



PROJECT MUSE®

Empire of Liberty

Anthony Bogues

Published by Dartmouth College Press

Bogues, Anthony.

Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom.

Dartmouth College Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/15060.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15060>

RACE, HISTORICAL TRAUMA, AND DEMOCRACY

The Politics of a Historical Wrong

How black men, coming to America in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, became a central thread in the history of the United States, at once a challenge to its democracy and always an important part of its economic history and social development.

—W. E. B. DUBOIS

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” That exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.

—TONI MORRISON

THIS LECTURE FOLLOWS the one titled “Empire of Liberty: Desire, Power, and the States of Exception” in two ways. First, I continue to explore some of the ways in which contemporary power functions, but this time I pay more attention to issues of race and democracy. In discussing these issues, this lecture works through questions of historical trauma while examining politics and democracy. A second feature of this lecture is the fact that its shape has been generated by our conversations following the first lecture. For this second lecture, I had originally intended to focus on reviewing the relationship between democracy and race, on thinking about how the relationship between the structures of racism and race itself influences discussions and debates about democracy. I would have mostly paid attention to the idea that racial power complicates any idea of de-

mocracy, arguing that not much attention has been paid to the issue of complication except in understandings of democracy as a minimalist representation of political equality. As I reflected more upon this issue and upon the question-and-answer period after the last lecture, I became convinced that, with regard to questions of race and democracy today, it would be productive to think about historical trauma, to reflect with you on the ways in which trauma, not as a psychoanalytic term or state, but as a social wound inflicted upon the body and the self, operates within a social context. As I make this move, I pose the following question: what does the process of historical trauma or of an event of historically catastrophic proportions mean when its legacies linger and shape the present? One of the issues this lecture addresses is: how do the processes of historical trauma, not as a single event, but as a historical event of long duration, through repetition become catastrophic, producing conditions and practices in the political realm? From this perspective, I ask: how do these conditions and practices shape democracy? As is my style in approaching these complex issues, I deliver a caveat here. I will not offer a psychoanalytic reading of race and democracy, although I will deploy terms of psychoanalytic provenance. Rather, I will explore trauma and its relationship to racial domination and democracy by working through the original, Greek meaning of the word, trauma as wound, injury inflicted upon a body.

With these preliminary remarks, let us begin. Racial slavery, Jim Crow, and general racial domination pressed down on black human flesh. The performance of power in these circumstances was a form of domination that one may call power *in* the flesh. It was power directing bodies through injury of the flesh. Saidiya Hartman, in a remarkable text on terror and slavery, reminds us that the “terrible spectacle” inducting Frederick Douglass into slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester.¹ She argues compellingly that the violence inflicted upon the slave body made the slave identify violence as an “original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born.’”²

If violence is the generative act that creates slave life for the black body, this is a violence upon and in the flesh. Such performances of violence create wounds on the body over a historical period and generate conditions for what we may call a *historically catastrophic* event. Such an event is not a singular one that we mark off with periodization boundaries, including a prelude and an aftermath. Rather, a historically catastrophic event is one in which wounds are repeated over and over again. In the case of coercive racial domination and racial slavery in the Atlantic world, these wounds were repeatable and repeated through the master's whip, rape, shackles, lynching, or the relegation of the slave to the status of a non-human being in everyday life, located, in Frantz Fanon's words, in a "zone of nonbeing."³ Thus one of my questions is: how can, or rather, how should we think about democracy under such conditions? In this lecture, I am not as interested in how history is written after traumatic events, in grappling with what Dominick LaCapra calls the "elusiveness of the traumatic experience."⁴ Instead, I wish to think about *the politics of the wound*, the politics of a historical catastrophe, and the ways in which, if we reflect upon the relationship between the wound as historically catastrophic and as a *wrong*,⁵ a different space may open up in which we may talk and think about practices of democracy. From this perspective, democracy is not a consensual, rational practice that operates through forms of deliberative procedures and leaves legacies intact, but is one way to reformulate struggles for forms of radical equality. I wish to open up this political space in part because, if racial domination (either in its coercive form or in twenty-first-century constructions of hegemony) is a site of exception within a racial state, the ending of this form of domination resides in a "constitutive outside." Here I do not mean that the struggles against racial power are simply a dialectical negation of racism. Rather, like all things that are located "outside," radical antiracist practices that have as their logic a radical equality are not commensurate with efforts that focus on racism primarily as the lack of inclusiveness within a democratic polity.

Trauma and History

Let us begin by talking about trauma. Although I am not going to develop a psychoanalytical reading of race and democracy, it is useful to observe some things about trauma at the outset. A lively field of “trauma studies” has opened up in the humanities, due primarily to what can be described as a psychoanalytical turn. One of the leading figures in the field, Cathy Caruth, paraphrases Sigmund Freud when she suggests that in trauma there is a:

Breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world—it is not like the wound on the body, a simple healable event, but rather is an event in which the structure of its experience . . . is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but rather is only done so, belatedly in its repeated possession.⁶

