

By Salim Muwakkil

## Young blacks discovering a new sense of community

**T**HE DEEP RUMBLE OF AMPLIFIED BASS SPEAKERS shakes the ground as the Jeep pulls into a parking lot on Chicago's South Side. From the fashionable vehicle exit three young black men dressed in the latest urban uniform: bulbous sneakers, pastel warmup suits, rakishly tilted baseball caps and large leather-crafted images of the African continent draped around their necks. The African continent?

In cities across the U.S., African-American youth suddenly are embracing symbols of their once-disparaged heritage. Images of the African continent; the colors red, black and green; and other insignia of African nationalism are appearing on everything from T-shirts to bumper stickers. Trendwatching clothing stores in black neighborhoods throughout the country are stocking racks of African-oriented items. In one inner-city Chicago shopping district, for example, Korean craftsmen are churning out red, black and green, mock-leather African necklaces by the thousands.

This consumer focus on gaudy symbolism makes it easy to dismiss this trendy black nationalism as just another fad. But many observers see it as the initial stages of a reinvigorated black power movement. A new sensibility is dawning, they argue, and it is being manifested across the class spectrum from inner cities to college campuses.

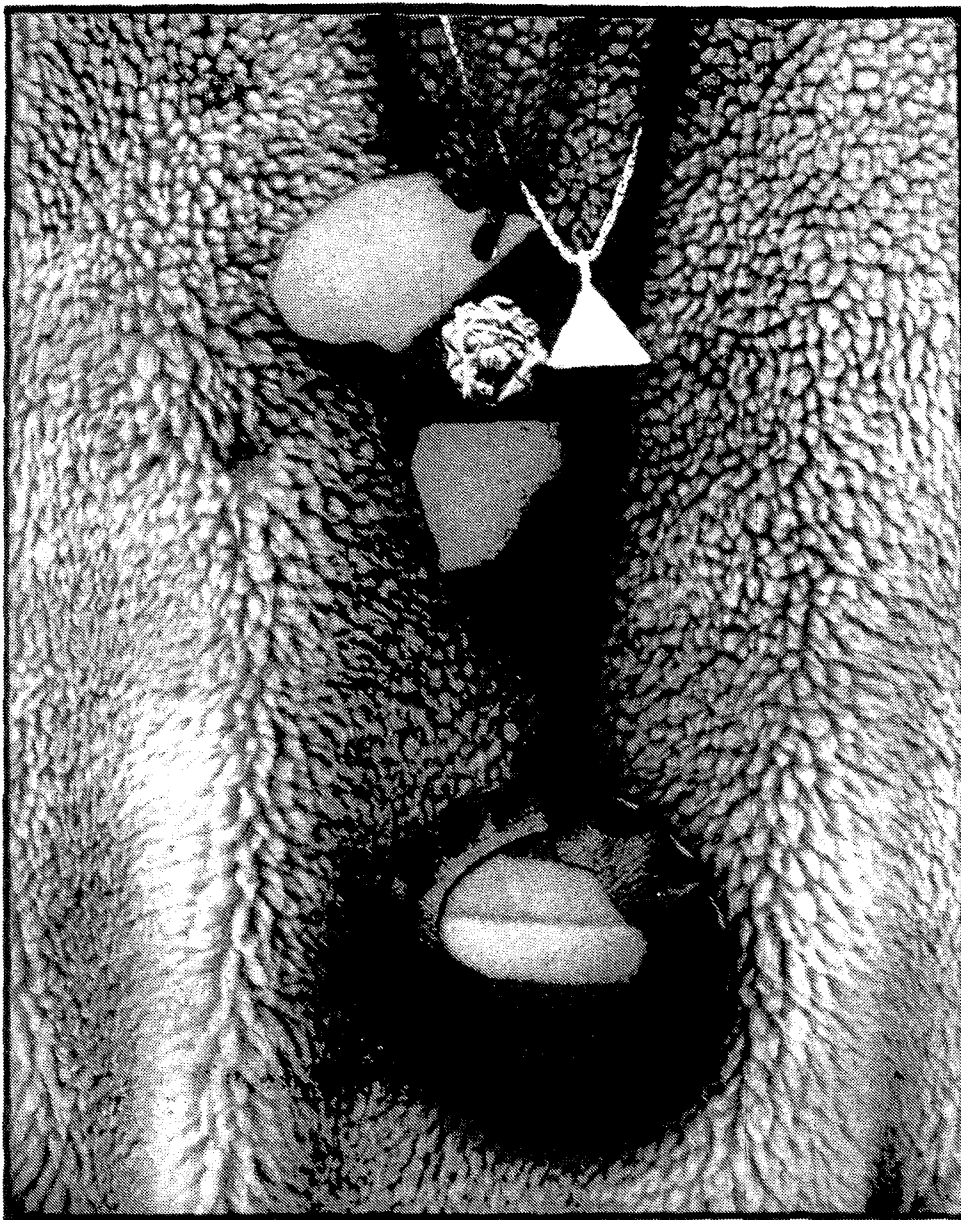
"There is definitely something significant happening among young black men in New York," says Greg Tate, a writer for the *Village Voice*. "Visually, you see it in the Africa medallions and the sculptured hightop haircuts. You hear it in the lyrics of the rappers. But it's also something much deeper than that; there's a new sense of camaraderie and fraternalism among young African-American men on the streets of the city. It's something positive that snuck up while no one was looking."

