

## Expanding on the ideas of Dr. Shawn Ginwright: Helping or hindering engagement of African American youth in their schools and communities

The promise of hip-hop culture is that it will do what the 60s generation could not or did not do and that is to advance national civil rights to global human rights.

-- The Black & Latino Policy Institute

*Many organizations and individuals are concerned with how to get urban youth more involved in activism. "More involved" is used because according to Prof. Shawn Ginwright, in his 2006 article, "Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism," although compared to 1960s Civil Rights or Black Power movements, today's urban youth seem less involved, he believes otherwise.*

*This pamphlet provides numerous examples of vibrant forms of youth involvement in political and civic life by: (1) Comparing the traditional view of youth activism with one more current; (2) Reviewing two factors that continue to threaten political activism among African American youth; (3) Discussing the debate between Civil Rights generation's "Afrocentric" solutions vs. Hip-hop's "Ghetto-centric" political orientations to solving social problems; (4) Raising the race and political identity issue: Is to be black, young, and poor also to be criminal?; (5) Discussing the difference between oppositional resistance--behaviors that make it difficult to achieve and transformative resistance--resistance as a strategy for achievement; (6) Linking transformative resistance to social change: Allowing African American youth to reject self blame for personal and group problems; and, (7) Discussing hip-hop culture and the politics of relevance: Hip-hop culture as transformative resistance.*

### **Are the wrong questions being asked about the civic and school engagement among black youth?**

In recent years, social science research about African American youth has narrowly focused on understanding various causes of problem behavior: violence, school failure, substance abuse and crime. To Ginwright, this ignores the complex ways and explanations of how youth engage in civic and political behavior--responding, challenging, and sometimes transforming the conditions in their schools and communities.

#### **What constitutes civic behavior for African American youth in urban communities?**

In order understand today's urban youth, Ginwright goes outside the tradition definition of civic/political engagement and asks new questions:

1. How do community conditions and social settings shape the contours of political behavior?
2. How do factors such as racism, poverty, and violence influence political ideas?

### **Understanding barriers to black youth activism: Including the most alienated and resistant students**

Prof. Ginwright exemplifies a new generation of youth advocating sociologists trained in the post-Civil Rights era who respect and are comfortable with the attitudes and behaviors of today's urban youth. His work on the streets have uncovered youth who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream civic activities, such as participation in student government or citywide youth councils, but who have strategies for engagement that often are overlooked. Examples are actions that address quality of life issues in their family, community, and their own lives such as police harassment when coming/going from school, encouraging their school to have heaters for their classrooms, or advocating for free bus passes for students on public assistance.

#### **Two factors that continue to threaten political activism among African American youth**

A. *The consistent attack on black youth and their families through hostile school policy.*

Ginwright believes young people need support from institutions such as American public schools. To him, schools have a tremendous opportunity, through the curriculum, to support students by challenging the social and economic problems students face daily in their community.

Unfortunately, this nurturing approach has been replaced by the idea that youth are becoming more violent and therefore need more discipline and tougher punishment. These negative perceptions have influenced school districts to create hostile zero tolerance policies that attempt to ensure school safety.

However, Ginwright presents evidence that these policies often have the opposite effect since schools take on the appearance and function of juvenile detention centers. Implementing a variety of punitive measures enforced by zero tolerance can actually increase classroom disruptions, hostilities between students, and tensions between youth and school police.

B. *African American youth activism is threatened by a “politics of relevance” in which generational political ideas are in conflict.*

The Civil Rights generation (adults who came of age during the Civil Rights movement) and the hip-hop generation (youth born after 1965) Ginwright argues, have divergent political ideas about poverty, race, public education and incarceration.

The loss of blue collar jobs, increased surveillance of urban schools, coercive policing practices, as well as corporate deception such as the Enron scandal, Ginwright argues, have made black youth suspicious. As a result, many youth of the hip-hop generation have little or no faith in a system that seems to only protect the wealthy at the expense of their communities.

Civil rights generation adults often cannot fully understand black youth culture, and this disconnects them from the political issues most important to youth. Their view is that poverty, unemployment, and limited job options are simply obstacles many of them overcame. Thus, they take the position of: Why can't your generation do the same? Or why does your generation use poverty as an excuse?

