

January 1994

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Berkeley Journal of African American Law and Policy

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Recommended Citation

Berkeley Journal of African American Law and Policy, *A Message from the Grassroots: Participatory Democracy, Community Empowerment, and the Reconstruction of Urban America*, 1 AFR.-AM. L. & POL'Y REP. 119 (1994).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bjalp/vol1/iss1/6>

Link to publisher version (DOI)

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38CG8F>

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A Message from the Grassroots: Participatory Democracy, Community Empowerment, and the Reconstruction of Urban America

BLACK BALTIMORE: A NEW THEORY OF COMMUNITY. By Harold A. McDougall*. Temple University Press 1993. Pp. ix, 244.

Reviewed by D. Malcolm Carson

A century ago, African Americans despaired as the hard-won gains of the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era were being decimated by the political and legal ascendance of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. The guarantees of full and equal citizenship provided by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had been ineffective in protecting blacks from the second-class status sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.¹ A debate ensued concerning the most effective response to this legalized racial segregation. Just one year prior to the *Plessy* decision, Booker T. Washington solidified his position as the nation's foremost black leader with a widely-received speech in which he proclaimed: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, yet as one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington advised blacks to "cast down your bucket where you are" and to seek economic advancement and prosperity within the confines of their segregated status.² At the opposite side of the debate table stood W.E.B. DuBois, who would later become one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). DuBois became Washington's most well-known critic with a series of essays in his classic work, *Souls of Black Folk*, calling on blacks to accept nothing less than full, first-class citizenship.³

While neither position became entirely dominant, blacks extensively utilized both strategies to their benefit. Within their segregated

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1. JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM: A HISTORY OF NEGRO AMERICANS 342 (1967) (citation omitted).

2. *Id.* at 391.

3. *Id.* at 393, 395 (citation omitted).

context, African Americans built thousands of strong community institutions including colleges and universities, businesses, mutual aid associations, fraternities and sororities, and others — many of which are still successfully functioning today. At the same time, blacks vigorously pursued their civil rights through a variety of means. An extensive NAACP legal campaign resulted in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*,⁴ which overruled *Plessy* and prohibited legalized racial segregation. This victory was followed by the historic Civil Rights Movement, which for the first time brought many of the promises of the Reconstruction-era constitutional amendments into reality.

In the 1990s, as African Americans once again face a retrenchment of racist forces following a period of relative progress, the age-old Washington-DuBois debate resurfaces in new forms. The great victory of the Civil Rights Movement has been the realization of legal equality for African Americans in American society. Blacks can no longer be blatantly discriminated against under sanction of law. However, the unanswered questions of the 1960s — political and economic, as opposed to strictly legal, inequality — have become increasingly relevant, given that the economic status of blacks generally has not improved, particularly for those without the skills and education requisite to taking advantage of the opportunities created in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, the strength of black community institutions has withered with the defection of a large proportion of DuBois's "Talented Tenth"⁵ to white institutions and communities. In response to these conditions, many blacks now argue for a return to community-building.

This shift toward community-building is also reflected in contexts larger than the black community. In the field of public interest law, particularly with respect to the provision of legal services to low-income communities, many now argue for a change in emphasis away from litigation and toward community-wide empowerment strategies, such as environmental justice and community economic development.⁶ The rise in prominence of communitarianism, as an alternative to liberalism as a guiding political and legal theory for American governmental decision-making structures, is evidenced by the communitarian rhetoric of

4. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

5. DuBois emphasized the importance of providing higher education for the "Talented Tenth" of the black community, who would then provide bold and effective leadership for the group. See FRANKLIN, *supra* note 1, at 393-95.

6. Rachel D. Godsil & James S. Freeman, *Jobs, Trees, and Autonomy: The Convergence of the Environmental Justice Movement and Community Economic Development*, 5 MD. J. CONTEMP. L. ISSUES 25, 30, 37 (1994).

the Clinton Administration⁷ and by scholarly literature.⁸

Into this Washington-DuBois dialectic comes *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* by Harold A. McDougall. The author argues for a third position that resolves the protest versus accommodation dichotomy by focusing on participatory democracy and community empowerment at the grassroots level. In chronicling the experiences of four inner-city black neighborhoods engaged in the process of community rebuilding on the West Side of Baltimore, Maryland, McDougall considers how "participatory democracy and community empowerment might help to better define the public interest, as well as furnish social approaches that are useful, and often necessary, complements to public interest regulation" (p. 9).

