

REFRAMING BLACK POWER, REFRAMING JESSE JACKSON.

BLACK ECONOMIC POWER IN CHICAGO, 1966-72.

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A “Moderate” Black Power Leader?

On January 15, 1971, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, national director of Operation Breadbasket, was the principal speaker at a program in the old Capital Theatre, located at 7941 South Halsted, Chicago. It was one of the city's several services marking Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. The 6000-seat movie theatre, recently purchased by Breadbasket, had been renamed Dr. King's Workshop, in memory of the leader of the civil rights movement. The Reverend Curtis Melson led members of Operation Breadbasket in a song and a raised right fist salute to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When Rev. Jackson presented his eulogy, he praised Dr. King as a man who became “a world authority” despite “crippling circumstances.” Then Jackson elaborated on his initial remark by saying that: King was a man who “had everything against him. He was black. He was short. He was from the South-Georgia.” But Dr. King overcame all of the challenges to his manhood and met them proudly.¹

“He was black. He was short. He was from the South-Georgia,” unusual words to commemorate a leader who was allowed to go to the mountaintop, but don't be fooled. Jackson was preaching. What he meant, what he wanted to say, was that King seemed to be an improbable leader, struggling as he did with his own finitude. He suffered a number of insuperable limits such as physical constraints (“He was short”) along with his race, which was uncommon at the time for an American leader (“He was black”). Rev. Jackson also inserted reminiscences of the Gospel, whereby he mentioned the place of Dr. King's birth (“He was from the South-Georgia”) was proverbially wicked as much as

¹ Text and Photo “Rev Curtis Melson Leads Operation Breadbasket”. Historical Images: Memphis (TN), No. 20462020, 1971. Personal archive.

Jesus' own origins ("Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46)). It seemed highly unlikely that the Messiah would come from a place like that. Yet, despite his finitude, King was a great man because he was a man of God. That's why he convinced the people in Montgomery "not to ride the buses." That's why he was successful in "all of those sit-ins and marches,"² because God was with him. It matters not where a man comes from, or what is the place of his birth, or how tall he is, or the color of his skin, provided he be authorized by God and qualified for His work.

This is probably what Jackson meant.³ Yet, his words were surprising, to say the least. Apparently Jackson does not need to be effected by the same racial and physical limitations as King to be a man qualified for His work. He is 220 pounds of muscle rippling through a six-foot, two inch frame with a billow Afro, a spirited Afro, with a demeanor of a beautiful, proud black man. As such, it needs to be emphasized, he is proud of being black. When he speaks of King, race was part of the "crippling circumstances." But when he speaks of himself, race is part of the assets: "I *am* black – beautiful – proud – I must be respected."⁴ He sells pride as much as he is preaching.⁵ Jackson is clearly embracing a different rhetorical code than King. He is pursuing a specific rhetorical strategy.

After the assassination of Dr. King, it was noticed that Jackson had gone from a more subdued wardrobe of dark, vested suits to his Dayglo designer dashikis and black leather vests; a symbol of rebellion and existentialism.⁶ When *Playboy's* Associate Articles Editor, Arthur Kretchmer, was sent to the old Capital Theatre to conduct an interview with Jackson, he noted that "he was dressed, like a Mod black emperor, in a brilliantly colored dashiki, bell-bottom jeans and high-top country shoes."⁷ Always around his neck was a gold-plated medallion of Dr. King, that is, a medal used as the pendant of a necklace. Jackson adopted the medallion man fashion style but with a more discrete open-collar shirt.⁸ When invited to talk at Harvard University's Eliot House in winter of 1970, he changed the medallion, and instead wore another huge medallion bearing an image of U.S. Olympic

² Text and Photo "Rev Curtis Melson Leads Operation Breadbasket".

³ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. Washington, D.C.: JFJ Associates, 1985, p. 10.

⁴ Jackson, Jesse. *I Am Somebody*. Poem.

⁵ Jacob Simms, Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many, *Time*, April 6, 1970, 14-19, p. 19.

⁶ Whereas King and the other executives at SCLC made it a point to dress in a suit and tie, Jackson dressed casually. For this, Jackson was usually the object of many jibes from the staff for his casual attitude towards dress.

⁷ Arthur Kretchmer, Playboy Interview: Jesse Jackson, *Playboy*, 85-112 and 188, 290-292, p. 86.

