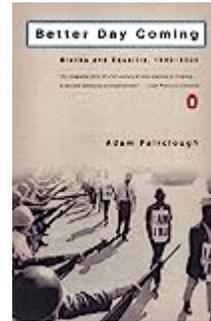




Adam Fairclough. *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000.* New York: Penguin Books, 2002. xiv + 384 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-200129-5.



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Gradualism and Militancy in the Struggle for Racial Equality

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Better Day Coming is intended, in author Adam Fairclough's words, as "neither a textbook nor a survey, but an interpretation" (p. xiv) of the circuitous struggle for racial equality pursued by African Americans and their occasional allies between 1890 and 2000. Chronologically organized, the narrative moves from an evaluation of the hard-pressed, contending forces vying for ascendancy in the black South at the nadir to the interwar period and well beyond, into the urban cauldron of the northern ghettos at the high point of the Black Power movement. Fairclough brings to his project a fluent understanding of the shifting institutional configurations of opposition to Jim Crow and a keen sensitivity to the ways in which the efforts of those who fought it were hampered, circumscribed, and occasionally crushed by the pressures of operating in a society formally committed—for most of the period under discussion—to aggressive defense of the racial status quo. Fairclough's "basic argument" seems at first glance uncontroversial: that "although blacks differed ... about the most appropriate

tactics in the struggle for equality, they were united in rejecting allegations of racial inferiority and in aspiring to a society where men and women would be judged on merit rather than by race or color" (p. xii). But his ultimate aim is more ambitious: he sets out to rehabilitate the accommodationist tradition represented by Booker T. Washington which, though "apparently unheroic," in the author's view "laid the groundwork for the militant confrontation of the Civil Rights Movement" (p. xiii). The debate among Washington's contemporaries about whether accommodation represented a betrayal of the race or a temporary, tactical concession that would win space for black advance in the precarious environment of the post-Redemption South lost its urgency nearly a century ago, but among historians it is unlikely to be definitively settled anytime soon. There are, to be sure, complex problems involved in revisiting the debate, not the least of which is the resort to subterfuge that white supremacy imposed, a tactic which often manifested itself in a conspicuous disparity between words and deeds. The deficiencies in the protest-accommodation paradigm, which dominated the debate for so long, are apparent in a body of nuanced, close-grained studies produced

over the last quarter century, but no fresh consensus has emerged to help make sense of the new complexities they raise. Neil McMillen's prudent caveat that any study of black politics in the period before World War II must begin with "an appreciation of feasible limits"[1] is by now accepted as axiomatic by working scholars, and Fairclough's argument that the futility of "militant confrontation ... obliged [blacks] to oppose white supremacy indirectly" (p. xii) is—with some qualification—compatible with this sensibility. The author is conscious, moreover, that he is entering a minefield, and even those who remain unconvinced of his thesis will acknowledge that Fairclough has steered clear of an uncritical assessment of accommodation. He acknowledges that Washington was a "product of black powerlessness" and for the most part refuses to gloss over his faults. His careful assessment of the seminal importance of Ida B. Wells's campaign against lynching, "the dark heart of the [South's] new racial order" (chap. 2); the rise and fall of the UNIA in the pregnant, briefly hopeful moment that followed on the heels of war (chap. 6); the contributions of the Communist Party in the thirties (chap. 7); and the transformation of the NAACP with the influx of a largely working-class membership in the 1930s and 1940s (chap. 9) are informed and mostly balanced and imaginatively conceived. Still, there are a number of conceptual problems with *Better Day Coming*. Though coherently organized and well-written—in places even lyrical—the author's attempt to combine temporal and geographical reach with interpretive assessment makes, at times, for a dense encounter. One suspects that the "general reader ... including those who have little or no knowledge" (p. xiv) of the material, to whom the author directs his effort, might come away from their reading more overwhelmed than edified. It is difficult to see how a student new to the material could assess the merits of, say, Fairclough's assertions that the National Negro Congress's "radical agenda of 1935 ... quickly became dated" and that as early as 1936, a "third-party strategy [had been rendered] futile" (p. 155); that black colleges in the late 1930s constituted "oases of freedom" in spite of the autocratic manner in which many were run (p. 176); or that, on balance, the Cold War "assisted the cause of racial equality" (p. 216). These are complex issues about which historians disagree, and in spite of the author's efforts at judiciousness, many readers will find the discussions too cursory to stand on their own. More problematically, the author's interpretive argument, forcefully asserted in the preface and in chapter 3, is seldom perceptible elsewhere in the text, and even a reader conversant with the historiographical terrain will find it challenging to discern

