

**Cedric Johnson. Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics.** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 978-0816644780. 320 pp.

“What we’re gonna start sayin’ now is Black Power!” These words, spoken by Stokely Carmichael in 1966 at the Meredith March often herald in the mainstream narrative of twentieth-century U.S. history the beginning of the Black Power movement, and thus the end of the Civil Rights movement. In the last decade or so, however, a revival of critical interest into the often demonized Black Power era (evident in fiction, on screen and within academia) has begun to shed more light on the genesis of this movement. In particular, it has questioned the dichotomy between, on the one hand the Civil Rights movement wholly committed to pacifism and integration, and on the other, the Black Power movement associated with violence and separatism. In *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, historian Peniel E. Joseph underscores, for example, the existence of more tangible connections between these two ostensibly antithetical political positions by looking at forerunners of Black Power ideology prior to 1966, as well as by tracing Martin Luther King Jr.’s political evolution post-1966. Christopher B. Strain also questions, in his study *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, the somewhat simplistic representation of the Civil Rights movement as strictly nonviolent.

Cedric Johnson’s new study, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, for which he was awarded the 2008 W.E.B. DuBois Outstanding Book Award, belongs, therefore, to this more recent revival of scholarly interest in the post-Civil Rights era. Although Johnson sees the reappraisal of the Black Power movement as an important and necessary task, he believes that often at the heart of this new interpretative move lies a problematic desire to vindicate Black Power radicalism while turning a blind eye to limitations in its ideology. Arguing that the Black Power movement “might best be understood as a historical debate over the character and address of post-Jim Crow race advancement projects rather than the projection of some common political will” (p. xxii), Johnson provides a rigorously discerning analysis of the diverse strands within the movement as well as their evolution in time. He devotes particular attention to significant attempts at establishing a united political front, such as the Black Power conferences, the 1972 Gary convention, African Liberation Day mobilizations, the National Black Political Assembly and the National Black Independent Political Party.

As the title of his study indicates, Johnson goes against the grain in viewing Black Power not as the paragon of radical politics, but instead as a period when the movement for African American liberation turned progressively away from participative democracy and grassroots organizing to become more and more identified with specific leaders and their party politics. In his own words, Johnson seeks to examine “the winding historical path from the defiant calls for systemic transformation and radical self-governance during the civil rights and Black

Power movements toward the consolidation of a more conservative politics predicated on elite entreaty, racial self-help, and incremental social reforms” (p. xxiii).

In order to explain the ultimate failure of the radical aspirations of Black Power, Johnson looks in particular at the questionable impact of the movement’s exclusive focus on identity politics, even after this had ceased to “serve as the adequate basis for sustained political activity” (202). Johnson makes in this context a vital distinction between “*racial solidarity* as a spontaneous form of consciousness emerging from racial stratification and *racial unitarianism* as a discrete political aspiration of Black Power politics” (p. 88). Thus, the assumption that all African Americans share the same political interests proved counter-productive as legitimate discussions about political goals and strategies became stifled by the overriding aim of achieving some form of basic consensus on black political integration. This ultimately served the more conservative elements within black politics.

The trend towards a form of politics centered on leadership rather than on participative democracy also constitutes in Johnson’s view one of the key explanations for the demise of Black Power. As does the growing sectarianism between the nationalist and Marxist factions, in which both sides of the debate engaged in increasingly abstract ideological discussions that merely alienated the great majority of blacks and ignored the very real concerns of the people they claimed to serve.

Johnson’s aim in scrutinizing Black Power activism, its successes and failures, goes beyond setting the historical record straight, however. He seeks instead to revive the debate about the best ways to inspire and organize new and more inclusive methods of social struggle. The common axiom that we need to learn from history in order not to repeat it becomes, on reading Johnson’s book, even more meaningful and urgent. In order to create a better alternative to the racist capitalist system that exists today, Johnson asks us to look candidly at past mistakes in order to avoid the pitfalls he sees as responsible for the failure of Black Power, something that still affects today’s political landscape.

Without doubt, this study delivers on its promise to elucidate the troubled transition from “Protest to Politics” - advocated by Bayard Rustin as early as 1965 - in the Black Power era. In this context, Johnson never seeks to apportion blame, but explores instead Black Power in its full social and political complexity. As in any study, the choices authors make in constructing their narratives leave the reader wanting to find out more – for instance about what specific role the Black Panther Party played in the larger Black Power movement. Johnson’s forte in this context lies, however, in his exceptionally clear and coherent style, which remains accessible even to those readers who might not be that well versed in the subject. I would, therefore, recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of Black Power, as well as to all those who, in Johnson’s words, seek to “build a counterpower that challenges state policies and productive relations which

reproduce inequality and seeks to remake our world in a more humanistic, democratic image” (230).

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