

A REVIEW

Manning Marable

Black American Politics

: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson

(London: Verso, 1985)

by

Abdul Alkalimat

March 1986

Twenty-first Century Books and Publications
P.O. Box 803351 / Chicago, IL 60680 USA

Analysts of Black politics will increasingly face the need for theory because it will be demanded by new generations of activists, e.g., mobilized forces in key cities fighting for reform oriented Black mayors and the national activists of the Rainbow Coalition. Otherwise, people will excavate their theory from previous historical periods and set Black political thinking on the familiar path of trying again some outmoded or failed line. The aim of this review is to encourage more effort to develop a general theory of the Black experience, especially by young Black intellectual activists.

The book by Manning Marable, Black American Politics (first of a two volume work) is an important contribution to the recent increase in literature about Black politics. Basically there have been empirical case studies and journalistic surveys and comments, with few serious theoretical statements. Marable had distinguished himself as a Black political journalist, amassing great quantities of factual information, and reflecting on this in a widely published newspaper column, journal articles, and three book length collections. It is important that this new work is a conscious attempt to develop a general theory of Black politics, a basic summation of the logical structure and process of development of Black political action. After summing up Marable's main points, I will offer a critique.

Marable identifies politics as ideological action. "Politics is a conscious, historical act: the decision to create a new history from ones point of view within a class." (page 11) This sets the context for his definition of Black politics: "Black politics in the first instance begins when individuals within a subordinated social class transcend their fear of the master class and the daily coercion that buttresses its authority: Black political movements begin at the historical moment when groups of such individuals find a common strategy, social vehicle or mode of resistance that contradicts the dominant coercive apparatuses." (pages 11-12)

He finds that social movements have been the greatest example of "historical modes of class resistance" followed usually by electoral politics and less seldom by revolutionary (Marxist) politics. "A social movement is a series or combination of different historical modes of class struggle . . . these modes of protest are exerted against the existing structures of society, including both the mode of production and the state apparatus . . . attacks the power, prestige, and the excesses of the ruling class . . . What they all have in common in their spontaneity and effluence." (page 13)

According to Marable it is possible to develop a general theory of Black social protest. He uses six concrete examples from 1895 to 1960 to make his case: three from the USA (National Federation of Afro-American Women - 1895, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car

Porters Union - 1925, and the 1960s Southern Student sit-in movement), dockworkers in Guyana (1905), Frente Negra Brasileira in Brazil (1931), and the 1952 Campaign Against Unjust Laws in South Africa. Marable believes that "... Black politics in the US, understood as a series of resistance modes cannot be viewed outside of the political sociology of the entire African Diaspora" (page 12). On this basis he develops at least 9 general aspects shared in common by Black protest movements. They are: 1) "focus on immediate perceptible grievances"; 2) "encourage the oppressed to articulate their grievances"; 3) "forge some plan of collective action"; 4) "are rarely based within a single class or gender"; 5) "leadership . . . are frequently drawn from the small intelligensia: technicians, clergy, teachers, physicians, writers, and other petty bourgeois elements"; 6) "initiated by a set of organizations or leaders who . . . are replaced or supplanted by . . . new class leadership, frequently from the working class"; 7) "focus on direct confrontations with those who dominate the political and economic institutions of a society"; 8) "cut across generational lines"; 9) "whites also participated in the cause." (pages 16-23, 39-41)

When applying these general criteria to the whole sweep of Black history, Marable goes on to specify 7 historical modes of Black resistance:

1. revolts against enslavement in Africa;
2. revolts of Blacks as slaves within slave society;
3. abolitionist activity by free Blacks;
4. the development of autonomous African communities (Maroons);
5. the insurgency of rural Black farmers or peasants;
6. struggle based on black religious institutions and belief systems;
7. the organized labor movement. (pages 24-38)

In these forms of resistance, Black women have been neglected, while in fact their specific condition of triple oppression (exploitation based on class, race, and gender) had frequently led them to play critical roles in Black social protest, usually doing much of the "work" with little formal recognition. Marable also speaks out against "homophobia."

