

THE REDISCOVERY OF BLACK NATIONALISM

by Theodore Draper

Viking, 211 pp., \$5.95

BLACK NATIONALISM IN AMERICA

edited by John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick

Bobbs-Merrill, 568 pp., \$8.50

Reviewed by Gary T. Marx

■ The direction of the black movement in America has clearly shifted. Many activists who were once caught up in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s majestic dream now visualize only Malcolm X's nightmare. With the change of goals from integration and assimilation to pluralism and, for some activists, separatism, the relative paucity of materials on black nationalism in American history has become apparent. These two books are thus welcome contributions. They supplement each other, one being an interpretive essay and the other a documentary anthology.

While Theodore Draper breaks little new ground, drawing largely on secondary historical sources and some of the arguments of W. E. B. DuBois and Harold Cruse, he brings together and analyzes a number of recurring themes in the history of American black nationalism.

The peculiar status of blacks in America, which Draper sees as involving something more than an ethnic group (because of slavery and the failure of assimilation), yet less than a colonized or third-world national group (due to diverse origins and numerical minority in a new land), has given rise to a persistent "fantasy of black nationalism" – the title of an earlier essay in *Commentary* of which this brief book is an expanded version. Other people have gladly left their ethnic ties behind them; "only the Negro has had to invent a spurious nationalism to cope with his extraordinary position."

In an argument that indicates the essentially "white" perspective of the author, Mr. Draper treats the black nationalist movement not as an autonomous development of a proud people seeking identity and self-determination, but merely as a reaction against an intractable and indifferent white society – and one well worth being integrated into at that.

Broken promises by whites and despair over the depth of racism have occasionally led disillusioned blacks to renounce the United States. Their great difficulty lies in finding an alternative. Although such blacks as Martin R.

Delaney and Paul Cuffe, as well as certain whites, among them Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, have favored emigration, where could Negroes go? Mexico, Canada, Haiti, some part of Africa? Where can one find a country today that is willing to open its doors to millions of immigrants? There is a further problem: the blacks who have the skills and resources most needed to build a new nation have generally been those least attracted to the project.

A second solution is "internal statism," the establishment of an independent black state within the U.S. This idea, once backed by the Communist Party and the Black Muslims, and currently espoused by the Detroit-based Republic of New Africa, raises other issues. How are the blacks going to induce the United States government to support financially and cooperate in its own partial destruction? How will the blacks deal with their wide geographic distribution and the presence of whites in the territory they request?

Still others have promoted a cultural and psychological nationalism, which stresses the development of black lifestyles and feelings of solidarity with people of color everywhere. While these factors are important, they are unlikely to effect fundamental policy change.

Draper's review of the dilemmas, contradictions, failures, and occasional excesses of American black nationalism is helpful, and it shows an honesty that is often lacking among Left-leaning whites in their response to radical blacks. Yet, in a society as rich in self-deception as ours, it is a little disquieting to have Draper devote all his attention and moralizing (some of it is a little snide) to the fantasies of black nationalism rather than to the far more damaging fantasies of white nationalism. Furthermore, the significance of a social movement does not lie simply in the rationality of its ideas nor in its successes. Draper underplays the possible strategic importance of extreme black nationalism in making moderate black leaders more acceptable to the white establishment and in arousing psychological and emotional responses among millions of ghetto dwellers. To judge black nationalism only by the logic of its ideas is to miss something crucial.

John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick have gathered considerable long-neglected material in their anthology, the first collection of original writings devoted entirely to black nationalism. Moreover, the editors, who are both academics and civil rights activists (Bracey and Meier are historians, Rudwick a sociologist) bring to their task wide knowledge, a sense of perspective, critical sympathy, and a keen eye for relevant and little-known details.

Part of a series designed "to provide the essential primary sources of the American experience," the book is divided into five main sections, covering the origins, maturation, flowering, eclipse, and revival of black nationalism from the first Negro churches and benefit societies in the late 1700s to the Revolutionary Action Movement and the Black Panthers.

Its seventy-seven documents are drawn from speeches, manifestos, letters, leaflets, poems, books, Negro newspapers, and the proceedings of colored people's conventions. Relatively well-known writings by Henry Highland Garnet and Marcus Garvey are included, as well as material ferreted out from more obscure sources, such as Bishop Henry M. Turner's 1898 article arguing that "God Is a Negro" and David Nickens's 1832 "Address to the People of Color in Chillicothe, Ohio."

In a thoughtful introductory article the editors identify seven types of black nationalism, ranging from simple racial solidarity and pluralism to cultural nationalism, territorial separatism, and Pan-Negroism. By defining the movement thus broadly something



is lost in precision, yet much is gained in scope.

What strikes one in reading these documents is the long history of many aspects of the current black power movement, such as race pride and self-reliance, the coexistence of nationalist and integrationist goals, sometimes in the same individuals, and the irony of a separatism born of the failure of integration but nevertheless often advocated as a means of achieving full acceptance in American society.

These books make it clear that, whatever the resolution of America's racial problems, it must take a genuinely pluralistic form, which, while granting blacks the same rights as other groups, appreciates their unique history, heritage, and interests, as well as the potential beauty and utility of strong ethnic communities.

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