2

A Frame of Reference for Black Politics

Mack H. Jones

SINCE DAVID EASTON'S eloquent argument two decades ago on the need for a conceptual framework to guide research in political science,[1] scholars in the field have been bombarded with theories, approaches, conceptual schemes, and—as one wag has aptly put it—"towards . . ." literature.[2] In the meantime, as the theoretical projectiles collect dust, disturbed only by the new approaches whistling by, research has continued along the atheoretical trail of institutional history.[3] Nowhere is this more evident than in the rapidly growing subfield of black politics. Much of what is done proceeds in an atheoretical manner, and when a theoretical network is evident, it is likely to be one with limited relevance for the black political experience.

The melting-pot theory of American pluralism seems to be the frame of reference most commonly used for analyzing and interpreting the black political experience in America,[4] although attempts have been made recently to carry over the modernizing traditional-systems model from the field of comparative politics.[5] In both instances, the researcher looks not to the black political experience for guidance in developing his conceptual scheme, but rather to the political experiences of other people. Such approaches posit a level of isomorphism between the black political experience and the experience of other groups which is denied by even a cursory examination.[6]

A frame of reference for black politics should not begin with superficial comparisons of blacks and other ethnic minorities in this country or elsewhere, because such an approach inevitably degenerates into norma-

Revised from a paper originally presented at the 1969 meeting of the Southern Political Science Association. Reprinted by permission of the author.

tive reformist speculation around the question of what can be done to elevate blacks to the position occupied by the group with which they are being compared. This, in turn, leads to the establishment of a linear model of ethnic or out-group politics and a Procrustean forcing of the black political experience into the contrived model, and in the process obfuscating, if not eliminating outright, the crucial variables in the black political experience. In developing a frame of reference for black politics, one should begin by searching for those factors which are unique to the black political experience, for this is the information which will facilitate our understanding of blacks in the American political system.

Joseph Roucek, some time ago, in an attempt to raise the study of the "race problem"[7] above normative reformist speculation, argued that the black-white problem should be looked upon simply as a question of power relations:

> Majority-minority relationships are but another aspect of the universal struggle for power *modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place on the local scene.*[8] (Emphasis added.)

This, of course, is a restatement of the ageless power theory and therefore nothing new, and, as its many critics assert, power theory does not explain very much. What it does and wherein its contribution lies is to point us in the right direction.

The important phrase of Roucek's proposition is "modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place on the local scene." Accepting this proposition, it follows logically that black politics should be thought of as a manifestation of one dimension or extension of the universal struggle for power. The immediately preceding proposition accepted, the question becomes what are the conditions which modify the struggle on the local scene? Or, to put it differently, what are the factors which distinguish those activities subsumed under the rubric *black politics* from all the other power struggles occurring simultaneously and interdependently? Whatever these factors are, they distill the essence of the black political experience and hence ought to serve as the orienting concepts for a frame of reference.

What, then, are the modifying conditions? A recent attempt by Blalock to establish a set of empirical propositions explaining minority-group problems may be instructive at this point.[9] After considerable preliminaries, he advances the following:

> GENERAL PROPOSITION: Men in superordinate positions act in such a manner as to preserve their position.
>
> SPECIFIED CONDITION: In the United States, whites generally are in superordinate positions vis-à-vis Negroes.

> LOWER ORDER PROPOSITION: In the United States, whites act toward Negroes in such a manner as to preserve their positions.[10]

While Blalock's propositions may appear to be commonplace or even trivial, the value in repeating them here may be demonstrated by observing that they are not reflected in many—perhaps a majority—of scholarly works dealing with the black experience.

