

Writing About Human Struggles

Sociology Professor Revisits Black Nationalism

by Jennifer Marciano

Slavery. Black nationalism. Class struggle. These are just a few of the key terms used in a new book examining the plight of African Americans.

Dr. Rod Bush of the St. John's College sociology department recently published the book, "We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century," in which he outlines the relationship between the social movements within the black community in the United States and the world, and he seeks to resolve the misconceptions commonly held by many Americans.

The book partly blames the status of American blacks today on what it calls two failures — first, of the civil rights movement, and second, of its leaders' "faith in universal liberalism." That faith held that racism, as "a moribund ideology" and "holdover from slavery," would "wither away." Although the civil rights movement overturned legal discrimination in the form of segregation, and deligitimized "overt discrimination," it failed to "meaningfully change the lives of the masses of African Americans outside the South," Dr. Bush writes.

What remained, he says, is "structural" or "institutional racism," which means the "arrangements and practices in our basic social institutions" that favor some groups over others.

Although the discrimination is not straightforward but often indirect, it is a problem, affecting the black working class much more than the black middle class, Dr. Bush said. The affected people include the marginalized — those who are socially isolated and relegated to lower-quality schools, not through any fault of their own but simply because of their location in poor, segregated communities. It is extremely difficult to make do, he said, when resources are kept out of reach. Deprivation leads only to more trouble.

Ideological racism, which assumes the inferiority of black people, reinforces the structural racism and is laden with stereotypes, Dr. Bush said in an interview.

"One thing I put in the beginning of my book is a quote from Jesse Jackson which reads, 'There is nothing more painful for me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start to think about robbery and then look around and see it's somebody

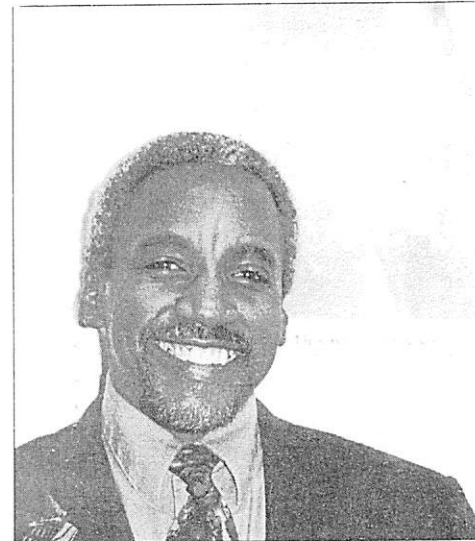
white and feel relieved. How humiliating.'"

This suggests that common stereotypes about blacks are not only held in the minds of whites and other races — but also among some blacks. There is much racial conflict within society which must be eradicated, Dr. Bush said.

"You watch the news every

his book is intended not only for activists of the 60s, to help them grapple with this history, but also for members of the general public who have been misled or are not knowledgeable about the topic.

"Most people who are outside the black community don't really understand," Dr. Bush said. "They look at the people who are



Dr. Rod Bush

night and there is a black man in handcuffs — people who should know better have been conditioned by this ideology," he added.

He said American society needs education and interaction to overcome this problem, which must change soon. Dr. Bush said he is profoundly optimistic that people can change. They have much potential to do good and be kind and loving toward one another he said.

In his book he writes that the United States needs "a social revolution of profound proportions" to solve the problems of black people today. He says he does mean a Leninist-style revolution but "a social transformation that not only redistributes power but democratizes it; empowers ordinary people to participate in and help determine the affairs of state, economy and society; challenges the law of value that impels all production to center ultimately on the profit motive; establishes a cooperative commonwealth in which production for human needs takes priority over production for exchange."

He said in the interview that

put forth by the mass media as spokespeople for the black community — such as Louis Farrakhan and Khalid Abdul Muhammad."

Dr. Bush explained this is a one-sided view — these people represent only a part of black nationalist thinking.

In the 20th century the black nationalist movement has served primarily as a vehicle in the quest for equality of the black working class. "An important distinction within the movement is that it is not necessarily about being anti-white but definitely anti-racist," Dr. Bush said. "People like Farrakhan make white people believe that black nationalists are out to get them." He noted that Minister Farrakhan became a media phenomenon at precisely the same time that Jesse Jackson was reaching out to whites and others with a call for a Rainbow Coalition.

Dr. Bush does not consider himself to be a black nationalist but is more aligned with class-conscious men and women like Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Ella Baker, Huey P.

