



Ben Keppel. *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. 314 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-95843-2.

Reviewed by Harry A. Reed (Michigan State University)

Published on H-Review (September, 1995)

Public Intellectuals and the Pitfalls of Cultural Politics

This work by Ben Keppel, who modestly describes himself as “teach[ing] history at the University of Oklahoma, examines the lives of three black intellectuals/activists during the post-World War II era. Keppel asserts that all three were involved at different times and with varying intensities in the public debates that engaged American energies. In addition, of course, to the issue of race, Bunche, Clark, and Hansberry also joined the discourses on several other subjects: foreign policy, artistic achievement, class status, gender consciousness, community development and community control over the resources for that development, socialization, personality formation and cognition, the role of social science in policy research and policy enactment, academic legitimacy, and, in the case of Bunche and Hansberry, criticism of the domestic cold war mentality.

Speaking so broadly about the issues confronting American society these three black activists embodied the work of democracy envisioned by Martin Luther King in 1963. King had opined that once race problems were solved we, as a nation, could go about confronting the other pressing national issues. As the beneficiaries of the new racial consciousness that started during the depression years and continued through the war years, Bunche, Clark, and Hansberry were able to engage American society in ways that prior black intellectuals had not found possible. Keppel briefly recounts the breakdown of academic support for racist doctrines, the Great Migration of blacks from the South, the contest against European fascism, the industrialization of the South during the war,

the election of government officials more attuned to but not necessarily acting on ideas of racial justice, and the emergence of the mass media as currents facilitating the new acceptance.

Paradoxically, it was the combination of politics and the media that also skewed the careers and contributions of Keppel’s three subjects. Given the cultural politics of post war America, particularly the red scare of McCarthyism, it was inevitable that the three would become the victims of democracy as much as they were icons of democracy.

Although experientially and temperamentally prepared to be icons of the American success story, they also embodied and gave voice to apposite criticisms about life in America. Their cogent challenges to American shortcomings, according to Keppel, were conflated, deflected, ignored, and reshaped in ways to serve a more flattering image of America. In this instance, Bunche and Hansberry were more victimized than Clark. Clark tended to work within the academy where he had already achieved legitimacy. Even when he contested or was criticized by fellow high profile academics like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Gunnar Myrdal, he was afforded some protection by the structure of the academy itself. More importantly, Clark had solid credentials within the academy on the basis of his publications prior to the research leading to the Supreme Court’s elimination of the separate but equal doctrine in education. Not only was his reputation built on his work *Prejudice and Your Child* (1955) and a

vast journal literature, but also his collaborations with his wife Mamie Phipps Clark on personality formation and testing of black children.

Kenneth Clark also had a concentrated community of black supporters through his work in Harlem relating to community control of schools, his clinic/settlement house, and his successful grantsmanship. Lastly, Clark was able to use the media in such a way that it would have been difficult to censure or reinterpret his assertions. In 1963 he hosted an NET sponsored program "The Negro and the Promise of American Life." This series of conversations with three leading black figures: James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X provided Clark with a national television audience and format difficult to manipulate.

In the program, Clark maintained that each man represented a similar yet different encounter with American racism and that they were legitimate representatives of segments of the black community. Although he and Malcolm X were friends Clark's assessment of Malcolm and the Nation of Islam was critical and probably dovetailed closely with his audience's perceptions. He was, however, able to lay the blame for their criticisms of American life to the fact that "by all meaningful indices, the Negro is still and unquestionably the down-trodden, disparaged group and for a long time he was systematically deprived of his dignity as a human being."

Chapter 4, "Kenneth B. Clark and the Cultural Politics of the *Brown* Decision," is a well-crafted analysis of Clark's role in creating the basic research on which the NAACP banked its case and which the Warren court used a basis for its decision. At the base of the court's attack on segregated education was Clark's work on inferiority in black children resulting from American racism. Hailed as a "sacred and redemptive" piece of legislation, the 1954 decision was initially celebrated for its value in restoring a balance between the U.S. and the USSR. Not until after the 1957 Central High School fiasco in Little Rock did Clark and others begin to question closely the efficacy of the court announcement. Most had not counted on the depth of racial ill-will that sought to deny blacks the benefits of equal education.

In the following decade, Clark, without abandoning his commitment to the debilitating inferiority caused by racism, became an explicator of the smoldering resentment of blacks boxed into northern ghettos and receiving a willful inferior education. In one of his earliest works *Prejudice and Your Child*, Clark was optimistic that if white parents understood the effects of discrimination

on black children they would rush to redress the damage. By 1965, his *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* struck out at the "colonial existence" of America's black population. Although Clark was later to repudiate his optimism about the 1954 legislation, his criticisms of American society's ills, unlike those of Bunche and Hansberry, were never recast to serve a flawed American idealism. Clark's work and reputation continued to inform important debates about American racism into the 1990s.

Bunche and Hansberry did not fare as well in the cultural political battles, it seems, because they were more public in their actions and criticisms. Keppel argues convincingly that Bunche, in addition to being in the rough and tumble arena of politics, was a victim of the cultural politics of race, in part because he believed in the democratic ideal and because at times he willingly allowed the manipulation of biographical material to fit that ideal. In high profile speeches and a prime time television biography, Bunche provided more than enough instances of his commitment to the American ideals, so the forces controlling the cultural images were easily able to ignore his criticisms of American racism. For Keppel, the controlling forces in the cultural political wars were the general cultural ideals of post-war America and those institutions and individuals contesting the specter of communism and driven by a desire to eliminate any hint of dissatisfaction with America lest it provide fodder for our enemies. Newspaper editors, for example, would ignore Bunche's germane observations about the treatment of blacks in the South or in corporate America so that only his immediate audience received the full impact of his remarks. The manipulation of Bunche's image was so complete that by the 1960s many black activists, particularly young radicals, considered him irrelevant if not a traitor to racial uplift.

