

What has happened to the black middle class in Britain?

09 January 2006 Deborah Gabriel

Where have all the buppies gone?

It was during the success-driven, money oriented Thatcher years of the 1980s that society became obsessed with class and status. It was the era when council tenants were encouraged to take out mortgages to buy their rented flats and houses to 'move up' in society.

It was also the era in which advertisers and spin doctors coined the phrase 'yuppie' to describe the 'young upwardly mobile' generation that typified the 1980s; it was the beginning of the bling phenomenon.

Everyone wanted to be a part of it and black people were not exempt from the advertisers spin: for in addition to 'yuppies', for the first time a growing black middle class was identified: 'buppies' (black upwardly mobile) comprising of doctors, lawyers, teachers, managers and IT professionals – yet twenty years on where are they?

This is the question posed by **BBC Radio 4** presenter Connie St Louis in her two-part documentary beginning on **January 10 at 8.00pm**. She wants to know why fewer black Caribbean people have 'made it' in comparison with other races and why those that have are so invisible in our society.

In the first episode, grammar-educated Connie St Louis whose parents were born in Jamaica, tries to find out what young black people and black professionals think about the whole issue of class.

Beginning with her own experience, the presenter relates how throughout her life she found herself being **"the only black pupil in her girl's school and the only black scientist at university."**

She says that being successful and middle class **"leaves a sense of alienation"**, and asks: **"why are the black middle classes only found in ones and twos?"**

Speaking to a group of young black students at a top sixth form college in North London, Ms St Louis asks what they understand by the term 'middle class.'

One opts for the professions, suggesting doctors and lawyers fall into this category, another suggests it is financial – you must be earning over £50,000 and a third says you have to be educated.

The fact that they are all studying for A levels with a view to going on to university does not influence how they see themselves. Using their parent's occupations as a yardstick none of them consider themselves to be middle class but say they feel they are **"something in between."**

Moving on to a 17-year old black male who is just starting a degree in sociology after gaining three A-levels, Connie St Louis poses the same question. He says that it is hard to know who and where the black middle classes in Britain are and what influence they have in society. **"If they are there, they're invisible"**, he laments.

Are Afro Caribbeans in the UK going forward or backward?

Connie St Louis speaks to MP and Culture Minister David Lammy, who was brought up on a council estate in Tottenham, the area which is now his constituency.

He speaks proudly of **“having an income significantly higher than the national average”** of **“having two degrees”** and of **“enjoying a lifestyle that gives access to some of the most powerful people in the country.”**

According to Lammy, he got where he is today **“through lots of effort”** but most black people succeed through **“some talent, patronage or luck.”**

He says that too many Afro Caribbeans grow up in black communities where they are **“chronically failed”** by the education system, but feels that the greater problem is the **“poverty of ambition.”**

Blaming absent fathers, the **“baby father”** syndrome and a **“laissez-faire”** attitude amongst some sections of the black community towards education, Lammy says that black people in the UK would have progressed **“further and faster”** were it not for these factors.

He argues that a black middle class is needed to provide role models both for black working class communities and for society as a whole and says it is important **“to fight stereotypes”** and harness economic power for the black community.

According to Lammy economic power currently rests largely with **“footballers and entertainers”**, is poorly organised and does not feed into the wider community. He suggests that it is essential for black people **“to succeed across the board.”**

According to a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in November 2005, there are signs of upward social mobility amongst British Afro Caribbeans.

However, it is too early to pop the champagne corks as education is the determining factor of that success and whilst black women are surpassing their white counterparts in many respects, the picture is very different for black men.

The study: Migration & Social Mobility found that upward mobility among children from minority ethnic groups was due to their educational achievements.

It is here that we see a marked difference in the educational achievements of black Caribbean males and females and the difference in career progression between black men and women.

Only 10 per cent of black Caribbean men are in professional and managerial posts compared with 15 per cent of white men. Connie St Louis feels that racism alone cannot be used to explain this disparity as racism affects all migrant groups:

“As education is the major escape route for social disadvantage, then progress amongst black Caribbean males must be hampered if only a quarter of them succeed in achieving the benchmark of five GCSEs.”

By contrast, figures from the 2001 Census show that 28 per cent of black Caribbean women were in managerial positions compared with 24 per cent of white women, making the black middle class a female-dominated affair.

How the black middle class developed in the USA

The second programme takes Connie St Louis to the other side of the Atlantic at the Cornell Theater at Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. It is described it as a **‘playground for America's white elite’** which in recent years has also become a haven for America's black middle class.

One African American woman she talks to who has holidayed at Martha's Vineyard for the last 17 years says she enjoys meeting **"like-minded, educated people"** with whom she can discuss **"issues that matter."**

Connie St Louis herself remarks: **"On my first visit to Martha's Vineyard many years ago I found it amazing to meet so many other professional black people just like me."**

In the USA, a mulatto middle class emerged from slavery as a result of the children of house slaves and slave masters who were allowed an education and bequeathed property and other benefits not enjoyed by dark-skinned black slaves.

An African American woman describing herself as 'upper middle' class holidaying at Martha's Vineyard tells Connie St Louis how her grandmother received a house from her former slave master and how through **"marrying in"** to others like themselves the mulattoes created the first black middle class in America.

