The Quest for Racial Change: African American Intellectuals and the Black Liberal Tradition

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Abstract
In his influential book Stride toward Freedom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that the United States had displayed "a schizophrenic personality on the question of race." In making this statement, he linked the double consciousness that black people experienced on a daily basis to the broader American body politic. The United States, King wrote, "has been torn between two selves: a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy." This bipolarity had plagued the United States since the birth of the Republic. King recognized in the civil rights movement, and in the federal government's and some white people's responses to it, the awakening of America to its finest and democratic self. For many blacks, the willingness of the Supreme Court to begin dismantling Jim Crow, the readiness of the Congress to debate new civil rights legislation, and the ability of local governments to address civil rights issues represented the coming victory of black liberal reform over American racism.

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In his influential book *Stride toward Freedom*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that the United States had displayed "a schizophrenic personality on the question of race." In making this statement, he linked the double consciousness that black people experienced on a daily basis to the broader American body politic. The United States, King wrote, "has been torn between two selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy." This bipolarity had plagued the United States since the birth of the Republic. King recognized in the civil rights movement, and in the federal government's and some white people's responses to it, the awakening of America to its finest and democratic self. For many blacks, the willingness of the Supreme Court to begin dismantling Jim Crow, the readiness of the Congress to debate new civil rights legislation, and the ability of local governments to address civil rights issues represented the coming victory of black liberal reform over American racism.

Dr. King's description of the United States, and his belief in local, state, and national governmental institutions to bring about racial change, spoke to generations of black liberals. While his words and ideas made sense to black liberals, and especially African American intellectuals, other Americans fundamentally misunderstood his elucidation of the black liberal tradition. Too often, black liberalism was lumped with white liberalism, distorting the differences between the two. Scholars and laypeople continue to misconstrue black liberalism today. African American intellectual thought has traditionally been viewed as either conservative or liberal, nationalistic or
integrationist. Such binaries obscure a great deal about what black liberalism entails. Black liberalism remains in many ways distinct and apart from its white liberal cousin.

This chapter offers an overview of the history of the African American intellectual liberal tradition in the United States. I define black liberalism as a belief system based on conceptions of American democracy, equality, and capitalism designed to bring African American structural incorporation into US society. Black liberals, generally speaking, believe in the power and integrity of the Constitution, the role of government in bringing about reform, and the power of black activism to eradicate racism. For black intellectual liberals—those individuals who attained advanced degrees and pursued an academic or scholarly life—and for liberals more generally, racism, segregation, and discrimination ran counter to American democratic traditions. To overcome these obstacles black liberals argued for something broader than integration or equality: they argued for racial change. If black intellectual liberals had a single goal, racial change was it. That term, like black liberalism itself, encapsulated a host of ideas and assumptions. Most important, racial change symbolized a transformation of black and white society. For black intellectuals, it connoted an elevation of African American status in the United States, the opening of American education and the workforce, access to quality jobs and affordable homes, and social integration, among other things. For whites, racial change meant the acknowledgment of the roles and accomplishments of black people throughout American history, the discarding of racial prejudices and stereotypes, and the recognition of blacks as the equals of whites. For both, it represented improved race relations, open communication, and cooperation.

**EARLY BLACK LIBERALISM**

Black intellectual leaders concentrated primarily on scholarship and philosophical thought to counter and correct the racist and stereotypical opinions white people had about blacks. For intellectuals, research and scholarly activism provided the best means for changing the white mind. This intellectual tradition stretches back to the nineteenth century. For example, abolitionist and intellectual James W. C. Pennington understood that in order for both blacks and whites to understand the black past, someone had to write an accurate history. Pennington was born a slave but escaped to the North, where he experienced a world as deeply racist as the one he had recently
left. Much of this racism was muddled by a poor understanding of history. Whites tended to view blacks as trapped in some kind of historical time warp—a forever backward, uncivilized, and tribal people. Pennington hoped to argue against this viewpoint. He took classes at Yale University (the first black person to do so) and eventually published the first historical text on people of African descent.