Juxtaposing the contributions of Roucek and Blalock, we arrive at the conclusion that what we have is essentially a power struggle between blacks and whites, with the latter trying to maintain their superordinate position vis-à-vis the former. Since the political system is the arena in which societal conflicts are definitively resolved, black politics should be thought of as the manifestation of the power struggle between these two groups. However, we need to add one other specifying condition to further distinguish black politics from other extensions of the universal power struggle. That condition is the stipulation that the ideological justification for the superordination of whites is the institutionalized belief in the inherent superiority of that group.[11] This condition cannot be overemphasized. It says that it is not their late arrival, their patterns of migration, their numerical strength, nor their cultural patterns which, beginning with Jamestown and continuing to the present, have underlain the differential treatment of blacks; it says further that any attempt to explain the black political experience in terms of any one or any combination of these will be insufficient.

Anticipating the argument that it is too simplistic to say that black politics is a struggle between whites lined up on one side holding on to the coveted values of society and blacks trying to reverse the circumstances, let me hasten to point out that I fully understand (and will discuss below) that within both communities there are patterns of activity tending toward various goals. Nevertheless, the notion that the superordinate group, in the final analysis, seeks to maintain its position, as we shall demonstrate shortly, is useful.

So far I have argued that black politics should be thought of as an extension of the universal power struggle, modified only by the condition that whites occupy superordinate positions vis-à-vis blacks, that this position is based upon the institutionalized belief in the superiority of whites, and that whites act in a manner that will preserve their superordinate position. The orienting concepts, and therefore the frame of reference for black politics, must grow out of the above propositions. I will argue in the following paragraphs that a useful frame of reference may be constructed by using group theory as defined by Hagan[12] and by utilizing the terms of dominant and submissive groups as orienting concepts.

Why the group concept? Reduced to bare essentials, Hagan's thesis is that the optimum orienting concept for political science is *the group*, defined as *an activity of human beings*. Societal values are authoritatively allocated through the clashing of an infinite number of goal-directed patterns of activity. A frame of reference utilizing this nonreified notion of group is especially appropriate for studying black politics, because it is comprehensive enough to include all factors which are involved in the black political experience. Comprehensiveness is especially important when one wishes to study the politics of a people who are either on the periphery or outside the formal political structures, because traditional or more formalistic schemes of analysis—usually in-group oriented—may leave out much that is important.

To amplify this point, most of the serious works dealing with the black political experience may be best described as studies of leadership. Such works give disproportionate attention to the points at which black political activity intersects with the formal and legitimate structures in the political system. In the process, much of the fullness of black political activity, especially the clash of conflicting patterns of activity within the black community and the patterns of activity tending toward goals declared illegitimate by the cultural component of the American political system, is lost.[13] It is probably for this reason that none of the numerous leadership and community studies anticipated the black rebellions of the sixties. Further, given the recruitment pattern of black leadership—in which the white community has a disproportionate voice—such studies may be not only incomplete, but misleading as well. The group concept guards against unwarranted exclusiveness by telling us that we are concerned with all activity having impact on the allocation of the values involved in the black-white power struggle.

With the breadth of the area of inquiry established, it now becomes necessary to formulate guidelines or points of reference to facilitate the identification and interpretation of activities relevant to the black political experience. The concepts of dominant and submissive groups will serve our purpose.

The concepts of dominant and submissive groups distill the essence of the black political experience and give us an analytical tool which will allow us to isolate, categorize, and interpret the important variables in the black political experience. I am using the terms *dominant and submissive group* in much the same fashion as Wirth used *dominant-minority relations*. The appellation *submissive* is being used for two reasons. First, it indicates more clearly the psychological relationship between the two groups; and second, it guards against the inevitable confusion which occurs when the

"minority" group is numerically in the majority.

The submissive group in the context of the American political system is a group of people who, because of their African ancestry are singled out from the other Americans for differential and unequal treatment. The justification for such treatment, de facto if not de jure, is the widely held belief in the inherent inferiority of persons of such ancestry. Moreover, this belief has been institutionalized and is subscribed to not only by members of the dominant group, but by members of the submissive group as well.[14] The dominant group is the residual category consisting primarily of persons of European ancestry. Its members enjoy higher status and greater privileges than members of the submissive group.

