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Three Traditions of African American Political Thought: Realism, Reformism, and Nationalism

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Abstract

This article argues that conflict rather than consensus defines the history of African American political thought. Its seminal figures have pursued justice along different and diverging lines—including advocating reformist, realist, and nationalist paths. While there is agreement that white supremacy is a form of social, economic, and political domination that should be eradicated, there is disagreement regarding its nature, effects, and resilience. This variance in judgments and inferences regarding the foundations and consequences of white supremacy leads to different accounts of social change, diverging strategic advice for realizing that change, and conflicting political theories. To press this claim, I consider the conflicting political visions of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and Marcus Garvey (1887–1940).

INTRODUCTION

Conflict rather than consensus defines the history of African American political thought. Its seminal figures have pursued justice along different and diverging lines—including advocating reformist, realist, and nationalist paths. Reformers are usually conscripts of hope. Believing they can improve things, reformers see protest as a feasible means of realizing social change. Nationalists, often prophets of pessimism, tend to view the United States as irreversibly racist and conclude that African Americans should emigrate to a historical homeland or a more favorable site. Doubting the efficacy of protest and questioning the viability of exodus, realists frequently choose a longer and more compromising path to curbing white supremacy. Each approach reaches back to the mid-nineteenth century or earlier (Dawson 2001, Moses 2004, Rogers & Turner 2021). Regardless, I have restricted this inquiry to the years between 1890 and 1930. In those decades, white supremacy became entrenched in the basic structure of Southern society—its central political and social institutions, prevalent economic arrangements, civic culture, and social life. Most African Americans lived in the South and faced that common problem.

But while African American political theorists at the time generally agreed that white supremacy was a form of social, economic, and political domination that should be eradicated, they disagreed regarding its nature, effects, and resilience. Those disagreements yielded different strategic and normative outlooks. This source of intellectual diversity deserves closer theoretical scrutiny. Holding white supremacy constant allows us to see the variance in judgments and inferences regarding the foundations and consequences of white supremacy and how those different verdicts shaped the diversity of African American intellectual history.

Toward that end, this inquiry focuses on three seminal thinkers: Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and Marcus Garvey (1887–1940). Black people in the South usually followed the political realism of Washington, while those in the less repressive North leaned toward the reformism of Du Bois. But it was the diaspora nationalism of Garvey that inspired the then-largest mass movement by black people in history. This study reconstructs the theoretical core of each author's view without displacing the social analysis and strategic considerations that bore his vision. It shows that how he conceived of white supremacy drove his criticism of the problem, the tactics he counseled, and the principles and ideas he invoked. In making this argument, I extend Robert Gooding-Williams's view that white supremacy is the defining concern of African American political thought. The Afro-modern tradition, he notes, contrasts with prevailing traditions of political theory, most of which omit the cardinal injustices of modernity—slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy (Gooding-Williams 2011, pp. 2–8).

My main contention is that African American politics has centered racial injustice in a way that compels a reconsideration of the relationship between principles and tactics. Political theory tends to address questions of principles for an ideal world and promulgate the morally right thing to do in ideal and nonideal conditions. The African American intellectual tradition has generally addressed questions of the process of social change and feasible political action to realize that change under oppressive conditions. It has sought and provided diverse answers regarding the path that a transition from a condition of profound injustice to a less unjust situation would take and the collective and individual strategies that the oppressed must adopt to aid that transition. Put differently, the history of African American political thought has taken the ethics of strategy seriously, and so should we. The diversity within that intellectual history further reminds us that envisaging feasible strategies can be as philosophically challenging and normatively vexing as devising principles of justice.

CATALOGING AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Three modern accounts of the diversity of African American political thought are worth noting. Critic Harold Cruse (1967, p. 5) initiated the first when he argued that there are two enduring political traditions in African American history: an integrationist strain running from Frederick Douglass to the modern civil rights movement and a separatist strain running from Martin R. Delany to Black Power. His paired history clarified a division within the modern civil rights movement between integrationists and separatists. Cruse (1967, p. 156) showed that the rift has recurred throughout history. That is because it emerges in every generation from an underlying disagreement over the optimal economic strategy for advancing the struggle for freedom and equality. The conflict has always boiled down to tactics. Should a direct struggle for political rights or indirect efforts at economic development take lexical priority? According to Cruse [2009 (1968), p. 82], Washington chose an economics-first policy and Du Bois advocated the opposite.

Political scientist Michael Dawson (2001, pp. 1–43) initiated the second development when he argued that African American history has multiple traditions: egalitarianism, liberalism, Marxism, conservatism, feminism, and nationalism. That diversity, he explained, stemmed from different ideological commitments shared by seminal theorists and ordinary citizens. The popular resonance of Washington and Garvey resulted from their ability to express in democratic and populist terms a political vision or ideology that a large section of the African American populace already shared. As Cornel West (2005, p. 73) observes, the public-mindedness of these writers makes them natural heirs of classical political philosophy; like Cicero, they wrote with an abiding concern for the political fate of fellow citizens. Cruse and Dawson narrowed the distance between the thinking of African American elites and the beliefs and behavior of the ordinary citizens they spoke to and for.

