BLACK ECOLOGY

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BLACK ECOLOGY

THE EMERGENCE of the concept of ecology in American life is potentially of momentous relevance to the ultimate liberation of black people. Yet blacks and their environmental interests have been so blatantly omitted that blacks and the ecology movement currently stand in contradiction to each other.[1]

The legitimacy of the concept of black ecology accrues from the fact that: (1) the black and white environments not only differ in degree but in nature as well; (2) the causes and solutions to ecological problems are fundamentally different in the suburbs and ghetto (both of which human ecologists regard as "natural [or ecological] areas"; and (3) the solutions set forth for the "ecological crisis" are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands.

In the realm of white ecology, pollution "closes your beaches and prevents your youngsters from wading, swimming, boating, water-skiing, fishing, and other recreation close to home."[2] And, "we want clear water, for boating, and swimming, and fishing – and clean water just to look at."[3]

Similar involvement includes the planting of redwood trees, saving the American eagle, and redeeming terrestial beauty. Thus it is seen that ecologists aimed at the hearts and purse strings of industrialists and hit the eyeballs of the white bourgeoisie.

Ecology accordingly has come to refer for the most part to chemical and physical or esthetic conditions only, while professional ecologists themselves have been known to differ in their definition of ecology.

> . . . the concept is borrowed from biology, where it means the study of relations between organisms and environment. In biological usage it includes relations between individual organisms and environment (autecology) and between groups and environment (synecology). In social science it is restri ted to human synecology, that is, the study of relations between human groups (or populations) and their respective environments, especially their physical environments.[4]

1. For example, in a 760-page volume, "being the record of a conference convened by the Conservation Foundation in April, 1965, at Warrenton, Virginia," only one-fifth of one page was devoted to the black race. (See F. Fraser Darling and John P. Milton, ed., *Future Environments of North America*. Garden City: Natural History Press, 1966.) Likewise, in a 286-page volume, "a Dial Report on the deteriorating quality of the American environment," the index contains no entry for "Negro" or "black." The book is entitled *Moment in the Sun*, but blacks received no "moment in the sun." Also, "suburbia" appears but there is no mention of the "slum" or the ghetto." (See *Moment in the Sun*. New York: Dial Press, Robert Rienow and Leona Train Rienow, 1967.)
2. Izaak Walton League of America, *Clean Water*. Glenview: February, 1970, p. 1.
3. Federal Water Pollution Control Administration, *A New Era for America's Waters*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1967, p. 4.
4. Julius Gould and William L. Kolb, ed., *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964, p. 215.

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by NATHAN HARE

A recent U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare report defines environment as "the aggregate of all the external conditions and influences affecting the life and development of an organism, human behavior, society, etc."[5] It is imperative therefore for us to understand how both the physical and social environments of blacks and whites have increasingly evolved as contrasts.

WITH the industrialization and urbanization of American society, there arose a relatively more rapid and drastic shift of blacks from Southern farms to Northern factories, particularly during periods when they were needed in war industries.[6] Moreover, urban blacks have been increasingly imprisoned in the physical and social decay in the hearts of major central cities, an imprisonment which most emphatically seems doomed to continue.[7] At the same time whites have fled to the suburbs and the exurbs, separating more and more the black and white worlds.[8] The "ecology crisis" arose when the white bourgeoisie, who have seemed to regard the presence of blacks as a kind of pollution, discovered that a sample of what they and their rulers had done to the ghetto would follow them to the suburb.

But there is a greater degree of all varieties of pollutants in the black ghetto, which also lies extremely exposed to the most final variety of environmental destruction imaginable — the "sneak atom bomb attack peril" this month reported by an authoritative study made by Great Britain's Institute for Strategic Studies.[9]

> Say Russia does drop a 10-megaton bomb on Washington, D.C. or Chicago, for example. Up to five miles from ground zero (the point of the explosion), nine out of ten of all inhabitants would be killed instantly and the rest seriously injured or victimized by radia-

