

BEYOND BLACK POWER: AFRICAN AMERICAN PROTEST AND POLITICS, 1965-1975

CATHERINE MADDISON

My work has focused on African American politics and protest movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in Charlotte, North Carolina and Washington DC. This study has grown out of my larger concern with trying to understand both the Black Power movement and, more generally, the decade from 1965-1975, two themes in modern American history which, I believe, have been poorly understood.

Whereas there are now many excellent local studies of the African American protest movement up to the mid-1960s, the student of the later period finds that the focus abruptly shifts from the local to the national, and the tone from sympathetic to sorrowful. Coverage of the late 1960s and early 1970s remains comparatively sketchy, and what has been written tends to portray a few events as representative of African American thought and activism as a whole. While the 'Montgomery to Selma' narrative of civil rights history has been widely criticised, accounts of the later movement still rely on a similarly reductive and simplified typology. The violent feud between the US Organization and the Black Panther Party is presented as evidence of the factionalism among African Americans, the controversy over community control of schools in New York is seen as representing black separatism and anti-Semitism, and the decline of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality indicate the growing impotence of African American protest organizations at this time. For example, an essay by Clayborne Carson on African American political thought cites the US/Panthers clash as representative of 'serious ideological conflicts within the African American political community.'(Carson 1996:

121-2) While I do not wish to deny the significance of these much-cited events, I would argue that they occurred within highly specific contexts, and should not be read as symptomatic of developments within black America as a whole. I would like to argue for more attention to be paid to the types of activism undertaken on a local level by African Americans following the decline of the national civil rights movement. Examination of the priorities, strategies and results of this later protest activity will, I hope, help us to flesh out the meanings of Black Power and reach a more realistic assessment of its impact and appeal.

I would like to focus here on the way in which the specific history of SNCC has been seen as representative of shifts within African American protest movements and popular opinion in the mid to late 1960s. For example, Nicolaus Mills's *Like A Holy Crusade* directly links the rise of Black Power to the disappointment of the 1964 Atlantic City Democratic Conference, where African Americans from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party were not permitted to replace the standard Democratic delegation. (Mills 1992) SNCC occupies a central place in the literature of both the civil rights movement and of its aftermath, given its pioneering community work and courageous protest campaigns. Its rapid path from interracialism to separatism, and from effectiveness to irrelevance, is thus of particular interest to historians. Yet it was this self-same accelerated process of development that helped undermine the organization. Being a SNCC worker in the rural South was a stressful, dangerous occupation, and many activists were sustained by a liberal belief that, once awakened to the dire situation of Southern blacks, American institutions would respond. However, as it became increasingly apparent that this faith would not be rewarded, anger and disillusionment grew. Within this context, and considering the sometimes insensitive behaviour of white members, as well as the disturbing tendency of some Southern blacks to defer to them, it is unsurprising that the organization became increasingly

responsive to the efforts of a small, Atlanta-based faction to impose a separatist policy, and that it became difficult for it to develop coherent policies and goals.

Yet most African Americans, even those active in civil rights, had not experienced such an accelerated, and highly public, journey from optimism and hope to angry rejection of white liberals. Although, by the late 1960s, support for integration was rarely heard and scepticism about the sincerity of whites was increasingly voiced, this did not necessarily spell the end of working relationships with whites or of effective activism. White allies may have faced increasing scrutiny, but those judged as being both sincere and useful were accepted. In one ironic example, the efforts of those staff members who had successfully promoted black separatism within SNCC to do so in the Atlanta ghetto were a resounding failure: when they criticised the presence of an anti-poverty worker in the community, derisively labelling him a 'white Jesus', residents strongly defended this man, citing his record of committed service on their behalf. (Carson 1981, 238-239; Tuck 2001, 232-233)

Two excellent recent case studies further suggest a divergence between events within national organizations and those in local communities. Heather Thompson's *Whose Detroit?* outlines a history of successful protest in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Motor City, as a coalition of African American and white radicals used the courts and unionism to both improve conditions for black auto workers and reform the city's criminal justice system. (Thompson 2001) Robert Self's *American Babylon* places the Panthers within the context of the Bay Area's particular political and social history and, while not denying their flaws, highlights the Party's successes in effectively dramatising local grievances over city policies, especially urban renewal. (Self 2003)

