrial jobs and real wages would not come until World War I when the U.S. industrial complex was threatened by the temporary halt to European workers.

At this historical juncture, the broad industrial and manufacturing base that attracted low-skilled labor is in decline in the developed world. Replacing that base are newer service sector positions that range from very low to mid to highly skilled technical jobs (Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994). One visible consequence of this for the United States is the increasing number of predominantly Black residents who are presently isolated in the once-productive industrial centers (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Wilson 1987; Wacquant 1989). Racism and classism, requisites of the American capitalist state, have eclipsed their chances of meeting the latest labor requirements of adequate educational preparation, technical skills, and a positive work ethic. The situation has given rise to a stream of frustrated, rebellious young people who in their struggle to survive oppression are defining new coping strategies—not uncommonly perceived as threatening by the wider society. The term “urban underclass,”² an invention of social scientists, journalists, and legislators, was specifically developed to describe this entrapped population.

The less developed regions whose stability is inextricably linked

to the policies of the "G-7" nations³ are directly affected by the current upheaval. The plight of their urban poor and working classes in many respects parallels the turbulence now observed in the more advanced regions. Human redundancy and unemployment, the influence of informal sector activities, the menace of a drug subculture, street crime, restlessness among youths, and the severing of traditional cultural values are manifestations of the global urban crisis. Across the regions the crisis is exacerbated either by the state's reluctance to respond or the bankrupt nature of implemented state policies. In Brazil, for example, death squads have assumed an official role in containing that country's street children crisis. In the United States, the prevailing response is to hire more police and build more prisons. In the wake of an outbreak of serious crime in Trinidad and Tobago, a bill was recently introduced to limit bail release for that nation's most serious criminal offenders.

Manuel Castells's critique of the urban crisis is instructive at this point. In his examination of the "urban question" (formulated as the urban crisis), specifically as it relates to developed societies such as the United States and Britain, he stresses the need to distinguish ideology from reality. For Castells, the notion of urban crisis is an ideological construct of the dominant classes in society that requires demystification (Castells 1980: 1-8; 379-429).

Urban Blacks in the diaspora provide a compelling case study. In the Anglo, Dutch, and Franco Caribbean and in certain Latin American countries, Black people and mixtures of African, European, and native Indian—mestizo and mulatto people—constitute a majority of the population. In developed societies such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France, where Black people constitute a critical mass, they tend to be concentrated in the inner cities. Their migration to the cities and towns in the United States was the result of internal capital exploitation. That commenced at the point of World War I when scores of African Americans were encouraged to abandon their agrarian life style in the South and head mainly to northern cities where industrial jobs were in great supply.⁴ In Britain and France, it was the case of colonial and, in the post-independence period, former colonial subjects immigrating to the mainland with the hope of finding a better life for themselves and their families. In the developing

regions, Black urbanization was largely the effect of foreign capital expansion.

It is important to keep in mind that the contemporary Black urban plight is a historical reality that is linked to their history of racial subjugation and exploitation throughout the world, which has been exacerbated by the present global economic transformation. Race, therefore, is an important factor in explaining the Black urban condition in the diaspora with observed differences based on such aspects as the colonial legacy, and the existing ethno-racial mix. For example, whereas in the United States a classificatory system of race prevails (i.e., racial shading among minority Blacks is not recognized, instead white and black phenotypes are recognized), in the anglophone Caribbean and Latin America, race is a more complicated matter. In the Caribbean and Latin America, a system of racial shading is recognized, but it is one's class (i.e., social background, education, economic position) that determines one's mobility in the social structure. Patterson (1972) has described the system for the Caribbean as continuous denotative in which majority Blacks and the minority whites are included alongside each other. The system in Latin America resembles the United States in that although racial shading exists, the white descendants of Europeans are ascribed a status of privilege above and beyond the other racial categories. He describes that as a discontinuous denotative system.

This book is a collection of essays that examines the specific ways in which the present global urban crisis has impacted and continues to impact Blacks cross-culturally. Most importantly, it examines the different strategies they have adopted to cope with the present challenge. The contributors analyze an array of problems that confront urban poor and working-class people in select societies. Their analyses are accompanied by thought-provoking recommendations for change.

The investigation covers five regions of the world where there is a significant Black presence. These include the developing regions of the anglophone Caribbean, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. They are considered alongside the developed regions of North America and Europe. Up to now, the tendency has been to focus on the problems of urban Blacks either regionally or country by country.⁵ Consequently, there is an absence of studies that have exam-

ined, in a single volume, the common and distinct aspects of the urban crisis across the Black diaspora. Not only will this approach strengthen the case for the global Black plight and the need to address it, it will contribute to the ongoing discourse concerning the immediate and long-term solutions. Needless to say, an important void will be filled in the literature on development and urbanism.