5. U. S. Department of Health Education and Welfare, *Environmental Health Planning Guide*, Washington, D.C.: 1968, p. 1.
6. Nathan Hare, "Recent Trends in the Occupational Mobility of Negroes in the United States: An Intracohort Analysis," *Social Forces*, December, 1965. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1969, p. 20, Table 20.
   In 1910, when whites were about twice as urban as blacks, only 27 per cent of blacks were urban. By 1960 blacks had grown more urban than whites; about four out of five of all blacks now live in urban places. See Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*, p. 67 and Karl E. Taeuber and Alma F. Taeuber, *Negroes in Cities*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965.
7. Bureau of Labor Sattistics, *The Negroes in the United States: Their Economic and Social Situation*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, June, 1966, p. 69. *Statistical Abstract, op. cit.*, p. 18, Table 17. Scott Greer, *The Emerging City*, New York: Free Press, 1962, p. 82. Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*, New York: Vintage Books, 1968, p. 283. George Schermer Associates, *More Than Shelter*, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1968, pp. 20, 26, 51-53.
8. Bureau of the Census, *We the Black People of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970. Taeuber and Taeuber, *op. cit.*
9. *San Francisco Examiner*, April 11, 1970

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tion. All structures would be demolished. From 5 to 9.7 miles out, half of the inhabitants would be killed, a third of them injured, all others dazed, shocked, and sickened by radiation, and all buildings damaged beyond repair. . . . In other words, this would just about take care of the Negro community.[10]

But the ecological ordeal of the black race does not have to wait for a nuclear attack; present conditions are deadly enough. The environmental crisis of whites (in both its physical and social aspects) already pales in comparison to that of blacks.

In addition to a harsher degree of industrial pollutants such as "smoke, soot, dust, fly ash, fumes, gases, stench, and carbon monoxide"[11] — which, as in the black ghetto, "if there is no wind or if breezes are blocked dispersal will not be adequate"[12] — the black ghetto contains a heavier preponderance or ratio, for instance, of rats and cockroaches. These creatures comprise an annoyance and "carry filth on their legs and bodies and may spread disease by polluting food. They destroy food and damage fabrics and bookbindings."[13] Blacks also are more exposed to accidents, the number four killer overall and number one in terms of working years lost by a community.[14]

> . . . poverty amid affluence, urban squalor and decay, and alienation of young people pollute the environment as much as garbage and industrial smoke. . . . A polluted political system which enables a handful of senile Southerners to dominate, through the seniority system, the law making body of a supposedly free people is a political system which finds racism, poverty, and poisoned rivers equally congenial in its scheme of things.[15]

Moreover, "the ecological perspective directs attention to various kinds of phenomena. These include, among others: (1) the psychological behavior of persons (singly and in groups of various kinds) . . ."[16] Crime, insanity and other forms of social pathology pollute the central city environment.[17]

> It would be a tragic mistake to consider only the material costs of slums. The great expansion of slums in recent times has become a most serious social problem because the areas demoralize a large segment of the urban population.[18]

AT THE HEART of this predicament, though not that alone, is the crowded conditions under which most black persons must live. Black spatial location and distribution not only expose blacks to more devastating and divergent environmental handicaps; they also affect black social and psychological adjustment in a number of subtle ways.

At certain levels of optimum density, flies in fruit jars have been known to die in droves and rats in crowded places to attack and eat their young and otherwise behave in strange and aberrant ways. Frantz Fanon and others have patiently charted the way in which oppressed peoples so crowded turn upon themselves when, for whatever reason, they feel too weak to fight their oppressor.[19] Blacks accordingly are relatively more prone to be victims, contrary to popular belief, of all major crimes of violence as well as a number of other forms. Although it is true that

10. Nathan Hare, "Can Negroes Survive a Nuclear War?" *Negro Digest,* May, 1963, p. 29.
11. Kenneth G. Bueche and Morris J. Schur, *Air Pollution Control,* Boulder: Bureau of Governmental Research and Service, University of Colorado, 1963, p. 5.
12. *Air Pollution*: The Facts. Christmas Seal Associates National Tuberculosis Association, 1967, p. 4.
13. Entomology Research Division, *Cockroaches,* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Leaflet No. 430, October, 1969, p. 2.
14. Ralph Thomlinson, *Population Dynamics: Causes and Consequences of World Demographic Change.* New York: Random House, 1965, p. 109.
15. The Editors, "Action for Survival," *The Progressive,* April, 1970, pp. 4, 5.
16. Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 8.
17. Egon Ernest Bergel, *Urban Sociology.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1955, p. 420.
18. *Ibid.,* p. 421.
19. Martin Oppenheimer, *The Urban Guerilla.* Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969, p. 64.

