Bloody Lowndes

David Eagle (October 26, 2009)

Bloody Lowndes is a provocative study that details the rise and fall of radical, democratic black freedom politics in Lowndes county, Alabama. The author argues that "neither apocalyptic events, nor movement messiahs...set the stage for the radicalization of black politics, but the slow and hard work of organizing" (141). However, "freedom politics was hard to keep alive;" its demise is traceable to the "failure on the on the part of [its] advocates to execute the viable political program that they had devised" (245). Jeffries tells the tale of the birth of a radically democratic organization with tremendous promise, which ends up being unravelled by both the personal aspirations of movement leaders and by deeply entrenched institutional and structural forces that favor white privilege. Jeffries is careful to describe the positive changes that were instituted by black politicians – in his book he paints a "remarkable...and cautionary tale of the perils of power" (6). This book follows the work of Du Bois who went against mainstream practice to examine a small, poor, rural, out of the way county in the South for signs of creative resistance and extraordinary resilience (c.f. 2005, 109-131).

Methodologically, Jeffries is careful to stick to describing the nuances and contextual complexity of the historical record. Unlike Roediger, Jeffries does not dissect the historical record with the "blunt instrument" of a singular psychological theory (Kolchin 2002, 166), but stays with an analysis of the material motivations for and consequences of white supremacy.

Following Dewey, Jeffries approaches his study with a firm belief in democracy as a "way of life" (1982, 94). He is out to demonstrate how the early organizing efforts in Lowndes county proves that a more fully democratic culture has immense transformative power, in spite of its ultimate failure there. Jane Addams famously said that "action is the sole medium of expression for ethics"(Addams 1902, 273-274) and Jeffries follows this reasoning in his critique of organizations like the NAACP that fought for civil rights on the ideological level and often achieved little for poor and working class black Americans in the Black Belt (168-169, 188).

Jeffries approaches racism from a predominantly structuralist standpoint – racist structures provide the key reasons for the many enduring problems of Lowndes blacks today. Two structures are particularly important in this study: republicanism and backroom politics. Through a variety of examples, the author shows how state and local control functioned as a major impediment to the advancement of blacks. Not until the federal government created and enforced mechanisms that trumped state and county power could racist policies be changed. Structural forces made change from within impossible; white elite interests were simply too entrenched. But even with federal involvement, white power was remarkably creative and resilient. The fact that today many rural public schools in the Black Belt (and elsewhere) remain effectively segregated and grossly under-resourced is clear evidence of this fact. Jeffries also shows that once backroom deals and non-accountable leadership developed, freedom politics were mortally wounded. In the words of Jeffrey Stout, democratic change "is not achieved by conforming one's opinions to those of the majority, but rather by expressing judgments that withstand critical scrutiny in a discussion open to all" (Stout 2004, 281).

Jefferies writes appreciatively of the role (although often limited) of the black church in supporting black advancement. However, he stops short of detailing how the white church offered a parallel support to white power. There is very little work, historical or sociological, which explores the place of the white church in supporting the racism of "ordinary" whites in the South.

This study asks a simple question, "Is the radical-democratic tradition ultimately doomed to failure and to co-optation by the forces of realpolitikkk?" In the US healthcare debate, it is striking how quickly Obama, who gained his office through University of Chicago-style organizing, abandoned the public option. Ideological commitments for change are important, but unless there are clear mechanisms built into the system to create accountability, they have little material effect. The challenge that the pragmatist tradition faces is that it has rarely created substantial reform of the political process; Obama is perhaps its most prominent "experiment" (Schultz 2009). However, the shared biographical parallels of Du Bois and

Carmichael issue a sobering reminder. Both began as ardent activists for social change in the US through a strongly pragmatic orientation, but later in life became disenchanted Pan-Africanists. Both fought to help blacks attain political power, but once achieved, “typical American politics” prevailed (164). Jeffries says, “the cumulative effect of structural arrangements made [and make] it difficult for even the most well-intentioned black office holders to generate lasting change” (243). As such, people cannot rely only on politicians to create deep change. This can only occur, at least in Jeffries account, through collective action, citizen education, grass-roots involvement, and creative leadership.

References

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