Another important figure, Ruth Leys, remarks on “the absolute indispensability of the concept [of trauma] for understanding the psychic harms associated with certain central experiences of the twentieth century, crucially the Holocaust but also including other appalling outrages of the kind experienced by the kidnapped children of Uganda.”⁷ She also notes that today trauma is a “debased currency.”⁸ Some scholars, when examining the African American experience, have pointed to cultural trauma as one possible way of understanding issues of history and identity. For these scholars, cultural trauma is understood as a “memory accepted and publicly given credence by relevant membership group.”⁹ In this definition, racial slavery becomes a traumatic event related to memory. I make two observations about this line of argument. First, it takes the view that the experience of trauma is related to flashbacks. Second, it positions collective memory as the source of these flashbacks and recollections. However, most scholars do not address the issue of repeatable wounds that occur because of an initial event. Thus, to see the African American experience primarily in terms of cultural trauma as defined by these scholars does not allow us to grapple

with historical trauma as wound. From my perspective, however, memory is a fundamental, contested site of politics and in the case of racial slavery it is of extraordinary importance.

Toni Morrison makes the point that American writing placed a deliberate veil over the event of racial slavery. She notes, "Over and over, the writers pull the narrative short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.'"¹⁰ Morrison's novel *Beloved* rips open this veil as *memory work* becomes storytelling. In *Beloved*, memory work is the recounting of the initial traumatic event and its terrible consequences. The event is too horrible to remember but must be remembered. The politics of such memory work is a complicated matter, but it pushes power to acknowledge a historical wrong. Although Cathy Caruth and others have argued that it is not the experience of the event that causes trauma but the remembering of it, a remembering that occurs after a period of forgetting, the event of racial slavery is of a different character. When describing traumatic neuroses, Freud observes: "Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright."¹¹ As an event, racial slavery was a historical wrong structured around racial domination. Over time two kinds of racial power emerged, one coercive and the other hegemonic. Both in turn generated ways of life that negated the humanness of African Americans.

Racial slavery and its violences constructed what Stephanie Smallwood calls the transformation of "African Captives into Atlantic commodities" and constituted the generative event for the construction of racial domination in the New World.¹² At the level of historical flow, there were two traumatic experiences. The first was the transformation of the African body into an African captive, and the second was an awareness on the part of this captive person of a death that would be experienced differently. Smallwood puts it well when she describes the crossing of the Middle Passage this way: "Entrapped, Africans confronted a dual crisis: the trauma of death,

and the inability to respond appropriately to death. . . . more fundamentally, on the sea voyage, even the African dead were enslaved and commodified, trapped in a time-space regime in which they were unable fully to die.”¹³ The point I am making here is worth repeating. With racial slavery and racial domination there is the repetition of traumatic events. Racial slavery was therefore a layered traumatic event that created the ground and opened up the space for another series of traumatic events that made history a catastrophe, thereby creating a social wound. In such circumstances, trauma as a social wound is experienced, assimilated, and understood immediately by those historically traumatized. There is no temporal gap in the experience. At the same time, this traumatic wound produced an array of politics that constituted critical elements of a black intellectual and political tradition.¹⁴ These elements were in part responses to the historically catastrophic event. However, they did not only work through the event but oftentimes expanded the boundaries of conventional political and social thought.

In drawing a distinction between historical and structural trauma, LaCapra notes that “structural trauma is related to transhistorical absence . . . and appears in different ways in all societies.”¹⁵ He argues that this form of trauma is different from historical trauma, which functions in the direction of loss and is “specific, . . . not everyone is subject to it or entitled to it or the subject position associated with it.”¹⁶ While we should pay attention to this distinction, the social wound of racial slavery straddles both forms of trauma. Racial slavery generated a historic loss, what Smallwood calls a “disappearance [that] threatened to put saltwater slavery beyond both the physical and metaphysical reach of kin. . . . Would the exiles be able to return home . . . ?”¹⁷ This loss can be grappled with through discourses, politics, and narratives to such an extent that the themes of exodus, redemption, and return litter all the discursive formations of black diasporic politics. This originary loss and exile expressed itself in twentieth-century Ethiopianism as well as in various forms of black internationalism, of which the movement

of Marcus Garvey, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was the exemplar in the early part of the last century. The consistent appeal of radical black diasporic movements that embodied conceptions of return arose both from the generative traumatic event and from its repeated repercussions. I put the matter in stark terms: for the African diaspora in the Americas, even if one were not born a slave, the fact of slavery marked one's life. Thus an individual black life becomes lived history, with the historical trauma of racial slavery congealing into wounds and scars of history. One might call these wounds and scars a form of structural trauma.

The wounds and scars of history, when inflicted, are of course witnessed. However, those who witness the wounds do so as outsiders, since the black being is often invisible, or in the words of W. E. B. DuBois, remains "a problem." Often, the witnessing is superficially a blank stare of nonengagement. This is a profound paradox, because, as Robert Gooding-Williams observes in his discussion of DuBois's formulation of American racial domination as the appearance of the "Negro Problem," "Black bodies, in fact, have been saturated with significance."¹⁸ Thus the stare is not one of nonengagement but rather one that already positions the black body as unworthy. The black body was or is, in Fanon's words, marked by "legends, stories, history, and above all historicity."¹⁹ This historicity operates through the repetition of past events and their consistent transformation into wounds. As stated before, racial slavery was the originary trauma; antiblack racism becomes the frame for the repetition of the wound and constructs parallel lives for African Americans. And here I mean two things. First, all major social and economic indices demonstrate that African American lives are adversely impacted in terms of education, income levels, access to health care, and, perhaps most damning of all, incarceration rates for young black men. Glenn Loury makes the point that the prison system in America is the principal venue "in which the legacy of . . . history remains vividly apparent. . . . We are . . . becoming a nation

