

Democracy and Faith: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Redemption in American Political Thought

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Project Abstract & Proposal

Democracy and Faith investigates the sustained commitment by African-Americans and women to the American polity amid exclusion in the 19th and 20th century through a number of key figures. It uses the philosophical and political category of “the people” understood as a *not yet realized ideal*, and argues that this category served as the space in which women and blacks sought to transform their fellows. In occupying this space they relied on *rhetoric* (i.e., as a tool for transformation) and appealed to the *sentiments* (i.e., the affective sensory capacity of humans to which rhetoric was directed). The moral is that since women and blacks did not know if or when their grievances would be answered, their actions were inescapably tied to uncertainty and so demanded faith. Faith thus encouraged self-assertion and so affirmed agency, but agency was circumscribed by humility about political outcomes and so disrupted the sense of America as a “chosen” nation. The book thus deepens our understanding of the dynamics of democratic transformation from the perspective of political theory, while simultaneously holding at bay an “exceptionalist” view of America’s moral development that continues to occupy studies in intellectual history and American studies.

How were women and African-Americans able to invoke the language of “the people,” even as they were consistently identified as standing outside the boundaries of the political and affective concerns of the nation? How, for example, do we make sense of individuals like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., or James Baldwin who so often occupied this space of belonging to and being alienated from “the people” they so diligently sought to transform? What did their orientation toward political life and their fellows mean for their understanding of democracy?

My current book project critically explores and uncovers the answer to these questions within the tradition of American political thought. Despite the ubiquity of philosophical thinking about democratic legitimacy and the concept of “the people” that is so central to it, these questions remain unsettled. This is because our current philosophical vocabulary is inadequate to capture how Americans thought about democracy amid persistent exclusion along racial and gender lines. It becomes all too clear when surveying the literature that political theorists often preclude the elements essential to America’s transformation—namely, the reliance on rhetoric and the sentiments—given the emotionally constrained view of deliberation they advance.¹ Or they simply reduce democracy to a set of institutions without thinking that it was precisely those arrangements that required transformation and so could not serve as a safe haven for political actors.² In another view, democracy is an adversarial domain, where groups swap lacerations, without any hope of healing them.³ As a result, many of those who comprise the rich tradition

¹ E.g., Jurgen Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action; Between Facts and Norms; Joshua Cohen, “Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy”; “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy.”

² E.g., Robert Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory; Democracy and Its Critics; Giuseppe Di Palma, To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions; Adam Przeworski, Democracy and the Market.

³ E.g., Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox; The Return of the Political.

of American political thought are excluded by virtue of the conceptual vocabulary currently at work. If we are to understand democracy more clearly than we do—both the vision of agency it presupposes and the humility it demands—we need to recover this tradition.

In *Democracy and Faith: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Redemption in American Political Thought*, I seek to settle the questions above and so deepen our understanding of democratic thinking. By turning to the tradition of American political thought what emerges is a very sophisticated view in which faith becomes a central component of democratic action. This means that in political life there will often be cases where citizens must run ahead of evidence that is otherwise needed to justify their sustained commitment to the polity. Faith thus involves a complicated phenomenology when tied to democracy. For as William James remarked: “Faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance.” Historically, this view encouraged self-assertion and so affirmed agency. But in contrast to the historiography,⁴ many political actors’ sense of agency was circumscribed by humility about political outcomes and so disrupted the sense of America as a “chosen” nation. Since those who occupied a position of exclusion could never know if or when their claims would be answered, their attempt to transform the citizenry was tied to uncertainty.

This interpretation of faith, I argue, only comes into view because of a conceptual understanding of “the people” that has classical Roman roots and achieved prominence in 18th century America, and was exploited in the 19th and 20th century by women, African-Americans, and those who defended their place in the polity. “The people” was a *not yet realized ideal* and this view was often invoked throughout the political history of America. This concept lends the project relevance given its historical and contemporary importance, but also provides the

⁴ E.g., Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*; David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*; John P. Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*; Patrick Deneen, *Democratic Faith*.

unifying theme. “The people” did not simply refer to a distinct population with rights and privileges of citizenship; it was also an aspirational category to which citizens had recourse to legitimize or delegitimize political action exercised over them, and often in their name. The invocation of the sovereignty of “the people” meant that there was never an uncontestable line that tied political power to those who employed it. Indeed, the sovereignty of “the people” captured both unity and difference and retained internal coherence for decision making, but was also susceptible to critical examination by actors not fully absorbed into the polity. In this way, then, the idea was not simply employed, as Edmund Morgan suggests, by elites seeking to claim power for themselves.⁵ While I do not deny this reading, we should also recognize that the invocation of “the people” by women and blacks involved a recovery of democracy’s latent “rebelliousness” that was (and remains) the source of its radical character.⁶ And as a result America was, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s language, the “imagined community,” where new political creations were possible.⁷

It is this description of “the people” that unites, albeit controversially, thinkers as diverse as Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Lincoln, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, William James, John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and James Baldwin. For them the voice and character of “the people” in a democracy was not settled once and for all and could not be if democracy was to retain legitimacy. Jefferson in particular

⁵ Edmund Morgan, Inventing the People, pp. 49-50.

