

**Michael L. Ondaatje, *Black Conservative Intellectuals in Modern America*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2010; pp. 220; RRP US\$34.95, hardback; ISBN 978 0 8122 4206 5.**

*Black Conservative Intellectuals* is based on Ondaatje's PhD thesis completed in the Discipline of History at UWA. His thesis was awarded the Robert Street Prize for the best PhD across all disciplines at UWA in 2007 – a significant achievement, indeed. His book does not disappoint. Focused on the rise of those black conservative intellectuals who gained such prominence with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, Ondaatje offers a fascinating insight into the complexities of how collective identities shape political debate in the land of liberal individualism. The author focuses on nine key thinkers – academic Thomas Sowell, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, economists Walter Williams and Glenn Loury, cultural theorists Shelby Steele, Anne Wortham and John McWhorter, and social activists Robert Woodson and Jay Parker. These intellectuals share a common belief in the traditional tenets of conservatism – “a suspicion of state power, a preference for liberty over equality and an unyielding faith in the political project that is America” (p. 155). Yet despite their role as members of a highly political intellectual vanguard their thinking on the three areas examined in *Black Conservative Intellectuals* – affirmative action, poverty reduction and school reform – has varied considerably.

The strength of *Black Conservative Intellectuals* is the author's willingness to take black conservative thought seriously by acknowledging its complexity and diversity. There are no straw people in this account. Ondaatje, for example, is highly critical of a tendency in the existing literature on black conservatism (much of it journalistic in style) to view its adherents as either ‘color-blind visionaries’ – distanced from any sense of racial identity - or ‘counterfeit heroes’ who have betrayed their own African American heritage. Ondaatje's review of the literature persuasively argues that the very novelty of the existence of black conservatives has precluded a serious examination of their ideas. It is this gap in the literature that he successfully fills.

Turning his attention to the attitudes adopted by his black conservatives regarding some of the most pressing public policy issues in 1980s and 1990s America, Ondaatje reveals a fundamental tension between his subjects' faith in market based individualism and their belief that, despite the history of segregation, contemporary black identity can be grounded in the American cultural past. In their critical assessment of government-led efforts to reduce African American poverty (most notably the policies of Lyndon B. Johnson's ‘Great Society’ program) black conservatives turned to free-market ideology. Thomas Sowell's advocacy of self-help strategies, for example, relied on the assumption that employers would not discriminate against African Americans as such discrimination would contradict market logic. The possibility that government's can ‘civilize’ capitalism by regulating for a minimum wage was rejected by Ondaatje's conservatives as, attached to market mechanisms, they have been “unable to accept the fact that state supports and self-help did not have to be mutually exclusive” (p. 116).

A similarly ‘all or nothing’ approach was adopted by black conservative intellectuals on the issue of school reform. They staunchly opposed the policy of ‘busing’ students to enhance ethnic and racial diversity within schools on the grounds that it was integrationist and demeaning to African Americans. Such a position sat uneasily alongside the fact that these conservatives were commonly speaking with authority from chairs in predominantly white institutions such as Stanford. Further, despite championing the history of American individualism and entrepreneurship, the positions adopted by these intellectuals on school reform were ‘curiously resonant of a black nationalist worldview with respectable (if problematic) roots on the American left’ (p. 137)

Drawing on a vast array of secondary literature, Ondaatje debunks much of the policy thrust of black conservatism including its misguided advocacy of school vouchers. By failing to grasp the complexities of race and class and remaining unwilling to countenance a positive role for the state in addressing a history of black disadvantage, these nine scholars fall short in Ondaatje's eyes. He concludes that ultimately 'the eminence of black conservatives in American political discourse during the past three decades had more to do with their ideological utility... than with the potency of their arguments...' (p. 156). That these intellectuals were strategically embraced, at least in part, because of their racial identity, is indeed an ironic and tragic reality given their own attachment to an ideology of individualism.

The book's author makes clear, however, that rather than constituting 'an ad hominem attack' (p. 156) his conclusion highlights the 'deep structures of racial awareness' (p. 156) in the United States. The author's approach is ultimately open-minded and humane. The stronger aspects of his subject's critiques of affirmative action and school curriculum are acknowledged. The independent thinking of Loury, who, unlike his conservative bedfellows, celebrated the diversification of school curriculum resulting from the adoption of multiculturalism, is given particular recognition. Importantly, the views adopted by these black conservative intellectuals are illuminated by a historical exploration of their own (commonly impoverished) backgrounds and their relationship with a broader cultural, political and economic movement that championed free-market conservatism. The past lives with black conservative intellectuals as much as the rest of us.

Ondaatje has produced a thoroughly researched, tightly structured and beautifully written account of a neglected phenomenon in American history. A lesser scholar could have written a self-satisfied treatise dismissing in entirety the views of black conservatives. Instead, Ondaatje has examined black conservative thought on its own merits, revealing along the way the complex and sustained influence of race on American intellectual life.

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