H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scot Brown. *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism.* New York: New York University Press, 2003. xvii + 228 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9877-5.

Reviewed by Mr. Robert Cruickshank (Doctoral Student, Department of History, University of Washington)
Published on H-1960s (June, 2004)

Revisiting Cultural Nationalism

Black Power has recently undergone a historiographical renaissance. Studies of the Black Panther Party have featured prominently in this effort, with several recent books and an academic conference helping to recast the meaning and legacy of this aspect of African-American nationalism. Moving beyond the "good sixties, bad sixties" narrative, scholars have begun to complicate the narrative of the Panthers and other proponents of Black Power, placing them in local, national, and historical contexts.[1] Historians such as Komozi Woodard and Robert Self have broadened this approach beyond the Panthers, showing the place of cultural nationalism in the African-American freedom movement. Their work has begun to break down the misleading interpretation of Black Power as a declension from the earlier Civil Rights Movement. Self and Woodward instead argue that both ideologies were and are deeply intertwined expressions of African-American aspirations for liberation.

Scot Brown's *Fighting for US* is a major contribution to this developing area of Sixties scholarship. Focusing on the US Organization and its leader, Maulana Karenga, Brown argues that US was an important, albeit flawed, part of the Black Power movement. The author uses the US Organization to show Black nationalism as a heterogeneous set of related ideologies, and he strives to move its history beyond the sectarianism that plagued the movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In what Clayborne Carson properly describes in the book's foreword as a "sympathetic but also judicious account" (p. xi), Brown presents a highly readable narrative that succeeds in reclaiming Karenga and US as major figures in twentieth-century Black politics.

Having been granted access to Karenga's papers, and with a score of interviews with US members past and present, Brown provides a useful account of the intellectual development of Karenga and the US Organization's brand of nationalist ideology. Karenga was influenced by the Negritude tradition of Senghor, which viewed traditional African culture as inherently communal and provided an alternate route to socialism that bypassed traditional Marxism. Brown uses this insight, along with other themes in Karenga's writings, to argue that cultural nationalism was never intended to be apolitical, as some of its critics have held. Similarly, Brown shows how Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity convinced Karenga of the value of united-front politics. By making common cause with other organizations such as the Black Congress in Los Angeles and the Congress of African People in Newark, US attained its greatest political efficacy.

Brown also provides an excellent analysis of the troubled relationship between US and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Both groups drew inspiration, politically and ideologically, from Don Warden, who founded the Afro-American Association in the Bay Area in 1962. Warden espoused a community-based ethos of activism that saw value in describing "the African American dilemma in cultural terms" (p. 28). Warden's critique of integrationism resonated with Karenga, who for a time became the group's LA representative. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who studied with Warden at Oakland's Merritt College, also soaked up Warden's critique of the nonviolent civil rights movement, although they went in another direction.

According to Brown, "the rivalry between the two organizations set in motion a binary discourse grounded on false assumptions. The choice between African culture as represented by images of military resistance and a central value system and rituals is a manufactured one.... nuances of this sort were replaced by sectarian allegations as the US/Panther conflict became intensified" (pp. 115-16). This insight forms one of the book's major contributions to our understanding of the complexity of Black Power, and challenges historians to avoid the sectarian divisions that trapped the two groups in a vicious cycle of organizational jealousy and destructive violence.

Brown depicts the January 1969 shootout between members of the US Organization and the Black Panther Party, which resulted in the deaths of Panther activists Alprentice 'Bunchy' Carter and John Huggins, as the pivotal and tragic turning point for US. He does not provide a definitive answer as to precisely what transpired on the UCLA campus that day thirty-five years ago, but perhaps it is impossible to do so. What Brown does show is how the violence forced US to shift tactics, which limited the group's overall effectiveness. In defense of Karenga, US members closed ranks and virtually abandoned political organizing, as well as cultural and artistic programs.

The role of the FBI in this affair, though critically important, also remains unclear. During the 1960s and 1970s, the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) undertook repeated efforts to disrupt organizations on the radical left. In the case of the US/Panther conflict, Brown uses previously published FBI documents to show how the FBI actively worked to sow discord between US and the BPP by drafting a letter, ostensibly from a member of US, stating that US planned to kill LA Panther leaders. The FBI intended that "this counterintelligence measure will result in an 'US' and BPP vendetta" (FBI file, quoted on p. 95). Brown is unable to determine the full extent of the FBI harassment, especially concerning the UCLA shootings. Was Maulana Karenga right to blame the struggles of US and his failing leadership on the stress caused by COINTELPRO (p. 126)? Brown, unfortunately, does not provide a clear answer to this question; thus, historians will continue to debate the role of the FBI in the demise of Black Power.

Although Brown admires Karenga to a degree, he levels several criticisms at Karenga and US, particularly at what he describes as their "retrograde forms of authoritarianism and sexism" (p. 72). The group's gender relationships were often patriarchal, and Karenga and some of his male followers frequently echoed liberal arguments about the supposedly negative effects of black matriarchy. Brown contends that, nevertheless, women played an important organizational role in US, but he does not discuss this claim in detail.

Brown is also critical of Karenga's role in limiting the effectiveness of the US Organization and its brand of cultural nationalism. Although Brown is clearly respectful of Karenga's contributions to Afrocentricism, he also believes that Karenga proved unable to provide the kind of leadership that could sustain US through difficult times. Instead, Karenga sought to increase his power; he also began to abuse drugs and women on his path to prison.

Finally, Brown does not provide a close examination of the relationship between US and the larger African-American community in Los Angeles, although he does suggest that the US emphasis on what he terms "a more total conversion" (p. 109) limited the organization's mass appeal in comparison to other nationalist groups. In retrospect, it seems clear that the impact of US was primarily cultural rather than political despite the organization's significant, if fleeting, role in LA's Black Congress. Yet Brown gives more space to the political and less to the cultural. He argues convincingly that cultural nationalism and political activism were fundamentally intertwined, but he fails to situate his fascinating chapter on the arts within the narrative flow of earlier chapters.

Despite these problems, *Fighting for US* is a book that historians of the 1960s, of African-American movements, and of cultural history will find useful. Brown has made a significant contribution by placing Karenga's cultural nationalism in both historical and global context, reminding us that the ideologies of the Sixties had deep, often global roots. The author has also helped to reconfigure the Black Power declension narrative by showing how US was, at times, able to promote cultural identity and mobilize political action within a volatile but, at times, stable coalition. The fact that Afrocentricity and the holiday of Kwanzaa have not only survived but thrived suggests that Black Power was and is far more than a destructive outgrowth of the civil rights movement.

Note

[1] Robert O. Self, "Are the Panthers Part of the 'Bad Sixties'?" History News Network, July 14, 2003. http://hnn.us/articles/1561.html.

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Citation: Mr. Robert Cruickshank. Review of Brown, Scot, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism.* H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9541

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