



## REALITIES IN BLACK AND BROWN: CRITICAL CONCERNS AND COMMON GROUND

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HERE IS NO EASY WAY OR WALK TO freedom; no shortcuts to justice; no quick fix for conceiving and constructing the good and sustainable society and world we all want and deserve to live in. Indeed, to achieve the good we all want in the world, we must work and struggle long and hard for it, i.e., we must be in it for real, in it for the good and for the long. And it is always good to remember and remind each other of this in our constant reasoning and wrestling with the urgent issues of our time. Certainly, Black/ Brown relations are one of these critical issues. And how we work out our relations with each other will determine the quality of life of our communities and this country, and our capacity to realize the just and good society we've fought so long for.

Our challenge is to think in new, different and more depthful ways not only about Black/ Brown relations, but also how to carefully craft social strategies and policies directed toward collaboration and cooperation for the common good of all. To do this, we must give up ideas riveted in racist interpretations of human reality which are preached and practiced by the established order under an endless number of disguises, deceptions and excuses. We must, as Fanon says, think new thoughts, reach inside ourselves and bring forth the best of our ethical insights and aspirations and dare lay the foundation and framework for a new history of humankind.

Latinos and Blacks, facing each other across the table of media misinformation, manipulated resources, contested space, and limited power, often misinterpret both the problems and possibilities before them. They often fail to appreciate and act on the fact that they have it in their hands to demand and achieve through struggle, along with other progressive allies, a just society committed to a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and power and devoid of the mutually destructive contention over crumbs people of color have been too often reduced to. The task is to develop a mutually beneficial set of cooperative projects and then to

organize and engage in cooperative practice to collectively complete them.

In order to build on the cooperative possibilities of Black-Brown relations, avoid mutually destructive conflicts and pursue collectively the quest for a just and good society, several things are necessary. The first of these is the development of *a new language and logic of ethnic relations*, a new way of talking and thinking about difference and the rights, needs and dignity of everyone. It must initiate and include conversation which recognizes and respects the presence, rights and essential relevance of each ethnic group in the awesome task of radically changing the way we do things and treat people in this country.

Secondly, we need to cultivate and demand *a leadership worthy of its claim*; a leadership that is morally sensitive to the needs and aspirations of our diverse communities; that is sensitive to human suffering; and profoundly committed to the pursuit of justice, the work of peace and the struggle to end inter-ethnic conflict and police violence so that our peoples can live in security in their homes and walk without fear in their streets. It will be a leadership not looking for back-patting approval or bankrupt ideas from the established order, but one which values the voice and vision of the people and struggles with them to achieve the conditions and means of a good life.

Moreover, we need *a protocol of exchange*, regular and established ways and means to talk often and productively with each other, ways to negotiate, discuss, problem-solve, intervene, introduce initiatives, and learn a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the way each people understands and asserts itself in the world. We need in-place structures and planned strategies which anticipate what happens and expect what occurs and thus contain readied responses for a wide range of possibilities.

Nowhere are these structures and strategies more necessary than on the two major issues that threaten to shape our relations in unhealthy ways from which it will be difficult to recover. There must be a collaborative and collective response

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to stop the various forms of inter-ethnic hostility and violence that have too often plagued our peoples. Indeed, it has already destroyed and ruined too many lives and once threatened to turn neighborhoods into zones of racial violence resembling the practices of a people that have savaged us both. And although it has diminished from prior levels, it still needs to be a constant concern on the activist agenda.

Then there is the *urgent immigration issue*, clearly larger than Latinos, but now made, in too many places and dialogues, into a Latino issue alone, leaving out consideration of Continental Africans, Caribbean Africans, especially Haitians, as well as Asians, Native Americans and others. We must not let even well-meaning progressives define the issue for us, reducing it to simple support for some immigrants (Latino) with little or no consideration or concerns for Africans and others. We must insist on adequate attention to other immigrants also and especially, to the meaning and consequences of massive immigration for the receiving and impacted communities.

Especially, must we define and discuss the issue as *an issue of justice for all involved and affected*. We cannot allow others to deny, devalue or discredit the legitimate concerns and apprehensions of African people under the guise of being progressive. We must advance our concerns as a matter of justice. For as we've continually argued and reaffirmed, there is no justice in denying, dismissing or failing to deal equitably with the clear needs and pressing concerns of fellow African Americans and other co-workers and neighbors who are also working hard to provide for their families, send their children to school, pay their taxes, secure a decent and living wage, live a good and meaningful life and build the just and good society we all

want and deserve. And in this context, we can support a just immigration policy, equitable political representation, quality education and the struggle for a living wage and an equitable share of jobs, contracts and training, and leadership opportunities and positions in unions.

As I have argued elsewhere from an African American standpoint, real alliance and coalition means reciprocity in everything, i.e., mutual respect, mutual support, and mutual benefit for each other. This translates in concrete terms as progressives working together to deal effectively with critical African issues including: (1) job loss and the problem of employment because of employer preference for undocumented and vulnerable workers, and often Latinos in general, and because of Latino kinship and ethnic networks; (2) inadequate union attention to securing justice, work, contracts and leadership positions for African Americans and building inter-ethnic common ground projects and opportunities; (3) neighborhood transitions, and the quality of resultant relations; (4) inter-ethnic gang-driven street violence as well as school and neighborhood conflict and violence; (5) equity and justice in political representation and in public funds distribution; and (6) collaboration and cooperation in educational issues.

**F**inally, it is important also to make sure that our current and urgent focus on Black/Brown relations not obscure or minimize the need to involve all other groups in this cooperative social project. The challenge posed here is undoubtedly an awesome one, but these are the demands of history which must be met in order to create a context for the justice we seek, the peace we pursue and the good life we want and work and struggle for ourselves and future generations.

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