Black Power, White Power, and the Negro Intellectual

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Current Literature on Negro Education

BOOK REVIEWS

Black Power, White Power, and the Negro Intellectual*

In the din and confusion caused by the collapse of the Civil Rights movement, efforts to give careful thought to fundamental issues are all too easily overwhelmed by the frenzied shouts of radical partisans and irresponsible reactionaries. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton have written a requiem for the Civil Rights movement and a penetrating arraisonment of racism in American society. Arguing that the coalition politics of civil rights organizations resulted from a disastrous misperception of the interests of reform elements like labor unions and liberal politicians, the authors call for a new pattern of Negro political action based on explicit principles of group solidarity and a rejection of white values. But the argument is extended beyond the American scene. "Black Power", the authors write, "means that black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the 'Third World'; that we see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles around the world." Unwittingly, Carmichael and Hamilton reveal the superficiality of the "Third World" analogy when used as a model for "liberation politics" in America. Liberation movements in Asia and Africa are nationalist, operate in different historical contexts, and when successful, achieve goals, like national independence, that are not antipode to the American scene. In the United States, Negroes can surely organize communities to reduce their political ineffectuality and social dependency. But this is hardly nationalist independence, or the means for a serious attempt at a reorganization of the American economic order. Carmichael and Hamilton weaken their position by frequent recourse to such intellectual sleight of hand. Occasionally, the romantic strain and taste for the dramatic and exotic in their thought, allow them to write patent nonsense, such as their fanciful opinion that "the extent to which black Americans can and do 'trace their roots' to Africa, to that extent will they be able to be more effective on the political scene." These rhetorical excesses do not, however, destroy the value of their book. The issues of race, political power and social change in America have been made sharper by their effort, and future discussions should be free of some of the shibboleths of the doctrinaire integrationists, so neatly disposed of in the early part of this book.

A more serious weakness of the book is its failure to develop a systematic analysis of the American economic and social system as a determinant of race relations. There is too much reliance on facile phrases and gross descriptive categories, like "institutional racism," creating vague and elusive impressions, rather than the kind of social analysis which could be the basis for a serious political program. As a consequence, "Black Power" as used by the authors, is still no more than a provocative phrase serving to obscure the tangle of political and social vulnerabilities of Negroes in American society.

While rejecting the philosophy and tactics of integrationists, Carmichael and Hamilton have failed to develop a substantive social strategy based on their perception of institutionalized racism. It is remarkable, for example, that after making a few rather obvious remarks about

demographic trends in American cities, the authors offer no explicit analysis of how Negroes may translate increased numbers into power that would increase the possibility of solving the social problems that beset the ghetto, which, after all, is the whole point of seeking "Black Power." Similarly, there is no analysis of how newly emerging strategies of white urban planners, such as "metropolitanism" and resource dispersion, may be the means for destroying all possibility for the political power the authors blithely assume will automatically follow from increased numbers of Negroes in cities and their political unification. Assailing "institutional racism," is hardly the equivalent of an exposure of how institutions, like banks and the corporate giants of American capitalism, and the operation of the social system itself, manage to make the political activity of Negroes empty posturing. The Negro's real confrontation is with the best financed, most formidable array of institutions in the western world, and not with the pathetic redneck sheriffs in Lowndes County or the backwaters of the Mississippi delta, who have been cast adrift by new technology and demographic change to languish in bitterness on the rural fringe of American society.

One irony is that the authors, for all their talk of the "Third World," are not basically revolutionary intellectuals at all, but American to the core in their fundamentally *ad hoc*, reformist approach to political action, their belief that more Negro political power will mean progressive social change, and their optimism about community regeneration and the possibility of creating a humane social order in the United States.

