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**Think Piece  
Black Civil Society's Leadership Burden  
by Martin Kilson, PhD**

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*Dr. Kilson delivered the following remarks at Temple University's conference on Black Civil Society in American Life, September 22.*

Let me reflect briefly on what might be called “Black civil society’s 21st century leadership burden.” As participants in today’s conference have pointed out from a variety of historical perspectives, the leadership sector of African–American society going back to embryonic leadership of pre–Civil War era Free Negro Black communities, to post–Emancipation Black communities and down through the 20th century, the several layers of leadership of Black Civil Society Agencies sustained what I like to call an “outreach–to–Black–masses–leadership ethos.” By the term Black Civil Society Agencies, I refer to a variety of Black people’s societal and institution–building agencies such as women’s clubs, mutual aid associations, artisan associations, clergy associations, churches, teachers associations, intellectual groups, fraternal associations among men and sororities among women, business associations, trade unions, professional associations, etc.

***Activist Character of Black Civil Society***

What defined Black Civil Society Agencies’ outreach–to–Black–masses–leadership orientation was what I like to call a “challenge–demeanor” toward the American White supremacist edifice. During the pre–Civil War era of small Free Negro communities into the Emancipation era and into the 20th century, the “challenge–demeanor” leadership approach to Black Civil Society Agencies was, of course, countered by the “accommodationist–demeanor” leadership approach – what W.E.B. DuBois labeled in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk* the “hypocritical compromise” leadership approach, the approach that Booker T. Washington canonized, so to speak. Thanks to the progressive intellectual legacy and civil–rights activist leadership of W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Ida Wells–Barnett, Monroe Trotter, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charles Hamilton Houston, A. Philip Randolph, Thurgood Marshall, James Farmer, James Lawson, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., Fanny Lou Hammer, and others, the challenge–demeanor toward American racism held the preeminent place among 20th century Black Civil Society Agencies for the most part.

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Today as we enter the 21st century, our goal – the goal of the liberal and progressive forces among African-Americans – must be both to sustain and innovate upon the challenge – demeanor leadership approach to Black Civil Society Agencies. Why is this goal a Black ideological and political imperative? It is a Black-people imperative because of what my former Harvard College student Cornel West has in mind when he asserts through the title of his new book that “Democracy Matters”. Which is to say, that without grass-roots and viable popular participatory infrastructures that are informed by humanitarian vision and values, a power-class cynical corporatist imperial hegemony – militarist in its identity and governing modality – will dominate our 21st century American society.

### **Averting Pseudo-Diversity Cooptation of Black Civil Society**

Black Civil Society Agencies can contribute significantly as one of numerous *counter-corporatist axes* in the evolving 21st century American society. But to do so will require a special fidelity to a challenge-demeanor Black Civil Society leadership orientation by an important segment of the evolving 21st century African-American middle-class and upper stratum.

Our post-Civil Rights Movement era Black middle-class and upper stratum is expanding reasonably well every day before our very eyes. I just saw the most recent data showing that as of 2004, 18% of Black adults over 25 years of age held four-year college degrees, which stood at 11% in 1990 and when I entered Lincoln University as a Freshman in 1949 it was under 1%. The most recent data also reveal an advance in the substantive attributes of the Black middle-class and upper stratum, insofar as by 2004 *for the first time ever* four-year college-educated African-Americans earned 95% of White Americans with four-year college degrees. That is, four-year college educated Whites earned median income of \$38,667 in 2004 and four-year college educated Blacks earned median income of \$36,694 (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Summer 2005, pp. 7–8). Furthermore, college-educated Black women now earn above parity the median income earned by college-educated White American women.

These advances in the substantive attributes of the Black middle-class and upper stratum are like a two-edged sword, however, because they can cut two ways, in either a progressive or a reactionary direction. Thus, on one level, these middle-class advances are to be celebrated as evidence of advances against longstanding racist marginalization of Blacks in American society. But, on another level, these advances suggest how important the need will be to secure a fidelity to a challenge-demeanor Black Civil Society leadership orientation in the evolving 21st century.

Why do I say this? I say this because today's cynical oligarchic Republican Party governing elites at the federal and state level – reinforced by a cynical plutocratic American corporatism – will now make every effort they can to advance reactionary forces among key groups that make up Black Civil Society Agencies.

That is what our power-cynical President of the United States, George W. Bush, is doing in cultivating political ties with the prominent Black Pentecostal Church clergyman Bishop T.D. Jakes, whose Porter's House Church in Dallas is a 30,000 member so-called mega-church. For the past decade, the oligarchic Republican Party governing elites have launched an ostensible diversity politics, which in reality is a *pseudo-diversity-politics* that serves the new oligarchic Republicanism and plutocratic corporatism.

This has translated into cultivating pseudo-diversity Black officials. Officials like mayoral candidate Cory Booker in Newark, N.J. for example, and well-known national-level Black officeholders like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In other words, pseudo-diversity Black officeholders are Black officials who are uniquely serviceable to the non-egalitarian purposes of oligarchic and corporatist American power elites.