Based on these descriptive categories, Marable moves with his historical comparative method to examine three instances of campaigns for a national protest demonstration in Washington, DC in 1941, 1963, and 1983. His thesis is that the 1941

demonstration pushed forward the anti-racist objective of expanding democracy, even though A. Philip Randolph compromised most of the original demands of the demonstration, while the 1963 demonstration was the high point of the civil rights activism of the 1960s, even though followed by a deepening of the split of leading forces into a right (NAACP and the Urban League, etc.) and a left (SNCC and CORE, etc.). The 1983 march was more significant than the 1963 one because it broadened the social base of protest significantly: the left was welcome ("Marxist-Leninist, democratic socialist, and all shades of opinion in between"), the anti-corporate forces were in the crowd and on the podium, and there was cooperation between integrationist and Black nationalist forces. Marable clearly states his hope coming out of the 1983 march (the only one he was involved with): "The 1983 March may prove to represent a turning point in the history of civil rights demonstrations. If a fourth March on Washington -- when it occurs -- completes the theoretical transition, and declares that the fight for racial equality is the fight against monopoly capitalism the political aftermath of that mobilization will be radically different." (pages 123-124)

After thus having dealt with Black protest politics as social movement, Marable turns to electoral action. He begins by noting that in addition to democracy as a form of capitalist rule, there are Bonapartism (dictatorship of the military), fascism (dictatorship of the most backward elements of finance capital), and apartheid (white supremacy). These three forms of rule are turned to in times of crisis, and therefore as Black politics becomes more effective these ills will become more and more considered necessary alternatives by the US ruling class prior to implementing full mass democratic reforms -- full equality. Marable goes on to "discern three, or perhaps four, basic periods of Black electoral politics."

The first coincided with the end of the American Civil War, the emancipation of the slaves, and the emergence of Black politicians throughout the states of the old confederacy . . . the second period . . . developed during the regime of Jim Crow segregation, may be subdivided by the Great Depression of the 1930's. . . . The third and shortest period . . . coincides with the Second Reconstruction and the achievement of legal desegregation, from the early 1960's until the end of the Carter administration . . . A possible fourth period, emerging in the 1980's, is characterized by Blacks' increasingly independent attitudes towards both of the major capitalist parties -- exemplified by both the Harold Washington mayoral campaign in Chicago in 1982-83 and the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign in 1984. (pp. 143-144)

He focuses his survey of these four periods on the characteristics of the main political activists, Black elected and appointed officials. Marable concludes that there is a remarkable consistency:

The central fact about Black political culture from 1865 to 1985 is that only a small segment of the Afro-American social fraction, the petty bourgeoisie, has dominated the electoral machinery and patronage positions that regulate Black life and perpetuate the exploitation of Black labor. (p. 172)

This reveals a critical shortcoming of more radical social protest on behalf of the working class, especially Black workers. The Black petty bourgeois politicians "lack a social theory that explains the essential dynamics of the political economy of capitalism, and the utility of racism in the process of capital accumulation," have "misconceptions about nationalism, ethnicity, and gender, . . . overemphasize the importance of electoral participation," and "have a mediocre track record on forming effective coalitions and alliances with other social movements and political organizations." (pp.175-180) Marable also draws attention to the usually whispered about subject of corruption of Black politicians. But in the end, full access to electoral politics has been denied Blacks, and, therefore, Blacks are likely to keep fighting for it. This is the significance of the Washington and Jackson campaigns.