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English Professor Helps Reveal The Poetry of Medicine

by Angela Ambrosini

Almost every physician struggles with life and death issues, symptoms of which are not necessarily found in a standard medical dictionary.

For contemporary physician-poets, discovering a softer side to their profession is the subject of a newly released book "Blood & Bone — Poems by Physicians," edited by Dr. Angela Belli, a St. John's University professor of English, and Dr. Jack Coulehan, director of the Institute for Medicine in Contemporary Society and professor of medicine and preventive medicine at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Drs. Belli and Coulehan collected a series of poems written by over 50 different medical doctors examining their hardships and relationships with their patients.

The forward to their book, written by Dr. Edmund D. Pellegrino, John Carroll Professor of Medicine and Medical Ethics at the Center for Clinical Bioethics at Georgetown University, explains the connection between poetry and medi-

cine. "The poet's 'sweet words' themselves may even heal — if not the patient, then the poet," Dr. Pellegrino writes. He describes poetry as a release of energy and emotions for everyone.

Dr. Belli, who has written many articles about the connection between literature and medicine, believes, from her own personal experiences, that the feelings between a doctor and a patient are often antagonistic.

Being an educated person with a college degree does not prepare anyone for real life issues when faced with important medical decisions, Dr. Belli said in an interview. "After being in an accident," Dr. Belli said, "it was like a culture shock for me. Nothing in my formal training prepared me for that experience."

Comparing and connecting the two worlds, Dr. Belli found an interest in the uniformity of both medicine and poetry and began the collection of "Blood & Bone."

Understanding human nature is a gift that some physicians

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Vincentian Convocation Celebrates Founders Week

by Scott A. Rosen

The lines that have divided the communities of the inner cities and the suburbs for decades remain intact today. This was the message that the Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J., shared with a large audience at last month's Vincentian Convocation.

Father Hollenbach says the movement towards racial tolerance is not enough. In his opinion things will not change until middle-class America and lower-class African-Americans learn to overcome their differences and form one community.

The board of trustees of St. John's University and the Rev. Donald J. Harrington, C.M., the president of the University, were hosts of the convocation, during Founders Week, on Thursday, Jan. 28.

The highlight of the evening was the Vincentian Chair of Social Justice Lecture for 1999, delivered by Father Hollenbach, a past Margaret O'Brien Award winner, the author of four books and a professor in the department of theology at Boston College.

Father Hollenbach, who received a degree of doctor of humane letters at the convocation, emphasized that all must work together to combat the growing problems caused by the intolerance of racial differences.



Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J. (left) received an honorary Doctor of Human Letters.

"To love God, with all of our hearts," Father Hollenbach said, "we must love all of our neighbors first." Love is different from tolerance, he said, and tolerance is simply not enough. He cited the "growing divisions between the communities of the white suburbs and the African-American-populated inner cities."

Father Hollenbach spoke of tuning in the news at night and seeing the reports of gang violence and drive-by shootings. "I know this makes it difficult" to view residents of these communities as neighbors, he said, "and hard to know what in fact a common good means."

He disagreed, however, with

those who put all the blame on this "so-called cultural war." He said the problems of poor urban African-Americans such as gang violence, drugs and single parenthood are partially the result of intolerance.

"The pursuit of community in middle-class America often separates us more," Father Hollenbach said. "In doing this we wind up building walls and moats between the inner cities and the suburbs, in the form of malls and zoning laws." He said this does nothing except gate in the privileged and keep out those who are "different and worse off."

Father Hollenbach did not focus on the intentions behind

the actions but the results. Despite moves to combat racism, Father Hollenbach said, inner-city residents continue to suffer the effects of intolerance.

"They simply have not benefited from racial tolerance; they get marginalized and fall through the society's cracks," he said. "The role of race continues to play a significant role in the form of lesser wages, radical differences in the qualities of schools and lesser acceptance in the work place. And it is this unemployment that eventually leads people to give up, and the drug usage and crime rates then come into play."

At the convocation the Vincentian Mission Award was presented to Monica Spiro-Farrell, an assistant dean of St. Vincent's College on the Staten Island campus.

The St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Medal was presented to Eileen M. White, the special counsel to the Archdiocese of New York.

The St. Vincent dePaul Medal was awarded to Neil Sheehan, a Catholic layman and the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Outreach Project, located in Richmond Hill, Queens. The degree of doctor of divinity was bestowed on the Rev. John J. Lawlor, C.M., pastor of Our Lady of the Valley Parish in Gloversville, S.C.