the relationship between the string of insights advanced from chapter to chapter and Fairclough's general argument. His more modest point, that a narrative comprised exclusively of "agitation and protest ... courtroom confrontations and bus boycotts ... would leave much of the story [of black resistance] untold" (p. 162), is clearly supported in the text. But Fairclough's more contentious assertion about the link between accommodationism and post-war agitation is never explicitly substantiated. The closest we get to such an argument is the author's discussion, in chapter 8 ("Blacks in the Segregated South, 1919-42"), of the contours of black activism between the wars, when black Southerners, forced to "make the best of a bad situation," ostensibly "revert[ed] to the strategy of accommodation devised by their slave forbears and dusted off by Booker T. Washington" (p. 161). "By enduring the daily humiliations of segregation," Fairclough asserts, "two generations of black Southerners made a second Reconstruction ... a historical possibility" (p. 162). In this discussion the author examines three spheres of unspectacular, but in his view essential, activism: middle-class-led "racial uplift" (the heyday for which, one might argue, had passed by 1919), interracial cooperation as embodied in the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and the Better Schools Campaign, the most significant fruit of which was a generation of black students "trained for democracy." Here the drawbacks involved in the book's attempt to straddle depth and temporal reach are most evident. As elsewhere in the text, Fairclough engages in a conscientious examination of the pertinent issues in each of these arenas, and while he concludes that in the long run this patient work was crucial, he is for the most part forthright about its limitations, acknowledging the gulf that stood between elite activism and black Southerners generally. His conclusions about the centrality of education are compatible with those reached by James D. Anderson in his seminal study, that schools served as "passageways to better times." [2] But a nuanced (and in other respects very different) argument presented in just under three hundred pages in Anderson's work is, in *Better Day Coming*, bundled into a chapter just seventeen pages long. Brevity has its merits, however, and scholars already familiar with the debates surrounding these issues will perhaps willingly forego the more extended treatment that this reviewer would have preferred. One might reasonably question the theoretical premise around which *Better Day Coming* is constructed. Fairclough's argument about continuity and the positive contribution of Washington-style accommodationism can only be sustained by blurring the boundaries between it and tactical gradualism, and more specifically

by underemphasizing the relationship between turn-of-the-century black conservatism and the political economy of the New South. There is a long-standing debate about whether Washington conceded too much for too little. Fairclough seems to consider accommodation, on the whole, an ultimately beneficial strategy, a case of “making the best of a bad situation.” On the other side of the argument, Kevern Verney has argued recently that “[i]f the Tuskegeean’s achievements during his own lifetime were limited, it was not just because of the constraints imposed by American society, but also because of the boundaries for action set by Washington himself.” More disparagingly, Manning Marable asserts that “the limitations and problems inherent in Washington’s political strategy ... helped to establish ... Jim Crow.”[3] As I acknowledge above, if one measures the efficacy of accommodation solely by its accomplishments on the race relations front, this debate is likely to continue endlessly. A more useful framework for understanding accommodation, in my view, begins with the relationship between Washington (and the black middle-class milieu whose outlook he articulated) and the white Southern ruling class during a period in which they were determined, first and foremost, to regenerate their South on the backs of a disfranchised and impoverished black labor force. Jacquelyn Hall’s compelling proposition that Jim Crow can best be understood as “racial capitalism”—“a system that combined *de jure* segregation with hyperexploitation of black and white labor”—captures the essence of the post-Redemption South in a way that the race relations framework pioneered by Myrdal and others cannot. Black conservatives did not merely concede white mythology about the “tragedy” of Reconstruction and repudiate the pursuit of “social equality,” as Fairclough acknowledges (p. 41). The Tuskegeean did not merely embrace a gradualist strategy, as the NAACP did at a later date. He colluded—perhaps unwittingly, though in my opinion with deliberation—in the exploitation of the mass of black agricultural and industrial workers. Was Washington’s faith in the “great human law ... that merit, no matter under what skin it is found is ... recognized and rewarded” (p. 43) justified, or “realistic,” in the predicament in which black Southerners found themselves at the turn of the century? Or was it a destructive illusion? Was it true that “if they proved themselves loyal, willing, and efficient workers ... whites would respect [black workers] and treat them fairly?” (p. 44). Hardly. The best that can be said in this context is that Washington maintained a naive faith in the free labor ideal in a context where it could not begin to offer a solution to the predicament of the vast majority of black Southerners. But his defense

