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INTO THE STACKS

Tammany Hall and the Machine Style in Black Politics

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"I seen my opportunities and I took 'em," explained George Washington Plunkitt speaking to the journalist William L. Riordan at the dawn of the twentieth century. For many college students, William Riordan's collection of musings and reminiscences from New York State Senator Plunkitt, delivered at a shoeshine stand on Manhattan's West Side, offers a definitive introduction to the history of urban machine politics. *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, first published in 1905, has become a ubiquitous text, frequently assigned in political science courses and excerpted in U.S. history source books. Plunkitt's reflections, while entertaining, present a transactional and opportunistic form of political practice. He famously differentiates between honest graft and dishonest graft; insists that showing up at fires to help victims is key to holding your district; declares the Irish to be natural born leaders; and derides reformers as "mornin' glories." He rages against the key urban reform project of the era, civil service examinations, as "the curse of the nation," amounting to "a lot of fool questions about the number of cubic inches of water in the Atlantic and the quality of sand in the Sahara desert."[1] Civil service exams blocked machine politicians from distributing jobs to loyal followers, which in the case of the New York Democratic machine typically meant recently arrived Irish immigrants. As Plunkitt explains, "The Irishman is grateful. His one thought is to serve the city which gave him a home. He has this thought even before he lands in New York, for his friends here often have a good place in one of the city's departments picked out for him while he is still in the old country."[2] Plunkitt's characterization of the linkage between migrant arrival and municipal work points to the central role that access to city payrolls played in the economic and political history of the New York Irish. Arguably, the only other urban group that relied as heavily on city jobs for economic mobility has been African Americans.

Scholars have explored how not only the Irish, but also Jewish and Italian New Yorkers, put the mechanisms of machine politics to work as they navigated survival in the city. Yet only modest attention has been given to how African Americans did the same.[3] The experience of the Harlem Democratic Party organizer J. Raymond Jones offers tremendous insight into this neglected history. Published in 1989 as a collaboration between Jones and the scholar John C. Walter, *The Harlem Fox: J. Raymond Jones and Tammany, 1920–1970* is told in the first person and recounts events in the form of a memoir. What emerges is a work of modern urban political philosophy that sheds light on the nature of the New York Democratic Party during a period of important transition. Far more serious and dignified than George Washington Plunkitt, Jones holds forth like a twentieth-century Ben Franklin, offering aphorisms about "paying dues" and arguing that the path to success in politics requires "starting

[1]William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (New York, 2015), 11.

[2]Ibid., 30.

[3]On white ethnics and machine politics, see, for example, Paul Moses, *An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians* (New York, 2015); Daniel Czitrom, "Underworlds and Underdogs: Big Tim Sullivan and Metropolitan Politics in New York, 1889–1913," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 2 (Sep. 1991), 536–58.

low and climbing the ladder."[4] Whereas Plunkitt evokes for students and scholars the transactional nature of machine style politics, Jones portrays the manner in which newly arrived African Americans in the urban north navigated this world of transactions. Plunkitt and his musings remain ubiquitous, while *The Harlem Fox* is long out of print and somewhat difficult to lay hands on. Yet the insights of Ray Jones are important to any understanding of twentieth-century New York politics, and the modest attention he has received from scholars points to gaps in both the study of urban machines and the study of Black politics, the two worlds which Ray Jones so successfully straddled.

Originally founded in the 1780s as a political club called the Society of St. Tammany, Tammany Hall became synonymous with the New York County Democratic Party during the nineteenth century. To be the head of Tammany Hall, often referred to as "chief" or "boss," was to be the chairman of the party's county executive committee. In the decades before primary elections, the executive committee had a free hand in selecting candidates, and thus many judges, alderman, state legislators, mayors, and governors owed a great deal to Tammany Hall. Yet the extent of its influence and power is difficult to measure historically, and much interest in Tammany has focused on backroom deals and smoke-filled rooms. In the most fully realized and thoroughgoing history of the organization, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (2014), Terry Golway takes our understanding of Tammany beyond its reputation for corruption and sheds light on the organization as kind of service delivery mechanism that enabled the very survival of the New York Irish. Golway gives close attention to the Tammany boss Charles Francis Murphy, who cultivated the careers of Governor Al Smith and U.S. Senator Robert Wagner, who in turn both used the machine's base of organization to pursue thoughtful public policy. In important ways, Tammany's mix of party organizing and social welfare foreshadowed the politics of the New Deal.[5]