Though egalitarian in spirit, if not always in substance, this public-minded approach risked unwittingly eliding the philosophical novelty of those thinkers—or such was the animating worry of the third development. To rescue African American political theory from ideology and activism, philosophers like Bernard Boxill and Robert Gooding-Williams argued for approaching figures like Douglass, Delany, and Du Bois as theorists whose writings should be read and debated in the same manner we read and discuss the works of Aristotle, Hobbes, or Locke. Accepting the historical sketch the two-traditions thesis offered, Boxill (1997, p. 119) contended that the division emerged not from disagreement about tactics but rather from "conflicting philosophical views about morality and human nature." Gooding-Williams (2011, pp. 2–3)—delicately breaking with Cruse, Dawson, and Boxill—outlined a distinct tradition of political theory that, he said, emerged out of shared thematic preoccupations with the "political and social organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial ideology, and the possibilities of black emancipation" that we find in the history of African American thought. In doing so, Gooding-Williams initiated the third view: Afro-modern political thought.

But he also warned that he did not intend to "elaborate a new and even more discriminating scheme of classification than, say, Dawson provides." Instead, he aimed to "provide a healthy skepticism with respect to the adequacy of any such scheme" (Gooding-Williams 2011, p. 7). The worry is not that the validity of an interpretation of a text in a tradition depends on the conceptual soundness of the tradition (Gunnell 1987, p. 66). If that were the case, the credibility of interpreting Washington's *Up from Slavery* [1972c (1901)] as a work of black conservatism would ride mainly on the thoroughness of our construction of a black conservative tradition.

The difficulty is more than just proper cataloging. We confront altogether different problems, one of which Gooding-Williams (2011, p. 7) observed when he said a work of political theory often has "a scheme-exceeding complexity and specificity" that makes conscripting it to a tradition an act

of textual distortion. Whether in teaching or writing, the discipline of political theory frequently relies on exemplars to palpably convey abstract ideas. But philosophical traditions usually become their own ends. Before long, their advocates justify abridgments, however misleading they may be, because texts are called upon merely to testify on behalf of traditions. Their authors are simply vessels of patterns of trans-historical and trans-textual ideas. As a result, visionaries appear before us as little more than enthusiasts of dogmas or mere political ideologues. Still, there is no denying the crucial role exemplars play in accounts of traditions of political thought or the history of ideas generally. The need for philosophical case studies may, in the end, justify consigning diverse thinkers to a more enduring outline of beliefs and thoughts, even at the price of narrowing their visions.

Traditions of political theory are analytical fictions for assisting interpretation along two lines. First, they aid the evaluation and explanation of individual works of political theory by providing criteria for works that should be included in or excluded from the tradition. Second, they outline themes and concepts that bind works into a single tradition of thought. A tradition is usually understood as a general philosophical perspective or worldview that implicitly informed the author under consideration. In addition to helping us make sense of what an author wrote, a tradition tells us what others wrote before and after about the same subject. That knowledge helps us decide if the author transmitted and also transformed the tradition. Armed with a sense of liberalism as shared fears, principles, and conclusions across various authors, for example, we can trace commonalities and changes from John Locke to Charles W. Mills, from classical liberalism to Afro-liberalism. Reading figures like Douglass and Delany through the lens of established traditions such as liberalism and republicanism helps us place them in a more enduring intellectual context, ultimately pushing back against the balkanization of black political thought.

Below, I make a case for viewing traditions of African American political thought in a way that centers questions of social analysis and political strategy rather than tradition itself. This approach rejects the silent assumption that political theory is concerned primarily with abstract principles. According to this view, questions of tactics are left to politicians and activists, those who decide which buttons to push or which levers to pull to realize the principles that theorists have worked out. This severing of philosophical thinking from political action is intellectually distorting. Most political theorists have concerned themselves with questions of political action, envisaging the correct strategic response to a concrete social problem, yet we consistently fail to give strategy its philosophical due. Doing so might show that some of the finest theoretical and normative insights in the history of ideas have flowed from the pens of those immersed in politics. Washington, Du Bois, and Garvey did not just apply the history of ideas to the problem of white supremacy. Confronting that lethal difficulty was itself philosophically generative.

REALISM

Let us consider a few critical judgments Booker T. Washington made when evaluating white supremacy and how they shaped his conclusion that African Americans in the South should pursue a realist form of self-help. Washington underscored the material bases of white supremacy, contending that historical circumstances and the structural conditions of his day forced most African American Southerners to enter tenant farming and other economic relationships that reduced them to modern serfs. Neither law nor custom could free them from these snares, he argued, because they were destitute and desperate. They would do any work that helped them meet basic needs. Economic development, Washington concluded, should precede activism for political rights. Washington further thought that white supremacy's economic and ideological bases made the system impervious to frontal assaults such as protests. Its roots were not simply prejudice or ignorance but the desire for profits and whites' normative conception of themselves as racially

superior. That sense of superiority, which legitimatized the system of domination in their eyes, was both reason-insensitive and evidence-indifferent.

