Harold Cruse, Black Intellectuals, and Reconstructing Black America

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Introduction

This paper re-introduces a much neglected classic: Harold Cruse's epic book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, published in 1967. A time of hope and optimism, but also a time of despair, protest, discontent, and rebellion.

The '60s was a crucial decade because America seemed reluctant to address unresolved issues: segregation versus integration in schools, employment, churches, housing, dating, and marriage. Then there was the Vietnam War which raised moral as well as economic issues—can we have both guns and butter, or must we choose between the two? It is such a juncture that prompts scholars, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens to raise the "what next?" question.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to address the question in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here.* Others, too, raised that question in the past: Plato's *Republic*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Lenin's *What is to be Done?*. Cruse's book continues to be important because the issues he raised continue to be ongoing issues in the American moral, political, cultural, and economic landscape.

The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual is Cruse's response to the "what next?" question. In addressing that question, Cruse believed he had to first deal with an unresolved question as to whether America is/was a "nation of nations," or a "melting pot." Each position required different philosophical, sociological, historical, and political perspectives. Cruse opted for the former, which denotes racial and ethnic, cultural, and political pluralism. In accepting this position, he challenged the prevailing view held by many that racial integration was the best path to gain Black economic and political prosperity and self-sufficiency. This position also caused critics to accuse him of advocating racial separation and segregation. Cruse countered that he was simply advocating for Blacks what successful white and Asian racial and ethnic groups (Jews, Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Irish) have done historically; that is, use their racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious unity to forge links to create a strong ethnic economic enclave in their communities, or ghettos.

Cruse notes that these groups were not interested in "integrating" with the larger white Anglo-Saxon cultural society, and were proud of their ethnic, racial, and religious solidarity; as well as their group consciousness, which stood them apart from the majority culture. They were not afraid to be seen as different. At the same time, it should be noted that the larger Anglo-Saxon society often rebuffed all attempts by racial-ethnic groups to integrate into their group, though Cruse mentions that it is/was easier for white ethnic groups to gain acceptance into the larger dominant society and culture than it is/was for Black Americans.

Cruse repeatedly makes the case that of all racial and ethnic groups in America, only Black Americans have been told by liberals, radicals, and Black and white politicians that racial integration was the only, and best, path to collective group prosperity. Believing America to be a nation of nations, Cruse asks, with which group will Blacks integrate? While resisting efforts to peg him as a separatist and segregationist, Cruse states that the fight for integration, and against prejudice (boycotts, picket lines, etc.), had sapped the time and energy of Black Americans, leaving them unable to do what the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Jews, Irish, and Italians, who did not fight to integrate with the dominant society, did: devote their efforts to collective group economic success and survival. Cruse views the successful racial and ethnic groups as representing racial and ethnic solidarity, which he views as a form of nationalism. He advocates both for Black America.

The first part of this paper focuses on Cruse's concept of the intellectual and the unique role of Black intellectuals in Black life and the role they should play in the larger American society. Included in this section is a critique of traditional views on racial and social integration, which Cruse contrasts with the concept of racial, ethnic, and cultural pluralism. The second part of the paper consists of Cruse's outline for the restructuring of Black institutional and organizational life.

The Role of Black Intellectuals

In his book Cruse (1967:536) clearly defines Black intellectuals and their various roles. They may function as writers, artists, academicians, and critics, but they have a dual role, that of dealing simultaneously with the white power structure, while at the same time understanding and dealing with "the inner realities of the black world" (1967:452). This charge, according to Cruse, requires a deep focus on what he believes to be the central task of Black intellectuals: understanding the central role of Black culture and its relationship to the politics and economics of Black life itself and how these interact with the issues, actions, ideologies, and premises operative in the larger American society. For him, these creators of ideas and objects—books, art works, music, etc., are to engage both white and Black worlds. As Cruse (ibid.) asserts, "the functional role of the Negro intellectual demands that he cannot be absolutely separated from either the black or white world." In other words, a cultural, political, and economic immersion in both worlds. This process suggests both a Du Boisian Double Consciousness and Dennis' (1991) concept of Dual Marginality.

But what prompts the idea of the "crisis" of Black intellectuals? With Harlem as a location site and functioning as a sociological and experimental laboratory, Cruse becomes the sociological researcher asking the central question, a hypothesis: why does a majority Black urban sector lack the power to control its present and future? The answer to this question, or the lack of an answer, directs us to the "crisis" in the title of the book. At the center of the crisis is Cruse's assertion that Black intellectuals have failed to deal with both the Black reality and the larger white American reality. That reality revolves around the "unresolved conflict between separatist and interracialist tendencies," around which the Black world gravitates (Cruse 1967:415). That intra-Black world conflict must still deal with what Cruse believes to be an issue just as important in the larger American reality; that issue is defining and capturing an American reality that revolves around the struggle for democracy. It is here that Cruse moves beyond the contemporary racial

conflict models that have characterized Black-and-white relations. For Cruse (1967:458), the struggle for power and dominance in the U.S. takes place among ethnic groups rather than between races. Under this model, the racial and ethnic groups that are more tightly organized around their race and ethnicity are the groups more likely to dominate key economic sectors in the society.

