

RESCUED FROM OBSCURITY: PETER H. CLARK, AMERICA'S FIRST BLACK SOCIALIST

March 17, 2014

Nikki M. Taylor. *America's First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013. 308 pages. Photos. Hardback \$40.00. Also available as an e-book.

Nikki Taylor's *America's First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark* rescues from obscurity the Cincinnati African American activist and politician who until now was known only to a handful of specialists in that city's history or in African American or labor history. Taylor, who has constructed this biography from exhaustive research in local and national African American newspapers as well as the private papers of major and minor figures in black history, argues that Clark was an idealist and even "a visionary" (p. 129) who late in life succumbed to political corruption and became a political and social conservative. Yet the evidence that Taylor presents suggests that from early on and throughout his life Clark was a political chameleon, a charlatan, and an opportunist, ever on the lookout for the main chance of political preferment and power, but who, because of his political unreliability failed ever to achieve of his dream and ended up a worn-out political hack despised by the African American community. There were idealistic black socialists in the late nineteenth century, but Clark was not one of them. (1)

Clark was born on March 29, 1829 was the descendant of both slaves and freemen. His father, the owner of a barbershop and a bathhouse, was successful enough that young Peter "did not want for much during his childhood" (p. 23) while his light complexion—his parents were both mulattos—also gave him social advantages and privileges throughout his life. He grew up amidst Cincinnati's perennial violence—the Cincinnati race riots of 1829, 1836, and 1841, white racist attacks on the black community—experiences that no doubt intensified his consciousness of the African Americans' precarious situation in the ante-bellum era. His family, as part of Cincinnati's African American elite, was able to send him to a private school where he received a classical education, graduating in 1848, though unlike some better off Ohio African Americans he never went on to study at Oberlin College.

Interestingly, Clark's youth was spent among abolitionists and utopian socialists, the latter followers of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. Several of these reformers joined together in 1847 to create a Fourierist "phalanx," as their cooperative communities were called, and some of Clark's relatives became involved in the community, giving young Peter what Taylor calls exposure to "socialist principles." (p. 32). Clark met and became associated with two Owenites, Thomas and Maria Varney, whose newspaper *The Herald of Truth* published articles on Fourierism, spiritualism, and socialism, including some by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The Varney's hired Clark as an apprentice stereotypist, that is a maker of metal printing plates, to produce their newspaper and the Free-Soil paper, the *Cincinnati Herald*.

When his father died, however, Clark, who had never wanted to be a barber, found that he had to take over the family business, cutting hair of both blacks and whites, a rarity at the time. But when once a white client asked if Clark could get him black women, Clark erupted in anger, vowed never to shave another white man, left the shop and gave up the barbering business. In need of a job he went to work for his uncle John Isom Gaines as a clerk in his grocery store. Gaines was community

leader who introduced his nephew to politics in the form of the Black Convention Movement, assemblies of African Americans taking place in many states in those years.

Clark accompanied his uncle to the Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio in 1849 where the issues of slavery and the merits of emigration were being debated. Most of the delegates supported the abolition of slavery and called for improved conditions of free African Americans, though some supported emigration to Africa to escape the racism of American society. Clark decided he wanted to emigrate and with two other friends organized the Liberia League—but they then sought and received the support of the American Colonization Society (ACS), backed in Ohio by the wealthy slaveholder Charles McMicken. Given its backing by a slave master, Taylor finds it “a bit perplexing that Clark would ever participate in any of its schemes.” (p. 49) Clark traveled to New Orleans, but at the last moment, decided not to board the ship. Clark returned to Cincinnati around the beginning of 1852, continuing to advocate emigration.

At the 1852 Ohio Colored Convention, Clark’s uncle Gaines was one of those who opposed emigration; the convention demanded abolition and called for solidarity with the European freedom fighters in Hungary and Germany. The following year, Clark attended his first national Colored Convention in Rochester, New York dominated by anti-emigrationists where he became “an ardent opponent of both emigration and colonization thereafter.” (p. 59) This was only the first of Clark’s many political conversions.

As a young man, Clark was a rare bird: a member of the Unitarian Church to which almost no blacks belonged, a friend the city’s German-born free-thinkers and socialists and radical intellectuals such as August Willich and Johann Stallo. He also became friendly with Alfonso Taft and George Hoadly, abolitionists who later became political movers and shakers, the former the founder of the Taft dynasty and the latter becoming Ohio governor decades later. The one constant throughout Clark’s life—despite several attempts by political enemies to get him fired, one of them briefly successful—was his job as teacher and principal in Cincinnati’s Colored Schools. Hired in the mid-1850s he continued to teach there until the 1880s when he fled the city in disgrace. It was also in those years that he married his wife Frances Williams, another member of Cincinnati’s black elite and a graduate of Oberlin College’s Ladies’ Course. Politics, however, would keep him from spending much time with his family.