Older folks expect black youth to benefit from the advances they made in the 1960s and are confused and disillusioned when youth seemingly ignore and even resist the opportunities. This is especially true with respect to schooling where older citizens spend time trying to persuade youth to “Get an education,” but they remain “The Unconvinced Generation” (Evans, J., 2006).

Ginwright shows concern that African American youth are increasingly isolated from “old guard” civil rights political organizations that do not share the same worldview, political identities, and economic realities. For example Ginwright notes in 2000 the NAACP publicly opposed the South Carolina Legislature's decision to retain the state's confederate flag while at the same time seemingly ignoring the complex issues of juvenile justice, education, and guns that were more relevant to urban youth: black youth in South Carolina comprised 73% of incarcerated juveniles, were twice as likely to drop out of school, and experienced more instances of gun violence than any other group.

Prof. Ginwright sees this generational disconnection as leading youth to look to other organizations such as The Nation of Islam, the Hip Hop Action Summit Network, the Malcolm X Grassroots movement as new spaces for their political discourse about racial injustice, resisting failed public policy, and generational tensions.

### **Key points in understanding the civic and political behavior of black urban youth**

#### **1. *Civil Rights generation vs. hip hop generation: “Afrocentric” vs. “Ghetto-centric” politics***

Ginwright discusses another way to understand the present inter-generational disconnect. “Afrocentric” vs. “Ghetto-centric” politics within black youth culture, represent two ways race and political identities are shaped in urban communities.

From the Afrocentric perspective, race and political identity are reconstituted in ways that acknowledge and celebrate Africa, representing changes in political consciousness. African culture, names, school curricula, styles of dress and hairstyle that celebrate African standards of beauty each challenge and transform white stereotypes of black racial inferiority.

The Ghetto-centric perspective also reflects racial and political identities. Rather than focusing on Africa, however, Ghetto-centric culture calls attention to the political and racial realities of “life in the hood.” Ghetto-centric identities embrace economic struggles, celebrate “the block” or particular neighborhoods, and exposes racist police practices.

## 2. *Race and political identity: To be black, young, and poor was also to be criminal*

Ginwright notes that during the 1990s crack cocaine epidemic, the term “black youth” became synonymous with “predator.” To be Black, young, and poor was also to be criminal.

These “xenophobic” type notions of youth, as well as fear of crime, shaped public policy hostile to African American youth and their communities, increasing repression through institutions such as schools, law enforcement, and juvenile justice systems.

Ginwright points to Los Angeles County, CA in 1996, where African American youth were 6 times more likely to be incarcerated and received longer sentences than their white counterparts. When charged with the same violent crime, blacks were 9 times more likely to be sentenced; for drug offenses they were sent to prison 48 times more often than whites charged with the same crimes.

To “not get caught up” in complex systems of control and containment, black identities were constructed in resistance to racist stereotypes and unjust public policies intended to criminalize black identity. Youth’s struggle for a genuine identity was played out through the expression of new cultural forms, such as hip-hop, that redefined, reasserted, and constantly reestablished what it meant to be urban and black.

## 3. *Oppositional resistance and transformative resistance: Resistance as strategy for achievement and success or as behaviors that make it difficult to achieve*

Since the common theme between all these expressions of black identity is that they all define blackness as a form of resistance to negative black images, according to Ginwright, the term “oppositional resistance” has been used extensively to explain various aspects of African American youth behavior.

*Oppositional resistance* is a set of shared values, beliefs, and attitudes that reject dominant social norms and contribute to behaviors that make it difficult to achieve. Scholars use the term to explain school failure, delinquent behavior, and violence.

Ginwright gives an example of resistance as a useful strategy for achievement. In one study (Akorn, 2003), black youth, tutored by Nation of Islam (NOI) members, were able to be “oppositional” and do well academically at the same time, getting the respect of school staff. More significant was that their student peers respected them because they were able to be oppositional (academically “debate” staff, especially

with respect to American and world history--which influence all subject areas--and resist obeying some dubious school/classroom rules) and get good grades.

