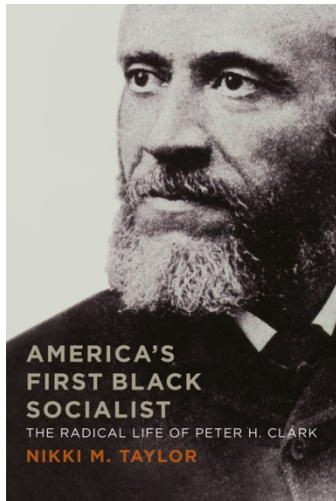


# America's First Black Socialist

*America's First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark* by Nikki M. Taylor (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013. 308 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8131-4077-3), reviewed by Eric R. Jackson (jacksoner@nku.edu), Associate Professor of History, Department of History and Geography; Director – Black Studies Program; Northern Kentucky University.



In search of his plethora of goals and aspirations for persons of African descent in Cincinnati, Ohio, as well as nationally, such as full citizenship and access to quality public education, Peter Humphries Clark defies the traditional classification of most persons of color who were born in the United States during the nineteenth century. At times Clark was a Socialist, a community activist, a member of the Republican Party, and a supporter of the Democratic Party. Although he also was inspired by a variety of abolitionists from the antebellum period and helped to set a firm foundation for numerous radical Civil Rights leaders who would follow him in later decades, Clark has been virtually forgotten today by most scholars and the nation at-large. However, preeminent social historian Nikki

M. Taylor's book seeks to change this perspective.

In *America's First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark* Taylor discusses how as an activist, educator, intellectual, and politician Clark was a highly complex and a consistently enigmatic figure to most people. However, he also was a pioneering educator who taught thousands of African Americans students during his fifty year teaching career. Simultaneously Clark also was involved in many hotly debated topics of his day, such as the use of segregated educational facilities, the capabilities of African Americans to lead local schools as an administrator, as well as the social movement for full citizenship and the participation of Black Americans in the nation's political system, on all levels. While he fought for these and many other goals, Clark became the first African American public school principal in the state of Ohio, a member of both major political parties, and a Socialist.

Within these over three-hundred carefully-written pages, Taylor contends that Clark “embodied the black *radical* tradition – meaning he refused to embrace dominant racist mores, values, history, or social hierarchies, and waged an unrelenting battle against oppression” (p. 5). Furthermore, the author claims that Clark “constructed and pursued a revolutionary vision of America in which the highest ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality reigned” (p. 5).

Finally, Taylor concludes that “Clark’s life proves that nineteenth-century African Americans were astute political players who believed politics and racial uplift- broadly defined – to be a panacea for racial inequality and unfreedom” [and] that African Americans saw political power before and after Emancipation and Reconstruction as central to their definition of freedom (p. 15).

In the first three chapters, Taylor discusses Clark’s childhood and early formative years as a young adult living in Cincinnati, Ohio during the antebellum period. In addition, the author describes how Clark gradually developed his Radical Black Nationalist perspective, why he supported a national campaign for African American emigration, and what led to his emergence as one of the preeminent African American leaders in the “Queen City” and beyond during the middle of the antebellum period. According to the author, during these years Clark was merely building on the multitude of ideas and concepts that he had absorbed as a young person growing-up in Cincinnati who was exposed to a variety of concepts that most African American Cincinnatians could not comprehend fully nor had no interest in examining at the time. But despite his atypical upbringing as an African American resident in the city, and experience with American racism almost daily as a youngster, Taylor concludes that very quickly Clark became “the dean of black upward mobility” (p. 86).

In the next three chapters, the author explores how Clark became a voice for African American equality and social justice within the Republican Party as well as his eventual transformation into a Socialist during the 1870s. It was during these decades that Clark also subscribed to the views of the “Liberal Republicans” in hopes that this faction of the party would redirect the larger “party away from issues of race and toward civil service reform, free trade, and general amnesty” for the non-military citizens of the Confederacy (p. 109). Clark and his colleagues of Liberal Republicans believed that such a political and social stance would “diminish animosity among southerners, blur sectional divisions, thereby fostering national unity” (p. 109). However, after almost no further economic, political, and social movement from the larger Republican Party after the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to help the plight of African Americans, Clark became disillusioned, started to outwardly criticize the Party, and thus by the late 1870s he “emerged as one of the most influential” American socialist in the United States (p. 130).

Taylor’s next three chapters are a detailed exploration of Clark’s gradual dissent as an advocate for racial equality, access to public education, social justice, full citizenship, and a Socialist to an obscure and little-known African American Cincinnati. In very meticulously written and very detailed pages the author describes how by early 1880s Clark had become a member of the Democratic Party, an organization that most Black Americans characterized as anti-African American and exclusion on every level. But more importantly, most African Americans viewed Clark’s association with the Democratic Party as a major contradiction from his political, economic, and social views that were articulated only a decade earlier.

This perspective was further enhanced when African American began to believe that Clark had lost his “conscience and commitment toward his people” and began to “dream of personal political power” (p. 157). This viewpoint became real for many Black Americans when Clark became intertwined in a political scandal where a bribery charge was aimed at him during the 1885 Ohio gubernatorial race. Taylor concludes that it was this pivotal event that destroyed Clark’s decades of work as a community servant and political leader for African American Cincinnatians and persons of color throughout the Midwest as well as nationally.

Taylor’s *America’s First Black Socialist: The Radical Life of Peter H. Clark* is a very well-researched and highly readable book that goes deep in the heart of Clark’s being on a variety of levels. It gives the reader a more comprehensive and complete picture of a brilliant, controversial, and often misunderstood man who rose to fame very quickly and descended at an even faster pace. For these points alone the author should be commended. However, Taylor also should be applauded for her masterful use of speeches, correspondences, and other rarely used historical evidence about Clark to provide a completely balanced and totally objective portrait of this highly complex African American leader. The only slight shortcoming is that a detailed perspective on how Clark fits into the larger context of radical African American leaders such as Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther, King, and Malcolm X would be helpful. But despite the minor shortcoming, Taylor’s path-breaking biography of Peter H. Clark is must read for anyone interested in the history of Cincinnati, the state of Ohio, and the national itself as well as the concept of African American leadership.