



Insights from Black Perspectives on American Democracy

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In an era of sharp partisan polarization, where can Americans turn for a believable public philosophy? Some urge a return to New Deal style liberalism, while others advocate a reprisal of Progressive-era reforms like trust-busting. Some political theorists argue that the times call for more communitarian understandings of democracy; others favor a strong dose of the founders' republicanism; and yet others yet others insist on a new American commitment to individual liberties. Missing from all these arguments are the perspectives of African Americans, who have experienced and contributed to the travails and triumphs of U.S. democracy. Surely the time has come to draw on the varieties of democratic thought their experience has engendered.

The word "varieties" is crucial. Far from being monolithic, black American thought is richly woven of many strands of sharply contrasting positions and principles. Variety is still more pronounced when we take into account the views of *all* those who have been marked as "different" from the supposed white norm by skin color and other visible physical characteristics. The full variety of their perspectives should be taken into account, because all Americans have much to gain from a new public philosophy constructed from the bottom up. More than the privileged who take their rights for granted, Americans who have been excluded, marginalized, overlooked, and disrespected have gained the keenest understandings of what our democracy is and should be.

Black Thought and Today's Democratic Challenges

Black political thought offers powerful ideas on the most pressing challenges facing U.S. politics and governance today – angry politics, loss of community, the conflicting demands of global and national citizenship, and the need to reconcile faith with pluralism.

Angry politics. The rise of Fox News on the right and competing reactions from the left raises a difficult question: can we harness the energies created by angry extremes without risking the destruction of democracy itself? Yes, we can, say a number of black political thinkers. Civil rights activist James Bevel noted that his first reaction to the September 15, 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, "was anger, rage. The bombing felt almost like a personal insult; the reactionary forces of the Klan, or whoever, were trying to teach us a lesson.... I got information to the effect that some of the guys involved in it were from the sheriff's department, and then I was thinking about killing people.... That's when I started thinking about what would be the appropriate response to that kind of situation." When anger is controlled and channeled as Bevel managed to do, it becomes indignation and promotes constructive democratic action. The key, as he suggests, is to use anger to spur reflection.

Loss of community. Since the 1960s, the United States has become a proudly diverse nation, where many citizens reject pressures to conform to standardized ethnic, social, sexual, or religious norms and insist on their right to be themselves with their own values. But other Americans feel threatened by so much diversity.

As “culture wars” continue to rage, a number of black writers and activists argue that democratic community does not require citizens to share fixed ideals and norms. Instead, a healthy democracy can be sustained by citizens who mutually recognize and affirm each other’s dignity – not just by tolerating differences, but by affirming that each person’s dignity is grounded in the distinctive features that make each person who he or she is, and no one else.

America in the world. Many Americans today see that they are citizens of the world as well as of the United States, but an effective public philosophy needs to explain how identities and obligations can be balanced. A number of black writers and artists espouse the stance of “black worldliness,” which highlights linkages such as the connection between Jim Crow in the United States and colonialism around the world. Having traveled widely, these thinkers stress the founders’ original claim that the truths of the Declaration of Independence are self-evident, belonging to all who acknowledge them and making the United States a nation founded on principles that are inherently and explicitly *transnational*. This understanding of U.S. citizenship and identity meets the challenges of globalization much better than the myth of America as an isolated and supreme “city on a hill” with a special global mission to force ideals on others.

Reconciling faith and pluralism. Growing religious fundamentalism raises difficult questions for democracy. How can deeply held beliefs enter policy debates without undermining democratic pluralism? Blacks bring special angles of vision to this discussion, because many drew on religious faith in struggles to overturn centuries of slavery followed by Jim Crow segregation, yet also understood that most established U.S. churches defended racial hierarchies. This dual historical legacy has informed black political philosophies that, with much tension, reconcile faith and democratic pluralism. In “The Gain from a Belief,” for example, Anna Julia Cooper argues that people who wish to *change* the order of things need “heroism, devotion, sacrifice” and cannot find these “in a primarily skeptical spirit.” In times of struggle for change, people “need to be anchored to what they *feel* to be eternal verities.” But, Cooper adds, “I do not mean by faith the holding of correct views and unimpeachable opinions... nor do I understand it to be the ability to forge cast-iron formulas.... For while I do not deny that absolute and eternal truth *is*, – still truth must be infinite” and cannot “be encompassed and confined by one age or nation, sect or country.” By embracing tensions, Cooper offers a powerful way to bring our deepest faith commitments into democracy without falling into intolerance, theocracy, or false universalism.

Political Ideas and Values Matter

All well and good, some will say, but do ideas really matter? Isn’t democratic politics at bottom a struggle among interest groups competing for material resources? I reject the view that we can approach democratic politics only from such a standpoint. To adjudicate the inevitable differences among contending interests, we must have recourse to shared ideas of how things should be. Democracy involves arguments about both policies and fundamental values. Does anyone deny the importance of recasting “all men are created equal” as *all persons* are created equal? As this shows, African American ideas have *already* transformed America’s public philosophy – and they can offer many further insights to meet today’s philosophical challenges.

Read more in Nick Bromell, *The Time is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of U.S. Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2013).