of jailers—and, racist jailers at that.”²⁰ In his Tanner Lectures, Loury accurately argues that substantive racial justice has not been achieved, and he posits that what has occurred is instead a form of “procedural race neutrality.” He then remarks that American prisons house 25 percent of the world’s inmates and that a large percentage of these individuals are black and brown, in numbers disproportionate to their presence in the population. He observes that a black male resident of the state of California “is more likely to go to state prison than to state college.” And Howard Winant makes an important point, which we should ponder. Writing about the new politics of race, he observes that we are in the middle of a transition from “racial domination to racial hegemony.”²¹ Putting aside my initial concerns about hegemony as a form of domination, I think that Winant is pointing us to the fact that certain forms of coercive domination do not seem as prevalent in what some have called the post-civil rights era as they once were. He also points to the fact that race and racism are constantly being made and remade and are therefore adapted to the demands of the moment.

In addition to social and economic indices (higher rates of unemployment among blacks than whites), there is another dimension to how race is lived in America. I want to turn my attention to a demonstration of how antiblack racism as a structured form of domination reaches out and transforms human relations, becoming the framework within which the social is lived in America. One dominant, common myth in the American narrative is that America is open to all immigrants. I do not wish here to be drawn into current debates about immigration in the United States; my own perspective on the matter mirrors the sentiment on a placard at a demonstration supporting immigrant rights. The placard reads: “No person is a non-citizen.” What I wish to draw your attention to is how antiblack racism as a sociohistorical construct operates, structuring and transforming identities.

In 2001 the *New York Times* published a book titled *How Race Is Lived in America*. Built upon numerous interviews and first-person

narratives, the text, though not completely successful, offers some glimpses of the everyday meanings of antiblack racism. I wish to draw our attention to one story, because it speaks to the pervasive, dominant constitution of the historicity of the black body as lack.

The story concerns two friends who immigrate to the U.S. from Cuba. In Cuba they were the closest of friends, but in America, Ruiz, one of the two friends, says, "It's like I am here and he is over there . . . and we can't cross over to the other's world." The narrative continues:

Ruiz discovered a world that neither the American television nor Communist propaganda had prepared him for. Dogs did not growl at him and police officers did not hose him. But he felt the stares of security guards when he entered a store in a white neighborhood and the subtle recoiling of white women when he walked by.²²

These stares and this recoil are indicative of how the black body, in particular the male black body, is perceived. In 1950, Fanon described a corporeal schema in which the sight of a black body incites fright. He wrote, "Look, a Negro! . . . Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened!"²³ A half century later, fright turns into stares and recoil, as the black body remains the site of a historical wrong that American democracy has no answer for and is still unable to grapple with. There are many reasons for this, and we will explore some of them in this lecture. One of them has to do with the material privileges of whiteness, which make witnessing a detached experience. As far back as 1903, DuBois put the matter very well when he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All never-the-less, flutter around it."²⁴ Never fully able to confront the profound meanings of antiblack racism as one consequence of racial slavery, American democracy therefore does not think about the meaning of race for democracy. In part, the problem lies in the narrow liberal conception

of democracy as political equality. From this perspective, the way to address racism and its consequences is to work within the framework of a binary of inclusion or exclusion. This way of thinking about race in America evacuates forms of structural legacies, making any analysis of racism reducible to a lack of formal procedural equality that can be solved with different procedures of representation. But the different levels of representation that mark forms of inclusion have not resolved in any way, shape, or form the fact that we are a nation of “racist jailers,” making the punishment of prison a form of disciplinary politics for the black body. What is clearly required is another view of democracy, for us to think, if possible, from the perspectives of those who have been slaves, whose ideas and practices have been erased from the body politic. In beginning to do this, I want to engage in a comparative reading of two texts: Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and W. E. B. Du-Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*. I do this as one possible means of beginning to rethink race and democracy in America.

A View of American Democracy

Alexis de Tocqueville’s two-volume *Democracy in America* is still seen as the seminal work on American democracy. In the words of Donald Pease, *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, “supplied the concepts, generalizations, and categories out of which U.S. citizens were encouraged to experience and make sense of U.S. democracy.”²⁵ Pease compellingly argues that “political scientists, literary theorists, philosophers, and citizens alike have invested Tocqueville’s work with a metahistorical knowingness about U.S. democratic culture.”²⁶ It is therefore appropriate that, in examining American democracy, one begins with Tocqueville’s work. In the 1848 edition of the book, Tocqueville wrote that the “advent of democracy as governing power in the world’s affairs, universal and irresistible, was at hand.” This idea was of course in accord with his original introduction to the book, in which he stated that “the

