

THE "BLACK MANIFESTO" AND THE TACTIC OF OBJECTIFICATION

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On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with her spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: "Who worships here? Who is their God?"

Martin Luther King

Letter from Birmingham City Jail

On May 4, 1969, James Forman interrupted the service of Riverside Church of New York to read a 2,500-word "Black Manifesto" and to make specific demands to the congregation. Responses to similar interruptions and demands in other churches were hotly debated in newspaper editorials and magazine articles across the country. The purpose of this article is to (1) describe the conception of the "Black Manifesto," (2) recount the characteristic responses by lay and religious leaders, (3) present an analysis of the rhetorical impact of the manifesto document, and (4) provide interpretative conclusions based on the analysis.

During the latter part of April (April 25-27), the Detroit campus of Wayne State University was the setting for a "National Black Economic Development Conference" (NBEDC) co-sponsored by the National Council of Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), and a number of other agencies (Christianity Today, 1969a: 29). The conference's purpose was to bring black leaders together for discussion and concerted action on the economic aspects of Black Power, but one of the invited speakers, James Forman, took over the meeting and demanded endorsement of a document he called the "Black Manifesto." Depending on the source of one's information, the conference was attended by 400-700 leaders who voted in favor of his proposal 187 to 63, with many abstentions (compare *Time*, 1969: 94; Deedy, 1969: 308-309). The manifesto demanded half a billion dollars in "reparations" from the American Christian-Jewish churches and vowed to back the demand with church seizures, disruptions, demonstrations, and force—by whatever means necessary. The money thus obtained would provide for the funding of: a Southern land bank to fund cooperative farms; four publishing houses to generate capital and jobs; four TV networks to counter "racist propaganda that fills the current television networks"; a research skills center; a center for training in communications; a grant to the National Welfare Rights Organization to assist welfare workers and recipient organizations; a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund; an International Black Appeal, headed by Forman, which would raise money for NBEDC, develop co-ops in Africa and support African Liberation Movements; a Black Anti-Defamation League; and a Black university (Forman, 1969).

The author of the "Black Manifesto" was James Forman, former officer of the Black Panther Party and former executive director of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).¹ He had dropped out of the leadership

spotlight when SNCC had undergone the periodic leadership of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. However, he remained director of international affairs for SNCC. The request for economic assistance contained in the "Black Manifesto" was certainly not an original idea of Forman's. According to Lecky and Wright (1969: 9):

As 1969 progressed, the notable, verbally lauded black-proposed economic development recommendations had not become national priorities nor been scheduled for congressional hearings. The "Domestic Marshall Plan" of the National Urban League lay dormant. The "Freedom Budget" of the A. Philip Randolph Institute was a paper document three years after it was announced by the venerated Mr. Randolph, president emeritus of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. When the labor leader marked his eightieth birthday in early 1969, tributes lacked a commitment to put into effect his request that \$185 billion be spent over a ten year period to free millions of Americans from poverty and deprivation.

In addition, it is likely that Forman borrowed some of the economic concepts from Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been assassinated about one year earlier. When King was assassinated, the highest religious hierarchs—Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Protestant—called for the realization of King's "Economic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged." It required about \$10 to \$12 billion from the combined efforts of the public and private sectors, *including the religious community* (Schomer, 1969: 867-868). The portion of the manifesto which specified the needs of black people contained little controversy or originality. The threatening aspects of the manifesto reflected the popular philosophy of attention-getting revolutionary rhetorical tactics; thus, the introduction and conclusion of the manifesto were given the most attention in the responses.

Response to the "Black Manifesto" quite naturally included both positive and negative statements. Most responses were qualified in one way or another. Even those who were

completely positive toward it often called the amounts of money requested astonishingly modest. On June 13, Forman answered some critics by collectively raising the amount from a half billion to three billion dollars. Those who viewed the manifesto negatively often called attention to the philosophy of reparations, the language or rhetoric employed, and the tactics utilized. Although the responses of the various churches and religious leaders obviously contained variation, *in general* the reactions can be classified as either positive or negative. Characteristic positive and negative responses follow.

