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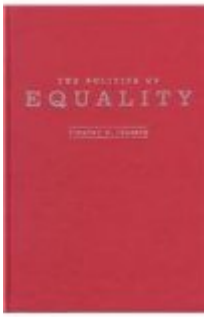
Timothy Thurber. *The Politics of Equality: Hubert H. Humphrey and the African-American Freedom Struggle.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. x + 352 pp. $83.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11046-4.



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At the 1997 meeting of the American Sociological Association, Douglas Massey of the University of Pennsylvania attacked Harvard's William J. Wilson in a panel discussion about the future of race policy. Wilson is a leading advocate of class-based social welfare policies. Wilson argued that government programs anchored in class relations rather then racial or ethnic identity are more sustainable then the traditional civil rights agenda. Massey charged that Wilson's ideas paper over the persistent problem of overt racial discrimination. More political courage in support of the traditional civil rights agenda is necessary. The panelists left in a huff, finding little concurrence.

The job of the historian is often to remind contemporaries that much political debate is the packaging of old wines in new bottles. This particular vintage (the question of how best to bring about racial equality) dates back to the 1940s, as liberals struggled to extend the promise of the New Deal to African-Americans.

Hubert Humphrey's record on race is the subject of this careful and well-written biography, both as a political life that had a significant impact on race relations, and as an exemplar of the Democratic party's struggle to reconcile racial liberalism and economic populism. Throughout his career, Timothy Thurber argues, Humphrey struggled to synthesize dualisms: the claims of racial and class based liberalism, the divide between the southern and northern wings of his party and the call of idealism against the pull of self-interest. Despite heroic efforts (peppered with occasional lapses) Humphrey's work at finding the winning formula that would bring racial equality while keeping the New Deal coalition together failed, as did his quest to win the presidency on terms that would keep a New Dealer's conscience clean and clear.

As with most liberals in the 1930s, Humphrey celebrated Roosevelt's victories. The perpetuation of racial inequalities (like the exclusion of blacks from Social Security) to keep Southerners on board was tied to pre-modern sensibilities. In Humphrey's whiggish view of American history, the answer to the race question was that the sphere of New Deal liberty would expand to include blacks over time. The gap between the reali-

ty of black inequality and the ideal of liberty would be closed through moral exhortation by progressive political leadership. Following Gunnar Myrdal, Humphrey argued that racial injustice was the great anomaly of American democracy, a neglected reform that was amenable to correction as the economic system was in the 1930s. Thurber maintains that Humphrey's mistake was that he "overestimat[ed] the public's commitment to racial equality," a conclusion that still has resonance today (p. 7).

And yet there was so much promise in the beginning. As an educational director at the Works Projects Administration in Minneapolis, Humphrey attracted the attention of the city's liberals as a rising political star. At age 34, he was elected Mayor. It was mostly a symbolic position, but the dynamic young politician used the municipal bully pulpit to advance the cause of tolerance. With a liberal's faith in the inherent goodness of man and the possibility to manage politics through reason rather then conflict, he formed the first municipal Fair Employment Practices Commission to investigate charges of discrimination and to encourage firms to eliminate barriers to employment.

The pioneering experiment in racial liberalism was modestly successful and it benefited Humphrey enormously as his work garnered national attention. He became a sought after expert on race relations and the darling of Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter Reuther and other leaders of Americans for Democratic Action. He led the fight for adoption of a strong civil rights plank as part of the 1948 platform statement of the Democratic party, and thus became a pivotal figure in unleashing civil rights as a major issue in American politics. Riding fame's wave, he was elected to the Senate the same year.

Along with other urban liberals in the Senate, Humphrey spent the 1950s at the periphery of power. The Southern whales blocked civil rights initiatives. They exercised power granted by the seniority system and Senate Rule XXII, the infamous filibuster provision. Yet Humphrey annually introduced bills to create a Fair Employment Practices Commission, a reform intended to break down discriminatory employment barriers against blacks.

Humphrey believed that unemployment, underemployment and poverty were the most pressing problems facing blacks. By the late 1950s, however, Humphrey was overtaken by events as the civil rights movement propelled voting rights and desegregation to the top of the agenda. But he adapted to the changing political environment accordingly. Humphrey's role in the Senate began to change too. The fiery orator at the 9148 convention became more conciliatory toward the South, realizing both the importance of the region's Senators in passing legislation, and its voters in regaining the Presidency for the Democrats. And of course, Humphrey himself harbored Presidential aspirations. He made key alliances with moderate Senators like John Sparkman, Estes Kefauver and most notably, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. Humphrey's new pragmatism bore fruit with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which enhanced the Justice Department's powers in the South.