⁶ There are a number of scholars who have done interesting work on the concept of “the people” from which I have learned a great deal (e.g. Morgan, Inventing the People; Bernard Yack, “The Myth of the Civic Nation”; Rogers Smith, The Stories of Peoplehood; Danielle S. Allen, Talking to Strangers; Margret Canovan, The People). Still, while useful in drawing our attention to this important concept, none of these thinkers discusses the kind of political deployment of “the people” in American political thought that I explore nor do they track its role in the struggle by women and African-Americans for inclusion into the polity.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism; cf. Christopher Looby, Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States.

provided the vocabulary that was subsequently exploited by women and blacks to overturn the vision of a politically homogenous society he envisioned. This view thus held out the *possibility* that one's sacrifices can, at some future time, be redeemed. On my reading, the appeal to "the people" thus encouraged a species of what Stanley Cavell calls *perfectionism*; these thinkers constantly pushed and prodded America, by virtue of the projections of life they called it to embody, to reimagine its self-understanding.⁸ Hence their deployment of themes otherwise central to republicanism—i.e., the focus on virtue, the epistemic development of citizens, and the importance of character—rather than an *exclusive* reliance on theorizing liberalism, which emphasized rights, juridical enforcement, and voting as the primary means for understanding political life. Of course the latter was important, but it was limited without a wider ethos of democratic citizenship to guide and ennoble liberal commitments.

Like my earlier research on Dewey, this project focuses on the characterological vision of the democratic self. This project, however, does so from a more general concern within American political thought and pays more careful attention to faith as a transformative category of political action. This characterological vision entails an *ethos* of how citizens ought to orient themselves toward political power and those with whom they share the political world. This vision becomes the basis for contestation about what kind of people Americans ought to be and what virtues are needed to occupy that way of being.

For these thinkers, because it was always uncertain whether sacrifices would be redeemed, an important question emerged regarding how and by what means the citizenry would be politically and morally improved. In addressing this issue, *rhetoric* emerged as an important

⁸ I do not deny that there were other—narrower—ways of configuring the people that were backward-looking. John C. Calhoun, for example, also invoked "the people," but only as a way to limit the orbit of affective and political concern. The aim, as far as my project is concerned, is to focus on the more expansive conception of "the people" in order to answer the questions that frame both this proposal and the book.

form of political education along with the *sentiments* in awakening the citizenry to the demands of the moral life. The use of rhetoric forced the following questions: Who among us will be more persuasive and capture the hearts and minds of the citizenry? Who among us will push or shame the citizenry into a position of moral rectitude? And the turn to the sentiments underscored that the possibility of affecting the moral sense—i.e., defining its contours and refining its use—was essential to political enlightenment. To borrow Gordon Wood’s language, the sentiments were seen as the “hidden forces in the moral world that moved and held people together.”⁹ But this was not simply confined to a few post-revolutionary decades—the periods between 1760 and 1820 with which Wood’s is concerned—but extended well beyond it. As a result, those who argued for the importance of the sentiments (e.g., Jefferson and the pragmatists), and those who appealed to it (e.g., Emerson, Stanton, Du Bois, and King) did so to transport and hopefully transform readers and listeners and expand the orbit of affective and political concern.

Consistent with the Scottish moral sense tradition, the idea was that one could come to sympathize—that is, to look on a scene and feel appropriately regarding the exclusion of others—a feeling that would subsequently serve as the basis for action. But unlike that tradition, in the American case this was employed to theorize the boundaries of the polity; Americans grappled specifically with the social and moral psychology relating to gender and racial exclusion and this underscored the possibilities and limitations of the sentiments. So while the Scottish Enlightenment reaffirmed the role of the passions in the study of human knowledge that was far less rationalistic and mechanical, it was to later American thinkers to test and explore the transformative character of the sentiments in a society deeply divide by race and gender

⁹ Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, p. 218.

exclusion. This is not to suggest that all were in agreement about the status of the moral sense. Was it a fundamental aspect of human nature as Jefferson and Emerson believed, and Du Bois implied? Or, was it better seen as something to be constructed as James and Dewey seemingly argued? Notwithstanding their position on this matter, all were in agreement that the mere presence of the moral sense did not necessarily imply an appropriate deployment of it. And this raised the issue of moral education, in which all these thinkers participated, and demanded meditation on the appropriate vehicle with which to impart it. If the vision of “the people” created the space for faith, then rhetoric and the sentiments served as the *possible* means to fulfill faith’s aim.

Although the turn to rhetoric and the sentiments is undergoing a revival, studies in moral and political theory typically confine their accounts to contemporary debates,¹⁰ while accounts in intellectual history and literature pay too little attention to the thinkers addressed here or the conception of “the people” essential to their thinking and democracy more broadly.¹¹ My project moves beyond current accounts by providing a historically informed philosophical framework in which rhetoric and the sentiments achieved primacy. More precisely it recovers rhetoric and the sentiments as key elements in America’s moral transformation regarding the status of blacks and women in the polity.