Positive responses. It is appropriate to begin with the response of Ernest T. Campbell, pastor of New York's Riverside Church, the first church which was disrupted by Forman on May 4. Campbell said he saw "sound theological pinnings" in the concept. Although he was very upset and angered at the disruption, Campbell refused to place the blame on Forman alone. Instead, he blamed religion. "The churches of the land, far from being a vigorous part of the solution of this problem, have been apathetic beneficiaries of it" (Lecky and Wright, 1969: 130). By May 10, Campbell had become the first clergyman to endorse the concept of "reparations," but did not name NBEDC to receive announced increases in minority funds. Lucius Walker, Jr., IFCO'S executive director, loyally supported the manifesto "in principle and in programmatic aspects" (Christian Century, 1969b: 2). The 200-member Ministerial Interfaith Association of Harlem favored "the principle" of the NBEDC demands, but not its attendant "political philosophy" (Commonweal, 1969: 308-309). The Episcopal Church submitted \$200,000 in response to the demands, although the money actually went to the more acceptable National Committee of Black Churchmen (Christianity Today, 1969c: 44). The members of the National Council of Churches' General Board pledged to raise \$500,000 immediately and to propose a plan

to the assembly for seeking "tens of millions of dollars" for black economic development (Christianity Today, 1969c: 44). Thomas Kilgore, Jr., the first black to become president of the American Baptist Convention, supported the Forman proposal "in substance" (Haughey, 1969: 689). According to *Time* magazine, "the Presbyterians authorized a drive to obtain \$50 million for general works against poverty"—the most generous response to Forman (*Time*, 1969: 94). The annual convention of the National Association of Laymen (Catholic) endorsed the reparations principle and asked a yearly sum of \$400 million from the U.S. Catholic Church for black-controlled organizations (Lecky and Wright, 1969: 20). And, finally, the World Council of Churches set up a secretariat on racism with a \$15,000 budget, \$200,000 reserve funds for "oppressed people," and asked member denominations to give more than \$300,000 more (Lecky and Wright, 1969: 27). There are other "positive" responses to the manifesto, but those which have been mentioned give an indication of the scope of the response. It should be noted that *not one* of the above allocated the money *directly* to either NBEDC or IFO, but rather the money went to either an already existing agency or to a newly formed program. However, even though the action was thus qualified, it remained a positive type of reaction.

Negative responses. Bayard Rustin, head of the A. Philip Randolph Institute and organizer of the 1963 march on Washington made this caustic negative statement: "The idea of reparations is a ridiculous idea. If my great-grandfather picked cotton for 50 years, then he may deserve some money, but he's dead and gone and nobody owes me anything" (Christian Century, 1969b: 2). Donald Harrington, pastor of Manhattan's Community Church and chairman of the Liberal party, described Forman as "a self-appointed individual who heads a paper organization" and asserted that to do business with Forman would "be an insult to black

people" (Christian Century, 1969b: 2). The Baltimore *Catholic Review's* editorial was bluntly negative as it questioned, "What about reparations for families of white Union soldiers who died in the Civil War to end slavery?" (Christianity Today, 1969a 29). Roy Wilkins of the NAACP stated that giving money to blacks who are without credentials or competence would show contempt for black Americans generally and undercut those working through the democratic process (Christian Century, 1969a: 1413). Washington Cathedral Dean Francis B. Sayre refused to pay the two million dollar demand of Forman and said the cathedral was "not a collection agency and could not liquidate its assets" (Christianity Today, 1969b: 48). Chancery's Archdiocese Cardinal Cooke of New York simply rejected it, saying that "the Manifesto is closely joined to political concepts which are completely contrary to our American way of life" (Deedy, 1969: 534). Bishop John E. Hines rejected the manifesto's ideology and methods (Time, 1969: 88-90).