How emerging black political organizers negotiated access to the Democratic Party and to city payrolls is less understood. The reflections of J. Raymond Jones illuminate this process. Born in St. Thomas, Jones arrived at New York in 1917 and began to work in politics in 1921. He describes "a club movement among Blacks in New York" in the early 1920s, ranging in emphasis from literature, art, and economics to politics. Jones began to frequent a local Democratic club:

> My association with the Democrats between 1920 and 1925 was merely one of expediency. I was not yet so politically sophisticated as to be able to make a clear philosophical choice between Republicans and Democrats. I think now that I merely gravitated towards the Democrats because at that time in New York, Tammany held power…. Actually, I was more of a Garveyite in this period than a Democrat. This was not unusual, for it was a time of political flux in Harlem and shifting and overlapping political allegiances were common.[6]

After he secured a job at Penn Station, he and several of his fellow "Red Caps" began to strategize ways to move beyond the limited and insufficient roles that the Democratic Party offered them through the patronage networks of Ferdinand Q. Morton and Tammany's Black organization, The United Colored Democracy. Jones and the "Penn Station Gang," he recalled, "wanted to become real district leaders so that we could have a say in the framing of policy, control patronage and select candidates for office."[7]

[4]John C. Walter, *The Harlem Fox: J. Raymond Jones and Tammany Hall, 1920–1970* (Albany, NY, 1989), 247.
[5]Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York, 2014).
[6]Walter, *Harlem Fox*, 37.
[7]Ibid., 46.

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The first important task was to build a following. The early days in politics for Jones were in fact quite similar to the manner in which George Washington Plunkitt got his start. Plunkitt tells of asking a handful of friends if he could count on their votes. "I worked the flat house I lived in from the basement up to the top floor, and I got about a dozen young men to follow me. Then I tackled the next house and so on down the block and around the corner."[8] As for Ray Jones, while residing at the newly built Dunbar Apartments in Harlem, he and a fellow Red Cap started the Jones Brothers Ice Company and quickly came to dominate ice service in the building. As the business developed, Jones "got the idea, that since we knew all the people at the Dunbar," the insurgent "new Democrats" could rely on this "natural constituency" to chart a course to political leadership.[9] In these early years Jones and his largely West Indian "new Democrats" forged an alliance with the largely native Colored Democracy, and succeeded in electing two black Democratic municipal judges in Harlem.

Summing up the political scene as of 1930, Jones notes, "any astute observer could see that Blacks were getting fed up with the Republicans. Certainly, with the State Legislature, the Governor, and the City Board of Alderman predominantly Democratic," the benefits of being Republican were minimal.[10] Among emerging Black Democrats, the energetic Jones group quickly superseded the old Colored Democracy, while also attracting many disaffected Black Republicans. Even so, as Jones tells it:

> Tammany leadership did not take us seriously, but we were serious, and made up as we were of Garveyites, West Indian immigrants, and militant native Blacks, we were an eclectic crew, ruled by no white appointed leader, and circumscribed by no burdensome traditions. Our goal was to make Harlem a place for Harlemites and a place in which people felt they had a stake with representatives of their own.[11]

After working as a Red Cap at Penn Station, Jones received a political appointment at the Board of Elections. During his time there he became a diligent student of election laws and the art of preparing petitions, which allowed him to gain influence and stature in the party. Describing his activities in the 1930s and early 1940s, he recounts, "I with others had been working strenuously to integrate swiftly as many Black people as possible into the Democratic Party. We operated strictly within the confines of the Tammany machinery hoping to elect Blacks to the State Assembly and Senate, City Council and the rest." After some moderate success, political momentum among Black New Yorkers began to build behind the Harlem activist and minister cum politician Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Having inherited the congregation of the massive Abyssinian Baptist Church from his father, Powell fused this constituency together with many of the political threads running through Harlem, from Black nationalism to Communism. Powell was elected as Harlem's first Black city council member in 1941, and with important help from Ray Jones, he was elected as New York's first Black member of Congress in 1944. According to Jones, "What Powell brought to our struggle for Black political leadership in Harlem was a revolutionary approach we were not capable of, being committed to the normal process of the Democratic Party machinery."[12]

The complex relationship between Powell and Jones reiterated the long-standing, tense dynamic between party "regulars" and the proponents of revolutionary movements among the poor. Terry Golway writes of Tammany's response to the mayoral campaign of radical economist Henry George in 1886. Although George lost the race, Tammany leaders took

[8]Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 9.
[9]Walter, *Harlem Fox*, 50.
[10]Ibid., 51.
[11]Ibid., 52.
[12]Ibid., 80.

