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Black conservatism in the 1980s: will the future be conservative ... for African Americans?

Lisa Veroni-Paccher

- 1 With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the obstacles to registration and voting were removed, and black political participation greatly increased. Meanwhile, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, which reinforced group identity and cohesion, the election of African Americans to Congress accelerated and marked the decline of protest strategies. Direct social mobilization and political action were now favored. These new political leaders were all Democrats and quickly formed the most liberal group of the legislative branch. They were supported by black voters who had become loyal to the Democratic Party in the 1930s and shared the liberal views of their representatives. Despite demands for descriptive representation, African Americans were also asking for substantive representation. Indeed, both forms of representation came together for those who believed that Black political leaders were the only persons capable of 'authentic' representation. A history of past oppression and the need for electoral representation led to the conclusion that they would promote specific black interests. African Americans have been strongly bound by a sense of group identity, even though their political views have changed greatly since the 1970s (Jaynes & Williams 1989). Thus, even if the broad notion of "group's interest" is usually difficult to define, it may be that, because of their sense of "common fate", a specific set of "black interests" is easier to construe (Haynie 2001). This does not mean, of course, that African Americans are monolithic in their political thinking. Their geographic, social and economic heterogeneity alone indicates that they cannot be considered politically homogeneous, even if their identification to liberal ideas remains strong (Nie, Verba & Petrocik 1999). The *National Black Elections Studies* of 1984, 1988 and 1996, a substantial national survey of black voters, confirms that their positioning is liberal to extremely liberal, especially on racial matters (Tate 1994, 29-38). The black ideological liberalism that is present at the mass level is also characteristic of the institutionalised Black leadership. Furthermore, black interests are

understood in collective terms. Insofar as the fight for civil rights in the 50s & 60s was successful because of the political unity of the actors of the movement, African Americans continue to share a liberal vision. In 1967, however, Black nationalists, some decidedly radical, others more moderate, started claiming that traditional political strategies, such as the ones used by the Civil Rights Movement at the time, were not the answer to the plight of African Americans. Stokely Carmichael, who was then president of the *Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee*, defined, with Charles Hamilton, a new ideological cadre through the notion of Black Power, which was based on the fundamental premise that "before a group can enter the open society, it must first close its ranks". Its aim was to articulate and defend collective interests as well as fight against systemic racism. In 1972, in Gary, Indiana, the first black national convention was organized with Black nationalists and liberal integrationists who were willing to create a political consensus for the defense of collective interests. Because the liberal integrationist strategies adopted by the new Black elected officials were heavily criticized, the Gary convention failed to bring political unity and the failure of the following conventions, in 1974, 1978 and 1980, seemed to show two things:

- first, that the Black political elite had failed to become united across ideological and political lines; 'unity without uniformity' couldn't become a reality
- second, that liberal integrationism (a form of liberalism which articulates and provides solutions for the defence of specific black interests) was the most prominent ideology among the members of the newly institutionalised political elite, mainly composed of civil rights veterans and black elected officials.

- 2 A few weeks after the last black national convention, held in Philadelphia in November 1980, Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams, two black economists, organized, with the help of intellectuals, politicians and businessmen, a Conference in Fairmont, California. Held between the 12th and the 13th of December, it aimed at creating alternative political strategies for the benefit of African Americans. Most of the 125 participants shared the same political vision.
- 3 The ambition of Black conservatives was quite clear: by their emphasis on the need for personal responsibility, *transethnicity*, and political diversity in the community, they tried to modify the political discourse on matters that are of most concern to African Americans, such as high poverty rates, equal rights and racial discrimination. The resurgence of a black conservative ideology was the expression of a rejection of a collective vision of African Americans interests. This tension between the desire to integrate fully into the wider American society and the need to promote a set of interests that is attached to a particular group is so palpable in the Black conservative discourse that it renders it utterly paradoxical.
- 4 Black conservatives also hoped they would replace the existing Black leadership in the near future. The Fairmont Conference also helped them strengthen ties with members of the Reagan team such as Edwin Meese, a counselor with Cabinet Rank at the White House. Clarence Pendleton, Henry Lucas, and Clarence Thomas, all became active members in the new Republican government.
- 5 To what extent can the Fairmont Conference be considered as the beginning of a genuine black conservative movement?

