
Book Review

Hulan Jack describes the fight for economic progress in New York

by George Canning

Fifty Years a Democrat:
The Autobiography of Hulan E. Jack.
New Benjamin Franklin House
Publishing Company
New York: 1982
234 pages \$9.95

Hulan Jack's *Fifty Years a Democrat* is a very particular kind of autobiography. Not merely the chronicling of events whose importance was that they constituted and shaped one man's life, the book instead offers an insider's view of New York Democratic machine politics by means of a man's life story which is inseparable from those politics. The book does not merely record the successes and tragedies of Hulan Jack's life, but rather reflects in those successes and tragedies the power and the failure that was Tammany Hall.

An immigrant during his teens from the West Indies, Mr. Jack early joined the Democratic Party in New York as a party organizer. This was a highly calculated move, as most Negroes (to use Mr. Jack's preferred term, from the early days of the civil rights movement) still regarded the Democrats in the early 1930s as the party of the slavocracy and the carpetbaggers. Jack, however, foresaw in the Democrats' method of constituency organizing an opportunity for the growing Negro population of New York to gain a share of political power; this analysis was borne out with the formation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's coalition of labor, farmers, and ethnic minorities.

Jack worked his way up through the ranks in the party machine, from a petitioner and poll inspector to captain, and later head of the New Deal Democratic Club and Assembly District organization leader in Harlem. He was elected to the county committee and various local offices, and then to the State Assembly in 1940, where he served until his 1953 election as Manhattan Borough President, the third most

important elected office in the nation in terms of scope of responsibilities.

Then, in 1960, Mr. Jack was "Watergated" and pushed from office, through charges of influence-peddling for the price of a pair of doors for his apartment. Mr. Jack returned to public office in 1968, when he was again elected to the State Assembly. In 1972, convicted of violating Taft-Hartley during the New York City purges which presaged Abscam and Brilab (charges of which he was later cleared), Jack failed in his re-election bid and served three months in federal prison.

Were this the extent of *Fifty Years a Democrat*, we would have before us an interesting historical work, what might be perhaps a tragic modern version of George Washington Plunkett's famous memoirs. But Hulan Jack's book goes far beyond that. In 1980, at an age when most men relegate themselves to dreaming about the past, Jack joined forces with Democratic presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche and African diplomats in the months before and after the party's convention, to unsuccessfully press the Carter White House to stop the mass starvation in Africa. Rebuffed by those said to be the party's major candidates, Jack endorsed LaRouche for the presidential nomination. He later joined LaRouche in forming the National Democratic Policy Committee as a political action committee aimed at preventing national suicide, by re-instituting the American System of statecraft. Beyond particular virtues it is the active commitment to building, as seen in the titles of the final two chapters, "Can New York Be Saved?" and "Rebuilding the Democratic Party," which give the book a power beyond any mere chronicle or political tract.

This book must be read by anyone who wishes to know the substance, beyond phony polls and media manipulation, of modern American politics. I will restrict myself here to discussing two striking reasons why this is so.

In the American city-builders' tradition

Mr. Jack begins the book by describing what is was like

to administer the nation's greatest city at the time he was Borough President. Through a series of examples, he portrays not only the achievements of his administration, but also *how* they were attained. What overwhelms the reader within the first 10 pages, particularly if he or she is a New York City resident, is that Hulan Jack is describing another universe, one which was but is no more. Increasingly inured to an era of (particularly urban) decay, though hating it, the reader is shocked to see portrayed a world where not only did things work, but where growth and improvement of the city were part of the natural course of things.

Jack discusses the building and replacement of the Third Avenue El, the building and maintenance of highways and other roads, traffic management, construction of new housing, schools, and hospitals, and even the repair of pot holes—not as some monumental exercise, but simply to show how the city was once properly run.

The beginning of the end of this era of American city-building came with the 1957-58 economic recession, which led to the snowballing economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s that have left our nation's urban centers in ruins. Mr. Jack's 1960 ouster from office and the destruction of Tammany Hall which followed on its heels was only the most dramatic of the assaults against constituency-based political party and law-enforcement machines being made nationally by a finance-capital elite battering down the hatches for the coming economic storms. It is worth noting that Mr. Jack was Watergated after opposing a reformers-promoted plan to replace the Borough Presidents' system of administering New York City's government, by amending the City Charter to concentrate all decision-making power in the hands of a Mayor answerable to no constituency machine.

How constituency politics worked

In the discussion of how the now-disappeared Democratic Party organized its constituency, *Fifty Years a Democrat* also stands out. The wheeling and dealing among the leadership is there, too, but for that one can read Theodore White; Hulan Jack, however, is able to make crystal-clear how sections of the urban population could be organized by leaders into voting blocs, to be wielded accordingly as the leaders provided the necessities of urban life.

The base of the party structure was the club organization. Forget what you've read of cigar-chomping "clubhouse politicians" gathered for the sole purpose of jobbing their opponents and dividing the spoils. Jack explains how the New Deal Democratic Club which he led met twice a week: "Residents of the community gathered to meet with their leaders, to work out problems, discuss policy, and plan activities. Election District captains reported to the club on meeting nights to mingle with the voters in their district."

Citywide and statewide leaders who belonged to the club would come there to keep in touch with the voters, not merely to shake hands, but to find out what was on their minds. The

club also provided for the development of its future leadership by providing youth with programs of political debate and assigning them basic tasks of the machine's practical politics. And though the machine grounded in the clubs required its leaders to provide for their constituents, the overall organization was not one of "each against all"; again and again in discussing his political work, Jack notes (to cite one example), that "each must take responsibility for all."

It was a pragmatic type of organization which awarded political power to those who proved capable of using it in the population's interests. Hulan Jack succinctly states the principle when he says, "I was put into office as a responsible and experienced representative of the party that the voters had chosen to safeguard their interests. If I did not follow through on this responsibility, neither I nor my party would be returned to office when the voters next went to the polls."

Enter the reform movement

Yet the practical strength of the Tammany machine was also its undoing. For though these leaders were, in a practical sense, the guardians of civilization, *they did not know themselves to be such*. Lacking great ideas on the dignity of man, assuming that progress and the delivery of its fruits were in the nature of things, they were sitting ducks when the rules changed. The banking and real estate interests created the reform movement to sweep them away, and they never really knew what hit them.

As for the reformers who railed against the corruption of Tammany Hall, Jack comments (and here the Mayor who wanted to be Governor comes to mind): "It was not too long before it became known that the average reformer carried his resumé in his pocket, and as he climbed the ladder of political leadership responsibility, opportunities for his own self-advancement were his first and foremost concern."

He appreciates also the actual purpose of the reform movement: "Their sole interest, indeed what could be called their passion, was the destruction of the regular party organization—which had built its strength by listening to and meeting the demands of the organized constituencies within its ranks. This organized party machine they sought to replace with the every-man-for-himself disarray that characterizes Democratic Party politics today."

In thinking about the party organization Hulan Jack describes in his autobiography, my initial response was that, good and bad as it was, we shall never see its like again. But in recent public statements, Mr. Jack has referred to the "clubs" of the National Democratic Policy Committee of which he is a leader. The idea is quite simple, and yet profound: by correcting the fundamental error of Tammany Hall, by creating a "club" structure not to provide day-to-day necessities, but to organize constituencies around the larger questions of policy which Mr. Jack poses at the close of his book, a machine may be created which might yet save this country.