The Curse of "Community"

I am not at all a very happy man. For the past few years, I have been travelin' the world. I have seen many places and met many people. But I have always felt that something was missing. Something that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Recently, I was invited to speak at a conference on the topic of democracy. I was honored to be asked, but as I prepared my talk, I realized that I had nothing to say. Nothing that hadn't been said before.

Then, one day, I was walking through a small town when I saw a group of people standing outside a building. They were talking about the local government. I listened to their conversation and was override by the sense of community and pride that they expressed.

But as I continued to think about the concept of community, I realized that it was not the same thing as democracy. Community is not about the people who live in a particular place. It is about the bonds that unite them, the shared experiences that define their lives.

Democracy, on the other hand, is about the people who govern a place. It is about the principles that govern their actions. It is about the rights and responsibilities that are granted to all citizens.

It is for these reasons that I believe that democracy is the true foundation of all communities. It is not just about living in a particular place. It is about the type of society that we want to create.

I hope that my words have helped to illuminate the importance of democracy. I believe that it is the key to a prosperous and just society. Thank you.
authentic-sounding doses of what they want to hear. More corrosive, however, is the fact that well-intentioned black activists themselves seem incapable of breaking out of the communitarian frame and its discourse of authenticity. This failure is a vestige of a style of class-based brokerage politics that prevailed among black Americans for most of this century, a style the 1965 Voting Rights Law should have eliminated. Now that black people have access to regular forms of civic participation, they should no longer have to depend on a politics in which white elites recognize and negotiate with nominal, ultimately unaccountable race “leaders.” I suspect that black activists’ continuing romance with political hustlers and demagogues (“Up with hope, down with dope!”) stems from their seductive promise of connection to a real, mobilizable constituency—something that black activists haven’t experienced in fact in more than twenty years, and then not for very long.

Whatever its appeal, the idea of a black community may do more harm than good at this point. And I do not in any way mean to endorse the black neocomm’s disingenuous jeremiads about a totalitarian reign of ideological terror in the Bastusian; the problem is rather the opposite. There are no significant forces on the ground in black politics attempting to generate any sort of popular, issue-based civic discourse, and the language of community is largely the reason.

Community presumes homogeneity of interest and perception, at least in principle. A politics stuck in its name is threatened by the heterogeneous tendencies put in motion by open debate. It is a politics that always has depended on narrowing the active black public and fastening the population as a whole to a middle-class–inflected program. But now that we have black people generating authoritarian urban-redevelopment policies and victimized by them, black people both enforcing and demonized by underclass ideology, black people fighting for and opposing gender equality and openness with respect to sexual orientation, the hollowness and inadequacy of this politics is all the more striking.

Moreover, the game is becoming all the more dangerous. Not only does this essentially demobilizing political style not provide a basis for generating effective responses to the corporate reorganization of American life that promises to wreak particular havoc on black people, but we can see signs of the black communitarian rhetoric’s appropriation for frightening ends—and not just at the hands of explicit reactionaries like Pat Robert and the agents of church-based black moral rearmament. The philanthropic foundations are joining hands in their own sly way with the right to undercut the basis for public, civic life by proclaiming the superiority of “community-based organizations,” which are accountable only to them (a domestic version of the non-governmental organizations deployed to weaken governments in what used to be the Third World).

In Chicago, for instance, we’ve gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices; one of them, a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable do-good credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics, has won a state senate seat on a base mainly in the liberal foundation and development world. His fundamentally bootstrap line was softened by a patina of the rhetoric of authentic community, talk about meeting in kitchens, small-scale solutions to social problems, and the predictable elevation of process over program—the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle-class reform in favoring form over substance. I suspect that his ilk is the wave of the future in U.S. black politics here, as in Haiti and wherever the International Monetary Fund has sway. So far the black activist response hasn’t been up to the challenge. We have to do better.