From Adolph Reed: Class Notes
The New Press, 2000

—Why Is There No Black Political Movement?

The question itself, no doubt, is already a provocation. Even as I pose it, I can imagine loud objections to its obvious presumptions. It's easy to anticipate a list of examples to the contrary: from the hip-hop nation to the Million Man and Woman marches to the current plans to organize a Black Radical Congress; from the black women who mobilized in support of Anita Hill to Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, Inc., and Operation PUSH; from various local mobilizations to the Congressional Black Caucus, the Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the NAACP; from a plethora of nominal (both single-issue and multipurpose) coalitions to independent parties and candidacies to nationalist and other sects. So, before going any further, I should clarify the presumptions and why I ask the question. The rub lies in what one means by a "political movement."

What I mean is a force that has shown a capability, over time, of mobilizing popular support for programs that expressly seek to alter the patterns of public policy or economic relations. There simply is no such entity in black American life at this point.

I can also imagine objections to this notion of politics—protestations that say it is too narrow; that it overlooks the deeper significance of what Robin Kelley, following political scientist James Scott, has usefully summarized as "infrapolitics": the region of "daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts." Hogwash. Twenty years after Reaganism took hold and twenty-three years after Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first black mayor, summarily fired nearly 2000 striking black sanitation workers with no rooted opposition from the black community, it's time for us to face some brute realities.

Sure, there's infrapolitics—there always is, and there always will be; wherever there's oppression, there's resistance. That's one of the oldest slogans on the left. But it's also a simple fact of life. People don't like being oppressed or exploited, and they respond in ways

that reflect that fact. That and a buck fifty will get you on the subway. "Daily confrontations" are to political movements as carbon, water, and oxygen are to life on this planet. They are the raw material for movements of political change, and expressions of dissatisfaction that reflect the need for change, but their presence says nothing more about the potential for such a movement to exist, much less its actuality.

At best, those who romanticize "everyday resistance" or "cultural politics" read the evolution of political movements teleologically; they presume that those conditions necessarily, or even typically, lead to political action. They don't. Not any more than the presence of carbon and water necessarily leads to the evolution of Homo sapiens. Think about it: infrapolitics is ubiquitous, developed political movements are rare.

At worst, and more commonly, defenders of infrapolitics treat it as politically consequential in its own right. This idealism may stem from a romantic confusion, but it's also an evasive acknowledgment of the fact that there is no real popular political movement. Further, it's a way of pretending that the missing movement is not a problem—that everyday, apolitical social practices are a new, maybe even more "authentic," form of politics.

This evasive tendency links up with much deeper and broader reflexes in black political life and masks a defeatist strain in black activism.

This defeatism stems from an impossible position that black organizers have locked themselves into for nearly all of this century: the "brokerage" model of politics. Under this strategy, political action centers on the claim to express the unified interests of black Americans as a single, corporate entity. It's ultimately a form of high-level negotiation; its main practice is assuming the voice of a putatively coherent black community and projecting it toward policy makers.

This political style emerged at a time in which disfranchisement and white supremacy severely limited possibilities for popular participation. However, its origins in the black elite made it easy to overlook the significance of that limitation. The strategy was accompanied by a highborn sense of duty among the elite—a responsibility to guide a rank-and-file population thought to be in need of

uplift as much as opportunity. And there was no shortage of energetic, middle-class "Race Leaders" prepared to accept the burden of speaking for the mute masses. Thus the old quip that any black person with a clean suit and five dollars in his pocket imagined himself a Negro leader.

This form of politics reigns across the black ideological spectrum. It defines the terms of debate along that left-right axis—a debate propelled by claims to legitimacy of spokesmanship shaped within a rhetoric of authenticity (claims, it should be said, that are directed largely at a white audience). Criticism of Ward Connerly, Clarence Thomas, or the Harvard Afro-American Studies Dream Team, for instance, focuses at least as much on their supposed distance from "the community" as on the substance of their ideas.

This is a corporatist argument—born of brokerage-style politics—not a populist one. Even as it comes dressed in invocations of "the people" or "the masses," this is not an approach that leads to popular mobilization. Rather, the Race Leader principle—and its pursuit of a vague notion of black unity—undercuts the discussion that could actually help stimulate a genuine movement. The "people" don't get to speak; they are spoken for. This is true by definition because "the people" exist only as an idea.

What exists in reality, though, is a broad variety of black individuals with an array of concerns and interests that converge and diverge, crosscut and overlap from issue to issue. A politics that insists on unity, and representation of an idealized collective, hinders mobilization precisely because its reflex is to diminish the significance of these differences.

Instead, the current activist model subordinates debate over political diversity in favor of establishing "unity." This, in turn, means generating political programs that combine laundry lists of issues that bow to arbitrarily defined constituencies, and sets of least-common-denominator particulars that symbolize generically racial interests and outrages—such as church burnings and police brutality—that demonstrate the persistence and extent of racism.

