

CORRELATES OF BLACK PARAMILITARY
ACTIVITY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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One indication of the racial polarization of our society is the rise of black paramilitary organizations. Interviews were conducted with a sample of active members of a black paramilitary organization located in a large Southern city. The young male respondents tended to be alienated, to have records of arrest and imprisonment, and to have served in the armed forces. Yet, they were found to adhere to a Protestant Ethic and to be fairly representative in terms of economic status. It is suggested that race alone provides the motivation for black paramilitary activities.

Introduction

Part of the conventional wisdom that traditionally has been passed on in America from one generation of social scientists to the next is the notion that the United States is a consensual society, with a "cohesive political culture." We have taken for granted the continuation of one of history's most promising examples of democratic stability. We have, as a people, indoctrinated ourselves in the belief that we manifest overwhelming agreement on all the fundamental political questions--that the procedures, arrangements and values of our political system are accepted by and acceptable to nearly all Americans. Change and adjustment have been sought historically according to well-defined "rules of the game." The system, we have believed, affords legitimate means for the realization of the nation's implied promises to all its people. Conventional politics, we have insisted, can result in the redistribution of advantages and disadvantages. It requires only the formation of a new majority.

But in the present decade we are witnessing a nascent fragmentation of the American political culture, and a persistent challenge to the system itself. The "new politics" is based on impatience and disillusionment. Its procedures are not consensus and compromise, but rather participation (beyond that of marking a ballot) and confrontation. Its demand is sudden change and reformation. Increasingly, one should suppose, the various strains of new politics activities in the larger social

and political environment will have serious implications for the nation's colleges and universities. To a large extent, campus disorders measure the degree of penetration of the academic milieu by the social and political environment.

Most of the demands for economic, social and political change have come from blacks who feel they have been excluded from the bounty of American life. Their dissatisfaction has been expressed variously, but urban riots notwithstanding, the civil and human rights movement has been notable up to now for the infrequency of militant and aggressive techniques. While many discontented blacks have agreed with the non-violent civil disobedience tactic, the young black residents of the larger urban ghettos have increasingly come to doubt the efficacy of marches, prayers, and sit-ins. As a result, some of the more enthusiastic supporters of Black Power have sought alternative means to social change. Thus, Black Power as a social movement is now, in part, characterized by the development of paramilitary types of organizations, the Black Panthers being the most popularly known example of this form. Writings on this newer organizational form have been limited to journalistic accounts. This article hopes to fill that void partially by examining selective social and psychological correlates of membership in one black paramilitary type organization located in a large Southern city.

The particular organization under study was organized just under three years ago and is modelled after the Black Panther form. Its members consider it to be a paramilitary organization with its major goal the arming of the black community in anticipation of the day when whites begin the (they believe inevitable) systematic extermination of blacks.

But also a part of the organization's black self-help goal--of which arms caches are pre-eminent--is the task of community organizing, the creation of a greater self-awareness, sensitivity, and psychological independence. For example, during the latter part of 1968 and early 1969, the group sponsored a black history and culture program at its storefront office; and group members are now seeking funds for a black library to be located in the ghetto. Thus, paramilitary activities are but a part of their program, albeit an important part.

SAMPLE--It is difficult to determine the total membership of this paramilitary organization as its officers are understandably secretive about its total strength. The local newspaper has estimated its membership at between 2,000-3,000; and while the group may be able to mobilize this many during a crisis, and while this number or more may identify with the organization, we have been able to pinpoint only 30-60 active members during the last year. By active, we mean those who have attended meetings and other group activities during the period June 1968-June 1969. We have obtained 40 interviews--36 usable--with those active during the winter months of 1968-69. Our sample, therefore, may not be representative of the total membership. We believe it to be representative of the active members and we believe that only a few active members escaped being interviewed during the period of our study.

The interviews were conducted by a member of the organization's executive board, a former student of one of the writers. We recognize the existence of possible interviewer bias, but we believe the relationship of the interviewer to the membership was conducive to obtaining candid responses.

The interview schedule was designed to furnish standard social background data as well as data on degree of alienation and commitment (or lack of) to middle-class values. Our aim here is not to undertake a comparative analysis to determine why some young blacks become militant while others do not. That is a question worth

investigating, and we hope to investigate it later. For the present, however, we mean only to present descriptive data about a small sample of black paramilitarists in a Southern city.

