

Ralph Bunche Journal of Public Affairs

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Inaugural issue of the Ralph Bunche Journal*


Article 6

Fall 1976

The political economy of liberation

Lerone Bennett Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalscholarship.bjmlspa.tsu.edu/rbjpa>

 Part of the [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bennett, Lerone Jr. (1976) "The political economy of liberation," *Ralph Bunche Journal of Public Affairs*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalscholarship.bjmlspa.tsu.edu/rbjpa/vol1/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Barbara Jordan Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs - Digital Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ralph Bunche Journal of Public Affairs by an authorized administrator of Barbara Jordan Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs - Digital Scholarship. For more information, please contact rodriguezam@TSU.EDU.

Lerone Bennett, Jr.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LIBERATION

There should be no illusions about the nature of this struggle ... the fight now is not to save democracy, for that which does not exist cannot be saved. But the fight is to maintain those conditions under which people may continue to strive for realization of the democratic ideals ...

—Ralph J. Bunche, 1944

By the grace of fate and the intransigence of twentieth-century Tories, America has come, on the 200th anniversary of its birth, to a fateful fork in the road. Massive movements and forces have converged at this crossroad and are forcing decisions that will echo and re-echo down the corridors of American time.

Let there be no mistake about the nature of the decisions before us. We are in the process of deciding the meaning and the destiny of America. That decision can no longer be evaded. The accumulated problems of the years are piling up on every street corner. To put the matter bluntly, and somewhat inelegantly, two hundred years of chickens are coming home to roost.

The signs of the crisis are to be found everywhere. The economy is not working. It has not worked since the 1920's without artificial stimulation, and it is never going to work again without radical surgery and a radical reordering of our priorities. By the same token, and in the same way, the political system is unravelling at the seams. It no longer works for blacks or whites. Instead of diffusing tensions, it aggravates them. Instead of raising our eyes to the heights, it focuses them on the gutters. The best example of this is Watergate. But we have misunderstood the meaning of that event. Watergate was no accident. It was no aberration. On the contrary Watergate was a precise and accurate expression of the internal urgencies of the American political economy.

The failure of Watergate, the collapse of the economy, the protracted pains of the cities, the agonies of the educational system, and the health system, and the social welfare system: all these interrelated problems are reflections of a deeper fact: the failure of the United States of America to create a human and rational environment. Consider, for example, the following facts from an excellent book, **Pentagon Capitalism**, by Seymour Melman:

"1. By 1968, there were 6 million grossly substandard dwellings [in America] mainly in the cities.

2. 10 million Americans suffered from hunger in 1968-1969.

3. The United States ranked 18th at last report (1966) among nations in

Published by Barbara Jordan Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs - Digital Scholarship, 1

infant mortality rate (23.7 infants deaths in the first year per 1,000 live births). In Sweden (1966) the rate was 12.6.

4. In 1967, 40.7 per cent of the young men examined were disqualified for military service (28.5 per cent for medical reasons).

5. In 1950, there were 109 physicians in the United States per 100,000 population. By 1966 there were 98.

6. About 30 million Americans are an economically underdeveloped sector of the society.”

To this litany of failures we can and must add the centuries-long assault on the constitutional rights of blacks, who are in the middle of a major depression, and whose very existence is threatened by poverty, deprivation and oppression.

These facts and figures constitute a damning indictment of the American Way of Life and underline the need for an alternative political economy. There are, of course, several possibilities. But the alternative I want to introduce and recommend tonight is the political economy of liberation. And what precisely is that?

The political economy of liberation is the sociopolitical ensemble mandated by the exigencies of our situation. It is the sociopolitical ensemble required to liberate the oppressed people of America and the suppressed democratic alternative in the American tradition.

The political economy of liberation is first and foremost political economy. That is to say, it is not politics or economics but politics and economics linked together in a grand design for the good of the commonwealth. The alternative proposed here is the direct antithesis of politics as practiced in America. It is the direct antithesis of the existing political economy of warfare-welfare-corporate care.

