

## Coerced Loyalty: Racial Equality as “Subversion”

Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *“Seeing Red”: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998)

Throughout American history the fear of protest, subversion, upheaval, and revolt among the black population has been a nightmarish obsession for those who held the reins of power. From the 17th through the 19th centuries, the mere stirring of slave uprising brought into being a repressive apparatus which commanded the participation of all strata of whites, sought to stamp out black literacy, intensified surveillance and control of slave labor, heightened violence against recalcitrant slaves, and choked off abolitionist influence. During Reconstruction, the efforts of freed blacks to forge a democratic polity and a modicum of social and economic justice were crushed in a cascade of violence that accompanied betrayal of the black franchise. During the 20th century the aspirations of rural and urban African Americans were met by governmental authorities on all levels with surveillance, intimidation, and legal and extra-legal harassment. The Cold War featured the methodical destruction of the artistic and political career of Paul Robeson and the harassment of W.E.B. Du Bois. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s relentless pursuit of militant activists during the civil rights upsurge of the fifties and sixties contributed to the fragmentation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and led to the violent dissolution of the Black Panther Party. The FBI’s laxity in the face of white supremacist violence against young civil rights workers in the South as well as its smothering surveillance and harassment of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders is well-documented as is its widespread use of agents, informants, and provocateurs aimed at destabilizing and eroding the movement for racial justice. For government authorities, the struggle of blacks of various political and ideological hues against institutional racism became a basis for questioning, attacking, and ultimately commanding their “loyalty.”

Theodore Kornweibel, Jr.’s *“Seeing Red”: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* explores the history of the assault on black militant (and not so militant) organizations and activists during the pivotal years when the repressive apparatus began to shift rapidly from private, mainly union-busting agencies to institutionalized governmental operations. The Espionage and Sedition Acts, promulgated in 1917, were aimed at putting the nation in lockstep behind U.S. involvement in the war. Sweeping aside First Amendment rights, the legislation targeted militant labor (especially the Industrial Workers of the World), socialists, liberals who challenged the assault on free speech, and African Americans who demanded racial equality. The flames of repression fanned by the war grew more intense with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Ruling classes from the capitals of Europe to Washington, D.C. reacted with rage and panic. That panic in the United States was exacer-

bated after the war by a militant strike wave and by a new spirit of black resistance to attacks upon their communities.

During the “Red Summer” of 1919, anti-black riots erupted in Chicago, Washington, and other cities across the nation. But there was an unprecedented mood of resistance to racist violence, often spearheaded by returning veterans who melded their outrage at the betrayal of the government’s implied promise to promote racial justice (as a reward for fighting) with a determination to forcefully defend their communities from attack. “The New Crowd Negro,” exemplified by a cluster of radical nationalists, socialists, embryonic communists, and disillusioned liberals, decried the anti-democratic outcome of the “war to make the world safe for democracy,” and launched small publications demanding self-determination for Africa and racial equality in America—while often cheering on the advances of Bolshevism.

The government’s response to labor unrest and black estrangement was massive, wide-ranging and methodical. The Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation (renamed the FBI in 1935) set up its General Intelligence Division (GID) under the already fanatically racist and anti-communist J. Edgar Hoover; the War Department pitched in with its antediluvian Military Intelligence Division (MID), freighted with political primitives spewing wildly inaccurate claims; the Post Office Department had a clump of sub-agencies and mindless bureaucrats who were ready to deny postal service to any material seen as subversive; the State Department had its investigative gumshoes; the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) joined the frenetic hunt for black-red miscreants; British intelligence worked with U.S. investigative agencies to staunch the alleged flow of anti-imperialist propaganda from American ghettos into restive colonies. All these disparate groups worked on a generally cooperative basis.

Kornweibel, a professor of African American history at San Diego State University, has worked for many years with the mountain of documents and investigative reports spewed by these agencies. He is the preeminent expert on the large-scale federal effort to monitor, control, and undermine black protest from the early postwar years to the mid-twenties. His book, tightly-written, carefully documented, and at times passionately argued, bares the sordid story of government efforts to circumscribe and ultimately crush black dissent and protest. He traces the rise of modern intelligence within the framework of global war and emerging socialist revolution and also illustrates the racist assumption that blacks were innately gullible and susceptible to “dangerous influences” of radicalism. Indeed, Communism would become “the bogeyman of American politics,” and would be seen by government snoops as the “engine that propelled every militant movement on the left.” As for African Americans, be they nationalists, assimilationists, liberals, socialists, or budding Leninists— all such gradations of dissenting ideology were seen as communist-inspired. The red-baiting incubus spread in a snarling and undifferentiated

manner — like the old cartoon of the little guy being dragged into a police wagon, pleading that he was an anti-Communist, and the cops responding that they did not care what kind of a Communist he was.