Humphrey's role in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act represents one the greatest moments of his career, and his most substantive achievement in advancing racial equality. Thurber does an excellent job in reminding readers of Humphrey's role as floor manager of the landmark legislation. He wisely ignored the advice and demands of President Johnson and liberal interest groups, boldly devising his own plan to marshal the votes needed for passage.

In February 1964, Johnson goaded Humphrey with the prediction that he and the Senate liberals were no match against segregationist Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, who was a master of procedure. When the Civil Rights bill was introduced, the Southerners began filibustering.

Humphrey turned up the pressure, organizing his liberals in shifts to respond quickly to quorum calls and managing the campaign to influence public opinion in support of the legislation.

Humphrey broke with civil rights groups with his strategy to woo Everett Dirksen, the Republican Minority Leader from Illinois, to gain Republican votes so that cloture could be invoked, even if the bill's strong provisions were weakened in the process. Huphrey's strategy paid off. Democrats from the North and West allied with many Republicans to end the filibuster on June 10, 1964. The Civil Rights Act passed soon after.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Humphrey envisioned a period in which gains would be consolidated as the Justice Department and other federal agencies worked on the implementation of the new law. But civil rights activists were impatient with the pace of reform. Trying to minimize loses in the South, Humphrey joined Johnson in opposing the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention, and steered away from civil rights issues on the campaign trail as the Democratic nominee for Vice-President.

Humphrey's service as Vice-President was marked by frustration. A legislator by training and temperament, he was not an effective executive, and he never won President Johnson's confidence. This was particularly true on civil rights matters. Humphrey chaired the President's Council on Equal Opportunity (PCEO), an office formed to coordinate civil rights efforts across cabinet departments and agencies. PCEO was a disappointment, duplicating much of the work of the Federal bureaucracy. Humphrey returned to his central interest in economic advancement when he headed up the President's Council on Youth Opportunity (PCOYO). He spearheaded a drive to cajole businesses to hire unemployed black teens for summer jobs. Despite a massive publicity campaign, the response of business was sluggish, and the Youth Opportunity Campaign did not meet its targets. Unemployment rates among black teens remained high.

Humphrey's life work exemplified a commitment to government programs to bring about racial equality tempered by the belief that, over time, white Southerners would be persuaded as to the righteousness of civil rights claims. But when the urban riots paralyzed the county in the summer of 1967, the liberal consensus splintered apart. Humphrey's familiar liberal refrain that the American creed owed blacks equality of opportunity was reinterpreted. The new left--the Kerner Commission and Humphrey's opponents in the 1968 Democratic Presidential primaries, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy--argued that little progress had been made in race relations in the post-war era. They were edging toward equality of outcome as the proper measure of justice. At the center, Democrats within the Johnson administration were cynical about the potential of government to bring about racial harmony and justice. To the right, George Wallace's populist campaign of resentment tied the cause of racial justice with the problem of societal breakdown.

Desperate to keep the New Deal coalition together, Humphrey sought to rebuild the old liberal consensus. Law and order was only possible, he argued, through the promotion of economic justice and equality. His efforts at comprise can be seen both an effort to forge a workable comprise and a strategy of appeasement. Whatever his motivations, Humphrey ended up alienating moderates with his proposal for a Marshall plan for the cities, and civil rights groups with his efforts to find concord with Southern moderates. Winning the Democratic nomination, he went on to lose (barely) to Richard Nixon in 1968. Nixon's successful formula played on the status anxieties of blue-collar whites, and the legitimate fears about crime that most liberals were dodging.

After the 1968 election, Humphrey became more critical of civil rights organizations that refused, in his estimation, to take the pragmatic im-

perative of coalition building seriously. He was particularly contemptuous of upper-middle class liberals who snobbishly dismissed the concerns of ethnic whites about the costs of affirmative action, busing and other race programs. Humphrey struck two cords that have a familiar ring. Like Bill Clinton and other right-center Democrats, he made the restoration of civil order the highest priority as a sign that blacks did not enjoy special privilege within the Democratic party. Like William J. Wilson, Robert Reich and other left-center Democrats from the universities, Humphrey's solution to the race problem sounds much like today's "targeting within universalism," the idea that the interests of blacks can best be advanced through programs like Social Security that offer protections to broad categories of classes. Hidden from view, part of a program's resources can be targeted to disadvantaged minority-group members.