Social Class and Militancy

Protest activity, as well as more common and acceptable forms of political participation, is highly influenced by the participant's social class. Studies of Students for a Democratic Society members and other New Left radicals, civil rights activists, and even black riot participants, document the relationship between higher social status and radical political activity (Westby and Braungart, 1966: 690-2; Keniston, 1968; Searles and Williams, 1962: 215-20; Marx, 1967; Bowen, *et. al.*, 1968: 187-200; Tomlinson, 1968: 417-28).

Socioeconomic indices are typically comprised of three variables, or some combination thereof: occupation, education, and income. For persons of our respondents' age ($\bar{x} = 23$) and position in the life cycle, the parental Social Economic Status (SES) is often accepted. However, because of the history of discrimination against blacks in this country, and its consequences, we have some reservations about using parental SES as our measure of social class. Nevertheless, we are interested in using some means of measuring the relative status or well-being of our respondents. We have, therefore, obtained data on the militants' total family income, believing this to be a satisfactory index of their social and economic status. Family income, as a gross estimate of social class, should give us some idea of the motivation for militancy.

On the basis of previous studies of civil rights activists and white radicals, one might expect that the respondents would be--economically--rather well off. One of the most commonly accepted theories explaining the rise of revolution and social movements is that of relative deprivation. This theory contends that it is when conditions begin to improve and result in rising expectations, that revolutions begin, and that revolutions are manned by those who are not completely deprived (Bowen, *et. al.*, 1968; Davies, 1962: 5-19). Table 1 indicates some support for the relative deprivation theory: 24 percent of the militants have family incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per year, an additional 18 percent have family incomes of over \$10,000 per year.

Table 1. Total Family Income

	%	N
Under \$3,000	32	(11)
\$3,000 - \$3,999	9	(3)
\$4,000 - \$4,999	18	(6)
\$5,000 - \$10,000	24	(8)
Over \$10,000	18	(6)
No Response		(2)

The sprinkling of middle and lower-middle class occupations (Table 2) offers further support for this theory of militancy. However, this theory does not completely explain the attraction of a paramilitary organization to all young blacks, because one-third of our respondents had family incomes below the poverty level last year. Absolute deprivation--poverty--may also be a stimulus to this type of extreme behavior. The large family size-- $x = 5.1$ --must place a strong demand on family income. Moreover, the predominance of unemployment and economically marginal jobs further suggests the relationship between militancy and absolute deprivation. In terms of family income and occupation, these black militants are quite different from other radicals on the left. Still, the pattern for this group of black militants is inconclusive. The fact that they come from a variety of income levels suggests that family income in itself is not a strong motivating factor for activism.

Table 2. Militants-Occupations

	<u>N</u>
Brick layer	1
Bus boy	1
Bakery worker	1
Community organizer-	
Human Rights	3
Draftsman	1
Federal Government Employee-	
Middle management	1
Lab Technician	1
Machine operator	3
Machinist	1
Mechanic	1
Salesman	1
Stock Clerk	1
Stringer	1
Student -- High School	1
College	5
Thief	1
Enemployed	<u>12</u>
Total	36

Urbanism and Militancy

While the effect of urbanism on conventional political behavior is not clear, black student protest has been found to be essentially an urban phenomenon (Orbell, 1967: 446-546). Gary Marx (1967) has documented more generally the relationship of urbanism to militant attitudes.

By definition we are dealing here with urban activists. But since population movement in this country is from rural to urban areas, it is of interest to determine whether the activists are predominantly persons who have been urban dwellers since birth, or if they are primarily those who have migrated to the cities. Between birth and age 17, 58 percent of our sample lived exclusively in a city (or cities) of over 100,000 in population; an additional 18 percent of the militants have lived in a city (or cities) this size for at least six years during the same age period. To some degree then, our data reaffirm earlier studies which relate an urban environment to activist proclivities.

Anomie and Militancy

There is a significant body of literature that suggests that much deviant behavior is a correlate and perhaps a result of the social-psychological state of anomie (See Merton, 1957: chap. IV; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960: 78-111; Clinard, 1964). The popularity of anomie, as a social and behavioral science concept, is largely due to a revival of interest in the writings of the European sociologist Emil Durkheim (1951). Anomie as defined and used by Durkheim refers to a condition of society (Mizruchi, 1964: 46) that reflects social malintegration or social isolation and lack of consensus on legitimate norms. But, like the concept alienation, for which it is often used interchangeably (Aiken, 1968: 67), anomie can also refer to a state of mind (Mizruchi, 1964: 46). The Srole anomie scale (1956: 713) was included in our interview schedule. While there are several other measures of anomie and alienation, the Srole scale more closely reflects the Durkheim concept.