⁸ Text and Photo "Operation Breadbasket and Rev. Jesse Jackson". Historical Images: Memphis (TN), No. 20504376, 1971. Personal archive.

track stars Johns Carlos and Tommie Smith, whose clenched fists were raised high in their defiant Black Power salute at Mexico City.⁹

Jackson was not afraid to raise his right fists in the air himself. In Watts, on August 20, 1972, wearing the black radical uniform - multicoloured dashiki, bushy sideburns and medallion - he gave the invocation in front of more than 100,000 people at the Los Angeles Coliseum. He then urged the audience to raise their right fists in the air and repeat while he recited his poem, "I Am Somebody." People stood and raised their fists in the air. Photos from the event featured Rev. Jackson and Al Bell, Executive Vice President and Board Chairman of Stax Records, giving clenched fist salute during the playing of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," often referred to as the "Black National Anthem," at the opening ceremonies of Wattstax, a seven-hour festival of sorts.¹⁰ During the brief invocation, Jackson carefully delivered a message of consciousness and self-determination. "Today is a day of black awareness. Today is a day of black people taking care of black people's business [...] When we are together we have power." In Watt we've shifted from burn, baby, burn, into learn, baby, learn, [...] We have shifted from bed bugs and big ticks to community control and politics."¹¹

Between December 1970 and February 1971, Jackson expressed a desire to run for mayor of Chicago as an independent. He announced that he was "certainly serious about the mayoral race," and he "may run for mayor."¹² Two weeks after his eulogy in memory of Dr. King, on January 27, 1971, Jackson announced that he will "try to qualify" for the mayoral primary election.¹³ He flirted publicly with the idea for months beforehand. Just the fact that he was dealing with the possibility was enough to have the media interested. Eventually, he decided not to enter the mayoral race in Chicago and snuffed out prospects of a wonderful political confrontation. Not that many felt Jackson could defeat Mayor Richard Daley. After all, Daley rode to an easy fifth term mayoral victory in 1971 carrying 78 percent of the vote. A decade later, however, the Chicago Machine fell apart and Harold Washington emerged as the victor in the three-way primary election.¹⁴ If Jackson had decided otherwise, he would have become part of new generation of black people running for

⁹ Jacob Simms, *Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Wattstax: 30th Anniversary Special Edition Dvd. Running Time: Approximately 103 minutes.

¹¹ Wattstax: 30th Anniversary Special Edition Dvd.

¹² Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 224.

¹³ Text and Photo "Operation Breadbasket and Rev. Jesse Jackson".

¹⁴ The Cook County Democratic Organization is one of the most powerful political machines in U.S. history. Traditionally called the "Chicago Democratic machine", or simply the "Chicago Machine", the organization has dominated Chicago and Illinois politics since the 1930s.

public office and joined what Professor Joseph calls the “Black Power-era politicians such as Maynard Jackson and Harold Washington,” who “embraced the movement, but with a moderate perspective.”¹⁵ But, of course, he had not. It was not his time. Politics was a secondary area of strength for Jackson in that period. Plus, Jackson did consider himself more of a national leader than a Chicago leader.¹⁶ When he finally ran for President of the United States it was a different period, well beyond the black power era’s classical period (1966-1975).¹⁷ It was “I am somebody” no more. It was primarily “never surrender. Keep hope alive.” During the Reagan era, hope had replaced pride.

Jackson has been described as someone who was engaged in raising the black consciousness.¹⁸ Along with many other black leaders in the late 1960s, he jumped on the trend of cultural nationalism. He did not simply adopt a dashiki-wearing, Afro hair, and medallion man fashion style; he literally rethought festivities from a black angle. The first annual Black Christmas in 1968 hosted a Black Soul Saint, who took the place of a White Santa Claus and “Jackson said came from the South Pole by the way of the Equator.”¹⁹ At the Black Easter in 1969, a black sheep replaced a white lamb. Although his immense rhetorical skills have received universal recognition, Jackson was not a towering figure in the realm of black culture and consciousness during the black power era’s classical period. He did not attempt to transform the way black people thought about themselves. For example, he did not try to change the psyche of the black folks, or decolonize the black mind as Malcolm X did.²⁰ He missed the intellectual stamina to deal with the fundamental archetypes of the black community. Apparently Jackson acknowledged the fact and qualified himself as a “moral engineer.”²¹ He preferred to offer psychological relieve and heal damaged souls, like every good preacher does. He enjoyed empowering black people’s heart rather than digging deeper into their minds.²²

¹⁵ Joseph, Peniel E. *Dark Days, Bright Nights: from Black Power to Barack Obama*. p. 4.

