

## Book Review

### *"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*, by Theodore Kornweibel Jr.

Christopher Capozzola

---

*"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*, by Theodore Kornweibel Jr. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 240 pp.

---

In the depths of America's first Red Scare in the summer of 1919, the notoriously antiradical Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer submitted a report to the U.S. Senate, responding to a congressional interest in radicalism among African Americans. Speaking during a summer of political hysteria and racial violence, Palmer warned that a wide range of radical organizations all "have looked upon the Negroes as particularly fertile ground for the spreading of their doctrines." As a consequence, "the Negro is 'seeing red'" (p. xiv).

Theodore Kornweibel Jr. uses the phrase "seeing red" to characterize the federal government's responses to black activism in the years after World War I. A. Mitchell Palmer himself implied a double meaning in his 1919 testimony: that "docile" African Americans, aroused by the left-wing propaganda of outside agitators, had been stirred up into a dangerous and revolutionary frenzy. Kornweibel sees a different double meaning: His book narrates a brief period when black people—enraged by their mistreatment—created the strongest and most radical left-wing movements yet seen in American history, but he

also records the repression ruthlessly imposed on these organizations by a new domestic intelligence arm of the federal government and analyzes the impact of the political security state on black politics in the modern era.

Kornweibel's story begins in the aftermath of World War I, when many black Americans expected some kind of return on their wartime investments of loyalty and sacrifice. What they were served instead was perhaps one of the bitterest heartbreaks in the American past. In the course of 1919—a year of radical labor activism, racial militancy, and severe repression—more than seventy African Americans were lynched across the South, organized workers were crushed by police and vigilantes, and unorganized black workers were recruited as strikebreakers throughout the industrial North. Antiblack violence erupted in Chicago, Washington, and other cities across the nation. Leading intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who heard in President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points a message of national self-determination that promised the end of colonialism in both the United States and Africa, found themselves excluded from the Peace Conference of Versailles.

Into this void stepped dozens of black organizations that advocated just as many different solutions to the "Negro Problem." In the NAACP's paper *The Crisis*, Du Bois urged black Americans to "Close Ranks" and

support the government loyally in the hopes of a quid pro quo. Marcus Garvey arrived in the United States in 1916, spreading a message of Pan-Africanist racial brotherhood that found expression in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the *Negro World*. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, on the other hand, urged the readers of the *Messenger* toward socialism and were jailed in 1918 for their antiwar stance, while other intellectuals and activists—inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviets' active support for black liberation movements worldwide—turned toward Communism.

In "*Seeing Red*," Kornweibel considers these organizations, and shows, in turn, how the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation<sup>1</sup> and its colleagues in domestic political intelligence monitored and interfered with their activities. What is remarkable is not the reaction of the Washington bureaucrats, but the range of black organizations they targeted: The government was deeply troubled by the activities of the dedicated Communists of the African Blood Brotherhood, but aggressively monitored all aspects of black activity, including Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, a weekly "race paper" in which the politics were no more than a firm but polite challenge to the existing order.

These organizations, which expressed a new depth of radicalism and movement building among black Americans, drew the attention and condemnation, and ultimately the destructive fire, of the federal government. But this was a changed government, one that had at its disposal legislation like the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, as well as state antisyndicalist laws, all of which forbid the expression of "un-American" views in addition to seditious behaviors. This was also a government of surveillance, gathering together the resources of several branches: the Bureau of Investigation was just the largest in a constellation of policing

that included the Secret Service, the Military Intelligence Division of the U.S. Army, the Office of Naval Intelligence, and the State and Post Office Departments.

In all of this repressive machinery, one figure looms larger than the rest: an ambitious young lawyer named J. Edgar Hoover, who acted as head of the Bureau of Investigation's General Intelligence Division from August 1919 until May 1924, when he first took the reins as the bureau's director. Kornweibel presents this complicated figure in refreshing ways. He insists, "This book does not aspire to add to the J. Edgar Hoover demonology. . . . I have chosen to let his memoranda and directives speak for themselves. If the picture is unflattering, it is because his own words and actions create such a portrait" (p. xiii).

And of course, the picture is as unflattering as they come. We see a skilled bureaucrat, obsessed with his own prestige and the advancement of his institutional agenda. We also see a muddled paranoiac unable to distinguish the philosophies of A. Philip Randolph from those of Marcus Garvey and unwilling to admit that a flowering of revolutionary rhetoric did not necessarily imply imminent revolution. Kornweibel's portrait of Hoover, if not wholly unique, is a welcome antidote to the now-tired hero/villain debates among anti-Communists and anti-anti-Communists and the more recent preoccupation with Hoover's quirky private life. In the rush to tell stories with punch lines involving high-heeled shoes and feather boas, we have begun to misremember the public J. Edgar Hoover and to forget that no one accomplished more in twentieth-century America's war against freedom, equality, and basic human dignity than he did. Kornweibel's book reminds us powerfully of this fact.