gradual development of the principle of equality is a providential fact.”²⁷ For Tocqueville, democracy in America was about the “general equality of conditions among people.”²⁸ As he made clear in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, equality was a more important political value than political liberty. He notes that “political liberty is easily lost. . . . men therefore hold on to equality not only because it is precious to them; they are also attached to it because they think it will last forever.”²⁹ Tocqueville’s preoccupation with democracy was grounded in his sense that a social revolution had broken what he called the “spell of royalty,” and this revolution had at its core the principle of equality attached to conditions. This was an equality in which the former hierarchies were threatened. In other words, for Tocqueville the critical question was how a democratic revolution in the nineteenth century could create new conditions, different from those that previously existed. Thus his concern was about more than formal equality; it was about equality as an embedded condition of life. Tocqueville was not as focused on issues of political liberty or political equality as he was on a general condition of equality. We should, however, be clear. It is not that political equality did not matter, because, as Sheldon Wolin has noted, “one of the great themes in *Democracy* is the appearance of the people as full-fledged political actors continuously involved in the exercise of power.”³⁰ However, the “new science of politics” that Tocqueville called for would describe the conditions of equality, conditions under which the so-called “tyranny of the majority” would be more of a cultural force than a legislative force. Tocqueville wondered, as Wolin so ably points out, about “‘the invisible and intangible power of thought’ affecting millions of beings scattered over vast distances,” under these conditions of equality.³¹

I would argue that Tocqueville, when considering these issues and their relationship to democracy, decided that what was necessary was that: “the light of intelligence spreads, and the capacities of all classes tends towards equality. Society becomes democratic, and the *empire of democracy* is slowly and peacefully introduced into insti-

tutions and customs” (emphasis mine).³² Here one should of course note the use of the word *empire*. Wolin has suggested that in this instance it means *sway*. I want to argue that here the word *empire* means the single universal truth under which human beings should live. We know that Tocqueville supported the French colonial empire and that he developed a positive view of French colonialism in his writings on Algeria.³³ In part, his positions on colonialism rested on the popular, conventional concept in European thought that there existed a hierarchy of nations and peoples and that at the apex of this hierarchy were Christian nations, who had a right to civilize so-called “savage nations.” Thus I would argue that it was not unusual for Tocqueville to understand democracy as a “providential fact.” But what about racial slavery? How did Tocqueville view racial slavery, and how did he see the relationship between slavery and American democracy?

In his 1843 essay “The Emancipation of the Slaves,” Tocqueville acknowledged that, regarding the abolition of slavery, “it is difficult to think of greater or more important questions today.”³⁴ He believed that the abolition of slavery was an important issue, because for France the “keeping [of] the colonies is necessary for the strength and greatness of France.”³⁵ For Tocqueville, while abolition was necessary, it had to be achieved under conditions that would not adversely impact French colonialism. Although he did not mention Haiti and the Haitian Revolution in this essay, the memory of the revolution haunted his thinking, particularly when he wrote, “emancipation is . . . A very dangerous enterprise. . . . we must resolve to do it, but at the same time we must study with greatest care the most certain and the most economical means of succeeding.”³⁶ It is therefore safe to say that Tocqueville’s attitude toward slavery in the French colonies favored gradual abolition, as long as abolition did not trouble the French colonial enterprise. He saw the system of slavery in the colonies as the foundation of their great wealth. Slavery was integral to the social and economic structure of the colonies and to the sustainability of colonial power. Therefore abolition

required a delicate and gradual process. However, when it came to America, Tocqueville had a different view. He did not see racial slavery as integral to the economy of America. His views on slavery were rooted in what he considered to be the natural superiority of white civilization and in the impossibility of blacks and whites' living together.³⁷ The so-called natural superiority of whites, specifically Anglo-Americans, meant for Tocqueville that, even though black slaves were badly treated as slaves, they were not and could not be part of American democracy. Indeed, from Tocqueville's perspective, racial slavery had no impact upon democracy and the principle of equality. Thus, when Tocqueville turns his attention to questions of race in America at the end of the first volume of *Democracy in America*, he makes it clear that he never had time in the preceding narrative of over three hundred pages to write about slavery, because in his mind slavery was a topic that was "American without being democratic [and] to portray democracy has been my principal aim."³⁸ For Tocqueville, although slavery was not democratic, it had no relationship to, did not inform, and did not shape American democracy. This is an important point, since such a narrative really argued that racial slavery was somehow separate from American democracy, as opposed to seeing American democracy as based on racial slavery and therefore shaped by its history. This narrative of separation presents slavery as an aberration, not as a historical wrong deeply shaping our present.

It is interesting how Tocqueville finally pays attention to slavery. After hundreds of pages discussing equality as a custom, after many chapters describing some of the political institutions of America (its systems of townships, constitutional arrangements, judicial power, political parties, liberty of the press, various forms of political association, and issues of representative rule by the majority), Tocqueville examines slavery and the genocide of the Native American population not by thinking about these modes of power in their social forms but by taking a distinctly racial view, one in which race is a scientific fact of nature, with some races superior and others

inferior. By thinking in this way, Tocqueville could write, without sensing any contradiction, that:

An absolute and immense democracy is not all that we find in America; the inhabitants of the New World may be considered from more than one point of view. In the course of this work my subject has often led me to speak of Indians and Negroes, but I have never had time to stop in order to show what place these two races occupy in the midst of the *democratic people*. I have shown in what spirit and according to what laws the Anglo-American union was formed³⁹ (emphasis mine).

