

Protest and Prejudice

A Study of
Belief in
the Black
Community

Gary T. Marx
Revised Edition
Foreword by
Bayard Rustin



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Foreword

by Bayard Rustin

This study by Gary T. Marx of Negro thought and attitudes—as well as the aspirations of our movement—tells it like it is, which is not the way many friends and enemies of the Negro struggle think it is. Its first virtue is that it does not look at the Negro community as simply a monolithic mass of apathy or militancy, but, in pointing out its complexity, takes full account of the variety of social and economic strata and opinions within it. This is in sharp contradiction to one aspect of white chauvinism which holds strongly to the stereotype of a “Big Black” opinion.

At the height of the civil rights struggle, one remembers that even as esteemed a journal as *The New York Times*, whose civil rights reporting was generally commendable, declared on occasions that “militants” were replacing the “old moderate” leadership of the movement. Such prognoses notwithstanding, the Negro leadership, and especially such thoughtful leaders as A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and Dr. Martin Luther King, retained, as this study shows, the overwhelming support of the Negro communities, and are still in positions of leadership. As an act of charity, we can easily forget the number of “militants” who at one time or another have been crowned kings of the Negro movement by the mass media. Less humorous, but of no more substance, was the discovery by the New York press of the “Blood Brothers,” a group of young Negroes supposedly bent on murdering and raping the white race. This, at the time, was a sensational “discovery,” but the “Blood Brothers” proved to be without flesh or substance and to have a spiritual existence only in the minds of the reporter and a few policemen. Of the same order was the mass media’s periodic discovery of enormous upsurges of Black Muslimism, something as fearsome as the “yellow peril.” The building of these myths did considerable damage to Negro-white relationships; and also led some would-be civil rights leaders, with no real base of support in the Negro

community, to issue inflammatory statements on race relations for the sheer sake of personal publicity. Through such publicity they hoped to gain at least one supporter in the Negro community and perhaps a little bit of that money from those white philanthropists who had been frightened by their blood-curdling cries and portentous slogans. These great battles of the press release left most of the Negro movement and community completely cold and disturbed, but presumably many papers were sold outside of Harlem.

A lot of this foolishness could have been avoided had the mass media maintained the same devotion to truth, the same care in its interviewing, and the same high standards in compiling and analyzing information that one finds in the study at hand. Black Americans are not so exotic as to prevent the mass media from making a profound understanding of their human aspirations. The ability to do this is clearly demonstrated by Mr. Marx's study; he has not only sympathy with, but also considerable background knowledge and experience in the writing of Negro history. In addition, the clear, good writing one finds here is more than is usually encountered in opinion polls and sociological tracts.

This study, meant to deal with Negro anti-Semitism, is part of a larger one on anti-Semitism in the United States. It is to the credit of its author and its sponsor, the Anti-Defamation League, that they recognized that one cannot understand Negro prejudice against Jews unless one understands something about Negro attitudes, life, and reactions to white prejudice. Rather than isolating Negro anti-Semitic attitudes, the study concentrates on examining the social and economic deprivations that lie at the roots of much irrational hatred and prejudice. To its credit also, the study did not attempt to apologize for some of the shadier operations of some Jewish businessmen in the ghetto (which, of course, are no different from the chiseling and price gouging practiced by non-Jewish, white, and Negro businessmen in the ghettos throughout the U.S.A.). It recognizes that Negro resentment of these practices is justified, but also points out some of the irrational hostility some Negroes have toward Jews who are not guilty of exploiting them. And, most important, rather than merely deploring unjust attitudes and practices on both sides, the study attempts to understand them in the context of ghetto conditions and life so that a real solution can be sought.

The discovery by these investigations that there is less anti-Semitism in the Negro community than there is in the broader white community is something that most people don't realize. I am thinking particularly of a television show which not long ago featured three Negro "militants" who were supposed to be expressing the typical hatred that Negroes felt toward Jews. They denounced Jews roundly for a variety of offenses to Negroes. One of the participants even charged a "Jewish-Zionist" conspiracy against black men

and people of color throughout the world. It did not matter to the producer of this program, fishing for sensationalism in troubled waters, that his panelists, although presented as Negro spokesmen, had no real following in the Negro community. Even if they represented any thinking at all it was that of a thin stratum of the Negro *petite bourgeoisie* with the kind of severe status deprivation upon which anti-Semitism feeds. This book makes it clear that Negroes, if anything, are less intolerant than whites. (Negroes, in fact, do not share the traditional anti-Semitic biases. They do not revile Judaism as a religion. On the contrary, Martin Luther King is called "Moses." Malcolm X always exhorted Negroes to behave as the Jews did, by which he meant get an education, buy stores, etc. His remarks were anti-Jewish perhaps, but certainly he did not think the Jews were an inferior people.) But, unfortunately, it will reach a much smaller audience than the television program that did such great harm to the relationships between Negroes and Jews.

We cannot and must not tolerate any Negro anti-Semitism as we cannot and must not tolerate any anti-Negro prejudices in the Jewish community. Many respected Negro and Jewish leaders have spoken out against such bigotry, and recently James Baldwin and Ossie Davis resigned from the Board of a Negro magazine that gave its pages over to a vicious anti-Jewish article. But more meaningful than appeals for brotherhood and denunciations of prejudice is the recognition that unfair business practices and some forms of anti-Semitism are endemic to the ghetto. Ghetto thinking by Negroes who live there and Jews who work there is a product of the social and economic deprivations that exist in its confines. And those that live outside its borders are also victims of the illusions and prejudices common to that larger ghetto. It is the ghetto, the social and economic walls between the races, that must be destroyed if real tolerance and brotherhood are to exist. This is the approach of Professor Marx's study, and one of the reasons it is worthy of consideration by both Negroes and whites.