Humphrey tried to put his ideas to work when he returned to Washington to serve in the Senate in 1971, and when he sought the Democratic nomination for President in 1972. But the right criticized his expensive jobs programs for the cities as foolish and counterproductive, and the left criticized Humphrey's reluctance to press the civil rights agenda in the north as evidence of political opportunism. The passage of the Humphrey-Hawkins Act with its guarantee of full-employment for all citizens represents the culmination of Humphrey's class-centered thinking. But the legislation was gutted, and Washington's economic policy-makers never took its provisions seriously. In those inflation phobic times, a full-employment strategy was politically untenable. Humphrey died without ever resolving the central riddle of his political life: how to create a viable electoral majority for the Democratic Party while maintaining a commitment to equality for minority-group members.

Thurber's general take on the Democratic Party's handling of the race issue is that the white middle class is inherently conservative. They might be outraged if blacks are being beaten on the Stennis bridge, but do not expect whites to bear any of the costs of integration. Thurber may be right, but I suspect that the truth is a bit subtler.

Thurber's position implicitly dismisses (or at least denigrates) the immense progress in race relations. Overt racism has dropped out of public discourse and, to a large degree, private attitudes. A sizable black middle class, fueled by access to public sector jobs, has emerged. Princeton political scientist Jennifer Hochchild's research finds that with the fall of de facto racism class and race questions have become intertwined, an argument that lends credence to the policy merits of "targeting within universalism" as an answer to the Democratic Party's race dilemma.[1] One of Bill Clinton's successful and consistent policies (despite the woes of his commission on race) is his three-pronged race policy. He firmly defends reasonable Affirmative Action remedies. Simultaneously, Clinton has taken law and order stands and distanced the administration from black interest groups (at least before the Monica Lewinsky scandal), all political theater intended to reassure white voters that the Democrats were neither a captured nor a soft party. He has also "deracialized" social policy by practicing of form of targeting within universalism, namely, the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) which has probably helped more black families than any other recent policy innovation in the last twenty years.

The cardinal principal to remember is that there is no single "racial remedy" to bring about social justice. Just as different varieties of cancer require a mix of therapies, the "racism cure" requires varying degrees of attention and treatment. Furthermore, just as cancers vary in their morality and morbidity rates, the extent of racism varies by policy domain. Much work remains in the field of criminal justice. But great successes

have been scored because of the enlightened policies of many educational institutions, and the hiring practices of many private employers and most Federal, state and local governments. Race policy in the United States must be informed by reasonable analysis that occupies the generous ground between the poles of pollyannaish color blind policy prescriptions offered by the Thernstroms and the unimaginative pessimism of Derrick Bell.[2] Reform is difficult, but within our reach.

Of course, there is one prong missing from Clinton's approach, Humphrey might remind us--New Deal style economic distribution: a Works Progress Administration, a Public Works Administration or a War on Poverty to close the income gap between the races. Thurber, following Alan Brinkley and other prominent historians, argues that that liberalism took a "group and individual" rights turn, rejecting the New Deal model as civil rights matters crowded out bread and butter economic issues. But its probably more accurate to say that this turn away from economic distribution was forced on the Democratic Party by conservatives within the party, Republicans, the public, and perhaps by the most important litmus test of all, the mixed performance of post-war jobs programs. If the turn is to be attributed to liberals at all, it certainly was not driven by civil rights organizations. As the recent work of Hamilton and Hamilton points out, civil rights organizations pressed a dual agenda emphasizing civil rights claims for blacks and economic equality for the have-nots, black and white alike.[3] The more likely suspects, I would argue, for the "enemy within" thesis were the Nadarites, the members of the consumer and environmental movements in the early 1970s whose Bradiesian distrust of all big institutions included New Deal style government.

Thuber's excellent biography will leave readers with a sadness, both for the unrealized hopes of Humphrey--a fundamentally good, intelligent man who would have made a better President then either Kennedy, Johnson or Nixon--and for Humphrey's unrealized hopes for his country.

NOTES

[1]. Jennifer Hochchild, Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[2]. Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America In Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). Derrick A. Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

[3]. Dona Hamilton and Charles Hamilton, *Dual Agenda: Race and Social Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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