We should note here that Tocqueville is very clear—American democracy is racially exclusive, the Anglo-American union is a racial state of white supremacy. It is a racial state that, though democratic, has no need to pay attention to racial slavery and Native American genocide because:

Among these widely differing families of men, the first that attracts attention, the superior in intelligence, in power, and in enjoyment, is the white, or European, the MAN pre-eminently so called; below him appear the Negro and the Indian. . . . both of them occupy an equally inferior position in the country they inhabit; both suffer from tyranny; and if their wrongs are not the same, they originate from the same author.⁴⁰

Tocqueville then speaks about the oppression of the “Negro,” which deprives “the descendents of the Africans of almost all privileges of humanity.”⁴¹ Having noted this, he then makes an argument popular at the time, that racial slavery had “debased” the black slave. It was a strange argument. First you make a human being a slave, then you say that his enslavement means that he has become debased and therefore cannot be freed. In this argument, the slave master continues to have his humanity while practicing coercive power over the slave. Debasement, the violence of power *in the flesh*, in the minds of the slave masters and those who witnessed slavery (Tocqueville witnessed slavery in his American travels), created the

conditions for the black slave to be a certain kind of creature. Tocqueville writes:

Equally devoid of wants and of enjoyment, and useless to himself . . . he quietly enjoys all the privileges of debasement. If he becomes free, independence is often felt by him to be an heavier burden than slavery. . . . a thousand new desires beset him, and he has not the knowledge and energy necessary to resist them. . . . In short, he is sunk to such a depth of wretchedness that while servitude brutalizes, liberty destroys him.⁴²

Thus for Tocqueville the slave has no capacity to be free even when freed. Brutal oppression has degraded him forever, and the condemned black body is to remain eternally outside of American democracy. But there is for Tocqueville another reason why the black body is condemned to exist outside the framework of American democracy. In an explicit reference to slavery, Tocqueville writes about the black body as follows:

The modern slave differs from his master not only in his condition but in his origin. You may set the Negro free, but you cannot make him otherwise than an alien to the European. . . . we scarcely acknowledge the common features of humanity in this stranger whom slavery has brought among us. His physiognomy is in our eyes hideous, his understanding weak, his tastes low; and we are almost inclined to look upon him as being an intermediate between man and the brutes.⁴³

Tocqueville approvingly cites Thomas Jefferson, who had previously written, “in the book of destiny . . . the two races will never live in a state of equal freedom under the same government.”⁴⁴ It is clear that American democracy, for all its providential certainty, could not grapple with the consequences of the historical wrong enacted at its inauguration. Thus its answer was to expel the black body. This was not just the view of Jefferson; it was the reason for the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816, founded by Henry Clay and John Randolph, with the membership

of Daniel Webster, Busrod Washington (nephew of a Founding Father), George Washington, and James Madison.⁴⁵ Many members of the ACS thought that slavery could not be sustained but felt it was impossible for the ex-slave to be integrated into American society. This proposed extraordinary exclusion, permanent if possible, of the black body from the American polity, shaped the character of American democracy.

Another View of American Democracy

If, within the frameworks and canons of American political thought and intellectual history, *Democracy in America* stands as the master text, then W. E. B. DuBois's 1935 book *Black Reconstruction* continues to be ignored. Yet this text forthrightly addresses the foundational issues of American democracy. I do not wish here to engage in any rehabilitative treatment of *Black Reconstruction*. Instead, I want to think through the rich conceptual tools that DuBois uses and in so doing offer some tentative analysis of the present moment and of American democracy.

One hundred years after the first publication of *Democracy in America*, W. E. B. DuBois published *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. The book was not widely reviewed at the time, and, as Nikhil Singh has observed, it was criticized for what reviewers saw as its “hyperbolic claims” about the ex-slaves or was “clinically dismantled as a romantic illusion.”⁴⁶ The Caribbean intellectual C. L. R. James noted that in *Black Reconstruction* the “Negroes *in particular* had tried to carry out ideas that went beyond the prevailing conceptions of bourgeois democracy.”⁴⁷ If *Democracy in America* was Tocqueville's attempt to think about the democratic revolution in Europe by locating America as the signifier of that revolution (an attempt that allowed him to sidestep the radical democratic movements that appeared in Europe by the 1840s), *Black Reconstruction* was an acknowledgment that, although the 1840s witnessed a radical experiment in democracy in Europe, the black slaves

and workers in America had gone beyond even the boundaries of the limits set by antislavery activists. For many antislavery activists the horizon of Reconstruction was black male political equality. The ex-slaves broke this limit. At the end of *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois writes:

The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy by the working millions which this world had ever seen.⁴⁸

Some argue, with a degree of accuracy, that *Black Reconstruction* is not part of the canon of American thought because its focus on the self-activities of black slaves does not fit easily into a conventional, national American narrative. I agree, but I would add one thing. *Black Reconstruction* does not fit within the conventional American narrative because it poses the most fundamental questions about American democracy. And in posing these questions, it supplies another language of democracy and its possibilities that is outside our current framework for thinking about democracy. Unlike *Democracy in America*, *Black Reconstruction* makes slavery the central question of American democracy. In the opening sentences of his text, DuBois writes about:

How black men, coming to America in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, became a central thread in the history of the United States, at once a challenge to its democracy and always an important part of its economic history and social development.⁴⁹

For DuBois, American democracy was challenged by the historical wrong of slavery. For him American slavery was “a matter of both race and social condition, but the condition was limited and determined by race.”⁵⁰ The core of slavery for DuBois was that it “represented in a very real sense the ultimate degradation of man.

