

A gripping reminder

The Future of Race

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
and Cornel West
Vintage Books

Erudite, yet accessible, Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West's *The Future of Race* offers us a gripping, provocative and diagnostic account of the conditions of modern day Black Americans.

Gates' essay, *Parable of the Talents*, anecdotal yet journalistic in tone, begins with his arrival on the Yale University campus in 1970. According to Gates, his arrival at Yale was symbolic because it followed three decades of relative economic and social success for American blacks. However, lamentably it was also symbolic because it signified the beginning of the end of this prosperity. As Gates puts it, this success was such that we "were never to see its likes again."

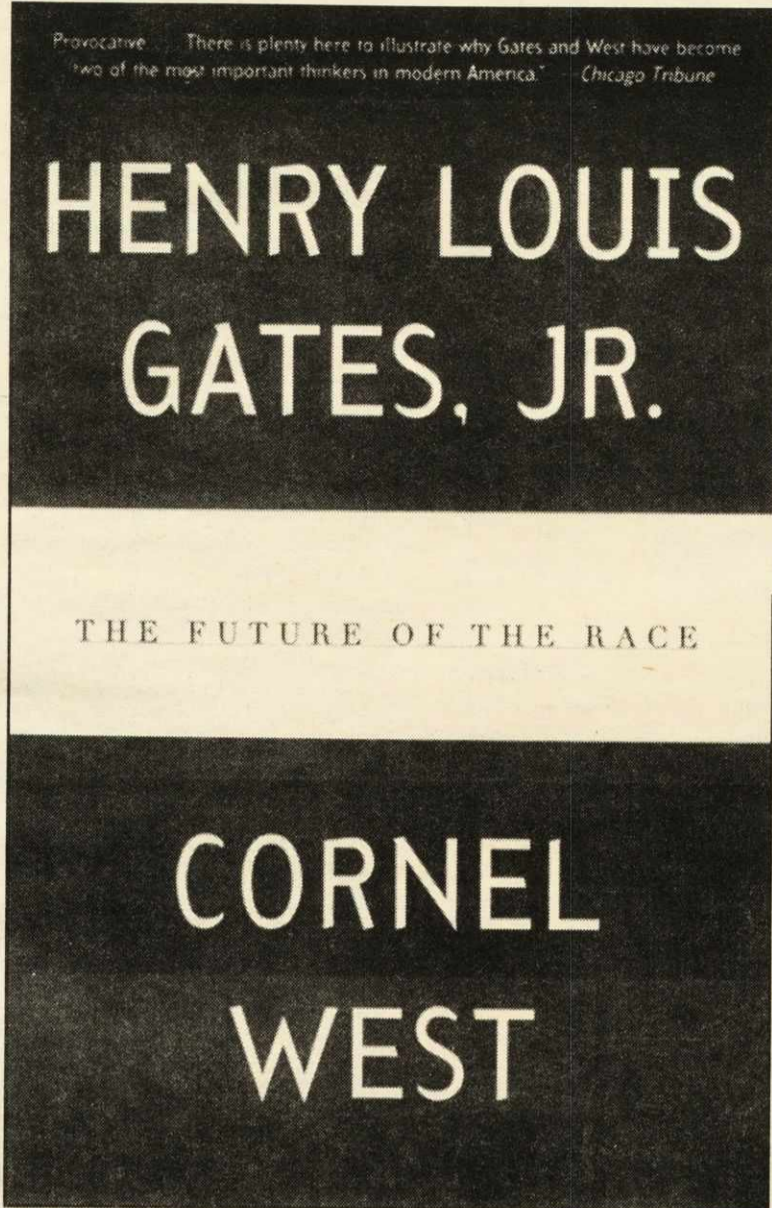
Why did things fall apart? Gates argues that the reasons can be traced back to the political movements of the 1960s which saw the rise of liberalism extolling the virtues of a fairer, more just society. The problem with this political movement was "not its policy failures," but its "political failure." Furthermore, this political movement ushered in a new era of electoral, mostly white, resentment against governments who were perceived as advocating policies bent on taxing "the majority" to advance "special" — which is to say "minority" — "interests."

According to Gates, what we have then today is a swelling black underclass which is severely underprivileged. For example, one-third of black families are poor and more than half of the black males between 25 and 35 are unemployed. Yet, there is no political establishment to redress these conditions. Moreover, there is little or no hope, argues Gates, of black-based leadership — there is crisis here, too. However, blacks are not totally without influence. Black literary and intellectual culture, Gates argues, has surfaces with a vigilance and salience, and much of it matters in American society. Much of it helps to bring out the nuances of past and contemporary black life.

Gates concludes his essay by bringing his discussion back to his own struggles as a young, privileged black striving to find his own identity and his own role as a black elite in a white culture, which brings to the fore the alienation and struggle of all blacks as they vie for their own identity.

Rather more critical, West's essay — *Black Strivings In A Twilight Civilization* — tackles the failure of the program which his intellectual mentor, W. E. B. Du Bois, created to eliminate black subordination.

Du Bois' main failing, West tells us, lies in his inability to provide an adequate definition of the human condition and his "inability to immerse himself in the rich cultural currents of black everyday life." The root of these inadequacies, West argues, was Du Bois' inability to respond — because of his



narrow world view — to the problem of evil.

In replace of Du Bois' notion of an educated black elite which would lead all blacks to their panacea, West argues that the black intellectual elite must "create and sustain high-quality public discourse addressing urgent public problems which enlightens and energizes fellow citizens, promoting them to take public action." This proposal is democratic, rather than elitist.

Following his critique of Du Bois, West turns to analysis of black culture, which lies in, "both the African and American character of black people's attempts to sustain their mental sanity and spiritual health, social life and political struggle" in the face of slavery and white domination. These assaults on black culture have produced what West calls "black invisibility and namelessness."

The road back to visibility and to a name, West argues, "will be propelled by self-loving and self-trusting made possible by overcoming a colonized mind, body and

soul." Regrettably, West notes, this has not been achieved by contemporary blacks. Black rage as an outcome of this namelessness and invisibility, he tells us, still proliferates.

Probing for a solution, West is less than sanguine: even though the crisis of race continues today, he argues, the nature of today's global society neglects the fundamental issue of black invisibility and namelessness, and fails even to address the issue of race. Today's global society with its emphasis on market economics, he says, has eroded many of the networks of support and care for citizens in exchange for a political scene characterized by derision and rancor with little room for mutual respect and empathetic exchange. In the face of this, West argues, it is doubtful that a black (or any) intellectual elite dedicated to democratic ideals can "turn back the deeper and deadly processes of cultural decay in the late twentieth-century

America."

Speaking prophetically, West suggests that the result of this cultural crisis will be a deepening division among blacks across class and economic lines which will only serve to exacerbate the crisis inflicting American blacks.

The real strength of this book is not to be found in its originality,

rather it is to be found in its ability to bring out the complex racial conditions of contemporary American society. Moreover, it brings to light a salient fact: we have a long way to go before we reach a society in which all people are treated equally and justly. We need constant reminder, and this is just what *The Future of Race* achieves.

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