Such manipulation also affected the career of Lorraine Hansberry. It was not only Hansberry's persona, though, but also her work that was appropriated, in this case by a largely white male artistic establishment, to serve ends not intended by her. Keppel notes that in 1959 Hansberry's drama *Raisin in the Sun* was initially praised for avoiding strident protest, affirming the essential accommodating nature of American society, and imbuing American blacks with white middle class aspirations. Almost totally ignored were her articulations on black feminism, a black American connection to liberation struggles in Africa, and a scathing denunciation of class and American racism. Feistier than Bunche, Hansberry fought as best she could to redeem her vision of America. Her ability to fight is drawn in detail by Kep-

pel in relating the ordeals of her father with the Chicago housing authorities and later the FBI. Like her father, Lorraine Hansberry also came under the scrutiny of the bureau, mostly for her four year apprenticeship with Paul Robeson and his leftist monthly newspaper, *Freedom*.

Despite the interest of the bureau at time of the play's opening a memo reported that

The play contains no comments of any about Communism as such but deals essentially with negro aspirations, the problems inherent in their efforts to advance themselves, and varied attempts at arriving a solutions....From [my] observations of the plot and the dialog, nothing specific was found that is peculiar to the CP program....Comments overheard from whites appeared to indicate that they appreciated the drama and the quality of the acting....Relatively few people appeared to dwell on the propaganda messages.

Thus, the bureau like the critical establishment was eager to define the play in terms of a new American accommodation to race and a vision of black intellectuals more interested in pursuing the universals of human existence rather than the particulars of racism. Keppel suggests that some black intellectuals did think until perhaps 1959 that a new day of race relations had dawned. They took for their cues the media enhanced high profile of Ralph Bunche's Nobel Prize, Jackie Robinson's heroics on the diamond and his centrist politics as black approval of their status. Most whites failed to understand that for many black intellectuals and especially Lorraine Hansberry, integration was a radical goal. In their eyes simple entry into American society was not enough. They instead envisioned an entry coupled with a reclamation of American values and institutions.

Hansberry did not succeed in legitimizing her racial/political poetics. Not only did she have arrayed against her the white critical establishment and network executives who refused to honor a commitment to do a television play of her Civil War drama *The Drinking Gourd*, but also the black critics who failed to exploit the anticolonial, feminist, and antiracist elements driving the drama. Older black critics like John Davis perhaps overly optimistic after waiting so long for the New Negro of the 1920s to emerge, praised the universals of the play. Younger critics of the Black Arts Movement of the late 60s dismissed Hansberry for lacking artistic imagination and political radicalism. Keppel fails to note the blatant misogyny of the black arts ideologies, but that's a minor quibble in light of his firm grasp of the material.

While Keppel's conclusion accurately asserts that the messages of black intellectual were misunderstood, intentionally distorted, or willfully ignored, he avoids the easy generalization of blaming a faceless white power structure for the manipulation. He offers a more imaginative and challenging but not fully developed explanation based on Raymond Williams' common meanings. For Keppel, the forces "committing the crimes" of cultural appropriation and distortion are to be found not in a search for elite gatekeepers, but through the myths that are collectively agreed upon within a culture. Authorities as well as the general public know, understand, and utilize the myths as an appropriate cultural worldview. Keppel argues throughout his work that in periods of stress these myths/values assume precedence over any issue that might introduce discordance. Achieving racial justice or any system of class or gender equity is by nature a discordant activity. Agitation against racism or other social ills is not always popular. And Keppel notes a fundamental paradox in contesting racism: evaluation of adjustment is in the hands of the oppressor.

Ben Keppel commences his provocative new work with the assertion that "The process by which Americans have sought either to avoid or to come to terms with the fact of racism in American life is the single most important theme in the history of the United States." A bold statement in light of today's spin doctors, media personalities, black neoconservatives, and Republican presidential hopefuls who would attempt to convince us otherwise. For them, the clear and present dangers in American society are fractured family structures and the ensuing loss of family values, welfare, entitlement programs, feminism, the unbalanced budget, the shrinking middle class, ad infinitum. Race is avoided except in the negative tropes: affirmative action, multiculturalism, merit, and quotas.

Keppel's voice, however, is not the lonely call in the wilderness. His volume can be placed squarely in the current debates concerning the new public intellectuals. At one level Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clarke, and Lorraine Hansberry are the 1950s and 60s analogs of Cornell West, Adolphe Reed, bell hooks, Houston Baker, Henry Lewis Gates, Toni Morrison and others. While a part of the debate, Keppel eschews the facile observations that have appeared in op-ed pages and journals of opinion. He brings rigor, reflection, and offers a more accurate assessment of the careers, the changing public appreciation, and the measured success of Bunche, Clark, and Hansberry. Keppel demonstrates that although these black public figures were unable to control their public images

or certain elements of their message, they advanced the “conversation” of racial justice. Despite the forces arrayed against them, their engagement in the public discourse was, according to Keppel, an absolute necessity. Moreover, Keppel cautions present readers “not to be dispirited or disrespectful” of Bunche, Clark, and Hans-

berry “as we take our place on the line, performing the work of democracy.”

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact reviews@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

[/reviews](#)

Citation: Harry A. Reed. Review of Keppel, Ben, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. September, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=175>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.