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blacks also exhibit higher rates of criminal activity, this merely stands in ecological succession to such groups as the Irish and Italians who in other eras inhabited the lower strata of the urban slums.[20] Only a minority of blacks are criminals; more are victims of crime. Due largely to existence in a criminally infested environment, blacks are about four times as likely to fall victim to forcible rape and robbery and about twice as likely to face burglary and aggravated assault.[21]

THE SOCIAL and psychological consequences of overcrowding are tangled and myriad in degree. To begin with, the more persons per unit of space the less important each individual there; also the noisier the place, other things equal, and the greater the probability of interpersonal conflict. Studies show that there is a greater hearing loss with age and that much of it is due to honking horns, loud engines and general traffic noise.[22] The importance of space to contentment also is suggested by the fact that in a survey of reasons for moving to the urban fringe, that of "less congested, more room" was twenty times more frequently given than the fact that the environment was "cleaner."[23]

The extent of black over-crowding may be seen in the fact that if population density were as great for the United States at large as it is for some blocks in Harlem, every person in the nation could live in one-half of New York City.[24] Using the yardstick of 1.5 persons per room, blacks are about four times as likely to be overcrowded as whites and they also are more often impelled to live "doubled up" with another family.[25] This necessity for doubling up imposes physical and psychological stress and affects self-perception and social behaviour.[26] A study of working class blacks in Chicago revealed that most of them, owing to a lack of space for beds, slept less than five hours in a given night.[27]

But the residential pollution of blacks rests not alone in overcrowding and the greater prevalence of unsightly and unsanitary debris and commercial units such as factories. The very housing afforded blacks is polluted.[28] This fact is crucial when we consider that the word "ecology" was derived by a German biologist from the word "aikos" meaning "house." A house, like the clothes we wear, is an extension of one's self. It may affect "privacy, child-rearing practices, and housekeeping or study habits."[29] Three of every ten dwellings inhabited by black families are dilapidated or without hot water, toilet or bath.[30] Many more are clearly fire hazards.

The shortage of adequate housing and money for rent produces high rates of black mobility which have far-reaching effects on the black social environment.[31] It means that blacks will disproportionately live among strangers for longer periods of time and, in the case of children, attend school in strange classrooms.

The household and neighborhood environments of blacks are perhaps of greater detriment to black health. The ability to

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20. Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family*, Washington, D.C. U. S. Government Printing Office, March, 1965, p. 25.
21. *Statistical Abstracts, op. cit.*, p. 140, Table 204.
22. Gary G. Smith, "Suggestions for the Schools," in Garrett De Bell, ed., *The Environmental Handbook*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.
23. Walter T. Martin, *The Rural-Urban Fringe*. Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1953, p. 37. Svend Riemer, "Maladjustment to the Family Home," *American Sociological Review*, October, 1945, pp. 642-648.
24. Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression*. New York: Meridian Books, 1968, p. 52.
25. Division of Housing Research, *The* 1950 *Housing Situation in Charts*, Washington, D.C.: Housing and Home Finance Agency, June, 1952.
26. Alvin L. Scorr, *Slums and Social Insecurity*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1966, pp. 17, 18. George Schermer
27. Allison Davis, "Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker," in William F. Whyte, ed., *Industry and Society*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1946, pp. 84-106.
28. Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
29. Scharr, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
30. *We the Black People, op. cit.* See also Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*, pp. 39, 40, 209.
31. Scharr, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

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control temperature and humidity at will —climate control—in homes can affect the incidence of respiratory infections. Its impact on comfort and productivity in all seasons is without doubt.[32] Health as a community resource is invaluable.