Perhaps it is J. Edgar Hoover's fault and not Theodore Kornweibel's, but it is difficult to tell from this book which organiza-

tions were most severely persecuted: Larger organizations seem often to have been the cause of greater concern because they were so popular, but they were frequently saved from attack by their relative political moderation. Smaller organizations that took more radical stances came under heavy pressure, but were sometimes ignored because they were seen as politically marginal. The point, of course, is that regardless of politics, nearly all black organizations of the 1920s were severely constrained by a culture and politics of surveillance, but a more comparative conclusion could have made these relationships clearer.

*"Seeing Red"* is broadly about the rise of political intelligence in this country in the early twentieth century. Kornweibel places these events in the context of earlier antiradical and antilabor government actions by state militias and the Secret Service as well as quasi-governmental organizations like the Pinkertons. The history of political intelligence cannot be understood without these nineteenth-century contexts, but *"Seeing Red"* is also a book about how these mechanisms of surveillance were used with a particular ruthlessness against black people. Kornweibel's aim is to show that *all* efforts at improving race relations drew the attention of political intelligence operatives and that the main aim of federal campaigns against black militancy was not so much the suppression of radicalism as the maintenance of an existing racial order.

If so, then Kornweibel has placed these developments in the wrong tradition. The suppression of black militancy—with utter disregard for its intellectual arguments or its political goals—has a long history in the United States, dating back to 1619 or so. Kornweibel does not adequately explain the continuities or discontinuities between already-existing structures for suppressing black militancy and the new techniques of re-

pression perfected in the years after World War I. That his study begins in 1919—a year that saw some of the most gruesome and frequent episodes of lynching in American history as well as the birth of the modern Bureau of Investigation—only highlights the unexplored connections that persist to the present day.

Kornweibel's work on each of these organizations in the 1920s will be useful to anyone interested in the political culture of the interwar years. But his chapter on Marcus Garvey and the UNIA is of particular interest. An ongoing debate about why Garveyism failed (or, in some people's minds, whether Garveyism failed) is aided here by a chronology of federal investigations of Garvey and a detailed explanation of exactly how he came to be charged with mail fraud in 1922. Combing federal records to supplement Robert Hill's massive documentary project,<sup>2</sup> Kornweibel provides another view of the toppling of the UNIA in the years from 1922 to 1925. The organization was never on secure ground financially, as Garvey poured increasing amounts of energy—and funds—into the Black Star Line, a UNIA-operated international ocean liner fleet designed to unite the black diaspora under its own steam. Much of that energy was diverted from political organizing, and much of that money went into the pockets of dishonest individuals, whom Kornweibel is in no hurry to defend. He presents the thesis—not seriously challenged any more by even conservative scholars—that

Clearly, zeal to enforce mail fraud statutes was not [the Bureau's] primary motivation. Rather, as a self-appointed guardian of the sociocultural consensus on which white hegemony was based, the Justice Department sought to silence Garvey's assertions of racial pride and black self-determination. Neither could be comfortably tolerated by men like Hoover. (p. 130)

Thanks to Kornweibel's thorough reading of Justice Department papers, readers see Garvey as the victim not only of white agents of the federal government intent on destroying him, but also of a number of African Americans. The UNIA was infiltrated by a series of black informants hired, paid, and placed by the bureau. The UNIA was also denounced at every turn by leading black intellectuals, including Randolph and Owen in the *Messenger* and Du Bois in *The Crisis*. Randolph was influential in drafting an open letter from a number of prominent black leaders to U.S. Attorney General Harry Daugherty in early 1923, asking the Justice Department to pursue prosecution of Garvey and the Black Star Line. Historians and activists—who have known about and discussed this letter for decades—may benefit by learning that Randolph asked James Amos, the first black agent on the Bureau of Investigation's payroll, to review the letter before publication. Amos and his ilk raise the thorny question of black informants and bureau agents. Reviled as race traitors or revered as patriots who broke the Justice Department's color barrier, this handful of individuals present a difficult problem for those who seek to write a truly inclusive history of African America. The informants' work was a necessary part of government efforts to destroy militant black movements; without persons of African descent working on a daily basis inside these organizations, the bureau could never have succeeded in its efforts to destroy the movements. But after reading Kornweibel's book, one is hard put to know what to do with them. He makes a good case that most of the informants were no more hostile toward black militancy than other members of the black middle class, who feared godless Communism and thought Marcus Garvey either dangerous, outlandish, or both. But in a few fleeting instances, Kornweibel also presents us with informants whose clearer understand-

ing of the nuances of black political thought in the 1920s provided crucial protection to moderate organizations like the NAACP and publications like the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Age*, and *Amsterdam News*. But Kornweibel shies away from a strong interpretive stance on the informants and presents few answers to the ongoing debate that has divided historians and activists for the past seven decades, although he does dispassionately provide new evidence for consideration.