¹⁶ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 224.

¹⁷ The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field, p. 773.

¹⁸ Among the many, Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 160.

¹⁹ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 164.

²⁰ Cone, James H. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 291.

²¹ Quoted in Jacob Simms, *Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many*, p. 15.

²² According to Henry Mitchell, “the goal of one sermon is not comprehensive knowledge of so little as one whole verse; it is the faithful change of life in the direction of no more than one Christlike characteristic, as called in the Word.” In other words, the preacher does not lecture, he facilitates a meaningful encounter with a biblical text and has a behavioral purpose. Mitchell, Henry H., *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*. Nashville: Abington Press (revised edition), 2008, p. 14-5.

Black Economic Power

It is in his search for economic power, however, that we can find the real, concrete connection between Jackson and Black Power. Jackson's self-appointed mission was to shape and discipline the growing black awareness and pride in order to build black economic power. "Say it loudly, I'm black and I'm proud and I drink Joe Louis milk."²³ Time correspondent Jacob Simms placed Jackson's strength in "his use of evangelistic fervor to achieve pragmatic ends."²⁴ Biographer Barbara Reynolds pointed out the same, writing about his "use of rhetorical inspiration to fire up the ordinary people into Buy Black consumers, as well as economic foot soldiers."²⁵ When he was asked in the early 1970s what his occupation was, Jackson modestly answered that "you can be an orator or an organizer. I am an organizer." Actually, he was a blend of both.²⁶ He had learnt from his mentor, Dr. King, about "how to organize local communities, how to use the press to give visibility to an issue, and to force confrontation through national attention."²⁷ He applied this experience to Operation Breadbasket.

Breadbasket was a program sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or "SCLC," established in 1962 to fight economic discrimination against African Americans in Atlanta. The goal was to promote equal employment opportunities for African-American workers, by mobilizing buying campaigns to pressure business and corporations to hire minorities. Coinciding with King's arrival in Chicago in 1966, Jackson was appointed head of the Chicago office of Operation Breadbasket. By 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC chairman, characterized Breadbasket the "most spectacularly successful program" in Chicago and appointed Jackson the national director of the program.²⁸

Jackson's stroke of genius was to expand Breadbasket's activities, moving beyond more traditional movement aims of job desegregation into addressing issues such as access to finance, portfolio of customers, development of brands, and corporate board memberships. Jackson agreed with King that employment was a crucial target to reach, along with the troubling path of economic

²³ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 14.

²⁴ Jacob Simms, *Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many*, p. 15.

²⁵ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 159.

²⁶ Jacob Simms, *Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many*, p. 15.

²⁷ Reynolds, Barbara A. *Jesse Jackson: America's David*. p. 197.

²⁸ King, Martin L., "One Year Later in Chicago," January 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Non violent Social Change, Inc. King Library and Archives, Atlanta, Box 26, 670100-001.

discrimination. He was also gifted with a better understanding of the way the economy works than King, or perhaps was more careful in listening to the rising voices of despair from the ghetto than his mentor. Whatever the reason, Jackson put these issues in a contemporary context. More than the desire to end poverty black families yearned to be a part of affluent society, and in the final years of the Age of Prosperity credit consequently became as important for black families as was income. At the very core of Jackson's views about economic power was the idea that in affluent America, in the 1960s, even poor black families evidenced consumer desires. Black people wanted to be consumers and accepted members of the American society as well as economy. They did not contest capitalism, they just wanted to be included and have the opportunity to take advantage of it. Jackson realized better than King that employment discrimination came together with credit discrimination, and with the prospects to assure prosperity for black families and end economic racial discrimination fighting the former without taking care of the latter was meaningless. Examining the intersection of income and credit in everyday life, Jackson looked behind the scenes of the black families and tried to make modern lending possible to them. He recognized the changes that were occurring in the larger structure of American capitalism, notably that lending money to facilitate consumption was (is) more profitable than lending to invest in expanded production.