A new political vision

- 6 The year 1980 marked the end of the Black national conventions. The last one that none of the influent Black elected officials nor members of the NAACP or the Urban League attended, was held between the 21st and the 23rd of November 1980 in Philadelphia. In a last organizing effort, it officially created a *National Black Independent Political Party* (NBIPP), but gathered little mass support and remained virtual. This led to the abandonment of nationalist strategies by most Black leaders because of their anti-institutional strain. The existence of diverging viewpoints on social, political and economic matters within the Black political elite became evident at the Fairmont Conference, which took place five weeks only after Reagan's election.
- 7 The Fairmont Conference showed that the Black conservatives were trying to impose a new vision based on individual responsibility, the notion of diversity within the ethnic community and the absence of ethnic frontiers in the perception of the self, which they called *transeethnicity*. The actors of this new political scene were Clarence Thomas, then aide to Republican Senator John Danforth (R-MO) at the time; Thomas Sowell, an economist member of the Hoover Institution; Walter Williams, another economist following the steps of Sowell; Clarence Pendleton, president of the San Diego Urban League and Tony Brown, radio show host (Brown stands apart as he considers himself more a moderate nationalist than a Black conservative) (Rueter 1995, 97). Not of all the participants considered themselves Black conservatives: some were liberal integrationists or nationalists; others were White conservatives, such as Edwin Meese and Milton Friedman. All of them nonetheless expressed the need to find new solutions to the problems that Blacks were facing at the beginning of the 1980s.

Individual responsibility

- 8 Most participants agreed that state interventionism at the social and economic level had negative effects. According to them, the danger was, paradoxically, that it helped maintain socially and economically excluded African Americans and that welfare policies promoted inactivity. For Black conservatives such as Michael Boskin and Walter Williams, just like for other American conservatives, African Americans wanted what they called *economic freedom*, and the governmental programs for housing and employment of the 1960s and 70s had been antagonistic to their interests. As an example, they mentioned California's Proposition 13, passed in 1978, when two-third of Californian voters agreed to reduce local property tax revenues and thus changed the way public services were administered. Reagan's electoral success and popularity provided evidence that America was rejecting collective responsibility (The Fairmont Papers 1981, 9-12; 26-32; 51-53). State programs aimed at improving the status of the poorest Americans weren't working and Black conservatives offered a simple explanation: racial discrimination did not play as important a role in the lives of African Americans as before. If this was taken into account in future social programs, people would realize that those based on race were inadequate. Walter Williams stated that African Americans did not need preferential treatment: they needed "government off their backs". One must remember that Americans were poor in the 40s, and African Americans were even poorer:

Except for a small minority enjoying upper or middle class status, the masses of American Negroes, in the rural South in the segregated slum quarters in Southern and Northern cities, are destitute. They own little property: even their household goods are mostly inadequate and dilapidated. Their incomes are not only low but irregular. They thus live from day to day and have scant security for the future (Myrdal 1944, 205).