Indeed the system was so reactionary, so utterly inconsistent with modern progress. . . . no matter how degraded the factory hand, he is not real estate. The tragedy of the black slave's position was precisely this: his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner."⁵¹

Racial slavery was about the degradation of the human being. As a system of "property in the person," it represented the ultimate form of domination. For such a system to exist alongside American democracy was not a gap between reality and ideal, a gap that could then be overcome by a series of inclusionary practices, bringing formal equality to those to whom it had been denied. Rather, an entirely new conception of democracy was required. So what would this democracy look like and how would we name it? But we should not run ahead of our narrative; let us see how DuBois begins to clear a new space in which we may think about American democracy.

At the beginning of his text, DuBois makes the case for us to begin rethinking the category of the slave. He argues that the wealth of the United States and indeed of the Atlantic world was created by slave labor on plantations that were the most modern productive machines of the period. The important historical point here is not the one made by Eric Williams in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*, about the centrality of black slave labor to the process of capitalist accumulation. Rather, DuBois is making a point about slaves as a human social category. By calling the slaves black workers, DuBois shifts two framing assumptions. He changes our conceptions of modernity and creates grounds for the slaves to invent their own forms of lives wherever possible. In his classic work on the Haitian Revolution titled *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James had performed a similar process of naming, making the point that: "The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time."⁵² In other words,

when one considers the writing of history from the vantage point of those excluded from society, those who, in the words of Jacques Rancière, constitute “a part of those who have no part,”⁵³ the question of naming, of the creation of new categories, becomes a central element of that writing.

Throughout *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois draws us into the life of these black workers or slaves, so that by the time they begin joining the Union Army, it is obvious that they are involved in what he calls a “general strike.” DuBois writes about the mass movement as the war unfolds of black slaves or workers into the Union Army in this way:

This was merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantation system.⁵⁴

But the black slave or worker had another objective: freedom. In the most lyrical chapter of his book, one that produces a poetic and historical knowledge of the conceptions of the slaves or workers of freedom from the absolute domination of slavery, DuBois attempts to produce what has been a special feature of radical black writing. He reaches for the interiority of the ordinary slave and then represents that interiority as a form of knowledge. In this part of the text, DuBois attempts to find both language and speech utterances that represent a rupture. He titles the chapter “The Coming of the Lord.” DuBois presents to us the freedom of the slaves in the poetic language of African American religious practices. He writes:

The mass of the slaves, even the more intelligent ones, and certainly the great group of field hands, were in a religious and hysterical fervor. This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. It was the Golden Dawn, after chains of a thousand years. It was everything miraculous and perfect and promising. For the first time in their life, they could travel; they could see;

they could change the dead level of their labor; they could talk to friends and sit at sundown and in the moonlight, listening and imparting wonder-tales. . . . and above all they could stand up and assert themselves. They need not fear the patrol; they need not even cringe before a white face, and touch their hats. . . . Then in addition . . . they wanted to know . . . they were consumed with the desire for schools. The uprising of the black man, and the pouring of himself into organized effort for education in those years between 1861 and 1872, was one of the marvelous occurrences of the modern world.⁵⁵

Here DuBois is describing a radical process that begins to unfold in American history, one that opens up another space for conceptions of democracy. The American Revolution established a limited, male, representative, democratic system, and, as I have made clear in the first lecture, because of racial slavery that revolution could only invest the meaning of liberty with the narrow freight of political liberty and political equality for white males.

When writing about revolution, Hannah Arendt makes two points that we might do well to remember. The first point is that “revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning.”⁵⁶ The question we should ask is, was the American Revolution a new beginning? We should ask this question in part because of Arendt’s second point: “[W]ho could deny the enormous role the social question has come to play in all revolutions?”⁵⁷ If the social was placed outside the framework of the American Revolution and the Revolution’s focus was on the political realm, then what kind of revolution was the American Revolution? This is a complex question, and I will not pretend to develop an answer in this lecture. I just wish to pose it because there were two central questions during the American Revolution: racial slavery and colonial domination. That the Revolution answered one and not the other opened up a political logic that culminated in the Civil War. Even Arendt does not see this political logic, the logic of *the politics of the wound*. She tellingly

writes that the reason for the success of the American Revolution was “that the predicament of poverty was absent from the American scene. . . . They [the revolutionaries] were not driven by want, and the revolution was not overwhelmed by them [problems of poverty]. The problem they posed was not social but political.”⁵⁸ In reference to racial slavery, Arendt states that, although there was an obvious “incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom,” the major figures of the American Revolution were indifferent toward slavery. In Arendt’s mind, this indifference was caused “by slavery rather than on any dominance of self-interest.”⁵⁹ This is of course quite a paradox, which Arendt did not face, in part because she wanted to demonstrate that the success of revolutions in general remains in the political domain and that their failures are linked to preoccupations with the social. However, for the black slaves or workers there could be no separation of the social from the political. They were not completing the American Revolution during the period of radical Reconstruction. Instead, they were opening up a political space in which democracy, freedom, and equality would have a new relationship and meaning. They were empirically engaged with the “problem of the new beginning.” They were attempting a different revolution.