> . . . health is, aside from the personal comfort or pain accruing to a given individual, a natural resource for the black community or any other. Health not only affects demographic composition and change; it also affects the ability of individuals – and therefore the community – to play their social, political, and economic roles. Tied in with this assumption is the fact that the advance in health since the eighteenth century may be attributed mainly to improvements in the physical environment. . . . Not only are the rates of mortality higher for blacks by each cause of death; there are some significant variations in degree. Blacks also, of course, are subject to higher rates of illness. Much of the differential causes of mortality revolve around communicable diseases, the narrowing of which has been the major factor associated with the decline in differential mortality rates by race.[33]

Throughout a person's life, both his probability of dying and the type of death he meets may be in large part a product of the kind of community in which he lives.[34] It is no coincidence in this context that the high rates of death for blacks are in the area of communicable diseases and nonmotor-vehicle accidents, mainly in industry. Blacks are more than twice as likely to die from pneumonia and influenza.[35] In the case of syphillis the death rate for blacks is about four times as high. The same is true of tuberculosis and of dysentery; and blacks die more from whooping cough and other communicable diseases.[36] The effect of all of this for even those who do not die is relatively more activity limitations on the job than whites.[37]

The life expectancy of blacks is almost ten years less than that of whites, and black infant and maternal mortality rates are at the level which whites exhibited twenty years ago. Black women are more than four times as likely to die of childbirth, and black children are about three times as likely to succumb to post-natal mortality. This is because (among other factors such as dietary deficiencies) black births are about twelve times as likely to occur in a setting in which there is an "attendant not in a hospital and not specified."[38]

Moreover, poor nutrition during pregnancy and in early childhood can retard the brain's development. Illnesses and inadequate medical care combine with unsanitary conditions to effect physiological pollution. "The glazed eyes of children, legs that never grew straight, misshapen feet," and skin disorders are visible signs of this form of pollution.[39]

YET THERE IS ALIVE today a neo-Malthusian fashion which blames "population explosion" for the ecology crisis.[40] Actually, the problem is not so much one of population explosion as population implosion, or "the increasing concentration of peoples on relatively small proportions both of the world's and America's land surface."[41]

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32. Thomlinson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
33. Nathan Hare, "Does Separatism in Medical Care Offer Advantages for the Ghetto?" in John C. Norman, ed. *Medicine in the Ghetto.* Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969, p. 44.
34. Wilbur Zilensky, *A Prologue to Population Geography.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. 42.
35. Marshall B. Clinard, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, p. 42.
36. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
39. The President's Commission on Income Maintenance Programs, *Poverty Amid Plenty: The American Paradox,* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 17, 18.
49. Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.
41. Patricia Leavey Hodge and Philip M. Hauser, *The Challenge of America's Metropolitan Population Outlook*—1960 *to* 1985. Wash. D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968, p. 1. Two-thirds of the people in the United States now live in 212 metropolitan areas comprising only one-tenth of the total land area; 53 per cent are crowded into less than one per cent of the land area.

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There is both an inadequate distribution of land and people and, more significantly, of people and resources. The United States accounts for only one-fifteenth of the world's population but controls at least three-fifths of its resources.[42] Within the United States three-fourths of the corporate wealth is controlled by about one per cent of the people. Hence one man's overpopulation is not so much a problem to him as is another man's overeating.

There is apparently something within the conditions of poverty that impels people to produce a larger number of children. Although the black birth rate is higher than that of whites, that is not true among women married to college trained men, where white women bear more children than do black women.[43]

No solution to the ecology crisis can come without a fundamental change in the economics of America particularly with reference to blacks. Although some of the ecological differentials between blacks and whites spring directly from racism and hence defy economic correlations,[44] many aspects of the black environmental condition are associated with basic economics. Blacks are employed in the most undesirable or polluted occupations,[45] lagging far behind their educational attainment.[46] About two-thirds work in unskilled and semi-skilled industries.[47] Aggravating, and associated with, the occupational effects on the black environment is the consistently low family income of blacks which must generally support larger families. Since the turn of the century, the family income of blacks has remained about half that of whites. Six in ten of all black children must grow up in poor families.[48] The figure is even higher for black families with a female head.[49] Unemployment is continually at least twice as high for blacks and has been shown to affect the rate of illegitimacy and marital separation, leaving many black families fatherless.[50]

In addition to unemployment, the same technology which defaces the general society also displaces a disproportionate number of blacks occupationally, into the throes of underemployment. At the same time, the black mother is more likely to be taken out of the home environment to work.[51] Today the war in Vietnam continues to send many of the most vibrant black males disproportionately to die in a foreign land in battle with fellow peoples of oppression. This means that five or ten years from now, assuming that blacks do not reject monogamy, an already depleted black sex ratio will drop considerably and there will exist even a greater shortage of young black males for black women to marry. The result will be increased marital and family disorganization.