Two important methodological footnotes are necessary at this point. The first concerns the inclusion of sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing Africa at the center of the Black diaspora, it is possible that its inclusion here may appear misleading or even superfluous. To the contrary, the inclusion of Africa is viewed as critical to the overall analysis. The immiseration and powerlessness of Blacks on the continent lends support to the argument that their crisis is entrenched. Another way of expressing this is to say that whether the analysis begins from Africa outward or from outside Africa, the precarious situation of Black people is a daunting reality. As well, questions may loom about the inclusion of two East African states, namely Tanzania and Kenya. Briefly, these neighboring states followed opposite political paths in the immediate post-independence period. Tanzania chose to walk the nationalist-socialist path while Kenya pursued closer ties to the West, chiefly the United States and Britain. Not only does their inclusion here provide compelling comparative data on the declining urban condition in East Africa—a region that is not adequately addressed compared to western and southern Africa—it calls to question the thesis put forth by modernization theorists that close linkages with advanced economies is a prerequisite for Third World development.

The second footnote concerns the conceptualization of commonalities and differences of the urban crisis across the diaspora. In the present global economy, societies have become more inter-linked than ever before. Technology and new age communications systems have dramatically affected the pace of cultural diffusion or homogenization. Consequently, the perception of the world as a small place surfaces as life styles, dress codes, patterns of behavior, and the social problems people experience across continents seem to converge. In this atmosphere Black inner-city areas such as New York City, Kingston, Jamaica, or Liverpool, England, appear indiscriminable. This was a profound observation during my

recent visit to Leyou, St. Vincent, a small village located just outside the central city of Kingstown. Without incident, one evening my companion, a retired Vincentian man, and I came face to face with five teenage males whose demeanor was menacing. Their dress style including large gold necklaces, hair styles, and body language led me to doubt for that brief moment that I was actually on the small eastern Caribbean island and not in one of New York City's Black urban districts. But one must be reminded, as Gilbert and Gugler (1993) point out in their comparison of urban cities across continents, that despite stark similarities, economic and cultural differences exist between and among societies that temper the cultural homogenization thesis.

Our analysis begins in Africa, the center of the diaspora. Essays by Carolyn Somerville on urban reforms in Dakar, Senegal; Joe L. P. Lugalla on Tanzania's changing urbanism; and Kinuthia Macharia on Nairobi's informal economy provide us the opportunity to examine and compare the challenge confronting urban Blacks on the West and East corridors of Africa. Moreover, they make us aware that Senegal, Tanzania, and Kenya are only the tip of the iceberg and that the crisis is pervasive across the continent.

Where racism is implied throughout the essays on Latin America and the Caribbean, the effects of political and economic instability on the urban masses in these regions are explicit. In his analysis of the crisis of Black Panamanians, George Priestley underscores a history of military and political intervention in the internal affairs of Panama—most recently the U.S. invasion on December 20, 1989. The interventionist argument is encountered as well in Raquel Z. Rivera's analysis of "rap" music among poor urban youth in San Juan and other cities of Puerto Rico. Rivera forces us to look squarely at United States colonial policy and to ask why after years of occupation by the world's wealthiest and most ardent proponent of democracy, Puerto Rico's urban masses remain poor and marginalized. Focusing more on domestic political affairs, Esther I. Madriz uncovers some of the contradictions of state neo-liberal policies and the impact on the continued suffering of the Black and mestizo urban masses of Caracas, Venezuela. Vânia Penha-Lopes' essay targets state neglect and racism as co-conspirers in the violence and abuse being waged against mainly Black and mixed-race children in Brazil's major cities.

Drawing attention to the urban dislocation in Trinidad and Tobago, my essay links the regional crisis to the larger issue of cultural and economic strangulation by dominant foreign powers and calls for a new analytical approach. Obika Gray and Joyce Toney continue the critique of the impact of external political and economic policies on the poor in their analyses of politically motivated gang violence in Kingston, Jamaica, and the crisis confronting urban women and their households in St. Vincent, respectively.

Considered next are the industrial, developed regions of North America and Europe. Although the problems associated with youth are reflected throughout the volume, this issue is singularly addressed in North America where inner-city youth are felt to be out of control. Gerald Horne's lead essay, "The Political Economy of the Black Urban Future: A History," with the city of Los Angeles, California, serving as a backdrop, gives us a historical overview and analysis of the Black condition across the United States. Essays by Kevin Arlyck and Kwando M. Kinshasa examine the matter of youth violence and rebelliousness and the rap genre as responses to racial and class oppression in the urban trenches.

Due to the dominant role played by the United States in the geopolitics of the region, the perception of Canada for many Americans is that of a stepchild of the United States or a geographic extension of the United States. The truth is that Americans know very little about their neighbors to the north. The fact that Canada's population of approximately twenty-eight million includes a sizable urban Black population whose struggle against racism and other destabilizing conditions has a long history, is a well-kept secret. Carl E. James's essay, "The Distorted Images of African-Canadians: Impact, Implications and Responses," is an important addition to this section as it provides a comparative glance at the state of Black civil society in the racially divided city of Toronto.