- 9 However, Myrdal viewed with great enthusiasm the new industrialisation and urbanisation of African Americans. Indeed, between the 1940s and the 1960s, as they were moving to the cities, they started getting access to the “comforts of American consumer technology” as well as medical care thanks to the programs established by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (Jayne & Williams 1989, 272). However, in the early 1970s, despite all the social and economic improvements brought about by the fight for civil rights, even larger differences between Blacks and Whites started appearing: earnings inequality increased and polarization of the family income distribution occurred¹.
- 10 The profound rejection of racism as the main explanation for inequalities could also be felt in the way Black conservatives dealt with questions of education. Sowell, Thomas, and Brown put the emphasis on the potential of success of the individual by taking two historically black schools, Dunbar and Saint Augustine, as examples. Sowell tried to prove that it was impossible to offer a large-scale explanation for scholarly success in terms of differing socioeconomic status or separate facilities for boys and girls (FP 1981, 74-75). To him, it was more a question of individual effort. As a consequence of this reasoning, because they think parents become free to choose the education of their children, most Black conservatives tend to promote school vouchers. Since, to them, the key-factor of social success resides in the freedom of choice of each individual, they consider that looking for collective solutions to the deficiencies of the school system is unproductive (ibid, 79). Embracing the mainstream conservative discourse of the era, they explicitly reject the idea that state interventionism and compensatory education programs will help improve the educational quality and environment of African American children.

Political diversity

- 11 For Thomas Sowell, the only way to justify black conservatives’ dismissal of the solutions offered by the State in the 60s and 70s was to offer an empirical analysis of their impact, such as the one he offered in his widely acclaimed book in conservative circles, *Race & Economics*, published in 1975. Sowell considers that the strong link between the representatives of the black community and its members has been broken. Whereas liberal black leaders claim they can only defend black interests, there are other voices that are just waiting to be heard. He believes that it is the duty of the Fairmont Conference participants, that he identifies as “individuals who dare to think for themselves”, to bring an alternative to the so-called liberal orthodoxy (FP 1981, 4).
- 12 In his inaugural speech, Sowell insists upon the fact that the conference participants, as well as African Americans in general, are not ideologically united. He underlines the contrast which exists, according to him, between the uniform vision of the institutionalised black leadership and the possibilities explored in Fairmont. The notions of diversity and alternative are thus recurring in his discourse.
- 13 For other participants, such as Thomas Berkley and Chuck Stone, two African American journalists, the need for diversity transcends party lines. Stone believes that his ethnic

community is afflicted with a *one-party syndrome*. It is thus urgent to form and promote new leaders and new alliances. The only way to achieve this goal is to let Black politicians deal with questions that are not specifically linked with Black interests in the new administration and the future ones (FP 1981, 118-119).

- 14 It quickly becomes difficult to understand how this goal can be achieved by Black conservatives when they start criticizing in very harsh terms the new Black leaders, affiliated with the Democratic Party. Black conservatives obviously feel closer to Republicans and do not consider the Black political elite legitimate. They know that, contrary to a majority of African Americans, the new Black leadership of the 1980s rejects the school voucher system and is against the implementation of stricter laws against crime. Moreover, most Black Elected Officials at the time favoured busing and affirmative action in employment and education, whereas African Americans as a whole were more divided on the issues.
- 15 As for Sowell, although he wishes to stress the merits of political diversity, he only focuses on the opposition between existing liberal programs, deemed counterproductive, and future conservative policies, that he assimilates to economic success and improvement of the living conditions of African Americans and other Americans. According to him, the only alternative is the conservative one. Most participants share his viewpoint, and hope that the conference will offer them more visibility and the opportunity to benefit from the support of white conservatives, and thus, from the new Reagan administration. The idea here is not only to offer a new vision on Black interests, but also to create an alternative at the elite level. In order to gain the support of other conservatives and of the Republican Party, through the integration in the new Republican-led government, Black conservatives also expressed the need to show that they were able to organize coalitions of interests transcending ethnic identity.

Transethnicity

- 16 For Henry Lucas, member of the *Republican National Committee* and former member of the *Institute of Contemporary Studies*, which was sponsoring the conference, the need for political diversity was first and foremost a need for ethnic transcendence. In his presentation, he underlined the necessity to find common interests and form coalitions not articulated in racial terms (FP 1981, 91-92). Despite the absence of references to conservatism, it seems that these common interests are conservative ones indeed. Most participants wished to rally the larger conservative movement, to which Edwin Meese and Milton Friedman belonged. But there was a paradox: if the organisation of the conference had required the collaboration of members of the new Reagan administration, which apparently shows the will to build interethnic coalitions, most of the 125 Fairmont participants were African Americans and their papers focused only on specific Black interests.