Jackson's connections with urban ghetto life guided his vision of black-owned banks, black-owned urban mortgage lending, and small business loans. Historically, most black enterprises had been small, undercapitalized, and in constant danger of insolvency.²⁹ He acknowledged the underlying reality of the inner black city economy. Insular, depredated, with no financial resources to approach the consumer, isolated from the larger mainstream of American capitalism, Jackson understood that black families were secluded from the affluent society. Rather than contesting the latter in order to include the former, he made every effort to push the former deeply inside the latter. Jackson wanted to construct a bridge between ghetto economy and American capitalism. During the first half of the century, black entrepreneurs had focused on black customers. Such a strategy seemed to be a fruitful expedient for self help. Jackson acknowledged that for black entrepreneurs to cater only to members of their own race put them at a disadvantage, but rather than envisioning for black business the access the white market as a possibility to business growth, he came with a new idea.³⁰ Somehow, he

²⁹ Thomas K. McCraw, *American Business, 1920-2000: How It Worked*. Wheeling (IL): Harland Davidson, 2000, p. 103.

³⁰ Thomas K. McCraw, *American Business, 1920-2000: How It Worked*, p. 104.

thought, money had to be diverted from white corporations, banks, retailers, and transferred to black businesses.

Black-owned banks with the right size of funds and huge deposits might provide the access to credit that white-owned banks denied. But not only that, since the relationship between a borrower and a lender involved many more subjects than just themselves, whereby a network of home builders, car dealers, publishers, consumer goods manufacturers was needed to sustain and encourage the black community entrée into the consumer society. If the Civil Rights movement was really concerned about increasing the stake of black people in American capitalism, Jackson believed it would worry less about policymakers and find a way to enable black capitalism to access affordable credit and low rate interest finances, eventually building the infrastructure of a black economy that may support home and car purchases and any other consumer desires of American black families. Increasingly, he began to incorporate the philosophies of black self-help and economic independency common to Black Power. Thus Jackson sought to reorient Operation Breadbasket and its operations. He envisioned Breadbasket as an engine to promote black capitalism because he saw the multiplicity of connections between financial capitalism and consumer capitalism and applied this vision to his community. He could not be clearer than that:

“The essential purpose of Operation Breadbasket is to have blacks control the basic resources of their community. We want to control the banks, the trades, the building constructions and the education of our children. This desire on our part is a defensive strategy evolved in order to stop whites from controlling our community and removing the profits and income that belong to black people. Our programs are dictated by the private-enterprise economy in which we find ourselves.”³¹

Jackson positioned himself on the opposite side of King and Ralph Abernathy, who continued to overestimate the potential of American capitalism, blaming the unjust system instead of recognizing it was just not powerful enough to satisfy everybody. Jackson wondered who, with the coalition of liberals, laborites, and minorities, might promote this agenda of economic development, which at the time practically did not exist. King’s vision of a full-blown welfare state seemed unlikely with the presidency in Nixon’s hands, and the Johnson Administration’s Great Society programs under attack. Nonetheless, the white establishment was willing to pay to provide well-paying jobs, well-

³¹ Arthur Kretchmer, Playboy Interview: Jesse Jackson, p. 96.

equipped schools, and affordable housing to black people. Jackson liberated himself from the visions of other Civil Rights leaders where economic wealth was made available to everybody; a Utopian society that had no poor. Jackson also understood that due to the decline of the affluent society and the prevailing economic troubles, largely associated with the increasing costs of the Vietnam War, the black community had to learn how to reduce their economic dependence on white liberals as well as central government in order to increase their autonomy. Thus he finally came to accept the concept of Black Power as a rationale for black capitalistic ventures, as well as the development of new relationships between black businesspeople and corporate America.³²

Jackson articulated his “quiet” and “moderate” understanding of Black Power ideology quite colloquially during the Saturday-morning meetings at Operation Breadbasket. The lobby of the Capital Theatre was filled with tables displaying black merchandise, and the auditorium itself was hung with signs that exhort the gathering to ‘Buy Black Products’ and ‘Use Black Services.’ For over an hour, usually Jackson delivered a passionate sermon filled with street talk, down-home slang and quotations from the Bible.³³ It was during these sermons that he emphasized his view of community self-help organizations, improvement of communities, pursuance of self-reliance, and economic and political independence from White authority. The black community had to learn how to reduce their economic dependence on white liberals as well as central government, as well as increase their autonomy. They definitively had to change the relationship with whites. What might have seemed an expression of generosity, or a private welfare paid by whites, had to instead become a merchant exchange. Not coincidentally, Jackson often talked of ‘reciprocity,’ meaning the need for a relationship between equals. He pointed out that the connotation of Black Power in the media might be violence, but the fact is Black Power is power sharing. It is equity.³⁴ “We want ownership, we want our share, we want investment,” will become his mantra in the following two decades.³⁵

He never embraced the midst of rhetoric of “any means necessary,” which persists to this day and clings to the American social imagination, as far as Black Power was concerned. He did not choose

³² Franklin, V. P. *Black Self-determination: a Cultural History of African-American Resistance*. p. 215.

