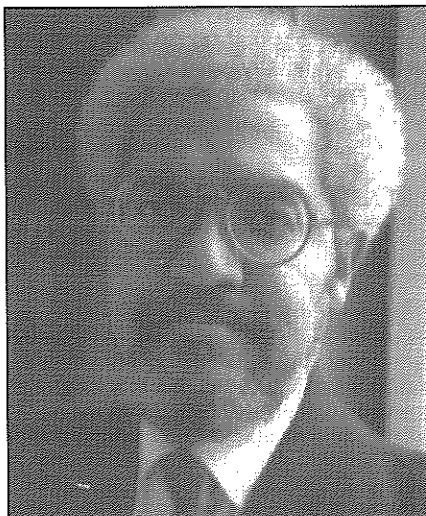


The war against black America

As Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March converged on Washington on 16 October, the black American academic and author Manning Marable gave this lecture, in which he discusses the condition of black America, to a Race and Class conference in London.

Marable is the author of "Race, Reform and Rebellion" and, most recently, "Beyond Black and White" (Verso, 1995).



Marable

THERE are five key issues that I would like to present to you.

First, one of the things which characterises this social and political conjuncture of black struggle is the escalation of attacks on people of colour within the political system. In the US, there are

- assaults on affirmative action;
- attacks on majority-minority legislative districts, which threatens to cut in half the number of black representatives in Congress.

- In 1994 Proposition 187 in California denied access to public health facilities to undocumented workers.

- The English-only movement aims to deny the vote to Asian-Americans and Latinos by changing arrangements for voting. Without Spanish ballots, as in California, millions of people would be disenfranchised.

- Refusal of support, in 1994 welfare legislation, to unmarried mothers under 18.

During the 1994 election, there was a massive racial polarisation. Huge sectors of the white electorate backlashed against the black freedom struggle.

This, in part, characterises the period.

Second is the polarisation of class, the escalation of social inequality in the United States. This is driven by:

- the transformation of production;
- the creation and introduction of new technology;
- the information revolution;
- the concomitant decline in the industrial and manufacturing sectors of production;
- the transformation of the workplace and the recomposition of the working class.

You can measure this in a variety of ways. I want to focus on just two.

There is a consolidation of wealth, power and privilege in society, the likes of which has never been seen in the US.

In short, a small minority of individuals

— in the US, 2-3 million, at most — dominate and control the overwhelming majority of society's resources.

You can see inequality growing. And this in part is what the conservative political agenda of the 1980s and 90s has been about — from Reagan to Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America", or, rather, *Contract On America*.

The ruling class of the US tries to hide or obscure that inequality — or to blame the hardships faced by the white working class on the blacks and Latinos.

Race is deliberately manipulated to obscure class and inequality and to hide the reasons for poverty and unemployment.

The third element is the acceleration of the construction of the coercive apparatus of the state. The new prisons and the use of the criminal justice system involve the warehousing of black and Latino labour.

In 1980 there were 500,000 people in prison in the US. In 1995 there are 1,500,000 in prison. At the present rate the number of prisoners is doubling every 7 years. Every day in the US, on average, 200 new prison cells are constructed.

In 1995 there were 554,000 officers employed by local and state police forces. There are an additional 1,500,000 private security guards employed to guard offices, stores and corporate headquarters, all over the country. Much of the new planned suburban housing is surrounded by walls, gates, wired by electronic surveillance and guarded 24 hours a day by private security personnel.

In this context, last year, the US Congress planned to pass a \$30 billion crime omnibus bill.

This Crime Bill included \$10 billion in federally managed funds so that the local governments could hire 100,000 more police over the next five years. \$10 billion for the construction of new federal prisons and the expansion of the number of federal crimes to which the death penalty

is applied from two to 58.

This Bill also eliminates the statute which stops the execution of mentally incapacitated people.

The so-called "three strikes" proposal mandates life sentence for anyone convicted of three violent felonies.

There is a section which allows for children as young as 13 years of age to be tried as adults. Special courts are being created to allow the deportation of non-citizens allegedly engaged in "terroristic activity", on the basis of secret evidence.

This is the criminal justice system, an enormous, expanding apparatus of repression.

What does this mean for the life chances of blacks and Latinos in the US?

Today, about one half, or over 750,000 inmates of prisons and jails in the US are African-Americans. Statistically, out of every 100,000 black male residents in 1992, of black men between the ages of 30 and 34, about 6,300 are in prison.

For the age group 24 to 29 the figure is 7,200 for every 100,000.