Believing the traditional role of all intellectuals throughout history to be that of creating the political, cultural, and social foundations of all societies, Cruse stated that Black intellectuals have failed Black America on theoretical and methodological grounds. In the former, intellectuals have failed to create a "workable theory" to explain Black life—past, present, and future. The second failure is in neglecting to create an "appropriate methodology" with which to study key areas of Black life, such as sociology, history, economics, philosophy, and psychology. Cruse's condemnation of Black intellectuals rests on the premise that intellectuals in all societies have a special role. According to Cruse, Black politicians and civil rights leaders may play, and do play, important roles in Black life. However, they do not "create new ideas and new images of life … that role belongs to the artists and the intellectuals of each generation" (Cruse 1967:96). Cruse continues by declaring that:

The race politicians may create political, economic, or organizational forms of leadership; but it is the artists and the creative minds who will, and must, furnish the all-important content. … Which means to say, in advanced societies the cultural front is a special one that requires special techniques not perceived, understood, or appreciated by political philistines. It is the Negro creative intellectual who must take seriously the idea that culture and art belong to the people- with all the revolutionary implications of the idea. (ibid.)

Moreover, Cruse asserts that each new generation, to shape and refashion a new challenging world for the future, must "first clear the way to cultural revolution by a critical assault on the methods and ideology of the old-guard Negro intellectual elite" (1967:99).

Cruse's focus on the importance of the intellectual's grasp of both theory and methodology highlights one of his major concerns throughout the book. The activist tradition in Black American political and social life is important and Cruse understands its importance. However, he asserts that activism without planning, thought, or "deep reflection" is not only anti-theoretical but may result in self-defeating actions and consequences (1967:92).

Lastly, Cruse believes the most damning accusation against Black intellectuals is their adoption of interracialism, which Cruse does not reject on moral or ethical grounds, but solely on its outcome or results. More pointedly, he states "[racial integration] is being criticized on sociological grounds, because its methodology is open to question, in terms of MEANS to achieve an END … it is the means that are under attack here" (1967:85). To clarify his views, he criticizes many nationalist groups for resorting to race hatred in their desire to combat interracialism, stating that "all race hate is self-defeating" and accusing those who do so of acting out of desperation, alienation, hopelessness, racial envy, and class inferiority complexes (1967:365). He accuses Black intellectuals of having bought into the idea that Black people cannot succeed without whites. Asserting the importance of racial and ethnic pluralism (tribalism), Cruse notes that:

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Every other ethnic group in America, a nation of nations, has accepted the fact of its separateness and used it to its own social advantage. But the Negro's conditioning has steered him into that perpetual state of suspended tension wherein ninety-five per cent of his time and energy is expended on fighting prejudice in whites. As a result, he has neither the time nor the inclination to realize that all the effort spent fighting prejudice will not obviate those fundamental things an ethnic group must do for itself. (1967:364)

Thus, Cruse issues a call for Black intellectuals to return to their people to help explain and define new ideas and theories of Black life, all of which may center around what Cruse, like Du Bois, defined as a Black spiritual culture. For both men, the use of the term "spiritual" did not necessarily suggest a religious orientation.

Reconstructing Black America

Earlier in the paper we asserted that Cruse used Harlem as a sociological and experimental laboratory. He did so to demarcate Harlem as the cultural capital of Black America, just as Chicago represented its industrial counterpart. Harlem served as a political base for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Socialist Movement, the Communist Movement, and the Labor Movement; and hosted a social and cultural mix of Blacks who migrated from the south, Blacks born in Harlem and the north, and Blacks born in the West Indies and Africa who'd emigrated to Harlem, plus the growing Spanish Harlem population. These are the groups central to Cruse's book, though the latter group does not play a major role in his political-cultural analyses.

First, it should be noted that Cruse, a former member of the Communist Party USA, while critical of capitalism, espouses neither socialism nor communism as appropriate for Harlem or for Blacks in the U.S. As he asserts, "American capitalism must prove that political democracy, economic democracy, and cultural democracy are possible under free enterprise" (1967:94-95). The liberation of Harlem, according to Cruse, must entail "autonomy in politics, economics, and culture" (1967:87). However, central to Cruse's (1967:86-87) Harlem survival kit was W.E.B. Du Bois's Negro Cooperative Economic Commonwealth Plan, suggested and partially outlined by Du Bois (1940:206-220) in his book, *Dusk of Dawn* (see also Dennis and Dennis 2017). Cruse proposes what can only be seen as radical political and economic steps towards achieving his and Du Bois's objectives:

1. A Harlem-wide boycott to "take control and ownership of all cultural institutions (theaters, club sites, and movie houses)."
2. Nationalize these institutions and operate them for the educational and cultural benefit of the Harlem community, under the control of a community-wide citizens' Planning Commission.
3. Abolish the "old economic concept of individual rights inherent in the idea of private property. The community should adopt the concepts of cooperative and collective economic organization and administration of its inner community life, or else the Negroes' chances for survival in the U.S. are very slim" (1967:86-87).

