



Manning Marable

# An anatomy of black politics: Inescapable poverty and racism



The election of 1976 also expressed a vote of confidence in black elected officials. Four of the 17 members of the Black Congressional Caucus received over 90 percent of the vote in their districts. Twelve black Representatives garnered over 80 percent majorities. Only four black Congressmen, including Andrew Young of Atlanta, were seriously challenged, but none of their opponents received more than 39 percent of the district's vote. Black elected officials and civil rights organizations had registered 9.5 million blacks, an increase of one million above 1972. 64 percent of all registered blacks went to the polls, compared to 58 percent only four years before.

Only one year ago James Earl Carter, former peanut farmer and south Georgia Democrat, was elected President, largely on the strength of the black electorate. In at least 13 states—including Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Alabama and Texas—the black vote proved to be the decisive factor in providing Carter's margin of victory. In Mississippi, for example, Carter received 147,540 votes from blacks, enough support to create a slim statewide majority of 11,537 votes over Gerald Ford. The largest number of black voters in history came to the polls.

But President-elect Carter appointed relatively few blacks to high administrative positions, and for several months he remained silent about the creation of federal jobs for minorities. The Humphrey-Hawkins bill and the principle of full employment became dead letters. Yet many black Democrats expressed satisfaction when Congressman Andrew Young was appointed Ambassador to the United Nations. Throughout the winter and early

months of spring they decided to wait for the new President to act.

By May, the Carter administration announced an end to "new programs" for social welfare and education in an attempt to balance the federal budget by 1981. With the approval of Federal Reserve Board chairman Arthur Burns, Carter announced that his new priorities were to cut inflation and to stimulate the business sector. Bert Lance, then head of the Office of Management and Budget, and chief economist Charles Schultze criticized liberal Democratic-Keynesian proposals that called for public jobs. Although Carter had promised the previous autumn to cut the defense budget by five to seven billion dollars, he actually increased defense spending to \$111.8 billion.

In the early summer months many prominent liberals sharply criticized Carter. Sen. George McGovern declared that "the corporations have cried the wolf of 'business confidence' and the administration has run scared." Even the *New Republic*, which had "cautiously" endorsed Carter, deplored his "moral" opposition to the use of Medicaid funds for abortions. Cold warriors like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and democratic socialists joined a growing chorus of organized labor, feminists and liberal intellectuals in opposition to Carter's entire domestic program. In the wake of growing liberal-left criticism, Vernon Jordan of the Urban League voiced reservations about the Carter administration.

One year after Carter's electoral triumph, the political and economic condition of black America is in crisis. Official unemployment figures for blacks

range from 13.2 percent for men, 40.4 percent for teenagers nationwide, and as high as 80 percent for teenagers in New York and other cities. The Urban League's unofficial unemployment figures are considerably higher. The "recovery" of 1975-77 never reached the ghetto.

Black petty bourgeois supporters of Carter had anticipated a flood of social legislation similar to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. They were greatly disappointed with Carter's backhanded support for Alan Bakke, and upset with the small number of federal patronage jobs made available to them. In September, 15 black leaders submitted at Urban League headquarters in New York to propose a counter-political strategy to meet the steadily deteriorating conditions of black urban poor. Many of the black leaders who attended the conference—Parren Mitchell, Bayard Rustin, Benjamin Hooks and Jesse Jackson—had been among the chief supporters of Carter earlier in the year. Declaring that they had been fooled and betrayed, Jackson charged Carter with "callous neglect." Gary, Ind. mayor Richard Hatcher declared, "Now it's difficult for any black leader who pushed the election of Jimmy Carter to face the people he campaigned with."

What went wrong? Neither Carter nor the Democratic party can be accused of "betraying" the real interests of blacks and the poor, since they never committed themselves to the socialist transformation of America's political economy, which is essential in destroying the inequities that black leaders complain about so dramatically. The 15 representatives of elite black civil and political society were primarily concerned about losing their own constitu-

ents, as the "Carter malaise" filtered downward through black America.

The current crisis in black political leadership is, more fundamentally, an expression of the deeper crisis within the black community. Most black federal, state and local officials tend to represent increasingly conservative black middle-class voters who support, consciously or not, the political economy of capitalism, and are only interested in marginal reforms. Vernon Jordan, Barbara Jordan and a host of others defend these interests.

But the inescapable reality of permanent poverty and racism still constitutes the heart of the black American experience. The real income gap between all black and all white families has steadily increased. In 1971, median white family income was \$10,672 per year, compared to \$6,440 for blacks, a gap of \$4,232. By 1974 white families were earning \$13,356, and blacks were making only \$7,808, a gap of \$5,548. The median black family income is roughly 58 percent of the amount earned by a similar white family.

It is to these people that black socialists must address their agenda, by listening to their grievances and concerns, by responding to beliefs and insights. Only by organizing a mass black political party that rejects elitism and the hegemony of the black petty bourgeoisie over indigenous protest institutions can the fundamental problems of black Americans be addressed.