Part I—“Faith in the People”—pieces of which are currently in progress—is comprised of four chapters. In chapters on Jefferson, Emerson, Lincoln, and finally pragmatists James, Dewey, and Niebuhr, I tease out the perfectionist orientation that informed their view of

¹⁰ E.g., Allen, Talking to Strangers; Martha Nussbaum, The Upheavals of Thought; Cheryl Hall, The Trouble With Passion; Sharon Krause, Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation.

¹¹ E.g., Julia Stern, The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in Early American Novel; Elizabeth Barnes, States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel; Andrew Burstein, Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image; Kimberly Smith, Dominion of Voice; Bryan Garsten, Saving Persuasion.

democracy and the role accorded rhetoric and the sentiments. In each case, what emerges is the idea of “the people” as a fluid signifier that initially orients Jefferson’s democratic vision in the late 1760s through the 1790s and points to the importance he attached to the moral sense, but which nonetheless served as the basis for subsequent expansion on who counts as a member of the polity. This view of the people, however, did not emerge seamlessly, for it was always coextensive, I argue, with the tragic possibility that the citizenry would remain untransformed. This produced unresolved ambivalence about democracy in someone like Emerson, especially in his anti-slavery writings, and about the use to which the sentiments could be put in transforming America. In others like Lincoln and the pragmatists it produced a disquieting sense that democracy could never be fully actualized and thus demanded an acceptance of tragedy amid human effort to defy it. Indeed, they accepted more consistently than Emerson did the fact that in a democracy citizens are both *actors* who attempt to tame the uncertainty embodied in those with whom they share the political world, and *subjects* who cannot escape being politically vulnerable to their fellows. This led to a rhetorical transvaluation of the Declaration that defined Lincoln’s progressive jeremiad, and a political faith that informed and united James, Dewey, and Niebuhr in their understanding of democracy. But all dispensed with the aura of certainty that dominated the sense of America as a “chosen” nation. Hence Lincoln’s remark in 1861 that America was God’s “almost chosen people” and Dewey’s claim in 1939 that democracy was always a “task before us.” They at once asserted human agency, but rejected the promise that our agency would bear fruit. Indeed, they embraced the looming vulnerability at the core of political life.

Part II—“The Necessity of Sacrifice and the Politics of Redemption”—consists of three chapters. First, I maintain that the sacrifices Stanton, Du Bois, King, and Baldwin argued that

women and African-Americans made to the polity and their faith in redeeming those sacrifices always presupposed the description of “the people” as a fluid signifier as discussed in Part I—it denoted both their agency and their vulnerability. Sacrifice was a prerequisite for restoring the fractured relationships at the core of the polity, but also denoted a knowledge deficit in which political action emerged and was therefore constitutively tied to faith. Second, I probe the attention to rhetoric that informed these thinkers’ orientation to democracy and their respective appeal to the emotions of their readers and listeners that connects them to Jefferson and Emerson. The appeal to the emotions of their fellow humans, I argue, becomes the mechanism by which these thinkers sought to close (although not completely) the gap between agency and vulnerability. It symbolized their belief in “the people” as a not yet realized ideal, but which might nonetheless be actualized through emotional appeals grounded in spoken and written word. Finally, I point to a disjuncture that emerges between Du Bois’ pessimistic political outlook that was more consistent with Emerson (despite their differences), and Stanton, King, and Baldwin who accepted a more chastened view that experientially extended the position of Lincoln and the pragmatists. Still, despite this difference I contend that all these thinkers grappled with, rather than denied the fact that democracy tied humans to uncertainty.

I admit that the project is ambitious—both the historical, philosophical, and literary fields it must engage, and the framing that will necessarily implicate me in conversations over the role and intentions of the thinkers discussed throughout. Jefferson, for example, appears to be an odd choice with which to begin our story given his belief that men would serve as the appropriate political proxies for women and his aversion to a bi- or multiracial republic. And yet it was precisely his theory of democratic legitimacy that provided the radical framework to supplant the positions that he and others ultimately advanced. One might wonder about the tight connections

drawn between Emerson and Du Bois. And yet both struggled in similar ways, especially on the issue of racial subordination and exclusion, with the materialist and idealist dimensions at the core of human existence and whether they could be reconciled in a democratic society. Others might see the connections as defying our historical imagination—Lincoln, Niebuhr, King, and Baldwin may well embrace humility, but this could not be said, some might argue, of Jefferson, Emerson, Stanton, Du Bois, and Dewey. For the latter (or so the story goes) would encourage us to assert ourselves, and to see our development as without end and the future without boundaries. But those who comprise this tradition were far more sophisticated than this divide suggests; they affirmed agency, but did so with a clear sense of the horizon of contingency from which agency proceeded and to which the fruits of agency had to return. They agreed with Niebuhr, that an “optimism which depends on the hope of the complete realization of our highest ideals in history is bound to suffer ultimate disillusionment.” The question at hand was the following: What character was needed for Americans to claim that they were up to the task? When Stanton, Du Bois, King, and Baldwin subjected themselves to public scrutiny and encouraged women and African-Americans to do the same, they did so with the hopes of answering that question. It placed them in a position where they courted adverse consequences from which they could not finally be relieved, and in which they could only see themselves through with faith.

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