McDougall sets the stage for his investigation of black community life in Baltimore with a critique of the rights-based approach of the Civil Rights Movement:

While achieving great rewards for individual African-Americans, the modern civil rights movement has undermined not only a sense of community among black people but also some of our strongest institutions, particularly those rooted in the vernacular (p. 10).

He illustrates how this rights-based orientation reflects the dominant American constitutional and legal traditions of representative democracy and strong centralized government, with its attendant limitations on public participation and community empowerment. McDougall traces the dominance of this approach to the victory of Federalism over the Jeffersonian ideal of participatory democracy and civic responsibility. McDougall notes, however, that as representative government has become more distant and ineffective, there has been a rise in paragonovernmental activity in which citizens in voluntary association seek either to affect the way government operates (interventionism) or to fill vacuums created by governmental inactivity (parallelism) (p. 11). Within the context of the black community, McDougall associates DuBois with interventionism and Washington with parallelism.

McDougall discusses the rise of interventionism and the decline of parallelism in Baltimore's black communities during the period between the New Deal and the Vietnam War. During this period, government increasingly replaced traditional, vernacular techniques of providing social services with what Charles Reich has termed the "New

7. Edward Epstein, *It's Controversial and Influencing Clinton: The Politics of Communitarianism*, S.F. CHRON., Jan. 5, 1994, at A1; Tony Mauro, *Communitarians Want to Share the Stage*, USA TODAY, Nov. 18, 1992 at A4.

8. For scholarly discussions of communitarian theory, see Stephen A. Gardbaum, *Law, Politics, and the Claims of Community*, 90 MICH. L. REV. 685 (1992); Wendy Brown-Scott, *The Communitarian State: Lawlessness or Law Reform for African-Americans*, 107 HARV. L. REV. 1209, 1216 (1994).

Property” of government entitlements.⁹ With the subsequent decline in government largess during the last two decades, however, parallelism, rooted in the black church, re-emerged as a major focus of black community activism. But as community-based organizations were made increasingly aware of their community’s lack of political power through encounters with intransigent local-elected officials, they began to chart a third course that combined elements of both parallelism and interventionism. These organizations set about the task of establishing themselves as “essential power bases for engaging in political dialogue, in government arenas, over the kinds of public benefits and public protections that were primary for DuBois” (p. 21). This new sense of empowerment was evidenced in Baltimore by the redirection of resources away from downtown redevelopment and toward the neighborhoods — a strategy that has characterized the Kurt Schmoke mayoral administration, the city’s first experience with an African-American mayor.

The author completes his argument by calling for the cultivation of “base communities” as the fundamental community organizing unit. The concept of a base community — borrowed from Latin American liberation theology — is a group of one or two dozen people who come together “in friendship and cooperative activity” (p. 163) to empower themselves in pursuit of common goals:

Such people might be found today in a microentrepreneurs’ peer lending circle, in a Bible study group, among Afrocentric cultural activists cooperating in a foodstore, or in a group of environmental activists. A base community might spring up in a small firm of civil rights lawyers, in a core group of activist ministers, in a collective of low-income housing activists, or among parents of sixth-graders in an elementary school (p. 163).

Wherever people are coming together to engage positively with their own living conditions and the conditions of those around them, peer groups of informal leaders are emerging and networking among themselves, often across what appear to be very diverse issue areas. In such a fashion, base communities are formed (p. 163).

Base communities become, then, the “physical and social locations in which people can develop the strength and capacity and definition necessary to challenge the dominant hierarchical matrix of public and private bureaucracies with which they must contend” (p. 164). They present a forum — unlike large community organizations, churches, businesses, and governmental entities — in which people can engage in the informal interaction requisite to empowering themselves for concrete political and social action.

McDougall’s book is important in a number of ways. By focusing

9. See Charles Reich, *The New Property*, 73 YALE L.J. 733 (1964).

on an in-depth look at the politics and community life of a specific neighborhood, the author is able to examine the actual workings of both the interventionist and parallelist approaches. By using a narrative/storytelling approach grounded in the concrete experiences of real people and communities,¹⁰ McDougall brings the subjective experiences of a subordinated community to bear on the meanings of the legal and political theories operating in society at large.

Through interviews with community leaders, McDougall shows the neglect, deterioration, and breakdown of community institutions in the wake of the apparent victory of the Civil Rights Movement. He also illustrates, on the other hand, the frustrations inherent in attempting to build community institutions in an environment of political powerlessness, as was the case in Baltimore up until the mid-1980's election of Kurt Schmoke. Rather than being subjected to a rhetorical, ideological debate about the relative merits of the two strategies, the reader is exposed to their benefits and shortcomings as demonstrated by actual practice.