Marable turns to the 1982 election of Harold Washington as a great example of how social movement protest can be successfully transformed into effective electoral protest at the polls. He argues that this election was a qualitative leap in Black politics for four reasons:

Firstly, it represented the culmination of a series of Black social reform movements for socio-economic and political equality which had finally assumed a bourgeois democratic electoral form . . . Secondly, the focus of the mobilization was against the most entrenched and corrupt municipal political organization in 20th century America . . . Thirdly, the struggle . . . highlighted . . . the central theme of Black political culture, the historic division within the petty bourgeoisie between the accommodationists and the reformers . . . Finally, the Washington effort of 1983 illustrated not only the racial divisions within the American working class, but the inherent instability of social class forces that the Democratic Party comprises. (pp.192-193)

Marable goes on to analyze the campaign of Jesse Jackson for the 1984 candidacy of the Democratic Party as taking "the shape of a democratic, anti-corporate social movement." He attributes this to "the timely absence of the bulk of the national Black petty-bourgeois leadership from the internal campaign apparatus . . . filled, in part, by Black nationalists, Black, Latino and white Marxists and white liberals;" also, "the unprecedented participation of the Black church," and "its multinational character." (pp. 269-278) Actually it was the Black church that provided the most solid organizational basis of the campaign. On a national level the campaign was a top down media phenomenon taking advantage of a general anti-Reagan climate among the masses of mashed down Black and Latino workers. Many left forces, anxious for a real spontaneous movement to come along, joined the campaign but liquidated an independent role for the "left."

Marable makes a clear analysis of how he views Jackson:

In short, Jackson may best be understood as an ideological and political weather-VANE, an inconsistent and changeable indicator of the minds and moods of Black America. His weaknesses were all too obvious - his braggadocio, sexism, organizational sloppiness and self promotion. His lack of a comprehensive social theory permitted him to promote various schemes that were often theoretically at odds. But obscured were his singular strengths--his intimate connections with the King legacy, his position as a major figure in the Black church, his willingness to take political risks, and chiefly, his uncanny ability to sense the shifts of Black working class and rural poor opinion, far better than his petty bourgeois counterparts in the NAACP and the CBC (congressional Black caucus). As Black opinion moved, so moved Jesse. He was always determined to be at the head of the masses, no matter where they happened to be going. (p. 266)

In the end Marable cheers Jesse on, and considers his speech at the Democratic National Convention "a masterful performance" though he does cite others like Baraka who is quoted as wondering why he was going home with nothing.

In the end, Marable puts forward his view of the overall importance of electoral protest:

Through their practical struggles to build a viable 'second party' that may at some point break from the Democratic Party, the masses may come to recognize the unity between full democracy and social class equality: the necessity not to administer the state, but to transform capitalist society from the bottom up.

(p.305)

As stated, the intention of this review is to stress the need for general social theory of the Black experience, specifically on Black politics. We have outlined the general parameters of a theory of the Afro-American experience with a paradigm of unity. This is based on the actual experience of Black people -- in terms of modes of production, social institutions, culture, and consciousness. Its central dynamic is a dialectical process of transformation between conditions of social cohesion (slave society, tenant society, urban society) and social disruption (Atlantic slave trade, emancipation, migration). Further, a 4th category of social cohesion, (African Societies), is included but only as a logical residual by which we make clear that Black people come from African peoples. Table I presents a comparison of the overall Peoples College paradigm of historical periodization with the analysis by Marable. Here Peoples College presents an intellectual map by which we can locate Marable's theoretical foci, and examine his silences.

Several important issues emerge, especially the issue of Marable's silences: (1) There is a general neglect of the basic periods of change in which social disruption is a modal experience. (See Slave Trade, Emancipation, and Migration.) Some how Cingue and all others who rebelled against the experience of the slave trade constitute a bonifide historical mode of protest. Other example can be found for each of the other experiences as well; (2) Our theoretical analysis of electoral activity should be inclusive of national and regional trends. Marable makes this distinction clearly in his inclusion of southern slave revolts and abolitionist activity by free Blacks in the north. Our theoretical analysis must take note of the inclusion of Blacks inside electoral politics (e.g. early Pennsylvania due to the egalitarianism of the Quakers). The issue is not empirical facts as such, but the adequacy of our theoretical model; (3) each historical experience should be comprehensively treated, for even in Marable's main case, the urban society, we find he does not regard Black student revolt or Black womens struggle as a historical mode of resistance.