However, valuable though Thompson and Self's work is, both authors focus on cities which produced particularly notable, and sometimes nationally recognised, black radical organizations and leaders. Were Detroit and Oakland, I wondered, exceptions rather than the rule? I thus decided to select cities which were not such well-

known exporters of African American militancy, and chose Charlotte and Washington DC. My choice of Charlotte reflected my interest in the years after the end of the national civil rights movement in the South, while my selection of Washington stemmed from my discovery of its unique political history and its under-explored activist community. In this paper, I will focus on my research on Washington DC, so that I might present a more detailed picture of my work.

Washington DC, 1965-1975

The history of African American protest in Washington provides a particularly interesting counterpoint to the dominant narrative of Black Power history, given the large numbers of former SNCC workers who came to the capital during that time. They included Charles Jones, who founded an organization dedicated to eradicating housing discrimination, and Dion Diamond, who worked for the local anti-poverty agency. Whereas historians have tended to focus on individuals such as Bob Moses, who left SNCC in 1965 and subsequently renounced the movement altogether, Jones and Diamond are arguably more representative examples of ex-members who continued their political involvement within local communities. Washington's anti-poverty agency, UPO, was particularly renowned for its high proportion of SNCC alumni. Even within the small cohort of former SNCC workers, people who were especially likely to 'burn out' and become nihilistic, nonetheless many remained committed to working for social change in a constructive fashion.

Former SNCC staffers were attracted to Washington not only by its majority-black population, but also by its unique political history. The city lacked any form of elected local government, having been governed by Congress since the Reconstruction era. Pressure to return home rule to the city, from both popular movements and the Johnson administration, was building, and it seemed that Congressional control could not last for much longer, although it in fact survived until 1974. With the city's future in

flux, and with no entrenched white political elite to offer resistance, there seemed real potential for young black activists to take power. Indeed, David Halberstam described mid-1960s Washington as 'a political-economic-social cauldron just waiting to boil over.' (Halberstam 1998: 544)

This sense of impending change also meant that the late 1960s and early 1970s, far from being characterised primarily by frustration and impotence, were a time of intense debate among Washington activists regarding the future direction of the city. There was a real sense of possibility, and hopes that the capital could become a national model for solving African American urban problems under African American leadership.

My research has particularly focused on the work of Julius Hobson, whose involvement in protest in DC spanned the 1950s to the 1970s and covered a wide range of issues. Hobson's career is of particular interest in terms of re-assessing definitions of Black Power. Although regarded as a leading Black Power proponent in Washington, even becoming involved in several attempts to found a national Black Power organization, he does not fit the stereotype of the irrational militant, more interested in posturing than taking action. Although Hobson was always willing to employ publicity stunts and inflammatory rhetoric in order to attract media attention, this was a part of his overall strategy, rather than the only card he had to play. A statistician for the federal government, Hobson continually stressed the importance of careful research and preparation. This strategy paid off in 1967 when he won a court case against the Washington Board of Education, requiring the Board to take steps to combat economic and social discrimination within city schools. A second decision in the *Hobson* case in 1971 went further, requiring the Board to spend exactly the same amount of money per pupil, in an effort to eliminate funding discrepancies between white and black schools.

Although Hobson was no separatist, believing that blacks could not succeed alone in overcoming inequalities in American society, he insisted that blacks should direct protest movements, and that any white person who worked with him should accept his leadership. He told an interviewer in 1974 that 'if there is a white person out there who believes in concepts of justice and freedom, and he is willing to help push the wagon up the hill, I'm willing to let him help push it. And I'm in charge of the wagon – as long as he understands that, everything's fine.' (Hobson 1974) Nonetheless, he retained close ties with numerous Washington-area white liberals and radicals.

Hobson's willingness to work with white Washingtonians, within a framework of black control, was reflected in other local protest movements. One particularly striking example is the Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis. The ECTC began life as a neighborhood based group in North East Washington, opposed to plans for a freeway through their community. Since this freeway was part of a larger system designed to loop around the centre of Washington, displacing many people from their homes, it quickly evolved into a citywide organization.