**Litany of woes:** Recent news from the inner cities has not been good. Poverty has become more entrenched, the so-called underclass is expanding, and urban educational systems are deteriorating, while crime, crack and AIDS add new dimensions of misery. Federal drug chief William Bennett and Housing Secretary Jack Kemp both have characterized these neighborhoods as "Third-World areas." Unfortunately, the lack of empathy suggested in that characterization also defines this administration's approach to addressing the problems of the underclass.

Despite President George Bush's rhetoric, there is a general sense that mainstream America is no longer interested in the plight of its black citizens. And when white Americans turn away, black Americans turn inward. Since the civil rights movement, motivated by a philosophical commitment to integration, is ideologically ill-equipped to lead the charge for self-reliance, black nationalist philosophy is most attractive to African-Americans during periods of racial retrenchment.

"Hey man, it's really no secret why we've got to change," says Ramon Wade, a young black Chicagoan who hosts a radio program featuring rap music. "We see our friends and relatives suffering and dying and generally catching hell out here, and we're tired of it. It's as simple as that."

Wade says the new attitude about their African roots is charging up the street youth with whom he comes in contact. "I do a lot of rap shows in different neighborhoods, and



A new kind tokenism: African continent amulet and grigri on a neck ornament.

I'm telling you, brothers love to hear raps about strong, responsible black men and the glorious history of the mother continent. There are some new role models being

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born." That this fierce new spirit of affirmation is emerging from the black underclass—the most despised segment of the U.S. population—may be a kind of poetic justice. That it's also spreading among black college students is justice of another kind.

"Our leaders have failed, by and large, to provide a way for us. We don't know where they want us to go and, quite simply, we're not satisfied with them," says Sherry Warren, a student leader at Howard University, a historically black college in Washington, D.C. "Consequently," she adds, "we've decided to provide our own leadership. And when I say 'we,' I'm talking about a movement of students on campuses all across the country."

Warren is a member of the Black Nia Force, the group that spearheaded the successful protest that ousted Republican National Committee Chairman Lee Atwater from Howard's board of directors. While ideologically ecumenical—"we study everyone and use what we think is relevant"—her group has a decided black nationalist orientation. She says the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan is "very popular, because he's talking about black empowerment and self-development."

**Stop the violence:** While it's difficult to trace the evolution of this new development,

most of the involved youth credit various rap groups for helping spread this new attitude. Rap music is a cultural product of the inner-city underclass, and performers are beginning to demonstrate increased concern for the deteriorating conditions of the communities that nurtured them. More specifically, they are addressing the crippling attitude of self-hatred that manifests itself in so many fratricidal patterns within the African-American community.

"The stop-the-violence movement was started by a New York rapper named Kris Parker," says Wade. "He got together with some others, and they decided to make a record on the subject—entitled 'Self-Destruction'—and mount a full-scale attack on black-on-black crime. As a result, black youth across the country are much more aware of the situation."