Before finding a language for describing this event, DuBois tells us, in perhaps the most moving passage of *Black Reconstruction*, that: “The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on the top of these mad moorings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea,—free, free, free.”⁶⁰ What DuBois is pointing us to is this. All historically catastrophic events, while wounding, produce cries. In hearing and listening to these cries we begin to glimpse alternative possibilities in relation to the historically catastrophic event. With these glimpses, a society may begin to work through its history and construct a polity that takes account of this history. This working through concerns

not only acts of atonement and forgiveness but also enactments of radical transformation. Continuing in the language of the transmuted Hebrew Bible, DuBois tells us that with the emancipation of the slaves, “the nation was to be purged of continual sin.” The tragedy in DuBois’s mind is that this process was defeated and America continued its march onward, continuously transforming liberty into imperial freedom. So now, what was the name of the new democracy that was possible? And how does this name help us to think about American democracy?

Abolition Democracy

For DuBois the chief significance “of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy.”⁶¹ DuBois sees this relationship as one that included issues of labor, property ownership, the right to vote, and education. When describing the aftermath of the Civil War, DuBois suggests that two theories of America clashed at that time. In the epigraph to chapter 7, he writes the following: “How two theories of the future of America clashed and blended after the Civil War: the one was abolition-democracy based on freedom, intelligence and power for all men; the other was industry for private profit directed by an autocracy determined at any price to amass wealth and power.”⁶² DuBois identifies *abolition democracy* as the combination of three distinct streams in American thought and political history. One stream was the transformation of “Puritan Idealism into a theory of universal democracy . . . expressed by the Abolitionists,” along with some labor leaders of the period and those DuBois calls “leaders of the common people like Thaddeus Stephens.”⁶³ There are three elements of abolition democracy that DuBois has in mind and that define it. These are the drive to end racial slavery, the positioning of labor as a democratizing force in industrial production, and a general commitment to ordinary people and their aspirations.

This perspective on the political meaning of abolition democracy at once broadens the realms in which equality must now operate. Not only is there full procedural equality between the ex-slave, the ex-master, and the rest of the population, but this equality democratizes economic production and opens up a space for the political speech acts of the ordinary person. DuBois argues that over time abolition democracy was pushed “towards the conception of a dictatorship of labor, although few of its advocates wholly grasped the fact that this necessarily involved dictatorship by labor over capital and industry.”⁶⁴ Some critics argue that, because DuBois was obviously influenced by Marxist theory at this stage of his life and was working through it, his conception of the dictatorship of labor is ill defined, particularly since, in the chapters on South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, he depicts a black proletariat that establishes a quasi-dictatorship of labor. However, I would suggest a different possible interpretation. We know that in the 1930s, DuBois, though interested in Marxist theory, also felt that Marxism was not the full answer to the issues of racial domination and class exploitation of African Americans. In 1933, two years before the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, he had already written an article titled “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” in which he stated that although Marxism was a “true diagnosis of the situation in Europe . . . it must be modified in the United States of America and especially so far as the Negro group is concerned.”⁶⁵ In *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois attempts these modifications, forcing us to construct a set of possible new grounds for thinking about the significance of racial slavery to America and also providing us with possible language for thinking about American democracy.

It seems to me that the concept of *abolition democracy* might provide us today with the political language to move past conventional notions of the relationship of democracy to political equality. In order to probe this further, let us leave DuBois for a while and briefly review the term democracy and some of its political meanings.

Democracy

In conventional narratives about Western political thought and philosophy, the concept of democracy begins in Athens. As John Dunn has demonstrated, “from the days of Pericles to those of Demosthenes a full century later [democracy] was a system of citizen self-rule.”⁶⁶ What is important and often left out in narratives of Western democracy is that Pericles’ funeral oration, given to us by Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, was about freedom. In other words, citizen self-rule is intimately linked to a conception of freedom.⁶⁷ I think we need to be reminded of this, because over time democracy has shifted away from this relationship and has become primarily a procedure of government. If, within Western thought, Pericles offered democracy as a way of life when he declared that “freedom is typical of life in our community,” then John Dewey’s statement of 1885 that “democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association,” though it attempts to retrieve democracy as a way of life, neglects to add freedom to this mix. I would argue that over time the issues of slavery and other forms of servitude complicated democracy in Western thought, and, when it began to reappear as a demand in the seventeenth century, democracy required two things. The first was a form of equality that could be realized through a system of representative government. The second was, as Rancière claimed, that democracy became invested with the notion of a “community of equals,” a radical demand for equality. Given this history, while I generally agree with Ernesto Laclau that democracy functions as a horizon “which establishes, at one and the same time, the limits and terrain of the constitution of any possible object,”⁶⁸ it seems to me that in politics these limits are established by a series of specific actions and demands at a given historical moment. Democracy may be an empty signifier, but it is one that is filled at each moment. Thus, while there is no transhistorical meaning to the term,

it has precise meanings at specific junctures. However, our interest in this lecture is in the question of democracy and representation.