Fairmont, Reagan & the republican party

- 17 The support of the Reagan administration given to the new Black conservatives symbolized a break between the government and the established Black leadership. At the Fairmont Hotel, hopes were high that the political future would be conservative, thus there were no expectations concerning the meetings organised between Reagan and the

Congressional Black Caucus, or civil rights leaders, who were said to defend obsolete strategies. Edwin Meese, addressing Black conservatives, referred to one of these meetings in the following terms: "They were talking about the last ten years and the ideas of the last ten years. You are talking about the ideas of the next ten years and beyond" (FP 1981, 160).

- 18 Even if ideological diversity was a reality at the Fairmont Conference, everyone, except maybe Charles Hamilton, Percy Sutton and Martin Kilson, felt closer to Republicans Party than to Democrats and relied upon the new Reagan administration to show them that they were right to believe that there would be in the near future, new white candidates in the Republican ranks ready to defend black interests². The Republicans needed to show that they were going to offer new opportunities to potential black candidates. For some, such as Percy Sutton, there were still doubts that the Party could do such a thing (FP 1981, 156). For others, such as Gloria Toote, formerly working in the Nixon administration, it was obvious that African Americans would find, in the Party, ways to consolidate their political influence. It was high time for the Republican Party to expand its electoral base. Its new voters could be Black voters, who would then become able to articulate their interests within the two-party system (FP 1981, 142).
- 19 What Black conservatives wanted was to distance themselves from the established Black leadership, such as the members of the CBC, and to modify the African American political discourse so that it would not be associated with a one-party approach anymore.

Republican nominations

- 20 Despite the fact that it had been thus far extremely difficult for African Americans to integrate the Republican Party, Reagan's election made the new Black conservatives confident that it would soon change³. Edwin Meese seemed at least to think so:
- I think Ronald Reagan is committed, as you suggest today, to putting blacks in nontraditional roles. There are going to be black people in high places on the White House staff, but they are not going to be there simply as ambassadors to other black people. They are going to be there because they have a substantive role to fulfil, and black people coming to the White House will go to the same people that everyone else does. You are not going to have one person that all blacks have to funnel through (FP 1981, 161).
- 21 In fact, some of the Conference participants played a role in the new administration: Clarence Thomas was offered the position of under-secretary of education for civil rights and after a year, was named at the head of the *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*. He chaired the commission during eight years; Clarence Pendleton became the chairman of the *United States Civil Rights Commission*; Gloria Toote was appointed at the *Department of Housing and Urban Development* and became influent in urban affairs; Henry Lucas became the first African American to serve in the executive committee of the RNC; as for Thomas Sowell, he was offered a position in the *Department of housing and urban development* (RUETER 1995, 98).
- 22 A first step was accordingly made by the new administration in the direction of the new Black conservatives. Reagan was exploring alternatives to the liberal Black political elite.

A Conservative Labyrinth

- 23 As Mack Jones and John Saloma demonstrate in their respective studies, the resurgence of African American conservatism in the 1980s was orchestrated by a myriad of conservative think tanks, institutes and other organisations. The success of the event sponsored by the ICS led the Hoover Institution to create, for Sowell and some 300 other Black conservatives, a favourable environment for the establishment of a new conservative organization at the national level, which could compete with organizations for political influence such as the NAACP and the *Urban League* (Saloma 1984, 132). Although it did not seem to have worked out, after Fairmont, the participants created the *New Coalition for Social & Economic Change*, which organized, in September 1982, a conference entitled "Rethinking the Black political program" (Rueter 1995, 97). This new coalition was to become a permanent forum for new approaches to problems of "black poverty, education, and government dependency. In its statement of purpose, the New Coalition emphasized the need for approaches "that reject the notion that American blacks need to be cared for" (New Coalition 1982, 2).

