

# **A Sociology of Immanence and Transcendence: Reflections on the Legacy of Benjamin Mays**

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In 1963, about a generation ago, sociologists in America began to examine and reexamine their concepts of caste, class and status. Dennis Wrong presented a paper at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in which he stated that "Historically, biological continuity has been the major means of preserving the internal solidarity and the distinctive ethos of class from generation to generation..." (Wrong, 1969:518). Wrong mentioned George Orwell's observation, however, that new sets of classes are emerging that are not recruited by the intergenerational transmissions of privilege through the family and whose cohesion does not depend on familial socialization (Wrong, 1969:519).

Adapting to this new development, testing for intelligence was perfected in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. And the testing centers, according to Wrong, "have become the vehicles for selecting the ruling elite or meritocrats" (Wrong, 1969:519). By way of tests, the non-elites are "scientifically proven to be inferior in ability to their rulers" (Wrong 1969:519).

This discussion by Dennis Wrong, a generation ago, helps us to understand the reason why the Bell Curve was published in 1994 (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). It is a continuous attempt to use biology as a way of claiming superiority by some people over others. It is a way of attempting to perpetuate the racial organization of American society into castes and

classes.

While Dennis Wrong was trying to make sense out of caste, class and status in 1963, Everett Hughes was trying to make sense out of the turbulence in our society that was caused by the revolt of African American people. In his presidential address at the 1963 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Hughes asked this question: "Why did social scientists ... and sociologists in particular ... not foresee the explosion of collective action of Negro Americans toward full integration into American society?" (Hughes, 1963:879). Hughes partially answered himself by stating that "if status arrangements are always tentative and likely to be questioned" but that "the group with the greatest interest in the status quo may...think of the arrangement as permanent, and...justify it by various devices—such as the doctrine of racial superiority and inferiority" (Hughes, 1963:883). Hughes and others failed to predict the civil rights movement because they kept their eyes on the dominant people of power and their various ways of justifying their position in society and failed to understand that the subdominant people of power also have beliefs of their own that differ from those of the dominants.

Sociologists failed to predict the civil rights movement because Hughes, Gunnar Myrdal and others failed to realize that subdominant people have power. They have veto power which the social theorists who examined caste, class and status did not understand because they kept their focus on the elite.

In *An American Dilemma* (1944) Myrdal called "the Negro problem" primarily "a white man's problem" (Myrdal, 1944:669). He described the races as existing in a caste order which is fundamentally a system of disabilities forced by the whites upon blacks in America (Myrdal, 1944:669). In the introduction to his book, Myrdal stated that "the Negro problem exists and changes because of conditions and forces operating in the larger American society," and that the Negro people may realistically acquire power in society only with the help of "interested white groups" (Myrdal 1944:16-17). Myrdal gave little, if any, attention to self-initiated behavior by blacks. Hughes committed the same error. He genuinely believed that African Americans "want[ed] to disappear as a group...to become invisible as a group...[to] be judged as if [being African American] did not matter" (Hughes, 1963:883).

It required the turbulence of the 1960s decade before white social scientists would begin to analyze ways of life of blacks and their adaptations

to circumstances of discrimination. It required the revolt of the 1950s and 1960s before whites began to understand the meaning of the concept of self-determination. Halfway through the 1960s, after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington and the Siege of Selma, Talcott Parsons would write that "the Negro community has the opportunity to define itself as the spearhead of one of the most important improvements in the quality of American society in its history" (Parsons, 1965:1048). Parsons further said "the record of the movement ... makes it clear that a very major part of the credit [for the movement] will go to the Negro community itself" (Parsons, 1965:1048). Sociologist Parsons saw through a glass darkly what historian Meyer Weinberg clearly understood a few decades later. He reported in the 1990s that "since 1940 the single most important factor in the lives of African Americans has been the rise of the civil rights movement. In the main, it was a movement of black people led by black people." (Weinberg, 1991:3). According to Weinberg, Francis Keppel, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, gave voice to a new realization in the 1960s that "the movement was becoming the principal engine for educational change in this country" (Weinberg, 1991:3).

Increased understanding of the role and responsibility of the black population in this freedom movement was possible as social scientists cleared away the conceptual underbrush anchored in the old ideas and beliefs about caste and class that had blinded them to what was actually happening in society.