With its oral emphasis, rap music has a rhetorical dimension lacking in other musical genres, and its raging popularity provokes uneasiness among those wary of its influence. In its early stages, the genre was characterized by the boast and bombast of young black males seeking affirmation in a culture that rarely offers it. Since rap appeals directly to those caught in the violence-prone lifestyle of the underclass, rap has the reputation of being a trigger for violence.

**Agit rap:** Although the music remains raw and largely unconcerned with social therapy, various artists have decided to expand the genre's thematic repertoire. Similar attempts at agitprop were made in the black commu-

nity during the '60s, with groups like the Last Poets. But the popularity of these groups was limited to a small coterie of college students and cult fans. Message-laden rap music combines the social urgency of the Last Poets with the mass appeal of Motown.

"There is definitely an escalating sensibility among black Americans," says Cornel West, professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton University. "And rap music definitely has played an important part in its development." West says he is fascinated by the conjunction of street and campus culture. "Now it's up to us to develop this unique historical moment into something solid, something organized, something institutional."

West strongly urges the African-American movement to change its emphasis from what he calls "the TV politics of Jesse Jackson" to more substantial efforts outside the electoral arena. A growing number of theorists are echoing West's assessment that the exclusive quest for political power has diverted much-needed resources and general wherewithal from the basic struggle for black empowerment.

Electoral politics was just one of many strategies proposed in the '60s by movement theorists. And, in fact, the thrust has been quite successful: the number of black elected officials jumped from fewer than 1,000 in 1968 to nearly 7,000 in 1989. But the electoral arena alone is inadequate to address the constellations of needs bequeathed by centuries of racist oppression. And, in fact, it was never intended as a singular strategy.

However, the African-American community is so hungry for signs of progress that political successes are accorded an exaggerated significance. Unfortunately, this strict electoral focus obscures other elements of the strategy for black empowerment—establishing a sense of cultural pride in African ancestry to help offset the Eurocentric bias inherent in American culture, and creating self-reliant economic structures.

"Our leaders have been wasting time since the '60s," says Howard's Warren. "We intend to change that and, according to the response we're getting from black students across the country, we're going to change it." □

### The colors of Africa

Derrick Warrick, 18, wears a large leather depiction of the African continent around his neck. He wears it to show pride in his heritage. "Just two years ago I used to laugh when anybody said Africa," Warrick explains. "We used to make fun of the way Africans look. Not just how they are shown in Tarzan movies and all that, but even the way modern Africans look who drive cabs in Chicago. But now I understand."

Warrick believes this new embrace of Africa among young blacks is a good thing, but he cautions that many who wear the trendy symbols don't have a clue as to what they mean. "I know a lot of brothers who are just wearing these Africa necklaces because everyone else is wearing them."

Vernon Nealy, 16, admits he's unaware of the meaning of the red, black and green Africa symbol he has sewn onto the back of his jacket, but he likes the way it looks. "I've seen some members of Public Enemy [a popular rap group] with these pictures on their clothes, and I wanted to look like them," he says.

—S.M.



By Stephen J. Simurda

**R**ECENT SOVIET ELECTIONS REPUDIATING the country's status quo grabbed headlines around the world and stunned many Western analysts. But virtually unreported in the weeks leading up to the elections was another important change—one that means the Soviet Union's trade relationship with the West will be dramatically different in the future. Whatever is happening politically in the Soviet Union, the nation's economy is clearly moving toward greater democratization.

U.S. experts say that a Soviet Council of Ministers resolution issued before the election calls for several major changes in the way the Soviet Union conducts business with foreigners. The decree allows virtually any Soviet entity to do business outside the USSR if it offers "a product that is competitive on the foreign market." Up until now the Soviet Union has continued to maintain tight state control over which enterprises could conduct foreign trade.

**Back in the USSR:** The decree will also ensure that for the first time in 50 years a foreign company can run a business in the world's largest communist country. The key changes in this area of the resolution deal with joint Soviet-foreign ventures. "What it says, in effect, is that the only requirement is that there be a Soviet partner," says David Kelley, visiting scholar at Harvard University's Russian Research Center.