Dominant-submissive group situations may take varied forms ranging along a continuum beginning with a static situation in which both groups share strong feelings of legitimacy about the situation and therefore exhibit supportive behavior. The continuum, at the other pole, may be characterized by a situation in which members of the submissive group deny the legitimacy of the system and threaten to use and/or do use whatever means they deem necessary to accelerate the demise of the existing order. Thus, the first extreme may be represented by a system of tranquil slavery or a rigid caste system, while the other would involve out-and-out warfare between the two communities. Like all ideal types, these two extremes will rarely be found. Most dominant-submissive-group situations will be found somewhere between the two. The American pattern has been a fluid one, beginning somewhere near the first extreme and moving steadily, if slowly, toward the second.

At this point the questions may be legitimately raised, How do these concepts facilitate our understanding of black politics? How do they serve as orienting concepts? Let us deal with these questions. Students of dominant-submissive-group situations have observed that historically—across time and cultures—dominant groups have pursued certain policies in order to maintain their superordinate position vis-à-vis their submissive counterpart.[15] Similarly, submissive groups have availed themselves of certain policies in order to maximize their position. Or, to put it in group language, historically we have observed within dominant groups goal-directed patterns of activity designed to insure the superordinate position of the dominant groups; and at the same time within submissive groups we have observed patterns of activity designed to alter the situations. These concepts become useful to us because they provide categories for a rudimentary taxonomy. We can take the historically developed categories of activities found in dominant-submissive-group situations and apply them to observable patterns in the contemporary American dominant-submissive-group situation. To the extent that the categories

are useful, we can move to the next stage of inquiry—searching for regularities in the interplay of these factors. To the extent that they are not present, and therefore not useful, the historically observed categories ought to put in sharp relief the differences between them and the patterns of activity in the contemporary American dominant-submissive-group situation. This in itself should bring us nearer to the point where we can advance explanatory propositions about the black political presence in the United States.

Figure 2:1 lists the patterns of activity which have been observed across time and cultures in dominant-submissive-group situations. Directional arrows are used to convey the notion that within each group participants in the several goal-directed patterns of activity seek, as an intermediate step, to have their policy orientations accepted as the goal of their respective groups, and ultimately as the authoritative policy of the society. At the same time, factions or those engaging in particular patterns of activity try to influence the disposition of the patterns in the opposite community in a fashion consistent with their policy positions. Thus, there are four dimensions to the dominant-submissive-group model. The first two involve intrafactional competition in each of the communities, the third involves competition across group lines, and the fourth is the synthesis of the other three. The synthesis, of course, is effected in the authoritative policy decisions. That dominant-submissive-group situations have these four dimensions is worth keeping in mind as we turn to the question of its utility in understanding the black political experience in America.

Even a cursory investigation of American history indicates that patterns of activity tending toward the goals posited by the general model have been factors in the black political experience. The dominant group, during the formative years of the republic, pursued, almost categorically, a policy of continued subjugation. Following the Civil War the basic policy orientation of the dominant group exhibited three distinct patterns: continued subjugation, as indicated by restrictive statutes in many states and by paramilitary terror in both North and South; legal protection of members of the submissive group, as evidenced by the Civil War amendments; and population transfer, as demonstrated by the agitation to expel blacks to colonial enclaves. The contemporary dominant-submissive-group situation, as Figure 2:2 indicates, is characterized by several patterns of activity coinciding with the historically observed ones.

In the dominant group, cultural assimilation, the inferred goal of Pattern D1, is the most discussed policy orientation. The term *cultural assimilation* is used instead of unqualified *assimilation* because the widely held