Pennington's *A Text Book on the Origin and History, of the Colored People* actually went far beyond a standard history of black people. He began his study of the black experience with African kingdoms, arguing that the ancient Kemetic and Kushite civilizations had far exceeded European standards of “civilization.” He further asserted that Africa was the root of European civilization, not vice versa. Unlike Afrocentrist scholars who tended to concentrate solely on ancient Egypt, Pennington also examined Africa's west coast, the region from which most black slaves in the Western Hemisphere originated. Pennington hoped to turn much of America's historical understanding of black people on its head. His goal in doing so was twofold: uplift the historical image of American blacks and diminish white perceptions of their own grandiose history. But *A Text Book on the Origin and History, of the Colored People* was more than just an account of early black history. It was also a historical ethnology of race and blackness. He evaluated the biblical and historical “branches” of humanity, ultimately concluding that race had made no difference in the evolution of the human species and that blackness, therefore, did not connote deficiency when compared to whiteness. Rather, the two were equal and the same. Thus Pennington concluded that race was a socially constructed category that had no basis in history or biology.4

James Pennington also published an important slave narrative about his experiences entitled *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington*. His account remains important because it involves more than just a recollection of his experiences as a slave. As he did in *A Text Book on the Origin and History, of the Colored People*, Pennington went beyond a simple narrative retelling to include analysis of the master-slave relationship, of social relations among the slaves, and of slave culture. As did other escaped slaves who offered narratives of their bondage and escape, Pennington concentrated on the brutality and immorality of slavery. In so doing, he castigated whites who condoned slavery, saw it as beneficial for blacks, or sanctioned it due to the perceived inferiority of black people. In his telling, black slaves come off as superior to whites for withstanding the horrors of southern slave life. This was a necessary corrective for many of the common misconceptions about slavery.5
Like Pennington, Ida B. Wells saw the potential of sound scholarship and intellectual liberalism to right wrongs. Wells firmly believed in the power of the Constitution and American democracy to eradicate social and racial ills, but her detailed study would expose problems in black society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there proved no greater social threat to black life than lynching. African Americans had experienced death at the hands of lynch mobs since before the founding of the Republic, but in the post–Civil War era, white people came to use lynching as a method of keeping blacks in their place. Whites meted out lynch “justice” primarily against black men for alleged sexual violations, most often false claims of rape made by white women. Below this veneer of chivalry, however, lay a deeper truth. Whites did not lynch blacks for sexual crimes; they lynched black people for standing up for their civil rights, for becoming successful business people, for getting a good education, and for voting.  

Wells had firsthand experience with lynch “justice” in Memphis. In 1891, a white mob lynched three of her good friends. They were three black men who ran a successful grocery store that took business away from a local white-owned store. The local press implied that they had harassed and possibly had sexual relations with several white women. Wells knew the allegation of sexual impropriety was false. More important, she understood that such accusations removed blame from the white store owners and hid the more mundane, profit-oriented reasons for the lynching. Wells traveled abroad to speak about the horror of lynching and published accounts of the deaths—including those of her three friends—in works such as *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892) and *The Red Record* (1895). In these texts, Wells forcefully articulated an intellectual vision regarding how the government could work to end lynching.

In *The Red Record*, Wells asserted that black people “demand a fair trial by law for those accused of a crime, and punishment by law after honest conviction.” In short, she wanted to see the law exercised freely and equally for black and white Americans. Wells went further, however. In explaining what she hoped would be “the remedy” for lynching, she encouraged her readers to call upon state and federal representatives to pass laws making lynch justice illegal. “Congressman [Henry W.] Blair offered a resolution in the House of Representatives, August, 1894,” Wells wrote. “[T]he organized life of the country can speedily make this a law by sending resolutions to Congress indorsing Mr. Blair’s bill…. In no better way can the question be settled.” Here, Wells uttered what became a mantra for her and other black
liberals; the use of scholarship to push federal laws that would help secure rights and destroy lynching.

The congressional campaign against lynching, one inspired by Ida B. Wells, continued for the next several decades. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which Wells helped found, made antilynching one of its most important aims. Like Wells, many of the leaders of the NAACP considered themselves political and intellectual liberals. NAACP leaders regularly published accounts of lynching in their influential magazine *The Crisis*. In 1916 the organization founded its Antilynching Committee to develop a legislative agenda and appeal to sympathetic members of the Congress to pass laws that would end lynching. The debate over antilynching legislation continued until the 1950s. Bills similar to Blair's appeared with some frequency, but none ever passed. Still, it is fair to say that the NAACP's efforts, and those of intellectual black liberals like Ida Wells, caused a significant decline in the number of black people murdered at the hands of lynching mobs.

