THE CRISIS
OF COLOR AND
DEMOCRACY

ESSAYS ON RACE,
CLASS AND POWER

MANNING MARABLE

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—Manning Marable
Boulder, Colorado, July 18, 1991

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issues and political events from a progressive analysis for a largely black audience.

Although covering a wide range of topics, these essays reflect several general perceptions about the current nature of American politics and the state of the black freedom movement. The first premise is that the black struggle for equal rights in the United States was forged in a special set of domestic and international realities after the Second World War. Globally, the basic political division was the conflict between American and Western European imperialism vs. the Soviet Union and its allies. Third world revolutions and social protest movements, in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa were waged in a bipolar context. In some regions, naked colonial rule was forced to retreat, but neocolonialism in the form of military juntas or dictatorships was imposed in its place. In South Africa, racial capitalism initiated a brutal authoritarianism termed "apartheid." Within the United States itself, the massive migrations of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north, combined with the gradual increase of black influence within the political system, had the effect of escalating sentiments for rapid democratic change. Blacks took to the streets in nonviolent demonstrations for desegregation and civil rights. The threat of international communism and the growing drives toward independence in the third world created great domestic pressure on the federal government and corporations to make concessions. With the successful adoption of reformist legislation on civil rights, thousands of previously disfranchised African Americans entered the political process, and soon contended even for the presidency itself.

In general terms, this was the political terrain which largely helped to define the contours of African-American struggle for four decades. Even during the period of black nationalist upsurgence and political radicalism between 1966 and 1976, the basic elements outlined above set

certain parameters on the character of protest movements. The political ideology, behavior and cultural consciousness of several generations of African Americans were rooted in a set of truths which were unquestioningly accepted. The ideological worldview of most African-American leaders, with the exception of the Black Power period, could be termed "integrationist." Integrationism meant the elimination of structural barriers which prohibited blacks from full participation within the mainstream of American life. Culturally, the goal was achievement of a "color-blind society," which in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., would mean that blacks "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." For the integrationist, there was an implicit faith in democracy, American-style. The system could be made to work, they believed, if only people of color and others victimized by discrimination and poverty were brought to the table as full partners. This could be realized by expanding the number of African Americans, Latinos, women, low-income people and others into positions of authority within the existing structures of power in business, labor, government and the media. When one encountered resistance, the integrationist strategy relied heavily on the intervention of a "benevolent" federal judiciary, which could be counted on to defend civil rights and civil liberties. Internationally, integrationists sympathized with the anti-apartheid struggle, but they failed to grasp the fundamental linkage between the battle against racism abroad and their own situation within the United States. Most failed to comprehend how the existence of a strong communist bloc internationally pressured the United States to make various political concessions to democratic protest movements domestically. For example, the Soviet Union's polemical attacks against America's system of racial segregation were important in pushing the Kennedy and Johnson administrations toward liberal reforms on civil rights.

Politically, integrationism in the period 1954-1988 largely accepted the premise that the electoral system was both rational and inherently fair. Political inequities existed only when certain classes of voters were arbitrarily barred from exercising the right of franchise, or prohibited from running for office. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other civil rights legislation, all members of society supposedly had an equal access to the process of democratic decisionmaking. The central flaw of this political reasoning was the fact that democracy is only really possible when all the participants have roughly equal resources as they enter the electoral field of competition.

Both major political parties had a vested interest in "managing" if not eliminating the electoral participation of blacks, the unemployed, low-income workers, and others. In national politics, the Republicans had become by the 1980s an upper-to-middle-class white united front, for all practical purposes. Two-thirds of all whites, and three-fourths of all upper-class whites voted for Reagan in 1984. The Republicans saw few advantages in encouraging the electoral participation of constituencies which were highly inclined to vote Democratic. But the Democrats also had problems with black and low-income voters, for several reasons. Increased black electoral clout would be translated into organizational influence within the Democratic Party's structure, which would shift the ideological axis of the part to the left. Most white Democratic officials were convinced that the Democrats had to move to the right, incorporating elements of the Reagan agenda into their own programs. Consequently, throughout the 1980s the actual influence of African Americans as a group declined within the mainstream of both parties.

The years 1988 through 1991 brought an end to the political certainties which had characterized the previous four decades. The most striking transition occurred within international politics. The massive internal con-

tradictions within Eastern European nations finally cul-
minated into a collapse of Stalinist communism. Inside
the Soviet Union, oppressed national minorities chal-
lenged the legality of the central government; longtime
dissidents such as Andre Sakharov and rebel former com-
munists such as Boris Yeltsin denounced Marxism-Lenin-
ism with popular approval. The demise of the Marxist
political system drove many third world countries into a
new accommodation with western imperialism. Within
Europe, the collapse of the communist Left set the envi-
ronment for a resurgence of ethnic violence and racism.
In France, the new fascist sentiments of the National
Front were absorbed into the major capitalist parties. In
the Netherlands, the Centrum Party which advocated
discriminatory policies against nonwhites was formed; in
England, the Thatcher government warned that it would
not permit the island nation to be "swamped by people
with a different culture." The eastern capitalist nations
moved swiftly to implement policies checking the emigra-
tion of Arabs, Asians, Africans and other nonEuropeans.