³³ Arthur Kretchmer, Playboy Interview: Jesse Jackson, p. 86.

³⁴ The original quotation is: “The connotation of Black Power in the media was violence. The fact is Black Power was power sharing. It was equity.” See: Madison Davis Lacey, Jr. and Henry Hampton, Eyes on the Prize II. Interview with Jesse Jackson, April 11, 1989, accessed September 3, 2012, http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/jac5427.0519.072marc_record_interviewer_process.html

³⁵ Jesse Jackson Threatens Companies with Boycott, *Florence Times*, January 10, 1982, 45.

violence first, and he pointed out that there was a *pragmatic* case for nonviolence.³⁶ He never joined the separatist wing of the movement, saying, “We’re already separated – and blacks did not do the separating – and we do not have the power to do the integrating.” He sustained that blacks were forced to stay separated, “so the question becomes whether we remain separate and dependent or separate and independent.”³⁷ According to Jackson, independence was a consequence of separation, not a goal in itself. He consequently blurred the traditional distinction between integration and nationalism. Doing so, he also made vague the borderline between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power.³⁸

The traditional narrative points out that at the same time that Civil Rights leaders, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fought for racial integration and distribution of wealth, other black leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael emphasized separatism and self-determination. The Nation of Islam built an organization that was also a vehicle of black uplift and self-help; the Black Muslims also emphasized the creation of black businesses in the context of Black Nationalism and separatism. However, in itself, Black Power does not necessary imply separatism, while it definitively implies self-determination.³⁹ At the same time, the Civil Rights movement does not necessary imply distribution of wealth while it definitely implies integration. At the turn of the century, Booker T. Washington – a black icon Jackson has been frequently associated with - and his followers emphasized racial solidarity, economic self-sufficiency, and black self-help, with the prospective of assimilation. Self-determination can work for both strategies of integration and separatism.⁴⁰ Jackson represented the very connection between integration and self-determination. He pursued a strategy of integration *through* self-determination.

³⁶ Arthur Kretchmer, Playboy Interview: Jesse Jackson, p. 86.

³⁷ Jacob Simms, Jesse Jackson: One Leader Among Many, p. 16.

³⁸“Black power activism existed alongside civil rights struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s, and certain activists simultaneously participated in both movements.” Peniel E. Joseph, ‘The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,’ *The Journal of American History*, December 2009, 751-776, p. 775.

³⁹ For this idea, I am indebted to Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: from Black Power to Barack Obama*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010; In-person conversation with Peniel Joseph, May 2011, Atlanta, GA.

⁴⁰ V.P. Franklin contends that African Americans through slavery and freedom have consistently valued survival with dignity (self-respect), resistance against oppression (self-help), religious self-determination (moral autonomy), and freedom (justice). Franklin, V. P. *Black Self-determination: a Cultural History of African-American Resistance*, Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992, pp.195-202.

Conclusion

The dap -- the black power handshake -- as an expression of solidarity within black folks, was *de rigueur* when “brothers” met. However, in September 29, 1971, Jackson exchanged a “black power handshake” with Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley.⁴¹ Jackson initiated the black power handshake when he met the Mayor and the latter responded, presumably as a gesture of good will. For sure, Jackson did not want to enlist Richard Daley in the movement. However, he unintentionally achieved the opposite, he de-ideologized the black power handshake. This is how we can look at Jessie Jackson during the roaring years of the Black Power movement, as a pragmatic black leader at home in any fracture of the black movement, promoting unity despite ideological differences. “When we are together, we have power,” he said at Watts. Therefore, there is a bit of Black Power in Jackson as well as of Dr. King. It is in his search for black economic power, however, that we can find the real, concrete connection between Jackson and Black Power.

⁴¹Text and Photo “Black Power Handshake”. Historical Images: Memphis (TN), No. 20558215. Personal archive.