Lois Benjamin. *The Black Elite—Facing the Color Line in the Twilight of the Twentieth Century*

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volved in Wittfogel’s generalizations about ‘hydraulic agriculture’ giving rise to ‘agrohydraulic despotism’ [there is a reference to Wittfogel at this point]. At best we can accept the term ‘agrohydraulic’ as denoting a certain technique, without any further implications concerning the political or cultural framework. Further discussion may help to explain and substantiate our reservations on this point.

The striking contrast between ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt lies in the psychological dimension. On the one hand we have the artistically-endowed Egyptian, confident in his ability to cope with his (in principle orderly) human and natural environment; on the other hand there is the more technically talented inhabitant of Mesopotamia who had to develop a wider range of capabilities in order to cope with the unpredictable world around him. In a turbulent political history, marked by waves of large-scale immigration and by conquests, the people of Mesopotamia were more innovative in terms of practical discoveries and technology, whilst the more sheltered Egyptians, who only occasionally experienced ethnic turmoil, showed greater achievements in art and in religious speculation.

It is clear that the agrohydraulic mode of production was not enough by itself to shape identical or even similar cultures. There were other, more fundamental, ecological circumstances, which contributed to the shaping of human dispositions; various dispositions framed different courses of action, which in their turn reinforced—by the accumulation of differences—the environmental impetus. We shall discuss this environmental factor in more detail in section 2.4.

The book is old-fashioned in its content, making no attempt at all to address currently hot minority issues, least of all in politically correct ways. As a general text for non-Western civilizations it is somewhat harmed by a lack of attention to sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. But in all, the book is firmly recommended for libraries and for the personal shelves of comparativists who want reasonably detailed general histories handy for personal reference. It is also recommended as a textbook, with the caveat that this is not for the student whose main interest is putting a required course on his record.

John K. Hord

AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN AND WITHIN CIVILIZATIONS


When two civilizations meet several things may result for their people, depending on various factors: Is the meeting among equals? Is the meeting the result of voluntary migration, or involuntary migration? Is the meeting skewed in favor of one civilization? It the meeting the re-
suit of reciprocal exchange, or is it through conquest? Is the meeting through the usurpation of the institutions of one civilization by the other?

In *The Black Elite*, Professor Benjamin approaches some of these questions with vigor, creativity, scholarship, and skillful research techniques, in an attempt to unravel the meaning of the civilizational encounters that have taken place and continue to take place between people of African descent and those of European origin, now living in the United States. Her focus, however, is on the sociological dilemmas that African Americans face day-in-day-out in the United States. But is this report necessary, one may ask? Do we not know already that African Americans, especially those in the middle class and above are doing just fine? Has William J. Wilson's book on *The Declining Significance of Race*, and others, not already documented ample material success among those classes of African Americans?

Benjamin's concern is not with the material or "objective successes" of the Black elite in America. The pains of sociopolitical, socioeconomic castration, psychological humiliation, and covert domination that mark a people's day-to-day interactions with a dominant civilization do not easily fade away with material acquisition, not especially when there are permanent reminders within the "Central(izing) civilization," to use Wilkinson's concept, that constantly knead these pains. So, Benjamin poses her own questions:

What does it mean to be a marginal Black elite poised between two social worlds of class and race? What psychological roadblocks do Blacks have to overcome to "make it" in this society? What are the sociopsychological costs of mainstreaming for successful Blacks? Are there any achievement-related stresses that are caused by the marginality of Blacks who are more structurally integrated in society, and if so, how do they manifest themselves? What are the mechanisms adopted by marginals in handling stress? How do styles of adaptation shape values, attitudes, and behaviors toward personal, class, and racial identity? Do high achieving Blacks experience race relations differently from the working class or the underclass? How do high achieving Blacks cope with racism?

Moreover, as William Harvey says in the Foreword of the book, the sociological studies, prior to Benjamin's book have concentrated on "the Black underclass," making their stories incomplete, "a mere fragment of the ongoing saga of what it means to be Black in America. In this volume, Lois Benjamin, in relating the racial experiences of the Talented One Hundred, tells the story of the Black elite and, in so doing, completes the saga."

Traditional sociological studies on the elite have shown that the elite are, normally, the knowledge-movers and/or cultural maximizers of their civilizations. Not so with the talented 100 African American elite that Benjamin studied. These are people who have, rather, experienced
the frustrations of "marginality," "individual racism and sexism," and "institutional discrimination." If the traditional sociological literature portrays the elite as a group united by enlightened self-interest, or a group that moves as individuals but strikes as one, the talented 100 Black elite's common experience is only the catastrophic results that "their encounters with racism" have had on their individual personalities and psyches. Instead of having self-confidence and feeling "power," they "were still Black in a racist society." They regarded the interviews given them by Benjamin as "therapy." They "cried, their voices quavered or changed emotional octaves, and their eyes filled with tears. They took long pauses to reflect. They laughed." But they continued, daily, to go about their businesses, wearing their cultural masks to hide the effects of these catastrophic civilizational encounters.

Surely, the talented 100 Black elite have experienced "objective success." But the "subjective" price paid for this seems tremendous and devastating. This picture is painted in detail by each of the eight chapters of the book. The book also has three appendices, a section on notes, and another on selected bibliography.

In Chapter One we are told that it is not only "the color line" that is reality in American society, but that "sex and class" also fundamentally serve as "stratifying principle(s) in this society." Even in the twentieth century in American society, Blacks still individually and collectively experience the ill-effects of a "double-consciousness."