Finally, turning to Europe, Stephen Small carefully analyzes the history and the future of the Black condition in Britain's most troubled cities. By juxtaposing the French urban periphery and the Black American ghetto, Loïc J. D. Wacquant offers us critical insight into the unique structuring of the French capital. Taken together, Small and Wacquant draw our attention to the persistence of race and class marginalization among Afro-Europeans.

We hope that this volume will assist its readers in dispelling the

myth of African Americans as “privileged” Blacks by virtue of their residence in the world’s wealthiest nation. As these essays inform us, in a rapidly changing global landscape where race and class prevail, people of African descent in every corner of the diaspora remain peripheralized. The challenge, therefore, for activists, progressive leaders, heads of state, and policy engineers for the next century whose resolve it is to uplift the race, will be to find common ground. That will demand that they identify those positive forces that presently unite and strengthen Black people and more urgently, those forces that threaten to keep them subjugated and divided as a people.

Appreciating the fact of societal and cultural differences, no attempt has been made here to advance a generic formula that would neatly satisfy the needs of every country. We do, however, present in the conclusion some of our ideas about how to work together for the common good.

Experience has taught us that policy recommendations for change are beneficial insofar as they are seriously considered and can be implemented. Experience has also taught us that the task of organizing for change should not be monopolized by scholars and other assumed experts. We recognize that creating an atmosphere that would encourage participation by the urban poor in the ongoing debate is the only way to move forward. It is our hope that the recommendations that emerge from this volume will ignite a new and broadly participated debate on how to bring about constructive change for diasporic Blacks and all people living at the edge in the urban trenches around the world.

NOTES

1. Most Latin American societies gained their independence by 1830. See: Gilbert, Alan and Gugler, Josef, *Cities, Poverty and Development: Urbanization in the Third World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.19.

2. A number of scholars disagree with this term. They see it as just another victim blaming ploy invented by the elite class. See for example: Herbert Gans, “The Dangers of the Underclass: Its Harmfulness as a Planning Concept” (a marvelous essay by Gans taken from a collection of his greatest essays entitled, *People, Plans and Policies*. New York: Columbia

University Press); Stephen Steinberg, "The Underclass: A Case of Colorblindness," *New Politics*. Vol. 2 (Summer 1988); Michael B. Katz (ed.), *The Underclass Debate: A View From History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

3. The "G-7" refers to the seven wealthiest industrial countries in the world: United States, Canada, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. For a clear description of this group and their relationship to the global economy see Noam Chomsky, *The Prosperous Few And The Restless Many*. Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1985.

4. This was the start of the greatest internal migration of people in history. For an expanded discussion of this historical experience, see for example: Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land*. New York: Vintage, 1991; Jacqueline Jones, "Southern Diaspora: The Origins of the Northern Underclass," in Michael Katz (ed.), *The Underclass Debate: Views From History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

5. So many studies can be cited that focus on the crisis either regionally or from the perspective of single nations. Recent among them are: Richard Stren, *African Cities in Crisis*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989; Joe Lugalla, *Crisis, Urbanization And Urban Poverty In Tanzania: A Study of Urban Poverty and Survival Politics*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995; Ambursley and Cohen (eds.), *Crisis in the Caribbean*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983; Charles Green and Basil Wilson, *The Struggle For Black Empowerment In New York City*. New York: Praeger, 1989; William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; Elijah Anderson, *Street Wise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

REFERENCES

- Aronowitz, Stanley and William DiFazio. 1994. *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bluestone, Barry and Bennett Harrison. 1982. *The Deindustrialization of America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Castells, Manuel. 1980. *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
- Drucker, Peter F. 1994. "The Age of Social Transformation." *The Atlantic Monthly* (November).
- Gans, Herbert. 1991. *People, Plans And Policies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilbert, Alan, and Josef Gugler. 1993. *Cities, Poverty And Development:*

- Urbanization in the Third World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gugler, Josef (ed.). 1988. *The Urbanization of The Third World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herrnstein, Richard J. and Charles Murray. 1994. *The Bell Curve*. New York: Free Press.
- Kennedy, Paul. 1993. *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Random House.
- Mander, Jerry and Edward Goldsmith (eds.). 1996. *The Case Against the Global Economy: And For A Turn Toward The Local*. San Francisco, CA.: Sierra Club Books.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1972. "Toward a Future that Has No Past: Reflections on the fate of Blacks in the Americas." *Public Interest* (27).
- Reich, Robert B. 1991. *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1991b. "Secession of the Successful". *New York Times Magazine* (January 20).
- Rodney, Walter. 1982. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Steinberg, Stephen. 1988. "The Underclass: A Case of Colorblindness." *New Politics* Vol. 2 (Summer).
- Toffler, Alvin. 1980. *The Third Wave*. New York: Morrow.
- United Nations Population Newsletter*. December 1990. No. 50.
- Wacquant, Loic J.D. 1993. "The Return of the Repressed: Urban Violence, Race, And Dualization In Three Advanced Societies." (Russell Sage Foundation).
- Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.