The NAACP became the organization most associated with black activism and liberalism in the twentieth century. The group concentrated not only on lynching, but also on eradicating obstacles to the franchise; destroying housing, school, and social segregation; and providing minorities better job opportunities. When the NAACP was founded in 1909 it had only one black member, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, the most important black intellectual of the early twentieth century. Du Bois served as the NAACP's director of publicity and research and edited *The Crisis*. While his leadership style overall might best be described as black nationalistic, his scholarship clearly reflected the liberal intellectual paradigm of leadership. Du Bois was born and raised in Massachusetts, attended Fisk University, and completed a PhD at Harvard University in history in 1895, the first black person to do so. Du Bois soon embarked on a career of letters, settling first at the University of Pennsylvania and then moving on to Atlanta University. Like other black liberals, he hoped to bring about racial change through his scholarship and scholar activism. His most profound works pushing such an agenda in the early twentieth century were *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Negro Artisan*.

*The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899 and distributed in 1900, was one of the first sociological studies of black people in a major American city. Philadelphia's black population totaled nearly forty thousand at the time, was historically poor, and was segregated into a small ghetto in the city's seventh ward. Most white Americans viewed blacks as ghettoized because of race:
black people were racially inferior, and that inferiority manifested itself in cities in the form of poor, overcrowded, and dilapidated black communities. As Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis noted, Du Bois felt "the world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. He would teach it to think right." In Philadelphia, he concluded that poverty, crime, despair, and living conditions did not derive from race, but rather from the racism blacks experienced. Whites forced blacks to live in the seventh ward. The city spent less on the education of blacks than whites. Social services were nonexistent. Black men and women found themselves denied a higher education, excluded from high-paying jobs, and as a result burdened by poverty. As Du Bois noted, the difference between blacks and other Americans was "the ancestors of the English and the Irish and the Italians were felt to be worth educating, helping[,] and guiding because they were men and brothers, while in America a census which gives a slight indication of the utter disappearance of the American Negro from the earth is greeted with ill-concealed delight." Racism infected the United States, rendering white people incapable of seeing the real causes of black social inequalities.

Du Bois went in a different direction with The Negro Artisan. Instead of looking at a city, he chose to examine a particular class of people. He surveyed thirteen hundred skilled craftsmen, as well as a host of other data, to create an impressive picture of race and race relations in labor. Once again, he sought to challenge prevailing, racist viewpoints that argued that blacks could not excel at skilled trades because they were inferior. He showed instead that racism kept blacks out of trade schools, out of unions, and hence seemingly out of the skilled trades. But Du Bois also discovered a great number of black skilled craftsmen, noting that while organized labor generally excluded African Americans, there were more than forty thousand unionized blacks. Moreover, blacks often worked as skilled craftsmen below the radar of many white people, operating in segregated communities where only black people knew or saw them. Du Bois, as such, concluded simply, "The Negro evinces considerable mechanical ingenuity." And there it was—the use of scholarship to specifically refute American racism and prejudicial perceptions about black people.

Du Bois's scholarship at the turn of the century was important, as was his scholarship after he left academia, especially his monumental Black Reconstruction in America and his work as editor of The Crisis. Indeed, his editorship of The Crisis allowed him to continue his intellectual pursuit of racial change in a venue that gave him a considerably wider audience than his other publications generated. In 1915, for instance, he discussed how The
Crisis advanced research on black people that, like his The Philadelphia Negro and The Negro Artisan, challenged American racism. Above all, The Crisis gave Du Bois and the NAACP “publicity . . . to carry on the propaganda for equal rights in the United States and, to a degree, to inform, guide and entertain thousands of readers.”

The following year, Du Bois added what came to be a regular feature of The Crisis: criticism of scholarly works that denigrated black people. In the January 1916 edition, for example, Du Bois took aim at John Todd, who had recently published an account of southern cotton agriculture that regurgitated standard notions of black “laziness” and “immorality” popular at the time. Du Bois sharply rebuked Todd, asserting sarcastically that such “laziness’ had succeeded in raising the rate of wages and the standard of living of black men” and wished that Todd would “soon get ‘lazy’ enough to raise his wage to some dim resemblance of decency.”