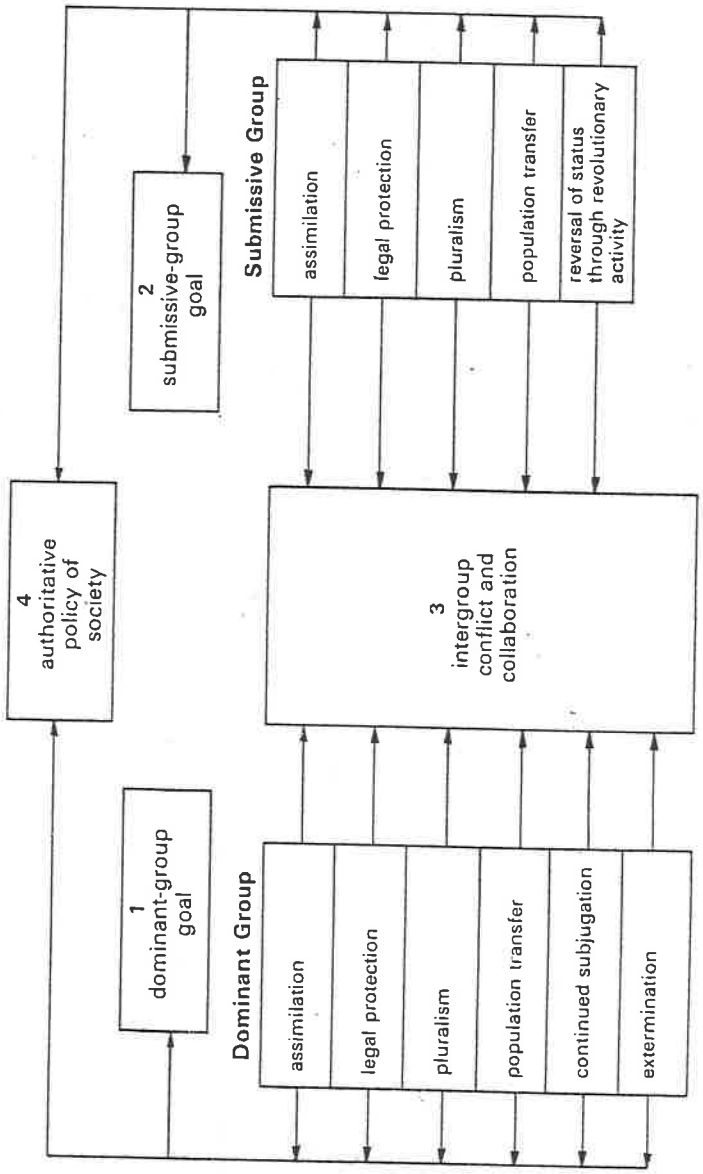

FIGURE 2:1. Goal-directed patterns of activity in general dominant-submissive-group situations. As the directional arrows indicate, each pattern of activity seeks to have its policy orientation accepted as the goal of its own group and of the society at large. At the same time, each pattern attempts to influence patterns across group lines in a manner consistent with its goals.

notion of white supremacy and its logical corollary, taboo against interracial sex, preclude any real assimilationist policy. Nevertheless, the official or acknowledged policy orientation of D1, which includes the major institutions of American life, such as churches, educational institutions, and industrial and commercial corporations, as well as scores of persons of high status and prestige, is a form of cultural assimilation.

Pattern D2, which tends toward legal protection and maintenance of white supremacy through separatism, subsumes individuals and reified groups who, while advocating minimal legal guarantees for members of the submissive group, oppose, but may grudgingly accept, civil-rights statutes or ordinances, once all legal and quasi-legal obstructionist ploys have been exhausted.

The third pattern in the dominant community includes the activity of individuals and reified groups who proclaim, without inhibition, their belief that whites are the natural masters of blacks and who categorically oppose movements toward sociopolitical equality for members of the submissive group. The fourth pattern, which tends toward extermination, is distinguished from D3 primarily by its willingness, if not alacrity, to use force to thwart advancement of the submissive group.

It should be noticed that the listing and brief discussion of observable tendencies in the dominant group do not include patterns tending toward a policy of population transfer. This is not because such a pattern is not observable but because population transfer does not appear to be the primary goal of any pattern of activity. It appears, however, in the policy orientations of all the patterns from D2 through D4, either as an attempt of members of the dominant group to accelerate the migration of blacks from certain areas or in the form of members of the dominant group's transfering themselves from among their submissive counterparts.