For many, Cruse's economic plan for Harlem might seem too revolutionary.

However, Cruse views Harlem's cultural decline as catastrophic, thus requiring no less than a revolutionary approach to exculpate it from what Cruse (1967:88) describes as social disintegration, hopelessness, political backwardness, poverty, and economic slavery. Throughout Cruse's proposals, it is important to note his exclusion of the larger dominant New York political, economic, and cultural structure in his critique, for he believes Harlem's massive population, existing institutions, and available individual and organizational networks, adopting his strategy, would readily transform the community. Earlier in the paper we suggested that Cruse was playing the sociologist-social scientist and Harlem was the laboratory-experimental research site. But there is almost a behavioral analogy here, for Cruse is suggesting, without formalizing his thoughts, that if political, economic, and cultural structures are transformed, human behavior will readily adapt to whatever structural formations are in place. That is, structure may shape behavior, and the behavior Cruse wants to ensure centers around building a cultural framework that would serve as a foundation for Black life and enable Blacks to coexist and compete with other races and ethnic groups in a plural society.

Lastly, in listing steps to save Harlem, Cruse lists the importance of an "All-Negro, community-wide political party." He asserts, "such a party would add bargaining force to social, cultural, and economic reforms" (ibid.). Throughout the early 1970s, creating an all-Black political party was high on Cruse's agenda, and he wrote a series of articles for Black World magazine outlining strategies for such a party (1971a; 1971b; 1971c; 1974a; 1974b).

Conclusion

Although many social scientists and scholars have written about the role and responsibilities of intellectuals, including Black intellectuals, none have written about this special group in a way that suggests this group to be the "deliverer" of their racial, ethnic, professional, or religious group. In fact, many of the articles and books on intellectuals tend to be rather abstract and theoretical and the authors tend to resist tying intellectuals to a particular task, or mission, or if they do so, it is only in a general manner. Cruse is the only writer who dares to task intellectuals, in this case Black intellectuals, with a specific mission, which Cruse clearly outlines in a seemingly task-oriented obligation. What he repeats throughout his writings is the special obligation Black intellectuals "owe" to their people to draft ideas and proposals to save them. More specifically, he clearly states that they are the only group with the skills, education, and broad societal and global experience and outlook, to do so. Moreover, and this became very controversial, interracial committees and groups cannot do it. Cruse extols a cultural framework as key to Black institutional and organizational survival, because he believes understanding the "lived" cultural experiences (history, sociology, economics, and politics) of Blacks places Black intellectuals in a key position to use their cultural base; and with their understanding and their personal experiences in Black and white America, they would constitute the most crucial foundation in creating ideas and shaping elements of Black cultural life; and would sew the stitches of that life to create a unified socio-political-economic framework for a new Black America. For Cruse, creating a New Black America sets the stage for creating a New America.

The book and Cruse's ideas continue to generate discussion and controversy, because the issues Cruse raised have been ongoing issues since the year that he wrote the book. These issues, integration and segregation, pluralism and melting pot theory, along with other issues raised by

Cruse, such as social justice, discrimination, and minority rights, have long been a part of the everyday concerns of many citizens, especially Black Americans. These issues are both integral and central to the theory and practice of concepts of American freedom, liberty, and democracy.

The "what next?" question has been the central theme of American democracy and has long coexisted with the question, "what can we do to make democracy work?" Cruse's books and articles emphasize the importance of Black self- development as a key element in the success of American democracy.

Throughout his works Cruse follows in the tracks of renowned thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Allison Davis, who also wrote about, and were equally as critical of, Black intellectuals as Cruse. They all highlighted the crucial role of Black intellectuals in the making, shaping, and dispensing of the ideas and values crucial in assisting Black communities, under great socio-cultural- economic-educational pressures, to not only survive, but more importantly, to prosper.

Cruse's message to Black intellectuals was to dig deeply into their own personal socio-cultural history, as well as the collective socio-cultural history of their people, to provide workable visions and ideals for their collective advancement. He was not anti-Marx, but he raged against Black intellectuals who wished to transplant 19th century European Marxist ideas to the contemporary Black condition, because he believed such ideas were insufficient to address, or answer, the racial and class issues of 20th century America, or the world at large. He also believed that contemporary integration policy, which he does not oppose on moral or racial lines, adopted more than seventy years ago, has not helped Blacks educationally or economically. Between 1988 and 2016, the percentage of Black students attending intensely segregated (that is, at least 90% non-white) public schools climbed in every region of the US; in the Northeast the figure is higher than it was in 1968 (Frankenberg et al 2019).

Structural changes (cultural, political, economic, and educational) within the collective Black world required that these communities themselves, with the assistance of Black intellectuals, be the change-makers. We believe, as does Cruse, that Black communities that are aiding and shaping their own collective political, economic, and cultural development, will give individual participants a heightened sense of their role as creators and participants. A community oriented towards Black-self and Black-collective-community participation, involvement, and control, will not only contribute to its own health, viability, strength, and power. It will also contribute greatly to the larger American society.

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