A good writer and outstanding public speaker—once called the “silver-tongued orator of the West”—Clark made a reputation early on by debating Frederick Douglass in the black newspapers on the question of African American education. While Douglass called for industrial education, Clark—like W.E.B. DuBois later—argued for a classical education that would give African Americans greater opportunity. By the time he was in his twenties, Clark had a national reputation as a black intellectual. He was a rising star.

Initially a Republican since shortly after its founding in 1854, Clark soon joined the Radical Abolition Party given the honor of introducing Frederick Douglass at its May 1856 convention in Syracuse, New York. He aligned himself with the militant abolitionists calling for abolishing slavery everywhere, and not merely stopping its spread, which was the Republican Party position. Yet, within a couple of years Clark had left the Radical Abolition Party and rejoined the Republicans. Taylor writes that in that period, “Clark’s abolitionism focused less on ending slavery, and more on securing full freedom, equality and citizenship for free African Americans.” (p. 90) Taylor speculates—though she concedes there is no solid evidence—that he may also have been involved in the Underground Railroad network, in part because of his once becoming involved in a fugitive slave case.

In 1855 Clark launched the abolitionist newspaper *Herald of Freedom*, and though it did not survive

long, it attracted the attention of Douglass who offered Clark a position on his paper, *Frederick Douglass's Weekly*, the leading African American abolitionist paper of the time. Clark moved to Rochester where he lived for a while working under Douglass. Taking Douglass as his model, Clark also traveled about lecturing and selling an abolitionist play he had written. He also remained active in the Colored Convention movement speaking out in solidarity with John Brown and writing petitions to repeal Black Laws. All of this took place in the turbulent period between the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision (1857). In the first years of the Civil War, Clark called for the emancipation of the slaves, sometimes speaking before hostile white audiences.

While few African Americans had initially supported the Republican Party at the time of its founding, by 1858 many had been won over, and by 1860 nearly all African Americans voted Republican. After the Civil War, black voters saw the Republican Party as the party that had ended slavery, emancipated African Americans, and granted them freedom, citizenship and vote in 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Clark, however, began to orient toward the Liberal Republican Movement, a group that was conservative on economic issues and generally hostile to black voters and to black workers. "Oddly enough, Peter Clark briefly joined this movement and even addressed the 1871 Liberal Republican Convention in Cincinnati." (p. 111). But, coming under fire from Douglass and other African American leaders, Clark deserted the Liberal Republicans that same year and returned to the Republican Party.

In the fall of 1872, Clark traveled throughout Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, speaking more than sixty times on behalf of the Republican Party. He hoped to be repaid with a patronage position, but when he went to the White House and spoke to President Grant, he failed to receive the job in the federal government that he sought. Angry with the Republicans and arguing that they had failed—as they indeed had—to live up to their promises to African Americans, he organized the Chillicothe Convention, a gathering of 100 Ohio African Americans who passed resolutions condemning the Republicans for failing to fight for full, equal rights for black Americans. In the end, the convention voted to back the Republicans at the state level but to call upon voters to make independent decisions on local offices. The Democratic Party, then the party of racism in America, supported Clark's Chillicothe Convention, seeing in it an opportunity to break off a piece of the black vote. Taylor argues that Clark's strategy represented a form of "independent political action," though it appears from her own evidence that he was simply trying to pressure the Republican Party for patronage jobs, above all for a job for himself. The Cincinnati African American community, disgusted with him, booed Clark when he attempted to speak at a meeting opposing the Chillicothe resolutions.

During the 1870s Clark developed political positions at odds with Douglass and other African American political leaders. He did not endorse "social mingling," that is, he did not favor integration, arguing that it was not a civil right and not an objective of the movement. He accepted Cincinnati's segregated school system, because he believed that it provided jobs for principals and teachers like himself who would in an integrated system be fired (as in fact proved true when the schools were later integrated). He defended African Americans who joined and worked with the Democratic Party, especially those in the South. All of these positions placed Clark at the far right of African American political activists of his time.

At the same time during the mid-1870s, he began to become involved in the socialist labor movement, participating in the Sovereigns of Industry cooperative movement, the Colored National Labor Union, and in 1876 joining the Workingmen's Party (WP) of the United States, made up of Marxist and Lassalleian socialists. He became the first African American socialist. Long a friend of the city's German socialists, Clark was welcomed in their party—even though he continued to work in the Republican Party, campaigning for Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 and "trying to secure Republican patronage through mid-1877." (p. 137)

The WP forbid membership or activity in a capitalist party, but Clark had ambitions; he wanted to be named the head of Howard University, but the Hayes administration failed to reward him. Still he remained loyal to Hayes. When Republicans agreed to the Compromise of 1877—effectively returning the Democrats to power in the South—Clark spoke at an African American protest meeting that year *defending Hayes* and somehow winning over the black crowd. Unlike other African American politicians, Clark actually applauded the end of reconstruction. Meanwhile, he continued to speak before socialist gatherings, at first as a gradualist and reformist, but over time calling for an end to the capitalist system.

