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A cura di Giovanni Battista CORVINO

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8/ RECENSIONE: SNYDER, Jeffrey Aaron, *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2018, XIV+243pp.

A cura di Giovanni BATTISTA CORVINO

The book of Jeffrey Aaron Snyder¹ titled *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow* explores the intellectual contribution of the «father of black history»² Carter G. Woodson³ and its legacy, without neglecting the importance that historians like John Hope Franklin and others had in the promotion and advancement of African Americans civil rights. The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of two chapters.

The first part, *The Color Line, 1915 - 1926*, explores the birth and evolution of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History⁴ until 1926, the year in which was created one of the event that contributed to the development of teaching of black history in American public schools: the Negro History Week⁵.

¹ Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is an Associate Professor of Modern U.S. History at Carleton College, department of Educational Studies.

² SNYDER, Jeffrey Aaron, *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2018, p. 36.

³ He was the second African American to hold a PhD from Harvard, studying African American history and the history of the African diaspora. Historian, journalist and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. He became Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University, one of the most famous black universities in history. Died on April 3, 1950, his academic production and his profitable social activity for a greater recognition of the civil rights of blacks, sensitized thousands of young people and scholars of his time. His most famous work is *The Negro in Our History* with over 90,000 copies. Furthermore, the association he founded is still active.

⁴ Initially called Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) by the founders Carter G. Woodson and Jesse E. Moorland, it was founded in Chicago in 1915 with the aim of promoting the study of the “history of blacks” as it was considered essential in the process of identity construction of the United States.

⁵ Negro History Week was created with the aim of promoting the history of the African diaspora and teaching it in public schools, so that young people would become aware of the historical importance that this migration had for the Americans. This event took place in the second week of February, the month of the birth of two key figures in African American history: Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. In 1976, thanks to the strong support of many, Negro History Week became the Black History Month with the official recognition of President Gerald Ford.

Chapter 1 *The Cause* observes through Woodson's firsthand experience how US racism occurred and was suffered by many blacks during the period of the Jim Crow laws⁶, years in which our protagonist was first a university student and then an academic.

Being an African American historian son of two former slaves, his social commitment to build black pride⁷ has, to some extent, helped in fighting the prejudices of whites. In particular, his association contributed to the study of black history, which for too long had not received proper attention.

As reported by Snyder, Woodson wrote in the first issue of the «Journal of Negro History» he founded:

[...] the people of this age are getting no information to show what the Negro has thought and felt and done. The Negro, therefore, is in danger of becoming a negligible factor in the thought of the world. In centuries to come when white scholars after forgetting the prejudices of this age will begin to make researches for truth, they will have only one side of the question if the Negro does not leave something to tell his own story. The aim of the Association is to raise the funds to employ several investigators to collect all historical and sociological material bearing on the Negro before it is lost to the world. . . . Our purpose then is not to drift into the discussion of the Negro problem. We shall aim to publish facts, believing that facts properly set forth will speak for themselves⁸.

Therefore, by exploring the racism to which Woodson was subjected to over the years, even during his doctoral studies at Harvard when he needed twenty years to recover⁹, the historical-social context necessary to understand the following chapters and the topics addressed is presented.

In Chapter 2, *Reverse the Stage*, the author tries to carry out a «process of historical reorientation»¹⁰, in which he showed how African Americans talked – and made people talk – about themselves through the stories and events presented by the Journal of Negro History and in other anthologies. The important role that the African-American population played in the construction of the United States identity was examined in-depth, and the theme of the «color line»¹¹ ceased to be treated only by whites and became the main subject of investigation by the black academic community.

⁶ The Jim Crow laws were enacted in the United States of America in 1877 and were in effect until 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act.

⁷ SNYDER, Jeffrey Aaron, *Making Black History*, cit., p. 17.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

Consequently, in Part 2 *Cultures, 1922-1941* emphasis is placed on the relations between the various movements that contributed to relaunching a better image of the black people and their pride in being one of them. Specifically, reference is made to the New Negro and the Negro Renaissance movements, both related to the black history movement.