"*Seeing Red*" is not a book for beginners. Writing almost entirely from the federal government's sources, without bowing to the weight of ongoing debates about black radicalism, Kornweibel alludes to interpretive controversies without citing them or really tangling with them. Also oddly absent are the black militants themselves, who vehemently protested the suppression of their publications and their activism. Some familiarity with 1920s leading radicals—Garvey, Randolph, Owen, Cyril Briggs, and others—is necessary to engage closely with "*Seeing Red*," and some immersion in these radicals' own writings can supplement their absence from this work.

Kornweibel has overcome silence—and provided an invaluable documentary service to historians and activists—in his dogged pursuit of historical documents. The base of his research rests in the files of the Justice Department and FBI held at the National Archives. These files are so unwieldy that many scholars have shied away from work in this area or have turned instead to Kornweibel's edited microfilm collection on black activism during and after World War I. With the addition of this work to the continuing efforts of the historian Stephen M. Kohn, scholars interested in the victims of federal political repression in the 1910s and 1920s now have a plethora of sources available to them.<sup>3</sup> Readers should also be impressed by Kornweibel's persistent submission of Fed-

**"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925**

eral Freedom of Information Act requests, although the FBI's continued stonewalling on the release of files that are now almost eighty years old demonstrates the continued hostility to democratic discussion and academic inquiry on the part of political intelligence communities in this country. Red-baiting has a long and notorious history in American politics, dating back not to the Cold War but to the tumultuous years at the beginning of this century. In 1919, America's black population was seeing red for good reason. But Kornweibel reveals a final set of double meanings in his title: In the 1920s, it was the red-baiters like A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover who were truly "seeing red":

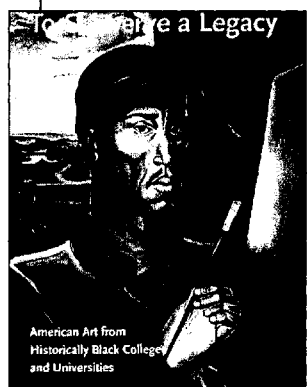
*They raged against a black militancy whose main weapon was rhetoric; they conjured up a communist bogeyman to avoid acknowledging that blacks had genuine grievances against the racial status quo; they claimed that blacks would be happy and contented if*

not for the evil machinations of aliens and their subversive doctrines. (p. xv)

In a post-Cold War world, mention of Communism may no longer conjure the specter it once did, but the political security state built up around this nation's fears still stands strong, particularly when it comes to the work of African-American activists. Theodore Kornweibel's book tells us how the foundations of that structure were laid.

### Notes

1. The organization was renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1935.
2. Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983-).
3. Theodore Kornweibel Jr., ed., *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, 1917-1925: The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985), 25 reels of microfilm; Stephen M. Kohn, *American Political Prisoners: Prosecutions Under the Espionage and Sedition Acts* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).



## TO CONSERVE A LEGACY

**American Art from Historically  
Black Colleges and Universities**

*Richard Powell and Jock Reynolds*

Many of this nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities have amassed significant collections of American art and founded galleries and museums on their campuses. These collections provide a rich resource for the study of African American art, yet many also possess a diverse array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art. *To Conserve a Legacy* documents an outstanding sampling of paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and sculptures owned by Clark Atlanta University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Howard University, North Carolina Central University, and Tuskegee University.

The artists include Romare Bearden, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Edmonia Lewis, Archibald Motley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Horace Pippin, P. H. Polk, Alfred Stieglitz, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Doris Ulmann, Carl Van Vechten, Thomas Waterman, James Weeks, Charles White, and many others. The book also contains forty-two entry essays by American scholars on many of the individual artworks.

200 pp., 40 b&w, 200 color illus.  
\$35 paper

To order  
books call  
800-356-  
0343 (US  
& Canada)  
or 617-  
625-8569.  
Prices  
higher  
outside the  
US and  
subject to  
change  
without  
notice.

**The MIT Press**

<http://mitpress.mit.edu>