Reagan and the new Black political alliance

- 24 The positions of the Reagan administration concerning the extension of the federal Civil Rights Law and the creation of a Martin Luther King holiday worried Black leaders and a majority of African Americans. However, Black conservatives such as Pendleton considered that the hostility that African Americans manifested towards the Republican administration was only caused by the attitude of Black leaders themselves, who had managed to isolate the Black vote:

The black leaders have made an industry out of racial politics... They created an industry and sold their only product—race—primarily to the government and to the liberal white establishment who are riddled with fear and guilt. These leaders make and made lots of money, have gained social acceptance and attract broad-based media attention. Still there is no parity but there is still poverty (in Brownfeld 1985, 35).

- 25 Five days before Reagan's re-election, a meeting between the President and more than a dozen Black conservatives, who were all members of the *Council for a Black Economic Agenda*, was organized. This emergent group was led by Robert Woodson, president of the *National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise*, which aimed at developing economic opportunities for Black Americans at the local level. This meeting, initiated by James Cicconi, White House staff secretary, may be understood as evidence that Reagan and Black conservatives were trying to reach common ground:

[F]or the immediate future, we must avoid the 'established' black leadership. Such leaders are unremittently hostile to this president and cannot be expected to take a constructive approach. The current black leadership seems, quite frankly, more interested in personal publicity and enhancing their influence within the Democratic party than they are in new approaches to black problems [...] Thus meetings would not only be unproductive, but would serve to strengthen the position of such hostile leaders within their own organizations, and among blacks generally. Instead of allowing ourselves to be pressured into such old, no-win patterns, we should seek out other blacks with whom there is a chance of reaching common ground (in Barnes 1985, 9).

- 26 One can draw an easy parallel between the New Coalition and Woodson's *National Center*, which is considered by Mack Jones as the active branch of the black conservative movement (Jones 1987, 28). Woodson, member of the *American Enterprise Institute*, shared Sowell's vision: he refused to believe that racial discrimination was the source of all the social evils that the black community had to endure.

Legitimacy

- 27 With the help of White conservatives, the Fairmont participants tried to elaborate new economic and political strategies and they benefited from a changing political context. However, despite the access, for some of them, to important positions in the party hierarchy, the new Black conservatives did not manage to be an integral part of the conservative movement in the beginning of the 80s, and the Republicans' efforts quickly became insufficient: the Party did not seem able to offer them a real political influence, as they remained mainly symbolic. Black conservatives were also unable at the time to find legitimacy in their ethnic community. Unable to cross party lines, unable as well to find common ground with the new Black leadership of the 80s, the Black conservatives's strength also happens to be their weakness: they build their political discourse on ideological antagonism. The persistence of ethnic links shows that it is still difficult for African Americans to orient themselves toward greater political heterogeneity, even though Black interests have become diversified. We know that African Americans still lag behind economically compared to Whites, as their median income is still inferior to that of Whites (Jaynes & Williams 1989, 24 and Chapter 6).
- 28 However, since the 60s, undeniable progress has been made, and the social gap between Blacks and Whites is not as wide as it used to be. On the other hand, with the emergence of a new African American middle class, and the rising number of urban ghetto residents, there is a widening gap between the members of the ethnic community. As they have become more socially diverse, it is undeniable that their new social divisions have modified the way they apprehend social redistribution policies.
- 29 The 90s, because of ever-increasing social and economic heterogeneity, have shown that there was a growing disharmony between African Americans and the Black leadership, which remains mainly liberal (Barker, Jones & Tate 1999). A slow transformation of the ideological identification of African Americans occurred; it is directly related to the fact that the Black leadership went through a deep identity crisis which partly undermined its legitimacy. With the rise and fall of such leaders as Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, it showed that it was either unable or unwilling to gather support outside the community. As this legitimacy was not transposed to Black conservatives, African Americans are still looking for leaders able to represent their diverse interests. Will they turn towards new forms of radicalism and nationalism or will they become better politically integrated? Hopes are high, especially today, that they will find a leader able to promote their specific interests while at the same time consensual enough to appeal to a greater part of the American public.
- 30 As conservative administrations seem unable to address their needs, it is highly unlikely that African Americans will massively turn to conservative policies and start voting for the Republican Party in great numbers. If African Americans are becoming much more conservative today that they were in the 70s, they still articulate their interests within the Democratic Party. Black conservatives, even though they have influenced the public