Inside the United States, the renaissance of racism
assumed several distinct new forms. In the wake of the
civil rights movement, it was no longer possible or viable
for white elected officials, administrators and corporate
executives to attack "niggers" openly. The Ku Klux Klan
and other racist vigilante groups still existed, but did not
represent a mass movement among whites. Instead a
neoracist strategy was devised which attributed the
source of all racial tensions to the actions of people of color.
David Duke, former Nazi and Klan leader, received the
majority of whites' votes in his Senatorial race in Louisi-
ana by arguing that "affirmative action" programs dis-
criminated unfairly against innocent whites. Black
college students were attacked as "racists" for advocating
the adoption of Black Studies academic programs, or the
creation of African-American cultural centers. Black
workers were accused of racism for supporting special

efforts to train people of color in supervisory and administrative positions. In this context, "racism" had begun to be defined as any behavior by individuals or groups which empowered Latinos, African Americans or other people of color, or an agenda which took away long-held privileges of white elites. Of course, the concept of "reverse discrimination" could only exist if African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and other people of color actually controlled institutional resources which could affect whites' life chances and opportunities. If they owned the banks and financial institutions, the systems of transportation, communication, housing and health services, even commensurate with their percentages of the population, then one might theoretically perceive a pattern of institutional prejudice aimed at whites. But of course, this is absurd. White, upper-class males still retain a thousand different advantages over virtually any person of color, from private schools and special tutorials to prepare for standardized tests for admission to colleges and professional programs, to membership in private clubs and access to capital from financial institutions. Even at their best, affirmative action plans and programs barely dented this entrenched pattern of power, privilege and elitism which the upper class terms "meritocracy."

Ronald Reagan was unquestionably the fountainhead of much of the new racism. His administration was openly contemptuous of African-American rights; he nominated virtually no people of color to the federal courts, and openly supported the apartheid regime abroad through his policy of "constructive engagement." George Bush pursued the presidency in 1988 by employing Reagan's racial strategy. His campaign cited the infamous example of black convict Willie Horton as an example of Democrats' "softness on crime." Without open appeals of white supremacy, he nevertheless benefited from a racist backlash against the gains achieved by racial minorities since the 1960s. As president, Bush continued to pursue

this racist agenda while employing a public style and discourse of racial harmony. He openly courted black middle-class leaders, inviting them into the White House, and spoke at historically black colleges. He publicly endorsed the passage of a civil rights bill, so long as it repudiated affirmative action and other effective measures to reduce discrimination. With the resignation of Thurgood Marshall from the Supreme Court in June 1991, Bush immediately nominated another African-American judge to replace him. But Bush's choice, former black nationalist-turned-Reaganite Clarence Thomas, was a vicious opponent of affirmative action, women's rights and civil liberties. Thomas was so conservative that he had even criticized the crucial *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which had abolished racially segregated public schools. Yet the National Urban League refused to take a public position against Thomas's nomination. The NAACP was also silent until pressure from other liberal constituencies forced this organization to oppose Thomas on ideological grounds.

The reason for the absence of strong resistance to Bush's efforts to undermine desegregation and to Thomas's nomination to the court was, in short, the bankruptcy of the ideology of racial integration as practiced by the African-American middle-class leadership. If one argues that the elevation of increased numbers of African Americans or other people of color into positions of public prominence will automatically expand black political power, then the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court would be perceived as a "positive" political gesture, regardless of his political ideology. One could even assert that it was preferable to have a black, Latino or woman conservative, rather than a white affluent male with the same political views. This sort of "symbolic politics" in effect permits the white corporate political establishment to select its own "minority leaders," such as Linda Chavez, Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and

Thomas, who have virtually no constituencies among people of color and who vigorously reject affirmative action and civil rights. Since the vast majority of African-American community-based leaders have little to no access to the media, little dialog really exists between working-class and inner-city black communities and representatives of the white elite. Of course, no dialog is really being sought by the latter; the object is to "manage" the unpredictable and volatile urban masses of blacks, Latinos and the unemployed, by elevating small numbers of nonwhites into positions of authority. The contemporary crisis of liberalism was also apparent in 1990-1991 with the U.S.-orchestrated war against Iraq. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein had little to do with the actual behavior of the American government and military. After all, when Israel launched its invasion of Lebanon less than a decade ago, the U.S. government did virtually nothing. In the post-Cold-War era, with the Soviet military abandoning its posts in Eastern Europe, an "external threat" was needed to justify the billions of dollars allocated for American conventional and nuclear weaponry. The casualties of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were required to secure American access to cheap energy supplies. Despite the anti-Arab racism and chauvinism which was generated by this unnecessary conflict, most liberal groups, white and black, did nothing to halt it. Most trade unions and the NAACP were almost silent. Despite efforts from students' groups and the fragmented Left to initiate demonstrations and public protests of various kinds, those who opposed the Gulf War were largely isolated. The absence of liberal opposition to the conflict meant that the media and politicians were successfully able to protect a "national consensus" for war.

But probably the best example of the bankruptcy of liberal politics, at least in the context of the African-American electorate, was the phenomenon of "post-black politics." The weight of ideological conservatism, the