Faculty Focus: Manning Marable on his New Anthology and Plans For A New Center

By Colin Morris

The American ideal of freedom lies at the core of this country’s value system. Yet through the country’s history, the idea and attainability of freedom has not been equally experienced among all Americans, according to Manning Marable, professor of history and political science as well as founder of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies.

In his new anthology Freedom on My Mind: The Columbia Documentary History of the African American Experience (Columbia University Press), Marable depicts the diverse but collective African Americans over our country’s history.

“The basic idea behind Freedom on My Mind is to chart what I call the political culture of African American people,” explains Marable. “The guiding theme in the evolution of black life has been the pursuit and the definition of freedom.”

According to Marable, there are at least two different definitions of freedom that have fueled the American experience. Marable argues that freedom can in part be personified by the contradiction between liberty and equality. “For white Americans, when they usually think about freedom, they actually mean liber- ty—that is freedom from the state. It speaks to a libertarian notion of what it means to be free—that you’re free from things.”

Marable finds that, for historically subaltern communities, the notion of freedom has much more to do with equality. For African Americans, this ideal dwells within the context of collectivity. “Slaves couldn’t free them- selves by themselves so it had to be a movement. It comes from a group of people deciding we will sacrifice individual choice for the benefit of the group.” That’s the logic of trade unions, the women’s rights movement and the labor and gay movement. In other words, emancipatory freedom is group freedom. Freedom is not found through multiple choices, but goals for all. Everyone should be able to eat, everyone should be able to vote and have decent schools.” Manning stresses group rights as a prerequisite to the idea freedom.

The anthology is organized into three sections that thematically echo this unified notion: Gender, Kinship and Community, Political, Economic and Social Justice and Culture Faith and Civilization.

The selections in each section are organized in chronological order. They encompass a broad array of historical voices—from the famous musings of James Baldwin’s formative years during the time leading up to the Civil Rights Movement, to little known Norman Rowley’s letter to Abra- ham Lincoln describing the hard- ships of black soldiers in the Civil War.

“We wanted selections that reflected imagina- tion, possibility, soul, spiritu- ality, all of the kinds of ele- ments that are usually relegat- ed by sober his- torians to the rear sections of d i s c o u r s e regarding poli- tics and power,” says Marable. “We want to think about politics as something that happens on the 1st Tuesday of November in a very, very, very rich kind of way.”

Marable con- sidered the African Ameri- can writing to be in part politi- cal. He was heavily influ- enced in this regard by C.L.R. James, a West Indian intellectual who advocated a broad view of how politics make up a significant amount of everyday life. James discussed with Marable his regret for not having expressed his beliefs in his earlier works in as more approachable, overarching themes. Looking back, James believed his earlier work should have spoken to more of what men and women live by as opposed to a single set of argued beliefs in the text. Marable too wanted his selections to be accessible and to resonate with daily life.

“He really helped me to think through a different way of con- structing political life in the most broad sense of the term. And that’s what the book tries to speak to.”

For Marable, this dichotomy in the way Americans envision free- dom embodies just that. “The book is the architecture of the imagination and how blacks have imagined freedom,” he explains.

“That’s really the message and that’s what I wanted to come through—that all these selections, as different as are, speak to that fundamental issue—that there are these two points of view that have dominated the construction of the country.”

For Marable these two points of view, however different, are not incongruous or irreconcilable. “What is truly remarkable about the black critique of the master narrative is that through it all, African Americans usually, in our best moments, believe in the poss- ibility of redemption and not throwing out the American exper- i ment,” Marable explains. “What we fought for is not just some- thing for ourselves as blacks but rather for the totality of the soci- ety, which is what King and Mal- colm, at the end of his life, dreamed of. It wasn’t, as Mal- colm said, about civil rights, it’s about human rights. It’s about the rights of all human beings and transcending all these hierarchies. You have the forces of oppression that speak to a very dif- ferent reality but try to do so and change things for the benefit of all—even the people who have been at the top. People don’t want to become new oppressors or to democra- tize the structure. And that’s the logic of the Black free- dom movement, to open up freedom to overturn hierarchies of all types and challenge the master narrative, which is rooted in the rigid processes of d o m i n a t i o n . That’s the radi- cal imagination, the logic of freedom that has been on the minds of black people since 1619.”