During the period of colonial modernity, the question of representation emerged in England with the Levellers and the Putney Debates. These debates, as C. L. R. James makes clear, are a rich source of ideas about the practice of a democratic politics; however, I want to focus on how the question of the relationship between representation and politics was posed. In the document “An Agreement of the People,” the Levellers stated that peace could only be established “upon the grounds of common right and freedom.”⁶⁹ Upon this freedom they propose that “the people do of course choose themselves a Parliament once in two years. . . . And that the power of this and all future representatives of this nation is inferior only to those who choose them.”⁷⁰ It is obvious that the concept of representation, as an alternative to self-rule, was influenced by the emergence of the modern state and by the idea of sovereignty and natural rights that could be representative and represented. In other words, political representation was located elsewhere, outside of common, daily life, but reflected the common community. In such a context equality divided itself up, with one element becoming political equality. Now the issue of representation in general is an interesting one. When we think about representation, we typically consider questions of culture, language, and the way in which meaning is produced. Stuart Hall argues that there are two types of systems of representation. He says that the first

enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things—people, objects, events, abstract ideas etc. . . . [and] the second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts.⁷¹

Regarding representative democracy that moves beyond a system of procedural governance, such a framework of democracy at first

blush might mean assembling a community. However, representative democracy does not organize a series of correspondences in a conceptual political field. Instead, it inserts a break, divorcing politics from action, from community, and, in the end, from equality. It does this in two ways. In the first, it reduces politics and democracy to the right of formal political equality. Secondly, it constitutes the processes of representation within the symbolic world of institutions (what Cornelius Castoriadis calls the second-order symbolic network) as an empty sign. This empty sign, however, has the capacity to do work because at the level of politics its language is about a relationship and an expression of the social, while that language simultaneously obscures the social. Thus the work of representation in liberal representative democracy is to confirm a series of slippages that make democracy a gap. Inside that gap, there is no political speech-act of the many. In American democracy, this gap is filled by a series of representations that have operated after the 1960s civil rights movement within a narrative of inclusion.

Any serious reading of what has been called the civil rights movement of mid-twentieth-century America indicates that this movement was multilayered and that different political currents existed within it. One current demanded a version of rights that went beyond political and civil rights and sought a complete overhauling of American society. This current, represented by the ideas and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., in his later years and by the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Ella Baker, was a drive for freedom. At its core was a conception of freedom that bundled together all rights, along with a desire to find a new basis for living in what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the “beloved community.” There was also another current, which focused its energies on inclusion and representation. Simply put, there have always been different currents in African American political thought and life, including those who advocated integration with the system and those who felt, in the words of Ella Baker, that “by and large [the movement] had a destined date with freedom . . . not limited to

a desire for personal freedom or even freedom for the Negro in the South. It was repeatedly emphasized that the movement was concerned with *the moral implications of racial discrimination for the whole world and the human race*⁷² (emphasis mine).

What is the importance of this to the issues we began with, historical trauma, race, and democracy? For those individuals and groups for whom integration was the primary objective and goal, representation became the crucial move. However, to enter into the “political kingdom” in this way required forgetting the historical wrong or developing a narrative of the historical wrong as a past event. Thus, representation as integration required establishing the historical wrong as a narrative of historical significance but one with little contemporary meaning for politics and democracy. In this universe, black representation becomes a way to forget the historical wrong. Such forms of representation (that is, of representation as only integration) remove themselves from the cries of the wound, because from this perspective the wound has been healed or is healing. In such a context American democracy continues to neglect its founding historical wrong as well as the consequences of that wrong.



So what is or can be the relationship between democracy and a historical wrong? I will offer only the following thoughts. In the first place, we know that one requirement of politics is speech. For American democracy to be transformed, one central element of speech must be the full recognition of the historical wrong of the nation’s founding, not as an aberration but as an event constitutive of the inaugural event itself. Thus the historical wrong is not an event that can be discarded or placed in a memory box and then erased. Speaking of this historical wrong raises issues of freedom and equality. And here the question is, how does one constitute a community of equals? At this point, we have to reengage with the ethos and practices that pervade *Black Reconstruction* rather than those of

Democracy in America. There is a radical equality in *Black Reconstruction* that is missing from *Democracy in America*, not only because of the latter's racial silences and assumptions of a racial hierarchy among humans, but because the equality of Tocqueville is not one that is worked through daily, which is invented and reinvented and which then encompasses the social. One may ask, on what grounds can such an equality, one that is beyond political equality and that takes into account the social, be built? My suggestion is a simple one. It can only be built on the common ground that we are all human. But for the community to hold in common the fact that we are all human as a principle of fraternity and solidarity and therefore as the basis of politics, we will have to return to the cries of "free, free, free," that DuBois writes so poetically about. Jacques Rancière argues that democracy is neither a "compromise between interests nor the formation of a common will."⁷³ Democracy is about dialogue, he argues, but dialogue must be heard to be effective, and to be heard it must be a dialogue of equals. If radical politics begins with the demand of "the part of no part," then transforming American democracy requires working through the politics of the wound of racial slavery and racial domination, not as a historical memory but as a present past, while taking heed of what the cries of freedom may mean for any project of human emancipation. In the end, the current form of American democracy is integral to the domestic political guise of the empire of liberty. Standing on the platform of the cries of freedom, we begin not to create liberty trees but to construct ways of life that make us human.