It will be my contention here that most of our current problems stem from a fatal separation of politics, economics, and public needs. It will be my contention that none of the pressing problems of the commonwealth can be solved without an alternative political economy and a vision that links politics, economics, and public welfare in one overall design. I shall maintain further that the political economy of liberation requires us to examine and reject the fundamental myths undergirding our political structure — concepts of eighteenth-century liberalism.

The fundamental myths of the American state are based, as is well known, on the natural rights philosophy with its formal and abstract creed of liberty and equality. The liberalism of this philosophy, as Bunche pointed out in an article in the *Journal of Negro Education*, “purported to guarantee the individual’s economic and political freedom. Economic freedom for the individual assumed his right to the protection of the state in acquisition and use of his property for his private benefit and profit. In fact, however, democratic liberalism did little to create those conditions which would facilitate the acquisition of property by any great numbers of the society. To the contrary, its principles were applied in countries whose economic structures were so ordered that the great masses of the

population were presupposed to be non-property-holding workingmen, whose opportunities for obtaining property became progressively less easy, and whose economic status was increasingly less certain as a result of technological and financial developments within the economic structure — resulting in periodic unemployment, loss of income, and dissipation of meager savings.”

The central failure of democratic liberalism, as Bunche and so many other students have pointed out, was its failure to address itself to the political task of creating the social and economic conditions necessary for the pursuit of freedom and happiness. We can see clearly in the basic political documents of the white founding fathers. These documents were and are abstract documents based on an abstract equality for abstract men in abstract settings. The natural rights philosophy behind these documents assumed the very point at issue: equality and equality of access. The natural rights philosophy was not concerned about the real conditions of real men. It was concerned primarily with abstract qualities of abstract men who were assumed to be equally free, whatever the limitations of their concrete situations. This emphasis on pure abstraction, this emphasis on statements without content and profession without practice, explains, in part, the failure of the white founding fathers to deal with the conditions of blacks or women or poor whites. Let us speak plainly here. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and most of the white founding fathers did not believe in liberty and equality for all men, not to mention women. They believed, if they believed anything, in the beauty of abstract words which had no relation to reality. It is a point of importance here that Thomas Jefferson owned more than two hundred slaves in 1776 and George Washington owned more than three hundred. Of equal relevance is the fact that neither George Washington nor Thomas Jefferson believed in government of the people, by the people, for the people. In fact, nothing frightened Jefferson more than the possibility of government by what he called “the swinish multitudes.”

This view was not shared by all of the white founding fathers or all of the people. There were men in the colonies who believed in real liberty and real equality. Thomas Paine was one, and there were others, including the 500,000 blacks and tens of thousands of poor whites, many of whom were indentured servants, one step away from slavery. It should be said also that despite the limitations of the supporting theory, and the limitations of the propounding theorists, the words of the Declaration of Independence were potentially revolutionally revolutionary in that age and in that setting. And it was this potential that attracted men who wanted to go beyond a formal and abstract revolution.

From the very beginning, then, there was a duality in the American political tradition. On the one hand, there were abstract theorists, primarily slaveholders and men of property, who believed in a real democracy based on the ideals and words of the Declaration of In-

dependence. In the end, of course, the abstract theorists won and relegated the ideals to the abstract words of Fourth of July celebrations. All or almost all of our contemporary problems stem from their success and from certain limitations in their theory — limitations that were perhaps understandable in the eighteenth century but are dangerous and threatening in the twentieth century.

The central limitation, of course, was the failure to define liberty within the context of concrete equality. The white founding fathers usually defined liberty negatively in terms of certain prohibitions on the use of state power. And this definition yielded certain formal freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, et cetera. These freedoms were and are important. But they are only dimensions of the freedom process, and to stop there without going on to the positive aspects of freedom is a perversion of freedom and a threat to freedom. For freedom also means freedom to do. And this positive definition of freedom finds its truth in concrete possibilities for concrete possibilities for concrete men in the social field, in the right to work, in the right to eat, in the right to shelter.