In the submissive group, Faction S1, the integrationist, appears to be the major faction. Individuals subsumed under this label are likely to initiate and/or support strong civil-rights legislation or other measures designed to improve the socioeconomic position of members of the submissive group *so long as these measures involve increased interaction with members of the dominant group.* Conversely, S1 opposes activity tending toward separatism, without regard to the source of initiation. The major civil-rights organizations and many black business and fraternal organizations, as well as most blacks of high status are in this pattern.

The second pattern, S2, engages those who accept the principle of gradualism in dominant-submissive relations. Individuals and reified groups who are involved in this pattern of activity tending toward legal protection are less likely than S1 persons to introduce measures and programs on their own, but are more inclined to accept the lead, and

DOMINANT GROUP

pattern		*policy*
D1	integration	cultural assimilation (permitted) [*continued subjugation*]*
D2	white separatism	legal protection [*continued subjugation*]
D3	restrained white supremacy	continued subjugation
D4	white terrorism	extermination

SUBMISSIVE GROUP

pattern		*policy*
S1	integration	cultural assimilation (forced)
S2	accommodation	legal protection
S3	black consciousness	cultural pluralism
S4	black nationalism	population transfer (peaceful)
S5	revolution	reversal of status

*The policy orientation *continued subjugation* is enclosed in brackets to indicate that each dominant-group faction—rhetoric notwithstanding—in varying degrees tends toward continued domination of the submissive community.

FIGURE 2:2. Goal-directed patterns of activity in the American dominant-submissive-group situation.

therefore the policy cues, of factions of the dominant group. Although S2 types do not have ready access to impersonal channels of communications and, consequently, are less well known than those in other submissive-group patterns, they are a recognizable force in most black communities, as anyone who has done fieldwork—not to mention lived—in a black community will bear witness. Suffice it here to say that one of the two black daily newspapers in the United States and the president of what is reputed to be the largest black church organization in this country both consistently articulate views tending toward legal protection.

The third pattern within the submissive community, designated as *black consciousness,* stresses internal improvement within institutions already controlled by and neighborhoods densely populated with members of the submissive group. Extraordinary emphasis is placed upon the need to strengthen the self-image of its members before parity with the dominant community can be realized. Activities of individuals and groups subsumed hereunder move toward a policy of cultural pluralism which must be distinguished from the separatism of D2.

If realized, the separatism of D2 would result in two communities, with the dominant group having the authoritative voice in both. The activity of S3, if rhetoric is to be given credence, tends toward a goal which, if realized, would be two mutually respecting communities interacting on those issues which were of common interest, while guaranteeing the subcommunity control over matters deemed especially important to its own survival as a people. There are, of course, numerous empirical referents, both historical and contemporary, for this pattern of activity.

S4, the black nationalist pattern, stresses the need for members of the submissive group to disabuse themselves of all feelings of belonging to the American government and substitute instead the notion that they are part of a different—a black—nation. Population transfer is the basic policy orientation of this faction, which includes well known entities such as the Nation of Islam as well as lesser known ones like the New Republic of Africa. Included also are those persons who are currently involved in the resettling of blacks in Africa.

Since revolutionary activity as a policy, like the extermination policy of D4, contravenes legal proscriptions, there is little to be said about it here. However, recent events, including the Ahmed Evans affair in Cleveland in which a ghetto "riot" was deliberately launched, suggest that there are patterns within the black community tending toward the reversal of status through revolutionary means.

The foregoing cataloging of the patterns of activity within the two communities is admittedly sketchy. No attempt has been made to define them sharply. Such definitions, of course, are essential if this analytical

framework is to be put to the test of the final arbiter—the field. However, this article is meant only to suggest the utility of such a scheme. Thus, I hope, the lack of precision will be indulged, if not excused. Whatever the verdict, let us explore further the usefulness of this frame of reference.