Beyond this, it provides interesting information and thoughtful conclusions about the Negro movement and the whole problem of racism and exploitation. As this study throws much light on the dynamics of social struggle and probes the deeper motives and aspirations in the Negro community, many myths fall by the wayside.

For instance: Ghetto life, rather than heightening the desire to struggle, decreases militancy, since it limits awareness of the possibility for change. Thus, the integrated character of the Freedom movement, instead of dampening militancy among Negroes, may encourage it. Similarly, membership in major civil rights organizations like the NAACP was found to be a key index of constructive militancy. A sense of relative deprivation, and not grinding oppression, was found to be a major stimulus to civil rights concern. Thus, greater militancy was found not among those most economically

depressed, but among steadily employed industrial workers and middle-class elements earning between \$4,000 and \$6,000 a year. Concrete victories and reforms won by the movement, rather than pacifying and absorbing Negroes into the establishment, as some would-be revolutionaries had argued, inspired them to greater militancy and greater demands for basic social change.

The facts of this study help to puncture another myth held in common by both white moderates and Black Muslims: the pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps school of thinking, which holds that a major cause of poverty and social misery in the Negro community is the lack of Negro self-help organizations. What the study shows is that Negroes have at least as many voluntary associations as other ethnic groups, and concludes that the cause of the Negroes' plight is the ghettos' lack of economic wherewithal and not the lack of good intentions or adequate organization. The blame for Negro apathy (much exaggerated, as this study shows) is put right where it belongs: on the American social structure which victimizes the Negro.

Also worthy of consideration is some of the information in this study on Negro reactions to the riots that flared up in a number of ghettos across the country. Although a minority in the Negro community thought the violence did some good, given the large-scale indifference to Negro demands shown by the white community, Negroes in areas where the riots took place, particularly in Harlem, had the greatest doubts about its usefulness.

Another interesting finding was that Black Muslim sympathizers were more likely to be recent migrants who couldn't get jobs or find their bearings amidst the confusion of ghetto and northern industrial life. Despite the misleading mass media reports, the study correctly concludes: "The 'rising tide' of black nationalism was unduly misleading; strong and consistent support for the Muslims was an infinitesimal ripple in the Negro community." Then and now, the overwhelming majority of Negroes were committed to integration: Not separatism, but integration in its profoundest sense; not tokenism, but equal opportunity and a fair share of the good things in life that other Americans enjoy. A number of us in the civil rights movement had always held this to be true, but amidst all the sound and fury we were often ignored.

But the exaggerated conception in the press of the size of the Black Muslims should not make us sanguine. The frustration and anger resulting from "a dream deferred" is growing in the Negro community, particularly in the racial and economic underclass America has created. Still, as the noted historian C. Vann Woodward pointed out, "It is clear that among the great majority of leaders and followers of the Negro movement, the racial reserve of patience and responsibility has never failed." The study bears this out and predicts that "as time passes, the proportion of the Negro community which is aroused and militant will increase." The study concludes that the direction the Negro community movement takes—toward

thoughtful militancy and more effective political action, or toward angry outbursts and frustration tactics—will be determined by the response of the white majority to the Negroes' just demands. Most Negroes, the study shows, still maintain their commitment to nonviolent social change and willingness to work with men of good will in the white community. But should their hopes for true equality be thwarted and the road to social and economic progress remain closed to the Negro masses, there will certainly be a bitter harvest. Already there are ominous signs of this. With the falling off of white support for the Freedom movement, such thoughtful scholars as C. Vann Woodward have warned of the dangers of a second Reconstruction. "If we are realists we will no longer pretend that the movement for racial justice and Negro rights is sustained by the same foundation of moral assurance, or that it is supported today by the same political conditions, the same interracial accommodations, and such harmony of purpose, and commitment and dedication as recently prevailed."

Thus, today, America is at a crossroads. The civil rights revolution generated the most healthy and constructive creative climate the country has known in decades; it sparked social consciousness and action that benefited all Americans. The compromise with racism that marked the first Reconstruction led to an era of reaction and moral callousness toward human rights from which the country has still not fully been freed. And a second Reconstruction means social retrogression, spawned by racial conflict among white and blacks at the bottom of the economic ladder, that will poison our society with bigotry of all kinds at a time when it needs to move dynamically forward to meet the new social problems generated in the wake of our technological revolution. We must recreate, in a new interracial movement, the high idealism and moral commitment that was reborn in the United States with the civil rights revolution. But this time we cannot build around the effort to get Negroes a cup of coffee at a segregated lunch counter, an integrated seat on a bus or a vote in a lily white electoral process. Considerable progress has been made in these areas, but we still have not touched the deeper misery of the black and white poor. The great "coalition of conscience"—that alliance of Negro, labor, liberal and religious groups that offers the best hope for a truly great society—must be restructured to confront the more basic socioeconomic problems of our society and meet the needs of both black and white Americans. To complete the unfinished democratic revolution of our time, we need a program with the social vision of A. Philip Randolph's \$185 billion Freedom Budget, which goes to the social and economic roots of bigotry, proposes to tear down the ghettos and slums and replace them with decent integrated communities, and can unite the Negro and white poor as well as all men of good will in the task of a just and equitable reconstruction.

This study delineates the problem, now we must get on with the solution.