Thus the reformist solutions tendered by the current ecology movement emerge as somewhat ludicrous from the black perspective. For instance, automobiles are generally regarded to be the major source of air pollution.[52] This is compounded in the case of blacks by the relatively smaller space in which they must live and drive amid traffic congestion and junked cars. On top of this, white commuters from the suburbs and the outer limits of the central city drive into the central city for work or

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42. Rienow and Rienow, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
43. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*
44. Taeuber and Taeuber, *op cit.* Robert H. Connery, ed. *Urban Riots: Violence and Change.* New York: Vintage Books, 1969, p. 112.
45. Scharr, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69. Bureau of the Census. *Nonwhite Population by Race*, PC(2)-1C, Table 39.
46. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
47. John Sirjamaki, *The Sociology of Cities*, New York: Random House, 1964, p. 247.
48. Schermer Associates, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 34. President's Commission, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 30. *Statistical Abstracts, op. cit.*, p. 324, p. 477.
49. Nathaniel Keith, Housing America's Low—and Moderate—Income Families, Wash., D.C.; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968, pp. 1, 2.
50. Office of Policy Planning and Research, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
51. President's Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
52. Ralph Nader, "The Profits in Pollution," *Progressive*, April, 1970, p. 19. Kenneth P. Cantor, "Warning: The Automobile is Dangerous . . .", in Garrett De Bell, *op. cit.*, pp. 201, 202. Gary G. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

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recreation and social contacts, polluting the black environment further. In every region of the country there has been a direct parallel between the increase in the number of cars and the growth of the suburban and fringe population.[53] Although automobile manufacturers are the chief profiteers, the contradiction of alien automobile polluters who daily invade and "foul the nest" of black urban residents remains.

Some of these commuters are absentee landlords who prevail as "ghetto litterbugs" by way of corrupt and negligent housing practices. Thus blacks suffer the predicament wherein the colonizer milks dry the resources and labor of the colonized to develop and improve his own habitat while leaving that of the colonized starkly "underdeveloped."

> The problems of the ghetto are comparable to a colonized country. Middle city businesses and housing are owned and taxed by downtown and nothing is given in return except renewal programs that are determined by the needs of foreign interests and the transportation network that feeds downtown. . . . The job market is determined by the needs of foreign business geared to producing goods that middle city ghetto dewellers can't afford and often don't want.[54]

THE REAL SOLUTION to the environmental crisis is the decolonization of the black race. Blacks in the United States number more than 25,000,000 people, comprising a kidnapped and captive nation surpassed in size by only twenty other nations in the entire world. It is necessary for blacks to achieve self-determination, acquiring a full black government and a multi-billion dollar budget so that blacks can better solve the more serious environmental crises of blacks. To do so blacks must challenge and confront the very foundations of American society. In so doing we shall correct that majority which appears to believe that the solution lies in decorating the earth's landscape and in shooting at the moon.

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53. Cantor, *op. cit.*, p. 201. William E. Cole, *Urban Society*, Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1958, p. 167.
54. Berkeley People's Architecture, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

These streets stretch from one end of America to the other and connect like a maze from which very few can fully escape. Despair sits on this country in most places like a charm, but there is a special gray death that loiters in the streets of an urban Negro slum. And the men who walk those streets, tracing and retracing their steps to some hopeless job or a pitiful rooming house or apartment or furnished room, sometimes stagger under the weight of that gray, humiliated because it is not even 'real.'

Sometimes walking along among the ruined shacks and lives of the worst Harlem slum, there is a feeling that just around the next corner you'll find yourself in South Chicago or South Philadelphia, maybe even Newark's Third Ward. In these places, life, and its possibility, has been distorted almost identically. And the distortion is as old as its sources: the fear, frustration, and hatred that Negroes have always been heir to in America. It is just that in the cities, which were once the black man's twentieth century Jordan, promise is a dying bitch with rotting eyes. And the stink of her dying is a deadly killing fume.

LE ROI JONES, Home

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