
The Significance Of The Study Of Black Political Thought In The Modern Day

For many, the idea of studying black political thought as its own subject is redundant and unnecessary, as it should be encompassed somewhere in the grand scheme of all history in the United States. There is no need, some argue, to learn the nuances of black political history and its implications in the modern day because American history all falls beneath one large, all-inclusive umbrella. This belief, however, is misguided and dismisses the importance of utilizing black political thought to interpret and explain modern-day phenomena that simply cannot be understood just by studying history in a general sense.

To understand and solve existing problems in the modern world, we must first explore and address the historical roots of these problems, which requires a degree of specificity only guaranteed by centralized study. Studying the works of enslaved blacks, as well as works that detail the changes in political structures in black communities following emancipation, is necessary in order to give context to general political phenomena in the United States, evaluate and address the degradation of the black familial structure over the last two centuries, and understand how previous ideals of true womanhood affect the treatment and perception of black women in the modern day. To study history without specifically addressing how black political thought has shaped certain ideals and political structures within the United States leaves us without the ability to develop an accurate picture of how modern political institutions, such as democratic participation and the involvement of women in politics, came to be.

For example, the study of fugitivity as it relates to slavery/segregation has provided an enhanced understanding of the view of democracy in the United States. Sheldon Wolin in his book *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays* defined democracy as a process that requires constant renewal and is of a rare and episodic nature, only risky during necessary periods of revolution. It was only through analysis using a black, political lens that Juliet Hooker challenged this long-accepted viewpoint in *Theorizing Race in the Americas*. She elaborated on the concept of fugitivity and determined that Wolin's analysis neglected to consider the role of black fugitivity in democracy, and how for black fugitives, practicing democracy was not something that was only risky when it called for renewal. Democracy was risky on a constant and enduring basis, as blacks even after the end of slavery remained fugitives under the laws of segregation and Jim Crow. This contextualization and challenge of Wolin's viewpoint is significant in the larger picture of history because it helps to explain why various communities have differing perspectives on democracy, and how this affects their political participation or lack thereof.

According to data collected by the United States Department of Commerce, the percentage of black voters from 1980-2016 has consistently fallen significantly below white voters with the only exception being 2012, when Barack Obama was reelected. This statistic, and the exception, is in line with perceived risks for black Americans when participating in democratic activity; because black Americans felt more confidence due to a reduction of perceived risk during the 2012 election, they felt compelled to participate in the democratic process despite having to face the usual barriers to participation such as difficulty registering or limited access to voting stations. This feeling of confidence came from the ability to mobilize in a large group in support of a strong black leader while feeling confident that the concerns of the black community would

be addressed. Another modern change that cannot be understood without the lens of black political thought and action is the allowance of women in the political arena. Elsa Barkeley Brown elaborates on the culture of political participation following emancipation in black churches in her essay *Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom*. She describes a culture of all-inclusive political participation in black churches that included men, women, and children that long preceded the inclusion of white women in the white political sphere.

Although this inclusion was short-lived and eventually resulted in a return to gendered separation of politics, this challenges the notion that white suffragettes were among the first women in American politics to truly challenge gendered political institutions in the United States. The significance of this understanding of black women as setting the stage for women in politics is that it develops an accurate depiction of history that gives credit where it is due to groups who are often dismissed and forgotten. To view the advancement of American political thoughts and processes through the study of black political thought gives us not only better context surrounding these ideological changes but also provides us with a more accurate view of how modern political discourse and practices have been shaped by the past. The degradation of the nuclear familial structure in black families is another modern phenomenon that requires the dissection of black political thought and processes throughout history.

According to a study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the percentage of black children living in single-parent households in 2016 was a staggering 66%, compared to 24% among whites and a 35% average among all races. The only way to address and alleviate this modern problem is to analyze its roots, and we find these to be especially evident in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs describes several aspects of slave family life that are the exact opposite of what one might consider a normal nuclear family: the commonality with which slave masters pursued and impregnated their female slaves, how she was forbidden from developing a relationship with a free colored man, and how the illegitimate children born to female slaves were often sold off to other slaveowners, to name a few. This constant state of distress forced upon the black family unit was not alleviated post-Reconstruction, as Elsa Barkley Brown also discusses in *Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom*. Immediately following emancipation, black churches were public spheres that included men, women, and children of varying socioeconomic statuses, degrees of literacy, and ages. Community events such as graduations, sermons, and the election of local political representatives, were held in church buildings that could house large groups of people. When increased efforts of exclusion by white Republicans began to put pressure on leaders in the black community, churches quickly became gendered and classist institutions that ceased to serve the community at large as they once had. Following the damage done to the family unit during the period of slavery, the act of the church essentially closing its doors further left the typical black family without a cohesive sphere to practice family values. These practices were reserved for the middle-class black family with high levels of literacy and political involvement and left the average black family without communal support that can serve the purpose of strengthening and reinforcing familial bonds. The repercussions of this reverberate through the modern black family and have caused significant gaps in nuclear family life, as aforementioned. Finally, an issue that requires the study of black political thought and post-emancipation black life is the perception and treatment of black women in the modern day.

In *The Legacy of Slavery*, Angela Davis discusses how black women were treated as

abnormalities of the 19th century ideology of the ideal woman, and could never truly be viewed as ideal by the standards of the cult of true womanhood as defined by Barbara Welter in 1966. Black women had a unique relationship with men, both white and black. Slave women were exploited like black men for physical labor and yet punished like women by white slaveowners who utilized sexual assault and blackmail. Harriet Jacobs also discusses this phenomenon and expands on how black women were not only considered subordinate to men, but they were also considered subordinate to white women and treated as such, as evidenced by Mrs. Flint's treatment of Jacobs. While the black man could at least justify his existence through associating with qualities valued in white men (masculinity, being outspoken, physical strength over emotion), the black woman could not fit in anywhere—not with black men or with white women. This treatment of black women as outsiders of their own gender or race has had lasting consequences.

In the contemporary feminist movement, black women are often still excluded from the narrative due to a lack of specific understanding as to how women's issues affect women of color differently than white women, leading to the development of what many black women refer to as "white feminism." The study of black political thought and history in relation to perceptions of black women is necessary in order to better understand and achieve equality for black women who are subjected to injustices at a higher rate than white women can relate to.

For example, in a CDC study that tracked the number of female homicide victims among different racial groups from 2003-2014, it was found that black women and American-Indian women ranked highest, with 4.4 and 4.3 homicides per 100,000 respectively. Only through studying and understanding the roots of such violence and treatment can awareness and a solution about the violence that continues to plague black female life be achieved. To solve modern-day problems, we often look to the past for explanations of how they came to be. Through gaining an understanding of the root causes of issues that continue to plague the black community and Americans at large, progress can be achieved. Black political thought and history during slavery and post-Emancipation provides context for existing problems in the modern world, such as the perception and treatment of black women and the collapse of the black family structure, while also allowing us to have an accurate account of history. It is not possible to address these issues without a history that is not only factual, but also gives credit where it is due to historically-marginalized groups.