discourse, do not seem to have strong ties with other conservatives, and haven't started a movement of their own with real mass support. Nevertheless, as they moved a little bit to the right of the political spectrum, getting closer to the center on a lot of issues, indicating that they were receptive to an alternative approach on specific social issues, the African Americans who haven't lost their faith in the political process are calling for a new kind of leadership, which would still be strongly associated with the Democratic Party but not as liberal-oriented as before, and with a conservative approach on some issues; a leader(ship) more representative of the real political heterogeneity of African-Americans.

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NOTES

1. Since the beginning of the 1960s, social and economic inequality between Blacks and Whites has been increasing. The victims of poverty were the working poor and the growing number of Black men without any earning. One also has to take into account the feminization of poverty and shift to childhood poverty. Public assistance used to play a key role in the support of low-income families. However, family assistance only benefited single-parent ones. Before the 1970s, this support extended greatly, but by the early 70s, as it was not indexed to inflation, and because of new governmental policies, its real value had fallen by at least 30% (see Jaynes & Williams 1989, Chapter 6, 269-328).
2. Eight years later, they probably thought they had just been proven wrong when they watched the Horton ad of George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign. This ad featured an African American named Willie Horton; he was a convicted felon who had been released for a weekend, as the subject of a Massachusetts furlough program, while serving a life sentence. During the weekend, he committed armed robbery and rape. This ad was of course critical of Democratic contender Michael Dukakis, who had supported the program.
3. They did not seem to mind the stigmatization of poor African American women collecting welfare checks – hence the 'Welfare Queen' label – in Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign.

ABSTRACTS

Le positionnement politique des Afro-Américains est semble-t-il sans surprise. Être afro-américain, aujourd'hui, équivaut à revendiquer des opinions politiques libérales et soit se désintéresser du vote, soit voter pour le candidat du Parti démocrate. L'identification à l'idéologie libérale et au Parti démocrate est si forte que la communauté ethnique est communauté politique. L'élite politique afro-américaine moderne, d'orientation intégrationniste libérale, est désireuse de préserver une unité forte. Or, on assiste depuis le début des années 80 à l'émergence d'un autre courant idéologique au sein de cette communauté : le conservatisme noir. Pendant l'hiver 1980, le climat politique est tout particulièrement défavorable à la promotion de tout programme politique libéral-progressiste. La « révolution conservatrice » est en marche, et pour la première fois, des hommes politiques, des économistes, des intellectuels et des entrepreneurs, pour la plupart afro-américains et « reaganiens », se réunissent pour proposer un projet politique commun. La conférence de Fairmont (San Francisco), qui s'est tenue les 12 et 13 décembre 1980, est diamétralement opposée aux conventions politiques afro-américaines qui l'ont précédée. L'organisme parrainant la conférence, l'Institut des Etudes Contemporaines (ICS), basé alors à San Francisco, propose des publications d'orientation conservatrice. Les fondateurs de cette cellule de réflexion conservatrice sont d'anciens conseillers de Reagan lorsque ce dernier était gouverneur de Californie. Le plus éminent d'entre eux, Edwin Meese III, est proche des conservateurs noirs Thomas Sowell et Clarence Thomas et se prépare à devenir ministre de la justice sous Reagan ; il est donc présent à la conférence en tant que représentant de la future

administration reaganienne. Cette conférence marque-t-elle les prémices d'un mouvement conservateur noir à part entière ?

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