As it did so, most of the white Catholics who had initially formed its leadership were replaced by an assortment of well-known local black militants, including future Washington Mayor Marion Barry. However, this did not reflect a move towards black separatism as much as a realistic awareness of contemporary racial politics. Given that the majority of people who would be affected by the freeway plans were African Americans, the group clearly felt that its message would be more credible if its public leadership was also black. Its use of slogans such as 'White Men's Roads Through Black Men's Homes' illustrates its decision to frame the freeway issue in terms of racial discrimination, thus attracting a wider support base than those directly affected. The founding members continued to be highly involved in the ECTC, carrying out much of its correspondence and behind the scenes organizational work. Furthermore, the ECTC

carried out, over a period of several years, an innovative and inclusive protest campaign which involved not only white participants but also many of Washington's notoriously conservative African American civic associations. Although, as Zachary Schrag argues, the eventual abandonment of the Washington freeway project owed more to scepticism from within the federal government than to popular opposition, the long-term cohesion of the ECTC coalition should be considered an achievement in itself. (Schrag 2004).

I do not intend to portray Washington as a place where racial antagonisms did not exist, but rather to argue that black nationalism was just one of many competing currents of thought in the city, rather than the dominant perspective. Nationalist ideas waxed and waned in the capital, becoming especially influential in 1968, particularly after the devastating riot following Martin Luther King's death and subsequent demands for destroyed white-owned stores to be replaced by black businesses. DC journalist Sam Smith argues that Stokely Carmichael's presence in Washington during late 1967 and early 1968 strengthened the nationalist tendency, noting that his arrival signalled a higher level of hostility towards white participation in protest movements. (Smith 2005) Yet Carmichael's efforts to strengthen black solidarity in Washington, principally by building a coordinating council for local African American organizations, the Black United Front, seemed reliant on his personal presence and prestige: after he left DC in late 1968 the Front swiftly collapsed, and resistance to interracial activism lessened.

Cultural nationalism was also weaker in Washington than in other cities with large African American populations. Detroit spawned both a thriving Black Arts movement and the Republic of New Afrika, an organization dedicated to founding a separate African American state. (Thompson 1999) In Newark, Amiri Baraka established a network of political and artistic movements centred around Afrocentric ideas. (Woodard 1999) Although similar projects existed in DC, such as the New

School of Afro-American Thought, such efforts were not nearly as influential. I would argue that, whereas both Newark and Detroit were contested cities in the 1960s, where white ethnic groups fought to prevent African Americans from gaining power, in Washington the need to define and assert black identity was felt less strongly, since few people envisaged any future for the city other than black political control.

Therefore, I view ideological and class-based divides as being comparatively more significant in Washington than purely racial divisions. This is illustrated through the history of the Washington Board of Education, which was the site of some of the most intensive debate regarding the future direction of Washington. The heightened importance of education reflected both the fact that the Board was the only elected body in the city, having been created in 1968 as a by-product of the *Hobson* suit, and the crisis in the city's schools, left in a chaotic state after years of under-funding. Amongst the Board's membership, and during its volatile public meetings, conservatives and liberals of both races argued over such issues as reforming the disciplinary system and community control of the schools. In general, representatives from the wealthy, white Northwest area of Washington tended to side with middle-class blacks from Far Northeast neighborhoods, in opposition to the radical policies promulgated by poorer blacks from the Southeast and Near Northeast and their allies from white liberal enclaves such as Capitol Hill and Southwest. These coalitions held together through the 1970s, and indeed continued to define the political makeup of the city after the introduction of an elected Mayor and Council in 1974.

Conclusions and Suggestions

I would like to put forward several tentative suggestions resulting from my research into African American politics and protest strategies at a local level from 1965-1975.