The materialistic and pessimistic bent of Washington's analysis led him to conceive of social change as unfolding over decades, if not a century, and as requiring a methodically indirect form of political action. The first "thing to do was to achieve financial freedom," Washington said in 1894, "and this would give the full use of the political freedom which now in the nature of things in the great majority of cases at the South could be but a name." He explained that sharecropping contracts forced a tenant farmer to "live in somebody else's house, wear somebody else's clothes, and eat somebody else's food." In that situation, "you can hardly expect to cast your own vote" [Washington 1974b (1894), p. 399]. That line of reasoning led him to conclude that African Americans should patiently and prudently chip away at the economic edifice of white supremacy through individual and collective strategies. Once they acquired greater personal independence, once their economic fates were no longer dependent on white landowners or employers, only then would they have reasonable protections against the economic reprisals sure to follow from confronting whites politically. Openly defying Southern whites meant paying the price of homelessness and hunger. In many cases, it meant being maimed or killed. Impoverishment made it too costly to look a landlord in the eye, much less to confront him in public or at the then-open ballot box.

Given the constraints of a short review article, what follows addresses only the significance that Washington assigned to the material foundations of white supremacy to show how that judgment shaped the political action he recommended, namely a realist turn inward to building up a viable economic base that could provide practical forms of exit from social relations of domination like sharecropping.

Black Southerners, Washington acknowledged, had little choice about entering exploitative labor relations such as sharecropping, which effected "a kind of slavery that is in one sense as bad as the slavery of the antebellum days" [1972b (1888), p. 503]. He explained that the mortgage system of farming constrained the black tenant farmer to working for another who "robs him of independence" (pp. 503–4). Consider his description of the cycle of debt and dependency that ensued from such contracts [Washington 1974a (1893), p. 282]:

> The first year our people got their freedom they had nothing on which to live while they were raising the first crop. The former masters said: If you will give a mortgage on the crop which you expect to produce this year, I will advance you the money or food on which to live while the crop is being grown. In this way the mortgage system started, and it has grown and overlapped from year to year and fastened itself into the moral and industrial life of not only the colored people but of the white people as well to an extent that it is hard for you to realize. Poor men whether black or white who are *compelled* to seek assistance through these mortgages are charged an interest that ranges from 25% to 40%, and if you bear in mind that this money is not used in most cases but for 4 or 6 months the interest mounts up beyond 100 per cent.

African Americans in the South faced the problem of conditional bondage. After emancipation, the old plantation forces used their land monopoly to recapture their once-enslaved labor force. Under free market conditions, whites reduced free men and women to virtual slaves—that is, bonded laborers. The historical record shows that fraud and coercion aided in that process. However, Washington's point was that even if such fraud and extortion did not exist, African Americans would still have to enter such labor relations to reduce their immiseration. No other job opportunities were available. In other words, the consequences would not have been radically different. With each passing year, their debt and dependency would have still deepened, further bolstering their domination [Washington 1972b (1888), p. 504]. The crucial point, however, is that it would likely take years, if not decades, before this "kind of slavery is blotted out" in the New South [Washington 1974a (1893), p. 282].

Meeting basic needs is the most important goal for everyone. Only people who have acquired standards of living far above subsistence dismiss as morally wanting those who prioritize necessities. If we look beyond this post-necessity prejudice, we can see that it was rational for African American sharecroppers in the South to subject themselves and their families to dominating conditions in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter (Lovett 2010, pp. 194–96). In *The Story of the American Negro* [2009b (1909), pp. 222–23], Washington said the sharecropper had long since transitioned from slavery to serfdom, and "there was very little difference between his condition in freedom and his condition in slavery." There was some difference. A slaveholder was permitted by law to abuse, sell, or kill his human property, but the dreadful rights of slavelords did not extend to landlords. Still, having a monopoly over the most crucial resource in an agrarian economy afforded landlords wide-ranging power over black laborers' lives, resulting in "a kind of serfdom" [Washington 2009b (1909), p. 223].

African American Southerners needed to give lexical priority to exiting the most immediate and piercing forms of domination they suffered, those that shaped their daily, perhaps hourly, choices. "You are an industrial slave, even if you are a political freedman," Washington concluded of a large percentage of the rural South [1974b (1894), p. 399]. Therefore, securing land ownership or other economic opportunities was essential to subverting white supremacy. Washington knew that economic independence did not liberate African Americans from the societal threat of racial violence. Any word or deed that threatened the racial status quo would have invited severe and direct punishment from whites. But material independence did afford African Americans greater agency. At the most basic level, private property provided legal protections and rights. Washington therefore argued that any feasible challenge to white supremacy must begin by addressing the entrenched poverty of black Southerners and the dependency this begot. As a matter of security, these men and women would first need to disentangle themselves from white landlords and employers, those who exercised hourly control over their lives.