No longer is a foreign partner limited to a minority ownership position or required to give up to the Soviets most of the management control for the venture. Foreigners can now hold the positions of chairman or director of joint ventures, and they can exercise control over who is hired and what they are paid. The Soviets are also planning a sweeping overhaul of their customs tariff regulations to make themselves more competitive in the Western market (see accompanying story).

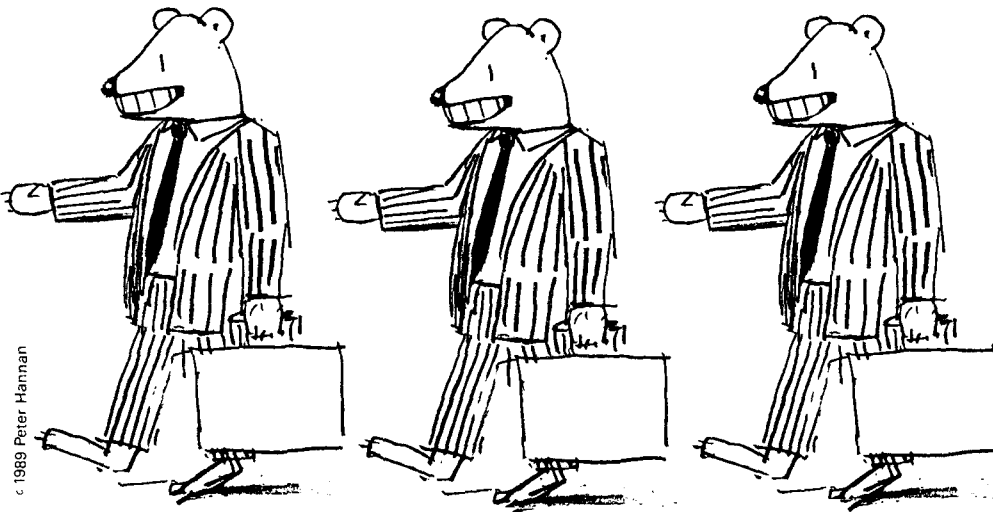
The resolution goes on to call for the creation of joint enterprise zones, in which foreign businesses will get favorable economic treatment. And there are even steps being taken to reform the complex Soviet currency system, which is encumbered by some 6,000 different internal exchange rates for the ruble but not one foreign exchange rate.

The Council of Ministers resolution has "apparently laid the groundwork for what would be, to put it mildly, radical changes" in the Soviet business climate, says Kelley.

But what effect these changes will have on average Soviet citizens and workers remains to be seen. So far, Kelley notes, Western economic influence has had almost no effect on the availability of basic products in the Soviet Union—and public indications of foreign investment can be seen only in Moscow. In addition, workers who have toiled for years under the egalitarian, if inefficient, communist system may be ill-prepared to deal with the demands for increased productivity exerted by Western business owners.

"Unemployment and inflation, if the reforms continue, are something that are going to set in," says Kelley. "People are going to get wealthy, prices are going to get high...and a lot of workers are going to feel cheated, going to feel betrayed."

**Missing the big news:** Despite the broad scope of the resolution, when it was issued



## From socialist enterprises to entrepreneurial entities

in December it received only scant attention in the Western press. The few reports that did appear focused primarily on the possibility of a significant currency devaluation in the Soviet Union. Such a devaluation would be a first step toward establishing rates at which the ruble could be exchanged for currencies from foreign countries—a move Moscow has long resisted. Subsequent reports indicated that this interpretation was premature, as the Soviets quickly backpedaled away from any commitment to devalue the ruble in anything other than internal transactions between Soviet entities.

But American experts who have studied the decree since then say that lost in that debate were more significant changes, some of which have already taken effect. For example, as of April 1, virtually any Soviet entity with a product or service to sell outside of the Soviet Union now has permission to begin export or import operations.

The resolution, an English translation of which appeared in the New Jersey-based trade publication *Interflo*, minces no words in explaining why such steps are being taken to further open the Soviet economy. Quite simply it explains that economic changes already made in the Soviet Union have not been enough to stimulate that country's

moribund economy.

Various Soviet ministries must still act upon the resolution in coming months. But there is little doubt that the changes it spells out will take place, since the the Council of Ministers is the governing body for all Soviet ministries.

"I don't think there's any possibility it won't become law," says Paul Surovell, publisher of *Interflo*.