During the Great Strike on the B&O Railroad in 1877, Clark—wearing his socialist hat—addressed a massive rally of 4,000 people in downtown Cincinnati, calling for an end to violence, but also for the government to take over and run the railroads. He was not only the first African American socialist, but also the only black person on record speaking about the strike. Clark now also called on African Americans to vote for the Workingmen's Party. The WP, excited to have the black orator in the organization, nominated him for state school commission, "making him the first African American in history to run for political office as a socialist." (p. 148) While the party won 24 percent of the vote, Clark lost his bid for commissioner, though he got a surprising number of votes from both black and white voters.

Soon, however, the Workingmen's Party (having changed its name to the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei) was pushed aside by the National Greenback Labor Party, which split the left and labor vote. By 1879, Clark could no longer see any future for the socialists and left the party. Taylor notes that "As the father of black socialism—and one who had been informed by black radicalism—Clark held ideas about black socialism what were surprisingly *white*." (p. 154) That is, Clark as a socialist had nothing in particular to say about the condition of blacks in America. Taylor concludes the chapter writing, "The truth is, Clark had never tried to change the color of socialism; but socialism had, in fact, changed him. If nothing else, it brought him tantalizingly close to the possibility of elected office." (p. 155) Clark returned once again to the Republican Party, no doubt hoping that he would find either an elected position or a patronage job there.

In 1880, Clark campaigned for Republican James A. Garfield, and when his candidate won Clark sought the positions of either minister to Haiti or assistant United States treasurer in Cincinnati, but, once again, no patronage job was forthcoming. So in 1882 Clark switched his allegiance, leaving the Republicans and joining the Democratic Party. For an African American at the time, this was not only a rare decision, but one that cut him off from most of his former friends and allies. The Democrats, however, immediately rewarded him by appointing his son Herbert Clark to be a deputy sheriff of Hamilton County and by providing funds for Clark to start a newspaper, the *Afro-American*, edited by his son. The paper served as the voice of the Democratic Party among Ohio's African Americans. Democratic Party governor Hoadley also appointed Clark to be a trustee of the Ohio State University. When an anti-segregation bill came up in the Ohio legislature, the Little Bill of 1884, Clark and his allies in Cincinnati opposed it because it would also have ended the segregated schools and cost African American teachers their jobs.

In the 1884 presidential campaign between Democrat Grover Cleveland and Republican James G. Blaine, a high stakes election, Clark supported the Democrats for whom he was now working. While the story is too complicated to go into here in detail, Clark worked with the Democrats to disenfranchise African American voters and then engaged in bribery in an attempt to get a black witness to retract his former statement and exonerate the white Democratic Party policeman who had suppressed the vote by jailing more than 150 black voters. When accused in print, Clark declined to deny the charges of bribery against him, and suggested that indeed he had bribed the witness to recant his testimony.

After his disgraceful act, Clark no longer had a future in Cincinnati. The Republican school board fired him and the black community would no longer come to his defense. Clark moved on, serving briefly as principal of the Alabama Colored Normal School and later taught in St. Louis at all-black Charles Sumner High School. He participated in the National Negro Democratic League during its 1888 St. Louis Convention, becoming its permanent chairperson. The NNDL, controlled by Booker T. Washington and his agent T. Thomas Fortune, represented the far right of African American politics at the time. Speaking to its convention, Clark laid out "a path of salvation for African Americans." "He advocated racial uplift through increased morality, intelligence, and wealth." (p. 210) Clark's last initiative came as a response to the lynchings of 1892, the worst year on record. He called for setting aside May 31, 1892 as the Day of Prayer, when African Americans would leave work, meet in churches, and pray. Most of the country's major African American leaders endorsed his call, though it is hard to know how many African Americans actually participated. By the turn of the century Clark was fading from the political scene. He introduced Booker T. Washington when he spoke in St. Louis to the Annual Afro-American council and spoke himself at the 1904 convention, but his career was at an end when he attended the Negro State Convention in Missouri in 1907. He died on June 21, 1925 at the age of 96.

Having read Taylor's book, one can see why he remained virtually unknown for so long, for his contemporaries were happy to see him fall into obscurity and his successors had no interest in disinterring his memory. Clark betrayed at one time or another every organization, individual, and principle with which he had been associated during his life. He seems never to have held any clear and firm conception of politics, having variously embraced emigration, abolitionism, the Republican Party, the Liberal Republican Movement, the Workingmen's Party, and finally the Democratic Party. What becomes clear is that by the time he had become an adult he was interested above all in a patronage position that would give him power and economic security. While Taylor does not mention it, through his adult years he must have been supplementing his income as a teacher with political payoffs from the Republicans or Democrats, money that allowed him to travel, speak, and organize. His was not, as the title suggests a "radical life," it was an opportunist's career. It is not surprising that neither American socialists or African American freedom fighters have ever claimed him as one of their own, for Clark was not one of them; he was a professional politician, interested in spoils and patronage, the man on the make whose restless ambition made him his own worst enemy, distrusted by all in the end.

(1) Philip S. Foner, Ed. *Black Socialist Preacher: The Teachings of Reverend George Washington Woodbey and His Disciple Reverend George W. Slater, Jr.* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983).