Even Negro church leaders expressed negative reaction. The Rev. J. H. Jackson, president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., the nation's largest Negro religious group, said that the manifesto "carries as firm a message for the destruction of the United States of America as has ever been given" (Time, 1969: 89). The *Amsterdam Times*, an influential Harlem weekly newspaper, rejected Forman's tactics in disrupting church services (Haughey, 1969: 689). The Synagogue Council of America and the National Jewish Community Advisory Relations Council condemned "the substance and the tactics of the reparations proposal on both moral and practical grounds" (Haughey, 1969: 689). Sixty black clergymen from New Orleans described themselves as "unalterably opposed to the demand's methodology, the racism, and the subtle call for a disregard in meeting the problems of economics as outlined in the manifesto" (Haughey, 1969: 689). Such statements characterized the negative response.

Much of the criticism from both positive and negative responses concerned either the tactics (methodology) or the language (rhetoric). The following statements are typical of such criticism. For example, a *Christian Century* (1969b) editorial, while taking a positive attitude toward the reparations concept, considered the manifesto typical of revolutionary movements in its language.

The real problem is not in the *idea* of reparations: it is in effective implementation of the idea. And if the document's title word "manifesto", along with its anticapitalist ideology rooted in the tragic history of the dehumanization of black labor, suggests Marxist language, that in itself provides no warrant for dismissing the document's substance. Quasi-Marxist verbiage is the habit of most of the world's contemporary revolutionary movements.

Even the central sponsor, IFCO's board of directors, could not agree to endorse Forman's tactics. President Marc Tanenbaum specifically rejected the "revolutionary ideology and racist rhetoric" in addition to the "disruptive tactics employed" (*Christian Century*, 1969b: 2). *Commonweal* stated that "the language is unfortunate. It embarrasses the movement, begets unnecessary polarization and gives excuse to the forces of reaction, while not at all bringing the *Manifesto* closer to completion" (*Commonweal*, 1969: 308-309). Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, John E. Hines, stated:

The language and basic philosophy of the manifesto are calculatedly revolutionary, Marxist, inflammatory, anti-Semitic, and anti-Christian-establishment, violent, and destructive of any democratic political process—so as to shock, challenge, frighten, and if possible, overwhelm the institutions to which it is directed. It was no surprise that throughout the white establishment the immediate response was—with few exceptions—one of outrage, furious hostility and disbelief [*Christianity Today*, 1969d: 37].

The General Board of the Disciples of Christ said the Forman plan contained "an ideology we cannot accept and a methodology we cannot approve" (*Time*, 1969: 88-90).

DISCUSSION

The positive and negative responses seem to have agreed that the rhetoric of the manifesto and its methodology were at best "unfortunate" indeed. However, perhaps one should consider the rhetorical *strategy* involved. Did Forman intentionally use such language and tactics for a predetermined purpose? An analysis of the manifesto itself provides convincing evidence that he did.

The very first sentence of the manifesto's introduction contains the word "racism," which is consistently repeated 22 times in the 8-page document. Usually this term is used in phrases like "rich white exploiters and *racists* who run this world," "*racist* white Christian churches," and "white *racist* imperialists." The U.S. government is referred to as "the most *barbaric* country in the world," "the *colonizer*," "*racist* America," "the most *vicious, racist* system in the world," and as "a *decadent* society." The word "demand" is used 31 times. The theme that "time is short" is used several times. Suggested actions include separation from schemes of Black capitalism, Black nationalists, and Black Power pimps; the use of force: "we have a chance to help bring this government down," "use whatever means necessary, including the use of force and power of the gun," it will be an "armed confrontation," "guerilla warfare in the streets," and "declare war on the white Christian churches and synagogues." Although many other illustrations could be cited, perhaps these will suffice. The question is: Was Forman using any particular rhetorical strategy in the manifesto? The answer is clearly yes. Consideration of what Arthur L. Smith calls "objectification" will clarify such strategy. Conveniently appropriate to our discussion, Smith has an entire chapter entitled "Strategies of the Revolutionists," and he defines "objectification" as follows:

Another stratagem which is employed by the black agitator is objectification. It is the agitator's use of language to direct the

grievances of a particular group toward another collective body such as an institution, nation, political, party, or race. . . . Heightening the rhetorical effectiveness in objectification is achieved by the use of derogatory names or titles. For this reason the term whitey is more potent than white power structure, and the racist honky government excites more passions than does the phrase white government [Smith, 1969: 29].

