

—The Curse of “Community”

I just got some Afrocentric hate mail from a guy in Dayton who castigates me as a race traitor Uncle Tom for criticizing Farakhan and the Million Man March. The writer accuses me of not speaking for him, a charge that’s absolutely accurate. He declares himself a nationalist and writes about how black people who disagree with him are mental defectives, dupes, or sellouts. He notes that the MMM, which he proudly says he attended, was for “real men,” “real niggas” like himself.

I mention this letter because it highlights what I think is a central problem in black politics, a crucial internal obstacle to generating a popularly based progressive black political movement. This problem, ironically, is the notion of a “black community” and the rhetoric of authenticity that comes with it. I say ironic because the ideological force of the black community idea—which is now such an impediment to organizing—rests largely on the imagery of grassroots activism and mobilization. But, as the man said, “All that’s apparent is not real.”

Assertion of links to, roots in, messages from, or the wisdom of “the community” is more a way to end a conversation about politics than to begin one. It is often the big trump in a game of one-upmanship, an attempt to validate one’s position or self by alleging privileged connection to the well-spring of authenticity, to preempt or curtail dissent by invoking the authority of that unassailable, primordial source of legitimacy.

But who exactly is “the community”? How can we assess the claims of those who purport to represent it? These questions are seldom raised, much less answered. A strain of Jeffersonian romanticism obscures them among the left, for whom community implies an organic entity animated by a collective mind and will. From that perspective we don’t need to ask how the community makes its decisions, how it forms its will, because it reflects an immediate, almost mystical identity of interest and common feeling. In the Jeffersonian fantasy world, it is possible to imagine that formalistic democracy—that burdensome and imperfect apparatus—springs

from the desire to approximate the informal, automatic popularity and transparent authenticity of the community’s decision making.

This idea of community is a mystification, however, and an anti-democratic one at that. All social units are comprised of discrete individuals whose perspectives and interests and alliances differ, and every unit’s members are bound together through a combination of negotiation and coercion. The less attention is paid to cultivating and protecting the sphere of negotiation, the more the balance shifts to coercion. The rhetoric of community is impatient with the former, and its myth of authenticity rationalizes the latter.

We can see this rhetoric’s antidemocratic face clearly among the so-called new communitarians, for whom the label is a warrant to enforce a conformist, punitive moralism. They attack divorce and abortion, and even civil rights: the American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities—one of the communitarians’ main organizations—went out of its way a couple of years ago to support the Chicago Housing Authority and its Battle of Algiers–like policy of putting housing projects on lock-down and conducting indiscriminate sweep searches, ostensibly seeking drugs and guns.

The community idea’s undemocratic, antiparticipatory underside is less visible in black politics, partly because black political activity and rhetoric are articulated most forcefully against oppressive outside forces. The effect is to shift everyone’s focus away from the internal dynamics that shape black political culture. But more insidious tendencies also blind observers to the black communitarian reflex’s ugly foundation. Because whites by and large don’t see black Americans as a complex population of differentiated individuals, the organic community imagery seems reasonable and natural to them. I cringe when I recollect the many occasions I’ve heard white activists rhapsodize about “the black community” coming in, with its particular clarity and moral force, to proffer its matter-of-fact, cut-to-the-chase wisdom, like the Ninth Cavalry of the Army of Righteousness.

Within black politics, of course, hustlers of one sort or another, high-toned and low, have always been willing to exploit that fundamentally racist mind-set, usually by giving whites with resources

authentic-sounding doses of what they want to hear. More corrosive, however, is the fact that well-intentioned black activists themselves seem incapable of breaking out of the communitarian frame and its discourse of authenticity. This failure is a vestige of a style of class-based brokerage politics that prevailed among black Americans for most of this century, a style the 1965 Voting Rights Law should have eliminated. Now that black people have access to regular forms of civic participation, they should no longer have to depend on a politics in which white elites recognize and negotiate with nominal, ultimately unaccountable race “leaders.” I suspect that black activists’ continuing romance with political hustlers and demagogues (“Up with hope, down with dope!”) stems from their seductive promise of connection to a real, mobilizable constituency—something that black activists haven’t experienced in fact in more than twenty years, and then not for very long.

Whatever its appeal, the idea of a black community may do more harm than good at this point. And I do not in any way mean to endorse the black neocons’ disingenuous jeremiads about a totalitarian reign of ideological terror in the Bantustan; the problem is rather the opposite. There are no significant forces on the ground in black politics attempting to generate any sort of popular, issue-based civic discourse, and the language of community is largely the reason.

Community presumes homogeneity of interest and perception, at least in principle. A politics stuck in its name is threatened by the heterogeneous tendencies put in motion by open debate. It is a politics that always has depended on narrowing the active black public and fastening the population as a whole to a middle-class-inflected program. But now that we have black people generating inegalitarian urban-redevelopment policies and victimized by them, black people both enforcing and demonized by underclass ideology, black people fighting for and opposing gender equality and openness with respect to sexual orientation, the hollowness and inadequacy of this politics is all the more striking.

Moreover, the game is becoming all the more dangerous. Not only does this essentially demobilizing political style not provide a basis for generating effective responses to the corporate reorganization of American life that promises to wreak particular havoc on

black people, but we can see signs of the black communitarian rhetoric’s appropriation for frightening ends—and not just at the hands of explicit reactionaries like Farrakhan and the agents of church-based black moral rearmament. The philanthropic foundations are joining hands in their own sly way with the right to undercut the basis for public, civic life by proclaiming the superiority of “community-based organizations,” which are accountable only to them (a domestic version of the non-governmental organizations deployed to weaken governments in what used to be the Third World).

In Chicago, for instance, we’ve gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices; one of them, a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable do-good credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics, has won a state senate seat on a base mainly in the liberal foundation and development worlds. His fundamentally bootstrap line was softened by a patina of the rhetoric of authentic community, talk about meeting in kitchens, small-scale solutions to social problems, and the predictable elevation of process over program—the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle-class reform in favoring form over substance. I suspect that his ilk is the wave of the future in U.S. black politics here, as in Haiti and wherever the International Monetary Fund has sway. So far the black activist response hasn’t been up to the challenge. We have to do better.