BREYER

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During this time it listens to 14 weeks of oral arguments, two weeks each month, and decides which cases to hear. On average, the court is asked to hear 7,000 to 8,000 cases a year, but only about 100 are accepted.

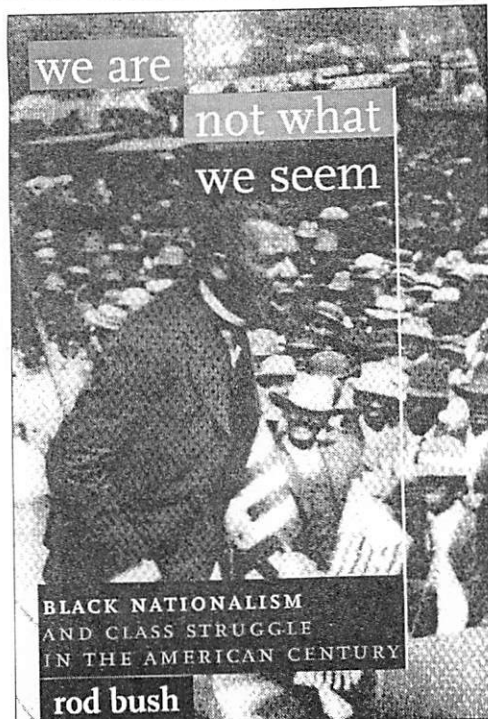
"We are not a court whose job it is primarily to iron out mistakes," Justice Breyer said. "Our job is to decide where lower courts have come to different conclusions about the same matter of federal law, including the Constitution."

He reminded his audience that petitioners who ask to be heard by the Supreme Court have already had their trial and opportunity to appeal — two appeals in some cases.

The 30 law clerks employed by the court are responsible for reading all the cases that are sent. Every once in a while, Justice Breyer said, a clerk will find "the needle in the haystack" — a case so unusual that it deserves recognition.

Justice Breyer is a graduate of Stanford, Oxford University and the Harvard Law School. He was articles editor of the Harvard Law Review, and he served as law clerk to Justice Arthur J. Goldberg in 1964 and 1965.

He taught law at Harvard from 1967 to 1980 and served on the U.S. Court of Appeals in Boston before being nominated to the Supreme Court by President Clinton in 1994.



DR. BUSH

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Newton, Angela Davis and the like.

There have been two approaches in the minds of some thinkers, he said. One is to reach full equality and to be integrated into society; the other is to be autonomous and build strength internally within the black community.

"If we have to be free by being

"I am interested in human emancipation. That is why I addressed these issues."

autonomous — fine, but we don't live alone," Dr. Bush said. He added that all people should deal with others with respect, not cynicism. "I don't want to be a part of the exploitation or oppression of anyone."

Major problems face African Americans in today's society and prevent them from achieving full equality, the most prevalent being racism. Black people have to deal with structural racism — the exclusion of black people from opportunities in this socie-

ty. Dr. Bush said both structural racism and ideological racism are key components of the cultural framework of historical capitalism.

In the 1960s, according to Dr. Bush, the discussions about the underclass focused on the idea that the poor could do nothing and had no motivation, were apathetic and were hopeless. When the civil rights movement hit, he said, the poor stood up and gal-

vanized other movements.

Dr. Bush discusses the civil rights movement at length and describes it as a general rise of the people on the bottom who asserted their dignity and right to a decent life, a right to hold their heads up. This had a tremendous impact on everyone else.

"That's why I have so much faith in what could happen," Dr. Bush said.

The book contains history that the general public may not know. Dr. Bush referred to J. Edgar

Hoover, the head of the FBI, who he said set out to destroy the civil rights movement in 1963.

In the 1960s some among the American elite viewed the egalitarian premises of the civil rights movement as a dangerous infection that might spread to other groups in the population, who were sympathetic or potentially sympathetic to the plight of blacks, Dr. Bush said. Blacks were blamed for crimes, for example, to prevent the various sections of society from coming together, he said.

Dr. Bush also discusses the assassination of Malcolm X and explains the nature of the involvement by Minister Farrakhan. Differences and misconceptions about the leaders of each of the parties are fleshed out in the chapters of his book.

"I didn't write this book because I am interested in gaining tenure," Dr. Bush said. "I am interested in human emancipation. That is why I addressed these issues."

He said he plans five to six additional books elaborating on three themes in "We Are Not What We Seem."