

American Hunger: A Political Introduction

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“Politics was not my game; the human heart was my game, but it was only in the realm of politics that I could see the depths of the human heart.”

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 372

In his book *American Hunger*, author Richard Wright describes himself as a conveyer of human emotions, especially those shared by African Americans, rather than a political writer. This book, set in the late 1920s and 1930s, describes Wright’s experiences and hardships as a young African American man in Chicago. On the surface, it is obvious that Wright delivers his story in an emotional context. However, when examining the book from a deeper perspective, it becomes clear that this text is not only an emotional depiction of African American life in the 1930s, but is also set in a much larger political context that greatly influences the structure and transformation of the African American community. Through his experiences, Richard Wright exposes much of the political unrest that African Americans endured during this time, which resulted in political transformations, Communist allegiance, and new, artistic visions shaped by the New Deal programs.

American Hunger begins with Richard Wright’s journey from the South to the northern city of Chicago. Between 1920 and 1930, the time that Wright migrated north, approximately 872,000 African Americans left the South to move northward. Much of this move could be attributed to the extreme political disenfranchisement, segregation, and violence that blacks suffered in the southern states. Many blacks believed that the North held more opportunity and possibility than they would ever be able to obtain in the South. Wright’s journey describes his reasoning for leaving the South, and his adjustment to the northern city of Chicago (Trump).

Like most blacks, Wright believed that the North held greater opportunities; however, once he settled in Chicago, he quickly discovered that the North, too, was extremely racist. Although the North was not quite as openly prejudiced as the South, the blacks were still segregated into ghettos and suffered political limitations such as excessive unemployment (Trump). In addition, the political significance of the migration had a potentially much more devastating effect on the black community. Just as Wright describes, once the African Americans began to settle into their northern homes, they became increasingly conscious of their race. In his book, Wright states that “Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man... strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid” (266). As Wright explains, although the blacks migrated north to escape the hate and disenfranchisement, the harsh political effects of the move still overwhelmed them, and left them feeling helpless and isolated.

As the black Southerners began to experience isolation even in the northern cities, they also began to feel neglected by the Republican Party. For years, African American allegiance had remained with the Republican Party because of Lincoln’s support for ending slavery during the Civil War (Trump). However, in the years following, the Republican Party disregarded the support of their black constituents, which forced blacks to rethink their loyalty to the party. Richard Wright himself wrote on a ballot for Republican candidate “Big Bill” Thompson the words “I protest this fraud!” (298). African Americans all over the country felt as though their loyalty to the party was being taken for granted, and they grew bitter toward the failed promises of the Republican Party.

In 1928, black allegiance to the Republican Party began to shift (Trump). Slowly, the Demo-

cratic Party gained more support from the black community. In 1932, Presidential candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised to impose national relief programs and Negro appointments to provide benefits to African Americans and promote their equality. In addition to stressing the relief programs in his campaign, he also appointed black cabinet members, and his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, sat with the leading members of national African American groups (Trump). To the blacks, FDR became known as a symbol of economic and political freedom.

In a 1936 African American journal, a campaign advertisement was published for the re-election of Roosevelt under the slogan “Not Promise but Performance” (Democratic). The advertisement outlined his relief programs and black appointments and encouraged blacks to “Read what he has done...vote for his re-election!” (Democratic). One political cartoon also showed FDR physically leading a suppressed African American to economic freedom (see Fig. 1). This shift of African American allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic Party depicted a major change that influenced blacks in the 1930s; and the hardships and neglect that are so vividly illustrated in Wright’s book accurately coincide with the reason for the African Americans’ political party shift. The disregard and inequality they suffered forced them to shift their political loyalty from the Republicans to the Democrats in search of a much needed feeling of unity and usefulness.

