

Bill Cosby blames parents for US society's ills

Lawrence Porter
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A major controversy has arisen over public comments made by the well-known African-American comedian Bill Cosby, whose remarks over the past several weeks have elicited commentaries in virtually every major newspaper in the US.

Cosby has declared that the principal responsibility for the high incarceration rate of black youth, as well as the problems of illiteracy and the 50 percent dropout rate of black high school students, lies with the parents.

On May 17, Cosby was one of the principal speakers at a gala at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling banning segregation in the public schools, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In his speech, Cosby denounced low-income black parents, stating, "People marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education, and now you have these knuckleheads walking around.... The lower economic people are not holding up their end of the deal. These people are not parenting."

Cosby continued: "I am talking about these people who cry when their son is standing there in an orange suit [i.e., prison garb]. Where were you when he was two? Where were you when he was twelve? Where were you when he was eighteen, and how come you didn't know that he had a pistol? And where is his father?"

Both in his speech and in a subsequent column, published in the *Detroit News* on June 13, Cosby placed the responsibility for the worsening and increasingly desperate conditions caused by poverty on parents who have allegedly failed to pay sufficient attention to their children.

While he correctly pointed out that many of the ills facing poor black families stem from a lack of education, and noted the correlation between inadequate education and early death, substance abuse and violence, he prescribed an individual, rather than a social, solution to these problems.

What was needed, said Cosby, was "parent power!" He elaborated: "Proper education has to begin at home.... We don't need another federal commission to study the problem. Scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and John Hope Franklin and activists such as Dorothy I. Height have already written eloquently on the subject. What we need now is parents sitting down with children, overseeing homework, sending children off to school in the morning well fed, rested, and ready to learn."

There was a time, some 50 years ago, when Mr. Cosby began his career, when the now highly successful and wealthy comedian was keenly aware—as a result of personal experience, acquaintance with prominent figures in the civil rights movement, and the prevailing atmosphere of social activism and political debate—of the social

and economic roots of illiteracy, violence, petty crime, substance abuse and the other ills that inevitably accompany poverty and the cultural backwardness and despair that poverty breeds.

After all, Cosby grew up in a working class district of Philadelphia. He played in the projects with his friends Fat Albert and Dumb Donald, figures who became celebrated characters in his early comedy skits. He has, however, become a rich man since then, and apparently has forgotten that the conditions facing the working class have little in common with the comfortable life of Dr. Huxtable, the character he portrayed on his long-running television series, "The Cosby Show."

The vast majority of black people he is addressing do not lead lives of upper-middle-class privilege and economic security. They are working people, many of whom face substandard conditions, often struggling to raise a family on less than poverty wages. Their children generally attend schools that are underfunded and understaffed. In predominantly black communities in cities across the US, the public schools are in a state of desperate disrepair.

Cosby cites W.E.B. DuBois to support his argument that the problem lies with African-American parents, but DuBois, a sociologist who studied the conditions of American blacks in the late 19th century, concluded that the roots of the problems facing African-Americans were social, not individual. DuBois eventually became a socialist, and argued that racial oppression was bound up with class exploitation and could be overcome only through the development of a movement for fundamental social change directed against the capitalist system itself.

Whether Mr. Cosby likes it or not, he himself is the beneficiary of political decisions made by the ruling class in America to create a black upper-middle-class elite. Cosby is not a politician or political scientist. However, he doesn't need a profound knowledge of history to recognize that he enjoys a level of wealth of which a black comedian would never have dreamed 50 years ago.

Like a considerable section of the leadership of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and the protest generation of the 1960s, Cosby has been won to capitalism. In the intervening years, an entire generation of upwardly mobile blacks has sought consciously to separate itself from the broad mass of oppressed and working class poor, and turn its back on the social devastation they confront.

In 1964, in his State of the Union address, President Lyndon Johnson stated, "this administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America." Today, capitalism no longer even acknowledges the vast social problems facing the majority of the population, especially the poorest layers.

Today, liberals and Democratic leaders echo the views of the right wing by preaching the gospel of “individual responsibility,” or remain silent while both parties destroy what remains of the tenuous social safety net established in previous decades.

What has happened in the 50 years since the *Brown* ruling? The US Census confirms that for tens of millions of people in the US, conditions today are worse than they were in 1950.