But the concerns that the vast majority of black people experience the vast majority of the time are not about those outrages and

large, symbolic issues (for instance, defense of affirmative action and majority-minority legislative districts). This is not to say that people don't care about those issues or that they aren't important. They are not, however, the kinds of issues on which a sustained popular movement can be built. They are too remote from ordinary individuals' daily experience to generate either intense, active support over time or the kind of dialogue that fuels political education.

The result is a notion of black leadership—"authentic" leadership—that substitutes for popular mobilization. It's a model that assumes categories of leader and led. The myth of the organic black community, moreover, makes it unnecessary to be troubled over questions regarding democratic representation—such as how to achieve accountability of spokespersons; how to stimulate and safeguard open debate; how to define plausible constituencies. These and other such issues are entirely absent from a black political discourse that conceptualizes democracy only in corporatist terms—as a condition that exists between the black community and others, not as a matter of serious interest within black political life itself.

A telling indication of how far the existing black politics is from such concerns is the general unwillingness to anchor political action in the creation of membership organizations—that is, groups with clearly identified constituencies that are, at least in principle, empowered to pass and execute judgment on leaders' actions. Nationally, only the NAACP is governed by its membership. Operation PUSH and the National Rainbow Coalition are mere banners for Jesse Jackson to speak in front of. Even the main products of the high period of political activism in the 1960s—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Congress on Racial Equality, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference—were not mass-membership organizations.

My point is not that those specific groups should have structured themselves on a popular membership basis; they did the work they were created to do in epic political circumstances and did it effectively. However, the limitations of a politics—especially a movement politics—that doesn't take account of the need to stimulate popular participation have come home to roost dramatically in

the subsequent history of the SCLC, the only one of those organizations to survive visibly into the present. That has been a story of decline, spiraling ever further downward into nostalgia and nepotism.

More radical, even avowedly Marxist or revolutionary, organizations have been no more inclined to concentrate on organizing concrete constituencies into membership organizations. Groups from the 1960s and '70s—the Black Panther Party, Black Workers Congress, National Black Assembly, African Liberation Support Committee—and the more recent attempts to create black united fronts all have been either cadre organizations (organizations of organizers) or coalitions of such organizations. The latter, which amount to little more than stacks of letterhead, give the illusion of a broad, popular base by equating breadth of representation with the length of the list of paper organizations.

This politics creates a particular conundrum for radicals, for whom the idea of connectedness to a popular constituency is a paramount goal. Opportunism is often employed as a tactic to paper over the problem.

As a case in point, nationalist activists organized an Afro-Caribbean International Festival of Life held in Chicago's Washington Park, principal location for South Side cookouts and family reunions, on July 4. Ever since the Black Power era, black Americans' celebration of the Fourth has been something of a thorn in the side for radicals, an apparent indication of how little headway our theoretical critiques have made in the population. In that context there are two ways to read the International Festival. On the one hand, it could be a strategy for presenting an alternative to the Fourth of July imagery; staging a big event where people are congregating anyway seems like a reasonable way to distribute the message. On the other hand, the festival could be an attempt to claim to speak for a large gathering by jumping out in front of it and controlling the only microphone.

Kwanzaa, Maulana Ron Karenga's mid-60s invention, was perhaps the prototype of this self-deluding flimflam. For years, radicals had been trying to sell a critique of Christmas as a destructively

consumerist and inappropriately Eurocentric celebration. Kwanzaa was an attempt to coopt the ritual of midwinter celebration that the majority of black Americans were unwilling to give up. Less obviously, it was an admission of failure to sell an alternative view of the world that would make Christmas unappealing. Instead, Kwanzaa merely creates a mythology that paints Christmas black without really upsetting conventional practices.

From this perspective Kwanzaa belongs to the same family of evasions as claims about infrapolitics and the brokerage school of political action. All of them rely on the pretension to express the concerns of people who don't have any say in the matter. In the 1980s, Jesse Jackson figured out how to work this pretense through the mass media. Louis Farrakhan pushed its evolution in the '90s with a strategy of giving speeches to packed civic auditoriums. Because in that format he is the only one empowered to speak, Farrakhan is able to claim that the lively, packed audiences both endorse his politics and represent a larger, mass base.

The Million Man March was this strategy's culminating moment, and radicals' defenses of this event underscore the proliferation of evasive politics. They also suggest its ultimate sources and why its seems so hard to break out of it. The defenses basically amount to a claim that the march should be separated from the man—that those who attended did so for multifarious reasons and didn't necessarily embrace Farrakhan's program.

The defense is hollow. The second claim is no doubt true, just as it was true of the 1963 March on Washington, anti-Vietnam War demos, and every other large gathering. The key fact about the MMM was that Farrakhan got to set the agenda, control the terms of discussion, and project himself as its leader. Those radicals who support and defend his rally dispute his claim by projecting other objectives onto the assembled throng. But even if one accepts this explanation, the throng remains an undifferentiated, mute mass—the repository of the interpretations of others who presume to speak on its behalf.

We'll never be able to create the kind of movement we need until we can break with the mystifications and opportunism that tie activism

to the bankrupt brokerage model of politics. The only possibly successful strategy is one based on genuinely popular, deliberative processes and concrete, interest-based organizing that connects with people's daily lives.