Marable makes several curious innovations on the Afro-American national question. The most far-reaching is his calling Afro-Americans a social fraction: "A combination of classes which develops cultural, economic and political cohesiveness as a historical unit." (p. 6) "Social fractions within a nation may be a numerical minority, e.g., Afro-Americans in the United States, or it may be an absolute majority in one state, e.g., South Africa's African majority." (p. 307) This seems to liquidate Afro-Americans as a distinct nationality, placing class as the dominant force. Further, it calls the entire USA a nation rather than what it is, a multinational state. While there seems little evidence for Afro-Americans to be regarded as a fully

TABLE I

HISTORICAL PERIODIZATION OF BLACK POLITICS by MARABLE

	Black Social Protest		Black Political Protest	
OF	Theoretical:	Empirical:	Theoretical:	Empirical:
AFRO-AMERICANS	Historical	3 Marches on	Stages of Case Studies	
by PEOPLES	Modes of	Washington	Black Electoral of Electoral	
COLLEGE	Resistance	Activity	Campaigns	

1. African Societies	1. Against enslavement	0	0	0
2. Slave Trade	0	0	0	0
3. Slave Society	2. Slave Revolt 3. Abolitionism by Free Blacks 4. Maroons	0	0	0
4. Emancipation	0	0	1. Emancipation	0
5. Tenant Society	5. Peasant Revolt 1941 6. Religious Revolt	2. Jim Crow	0	
6. Migration	0	0	0	0
7. Urban Society	7. Organized Labor Movement	1963 1983	3. Second Recon-struction 4. New Black Independents	1. Mayoral Campaign of Harold Washington 2. Presidential

Campaign of

J. Jackson

1. Abdul Alkalimat and Associates, Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A Peoples College Primer (Chicago: Twenty-first Century Books and Publications, 1985).

2. Manning Marable, Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson (London: Verso, 1985).

developed nation, it is equally incorrect to liquidate nationality altogether. Of course we fully agree with Marable's political observation that "class struggle, or more specifically, the conscious struggle for power, is for Black America historically a dual dynamic: it has been both anti-racist and nationalistic; it has attacked racial segregation, yet affirmed the cultural and social integrity of Afro-American people." (p. 56)

Further, we can't find the theoretical justification for his insistence on analyzing the entire African Diaspora for a theory of Black politics in the USA. One would have to include the full range of factors to establish causal linkages, e.g., mutual influences and penetrations, common sources of conflict and contradictions. He could use Wallerstein's world system theory, the cultural continuity thesis of the Herskovits-Turner school, or simply DuBoisian pan-africanist politics. Such an analysis might be possible, but it is more declared than demonstrated -- theory by fiat.*

The most important omission is an analysis of the revolutionary option. Of course this is more due to the relative weakness of Black revolutionary forces, and the difficulty of making such an analysis under the fascist climate of Reagan. However, the revolutionary alternative is the one option that does require conscious political thought whereas the others (and here I disagree with Marable) can and do spring spontaneously from mass struggle as guided by the structures of the mainstream. The ruling class likes nothing better than a mass movement to go into electoral politics if the option is more directly revolutionary, for in that event there is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of their rule. It remains an amazing political weakness that the role of the left in American politics, and the Black movement in particular, is so seldom discussed and almost never understood. And yet, the left has been an extremely important part of most movements in good and bad ways. Our only exception remains, unfortunately, esoteric polemics hidden in the archives, and a very limited popular left press like Radical America, Monthly Review, Socialist Review, etc.

This book by Marable is a good contribution to this important discussion of theory. It is necessary for a dialogue to begin among recent contributors to this literature, e.g., Vincent Franklin, Lloyd Hogan, Houston Baker, Clarence Mumford, Robert Harris, Ron Bailey, James Jennings, Amiri Baraka, Cedric Robinson, Rod Bush, Linda Burnham, Jack O'Dell, Bill Sales, and many others. The production of social theory is a social process, it can best occur as an emerging school of thought. Black intellectuals must not repeat the error of only speaking with whites, being a token, but must make the sacrifice to forge unity with other Black intellectuals. Of course, finally, theory is a universal expression of human understanding and should be

developed by everyone able and so inclined, to be used by all forces of good will for progressive social change.