It is important to reiterate that Washington took for granted that his readers knew African Americans in the South were effectively disenfranchised, and therefore they could not use the electoral arena to challenge Jim Crow. Also, living under segregation made it unlikely they would form meaningful interracial coalitions in the South that could press for real change. These were realist judgments, not conservative dogma.

By labeling Washington's approach realist, I only mean to say that he took seriously finding the most feasible means for realizing progress in a condition that radically restricted his repertoire of choices and ends. A realist generally believes that the political realm requires a morality that is contextually grounded, consequentialist, and prudential. Washington's situation required more than an awareness of the principles of an ideal world or near-just political conditions. He had to have the practical wisdom to adapt his ethics to unforgiving circumstances. That meant making difficult choices, some deviating from ideals such as open confrontation. As a responsible leader, he recognized that his context called for different means and limited ends. So Washington encouraged African Americans in the South to pursue practical relief from economic deprivation before protesting segregation and disenfranchisement. In his Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition speech on September 18, 1895, he declared, "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" [Washington 1972c (1901), p. 332]. Many African Americans considered the strategy pragmatic. He advised them to moderate their criticism of Jim Crow for tactical rather than moral reasons.

Washington did not oppose protesting Jim Crow generally. He endorsed marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and activist journalism, but he insisted that those means for combating white supremacy were suited to the North, where protestors had greater security. Those strategies, he thought, were too dangerous and demanding for an African American peasantry in the South, those vulnerable to

roving white mobs. In 1909, Washington wrote privately to Oswald Garrison Villard, "I am not afraid of doing anything which I think is right and should be done. I have always recognized, as I have stated to you more than once, that there is work to be done which no one placed in my position can do, which no one living in the South perhaps can do." Washington added, "I have always recognized the value of sane agitation and criticism" [2009a (1909), p. 119]. He insisted that ignorance of the concrete conditions of the South and the localized nature of Jim Crow could encourage a naïve faith in the power of protest and lead to unrealistic demands for those living in the South to practice a politics that had no chance of succeeding. "I become just as impatient as they do, and wish just as much as they that I could change conditions," Washington [1979 (1904) p. 132] had written five years earlier to Villard, "[but] you and I both know that the mere wishing will not make a change, that we have got to go through a long process."

Conscious that the entire nation had capitulated to white supremacy, that the North had washed its hands of race, Booker T. Washington decided African Americans would have to resist their oppressors from behind enemy lines and without Northern support. Three facts informed that realist calculation. First, political disenfranchisement closed off access to democratic arenas of social change, eliminating any electoral incentive for either major political party to respond legislatively through local, state, or national policy to the interests and concerns of African American Southerners. Second, the specter of racial terror threatened the lives of any African American in the South who openly protested Jim Crow, thus closing off the street. Third, the average African American Southerner was trapped in a social relation of domination that made her and her family vulnerable to the wrath of white landowners and employers. Being generally impoverished and unarmed, they were defenseless against legal reprisals and extralegal retaliation. Therefore, it was tactically wise for them to choose a protracted insurgency that prioritized undermining the material foundations of white supremacy before moving to a more direct and confrontational strategy.[1]

Essential to the economic stage was creating organizations and institutions that could identify the best individual and collective means for exiting social relations of domination. In short, thought Washington, African Americans should dedicate their efforts to collective self-help along economic and social lines because neither Congress nor the cavalry was coming to the rescue. This reasoning extended the temporality of the struggle for freedom and equality. It also inadvertently led to the commonplace view of him as a capitalist and a coward. This contemporary unfavorable view insists that he saw free market competition as a panacea for all social ills, which was not the case. Washington drew a realist conclusion: Given the precarious economic condition of African Americans in the South, he took the long road to rights. It was not until African American Southerners acquired premobilization resources, a half-century later, that the modern civil rights movement emerged.

REFORMISM

W.E.B. Du Bois dedicated his early career to revealing the inner injuries of white supremacy, namely Jim Crow's assault on African Americans' sense of self-respect. Du Bois conceived of self-respect in moral and psychological terms. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he wrote that in striving for self-respect, the freedman's "own soul rose before him, and. . .he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another" [Du Bois 2015 (1903), p. 9]. In his assessment of white supremacy, Du Bois decided that the system denied its victims the social, economic, and

[1]My forthcoming book, *Dark Virtues: Booker T. Washington's Tragic Realism*, fully expresses Washington's political realism.

political bases of self-respect, and that the color line compelled African Americans to occupy an inferior status that bore "peculiar problems of inner life," including those of "a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence" [2015 (1903), p. 152]. Essentially, Du Bois prioritized psychological, moral, and status injuries.