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Barbara Ehrenreich

# The women's movement must rethink its image and revamp its program



I remember the heady days of the early Women's Liberation Movement when we knew we would win simply because we outnumbered them. Unlike students, or blacks, or even the industrial working class, women are a majority category. All we had to do was get the word around to our 52 percent of the population and, in any fair fight, we'd have it made.

But now, eight or so years later, the women's movement is beleaguered—in some regions, almost cornered. The ERA has been defeated in every state except Indiana where it's come up in the last two years. Abortion rights have gone through so much legislative surgery that it's questionable whether they'll survive at all. And perhaps the most bitter pill of all: the rank and file opposition to the ERA and abortion is not coming from bands of testosterone-crazed males, but from women. (A recent poll shows that men are more likely to favor the ERA than women.) So much for that old 52 percent majority and the idea that sisterhood wells eternal in the female breast!

But by now we've had enough experience with the anti-feminist opposition to begin to analyze and make some distinctions. Just as all feminists are not unkempt man-haters or hard-headed female executives (pick your favorite perjorative image), not all anti-feminists are deluded fundamentalists, Ku Klux Klan fans, or dupes of the Vatican. As least half—maybe far more—of the current and potential anti-feminist opposition should be on our side. And will be, if we're willing to develop a feminist politics that speaks to the real needs of a majority of American women in the late '70s.

There is, of course, the hard-core, politically conscious, upper middle class-based

rightwing opposition. For the rising American New Right, abortion and the ERA are only part of a long list of issues that includes opposition to busing, the Panama Canal Treaty, gay rights, and car pools (they erode individualism). It's a nostalgic kind of politics, calling for the good old days of Pat Boone, Doris Day and Joe McCarthy, when "love and marriage went together like a horse and carriage," when "Negroes" were either inoffensive or invisible, and when homosexuality was a disease ranking in social acceptability slightly lower than leprosy or advanced syphilitic degeneration.

Aside from the conscious right-wingers, there's a whole other constituency for anti-feminism. Most of them are housewives. Unlike anti-ERA leader Phyllis Schlafly, though, they don't have their own housekeepers, secretaries, and private family bomb shelters. But they're scared, too. The sexual and cultural "revolution" of the last ten years didn't liberate them. Forty percent of marriages end in divorce, and something like 60 percent of divorced men skip out on alimony and child-support payments before a year is over (without any help from the ERA, it should be noted).

Men are irresponsible, but what are the choices for these housewives? \$2.35 an hour standing behind a counter or assembly line while you wonder what the kids are doing? And what does feminism have to offer when its most visible representations are *Ms.*, *Viva*, *Working Woman*, etc.—all aimed, more or less, at slender, youngish career women who have credit cards, therapists and several ongoing affairs? Rightwing anti-feminism at least seems to offer some simple comforts:

That motherhood will be respected. That families will hold together. That things will go back to being more or less like they were supposed to be when you first got engaged.

But, of course, the right wing can't offer any real security because its class interests are opposed to those of the average working class or lower middle class housewife. Rightwing anti-feminists rhapsodize about the glories of homemaking, but oppose pensions for women who have put in a lifetime of it. They "honor motherhood" but oppose measures—like a guaranteed annual income—that could free mothers from total economic dependence on a man. They adore all fetuses until the moment they exit from the birth canal and add to the welfare rolls, the school tax rate and the nation's Medicaid bill. And of course the right has nothing to offer the working mother trying to make ends meet on a \$2-3/hour—except perhaps some expensively-produced literature on her "right" to work in an open shop.

I still think the women's movement has a fighting chance to become a majority movement. Phyllis Schlafly—plus the rest of the John Birch Ladies' Auxiliary types—is an enemy, no matter how many hormones we have in common. But the woman in curlers pushing a shopping cart with a few toddlers in tow and worrying about the price of ground chuck is, or should be, a sister.

If feminism is going to mean anything to her the movement will have to re-think its image and revamp its program. Somewhere along the line the image of "feminism" got taken over by the \$1-and-up magazines, the gray-suited businesswoman with attache cases, and the purveyors

of assertiveness training for managerial women—as if all we wanted was a chance to integrate, one by one, into the man's system. But the radical thrust of feminism always lay in its insistence on our connectedness as women: that we would support each other, stand together, and re-make the world for all women, for all people. Is it too late to re-make our public image in our own image?

As for program: There's no getting around it, in late 1977, a majority-oriented program for women's liberation has to focus directly on a few economic issues like adequate welfare and child support, full employment, decent wages for women's work, etc. So long as most women are economically dependent on an individual man—and so long as there are no visible, social alternatives—we might as well concede defeat to Mirabel Morgan of *Total Woman*. But if we can make the issues of economic justice central to the idea of women's liberation, then there'll be a lot more women on our side.

This means expanding beyond the narrow ground that mainstream feminism has retreated to in the face of the New Right threat: Broadening, not narrowing, our concerns. Linking the ERA, for example, to the overall problem of women's economic security. Linking abortion rights to the need for decent health care and day care. Building alliances with everyone else who's threatened by the New Right campaign—minority group movements, the gay movement, the labor movement.

Publications like *ITT* can be a big help in doing this. Happy birthday, *ITT*!

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