of that ideal was launched in a very specific context: the Atlanta speech that ushered in the Age of Washington was intentionally crafted to alleviate the fears gripping white elites then faced, in the South, with an interracial, agrarian revolt and in the North with a restive, intermittently insurrectionary working class. The prominent allusions to the docility of black laborers and their invulnerability to radicalism in the speech were inserted for a reason. Accommodation in this period (and for the duration of Washington’s life) therefore exhibited a quite specific class character that distinguished it from the tactical gradualism imposed on those who took up the fight for racial equality in another period. Interestingly, it is this feature of Washington’s outlook that has over the past decade won him a new flock of admirers among neo-conservatives and the Christian right. Writing in the *Lincoln Review* in 1993, Richard H. Powers came to Washington’s defense against the “coterie of ideologues who rule the field of American history,” among whom he included C. Vann Woodward and Louis Harlan. Elizabeth Wright, editor of the black Christian right newsletter *Issues and Views*, follows her mentor, Thomas Sowell, in combining battle against the “tired, worn-out social agenda” of American liberalism with “trying very hard to revive the Booker T. Washington perspective on self-help.” Arguing that it is “time to re-evaluate the philosophy of [Washington] and assess its real meaning,” a similarly inclined Trelle L. Jeffers argues in “Booker T. Washington: The Mistaken Giant” that “too many blacks have become satisfied with having handouts from the government. In addition, blacks have become a community of whiners ... their homes and schools are places where children learn to embrace violence as a way of life ... [etc.]”[4]

Neither Adam Fairclough nor Washington himself is responsible for the foul company they find themselves in. But a clear understanding of the limits of accommodation, and of its roots in the political economy of developing capitalism in the Jim Crow South, have continued relevance for answering the questions posed by the author in his closing rumination on how supporters of the unfinished struggle for racial equality might confront the “profound crisis of confidence within the black community that meshed ... with the political conservatism of [recent] times” (p. 334). Given the widening class gulf among African Americans, Henry Louis Gates’s recent assertion that “the belief that we are all united because we are black ... no longer applies” is an important element in the reorientation required for finding what Fairclough calls the “next road—the right road” (p. 336), but Gates’s attempt to dust off elite-led racial uplift for the

new millennium, to “cultivat[e] the best and brightest black minds [and] create a leadership that will then advance the interests of the black race as a whole”[5] represents a rehash of a strategy whose deficiencies should be clear. That the elite, trickle-down strategy popularized by Washington is an impediment and not a solution to the ongoing struggle for real equality is evident from a critical reading of the accommodationist legacy. Notes

[1]. Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1982), p. 287. [2]. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, 1988). Anderson is far more critical of Washington’s espousal of industrial education than Fairclough and firmly grounds his critique of industrial education in the relationship between the rise of black conservatism and the political economy of the post-Redemption South. Hampton and Tuskegee, he writes, “received national acclaim because of their profoundly conservative approach to the problems of race,

labor, and politics in the New South” (pp. 72-3). See also Donald Spivey, *Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915* (Westport, 1978). [3]. Verney, *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881-1925* (New York, 2001), p. 46; Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York, 1998), p. 23. [4]. Powers, “An American Tragedy: The Transformation of Booker T. Washington from Hero to Whipping Boy,” *Lincoln Review* 11, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1993): p. 19; Joe Maxwell, “Choosing the Old Ways: Elizabeth Wright is Reviving the ‘Booker T. Washington Perspective,’” *World* (Asheville, 4 March 1995): p. 24; Jeffers, in *Booker T. Washington: Interpretive Essays* (New York, 1998), p. 140. See also Rickey Hill, “From Booker T. Washington to Clarence Thomas,” *Southern Exposure* 23, no. 1 (1995): pp. 30-33. [5]. Gates was interviewed by Sean O’Hagan for his series *America: Beyond the Color Line* (forthcoming on BBC2) in *The Observer Review* (London, 20 July 2003): p. 3.

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