Where W. E. B. Du Bois chose to focus on sociological studies of distinct communities, Alaine LeRoy Locke explored the world of black artistic contributions. Locke was one of the leading intellectual figures of the early twentieth century. He became the first African American Rhodes Scholar, and he earned a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1918. Locke’s doctoral dissertation demonstrated a keen intellect, one able to analyze concepts beyond traditional academic disciplines. In “The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Value,” he critically analyzed the developing field of value theory and the classification of values by human beings. Locke argued that understanding values was not the first step in value classification. Instead, philosophers had to discern what values were important, why they were important, and how they impacted human emotions. More importantly, he questioned whether human beings shaped the theory of value or if such developing theorems shaped people. Values, like opinions or biases, were malleable, Locke observed, and always subject to change.

Locke had no explicit discussion of race in “The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Value.” Reading between the lines, one can easily discern the core of his intellectual liberalism and his understanding of race, which were woven throughout the text. For example, by tying value theory to human biases, he underscored the ways in which both can reinforce and undermine prejudices. More importantly, in seeing values as malleable, he attributed the creation of values and their classification to human beings. This was a profound explication at the time, one that would become important for the study of race in the coming years as scholars began to understand race and racism as socially constructed. He also discussed value and the arts, which showed Locke’s developing sense of the importance of artistic creation.
Indeed, Locke is best known for his cataloging and analysis of black art, especially the literature and fine art coming out of the Harlem Renaissance.\textsuperscript{18} A number of other black liberal intellectuals chose to focus on the impact that segregation had on the African American community. By scrutinizing Jim Crow, these scholars could, like Du Bois, demonstrate the inequalities of the American racial caste system. The study of history offered the best avenue for explaining the myriad problems generated by racial segregation. By examining the black past, not only could historians set the record straight as to the accomplishments of African Americans, but they could also counter the prevailing racist climate that pigeonholed black people as racially inferior. The most important black historian of the twentieth century, Carter G. Woodson, did exactly this. He is widely and correctly regarded as the “Father of Black History.”

Woodson was largely denied an education growing up in rural Virginia and West Virginia. At the turn of the century, he enrolled in Berea College, where he achieved a bachelor’s degree in literature. He then entered the University of Chicago, where he earned a master’s degree. He then went to Harvard University, earning his PhD in history in 1912; he was the second African American after Du Bois to achieve such a distinction. Like other black liberal intellectuals, Woodson remained convinced that Americans fundamentally misunderstood the role of black people in US history. Only sound scholarship, he believed, could correct this historical amnesia and bring about racial change.

Woodson’s first book on black history set the stage for his broader role in the study of black history, especially the education of African Americans. In \textit{The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861}, published in 1915, he presented a detailed accounting of the history of black education, primarily concentrating on the slave South. Woodson chose to focus on southern states because most Americans believed either that masters did not educate their slaves or that slaves were not able to be educated. He showed that for philanthropic, economic, and/or industrial reasons, numerous whites found it necessary to educate slaves. For example, slave owners frequently had to contract with skilled craftsmen for blacksmithing or mechanical repair work. Those who hoped to centralize production on plantations trained slaves as blacksmiths, coopers, or mechanics and thereby saved a great deal of money. While Woodson noted the capitalistic aspects of this type of education, he also demonstrated how slaves excelled at this training, something which frequently surprised white observers who believed them incapable of such education. Thus, Woodson refuted those who viewed black people as racially inferior and lacking the capacity to learn. As he acknowledged,
Intelligent colored men proved to be useful and trustworthy servants; they became much better laborers and artisans, and many of them showed administrative ability adequate to the management of business establishments and large plantations. Moreover, better rudimentary education served many ambitious persons of color as a stepping-stone to higher attainments. Negroes learned to appreciate and write poetry and contributed something to mathematics, science, and philosophy. Furthermore, having disproved the theories of their mental inferiority, some of the race, in conformity with the suggestion of Cotton Mather, were employed to teach white children.\textsuperscript{19}

Woodson's other major study on black education went further than *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. In 1933, he published *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a searing indictment of black education in the twentieth century. Woodson explored both the history and the sociological aspects of black schooling, interjecting his own experiences and opinions throughout. He articulated the black liberal intellectual theory that only through sound teaching and scholarship could African Americans inaugurate racial change in the United States. "Only by careful study of the Negro himself and the life which he is forced to lead can we arrive at the proper procedure in this crisis [of black education]," he argued.\textsuperscript{20} Woodson criticized a system which either viewed blacks as unable to learn or more often simply indoctrinated them into the US body politic as second-class citizens. To overcome problems with the education system, he contended that black people had to develop a new educational model that would not only educate them but also reform whites. "The program for the uplift of the Negro in this country," he concluded, "must be based upon a scientific study of the Negro from within to develop in him the power to do for himself what his oppressors will never do to elevate him to the level of others." As such, he rearticulated the basic formula for racial change in America—black people would reform themselves and in the process reform whites.\textsuperscript{21}

