

Book Review: Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics

by blog admin

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*In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, polls revealed that only 20 per cent of African Americans believed that racial equality for blacks would be achieved in their lifetime. But following the election of Barack Obama, that number leaped to more than half. Did that dramatic shift in opinion really reflect a change in the vitality of black politics—and hope for improvement in the lives of African Americans? **Tom A. Davies** finds **Michael C. Dawson's** work highly readable and a book which should, at the very least, help stimulate the debate about the future direction of black politics and the continuing significance of race in American life.*



Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics. Michael C. Dawson. University of Chicago Press. November 2011.

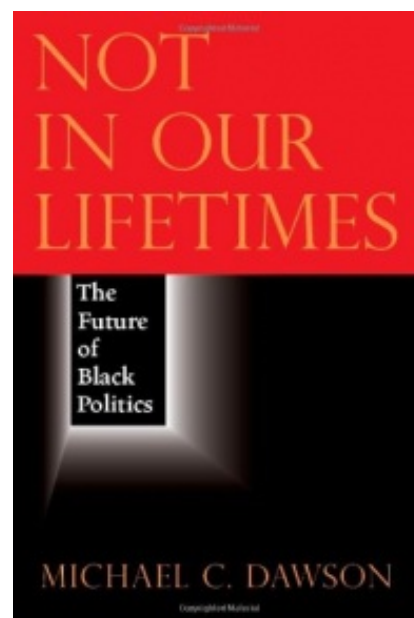
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Barack Obama's election in 2008 has been offered by some as *prima facie* evidence of the progression of blacks within American society and politics, and of the nation itself toward the goal of racial justice. In *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics*, renowned political scientist [Michael C. Dawson](#), one of America's leading authorities on black political behaviour and culture, sets out to thoroughly dispel such an "illusion".

Beginning with Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2005 and bringing us up to the present day, Dawson offers a trenchant analysis of the current state of black American politics and society which emphasizes the continuing salience of race and class as critical factors determining the limits of democracy and social and economic justice in America. Indeed, throughout the book Dawson provides damning statistical evidence to starkly outline African Americans' place at the bottom of America's racial (and by extension, political and economic) order which is likely to shock even those familiar with the subject matter.

Dawson uses the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to dramatize a number of key issues facing black American society. The dominant narrative of events established by the mainstream US white media and federal, state, and local officials following the disaster both wholly dismissed the significance of race in explaining the Bush administration's inadequate response to the unfolding crisis (a widely held conviction among black Americans) and demonized the predominantly poor blacks who had been Katrina's main victims. The inability of the black community, both locally and nationally, to effectively counter this often blatantly racist dominant discourse, Dawson argues, reflected not only their marginalization from mainstream civil society, and powerlessness to influence national policy debates, but also the critical weakness of contemporary black (and progressive) organizations and institutions.

These weaknesses were further magnified by the success of local and state white political and business elites in making post-Katrina New Orleans "smaller, whiter, and richer" by using the city's regeneration plans first to try and disenfranchise the overwhelmingly poor and working-class blacks displaced by the disaster, and later prevent many of them returning to the city altogether by limiting the affordability and supply of



housing and jobs. These trends, Dawson suggests, not only reveal the “continued existence of a racialized social structure in the US” that has “consistently negative effects on the life chances of African Americans, and particularly those of poor blacks” but also the centrality (and continued vitality) of white supremacy in the ongoing efforts to maintain it.

The fundamental weaknesses in black American political and public spheres demonstrated by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are compounded, according to Dawson, by other dangerous developments. Using specific examples of recent local elections and community activism in Chicago and Los Angeles, Dawson asserts that a class cleavage in the black community is rapidly widening. At the root of this is the black middle-class and elites’ increasing adherence to neoliberal ideology which includes abandoning traditional black support – still prevalent among an overwhelming majority of poor and working class blacks – for “a strong central state that both regulates the economy and redistributes wealth from the rich to the poor.” Dawson offers Barack Obama, whose centre-right political platform, he argues, puts him “out of step with the mainstream of black America”, as a prime example of a new breed of “cosmopolitan, super-credentialed” and technocratic neoliberal black politician whose policies continue to disadvantage the black poor and do nothing to change the fact of blacks’ institutional weakness, political demobilization, and isolation. Worse still, Obama’s neoliberal insistence on the irrelevance of race in modern American life (as seen in the mainstream white America’s analysis of Katrina and his own 2008 campaign) bolsters the myth of a ‘post-racial America’ and threatens, Dawson suggests, to “only make it harder for blacks and progressives to begin establishing a debate on race and the continued workings of white supremacy” in the future.

The growing importance of class as a factor in black politics is, Dawson suggests, another critical obstacle to the creation of the progressive multiracial political alliances he says are needed to push back against forty years of neoliberal state policy which has devastated poor inner-city minority communities, crippled the welfare state, and vastly enriched corporate interests and white elites. However, while Dawson’s discussion of Katrina is well supported by wide-ranging evidence, his analysis of the growing support among black middle-class and elites for neoliberal policies and practices – perhaps the most interesting and novel part of his thesis – draws only upon a handful of small examples. These ‘vignettes’, as he himself calls them, are arguably insufficient to base his dire predictions for the future of intra-racial black politics on (though this does not mean they are wrong, of course).

Dawson finishes by calling for revitalization of black (and multiracial alliance) politics focused on social and economic justice and a resuscitation of the mass mobilization and issue-based activism of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s which has been lost, he laments, to what is now an age of ‘black nihilism’. It is on this aspect of the book that readers’ opinion of it may well hinge for as much as it is certainly a valuable and insightful analysis of the current state of black American society and politics, it is also essentially a political manifesto, something Dawson makes clear at the outset. While many readers will appreciate Dawson’s piercing critique of contemporary America – as I did – others may disagree with the prominence of Dawson’s own class politics and its somewhat polemical tone. Ultimately, however, this is a well written, highly readable, and powerfully argued book which should, at the very least, help stimulate the debate about the future direction of black politics and the continuing significance of race in American life that the author is so keen to see. With the 2012 US Presidential election nearly upon such a debate that is more relevant than ever.

Tom A. Davies is a PhD student in the School of History at the University of Leeds. His main research interests are twentieth century American urban, political, and social history. His thesis explores the relationship between the growth of black political power in New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s and its relationship to the Black Power movement and liberal and conservative politics. [Read more reviews by Tom.](#)

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