However, as Connie St Louis concedes, the Black Civil Rights Movements with leaders such as Garvey and Malcolm X, battled for legislation which paved the way for all black Americans to have better opportunities.

They ended the John Crow legislation which had kept blacks out of mainstream institutions and mobilised blacks to use their power through the ballot box, electing African Americans to local seats and then to Congress.

In the mid 1960s around 200,000 African Americans were enrolled in colleges and universities but today that figure has grown to 1.8 million and those in doctoral and professional schools have tripled.

Most importantly, the black middle class in America has increased sevenfold in terms of the goods and services which they provide to mainstream America.

Connie St Louis maintains that in the USA segregation helped to build strong, cohesive black communities who had no choice but to establish their own networks and institutions which helped them to overcome racial disadvantage.

Is the grass really greener on the other side of the Atlantic?

According to Mary Patillo-McCoy in her 1999 book: *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*, **"The public celebration of black middle-class ascendance has perhaps been too hasty."**

Although the public perception on both sides of the Atlantic is of a thriving black American middle class that enjoys all the trappings of wealth and success as their white counterparts do, Patillo-Mc Coy argues that the reality is that middle class whites and blacks are **"separate and unequal."**

According to Patillo-Mc Coy, lower middle class is a more appropriate term for African American professionals because middle class black Americans earn less than their white counterparts and are concentrated in sales and clerical jobs rather than professional and managerial posts.

Patillo-Mc Coy says that although white middle class Americans enjoy superior housing in the suburbs, the black American middle class face the same level of housing segregation as poor black

Americans and tend to live on the fringe of poor black neighbourhoods:

“Unlike most whites, middle-class black families must contend with the crime, dilapidated housing and social disorder in the deteriorating poor neighborhoods that continue to grow in their direction.”

According to Patillo-Mc Coy, middle-class African Americans do not perform as well as whites on standardized tests in school or in employment; are more likely to be imprisoned for drug offences; are less likely to marry, more likely to have a child without being married and more likely to be unemployed. She writes:

“More than thirty years after the civil rights movement, racial segregation remains a reality in most American cities. Youth walk a fine line between preparing for success and youthful delinquent experimentation, the consequences of which can be especially serious for black youth.”

According to a study last year by Professor Elizabeth Warren from Harvard Law School, African Americans are six times more likely to file for bankruptcy than white Americans.

Many college-educated black Americans are having to hold down two jobs to make ends meet. The unemployment rate for African Americans is double the national average of six per cent and fewer black Americans than whites have employer-funded healthcare plans and private pensions.

Odds stacked against black people succeeding in the UK

Returning to the UK to continue the discussion on Britain's black middle class, Connie St Louis says Britain's black professionals are only just emerging in the UK and they are largely powerless.

She speaks to Novelist Mike Phillips who says: **“There is no black middle class in Britain, just a few black individuals who have middle class status and characteristics.”**

Peter Herbert, chair of the Society of Black Lawyers is both a barrister and part-time judge and member of the Metropolitan Police Authority. He tells Connie St Louis of his discomfort with the middle class label saying that: **“the odds are stacked against black people succeeding in this society.”**

Despite his professional status he still feels the full force of racism, just as any other black man would, citing being stopped and searched at the airport to putting up with a lack of courtesy from police at the House of Commons.

This may be one reason why black youths are ambivalent about taking the 'traditional route' to success, because no matter how great their success they are still treated with a lack of respect because of the colour of their skin.

Turning her attention to Joy Nichols, Director and Chief Executive of a successful recruitment agency, Connie St Louis asks why other races have succeeded where Afro Caribbeans have failed, despite facing similar levels of racism.

Joy Nichols tells her that unlike other ethnic minorities who have been successful in the UK such as Ugandan Asians and Gujarati Indians, Caribbean people were not brought to the UK to set up businesses or to bring their businesses with them:

“They were brought to Britain to work in the health service, within the transport industry and generally doing jobs that the white population did not want to do.” Afro Caribbeans were **“programmed to work.”**

The Caribbean population integrate with white society more than other ethnic groups. The 2001 census revealed that 35 per cent of Caribbean men and 25 per cent of Caribbean women have a white partner.

The suggestion is made that 'marrying out' has diluted the strength of the Caribbean position that no longer has a common purpose. Connie St Louis says it was segregation that gave black Americans a strong sense of unity and cohesiveness and a determination to improve their lot.

However, Joy Nichols feels that the government needs to do much more but senses that more black people will turn to entrepreneurship to secure their fortunes while the doors remain firmly closed for progression in the corporate world:

“This is the way forward for black people in Britain to establish our middle class.”

This two-part radio documentary is well-produced, interesting to listen to and is a viable topic for scrutiny, but it would have been useful to hear from other sections of the black community about their views on class and its relevance to them.

In addition, whilst holding up America as a shining example of what British black Caribbeans should aspire to, it ignores recent evidence that point to a tenuous and fragile black American middle class who cannot escape racism and disadvantage because of their professional status.

In this respect, black British professionals and the rest of the black community share the burden of inequality and racism with their African American counterparts, as barrister and judge Peter Herbert testifies - on both sides of the atlantic, it seems class is no respecter of the black race.

The Black Middle Class; BBC Radio 4 10 & 17 January at 8.00pm

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