Carter Woodson was a pioneer beyond his scholarship. He also created one of the most important vehicles for the study of black Americans, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), founded in 1915. The ASNLH proved an important step in the work of intellectuals to uplift the status and image of black people. Even more important, however, was the ASNLH's publication, the *Journal of Negro History*, which was published continually for nearly one hundred years and renamed the *Journal of African American History* in 2002. The journal not only helped advance the message
of black intellectuals; it served as a clearinghouse for scholarly knowledge on African Americans. Woodson also established Negro History Week in 1926, now Black History Month, for the acknowledgment and appreciation of black contributions to the United States.

Like Carter Woodson, Marion Thompson Wright took school segregation as her area of focus. One of the pioneering female intellectuals of the twentieth century, Wright initially cast a wide net by examining segregated schooling in sixteen different states for her master's thesis at Howard University. In 1938, she earned her doctorate from Columbia University, becoming the first black historian to graduate from the Teachers College. Wright's dissertation "The Education of Negroes in New Jersey" condensed her work on several states into an exhaustive study of one state. By examining New Jersey, she chose a state that many Americans might not have considered a hardcore, segregated locale. Her choice was masterful. As a northern state, New Jersey's system of segregated schools demonstrated that racism and school segregation were not simply southern issues. Rather, as she noted, they were national issues. As Wright demonstrated, New Jersey schools operated along the southern model. Most districts reserved a pittance for the education of black children, black children attended classes in dilapidated buildings, and black teachers received on average half the pay of white teachers. More importantly, Wright expanded her focus to examine the social consequences of these inferior schools. She tied school segregation to crime, juvenile delinquency, joblessness, and poverty. Her analysis echoed Du Bois, as well as numerous later studies that analyzed the deleterious effects segregation had on black people.

The most influential black historian of the twentieth century was John Hope Franklin. He attended Fisk University and earned his doctorate from Harvard in 1941. A master of the historian's craft, Franklin, like James Pennington, sought to write the first definitive history of black people in the United States. As he noted in his 2005 autobiography, American racism and southern segregation laws unfairly burdened black people. "I became a student and eventually a scholar," he wrote, "and it was armed with the tools of scholarship that I strove to dismantle those laws, level those obstacles and disadvantages, and replace superstitions with humane dignity." Capturing the spirit of black intellectual liberalism, Franklin noted, "I thought [of black history] ... from the outset, as a corrective or as a supplementary revision of United States history." In 1947 he published that corrective, the monumental From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, which has been continually expanded and updated since it was first written.
From Slavery to Freedom did what no history text had done before: it accurately and honestly surveyed African American history from its African origins to the present day. Franklin chose to begin in Africa, but he focused not on Egypt, as other scholars had done, but instead on the great West Coast African kingdoms of Ghana, Songhai, and Mali. When he moved on to discuss the slave trade, he included a frank discussion of the African role in the trade. Unlike numerous other scholars before him, Franklin distinguished between colonial era slavery and slavery in the nineteenth century. His discussion of nineteenth-century slavery excoriated slave masters and the ideological underpinnings of the institution. He also discussed the abuses slaves endured and their resiliency. Most importantly, he recorded aspects of the black experience that most Americans knew nothing about: the black migration westward, the African American role in the military, the Harlem Renaissance, and the developing civil rights movement.

Franklin was an excellent scholar. Over his career he wrote more than a dozen books, while constantly updating From Slavery to Freedom. His intellectual prowess encouraged numerous others interested in the black past to make their careers studying African American history. As a liberal, he was also an activist. He served on the NAACP team that fought Brown v. Board, providing crucial information on the history and legacy of school segregation. He joined Dr. King during the Selma campaign and marched in support of voting rights. In the late 1960s he joined other scholars in denouncing the war in Vietnam. Franklin was a model of black intellectual liberalism who used his scholarship in an attempt to better the lives of black Americans and bring about racial change. As an activist-scholar he also joined the black freedom struggle to achieve the same goal.