Dr. Ginwright calls this *transformative resistance*--development of a black achievement ideology where academic success supports their notions of what it means to be black.

3a. *Linking transformative resistance to social change: Allowing African American youth to reject self blame for personal and group problems*

To enable more transformative resistance, Ginwright suggests discussions and activities that develop a political understanding about juvenile justice, racism, poverty and how these social issues shape their lives and communities. This, he believes, will push young people to understand systemic and root causes of social inequality and create new forms of political consciousness that allow black youth to identify injustice in their everyday lives and to advocate for themselves.

Ginwright suggests educators and youth advocates must work with youth through a transformative resistance process where they take advantage of black youth's oppositional stance and link it to political struggles for equity and justice in their lives and in their communities.

This links transformative resistance to social change and allows black youth to reject self blame for personal problems and fosters a critical worldview that is informed by their particular social, economic and political position.

4. *Hip-Hop culture and the politics of relevance: Hip-hop culture as transformative resistance*

Ginwright points out the Black Panther Party's ability to relate politically to disenfranchised black youth during the late 60s-early 70s. Rooted in new articulations of black identity and new forms of politics, these anti-establishment activists linked racial inequality to larger economic and political issues of justice.

In many ways, Ginwright views progressive hip-hop as representing a new "politics of relevance" as it calls attention to critical issues that confront black youth.

Today's African American youth have new and vibrant forms of civic and political activities including organizing local political hip-hop entertainment combined with political education. In 2004, the first National Political Hip Hop Convention (<http://hiphopconvention.org>) took place in an effort to create a platform relevant to the needs of millions of disenfranchised youth and young adults.

Hip-hop culture gives youth a platform for their political voice and a place to organize and build their own base of support, a forum the Democrats and Republicans political parties have not. Besides, Ginwright explains, the traditional parties are not as real to urban youth because of their old ways of campaigning and organizing. Hip-hop brings new tools by which to organize young people through graffiti art, hip-hop concerts, rap videos, and spoken word events.

According to Ginwright, hip-hop culture can influence black youth to change their thinking about community problems, and act toward creating a more equitable world. *While progressive hip-hop culture*

*functions as the voice of resistance for America's black youth, it also provides a blueprint for the possibilities of social change and has been utilized as a politicizing tool to inform youth about significant social problems.*

Hip-hop groups today provide black youth with an analysis of racism, poverty, sexism, and other forms of oppression. For many black youth, hip-hop culture is a vehicle for expressing pain, anger, and the frustration of oppression through rap music, style of dress, language and poetry.

Because of hip-hop artists' ability to boldly criticize and reveal serious contradictions in American democracy, hip-hop culture is also used to organize, to inform, and to politicize youth about local and national issues.

Also with respect to the Internet and globalization, American youth can easily view the actions of young people in countries around the world who are also committed to an ideology of social equality. Prof. Ginwright sees this kind of globalization leading black youth to the sense of actually being "somebody" able to change the course of world events.

The key, according to Ginwright, is to acknowledge the politicizing potential that global hip-hop culture has on disenfranchised youth and how it carries the possibility to unite youth around the world through common experiences of suffering and common struggles of resistance.

**In conclusion: Representing uncharted political territory in our understanding of democracy, respect for black youth cultural forms of civic behavior will benefit all Americans**

As a sociologist, Dr. Ginwright, suggests social science research must consider how economic, social and political realities intimately shape the civic-political and school engagement among black youth. A deeper understanding of these forces will yield greater insight into new forms of politics among African American youth.

These "ghetto" and hip-hop-oriented cultural forms of civic behavior represent uncharted political territory in our understanding of democracy. Thus, the extent to which social science can identify these practices and uncover how they inhibit or contribute to new forms of political behavior, Ginwright asserts, will expand America's understanding of its democratic potential, benefiting all Americans.

**References**

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This pamphlet is a compilation of the ideas and direct quotes from Dr. Shawn Ginwright's "Toward a Politics of Relevance." © 2007 john@bl-pi.org Black & Latino Policy Institute.