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A CONTRARY VIEW ON INTEGRATIONISM

By David J. Garrow

PLURAL BUT EQUAL

Blacks and Minorities in America's Plural Society

By Harold Cruse. Morrow. 420 pp. \$22.95.

Twenty years ago, Harold Cruse published "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," an acerbic critique of the 20th-century American black left. One black periodical called it "a literary landmark" that marked Cruse as "the most controversial black writer of the decade," and the social historian Christopher Lasch, praising it as "a monument of historical analysis," termed "The Crisis" "one of the landmarks of social criticism in the twentieth century."

Now, after more than 15 years of work, Cruse has published his long-promised sequel, an equally important and intermittently brilliant book that will irritate some black organizational leaders but that raises, and starts to answer, the most fundamental questions about the future of blacks in America.

Two major themes predominate. First is Cruse's harsh but cogently articulated dismissal of the concepts of integration and assimilation as offering (or ever having offered) any future that black Americans should welcome. Cruse's attack concentrates on the famous 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, which, he argues, fully and fatally reflected America's inability to distinguish between racial segregation -- legally-imposed inferiority -- and racial separation: a desirable source of strength for any minority group, but particularly blacks, in America's plural society.

The *Brown* decision, Cruse writes, presumed "that separateness is inherently to mean inferior. Intrinsicly, it means no such thing. Legally imposed segregation was what rendered separateness implicitly inferior. Remove the legal sanctions of imposed segregation, and separateness has the potential of achieving equality in its own right."

Cruse's assault on *Brown* is often extremely caustic, but his substantive critique of the inaccurate and unexamined presumptions of *Brown*'s integrationist faith cannot be ignored. *Brown* "was a mindless act of social irresponsibility. Racial segregation was not the cause of the inferior education found in separate black public schools, and racial integration was no guarantee of the universalization of quality education for blacks or for any other nonwhite minority."

Cruse quotes at length from the 1971 Chicano Manifesto in explaining his point:

"We do not believe that our Chicanos must attend classes with Negroes and Anglos in order to attain an adequate education. If there must be integration, we say, let it be in terms of cash, curriculum, and control. Let the Chicano enjoy a just share of funds so that his barrio schools can

hire the most qualified teachers, purchase the best equipment, and give the young people the finest education possible."

In short, Cruse is arguing that "the separate but equal doctrine that Brown ruled unconstitutional should have been supplanted by the truly democratic doctrine of 'plural but equal,' " rather than by a thoroughgoing black insistence on integration as a curative solution for all social problems.

Understanding Cruse's usage of "plural" is crucial to appreciating his argument. Nonwhite minorities neither will nor can be racially assimilated into any "melting pot" American society, and both those minorities as well as American constitutional law ought to appreciate that truth sooner rather than later, Cruse argues. What American blacks need to pursue and achieve, he contends, is "internal organization and consolidation of the minority group within a multiracial, multicultural society." "Individuals should integrate but still remain identified with a group in order to share intergroup power."

Cruse devotes lengthy segments of "Plural But Equal" to detailing how most 20th-century black activists have unfortunately subscribed to a simplistic and woefully incomplete integrationist faith that Cruse succinctly labels non-economic liberalism. The most notable (although partial) exception was W. E. B. DuBois, who by the mid-1930s was beginning to argue that economic organization and cooperation within the black community were more crucial to the future of blacks in America than increased racial integration.

In Cruse's view, the entire 20th-century integrationist emphasis of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and such landmark anti-discrimination statutes produced by the civil rights movement as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were misguidedly incomplete achievements. "While the civil rights victories were legitimate and necessary, they did not address themselves to the central problem of black people in the aggregate -- economic powerlessness."

Like other scholars, Cruse emphasizes that most civil rights gains have predominantly benefited the black middle class. "For the overwhelming majority of blacks, integration since the Brown decision has meant very little either socially or economically," he writes. While part of the fault, Cruse says, lies with the longstanding acceptance among both blacks and whites of non-economic liberalism as the dominant racial ideology, which "downgraded and discouraged indigenous black self-help economic enterprise," the black leadership elite deserves special castigation. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the black leadership essentially has been "spokesmen and spokeswomen," Cruse writes, whose function has been "to beseech the administrators of the white power establishments. . . for fair treatment of their black constituencies."

Artificially self-constrained by this supplicant's role, the black middle class has failed to give the larger black community real leadership, Cruse argues. "This class and its various spokesmen and spokeswomen cannot admit. . . that, for all intents, it has written off the contemporary condition of the black underclass as a lost cause." Instead of appreciating the necessity of cross-class black economic development and self-help organization, and of combining "black political

organization with black economic organization," the present-day black elite has become simply "an indulgent 'Me' generation," Cruse writes.

In short, not only is Cruse's verdict on the last 70 years of black activism critical and acerbic, but his evaluation of black America's present situation and its likely future prospects is not at all optimistic. "What is lacking," he declares in the book's closing pages, "is the quality of black leadership capable of harnessing black potential." "The only hope left for the political, economic, and cultural survival of blacks into the next century is self-organization." While Cruse's message is a harsh and unpleasant one, his arguments and conclusions are ones that everyone interested in the future of blacks in America needs to confront and ponder.

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