

What the Blacks Want

What Country Have I? Political Writings by Black Americans, edited by Herbert F. Storing, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970. vii + 235 pp.*

HERBERT STORING states in his opening paragraph that his aim in this work "has been to select those writings that explore

most deeply and widely, and in fairly brief compass, the American polity and the blacks' place in it—or out of it." The particular authors represented, he says, "are distinguished by their capacity to give coherent, deep-rooted, well thought-out *reasons* for their position," and thus merit consideration as serious political thinkers.

Such an endeavor is not to be treated lightly. White readers face an inevitable block to appreciation of black political writing because all of that writing points out societal flaws—often, to be sure, in exaggerated terms—we find it easier to overlook, and much of that writing harshly attacks whites for causing those flaws. Since the race question is simply not going to pass away unanswered with other *foci* of dissatisfaction, it would be wise—more: it is *essential*—for whites to familiarize themselves with the terminology and arguments of the accusers, even as capitalists need to analyze the Marxist critique.

Storing succeeds to a surprising degree in his task. Virtually every strand of black thought is represented in this anthology by at least one article: separatist (Eldridge Cleaver) and integrationist (Martin Luther King), radical (Julius Lester) and conservative (Joseph H. Jackson), emotional (Albert Cleage, Jr.) and analytical (Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton), semi-literate (Malcolm X) and polished (James Baldwin). Virtually every thesis is at least plausible; many criticisms are trenchant, and a few are convincing.

To a certain extent, any anthology will defy summation because of the inevitable variances in quality among authors, numbering here a baker's dozen. It becomes necessary to discuss at least a few of the pieces, when none can be truly "representative" of the rest. A strong critic could damn the work simply by quoting the rantings of Malcolm X, while an admirer could do the opposite with others. Let it be clear, therefore, that this is a mixed bag, worthy in different parts of both objection and acceptance.

There is no way to avoid Malcolm X. The speech reprinted here, entitled "The Ballot or the Bullet," stands out from the rest as he himself did before his murder. The brute verbal force with which he dominated and captivated his followers (and continues to do so) is likely to paralyze some readers with exasperation. One wonders where to begin a response, a familiar feeling to those who have listened to the current crop of left-wing orators. Here, for instance, is Malcolm speaking just before passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964:

And your and my leaders have the audacity to run around clapping their hands and talk about how much progress we're making. And what a good president we have. If he wasn't good in Texas, he sure can't be good in Washington, D. C. Because Texas is a lynch state. It is in the same breath as Mississippi, no different; only they lynch you in Texas with a Texas accent and lynch you in Mississippi with a Mississippi accent. And these Negro leaders have the audacity to go and have some coffee in the White House with a Texan, a Southern cracker—that's all he is—and then come out and tell you and me that he's going to be better for us because, since he's from the South, he knows how to deal with Southerners. What kind of logic is that? Let Eastland be president, he's from the South too. He should be better able to deal with them than Johnson.

His pages are filled with factually erroneous statements as well as rhetorical distortions. It simply is not true, for example, that "the Constitution itself has within it the machinery to expel any representative from a state where the voting rights of the people are violated," or that "any time anyone violates your human rights, you can take them to the world court." This may be grist for a political rally, but it is not, contrary to Storing's assertion, serious political thought.

Fortunately, Malcom is even more an aberration to this collection than he was to black thought while alive. Booker T. Washington, by way of contrast, is rejected out of hand by today's young black militants (few of whom seem to have read any of his works), but his emphasis on economic self-sufficiency as the key to racial progress has modern echoes ranging from President Nixon's campaign talk of "black capitalism" to the black power demands of the contemporary theorists of separatism.

Speaking more generally, the common theme running through all of the selections is the continuing debate between separatism and integration as answers to the question posed in the title. The casual white reader might easily be captivated by the apparent moderation of the integrationists (especially when posed against the bombast of some separatists), but the tragic failures of integrationist ideals during the past two decades should raise suspicions. Those ideals—represented here mainly by James Weldon Johnson's "Isolation or Integration?"—sound increasingly quaint now that blacks have begun to reject them almost as forcefully as have whites. It is not to be wondered at that, according to George Gallup, four out of ten blacks oppose bussing of their children to achieve racial balance in schools. After all, as Joseph Alsop has pointed out, the assertion that blacks cannot learn unless proportionately interspersed with whites is a monumental insult.

Far more convincing is the line of thought represented by W. E. B. du Bois and Stokely Carmichael—surprisingly so, I hasten to add, in light of their radical leanings. At least in the selections presented here, both men are concerned with cultural preservation, a very conservative concept. Du Bois proposes in his creed for a Negro Academy,

not such social equality between these races as would disregard human likes and dislikes, but such a social equilibrium as would, throughout all the

complicated relations of life, give due and just consideration to culture, ability, and moral worth, whether they be found under white or black skins.

Carmichael is even more specific:

"Integration" also means that black people must give up their identity, deny their heritage. . . . The fact is that integration, as traditionally articulated, would abolish the black community. The fact is that what must be abolished is not the black community, but the dependent colonial status that has been inflicted upon it.

When stripped of its excesses (Marxism, bigotry and violence), the doctrine of separatism seems more aware of human fallibility and is thus more realistic than the unbounded reliance upon the perfectibility of men found in much integrationist writing.

The process of thought can be taught with the aid of almost any writing, if the teacher himself knows the uses of textual analysis. (It is said of a certain Harvard Law School professor that he could be as effective using nursery rhymes as others could with legal texts.) Still, it is not to be denied that works of true scholarship are better source materials and can relieve many professorial shortcomings. Storing has put together a work of such scholarship, an easy entry into the realm of black thought for the general reader and a fruitful collection for the student of American problems. One hopes that the nascent black studies departments will make use of *What Country Have I?* and works of similar quality.

Reviewed by DENNIS R. NOLAN