By identifying black-white relations as caste and class arrangements of highly formalized behavior sanctioned by religion in which interpersonal activities of exchange are prohibited, social scientists were unable to understand the self-determination behavior of blacks and what was happening in the civil rights movement. By keeping the focus on the social arrangements perpetuated by whites rather than on what blacks were thinking and doing, social scientists were unprepared to witness a new movement being born.

I find no value in the concepts of caste and class, first, because I believe inequality is a function of social organization and its complementary activities and, second, because I am convinced that no group is biologically inferior or superior in all traits. I believe, for example, that social processes such as stability and change complement each other and so do cooperation and conflict. I also believe that socially structured positions such as wealth and poverty and behavior associated with these positions

complement each other. Both have the capacity to be dependent and independent variables. For this reason, I disagreed with William Wilson's concept of an underclass as a permanent and intractable group in American society. An underclass exists because of an overclass and vice versa. The two are interconnected. Each has self-determining capabilities and each affects the other.

We can understand these principles better if we examine them as they are manifested in the life of an archetype individual such as Benjamin Elijah Mays.

Born in South Carolina in 1894 where myths of the inherent inferiority of all blacks and the inherent superiority of all whites were articles of faith, Mays did not accept these and he enrolled in Bates College in Lewiston, Maine to test himself. At the end of his racially integrated college career at Bates, Mays said, "I had done better in academic performance in public speaking and in argumentation and debate than the vast majority of my classmates." (Mays, 1971:60). Thus, he concluded that Bates made it possible for him to emancipate himself, to accept with dignity his own worth as a free person (Mays, 1971:60). Mays said that he wanted to go to New England for his college studies for one reason: if he could compete successfully with the Yankee he would have prima facie evidence that blacks were not inferior. He proved at Bates that he could compete successfully with all sorts and conditions of students. And at Bates, he discovered that "Yankee superiority was as mythical as Negro inferiority" (Mays, 1971:50).

Mays said that he had never accepted his assigned status in South Carolina, for one reason, because he had a reference group that differed from the reference group of South Carolina whites. The people in his rural church were his reference group; they encouraged him, told him he was smart and would "go places" in life (Mays, 1971:50,17). Reference group theory is an important contribution in sociological analysis and helps to explain how individuals overcome and transcend their assigned status in life, how people break out of the constraints of caste and class.

An examination of the life of Benjamin Mays also demonstrates the value of conceptualizing intelligence as a pluralistic, multiple or many-splendored entity rather than as unitary phenomenon as declared by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994:18-19, 22-23). Mays' life also is clear and present evidence that intelligence is a property of each individual and not a group phenomenon as Herrnstein

and Murray assert that it is.

As a nine-year old boy, Mays received a terrific ovation from the congregation of his church after reciting a portion of the Sermon on the Mount on "children's day" at his church. Having been confirmed as an accomplished public speaker, Mays entered the sophomore declamation contest at Bates College that was held during the first semester. The wife of Mays' biology teacher was good in speech. She coached him and he won first place in the declamation contest. Mays was elated to win over his five white competitors (Mays, 1971:56). This was an important victory for Mays because, during the same semester, he received only one A and also received the first D in his whole academic career. The point is that Mays excelled in one intellectual sphere while not doing well in others. The support and encouragement that Mays received for doing what he could do well early on in his academic career sustained him until he could do other things well. In a section on "Educating Intelligences," in his book, *Frames of Mind*, Howard Gardner asks, "does one play from strength, does one bolster weakness, or does one attempt to work along both tracks at the same time?" (Gardner, 1985:388). Benjamin Mays obviously played from strength. Although he earned grades less than A in most of his courses the first year he attended Bates, he won first prize in the public speaking contest. And accolades he received for his public speaking ability sustained him until he could do better in other subjects. In his senior year at Bates, Mays received A in eight out of eleven courses, a distant experience from his first semester of study at Bates.

There is no such cluster of people known as the intellectual elite in human society. There are many intellectual capacities and, therefore, different kinds of elites. People smart in one intellectual sphere may not be smart in another sphere. Thus, the intelligence testing experts who are attempting to reintroduce biology as the basis for social class differentiation in America are barking up the wrong tree. We know, as Howard Gardner has suggested, that there are multiple intelligences all of which are needed "to solve problems or create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings" (Gardner, 1985).