Finally, E. Franklin Frazier also fit into the liberal model of black intellectualism. Frazier was educated at the University of Chicago, where he earned his doctorate in sociology in 1932. While his research interests were broad, Frazier primarily concentrated on African American social relationships, especially those of the black church and black family, his work fusing black history and sociology seamlessly. In The Negro Church in America, for example, Frazier not only synthesized African American religious traditions going back to their African origin, but he also detailed the ways in which post–Civil War church organizations and activities bound black people together. The black church thus became an incubator of sorts for the maintenance of African American people and communities, one that helped to give rise to the civil rights era of the 1960s. For Frazier, like other black liberal intellectuals, African Americans had a fundamental right to full citizenship in the United States.
John Hope Franklin, Marion Wright, Carter Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, and numerous other black liberals combined scholarship with many of the broader strands of black liberal thought. For example, they argued that segregation violated American values and that quality schooling was a right due to all Americans. In the 1950s, their research, especially Wright’s “The Education of Negroes in New Jersey” and Franklin’s vast knowledge of African American history, became a part of the body of evidence presented in the Brown v. Board case.26 That case and the members of the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) who fought it marked an important evolution in black intellectual liberal thinking. The LDF had originally been founded by Charles Hamilton Houston as the NAACP’s Legal Redress Committee. Houston was an intellectual giant in his own right. He received his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1919, became the NAACP’s litigation director, and served as professor and later dean of Howard Law School. He educated generations of black attorneys for the sole purpose of destroying Jim Crow.27

While a firm believer in integration, Houston originally promoted the legal strategy of equalization. Like numerous other black leaders, he knew that in the South separate was not equal. The NAACP could sue local governments and school districts by arguing that they did not comply with the law since separate black and white facilities were not the same. It may appear that Houston and other attorneys attempted to make segregation more palatable—that they embraced the system and simply wanted separate to be equal. But this would miss the broader point. Houston knew that southern governments and businesses, if made to equalize facilities, would go bankrupt. In forcing them to equalize facilities, he would actually bring about the end of Jim Crow because communities would choose to integrate rather than face the cost of equalization.

Houston’s greatest acolyte, one who would succeed him as head of the LDF and as the preeminent black legal mind of the twentieth century, was Thurgood Marshall. A student of Houston at Howard, Marshall graduated at the top of his class and soon embarked on a legal career with the NAACP’s LDF. One of his first cases, Murray v. Pearson, which Houston and Marshall fought together in 1936, forcefully communicated Houston’s equalization strategy. Donald Gaines Murray had been denied admittance to the University of Maryland Law School because he was black. He sued with the assistance Marshall and Houston, who argued in state court that the lack of equal facilities (Maryland had no law school for African Americans) violated
segregation laws. The Maryland court agreed, handing Murray, Marshall, and Houston a victory, but one confined to Maryland.28

The problem with Murray v. Pearson and the equalization strategy was that the benefits were restricted to Maryland. To benefit blacks across the United States, Marshall would have to break with his mentor and develop a new strategy. He did so in two important cases—Sweatt v. Painter and Brown v. Board. Sweatt was in many ways an important evolution in Marshall’s legal thinking and one that laid the groundwork for Brown. In 1946, University of Texas president Theophilus Painter had rejected Heman Sweatt as an applicant to the UT Law School because of his race. Texas had no Negro law school, so Sweatt sued. When the Sweatt case reached the Supreme Court in 1950, Marshall argued—as he had in Murray—that the lack of equal facilities violated the law. But he also asserted that other intangible factors marked segregation as harmful to black people. The Court agreed, asserting that the Texas situation violated Sweatt’s Fourteenth Amendment rights while simultaneously arguing that separation harmed African Americans and damaged their ability to compete fairly in the legal field.29

Brown v. Board took Marshall’s legal thinking one step further. In that case, he abandoned Houston’s equalization strategy and attempted instead to eradicate the basis for segregation, the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case. Marshall presented an array of statistical and sociological data that demonstrated that segregation had a harmful effect on black children. Instead of arguing that facilities were unequal and hence violated the law, he asserted that the law itself was wrong and that segregation must end. The Supreme Court agreed. It stated that since schools formed the foundation of good citizenship, and that the children who emerged from American schools would form the basis of the American democratic order, segregation was deeply problematic and constitutionally indefensible. Brown reversed generations of constitutional law and effectively overturned Plessy. The case represented one of the great victories of the black intellectual tradition and vindicated the goals of black liberals going back to the nineteenth century.30