Anomie is thought to be especially prevalent in urban areas,¹ but does not seem to be a condition characteristic of black civil rights activists, or even the more militant thinking blacks in the general population (Searles and Williams, 1962: chap. 14; Orbell, 1967; Marx, 1967: chap. 3; Jackson, 1969). In contrast to the findings of other studies, we found the overwhelming majority of our respondents to be anomic. This suggests that anomie is related to the paramilitary form of urban extremism.² It should be noted, however, that while all but one of our respondents exhibited anomic feelings, the cumulative mean score (14.27) indicates only moderate anomie. Using a four point scoring procedure for each item (DK = 0, SA = 4) it is possible for a person to score a high of 20 or a low of 0. We dichotomized the scores into **anomic-non-anomic**, thus a score of 11 was necessary for an anomic classification.

Militants and the Law

Additional evidence of the respondents' militancy, deviancy, and perhaps alienation, is seen by their arrest records. Almost two-thirds of the sample have been arrested at least once on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to more serious felonies. While many arrests have come simply from civil rights related activities, 11 respondents have served time in prison for more serious offenses.

Militancy and the Protestant Ethic

It is generally assumed that black militants are revolting against the established society and the norms of that society which are best expressed in the values of the white middle class. Black Power is itself a recognition of the failure of this nation to overcome racial discrimination--a failure which implies a basic weakness in the underlying value structure of the political, economic and social systems in the United States.

Our measure of middle class values is Zeigler's Protestant Ethic scale (1966: 8). This scale attempts to measure those middle class values which revere "thrift, frugality, individual initiative, self-reliance, hard work, and respect for established authority" (Zeigler, 1966). This Likert type scale when dichotomized classifies a commitment to middle-class values as a score between 15 and 28. Twenty-nine of our respondents exhibit some attachment to the Protestant Ethic; however, the respondents' mean score is only 17.02, indicating a rather low overall commitment. It is difficult to explain this slight commitment; little in their behavior or attitudes indicate this acceptance of middle-class values. We suggest only the rather tenuous possibility that the statements are so much a part of the

American folklore (representative of the American creed) that even extremists can unwittingly accept them as valued. Campbell and Schuman offer tentative support for this conclusion; in a nationwide survey conducted during the spring of 1968 (p. 6) they found that "nearly four out of five Negroes" believed hard work to be the way to success.

Conclusion

The very existence of a black paramilitary organization is an indication of the racial polarization of our society. The fact that it has a paramilitary form suggests its potential for violence. This violence potential is furthered by the age and sex of its members. Campbell and Schuman found that black youth expressed a much greater readiness to resort to violent means than did older persons; furthermore, men are more ready than women to use violence (1968: 56). The alienation of the group, the prison records of a large segment, and the incidence of economic deprivation³ suggest its readiness for extreme behavior. The group's military expertise is suggested by the military experience of the members--one-third are veterans and one-half of that number have served in Viet-Nam. The scores of our respondents on the Zeigler scale indicate that this form of violence prone activity can take place among young blacks even when they adhere to some extent to the dominant "Protestant Ethic" values of the society against which they are rebelling.

What we do not know is whether membership serves just a cathartic purpose, or whether the bringing together of these social and personality types into one organization constitutes a potential threat to the community's stability. To date there is no evidence that this particular paramilitary organization has been involved in any violent acts. What is instructive about our data is this: we are left with the conclusion that a group of young men who are highly alienated, have records of arrest and imprisonment, and organize into a paramilitary unit, but who nonetheless are fairly typical in terms of economic status and adherence to the underlying values of the society, are motivated toward paramilitary activity on the basis of one characteristic--race. The implications of this in terms of the nation's record, and of its future, need no elaboration here.

Footnotes

¹The linkage between anomie and urbanism was suggested as early as 1938 by Louis Wirth, and recent confirmation is offered by Bonnie Bullough, 1967: 469-78.

²Harry W. Reynolds, Jr. (1968: 237-59) found that on the Srole scale 75 percent of Omaha riot participants were alienated.

³Michael Aiken, et. al. discusses the relationships between economic deprivation and extremism.

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