Du Bois also compared his moral reformist approach to Washington's realism to argue that others should share these priorities. Washington looked for practical remedies to erode the material bases of white supremacy. Du Bois thought the result was a subsistence ethic [2015 (1903), pp. 47–57]. Realist or not, it further injured African Americans' self-respect when it withdrew "many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens," Du Bois argued [2015 (1903), pp. 40–43]. The realism that Washington preached—and many African Americans practiced—involved publicly submitting to Jim Crow and silently affirming their civic inferiority, which only intensified their public humiliation. To counter those costs, Du Bois implored African Americans to openly protest Jim Crow [2015 (1903), p. 150].

Before doing so, he used the metaphor of a veil to explain the inner consequences of living on the other side of the color line, a world separate and unequal. For Du Bois, the critical injury of racial injustice was the loss of self-respect. Living in a society that denied a person fair and equal treatment because of her race undercut that person's ability to form her own conception of a good life and damaged her confidence in pursuing that conception, were she to arrive at one. Du Bois wrote that a "vast prejudice" such as Jim Crow brought "the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate" [2015 (1903), p. 10]. As a result, one ended up "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 5). Today as then, when a society distributes vital social goods based on such morally arbitrary features as race or gender, it fundamentally restricts the capacity of some citizens to conceive of their ends, to be confident in their projects and plans for realizing them, and to see their lives and goals as worthwhile.

The notion of self-respect running through Du Bois's work resembles the modern definition in the work of John Rawls: Having self-respect is (*a*) having a sense of your moral worth and a conception of the good, and (*b*) believing you can realize your idea of a good and worthwhile life. These features make self-respect a social-sensitive and agent-relative concept. A person's conception of herself as valuable and her sense of efficacy in attaining her ends depend on specific economic, social, and political preconditions (Rawls 1971, Zink 2011). Du Bois argued that Jim Crow denied African Americans these bases. It is not a stretch to say that in doing so, Du Bois shared the further Rawlsian intuition—or more accurately, that Rawls shared the Du Boisian intuition—that without self-respect, "nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity become empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism" (Rawls 1971, p. 386).

To emphasize the inner harms of white supremacy and warn against responses that neglect or worsen those injuries, Du Bois [2015 (1903), pp. 40–43] felt it was essential to show the internal inconsistency of Washington's realism. He accepted that Washington pursued a sequential strategy and not an all-out surrender of rights, that he "distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present," their "insistence on civil rights" [Du Bois 2015 (1903), p. 40]. Washington certainly believed that African Americans should carry out a more direct political struggle for rights, once they had created a material base from which to launch that struggle. But Du Bois rejected the economics-first strategy. It presumed that landownership and better jobs could be attained without first obtaining political liberties and civil rights. He asked if it was possible to "make effective progress in economic lines" if people were "deprived of political rights"—and concluded that

"history and reason" had given "one distinct answer. . .an emphatic *No*" [Du Bois 2015 (1903), p. 41]. Du Bois argued that Washington's realism placed the material cart before the political horse.

Du Bois made an insecurity argument and an incentive argument to show how it did so. He wrote that Washington was "striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage" [Du Bois 2015 (1903), p. 41]. Even if the sharecropper escaped crushing poverty and social misery, his gains would be insecure if he lacked the protections of the rule of law and equal rights. The right to vote could also incentivize legislators to provide social and economic opportunities for African Americans. But if this group remained disenfranchised, legislators had no electoral incentive to respond to their policy preferences and concerns. Du Bois concluded that with "the right to vote goes everything: freedom, manhood. . .the right to work, and the chance to rise" [1970a (1907), p. 171].

Besides, when reformers like Washington overstated the power of self-help, they shifted attention away from the concrete injustices African Americans faced while shifting the burden of remedying those wrongs onto the shoulders of victims, essentially releasing white Americans from their responsibility to work for a more free and equal polity. "In failing thus to state plainly and unequivocally the legitimate demands of their people," Du Bois insisted, "the thinking classes of American Negroes would shirk a heavy responsibility" to themselves, the masses, and the nation [2015 (1903), p. 43]. Importantly, he insisted that only openly defiant politics could attain such ends while preserving black Southerners' self-respect and holding whites accountable. By directly and publicly protesting Jim Crow, African Americans said, "Things are bad but it is worthwhile to let the world know that things are bad in order that they may become better" [Du Bois 1970b (1907), p. 177]. Therefore, African Americans needed to prioritize attaining political liberties and civil rights over socioeconomic development. Those were, Du Bois thought, prerequisites for such development.