Moving through successive studies of government surveillance and intimidation, Kornweibel surveys federal investigations of Robert Abbott and the conservative *Chicago Defender*, surveillance and threats of suppression of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Du Bois's *Crisis*, efforts to silence A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen and their socialist *Messenger*, the extensive campaign to destroy Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, efforts to silence Cyril Briggs's *Crusader*, and undermine his pro-Communist African Blood Brotherhood, and relentless attempts to isolate and destroy the political lives of the handful of black Wobblies of the Industrial Workers of the World.

A common feature of all these campaigns (and a major theme of the book) is that they were not targeted against any reasonable threat to national security, but to the maintenance of the institutional system of privilege derived from racial oppression. The fear that Bolshevism was spreading among blacks was rooted in a perception that radicalism articulated and advanced the cause of racial justice and equality, challenging the patriotic "norm" embraced by Hoover and his ilk that America had been, and must remain, a white man's country.

The case of Robert Abbott was instructive. The founder of the leading African American weekly bowed to no one in loyalty, patriotism, and fidelity to the gospel of wealth. But Abbott had an unsurprising distaste for lynching and thought little of prospects for blacks who remained in the South. He regularly urged migration to the cities of the North, angering southern politicians and businessmen who lamented the potential loss of cheap labor. Abbott's views brought intimidating visits from federal agents and delays in postal delivery of the *Defender*. Pressure increased when he dared criticize the treatment of blacks in the armed forces. Subsequent to the riots in Chicago in July, 1919, the MID castigated Abbott for sponsoring a day of prayer for victims of lynching and racial violence and characteristically condemned the *Defender* for its "anti-white" temper. The MID also censured Randolph's *Messenger* for its "vicious" attacks on the Ku Klux Klan which, according to military intelligence, was simply trying to stop "the encroachment of the negroes in those neighbourhoods populated by white people." Typical of the exceptional demands upon blacks, postal officials often ignored criticism of Woodrow Wilson in the white press while denying that right to the black press on grounds that such expression sought to alter the racial status quo.

The NAACP and its *Crisis*, edited by Du Bois, were subjected to intense surveillance despite the Association's assiduous care never to breach the system's limits. But Du Bois's entreaties to the Paris peace conference to grant freedom to Africa, his inquiries into discrimination against black troops in

France, and his seminal role in organizing the Pan-African Congress, were enough to categorize him as a subversive “rock-the-boat type.” The NAACP’s complaints about mistreatment of Negro soldiers as well as coverage of that situation in *Crisis*, actually sparked an ultimately failed effort to prosecute the journal for violation of the Espionage Act. Surveillance of the NAACP by a variety of government agencies (as well as British Intelligence) continued into 1922, when the attention of the apparatus turned increasingly to Marcus Garvey. Along the way, the claims of informants reached unprecedented levels of idiocy with charges that the NAACP was shilling for the IWW and that ferociously anti-Communist Walter White was a parlor “Bolshevist.”

Government persecution of Marcus Garvey stepped over the line of surveillance and intimidation into a concerted effort to imprison (and ultimately deport) the charismatic black Zionist. While Garvey was successfully prosecuted for mail fraud, his real “crime” was his fierce articulation of black pride and national consciousness. In the early postwar period, Garvey had sounded an anti-imperialist clarion: expressing spiritual support for Ireland’s Sinn Fein and admiration for Lenin and a call for national self-determination for Russia’s imprisoned nationalities. However, as the noose tightened around Garvey, he became increasingly conservative — grandiloquently rejecting cooperation with white radicals (proclaiming that white leftists in the crunch would always act as whites and not as blacks’ class brothers) and muting his anti-colonialist rhetoric. That mattered little to government zealots who persistently interpreted Garvey’s injunctions to the black masses to embrace the greatness of their heritage as both “anti-white” and as a prelude to a frightening worldwide linkup of black anti-colonial forces.