A far more pessimistic assessment of the future of race relations in America is found in the brilliant work of François Masnata, of the Institute of Political Studies in Paris. Masnata rivets his attention to the question of White Power in America, and how certain fundamental values limit the possibilities for basic social change. The very elements of the American system which most Americans support, federalism, states rights, private property and free enterprise, he argues, have forged a powerful chain of protection for private and institutional racism. Like many other foreign observers, Masnata finds white Americans schizophrenic: "L'Américain blanc a donc une 'double personnalité': il est d'une part 'bon américain' croyant au Credo de son pays, et d'autre part raciste." Like Carmichael and Hamilton, he insists that the politics of coalition simply will not work for Negroes. Masnata bases his argument on the fact that white liberals are too bound to procedural reformism and the ideal of political stability to abandon traditional forms of protest which are now clearly ineffectual. Thus, when the school integration campaign in the North was opposed by the full force of city hall, hostile teachers' unions, and white "citizen-taxpayers" groups, the so-called alliance collapsed. After the legal remedies had been exhausted and found to be unproductive, the white integrationists were unwilling to take the next step—to challenge the system itself. This challenge came later in the form of demands for decentralization or community control of schools, and Negro parents had few, if any, white allies in this effort. Masnata concludes that America has enormous resources for nurturing racism, which has survived and flourished because of the character of American culture. He foresees no alteration in the Negro's status without a radical change in American political institutions and social values; and change of this dimension and character has no supporters outside of powerless out-groups of society, like the hippies. Instead of change, there looms the very real possibility of a garrison state organized specifically to repress Negroes trapped in the nation's decaying ghettos.

Unlike, Masnata, who indicts white Americans for the present racial crisis, Harold Cruse, argues that Negroes are stymied because they do not have "a real functional corps of intellectuals able to confront and deal perceptively with American realities on a level that social condi-
Cruse has written a rambling, at times peevish, but very important book. Tracing much of the confusion of Negro intellectuals to a persistent failure to analyze the role of culture in social and political struggles, Cruse sets out to develop a critique of the Negro's reaction to American culture. It is his view that neither the integrationists, nor the nationalists, have an understanding of the scope or significance of America's cultural malaise. In a typically turgid passage, Cruse writes that contemporary America "is a cultural desert strewn with the corpses of commercialized commodity-art where sweet voices sing lullabies of cultural degeneration; its aesthetics are anti-life, its images those of lunacy and the propaganda of destruction."

When writing about the development of black nationalism, Cruse is especially effective, and well-informed about its development in New York. One important contribution to our knowledge of this continuing strain in Negro thought is his able analysis of the West Indian influence. In assessing the West Indian impact on American Negro thought however, Cruse tends to lose perspective, largely because he shares the provincialism of most New Yorkers, which allows him to write the remarkable, and obviously wrong, statement that "the way Harlem goes (or does not go) so goes all black America." Cruse's provincialism also causes him to devote far too much space to the tedious internecine squabbles of groups like the Harlem Writers Guild and the Harlem Writers Club. When not swamped by the details of petty feuds between political and cultural factions in Harlem, Cruse often reveals himself to be a shrewd critic of the shrill bombast that has been the counterfeit of serious thought in the Negro community. He does yeoman service in exposing, for example, the bogus Africanism that has been grafted on the post-civil rights phase of the Negro freedom movement. He writes for example that "the readiness of most Black Nationalist trends, to lean heavily on the African past and the African image, is nothing but a convenient cover-up for an inability to come to terms with the complex demands of the American reality." Similarly, Black Power advocates in Cruse's view, flounder in "a muddled world of vague ideas and conceptual confusion," bravely hoping to cover what he views as a hasty retreat by extravagant emotional appeals to Negroes frustrated by white society's sullen refusal to dismantle the structure of racism in American life. Sometimes Cruse's criticism slips into gratuitous vituperation, such as his comment that "even at this advanced stage in Negro history, the Negro intellectual is a retarded child."

One of the fundamental weaknesses in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual is the author's failure to deal explicitly with the social and historical sources of the Negro intellectual's inability to establish a rich and vigorous intellectual tradition. The problems of social isolation, habitual anti-intellectualism, and the lack of the institutional resources which support such a tradition, like universities, publishing houses and journals of opinion, deserve a prominent place in any fair account of the crisis faced by contemporary Negro intellectuals. Despite all of these faults, Mr. Cruse's book is a useful addition to the growing body of literature on Negro life and thought in America.

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Negro Higher Education in the 1960's*

Another document can be added to the already long list of studies suggesting cures for the ills of Negro higher education. Beginning with the assumption that