For Du Bois, protest does far more than alert the public to wrongs [1986a (1930), pp. 1231–32]:

> Protest is for two purposes: first, for its effects upon your political enemies, and secondly, for its effects upon yourself. The effect upon your political enemies can be registered through successful protest which ends in their defeat but also through unsuccessful protest which gives them a clear notice of what your attitude of mind is. . . . But above all this, the black man that takes his medicine of insult, discourtesy and prejudice sitting down and saying nothing, loses his own self-respect. Even if the offending politician does not hear of your opposition; does not feel your lone vote, you know and you feel, and it is an awful thing to have to be ashamed of one's self.

In refusing to stand up for oneself and one's group, Du Bois was saying, a person vitiated her self-respect and injured her dignity. Protest was instrumentally valuable because it could reform the views and behavior of racists, which was crucial for political and social reforms. But publicly protesting racial discrimination was also psychologically ennobling and morally restorative, even when it failed to make inroads with racists. "Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty," Du Bois decided, so African Americans should "protest emphatically and continually" for their rights [1971 (1909), p. 431].

Du Bois believed that moral suasion could undo hatred and prejudice. In reforming the racial biases of whites, such appeals and protests would, in effect, shift public opinion toward more favorable policy while restoring self-respect even when such reforms were not immediately forthcoming. This line of thinking became the *raison d'être* of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Before developing its well-known legal strategy, the organization focused on informing all Americans about race-based injustices in every domain of public life and what they could do to correct them. Its mission was "organized opposition to the action and

attitude of the dominant white group," which included "ceaseless agitation and insistent demand for equality: the equal right to work, civic and political equality, and social equality. It involved the use of force of every sort: moral suasion, propaganda and where possible even physical resistance" [Du Bois 1986b (1940), p. 695]. Du Bois was confident that rational arguments and empirical evidence could correct racist attitudes and that moral suasion could shame racists into civic consistency. He thought the "best way to get rid of" injustice was to "stand up and. . .point out the evil around" you. Du Bois reassured his readers that "all great reform movements. . .have been preceded by agitation" of this sort [1970b (1907), pp. 177, 175].

Underlying Du Bois's argument for protest was his belief that racism stemmed from poor reasoning or ignorance and that it would melt in the light of reason and dissolve under the rays of evidence. Du Bois acknowledged that in his early work, he had believed that racism was a cognitive or perceptive failure [1986b (1940), p. 760]:

> My basic theory had been that race prejudice was primarily a matter of ignorance on the part of the mass of men, giving the evil and antisocial a chance to work their way; that when the truth was properly presented, the monstrous wrong of race hate must melt and melt quickly before it. All human action to me in those days was conscious and rational. There was no twilight zone.

In his autobiography, Du Bois (1968, p. 197) explained, "The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure was knowledge based on scientific investigation." Political historians' admiration for Du Bois's early work rests partly in the fact that it affirms their own beliefs that racism stems from ignorance and that we can reduce such ignorance through arguments and evidence.

But for whites in the Jim Crow South, antiblack racism was a constitutive commitment: a profound attachment that constitutes a core part of a person's normative self-conception and view of the world (Sandel 1982). A constitutive commitment disposes a person to reliably commit to acting upon certain beliefs, ideals, and values (Gilbert 1992). For example, civic ideals such as autonomy, lawfulness, and fairness constitute (or should) a core part of a citizen's social and political identity (Rawls 1971, pp. 571–72). The stability of these ideals depends on citizens having a disposition to respect and follow them, including showing equal regard for the interests, projects, and rights of other citizens regardless of their race.

Others saw that in the Jim Crow South, white supremacy was a constitutive commitment that delimited civic values along a color line. Washington and Anna Julia Cooper [2008 (1892)] suggested as much. The white supremacist worldview was like a religious faith, Washington thought. It was reason-insensitive and evidence-resistant and, therefore, not refutable. He warned that "two hundred years' schooling in prejudice against the Negro" had left whites in the grips of racial bigotry that would take centuries to loosen [Washington 1972a (1884), p. 259]. Cooper insisted that "impervious to reason is the man who is dominated by the sentiment of race and prejudice" [2008 (1892), p. 230]. Later, Du Bois came to see that understanding the resilience of white supremacy required entering a twilight zone not visible to him when he launched his blistering attack on Washington's realism.

NATIONALISM

Inspired by the abolitionist movement, Du Bois believed that exposing and protesting racial injustice would morally persuade white Northerners to push the federal government to intervene in the South. But before the New Deal, federal domestic policy included only internal improvements involving shipping, tariffs, public land disposal, patents, and currency. State and local governments decided virtually every policy, determining their citizens' social and political fate. Perhaps Du Bois thought protests could effect a revolutionary transformation of federalism. Or perhaps he

thought they could change the hearts and minds of white Southerners. Washington, who had lived his entire life in the South, including as an enslaved person, had little faith in whites, so he advocated strategic self-help. Since poverty left African Americans susceptible to domination, they should prioritize reducing their poverty. Besides, he reasoned, direct political action from within the South was dangerous and unproductive because white Southerners, who alone determined state and local policy, were immune to the moral appeals of African Americans. Both Washington and Du Bois approached the problem of white supremacy as a national or regional problem, at least initially. (Du Bois suggested the color line was global. Decades later, he would make that gesture an intellectual enterprise.)