In human terms what does that mean? About 30% of all young black men between the ages of 18 and 29 are either in jail, on probation, on parole, or awaiting trial. In a typical day in Washington DC in 1991, 15% of all black men were in prison, 21% were on probation or on parole, 6% were being sought by the police or on bond [bail] or in trial.

The criminal justice system in a city like Washington DC has 42% of all young black males between 18 and 34 within some aspect of it. The study which was done on Washington estimated that 70% of black men in the District of Columbia would be arrested at some point before the age of 35. 85% of black men would be arrested at some point in their lives.

Now you can grasp the reality of the role of the criminal justice system in regulating and dominating and controlling millions of black lives.

The fourth point which needs to be made is that there is systematic destruction of progressive black organisation, tradition and leadership. Over the last 30 years, the state has done everything it can to attack and divide progressive black leadership — beginning with the assassination of Malcolm X, the assassination of Martin Luther-King — who in the last two years of his life moved from reformism towards a more internationalist perspective.

We saw the systematic attacks of the late 1960s and 1970s on the Black Panther Party and the destabilisation of black radicalism through the Counter Intelligence Programme, Cointelpro.

In the 1980s we had a very contradictory project, which had both strengths and weaknesses — Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988. 7,000,000 people voted for Jackson in the presidential campaign, and only

3 million of those votes were from African-Americans.

The campaigns registered hundreds of thousands of new voters. It created the potential for an independent politics to the left of the Democratic Party. But that did not happen. Part of the reason it did not happen was due to Jackson himself. He demobilised and destroyed his own movement in 1989 by insisting on his right to name his own representatives of state organisations and oppose the democratic election of the leadership of the Rainbow Coalition from the bottom up.

As a result the forces within the Rainbow became disorientated, disorganised and disillusioned and there was a fragmentation of the movement.

As a result of that the early to mid-1990s saw a massive political vacuum created within the black freedom struggle. In 1993-4 the potential existed for filling that vacuum, ironically enough — and much to everyone's surprise — from within the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Ben Chavis, who was briefly the head of the NAACP, was a person with a very distinct political history. For five years during the 1970s he was a political prisoner. He related to the left in a positive way.

He defeated Jackson for the leadership of the NAACP in early 1993. He opened a dialogue with the urban youth gangs, the black nationalists and the left. He advocated a broad-based black united leadership, which would include Farrakhan. But as a result of reaching out for a broad, black united front, a variety of forces from the left, including the black nationalists, Angela Davis and many cultural nationalists joined the NAACP.

I believe that this was threatening to the power structure in the US. And after the middle of 1994 a massive ideological counter-offensive began against the trend represented by Chavis. I had one editor of a white, New York, liberal publication say to me "we would rather see a black leadership which goes nowhere than a black leader with the politics of Ben Chavis talking to Farrakhan."

By the end of 1994, Chavis's own mistakes — misappropriation of NAACP money to cover up allegations of sexual harassment — eroded the moral and political basis for his leadership. A compliant board

of directors, some of whom had personally benefited from the corruption and patronage inside the NAACP hierarchy, summarily fired Chavis.

Farrakhan astutely recognised the opportunity to expand his own base with the assistance of Chavis. Ben Chavis still commanded substantial influence among key sections of the black middle classes and professional associations. By recruiting Chavis to become national spokesperson for the Million Man March, Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam were able to reach new constituencies, where they previously had marginal influence.

This was apparently based more on pragmatism than political philosophy. Chavis sought personal and political rehabilitation. Farrakhan sought to move his own organisation from the margins into the mainstream of black middle-class politics. Chavis was prepared to jettison much of his previous left-of-centre politics for a black nationalist programme centred on patriarchy, the theme of atonement and self-help conservative politics.

To grasp how conservative the programme of the Million Man March was, listen to the speech Clinton made during the march. The President of the US said that he had no problem with the agenda of the march. So what does this tell you about the content of this mobilisation?

This is not to say that the brothers — and some sisters — who were on the march are uniting with or represent the politics of Louis Farrakhan. We have to be very clear that there is a difference between the politics of the people on the platform and the politics motivating the mass of black people on the march.

Where do we go from here? There are models of resistance at global and community levels all across the US which cut across the narrow boundaries of race and ethnicity. This resistance does not have the level of media coverage of the Million Man March.

Our best moments of resistance have been when our politics are politically and morally justified, where we have a social vision which is not distorted, truncated or corrupted by the boundaries of race and racism, where we articulate a vision of emancipation and liberation that speaks not just narrowly to ourselves, but to all of humanity. ■

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