Finally, the life of Benjamin Mays demonstrates the importance of the temporal aspect of social organization. Although receiving only one A in his first year at Bates, he received eight As in his senior year. Moreover, he was captain of the Bates debating team his senior year, elected Class Day orator and president of the Bates Forum and the Phi-hellenic Club. Mays

said that his achievement was so outstanding that he conceded superiority to no more than four in his senior class (Mays, 1971:59-60). He graduated when he was twenty-six years old; he graduated with honors.

Several years ago, I conducted a study of *Black Students in White Colleges* (Willie and McCord, 1972). The book, incidentally, was dedicated to Dr. Mays whom I described as "a black student who endured, transcended and overcame." Some years after Mays' study as a black student at a predominantly white college, this book revealed findings for other black students that are similar to those for Benjamin Mays. Only 14 percent of the first-year black students received average grades of B or above after their first semester of study at college, compared with 47 percent of the white freshmen. By the fourth year, however, many black students had caught up with the white students and were doing quite well. In fact, a majority (52 percent) of the black seniors had accumulative averages of A or B compared with 42 percent of the white seniors (Willie and McCord, 1972:87). Clearly, the association between years of study in school and grades received is not fixed, immutable and intractable as those who insist on describing social organization in caste and class terms would have us believe. The Mays experience and my findings of black students in white colleges indicate why tracking is a harmful way of organizing educational experiences. Those who start behind are not destined to stay behind.

May I conclude this discussion by returning to the issue of power. The association, if any, between power, status, and social mobility has been a troublesome problem for many social theorists. Carl Degler argues that "the status of the Negro in the English colonies was worked out within a framework of discrimination; that from the outset, as far as the available evidence tells us, the Negro was treated as an inferior to the white man, servant or free" (Degler, 1975:44-45). Because the church and other institutions sanctioned the inferior status accorded blacks, it has been assumed that blacks also accepted as authentic their low estate. Of course, we have Benjamin Mays' statement that he never accepted his assigned status in South Carolina. But even before the twentieth century, there is plenty of evidence that blacks did not accept the position to which they were assigned by white culture.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was one of the early authors to realize that blacks had not internalized the low estate to which they had been assigned by whites. In the confrontation between Uncle Tom and Legree, one of the most hated slavemasters in the South, Tom refuses to whip a slave

woman as directed by Legree. For Tom's refusal Legree struck him a heavy blow across the cheek. But Tom persisted in refusing to whip anyone in his slave community. He told his master that he didn't think that this was a right thing to do and that he never would do it. Legree became furious after Tom's refusal to obey him. He quoted the Bible to Tom stating that servants were admonished to obey their masters. With blood flowing down his face from the heavy abuse he received from Legree, Tom told him that his soul did not belong to any master, including Legree; it was not for sale because his soul belonged to God (Stowe, 1963:364-366). Benjamin Mays uttered words that were implicit in Uncle Tom's defiance. "To be able to stand the troubles of life," Mays said, "one must have a sense of mission and the belief that God sent him or her into the world for a purpose, to do something unique and distinctive; and that if he does not do it, life will be worse off because it was not done" (Mays, 1983:7). Understanding the power that is inherent in each person, Mays said, "nobody is wise enough, nobody is good enough, and nobody cares enough about you to turn over to them your future" (Mays, 1983:6).

What Benjamin Mays and Uncle Tom understood is that all people, including subdominant people, have power. They have veto power. They can prevent life from continuing as it is unless life takes into consideration the welfare and needs of each of its human critters. Subdominant people of power do not have to go along and cooperate in their own oppression. Like Uncle Tom, all people including subdominants can say no. Because sociologists failed to understand the presence of veto power, they failed to predict the civil rights movement. Our preoccupation with status, class and caste has locked us into a deterministic mode of analysis. Benjamin Mays provided us with a transcendent view of society. He said, "the future is always with those who take the high road, the high road of truth, social justice, love...and concern for the advancement of all humanity." He said, "the future belongs to those who are able to rise above the currently accepted practices and point the way to higher and nobler things" (Mays, 1969:35).

Our preoccupation with caste, class and status has led us down the deterministic path to a sociology of immanency. Benjamin Mays has suggested to us a new way to imagine society by way of a sociology of transcendency. The two go well together and deliver social analysis from the shackles of caste, class, and status.

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