In fact, Sarah C. Carey, a Washington, D.C., attorney whose clients include several U.S. companies doing business in the Soviet

**While the Western press focuses on ethnics and elections, the Soviets are busily prying off the political restraints on their economy, starting with foreign trade.**

Union, says any further Soviet action on the resolution involves nothing more than red tape. "I think it could be treated as law now," she says.

And the terms of that law represent a big

improvement for foreign firms that have long complained of controls still imposed upon them in Soviet business ventures. Henry A. Raab, a New York business consultant who has done business in the Soviet Union for nearly 20 years, calls the significance of the changes "enormous. It will be a complete breakthrough, a complete turnaround" in the Soviet business climate, he says.

But Jan Vanous—research director for PlanEcon, a Washington, D.C., firm that specializes in analyzing economic developments in the USSR—is quick to counsel some caution for U.S. businesses interested in Soviet trade. "I want to see what [the resolution] really means," he says. "There is an awful lot of talk in the Soviet Union. Talk is cheap."

And Kelley notes that while the resolution broadened the types of Soviet enterprises allowed to get involved in foreign trade, a subsequent decree took back some of that. That decree (issued Dec. 29, 1988) limited the role of Soviet cooperatives in these sweeping changes by denying them the right to deal in hard-currency transactions or get involved in foreign trade in a variety of industries.

**Made in the USSR:** These cooperatives, which are *perestroika's* answer to free enterprise, represent some of the most dynamic areas in the Soviet economy. As such they have the potential to create new exports without the help of foreigners, an option the Soviets would clearly prefer.

But for the average Soviet citizen, many of the changes going on in the USSR have yet to hit home—and may not for a while. "Things are changing dramatically in theory, but there don't seem to be dramatic changes in real life," says Kelley. And while many foreigners want to sell sophisticated consumer products to the Soviet market, Moscow would rather have Soviet industries learn how to produce such items themselves rather than simply import.

That probably means it will still be a few years before anyone but the Soviet elite enjoys any potential benefits from the swing toward free enterprise in the USSR. "The reality of the thing is it's a slow, simmering kind of change," says Kelley.

Stephen J. Simurda writes regularly for *These Times*.

### If cold war becomes trade war, Soviets will side with the European Community

The Soviets, like the rest of the world, are looking to 1992 to see how they can benefit from trade with an economically united Europe (see story on page 11). Ironically, the changes they are making to prepare for a truly common Western European market could lead to a trade war with the U.S., a country that has greatly hindered Soviet trade for 15 years.

The Soviet Council of Ministers resolution calls for suggestions from eight government ministries by Jan. 1, 1990, for a new Soviet customs tariff. The new measures would govern what types of products are allowed in the USSR and how much it would cost to bring them in. The regulations are aimed at controlling supply and demand in the Soviet Union and will serve "as a base for conducting international trade talks."

The resolution specifically mentions

trade talks with the European Economic Community and the possibility of some "effective non-tariff regulation of USSR foreign economic ties." In other words, the Soviets appear willing to make it easy for certain countries to trade with them. The U.S., however, may not be one of those countries.

"What the Soviets are going to do with their customs and tariff laws is seduce the European market," says David Kelley of Harvard University's Russian Research Center. Many European countries have already proven themselves more eager than the U.S. to conduct business in the Soviet Union. Nations such as West Germany, Finland, Austria and Italy have all signed more Soviet joint venture agreements than the U.S.

For the Soviets, the biggest irritant regarding trade with the U.S. is the 1974

Jackson-Vanik amendment, which imposes the highest possible tariffs on Soviet products brought into the U.S. until the Russians allow free emigration from their country. The U.S. also limits the types of products, particularly in the technology area, that may be exported to the Soviet Union, citing security concerns.

Kelley predicts that while the Soviets may make trade easy for the Europeans, they may erect big barriers for countries such as the U.S. in retaliation for restrictions like Jackson-Vanik. Will a trade war ensue? "I don't think there's any question about it," says Kelley.

Congressional leaders have said that doing away with Jackson-Vanik must be a presidential initiative and, so far, George Bush has said nothing to indicate he plans to lift the restrictions. —S.J.S.