The dominant-submissive-group model, as discussed above and presented graphically in Figures 2:1 and 2:2, brings into focus the dynamics of black politics in America. By categorizing the various patterns of activity in terms of their policy orientations, it calls attention to areas of possible collaboration and conflict among the several factions both within and across group lines. This, in turn, should facilitate our understanding of why certain alliances and schisms develop within and across groups. Further, it promises to sharpen our understanding of black leadership—a much-discussed but rarely understood phenomenon. It should allow us to rise above common-sense explanations—Uncle Tom or selling out—of black leadership. And finally it should permit us to refine our stock of ambiguous concepts—status and welfare goals, race man, militant, and the like—which constitute the working language of this area of inquiry.

For purposes of illustration, we may begin by exploring its usefulness in understanding collaboration and conflict across group lines. We may begin with the assertion that each group will be inclined to form alliances with other factions to the extent that it perceives compatibility of goals. The power to initiate action rests with each of the several factions. In terms of day-to-day strategies, perceptions of short-term goals are likely to be more important than perceptions of long-term goals. By this I mean to suggest that factions are likely to forge temporary alliances with other factions in situations of the moment, even if they perceive their ultimate goals to be incompatible. Let me illustrate. Factions D1 and S1, both of which may be designated as the respective establishment factions, are given disproportionate attention. Both tend toward assimilation as a goal. The rhetoric of the two are more alike than not. Since the two, according to their rhetoric, are pursuing the same goal, it becomes understandable that they often appear as partners in an alliance. Often it appears that members of S1 accept the good faith of D1 and consequently assume as their primary role prodding S1 along toward more rapid assimilation. This close relation between the two is the father in the submissive group of many theories of conspiracy and notions of selling out.

However, when we consider our proposition that members of the dominant group always try to maintain their superordinate position, along with the disparate power of the two factions, another explanation begins to surface. Since D1 has dominant power over S1, the demands

or initiatives of S1 are often shaped to conform, more or less, to the policy pursuits of D1. Moreover, the success and, to a great extent, the survival of the submissive-group faction depends upon what the dominant-group faction does. For example, witness Whitney Young of the National Urban League asking the national government for "some victories." So long as one accepts the notion that the two partners are tending toward the same goal, this relationship between the two appears to be a logical and perhaps a prudent one.[16] However, those in the submissive community who do not accept the notion of a confluence of interest between the two tend to resort to "Uncle Tom" or "selling out" explanations. A careful look at the assumptions and goals of the two factions, as the dominant-submissive scheme demands, suggests a different explanation.

For further illustration let us explore another pattern of interaction. Initiatives of S3 (black Consciousness) such as autonomous black-studies departments, black dormitories on "white" campuses, and strengthening the old schools and building new ones in black areas, to be controlled by blacks, are likely to meet greater opposition from S1 than from any other faction in the model. For example, it was the NAACP which brought suit to prevent the establishment of racially restrictive black institutions in American universities. The dominant-submissive-group model suggests an explanation for that. The area of conflict based upon the goals of the several factions is greater, at least on the surface, between S1 and S3 than between, say, S1 and D2 or D3.

Similarly, the fact that S3 (black consciousness) and D2 (white separatism) and D3 (self-acknowledged white supremacism) find themselves increasingly on the same side of the school integration controversy (in Georgia, Governor Lester Maddox and the black-consciousness faction are in concert on the closing of black schools, for example) is readily understandable in terms of our model.

The foregoing discussion suggests the utility of the dominant-submissive-group model as a frame of reference for understanding black politics in America. What remains to be accomplished is a more systematic delination of goal-directed patterns of activity within the communities. Once this has been done, we can use it as a classificatory scheme to sift and group political happenings in the lives of black people on both national and local levels. This, in turn, ought to facilitate the discovery of regularities in the patterns of interaction between and among those engaged in the several patterns of activity both within and across group lines. The discovery of such regularities would make possible the classification of subsystems according to the patterns of regularities observed. Once such classifications have been established, it may be possible, by using some

variant of group vector analysis as adumbrated by Monypenny[17] to determine the probability of achieving certain kinds of change in certain kinds of communities, depending upon the mix and relative strengths of dominant- and submissive-group factions.