Marcus Garvey took a far more global and pessimistic view of white supremacy than did either Washington or Du Bois. He had spent his adult life as an impoverished migrant. He worked in Latin America and England before moving to the United States, and he experienced white supremacy wherever he went. He also witnessed a universal desire among the black diaspora for freedom from that common scourge. "Negroes everywhere are determined to be free, determined to be liberated, liberated from lynch law, liberated from mob rule, liberated from segregation, liberated from Jim Crowism, liberated from injustice. That is the spirit of Negroes everywhere. It is a universal desire and it is a universal program that. . .[will] liberate Negroes everywhere" [Garvey 2004a (1921), p. 37]. Black people worldwide faced colonial domination or racial apartheid and sought a collective, transnational solution, Garvey thought. That made, for him, the African American condition unexceptional. The Jim Crow South instantiated a global problem that needed a transnational remedy.

Garvey ultimately ruled out the possibility of African Americans ever attaining justice in the United States. I have reconstructed his reasons for doing so and his transnational alternative elsewhere (Jagmohan 2020). Here, I merely sketch a few deductions he made when analyzing the nature and durability of white supremacy and show how those inferences and premises informed his conclusion that white supremacy was, in fact, an unfortunate byproduct of group competition for scarce resources. In veering quite close to naturalizing white supremacy, he ruled out the possibility of substate solutions to racial conflict in multi-ethnic states.

Like many nationalists at the time, Garvey found social Darwinism a compelling account of group competition and racial antagonism. In 1921, he said, "You must remember that we are living in an age of keen competition. Nation rivaling nation, race rivaling race, individual rivaling individual in the great battle of the survival of the fittest" (Garvey 1921, p. 1). Earlier that year, he had concluded that politics was material and soulless [Garvey 1984c (1921), p. 169]. Many people in the history of ideas have seen competition, conflict, and power as the essence of politics. Like Thomas Hobbes and James Madison, Garvey accepted that humans lived in constant competition and conflict. Social Darwinism intensified, rather than originated, the lasting belief that human beings were weak and vulnerable on their own but also selfish and hostile, and that these qualities compelled them to try to subjugate or destroy each other preemptively. The genocide of Native Americans was an ominous warning to groups who dared compete with white Americans within the continental United States, noted Garvey (1923, pp. 63–64). In 1922, he even concluded that the "stage [was] set" for another such "holocaust" [Garvey 2004b (1922), p. 97].

According to Garvey, human beings are naturally competitive and deeply fearful, facts that explained racial hostility and group-based violence. This inference stemmed from his assumption that natural distrust and fear would result in conflict between groups that track ascriptive characteristics such as race or ethnicity. Garvey [1991 (1938), p. 864] said that "while one man looks after his own interest, it must be considered that [it is] not only individual interest that makes it possible for the man to live, but it must be the co-operative interest as well. And so he has made that co-operative interest with the man who looks like him in every detail." It is intuitive for

individuals to join a group because the group will safeguard and empower them in exchange for their aid to the group's pursuit of economic, political, and social capital. But group members also incur obligations to favor and advantage other group members. Garvey thought they advance their interests by linking their fate to the group.

That relationship produces associative duties which, over time, evolve into "racial selfishness," a person never thinking "outside of his race" [Garvey 1984a (1920), p. 79]. From this perspective, Garvey concluded that whites had strategically pooled their resources "to safeguard and protect" their collective interests and to harm and undermine the interests of actual or perceived rival groups. They did so by first capturing the state and then making themselves "citizens of first claim" [Garvey 1987b (1937), pp. 240–41]. But because in a republic arbitrary exclusions require justification, they turned to racial ideology (Garvey 1977a, p. 85).

For Garvey, group solidarity began as a strategic alliance to gain, preserve, and wield power. But over time, it developed into a racial covenant that bred group hostilities, and justificatory beliefs to back them up. "Not only has humanity divided itself along racial lines," Garvey observed, "but it has become more suspicious" (Garvey 1977a, p. 141). Natural conflict produces social accords that grow into racial blinders. "Every unemployed white man looks upon the Negro as a dangerous competitor for possible employment, and in that case he loses all reason and respect for law, and will go to any extent, even to that of scaring and lynching the Negro so as to keep him away from the possibility of getting the job he wants" (Garvey 1977b (1934), p. 86). If black people's interests clashed with "those of the ruling faction," meaning whites, black people would "have absolutely no rights" that whites would recognize and enforce [Garvey 2004d (1922), p. 107]. Garvey's point was that the source of white supremacy was a desire for power. All racial groups compete for power and resources, but once any group captures the state, it will use the state and its monopoly on violence to advance its interests and disadvantage other groups.