The Institute for Research in African-American Studies (IRAAS) and Marable’s Cen- ter for Contem- porary Black History (CCBH) are anticipating a busy year. The Institute is cele- brating its tenth anniversary this month. On Oct 2-3 a h o m e c o m e i n g c e l e b r a t i o n for former students will honor all those who helped build the Institute. As part of the celebration, “Rethinking Black Studies,” a two-day confer- ence will take place.

During the celebration, Marable plans to announce a major new initiative at Columbia. The Uni- versity’s administration has approved the creation of an enhanced center in a new or renova- ted facility in the next four to six years. According to Marable, the center will focus on the Black lead- ership in the 20th century through an extensive collection of archives, papers, documents, and multimedia sources.

CCBH’s African Criminal Justice Program, Marable is col- laborating with Myrlie Evers- Williams (widow of civil rights leader Medgar Evers) to recognize the 40th anniversary of Mississippi’s Freedom Sum- mer. The project is similar to the original 1964 voter lobbies, which drew a diverse group of young people to the state to campaign to integrate the public schools in the time of segregation. The project will be similar to the original but extends its focus to advocate for the release of a diverse and dis- franchised group.

The project will highlight a major civil rights issue, according to Marable, that has gone unex- plored or unexamined by most universities: the fact that nearly five million Americans have lost the right to vote permanently due to their ex-felon status.

“Ten states if you are convict- ed of a felony you lose the right to vote for your natural life. The state of Mississippi of all black men cannot vote. We are seeking a change in the law to re- enfranchise, to give back the right to vote, people who have served time but successfully completed parole.”

Marable plans to bring approxi- mately 250 young Mississippians to the University for an intense educational and public awareness campaign around the issue. Marable and Evers-Williams are working to raise a half-million dollars to sup- port the project.

The Center is also hard at work on their Malcolm X project—an online interactive story to move into the complex history of this seminal figure. “There’s really never been anything like this,” explains Marable. “It’s a web-based ver- sion of the autobiography with 1,500 icons and thousands of hyperlinks to movie clips, F.B.I. documents, incredible stuff, and we’re reconstructing the assassi- nation of Malcolm X.”

“An external review ranked us first in the U.S. for a program that focuses on black urbanism—the study of the African American experience in the modern era and the most contemporary issues,” Marable says. “I think we’re arguably the leading program in the country and the program in the country with an emphasis on the social sciences.”


Barzun Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom

(Continued from Page 1)

Columbia College in 1927 he became an instructor in the his- tory department. He obtained a Ph.D. in 1932 and was appoint- ed full professor in 1945. From 1958 to 1967, he was dean of faculties and provost. Barzun became University President Emeritus in 1975 and moved to San Antonio, Texas, in 1997.

He joined the faculty of Columbia College, as a key sup- porter of the creation of the Col- logium on Important Books, which he taught at one time with Lionel Trilling. He later helped establish Humanities A and B.

Barzun was one of the founders of the discipline of cul- tural history, and for eight decades has written and edited more than 30 critical and histori- cal studies on a wide variety of subjects. A sampling of these include: Race and Sex in Mod- ern Superstition (1937); Roman- ticism and the Modern Ego (1945); The fb 29 Society (1955); Science: The Glorious Entertainment (1964); The Use and Abuse of Ideology (1975); The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning (1991). In 2000, he published a grand historical survey, “From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life” which became the surprise best seller referenced by President Bush. Barzun was on the faculties of the 2003 Medal of Free- dom. The others were: author Thomas Pynchon; film legend Roberto Clemente; pianist Van Cliburn; Czech pres- ident Vaclav Havel; actor Charl- ton Heston; physicist Edward Teller; restaurant operator Dave Thomas; actor Steve Martin; actor Alan Alda; film director Byron White; political scientist James Q. Wilson; and basketball player and coach John Wooden.