

BOOK REVIEW  
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Long Memory: The Black Experience in America. Mary Francis Berry and James Blasingame. Oxford University Press, New York, 1982.

Periodically, during a process which has spanned time and has involved various issues, it is wise to review the situation for clarity before one goes a step further. This is just what the authors of *Long Memory* have done. Implicit in their approach to analyzing the historical experience of Blacks in America, is an acknowledgement that Black Americans have reached a time at which they must take stock of their situation, review whence they have come, assess the present and prepare for the future.

Black people have not forgotten their past and *Long Memory* is a metaphor for the historical and social consciousness that has neither been dimmed by time nor shaken by illusions of progress. From this direct, thorough text, which is neither apologetic nor polemical, we read about Black people who, from the inception of this country have endured, survived and struggled to maintain their dignity while physically and spiritually experiencing "America's contradictions between its ideals and its practices." (p. ix)

Organized thematically, each chapter, with an internal chronological presentation of material, lends itself to a focused, in depth analysis of issues and events which have impinged upon the lives of Black individuals, communities, organizations and movements. Chapter eleven, for example, addresses major issues and captures the dissonance and harmony which characterize the historical Black experience in America: the Shaping of Black Culture; Free Negroes in America; Enduring Institutions; Sex and Racism; Politics and Economics; the Battle for Education; Military Service; Black Protest and Black Nationalism. Individually and collectively, the chapters assess and reaffirm the textured, layered, and complicated dilemma in which Black Americans have found themselves: slaves in a "free land"; poor in the land of plenty; uneducated and unskilled in a society of public education and high technology; disfranchised in spite of constitutional guarantees; maligned and treated as un-American in spite of demonstrated loyalty and allegiance.

Four chapters in particular offer depth and cogent analysis. Chapter 2 discusses "An Insecure People: Free Negroes in America," a topic which is often given cursory attention. As treated by the authors, this topic graphically illustrates the marginality of free Negroes who, in spite of their status, faced dubious circumstances being neither slave nor white. In spite of their striving to be good citizens, their desire to vote, the financing of their children's education at their own expense, acquisition of property and involvement in civic activities, they were

confronted with blatant racism, rude affronts, acceptance by only a few whites and had their activities circumscribed. The marginality they experienced was a portent of that which was later to be experienced by Blacks in general after slavery was formally abolished.

As the authors point out in Chapter 6, "The Economics of Hope and Dispair," (p. 195), "Freed without land, the poverty and ignorance of the Black left him at the mercy of the southern planter." The oppression and exploitation Blacks suffered is carefully described through an analysis of sharecropping, migration to the North to become industrial workers, union discrimination and displacement by new technology. The persistent gap between Blacks and Whites regarding education and income, death rate, life expectancy and general quality of life documented by statistics is presented as a telling indictment against America's treatment of its Black citizens.

The struggle to make a living has been coupled with the struggle for access to quality education. Accordingly, "The nineteenth century school was a battleground where European immigrants, lower class Whites and Blacks fought for intellectual, social, economic and political advancement. Unlike the other warriors, however, the African American was disarmed before the battle began (p. 261). Chapter 8 clearly documents the effects of institutional racism and its various historical manifestations: outright denial of education, exclusion, segregation and tracking into inferior curricula.

The authors argue that remedies in the form of integration, desegregation and affirmative action have resulted in tenuous progress which, since the 1960's has already begun to erode as a result of White resistance and federal policy. In the 1970s the Supreme Court ruling in the Bakke case, against the use of quotas to meet objectives, signaled robust legal challenges to Affirmative Action which many Whites viewed as reverse discrimination. This backhanded blow has reaffirmed the tenacity of institutional racism and serves to exemplify why many Blacks perceive their dreams of equality as deferred and sometimes implausible.

In Chapter 10, "White Proscriptions and Black Protest," the major killers of Black people's dreams of equality are clearly outlined: the Republican betrayal of Southern Blacks; Supreme Court rulings in favor of white supremacy; denigration of Blacks in the media via caricatures, lampoons and blatant racial slurs. Attempts to organize resistance against these injustices were met by repression, sabotage and conspiracy both on the individual as well as on the organizational level.

Yet, a spirit to survive and maintain dignity prevails among Black Americans. Having experienced a cultural and political

resurgence in the 1960s and having developed a sense of nationalism as well as Pan-Africanism, Blacks organized themselves for revolutionary changes on the domestic front and supported the liberation struggle in African countries. The 1970s brought the assassination of Black leaders, their arrest or co-optation and the demise of Black militant organizations. Black people, refusing to lose hope," turned full circle and began lobbying for legislation and supporting court suits again." (p.387).

Having taken stock of the history underlying the Black experience, the authors believe that "The 1980s holds a promise for a new era of protest." High unemployment among Blacks, inferior education, and an increase in police brutality, serve as a grim reminder and a reckoning that "those who have power have not been concerned with moving to give Blacks an equal share of power and economic benefits. They have made concessions only when they seemed necessary to maintain enough order to perpetuate the existing social and economic order." (p. 386)

The apt chronicle of events in *Long Memory* attests to this historical practice and should rekindle a resolve to struggle. For this reason, this book should be recommended reading. The authors leave Black people with the task of setting a new agenda --mindful of their past, cognizant of their present and prepared for the future. This book passes on the legacy of knowing one's history...being mindful...lest one loses the way.

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