The above line of reasoning ruled out racial integration and denied the likelihood of national solutions easing racial injustice in multi-ethnic states, ends Washington and Du Bois desired. But Garvey's argument also struck at the political strategies of both men. Washington, echoing the republican fear that dependency yielded domination and taking a realist view of the challenges federalism posed to Northern intervention, encouraged African Americans to lift themselves up economically before pressing for political change. But Garvey saw economic competition as a primary and exacerbating source of racial hostility, which meant that progress along that line by African Americans would only intensify whites' racial fears and resentment and heighten their hatred and cruelty. He insisted [Garvey 2004c (1922), p. 58] that any "thoughtful leader realizes well that industrial, economic and political competition among peoples of different races breed prejudice, hatred and end generally in massacres, in civil wars, to the detriment of the weaker group. It has been so in all history; it is so now, and it will be so in the future." If African Americans escaped poverty through self-help measures and exited personal relations of domination, they faced increased lynchings and race riots. There could be no reprieve from white supremacy, only a need to build up adequate defenses.

In naturalizing white supremacy, Garvey ruled out social change and therefore protest of injustices as an effective strategy to reach it. "Protests are the order of the day," he explained, perhaps with Du Bois in mind, "but protest alone will not help the American Negro, because the things he is protesting against are traceable to a natural consequence that cannot be curbed nor prevented by law, in that the law is in the hand of the majority, and they can always influence the law to suit their own opinions and their own whims and caprice" (Garvey 1977a, p. 85). The law could not regulate characteristic features of the human condition, and even if it did, the white man made and enforced the law. As a result [Garvey 1984a (1920), pp. 79–80],

> You cannot successfully combat him here because he has everything at his command. He has the strength of the nation behind him; he has the wealth of the nation behind him, and it is preposterous for you to think that you can ever combat him single-handed. It cannot be done. The only salvation for the Negro—the American, the West Indian and the South and Central American Negro—is to unite their intelligence and their resources to use the civilization that they have, to stop the white man in Africa and demand Africa.

It is not in the interest of a powerful group to empower its competitors. Garvey believed that it was, however, in the interest of whites to use their control of the state and economy to subjugate and exploit other groups. Therefore the "only protection against injustice in man is power, physical power, financial power, educational power, scientific power, power of every kind" [Garvey 1984d (1922), p. 771]. The question, though, was how to gain such countervailing powers. "No race is free until it has a strong nation of its own—its own system of government and its own order of society," Garvey argued [1987a (1937), p. 211]. Social Darwinism wedded him to a view of conflict and competition as natural and inescapable, the idea that a member of an oppressed group could not compete with those of the dominant group within the same state.

Hence, the optimal response for the diaspora would be a transnational struggle for a powerful black state [Garvey 1984b (1921), p. 562]:

> No Negro with all his success is secure in any community where the Government is vested in an opposite race, when that opposite race is prejudiced to the Negro. There is no guarantee to the safety of any such Negro, because by mob violence and by lynch law, the outcome of race prejudice, one's success can be overthrown overnight, and one transformed from a prosperous subject or citizen, to a refugee. That has been demonstrated in many communities and it should act as a warning to the educated and prosperous Negro, and let him realize that the best thing for every one to do, is to unite, and so fortify ourselves by building up a strong Government in Africa, that as citizens of that Government we can claim protection in any part of the world we happen to find ourselves.

Essentially, Garvey shifted the struggle against white supremacy onto the international arena, where conflict and competition would unfold between states rather than groups within states. Given this view, the size and power of a state were critical for advancing its citizens' interests and protecting their rights, including those of people residing outside its territory. Consequently, the best thing for African Americans to do would be to unite and fortify themselves in a strong state in Africa [Garvey 1984b (1921), p. 562].

CONCLUSION

The account I have presented questions the ethics-first or principles-first approach to the study of political theory, including African American political thought. Evaluating social ills should not be restricted to social science, social theory, or cultural criticism. Strategy or political action questions should not be confined to activists and politicians. The difference in judgments made when analyzing a social problem often leads to different views about the process of social change and the form of political action necessary for that change to occur. The preceding discussions of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey show that their distinct verdicts regarding the nature and effects of white supremacy led them down different strategic and normative paths. The approach I have opted for concedes that political ideologies informed their judgments and conclusions. It admits, for example, that the republican tradition's fear of dependency helped explain why Washington prioritized economic independence. It also recognizes that social Darwinist thought profoundly shaped Garvey's understanding of group conflict as a permanent feature of the human condition.

The crucial aim, however, was to show that seminal figures in African American political thought appraised social ills with great conceptual care and brought a profound moral seriousness

to bear when choosing a political strategy. A further and perhaps more important point is that a political theorist who updates her understanding of the nature and consequences of the problem will arrive at a different view of social change and what counts as feasible political action, and a recalibration of ultimate ends. Tracking those differences across authors, or over time in a single author's work, reveals that strategizing can be as philosophically complex and normatively difficult as theorizing.

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