One significant reason for the political change from the Republicans to the Democrats was the New Deal programs imposed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt; the experiences described in *American Hunger* are deeply intertwined with many of these programs. The New Deal programs that were established by FDR were essentially an attempt by the federal government to manage the economy and provide assistance to unemployed and poor citizens, including African Americans. Organizations such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA) were established and employed a large number of blacks in the country (Trump). For example, a campaign advertisement that was published in an African American journal confirmed that the “unemployment relief inaugurated by the Roosevelt Administration saved millions of Negro men, women, and children from extreme want by direct relief, WPA and PWA” (Democratic). These New Deal programs created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt provided many new economic and political opportunities for African American citizens in the United States.

Wright’s experiences with the New Deal programs not only coincide with the greater political context of the era, but also provide a window to how these programs intersected with African Americans’ artistic visions. For example, one of the jobs Wright was given by the government was working in the Federal Negro Theater, an art division under the WPA. While working in this theater, Wright describes his larger goal, one of great political importance, which was to create a genuine Negro theater to depict the realities of African American life. He believed that the “heart of the Negro actor was pining for adult expression in the American theater” (Wright 365), and he wanted to be able to help blacks express their feelings.

Wright’s goal was shared by the overall objective found in these Federal Arts relief programs. These political arts programs did many things to document the experience of the African American. For example, the theater produced all-black performances of *Macbeth*, the writing division produced an oral history project that included southern ex-slaves’ stories, and guidebooks were created by blacks that included a history of African Americans (Trump). Overall, Wright’s explanation of his experiences with the relief programs and his artistic visions as a result of his experiences intersect the New Deal programs and the larger political framework of the time period.

Despite these New Deal programs and the exposure to art that Richard Wright and other African Americans received, many blacks began to turn to the Communist Party as a way to pursue their artistic endeavors. The Communist Party was a great supporter of African American art. Richard Wright himself said, “I owe my literary development to the Communist Party and its influence, which has shaped my thoughts and creative growth” (Trump). In a sense, African Americans turned to the Communist Party because it gave them a feeling of hope within America when everyone else had aban-



Fig. 1. Cartoon in *New York Amsterdam News* (Oct. 1936); rpt. in Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1983; print; 215).

done them. For example, the lynching of blacks became a very prominent issue in the early 1900s, yet the response of the Democratic Party to brutal lynchings was one of disregard. Although Roosevelt claimed to oppose lynching, his fear of losing the support of Southern Democrats kept him from pushing any anti-lynching bills through the Senate (Trump). Conversely, in 1928, the Communist Party publicly denounced lynching in their party platform and urged blacks to organize against the practice.

In a 1934 election article titled “Why Every Negro Should Vote Communist,” the author points out that “It is the only party that fights against lynching, jim-crowism, discrimination, and for complete equality and freedom of the Negro people” (The Communist Party). In addition, in 1925 the Communist Party integrated blacks and whites in order to advance the Communist Party’s political well-being, long before the two major parties did so. As a result, some African Americans began to show greater allegiance to the Communist Party in the 1930s. In Wright’s discussion of his ties to the Communist Party, he states, “It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole” (318). Just as Wright’s search for unity and integration led him to find the Communist Party in this book, African Americans as a whole in the 1930s were drawn to the Communist Party because of the support it provided for black artists, and because of its sense of unity and kinship, a feeling many African Americans had never known before.

Overall, the early 1900s was a time of unrest and political turmoil for many African Americans. Even those who moved north to escape the hatred and isolation of the South were still unhappy and felt abandoned. Richard Wright’s book *American Hunger* does an excellent job of shaping this feeling and opening the reader’s eyes to the larger issues of the era. Although he claims he is not a political person, nor a political writer, the issues he exposes in his novel seem to express the overall plight of African Americans in a largely political manner. Wright’s words and experiences resonate in a way that allows his readers not only to sympathize with the emotions and sentiments he felt, but also to understand his hardships, and those of other African Americans, in a much broader political culture. Just as African Americans in the 1930s continued searching for a feeling of unity and equality even during times of struggle, Richard Wright’s main goal with this book was to “send other words to tell, to march to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (Wright 384). And he succeeded.

Works Cited

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