That fear also played a major part in intense government scrutiny, infiltration, and beleaguering of the African Blood Brotherhood (whose founder, Nevis-born Cyril Briggs, was first fingered by British Intelligence). The ABB, launched by Briggs in 1919, was the first black organization to wed national consciousness to revolutionary socialism — attacking the capitalist roots of racism, ardently supporting Soviet Russia, advocating militant defense of black enclaves, championing alliances with radical white workers, and calling for global black unity to advance the liberation of Africa. A procession of undercover agents infiltrated the ABB; concerted efforts were undertaken to monitor and muzzle Briggs’s publication *The Crusader*, and, it turns out, government agents within the ABB deliberately provoked a widening conflict between Briggs and Garvey.

Hoover’s GID, along with other agencies, maintained a morbid interest in the handful of remarkable black organizers for the Industrial Workers of the World whose mail was intercepted, and who were shadowed, hectorred, and jailed repeatedly. The Wobblies’ uncompromising interracialism was the federal authorities’ worst nightmare. The image of articulate black organizers actually leading white men and women (who accepted such leadership) sent

government investigators into paroxysms of fear. With an acuity borne of self-interest, Hoover and the others recognized that working class unity and cooperation across racial lines constituted perhaps the most serious radical potential and the most compelling threat to the status quo. Having falsely branded all manner of black radicals as anti-white, the federal snoops had trouble rationalizing the passionate pleas of Ben Fletcher, Joseph Jones and others for solidarity between working people of both races. Unable to resolve the contradiction, the federal apparatus threw its hands up and accused the IWW of attempting to foment black-white violence while also propagating interracial intimacy. Kornweibel concludes wisely that the IWW (like the other radical groups) had to “be crushed if [the] wealth, privilege, and power of America’s elite were to be preserved. And there was no less doubt that the Wobblies’ plan for interracial equality ... must also be challenged.”

Kornweibel’s impressive research suggests some important conclusions: 1) all political hues of the civil rights movement have traditionally been viewed with deep hostility by government agencies and their corporate allies as a threat to the overt racist fabric of American society and to the web of social and political relations that protects special economic exploitation and social proscription; 2) an evaluation of the impact of the civil rights movement must not only involve internal weaknesses, but must take into account immense external pressures exercised by governmental agencies; 3) hostility towards militant blacks has been unremitting and has affected in various ways the entire freedom movement. The death sentence that today hovers over Mumia Jamal and the continuing, lengthy incarceration of radical black activists (especially former Panthers) is stark evidence of the persisting animus of governmental agencies and remains an inhibiting factor for the entire movement.

Kornweibel’s “*Seeing Red*” does not probe deeply into the nuances and complexity of competing black ideologies in the critical years under study. If one is seeking such an exploration, she or he will not find it in this book. In fairness to the author, ideological issues are at best only minor themes, treated sketchily. However, Kornweibel perpetuates at least a small injustice to the significance of those ideological debates in the process of correcting bizarre government claims that educational events and the airing of political differences were insurrectionary plots. The government’s expansion of the black radicals’ debates into threats to national security are one thing. But Kornweibel tends to dismiss the debates themselves as innocuous rhetoric, without organizational muscle or substance. Such a view leaves the unintended but nevertheless disquieting inference that had that rhetoric been backed by ample support and an activist agenda, it would have constituted a legitimate target for governmental surveillance. The debates themselves, which of course should have been shielded without qualification from unconstitutional interference, were significant in terms of shaping and influencing the black liberation movement for years to come. The ideological conflict between Briggs and Garvey, for exam-

ple, bared the tension between a view that converged racial consciousness with class consciousness versus a rigid race-first outlook and agenda. The issues generated by that debate remain vibrant and vital today and continue to cut to the core of black political thought.

Kornweibel also manifests a timidity which contradicts his own probing study of governmental repression of black militancy and unfortunately concedes vital ground to the heresy hunters. He accepts the spurious contention of the “secret world of American Communism” school that Communists sought the violent overthrow of “the American state.” That canard is quoted uncritically, despite the fact that his own extensive research failed to uncover a single illegal act by black Communists, much less a conspiracy to violently overthrow the government. Kornweibel steps into the dark forest of anti-Communism where principled defense of democratic rights becomes entangled in a thicket of political stereotypes and concessions to the red baiters. The stark, unsupported statement is offered that “American Communists spied for the Soviet Union’s foreign intelligence agency, and a number — including several blacks — went to Russia for training or conferences.” Thus, there were “reasonable grounds” for spying on Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood, while surveillance of others without Communist ties was unjustified.