The author claims: «black history was an integral component of the renaissance, providing a foundation for the awakening of African Americans as “a people” with a shared past, a shared struggle, and a shared culture»¹² and it is for this reason that Chapter 3 *Heritage: Anthologies and the Negro Renaissance* makes a careful overview of the artistic-literary contributions that helped to build a non-prejudicial image of blacks in print culture.

Specifically, Snyder takes into analysis two anthologies: James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and the *Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* (1941), considered essential for understanding the development of the American literature and how the African American literature claimed its importance in this evolutionary process. However, it is undisputed that during the Jim Crow laws there was a strongly racist representation of men who until a decade or so would have been slaves of whites, but how did intergenerational racism spread and reproduce itself?

Chapter 4 *The New Negro Goes to School* examines the historical significance that school segregation had in the life stories of blacks and how this turmoil contributed to the will of African Americans to greater assert their role in the society.

In the wake of this thought, in February 1926 the «Negro History Week» celebrated the pride of being black. A veritable annual celebration in which is possible to observe the efforts of the black press for the affirmation of an anti-racist culture. Examples are the numerous reflections on Africa as «a homeland, a site for providential mission, a respite from American racism, a place for self-determination, an inspiration for a new name (Afro-American) and a cause célèbre»¹³ and the contribution of the «Negro History Bulletin», which provided to the largest possible number of teachers the tools to explain the black history in segregated schools, in order to fight the vision of a history made and told only by whites.

In the last part *Race, 1942-1956*, the author investigates the issue of race following the consequences of the advancement of civil rights, the end of «scientific» racism and the importance that the «Negro problem» holds for the society. These impacted the work of Woodson and his colleagues and favored a greater stance of black activism in post-World War II.

Therefore, in Chapter 5 *A Revision of the Concept of Race and Racism*, ample space is given to the evolution of the belief of race and racism, in which the fall of the dangerous false myth of racial inferiority is also considered, even if the common social prejudice persisted over time.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 71.

¹³ As quoted at page 70, note 14, in SNYDER, Jeffrey Aaron, *Making Black History*, cit.

With the aim of observing «What did it mean to be "Negro?»¹⁴, Snyder performs an extraordinary exploratory study between different disciplines, including hints to psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

In the last chapter *Look to the Roots: History Lessons for the Present*, the study of history made by Woodson is triumphant. His association with other scholars is considered by them as means of explaining the advancement of civil rights and racial integration. As stated by the author:

Historians told stories, stories that necessarily centered on the development and transformation of the United States as a country and stories that had inescapably moral dimensions. Black history served as a running commentary on the state of the nation, with our most cherished ideals of equality, freedom, and democracy hanging in the balance. These ideals were touchstones of Cold War political rhetoric, something association members well understood. Consequently, Woodson and his colleagues touted the significance of black history as a yardstick with which to measure our progress in fulfilling the American Creed¹⁵.

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder's book thus contributes to today's literature on issues still under investigation, albeit already extensively explored. Thanks to the person of Carter G. Woodson, the long African American struggle for the full recognition of their civil rights enshrined in the constitution is shown amply and in detail – from a stimulating point of view. This was possible thanks to the in-depth study of the black counter narrative that claimed the need for a history no longer described only by whites. The final lines of Chapter 6 embody this thought well:

For members and friends of the association, it was history that would connect truth and justice, history that would turn the wheels of progress forward. If we could just get our history right, all would be right in the world¹⁶.

In the concluding epilogue, the author discusses the social importance of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) – opened only in 2016 – as a place that: «claims that black history and black culture are integral to the American experience, propositions that were revolutionary when they were advanced by Woodson and his colleagues»¹⁷. Despite the success of this beautiful result, still many steps need to be taken to achieve a fully inclusive society for African Americans. Hoping for this future goal, the author

¹⁴ SNYDER, Jeffrey Aaron, *Making Black History*, cit., p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

concludes his book by stating: «History, even one as long, terrifying, and inspiring as that of African Americans, can only carry you so far»¹⁸.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

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