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Of course, this advance in the authority roles of the Black American political class reflects, in one of its aspects, the successful incorporation of Black professionals into systemic decision-making roles in mainstream American institutional life. This advance in authority roles for African-Americans was a basic goal of the great Civil Rights Movement. The issue, however, is the nature of our American systemic economic and political patterns into which post-Civil Rights Movement era African-American professionals are being incorporated.

### ***Black Civil Society Requires a Neo-Black Communitarianism***

This brings me to what I view as a fundamental feature of what I call Black Civil Society's 21st century "leadership burden". Namely, that burden is to ensure as best we can that the mainstream systemic incorporation of Black professionals does not become a *one-dimensional Black elite-cooptation process*. Because a one-dimensional Black elite-cooptation process does not facilitate what Cornel West means when he uses the term "Democracy Matters."

It does not facilitate, that is, a fair equalitarian organization of social, economic, and political opportunities in our post-industrial and global American society. Quite the contrary. It assists the oligarchic, plutocratic, corporatist – and thus imperial – structuring of today's American society.

Let me lay out some concluding prescriptive suggestions regarding how Black Civil Society Agencies might help avert a one-dimensional Black elite-cooptation pattern. If this can be realized, evolving 21st century Black Civil Society patterns will contribute to a fair equalitarian organization of social, economic, and political opportunities in American society.

Achieving a multi-dimensional Black elite-cooptation pattern will require what might be called a "Neo-Black Communitarianism." By this term, I mean mobilizing liberal and progressive elements in Black Civil Society Agencies – in women's clubs, clergy organizations, fraternal organizations and sororities, churches, labor unions, professional associations, etc. – that cultivate what I call a "Black-awareness ethos". A "Black-awareness ethos" is an outlook that puts the needs of the weak-sector Black Americans at the center of overall 21st century African-American concerns.

The weak-sector of Black Americans amounts to perhaps 40% of African-American households today. This weak-sector of Black Americans was rudely and graphically brought to national and world visibility by the Katrina Hurricane devastation of Black lives in New Orleans. Professor Cornel West, in a brilliant address to a Reunion of some 700 Black graduates of the Harvard Law School last weekend (September 16–18) used the apt term "povertrina" to describe this devastation.

It is, I think, especially crucial that a Neo-Black Communitarianism gain ground among the Black middle-class and professional stratum in the evolving 21st century. The groundwork for this Black-awareness ethos activism has already been innovated, I suggest, by activist Black professional associations like 100 Black Women and 100 Black Men. Furthermore, this Black-awareness ethos activism can be reinforced at the political class level, by fashioning what might be called "Reformist Cadre" among activist-oriented Black political class members at local, state, and federal level. There are over 9000 elected Black officials today, and many thousand more appointed Black political class officials who, I think, can be mobilized into "Reformist Cadre" that, in turn, can function as Black-awareness conveyors.

This kind of nexus between Black-communitarian awareness activism, on the one hand, and liberal-reform oriented political class cadre, on the other hand, was developed by Irish-American Civil Society Agencies (aided extensively by the Catholic church infrastructure) from the 1880s through the 1950s. As a result, Irish-American Civil Society was able to checkmate a one-dimensional Irish elite-cooptation process within the WASP-dominant mainstream American socio-economic power system. This, in turn, facilitated a

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multi-dimensional Irish-American elite cooptation pattern. That is, a pattern that enabled the liberal-reform sector of the Irish-American professional stratum to influence important public policies which facilitated broad and viable social mobility advances for working-class Irish-Americans.

Thus, what I call the new 21st century leadership burden facing today's Black Civil Society Agencies will be effectively managed only if a critical-minority sector of the African-American middle class and professional stratum can be kept "Black-culture friendly." Something like this transpired among Irish-Americans between the 1880s and the 1950s when a critical-minority sector of middle-class and professional Irish-Americans was kept "Irish-culture friendly." (See, for examples, the writings of Irish-American intellectuals like Steve Erie).

Accordingly, key African-American intelligentsia personalities must be in the forefront of encouraging a "Black-culture friendly" middle-class and professional sector among evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century Black America. These must be African-American intelligentsia personalities who are the equivalent of "Black-culture friendly" early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black professionals like W.E.B. DuBois, Ida Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Monroe Trotter, Rev. Francis Grimke, Bishop Reverdy Ransom, John Hope, Benjamin Mays, James Weldon Johnson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Bishop R.R. Wright, A. Philip Randolph, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, to mention just a few of them. I am optimistic that enough 21st century members and leaders of Black Civil Society Agencies will emerge with the required degree of the "Black-culture friendly" perspective.

### **Conclusion**

To all of you who have done me the extraordinary honor of mounting this Black Civil Society conference here at Temple University today, who have participated in its organization and its execution. To all of you, I can say that in your hands and hearts can be found the capacity to facilitate a progressive and humanitarian advancement of Black Civil Society Agencies in today's oligarchic corporatist American society. To this extent, some of the future genuine Democratic Renewal of our now raucously oligarchic American society is in our hands. Maybe not a whole lot...but *some* Democratic Renewal capability is in our hands.

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