The first would be to argue for a greater degree of continuity between the late 1960s and earlier decades than is generally acknowledged. It may be the case that we should see the inter-racialism of organizations such as early SNCC and CORE as the aberration rather than the norm. After all, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, created in 1957, was an emphatically black-led and centred organization, following the arguments of Bayard Rustin that it not be an interracial group, given the lack of enthusiasm Northern African Americans were displaying for CORE. (Fairclough 1987: 31) In discussing the protest campaigns of the late 1960s and beyond in Georgia, Stephen Tuck notes that the focus on specific local issues rather than broad demands for rights was not a new phenomenon, but a return to an older tradition of black protest that had been temporarily 'obscured' by recent 'set-piece battles for integration'. (Tuck 2001: 236) In Washington, there had never been a mass, non-violent, integrationist movement, and early 1960s rights-based activism had focused primarily on securing more jobs for African Americans. Calls for integration made little sense in a black-majority city, which had been largely desegregated in the 1950s following federal pressure: Hobson's lawsuit against the Board of Education, which aimed to end resource disparities rather than to re-impose desegregation, reflected not so much a rejection of integrationism as an acknowledgement of social realities in Washington, where the school system was over 90% black.

The second would be to suggest that, just as historians have moved towards understanding the civil rights movement as a phenomenon with roots in specific local political circumstances, the same should be done for Black Power. Indeed, the need to place Black Power ideas within a local context is even greater, since I would argue that it was a philosophy designed to be rooted within specific local communities, and thus one that made most sense when viewed in this light. Much of what we understand as 'Black Power' may be more accurately viewed as a return to, or a continuation of, the community-based, single-issue projects described by Tuck. Commentators have

queued up to deride the folly of calls for African American control in a nation where whites were by far the majority race. While this is a valid criticism, most Black Power advocates saw their ideas as being applicable primarily in communities where African Americans formed a majority, such as large cities and Black Belt counties, rather than on the national level. (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967) Thus, national organizations that espoused Black Power, such as SNCC and CORE, failed to develop coherent programmes and policies, and the Panthers retreated to their home base of Oakland rather than developing their nationwide network of chapters. However, within the context of particular cities, especially those with large African American populations, ideas about building independent black power bases from which to establish a degree of political control did make sense, and thus local organizations and leaders were often more successful than their national counterparts. Conversely, it was again local factors that limited the progress they were able to make, primarily the economic problems experienced by many cities in the 1970s, rather than the factionalism and violence emphasised by some historians.

The final point I would like to make is that it has been our obsession with relations between white and black Americans, and with black violence, that has limited our understanding of not only Black Power and what it meant, but also of the late 1960s and early 1970s in general. I would argue that historians have followed the news media of the period in focusing on the sensationalistic aspects of African American thought and activism, at the expense of less dramatic, but more representative, developments. To be sure, this is partly the fault of those black militant leaders, such as Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, who continually employed inflammatory language, but it is nonetheless the job of historians to look deeper than the surface level. In the late 1960s, the Black Power advocate Julius Lester wrote that 'all the white folks wanted to know was if Black Power was anti-white and if it meant

killing white folks.' (Lester 1970: 98). Thirty-five years after Lester wrote these words, I am not sure that much progress has been made.



Works Cited

- Carmichael, Stokely and Hamilton, Charles V., 1967. Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Carson, Clayborne 1981. In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Carson, Clayborne 1996. 'Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era', in The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. by Tony Badger and Brian Ward, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 115-130.
- Fairclough, Adam, 1987. To Redeem The Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Halberstam, David 1998. The Children, New York: Random House.
- Hobson, Julius, interview with David Eaton, 1974: Series 17, 'Manuscripts and Interviews', Julius Hobson Papers, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, Washington DC.
- Lester, Julius, 1970. Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!, London: Allison and Busby.
- Mills, Nicolaus 1992. Like a Holy Crusade: Mississippi 1964 – The Turning of the Civil Rights Movement in America, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee,
- Schrag, Zachary M. 2004. 'The Freeway Fight in Washington D.C.: The Three Sisters Bridge in Three Administrations', Journal of Urban History, Vol. 30, No. 5, 648-673.
- Self, Robert O. 2003. American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Smith, Sam, conversation with author, Washington DC, March 18th 2005.
- Thompson, Heather Ann 2001. Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Thompson, Julius E., 1999. Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960-1995. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.
- Tuck, Beyond Atlanta.
- Tuck, Stephen G.N. 2001. Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980, Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Woodard, Komozi, 1999. A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.