Where the law had the potential to eradicate the political system that buttressed segregation, black faith traditions offered a different kind of redress.31 Black religious liberals knew the Bible made no specific demand for the separation of the races. In fact, the Bible mandated the exact opposite of segregation—brotherly love, Christian compassion, and the love of one’s neighbor. They also took specific inspiration from numerous biblical stories that they regarded as liberal: the call to action of Jeremiah, the story of Moses, the trials of Job, and the teachings of Jesus all inspired black religious
liberalism. As such, religious liberals knew that Jim Crow was not only wrong; they saw it as a violation of the spiritual tenets of Christianity. As Christians, black liberal ministers had to fight against segregation and racism.

Perhaps no one better represents the combination of religious and intellectual liberalism than Martin Luther King Jr. His religious leadership is well understood, but his intellectual accomplishments are often forgotten. King attended Morehouse College and Crozer Theological Seminary before earning his PhD from Boston University in 1955. His doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conception of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," while an important academic accomplishment and an important marker of his intellectual gifts, has relatively little to say about black liberalism and civil rights. In his dissertation, King explored the differing perceptions of God as held by two of the preeminent religious minds of the time, Tillich and Wieman. He began by discussing Tillich's thinking on God. Tillich, King wrote, viewed God as omnipresent and omniscient, as a god of love but also justice. Wieman, King noted, viewed God as more finite. Still, King concluded that the thinking of the two men was more similar than different. His siding with Tillich represented in some ways King's thinking not only on God but also in the biblical aspects of the civil rights movement. Since Tillich and King's god was a god of justice, faith in a righteous cause would ultimately be victorious. That success would come from faith and God's assistance. As historian David Chappell has shown, this type of theological and intellectual thinking was common among black ministers at the time.32

King's sermons and published works offer more insight into his intellectual liberalism than does his dissertation. As noted above, Stride toward Freedom does a good job of elucidating King's liberal thinking on the United States. His book Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? is even more important. This was King's last attempt to elucidate his intellectual liberalism. He was assassinated several months after its publication. In the book, King expands upon his views of American society and the course of the civil rights movement. "When a people are mired in oppression," he wrote, "they realize deliverance only when they have accumulated the power to enforce change.... Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands." Such had been the challenge of the black liberal tradition for more than one hundred years. "It is enormously difficult," King continued, "for any oppressed people even to arrive at an awareness of their latent strengths.... Only when they break out of the fog of self-denigration can they begin to
discover the forms of action that influence events.... This is where the civil rights movement stands today.”33 King once again reminds his readers about the overarching goal of racial change. The civil rights movement and black intellectual liberalism had to reform American society as a whole and not just its constituent elements.

King's sermons were perhaps even more important pieces of his intellectual thought than his published works. One of his last sermons, “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” delivered at the National Cathedral shortly before his assassination in 1968, is a classic elucidation of King’s liberal vision. King stated:

One day we will have to stand before the God of history and we will talk in terms of things we’ve done. Yes, we will be able to say we built gargantuan bridges to span the seas, we built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies....It seems that I can hear the God of history saying, “That was not enough! But I was hungry, and ye fed me not. I was naked, and ye clothed me not. I was devoid of a decent sanitary house to live in, and ye provided no shelter for me. And consequently, you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness. If ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me.” That's the question facing America today.

Here King shows once again his intellectual dexterity, combining biting social commentary with theology. As other liberal intellectuals had done, he raised the question about what the United States had done for the black community and found in the answer the United States wanting. He borrowed from Matthew 25:35-36 and 42-43 to allow “the God of history” to assess the value of the things America had done. For King, as for his “God of history,” without correction, without answering “the question facing America today,” America would not enter the “kingdom of greatness.” Yet King ended his sermon on a positive note, stating, “I can still sing ‘We Shall Overcome’. ... With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