NOTES

1. D. Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

2. For a discussion of the proliferation of "approaches," see S. Hoffman, "The Long Road to Theory," *World Politics* 11 (1959): 346–377.

3. This notion is borrowed from N. Long, "Indicators of Change in Political Institutions," an unpublished paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1969.

4. For example, see J. Wilson, *Negro Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 25–34.

5. See H. Holloway, *Politics of the Southern Negro: From Exclusion to Big City Organization* (New York: Random House, 1969), especially Chapter 1.

6. As early as 1945 L. Wirth called our attention to the distinction between racial and ethnic minorities and intimated the inappropriateness of trying to explain the black experience by referring to the history of ethnic minorities in "The Problem of Minority Groups," in *The Science of Man in World Crisis* ed. R. Linton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 338–372.

7. J. Roucek, "Minority-Majority Relations in Their Power Aspects," *Phylon* 17 (1956): 24–30.

8. Roucek, "Minority-Majority," p. 30.

9. H. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority Group Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1967).

10. Blalock, *Toward a Theory*, p. 191. It is not clear whether Blalock advances these propositions as valid ones dealing with black-white relations in America or whether they are cited simply as examples of the kinds of assertive statements we need to develop. Whatever his intentions, I accept the propositions as valid statements.

11. This point, I suppose, is now beyond dispute. Long a theme of political essays, it is now commonplace in respectable social-science literature and, as a recent development, in government reports.

12. See Hagan, "The Group in Political Science," in *Approaches to the Study of Politics* ed. R. Yong (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1958).

13. For a brief, yet adequate, discussion of the function of the cultural component in a society, see R. T. Holt, "A Proposed Structural-Functional Framework for Political Science," in *Functionalism in the Social Sciences*, ed. D. Martindale (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1965), pp. 84–110.

14. This assertion is consistent with two major works by clinical psychologists, one by a white team and the other by blacks. They are, respectively, A. Kardiner and L. Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression* (New York: World, 1951), and W. Grier and P. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

15. A popular text asserts that dominant communities have followed six major types of policies in dealing with minority groups, which I have used in Figure 1. See G. Simpson and Milton Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 3–26.

16. The perception of the confluence of interests and, therefore, complementarity of goals of S1 and D1 appears to be on the wane. Many blacks have begun to question the

good faith of D1. The fact that the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP and the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice no longer are fellow plaintiffs but adversaries in certain desegregation suits is an indication of this development.

17. See P. Monypenny, "Political Science and the Study of Groups: Notes to Guide a Research Project," *Western Political Science Quarterly* June 1954.

3

The Black Man's Role in American Politics

Mervyn Dymally

SOMEBODY ON THE inside said once that politics is the art of the possible. But for the black outsider in America politics in the United States has been the art of the impossible.

It has been the art of the impossible because it has been the art of trying to make a fundamental change in a political system by using the structures and instruments that were designed to perpetuate that system.

It has been the art of the impossible because it has been the art of trying to make a social revolution with moderate tools that were invented to prevent social revolutions.

It has been the art of the impossible because of the nature of politics, which is the art of making some things impossible for outsiders. And because of the extremity of the black man's situation, which cannot be changed unless all things are made possible, the black man's role in American politics continues to be impossible.

Because of the black man's situation, which is radical by any definition, and because of the nature of American politics, which is moderate-to-conservative by any definition, the black man in America has been condemned to seek radical ends within a political framework which was designed to prevent sudden and radical social and economic changes.

For almost one hundred years now, the black outsiders of America have been squirming within the halters of this maddening paradox. During this period, some representatives of the outsiders in the councils of the insiders have made striking gains *as individuals.* But black people as a group have not been able to change their status or their social and economic conditions with political instruments. And the question we

Reprinted from *The Black Politician*, Fall 1969, by permission of the author and the publisher.