It seems clear that Forman's use of language can be referred to as rhetorical strategy. But what about the demands, threats, and declaration of war? Does this too serve a rhetorical purpose? Again, the answer is yes. Such statements serve to terrify whites because of "their mystery, indefiniteness, and even, vagueness" (Smith, 1969: 6). The reaction to the manifesto (what some would call overreaction) indicates Forman's rhetoric served him well. A third question encompasses both the rhetoric and tactics employed. How effective was the manifesto? The answer seems dependent upon whether the goals of the manifesto were immediate or ultimate in the mind of Forman. Only Forman knows for sure, but we can speculate. It seems that if Forman's goal was in fact to raise half a billion (later increased to three billion) dollars *for the BEDC*, that goal was a miserable failure. The *only* recorded amount paid *directly* to the BEDC was an *estimated* figure of \$22,000 (Time, 1969: 94). But in terms of money "earmarked," "pledged," "invested," "disbursed," "requested from members," "approved," "appropriated," and "set aside" for purposes of improving the life of blacks in America, the manifesto had an incredibly successful impact in the perspective of long-term effects.

As an attempt to raise money for NBEDC, Forman's ultimatum to the churches has been a complete failure. As an ideological document, his Black Manifesto has been almost universally disavowed. As a tactic to get churches and synagogues to re-examine their priorities and assign new portions of their funds to the task of dealing with racism and poverty, his fury is having a decided effect [Haughey, 1969: 689].

Ever since the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Report) pointed out the dismal plight of racism in this country in March of 1968, little direct action has been taken toward arriving at a solution for black problems. The manifesto, it should be pointed out, revealed an existing crisis more than it created one.

Some general conclusions from this study indicate the following: The manifesto's effectiveness is negative when viewed with short-term goals in mind; positive as a catalyst in moving churches to examine and reorder long-term economic priorities. The general reaction of the churches was to review and enlarge existing programs for the disadvantaged or to institute new programs. This result was decidedly a "good" accomplishment for the manifesto. There seemed to be sympathy for the specific programs of the *Manifesto*, but general disapproval of the rhetoric and tactics. The manifesto as a national movement was short-lived; its spark of life lasted less than a year from Forman's confrontation at Riverside Church. The Marxist rhetoric and dark threats alienated white sympathizers and the black community itself.² When it is compared to previous programs such as the "Freedom Budget," "Domestic Marshall Plan," and "Economic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged," it must be admitted that the Black Manifesto secured more positive, active results. But Forman used insipid logic in several instances within the manifesto itself. One example is that he cautioned blacks not to accept a few crumbs of economic assistance, then he set the brilliant example by demanding the few crumbs of "\$15 a nigger."

Martin Luther King, Jr., once made a statement with reference to the news media's reaction (overreaction) to a speech he made on Vietnam, which seems very appropriate to the Black Manifesto's effect. He said, "Anything that gets white folks so upset must have some good in it" (Abernathy, 1969: 1064-1065). The Black Manifesto certainly did upset

many people for a short period of time at least, but for many people the "good" was obscured by its purple language and shock tactics. Perhaps the clearest conclusion was stated succinctly by Ronald Goetz of *Christian Century*: "In short, the manifesto makes fair rhetoric, but it bites off more than it can chew. The white churches didn't get where they are today by losing fights with the likes of James Forman."

And yet, those Christians who have actually read their Bibles instead of merely displaying them—regardless of Forman's rhetoric and tactics—are perhaps uneasily reminded of the prophet Amos:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream [Amos 5 : 21-24].

NOTES

1. Forman definitely wrote the introduction, but who authored the rest is not known; however, the credit for the entire document is given by many to Forman.
2. The Gallup Poll, surveying 1,515 adults between May 23-27 found 98% of whites and 52% of black populations did *not* support the concept of reparations (see Lecky and Wright, 1969: 163).

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