My point here — and the point is important — is that freedom, to be meaningful, must be concrete. Freedom is bread. Freedom is housing. Freedom is education. Freedom is the right and the resources to be and to do. A freedom divorced from material premises, a freedom divorced from the wherewithal, cannot guarantee anything, except the freedom to talk or the freedom to starve.

For all these reasons, and for others as well, I maintain that the political theory of the white founding fathers is a stumbling block and a snare in today's world. The limitations of this theory explain why liberalism has become conservatism and why conservatism has become proto-fascism. The limitations of the theory also explain the philosophic and pragmatic poverty of liberals and conservatives who champion free enterprise for the poor and socialism for the military and the rich and powerful. "To the world's range of enormous problems," C. Wright Mills wrote, "liberalism responds with its verbal fetish of 'Freedom' plus a shifting series of opportunistic reactions. The world is hungry; the liberal cries, 'Let us make it free!' The world is tired of war; the liberal cries, 'Let us arm for peace!' The peoples of the world are without land, the liberal cries, 'Let us beg the landed oligarchs to parcel some of it out!' In sum: the most grievous charge to day against liberalism and its conservative varieties is that they are so utterly provincial, and thus so irrelevant to the major problems that must now be confronted in so many areas of the world."

The political economy of liberation rejects the provincialism of liberalism and conservatism and calls for a new theory based on the duty of the state to create social conditions for the realization of freedom and equality. Beyond all that, the political economy of liberation calls for a redirection of our energies and a reordering of our priorities.

The meaning of all this on the level of strategy and tactics is clear, and dangerous. It should be obvious by now to almost everyone, for example, that private enterprise cannot solve the problems of the cities. It should also be obvious that these problems cannot be solved without profound structural modifications, without real changes in the tax structure and the balance between the private and public sectors. The only power center in America with the resources and the authority to do these things is the federal government. And it is our task, I believe, to develop a theory and a practice that forces the government to launch a massive, multi-billion dollar program for the transformation of the slums and the social development of America. Every serious student of the American scene — Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, and Ralph J. Bunche, among others — has proposed such a program.

“There has to be a massive, determined attack at the roots of this problem,” Ralph Bunch told *Jet* in January, 1970. “No more palliatives. No more band-aids. No more pecking at the problem but getting at the root which means transforming the ghettos . . .”

Dr. Bunche added:

“The whites in America hold all the decision-making tools, they control the power structure, they are in the majority, they have the wealth, they have the military power, they have the police, and they have the means and resources necessary to eliminate this problem.

“But what has always been lacking [in dealing with] what is now, in my view, the most serious internal challenge — and that includes the Civil War — what has been lacking is the will, the national will to eliminate this problem, Not some time in the distant future — one hundred or two hundred years from now, but immediately . . .”

Ralph Bunche was right. And I propose that we take his words seriously and start holding public officials responsible for their criminal and culpable neglect in willfully perpetuating conditions which are maiming and destroying millions. I propose further that we take his words seriously and start holding ourselves responsible. I propose, in other words, that we take our careers, our reputations and, if need be, our lives on the implementation of such a plan.

The first step on this road, the only road of responsibility, should be the enactment of an emergency work program for all unemployed Americans and the implementation of a national policy of full employment. As I have said elsewhere, we need a new Declaration of Independence embracing, among other things, the unalienable right to work, without which the pursuit of happiness is a cruel joke.

The second step should be the immediate cessation of discrimination and a program of national atonement for hundreds of years of soul-destroying oppression, a program that would involve at a minimum the expenditure of from thirty to forty billion dollars a year and the engagement of the energies of all our citizens.

This program should be based on simultaneous attacks in the

economic, cultural, and political spheres. The problem is a whole and must be attacked as a whole. And it must be attacked within a new perspective which emphasizes development instead of charity. It must be based, in short, on what President Leopold Senghor called "the complementary totality of matter and spirit, of the economic and the social, the body and the soul." In order to be effective, such a program would have to approach the dimensions of the social legislation of the thirties. To cite only one example: We desperately need a modern, non-paternalistic version of the CCC camps of the thirties. A program of this magnitude could train young men and young women and pay them decent wages to clean up our environment and transform our cities.

