The Politics of the Emerging Black Peti-Bourgeois

It has been the practice of the Black Voice in the past to look critically at some of the developments which are generally taken for granted within our community. We wish now to look at the emergence of what may be called the Black Peti Bourgeois but which in some quarters is called the Black Middle classes. At the start we should attempt to make clear who we mean by the peti Bourgeois. For our purposes this means the section of our community who either through small business ventures or service to the state for example as Professionals perceive themselves as separate from the rest of our community. We should make it here the importance of ideology or ideas to emphasize the fact that a few black professionals do not accept the ideas of the Black Peti Bourgeois and so continue to give their support to the overall black struggle.

Although this issue has recently become more important it is necessary to remember that this tendency was always present within the black movement from its emergence in the Mid Sixties. At that time the movement had not evolved sufficiently to make class differences clear and in fact there was a community-of-interests between the very small Peti Bourgeois and the rest of our community. For instance there would be a unity in the struggle against racism in education and housing and the demands that were made would satisfy both the aspirations of the latent Peti Bourgeois and the community as a whole.

With the passage of time we believe that this community of interests now no longer holds and there has now emerged clear differences between the demands made by this section and those made by the rest of us.

Historically there has been two forces working towards this divergence of interests. On the one hand the State quickly decided that it was in its interest to split the Black movement by using the rising aspirations of certain sections. To create black unity it quickly created lucrative posts in the Community Relations Industry (CRES) As far back as in 1975 the Black Voice reported on the plan of the Principal of Brixton College to create a Black middle class and so hold back revolution. We should also take time here to mention those black militants who emerged with the mass movement but then accepted highly paid jobs and gave up the struggle we could dub them the political peti Bourgeois. The second force was the aspirations of our community who aspired to rise within capitalism securing the future of themselves and their families but not overly concerned with the rest of our community.

The peti Bourgeois, first showed that it could stand on its own two feet by creating a vehicle to convey its ideas. This vehicle made no pretence of serving the whole community unlike its previous attempts like the West Indian World which pretended that it spoke for the whole community.

This was Root magazine launched in the late 1970s and which boasted of its middle class. It took its name from Alex Haley's book and the Television programme which chronicled the history of a black middle class family and which boasted that the black middle classes or achievers were no longer ashamed of being called Uncle Toms but were in fact proud to be so called. In an article in its Dec 1979 issue the "Emerging Black middle Class" (their term) they state "The Roots generation takes its name from the Television programme(of the book). it is a generation that adores in Chicken George the character who played what pre 1970s militants called an Uncle Tom" It sees the black middle classes emerging from "Magistrates, College Lecturers, Senior Nurses and Teachers, to Doctors,Farmers, Social workers and those in the caring professions" it adds "Enterprise men and women are embarking on business ventures such as hairdressing, small retailing, vehicle repairs, home decorating, plumbing, insurance agencies, importing and exporting and many other similar jobs. It is important to note that what is listed here is not a middle class but a Peti Bourgeois or lower middle class. It is in fact a tendency amongst the peti bourgeois to imagine themselves to be more important that they really are.

These treacherous black men and women that have contributed to the emancipation struggles of black people but those who have made it in either business or entertainment. So rather than promote the ideas of a Malcolm X or George Jackson they will instead promote the luxury life-style of a cover girl.

It is most important for us to clearly mark the differences between ourselves and the peti bourgeois. Generally they have no real quarrel with this racist and oppressive capitalist system, they even go to the extent of predicting better times around the corner as soon as the economy shows an upturn and so are in
fact very close to Conservative ideals. A common idea among them is that black people who are failing in this system have only themselves to blame they cannot be really trying because they themselves have succeeded in spite of all difficulties.

There are specific areas in which the ideas of this class is totally opposed to the interests of the rest of our community. One such area is Education and these sell out black have gravitated towards a solution that suits their own interests that is support for private fee paying education and it certainly does not favour a comprehensive system and here again its ideas are very close to those of the Conservative party. Sections of the peti bourgeois also support black schools but again these would be fee paying schools and could not satisfy the needs of the mass of our community. Another area is that of businesses these reactionaries tells our community that it is in business chiefly to serve the community. The reality is that because it is small scale it is often more crude in its self interest and in fact can be a parasite on our community. Another important area is that of housing where traditionally with some justification could claim to have served because racism closed white home to the first black tenants. This was certainly true in the past but does not justify the exorbitant rent charged by black landlords today.

The above are just a few of the areas in which clear differences are emerging between black aspirers and our community. In terms of political ideas things are just as complex varying from those who support the Conservatives to the less confident sections who call for black businesses for the black community. They would argue that the black community belongs to the black businessman and taking this to its logical conclusion would probably favour Jamaicans buying from Jamaicans and Guyanese buying from Guyanese. The lower middle class then are often vessels for the most conservative and reactionary ideas.

We have here examined the role of the Peti Bourgeois because we now believe that their interests are no longer identical with those of the rest of us. As a class they still attempt to give leadership to the black movement but would only lead us to the path which best suits the their interests. If the peti bourgeois is to again play a role in our movement it must subvert its own aims and interests and fall behind demands that serve our whole community. We believe that the peti bourgeois has not previously shown either the will or the inclination to do this.