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careful note of the substantial defection of many Irish Catholics, who were drawn to Henry George's labor left critique of New York life. In the aftermath of the election, Tammany worked to remake itself and "back-room deal-making gave way to a well-organized network of respectable clubhouses in each of the city's assembly districts … clubhouses became the physical articulation of Tammany's ad-hoc ideology of service and social welfare."[13]

In contrast to the machine in the era of Irish dominance, which had co-opted, adapted, and ultimately muted the labor left, Black Democratic regulars depended on the appeals of protest leaders and activists in order mobilize the electorate and shift the nature of the party itself. Ray Jones describes the collaboration between himself and Powell as complementary and mutually reinforcing:

> Although Adam Clayton Powell was supposedly a Democrat, he was not a Democrat of the kind that I was … I worked from the inside out. Powell worked from the outside in. My fights in the Democratic Party took place behind closed doors … I obtained various jobs for Black people in the city … I attended to the needs of the people in their everyday lives. For example: "My son is in jail can you help?" "I am being harassed by the police can you help?" These complaints had to be taken care of in the normal and traditional way.

Powell on the other hand was a "human catalyst," who mobilized the Black masses and "created new realities out of old," while "holding the party's political feet to the fire."[14]

Jones's stature continued to grow after World War II. Although he had a falling out with the mercurial and undependable Powell, Jones became a close ally of Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. and helped Wagner remake the New York Democratic Party. When Wagner ran for a third term in 1961, he broke with Tammany leadership and, working with Jones, cemented a new coalition of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and voters connected to the labor movement. In alliance with Wagner, Ray Jones became New York County leader in 1964, and was thus the first Black man to become "Tammany Chief." By the time Jones occupied the position, however, much of the patronage of old had come to be covered by the civil service laws against which George Washington Plunkitt had railed six decades earlier. As Jones reflects, "Tammany Hall by this time was not much more than a myth." While Jones was not free to dispense jobs and contracts en masse, and while he did not sit atop a tightly controlled political organization, his most significant accomplishments came in cultivating and elevating a generation of Black political leadership. Most notably, he was crucial to the rise of Constance Baker Motley, the first Black woman appointed as a federal judge, and Charles Rangel, who unseated Adam Clayton Powell and went on to serve for more than four decades in Congress. When Jones finally retired for good in 1969, his handpicked successor to lead his Harlem political club was David Dinkins, who was later elected as New York's first African American mayor.

The aftermath of the 2020 Democratic presidential primary featured much reflection on the central role of African American voters in charting the course of the party and ensuring its success at the polls. The standing of Black voters as the crucial constituency of the Democratic Party represents a remarkable turn of history 150 years on from the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Yet historians often oversimplify the transition of Black voting allegiances from Republican to Democrat after 1932 by focusing solely on presidential elections, missing the important dimension of local politics and the particular dynamics that developed as African Americans arrived in northern cities and confronted a political landscape dominated by Democratic urban machines. For Ray Jones, the key to success in navigating this landscape was "active party participation," along with "a mastery of the mechanics of the system."[15] When

[13]Golway, *Machine Made*, 154.
[14]Walter, *Harlem Fox*, 82.
[15]Ibid., 247.

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the national Democratic Party finally broke with the white supremacist South during the mid-1960s, this required not merely moral courage from John Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson; it was also driven by the growing influence of Black party regulars in the urban North. The work of such party organizers lacks the lore of Tammany's heyday and lacks the magnetism of the politics of protest central to the narrative of the Black freedom struggle. Yet certainly the mechanics of Black party building in postwar American cities merits more attention than it has received. As Ray Jones summed up his philosophy, "If Black politicians are to do well in this country and find the mechanisms and means for making the social changes eminently desired … their best route is through the political parties."[16]

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[16]Ibid., 245.

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