We are treated like stepchildren so we are without a country. And nobody wanted to claim Africa because of its presentation to Blacks as an 'ignorant, savage, and dark continent.' Now that Africa has been emancipated, we are not Africans, so we can't claim it.

Benjamin's Blacks also experience blackness in some other "conflictual" ways:

Being Black is to be conflictual; ... watching and walking the tightrope; ... is to experience the double standard; ... is to be on perennial probation; ... is never to be good enough; ... is to bear the race burden; ... is to be always in a precarious status; ... is to be forever in a continuous struggle, personally and collectively; and being Black is to wear the mask.

The double-consciousness manifests itself in Black elite behavior in multifaceted ways which relate to class-race awareness; Eurocentric-Afrocentric mannerisms; male-female relations; and so on. The catastrophic results of civilizational encounters between people of African civilization and those of European civilization seem not only to generate mistrust between members of the two civilizations, but also between people within the Black community, itself. "The tightrope is not only with Whites, but also with Blacks." There is schizophrenia, which makes Blacks act "one way around Blacks and another way around Whites." Why are the doings of the African American double consciousness so
unlike those of other minorities? Why has the consciousness not unleashed a collective energy of creativity as it has done with some historical minorities? Why has it not resulted in the building of functional alternative structures?

Is it true that the physical, emotional, and psychic violence that the African experienced, beginning with the operations of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade through the days of "floggings, lynchings, whippings, murders, and police brutality," is a unique one? Whatever characterization may be appropriate to the Black experience, one thing seems to be clear: History suggests that any time an enslaved and then freed people were able to use their double-consciousness functionally and creatively, they were first either completely assimilated into the centralizing civilization or allowed the freedom to go and find a "home" for themselves. If assimilation was impossible, a Moses has always emerged to demand: "Let my people go!" But, this has not been the case of the African in America. His history has been taken away, his institutions, culture, including his language, have been destroyed. Then, there is the problem-atic of his assimilation into the centralizing civilization, itself. The African's dilemma in America is, therefore, truly an American Dilemma, to use the title of Gunnar Myrdal's great study. While the centralizing American civilization has succeeded in assimilating other groups, the African has continued to sit at the peripheries of society—perpetually in cultural limbo, experiencing a cultural angst.

Benjamin's book details the history of this peripheralization of the African in America in Chapter Two: "Manifestations of the Color Line—The impact of violence." While traditionally the status quo, through a profused use of negative labeling, makes us believe that it is minorities in general, and the African, in particular, who is violent, Benjamin demonstrates that it is rather the dominant culture which is violent. The centralizing civilization has expressed, and continues to express, this torture through physical violence, cultural domination, social domination, and sexual racism. From Chapters Three to Six we are taken through each of the worlds of the Black elite, beginning with their work world to the world of gender politics and dynamics. These chapters reveal intimate stories which further detail the severe nature of the psychic, emotional, and psychological scars that the Black elite has suffered and is suffering in American society. In my judgment, these stories have been documented in a manner which no sociology book has ever captured so successfully before.

The dilemma painted in Benjamin's book cannot simply be a Black elite or a Black problem. An African proverb says, "A child who cries at night in order to keep his parents awake never gets any sleep himself." Therefore, the scars that the dominant culture has caused in the souls of Black folk are scars of America. The plight of Black people is the plight of all America. For any civilizational catastrophe affects all people involved in such an encounter.

So, one might say that, in the end, Benjamin paints the problem of
the Black elite as a mere microcosm of the global situation, itself, which is the macrocosm. The saga, alas, has not yet been completed, as Harvey had hoped. We are all caught up, it seems, in the throes of civilizational encounters, the results of which have not been the same for all people, nor yet fully studied, discussed, analyzed, and documented. I propose that the ISCSC be the first venue for the discussion and analysis of the results of such catastrophic civilizational encounters.

But a solution suggested by a member of the Black elite can be quite gratifying for the moment. He envisions and is working for the formation of a "beloved community" for the twenty-first century where "justice and peace are priorities" in "the global village."

This is, obviously, a powerful book, must reading for all civilizationists and students of the comparative sociology of the elite.

Korsi Dogbe

COMPARATIVE SALVATION


The author of this invaluable scholarly work is a Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of California in Berkeley. Gender and Salvation is a modern introduction to the debates in the Jaina religion of India between the religion's two main sects, the Digambaras, also known as the "sky-clad," and the Svetambaras, also known as "white-cloth-clad." The debates are basically about whether or not women have the same qualities as men to attain moksa, that is, spiritual salvation.

To have a clear civilizational understanding of these complicated debates, I suggest that the reader first peruse thoroughly the lucid essay, written by Professor Robert P. Goldman, which was published as the Foreword, before delving into the debates themselves. In this essay, Goldman helps the student to place the debates within "the context of the broader social history of traditional India."

In addition to the Foreword, Jaini's Gender and Salvation has a Preface, an Introduction, six chapters, an Appendix, Glossary of Sanskrit and Prakrit Words, a Bibliography, and an Index of Names. Jaini's general Introduction of the entire debate, itself, is extremely enlightening. The glossary and index of names sections are particularly helpful to the least tutored reader in such Indian words and names. But even with constant reference to these names and words, this reader still had some difficult moments with the text itself.

Jainism, a philosophy and a religion, is one of three ancient religions in India, called the three heterodoxies. The other two are Buddhism and Ajivikism. The central ethical concept in Jainism is ahimsa, meaning "noninjury to all living creatures." And the attractive thing about