Such a rationalization of unconstitutional practices comes close to undermining Kornweibel’s entire work and certainly damages his defense of democratic rights. The hazardous distinction between “justified” spying on Communists and “unjustified” surveillance of other radicals, flies in the face of Kornweibel’s own critical point made repeatedly: once Communism was defined as the undigestible bogey, all radicalism was inevitably tarred with the same brush. Indeed, once any dissenting political thought is cast beyond the constitutional pale, no dissenting political thought is safe. It is nearly incredulous that there is still a need to conjure the words of Germany’s Pastor Martin Niemoller who ruefully recalled that when they came for the Communists he said nothing, and when they came for him — no one was left to speak up.

Only the warped political mentality of the Hoover ilk would fuse the ABB’s passionate agitation into a threat to national security. Despite some bombastic claims by Briggs, the ABB was nothing more than an educational and agitational organization, and a relatively weak one at that. Was it necessary, or legal, to infiltrate the organization, to actively undermine it, to inflame the already heated conflict between Briggs and Garvey to get the goods on the ABB? Certainly, any evidence of criminal intent, if such evidence existed, would be manifest and would not require a *sub rosa* assault on the ABB’s constitutional rights of speech and assembly. There is proof only of a Workers Party’s donation of a mimeograph machine to the ABB. There is also a claim by government informer Joseph Kornfeder that the Party helped finance a series of bulletins that the ABB distributed to a Garvey convention. Those

crumbs, of course, were not illegal. There is no verification that Briggs received a “personal stipend and subsidy” for his *Crusader*. That journal died from rampant insolvency — with no sign that the Communists came to its rescue with the Comintern’s legendary purloined czarist jewels. The notion, repeated by Kornweibel, of the ABB’s “ties to the Communist International” skirts the ludicrous. Briggs in his *Crusader* urged blacks to make common cause with Lenin’s International, but he never traveled to Russia and never had any contact with the Comintern, nor did any members of his founding group. (Otto Huiswood, the pioneer black Communist attended the 4th Comintern Congress in Moscow in 1922 representing the Workers Party. He later became an organizer for the ABB, but that was at the Party’s behest, not the Comintern’s, which only projected a general sense that the Party’s “Negro work” was insufficient. McKay sought entry to the 4th Congress as a “representative of the ABB.” But that was a ploy.) Even more bizarre is the notion that the involvement of African American students in the KUTV (The University of Toilers of the East) in Moscow justified the monitoring of the ABB. The first African American students enrolled at KUTV in the fall of 1925, long after the dissolution of *The Crusader* and the ABB. Recently opened Comintern documents show that the African American students slogged through long sessions on political economy and dialectical materialism while complaining of a lack of relevance to American circumstances and coping with the harsh conditions of life in Russia. Schools and conferences were not illegal and hardly the stuff of potential insurrection.

Higher authorities at times checkmated the escalating provocations of various counter-intelligence agencies against black radicals, fearing that such excesses could come home to roost and devour the country’s delicate institutional stability. But Kornweibel makes the valid point that surveillance itself has material consequences. It generates fear, frustration, and paranoia, crippling the cohesion and stability of the monitored organization and undermining its exercise of free speech. To acquiesce in the monitoring of the ABB’s speech and assembly unfortunately concedes precious rights to those who would savage constitutional principles.

Kornweibel is also unreasonably beguiled by the neglected story of black informers and overt government agents who monitored and/or infiltrated black radical groups. Perhaps there is reason to be impressed with one or two blacks who bucked the FBI’s racist structures to build long careers as government agents. But those agents blazed a dubious trail. According to Kornweibel they were convinced that the radicals were inflaming racial tensions “and believed that progress would only accrue from reasoned civil rights advocacy and appeals to morality.” The cruel paradox, again stressed by the author, was that virtually all federal interventions against black radicals were targeted at racial equality and not at alleged subversion. Whatever their admirable qualities, the black agents were accomplices in the victimization of fellow African

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Americans, and that implies a moral condemnation that supersedes their tenacious efforts to force a few cracks in the bureaucracies' segregated anti-black edifice.

While Kornweibel demonstrates in some areas the pitfalls of a liberal interpretation of radical history, his book is exceptionally valuable for understanding the scope and character of long-standing federal hostility to the aspirations and actions of black militants. And with that understanding, we can arrive at a firmer grasp of the factors that both propelled and impaired the long struggle for racial justice. "*Seeing Red*" illuminates the fragility of constitutional rights and sensitizes the reader to the compelling need to defend radical dissent as a front line in defense of all protest. And despite inconsistencies, Kornweibel's exhaustive efforts remind us of the pernicious nature of red-baiting — something which has by no means disappeared from the political landscape. This is an important book that deserves careful thought and a wide audience.

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