Between 1950 and 1978, the final period of the post-war boom, the poorest 20 percent saw a 138 percent increase in family income, while the top 20 percent had a 99 percent increase. Income inequality actually decreased during this period.

However, between 1978 and 1994, this trend was reversed, with the incomes of the poorest 20 percent declining 17 percent while those of the wealthiest 20 percent increased by 18 percent. In 2002, 1 of every 10 US citizens—a total of 34.6 million people—lived below the official poverty level. This figure rose by nearly 2 million between 2001 and 2002. The number living in severe poverty increased from 13.1 million to 14.2 million (see <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2003/cb03-153.html>).

The black poverty rate was 24.1 percent, affecting a staggering total of 8.6 million African-Americans.

Moreover, as is well known, the real poverty rate is at least double the official figure, which vastly underestimates the actual level of economic distress in order to conceal the prevalence of hunger, homelessness, disease and other social ills, and reduce government outlays for desperately needed benefits.

Under these conditions, a sizable section of America’s poor has become lumpenized. But this disturbing development cannot be laid at the feet of individual parents, no more than the prevalence of physical diseases such as cancer can be blamed on individuals. Social backwardness is inevitable in a society that enforces conditions of brutal oppression and poverty.

Significantly, one of Cosby’s strongest supporters is the leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Kweisi Mfume. Mr. Mfume also attended the gala event, and after Cosby spoke, gave him a hug and told him he agreed with most of what he had to say. Mfume is a former Democratic congressman who presides over an organization that heavily promotes the Democratic Party.

If Cosby was determined to improve the conditions facing black youth, why didn’t he turn to Mfume and demand that he explain why he and his organization remain tied to a party that bears direct responsibility for the conditions facing the poor?

Unlike Dr. Martin Luther King, who opposed President Johnson on the Vietnam war, none of the present leaders of the established civil rights organizations are prepared to challenge the political forces that are responsible for the social crisis, attacking instead those who are the victims of government decisions and are least able to defend themselves.

The degeneration of the social layers represented by Cosby and Mfume is the culmination of an entire social process—the collapse of liberalism and, as part of this phenomenon, the repudiation of the democratic and egalitarian positions once espoused by the civil rights movement. Following the death of King, his erstwhile followers—Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and others—abandoned the struggle to unite African-Americans with the struggles of the

working class, and its implicit challenge to the profit system. Instead, the civil rights movement turned in a legalistic, pro-capitalist and reactionary direction.

One of the forms this took was the promotion of various strains of black nationalist ideology, the political essence of which was the striving for privileges for a small black elite. For this layer, the most important demand has been affirmative action, a policy that abandons any struggle for equality in favor of appeals to the American ruling elite for set-asides and perks that benefit only a narrow layer of African-Americans.

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, the black professor at Harvard University, has said “it was naïve” for blacks to believe affirmative action would move the entire black community forward. “You see,” he said, “we were all in the same class before the law under segregation. But once the law is lifted, class distinctions which have always [been a part of] the African-American community, as every black person knows, came to the fore.”

The growth of income disparities among blacks has been accompanied by a shift in social outlook. While the conditions of black workers have deteriorated dramatically, the privileged middle class among African-Americans, the primary beneficiary of affirmative action programs, has prospered.

E. Franklin Frazier, the former sociology professor at Howard University, stated in his 1950s study of the black middle class, entitled *The Black Bourgeoisie*, that the black middle class has always sought to separate itself from the poor, and has been as disdainful in its attitude toward poor blacks as the white elite has been toward poor whites.

Cosby’s rise to success was characterized by a concern for presenting “positive images” of blacks—such as his Huxtable character in “The Cosby Show.” This is a fixation that Frazier has associated with the black middle class, which he believes feels itself driven to create certain “myths.” The myth in this case is the depiction of the average black family as highly educated and successful, a far cry from the real-life experience of black working-class families struggling to make ends meet.

Cosby acknowledges that there are serious problems facing poor black families in America. However, his disparaging attitude toward poor blacks and his belittling of any broad social or political dimension to these problems reflect the “problems” of an African-American elite—a social layer that has made its peace with American capitalism in return for money, fame and “respectability.”



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