By focusing on the concrete experiences of people at the grassroots level, the author successfully destroys the false dichotomy between political and economic approaches to black community advancement and the problems of the inner-city. McDougall clearly shows that economic and political empowerment are mutually dependent. This insight is made all the more valuable considering the recent re-emergence of community-based strategies in public interest law as alternatives to litigation. The critical roles of both government support and community institutions should be noted by all who seek to further the cause of racial justice and urban revitalization in America.

On a broader level, McDougall uses his case study of Baltimore to make a forceful argument for a nationwide shift toward the Jeffersonian ideals of participatory democracy and community empowerment. Widespread dissatisfaction with government in general, and the well-known ineffectiveness of governmental entities to address many of our nation's most pressing concerns, indicate a need for a change. A government that is closer to the people, more open to direct participation, and more responsive to the needs of local communities may provide some solutions to our present problems. The success of resident-controlled public housing juxtaposed against the nightmarish failure of macro-managed public housing provides a good argument for local control. Community policing, neighborhood-based land-use planning, mu-

10. The narrative/storytelling approach has been utilized extensively by Critical Race Theorists as an alternative means of legal discourse which would be more accessible and meaningful for scholars of color. See generally Symposium, *Legal Storytelling*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2073 (1989).

municipal civil rights, affirmative action, and set-aside programs are other promising strategies to bring about greater local control and participation. Our nation simply may be far too large and populous at this point for a system dominated by centralized governmental power and purely representative forms of democracy. A return to the more communitarian approach which lies at the core of our nation's history — as exemplified by the New England town hall meeting — may bring about increased civic responsibility and participation.

Finally, by providing us with a new mechanism of achieving participation and empowerment at the grassroots level — base communities — McDougall makes a genuine contribution to the advancement of political theory. The base community can be utilized effectively as a means to empower people to make changes in their communities. The informality and connectedness of small organizations may effectively counter some of the political and social alienation endemic in our society. The base community concept should be seized upon by people at all levels of society as a means of effectively contributing to social change.

McDougall does not address many of the criticisms commonly lodged against community-based approaches to the problems of the black community. He makes the assumption that inner-city black neighborhoods are worth the considerable time, energy, and investment necessary for their reconstruction. Many would argue against “gilding the ghetto,” as opposed to providing opportunities for blacks to move to more prosperous areas with less crime, more job opportunities, better schools, and cleaner environments. Concentrating resources on improving existing black communities will surely take steam out of the effort to integrate other neighborhoods. Is it right for blacks simply to accept their segregated status and build upon it? This fundamental question plagues not only McDougall's prescriptions, but community-based strategies in general.

McDougall's approach of examining the question of black community advancement by focusing narrowly on a specific community runs the risk of failing to incorporate the fundamentally national nature of the problem. After all, is it a coincidence that virtually every urban black community in the country faces problems almost identical to those faced by West Baltimore? If not, then what real difference can local, community-based action make in the face of powerfully influential national urban and racial policies? There exists the very real possibility that these problems can be solved only at the level of national policy, rendering McDougall's in-depth analysis of local action largely irrelevant. While action at the local level is crucial, blacks surely cannot afford to be silent on the wider issues that affect them.

These criticisms point to the fundamental danger of advocating

community-building strategies rather than protest-oriented strategies; this advocacy may serve to deflect attention away from the wider societal forces that are ultimately responsible for the conditions of life for people at the bottom of our society. Without confronting those forces, self-help strategies may amount to little more than a positive variant on the "blame the victim" approach so prevalent in American political and economic discourse. Even at the local level, community development approaches must address the structural causes of poverty and unemployment in order to achieve ultimate success. Efforts to combat bank redlining of inner-city neighborhoods through use of the Community Reinvestment Act¹¹ provide good examples of this kind of approach.

Despite these criticisms, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* represents an excellent contribution to the literature on the problems faced by inner-city black communities. Fundamentally, the kind of community activism advocated by McDougall involves building the social networks at the neighborhood level that are requisite for effective interaction in wider contexts. In the face of increasingly distant and unresponsive political and economic structures that characterize the rapidly-ascending global economy, community-based networks that provide supportive and participatory social infrastructure become more crucial than ever. The book also speaks to national policy by making a strong case for policies that are supportive of participatory democracy and community empowerment. Given the Clinton administration's communitarian rhetoric, McDougall's prescriptions may be welcomed at the national level. At the local level, the book should serve as a useful resource for community activists and others seeking effective models for rebuilding urban communities. McDougall brings us a message full of hope and promise for seemingly intractable problems.

11. 12 U.S.C.A §§ 2901-2906 (West 1988 & Supp. 1994).