Another and more relevant model is TVA — not the TVA which exists but the TVA which was originally proposed and which was subsequently gutted by selfish private interests. The original proposal for TVA called for a public corporation, in President Roosevelt's words, "clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of private enterprise." The new corporation was to be charged with the responsibility of transforming environments and people for the public good, and it led logically, he said, "to national planning ... involving many states and the future lives and welfare of millions."

In a private letter to the author, Arthur E. Morgan, first chairman of TVA, said he conceived of TVA as an experiment in human and environmental development. Morgan said he recognized almost immediately that money alone would not solve the urgent social problems faced by the people of the Tennessee Valley. What was required, he said, was money linked to a comprehensive development plan. And under the plan he proposed, TVA was supposed to stimulate industry and organize social and economic projects.

This vision, this model, this plan was, as I said, sabotaged by private interests. But the ideas behind it were sound, and we need to revive them and call for an Urban Development Authority, a public corporation charged with the responsibility of planning and rebuilding our cities, a public corporation charged with the responsibility of stimulating industry, founding cooperatives, and organizing educational, housing, and health structures.

It is, of course, utopian to believe that America will adopt a program of this magnitude without massive pressure. Hence, the need for national mobilization. Hence, the need for organized power and organized pressure. Hence, the need for struggle and sacrifice.

There are inequities in America because America wants inequities. The slums exist, racism exists, because powerful forces sustain slums and racism. And if we want to eliminate racism and slums, it is going to be necessary to confront powerful forces which profit or seem to profit from the divisions in our society.

The men and forces that sustain racism and slums are helped enormously by certain myths which confuse and mystify the public. One of

these myths is organized around the belief that it is right to help private corporations but wrong to help people and public corporations. This view, which is one of the most cherished props of eighteenth-century liberalism, contends that it is right to spend for public destruction but wrong to spend for public construction, right to spend for death, but wrong to spend for life. Somehow, someway, at whatever cost, teachers, preachers and laymen have got to summon the courage to say that this is an evil concept and that a nation founded on such a concept is an evil nation.

There is another and allied mind-set which makes people cry over the pennies doled out to the poor and applaud the billions doled out to the affluents. Here is one example. In 1962, America spent 820 million dollars to subsidize housing for poor people. In that same year, America spent 2.9 billion dollars to subsidize housing for middle- and upper-income Americans. Now, the meaning of this is clear, as economist Gerhard Lenski pointed out. "It is probably not unrealistic," he said, "to estimate that from one-third to two-thirds of all governmental services redound to the benefit of the most privileged two per cent."

If we are serious about freedom in America, we are going to have to deal with that problem. Since 1946, we have allocated 1500 billion dollars to the Department of Defense. In the sixties and seventies, we spent some 700 billion dollars in Vietnam. We are now spending 80 to 90 billion dollars a year for "defense." If we cannot spend half that amount to save our cities and make us one people, we cannot survive as a nation, and we do not deserve to survive.

Whether we survive or not depends on what we do in the weeks and months ahead. It depends on whether we have the courage to demand an alternative political economy. It depends on whether we have the will to do what is required to make that political economy a reality.

Whatever we do, we should at least understand the choices before us. We have come to a point of no-return in this land, and there are only two roads before us. We are going to become a democracy, or we are going to become a Fourth Reich.

The political economy of liberation speaks to this situation because it is a political economy of hope and because it offers the last and best hope for the realization of the great dream that sustained and transformed Ralph Johnson Bunche.

LERONE BENNETT, JR. is Senior Editor of EBONY Magazine. He is also an author and historian and has been visiting professor of history at Northwestern University. He is on the board of trustees of the Martin Luther King Memorial Center and is a fellow of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. Morehouse College, his alma mater, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Letters degree in 1965.