It would seem that with all the words spoken, sermons given, and books written by the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, or Martin Luther King, all that needed to be said about black intellectual liberalism had been said. But as King had noted, without programs and actions their words meant very little. While direct action demonstrations themselves are neither liberal nor conservative, the widespread usage of protests and the dissemination
of philosophical nonviolence fit in well with the broader liberal agenda. Black liberal intellectuals, as King, Shuttlesworth, and numerous others had done, debated the merits of nonviolent protest activism and found within protest not only a key feature of their ideals, but also concrete action. More importantly, their elucidation of nonviolent direct action inspired and appealed to individuals across the United States. These individuals frequently called on leaders such as Dr. King, but even more often they took the ideals of nonviolent protest as their own and engaged in their own local freedom movements. 35

Legal victories and legislation helped mark the success of intellectual liberalism and protest activism. Black liberals had their most important legislative victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Civil Rights Act satisfied many of the goals that African Americans had fought for since Reconstruction. These included bans on almost every form of racial segregation and protection for voting. The voting provisions in the Civil Rights Act were generally weak, so the Congress passed the Voting Rights Act to shore up protection of black voting. The Civil Rights Act justified the activism of black liberals going back at least four generations. The Voting Rights Act, while certainly another vindication, did something more. It allowed for a revolutionary expansion of the black electorate and the election of hundreds of black politicians to local, state, and national offices.

Barbara Jordan of Texas is a good example of the political evolution of black liberalism. Jordan was born in 1936 in Houston. She attended Texas Southern University and then went to Boston University Law School. She returned to Texas in 1960, passed the state bar, and practiced law for several years before contemplating running for political office. Jordan's initial campaigns demonstrate the overall power of the Voting Rights Act on the local level. She ran for the Texas House in 1962 and 1964, both times losing resoundingly. But after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, she ran for a seat in the Texas Senate in 1966. She won, becoming the first black woman ever elected to that body. In the Texas legislature, Jordan fought for a state minimum wage, increased voting protection via redistricting and greater statewide acceptance of labor unions. In 1973, she ran for a seat in the US House and won easily. She was the first black woman from a southern state to serve in the House and one of the first two blacks (she and Andrew Young both won seats in 1973) to win election from the South in the twentieth century. 36

Once in Congress, Jordan quickly made her intellectual prowess evident. She became an outspoken critic of President Nixon and testified before
the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate hearings. Jordan told the committee, "My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total and I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution." Black political liberals stretching back to the nineteenth century probably could not have spoken of their faith in the Constitution with such eloquence. Jordan gave her most profound speech at the 1976 Democratic National Convention. In her address, she linked many of the principles of black liberal thought to the overarching ideals of the Democratic Party. For example, she emphasized freedom and fair play. "We believe in equality for all and privileges for none," she intoned, "This is a belief that each American regardless of background has equal standing in the public forum, all of us." In regards to the role of the government in racial change, she stated, "We believe that the government ... has an obligation to actively underscore, actively seek to remove those obstacles which would block individual achievement ... obstacles emanating from race, sex, economic condition." Finally, Jordan emphasized the benefits of America's constitutional democracy, one of the key elements of black liberalism. "We believe that the people are the source of all governmental power; that the authority of the people is to be extended, not restricted. This can be accomplished only by providing each citizen with every opportunity to participate in the management of the government," Jordan declared. Throughout this speech, she tied the Democratic Party to the long history of black liberalism. Her constant use of the personal pronoun "we" not only demonstrated shared ideals; it represented a coupling of black and white liberalism for a united purpose.38

Jordan represents the pairing of black political liberalism and black intellectual liberalism. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965, thousands of black liberals have won election to local, state, and national office, continuing the trend of securing racial change through the electoral process. Political liberalism has perhaps won most of the goals that African Americans have fought for since the nineteenth century, but black liberal politicians still fight for the betterment of the black community and the alleviation of historical inequalities.
BLACK LIBERALISM TODAY

The black liberal intellectual tradition has continued beyond the civil rights movement and black politics. Today, numerous black liberals occupy positions of importance in America's top institutions of higher learning. One of the recent and most important black liberal intellectuals is Henry Louis Gates Jr. Like other black liberals, Gates has expressed a consistent and profound belief in American democracy and the power of scholarly thinking to right wrongs. He received his doctorate in literature from Yale University in 1979. He currently directs Harvard's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. Gates is an expert on African and African American literature. His major scholarly work in this field, *The Signifying Monkey*, explores the African American cultural practice of "signifying." Signifying is akin to the double consciousness discussed by Du Bois and King. It relates to a practice, traceable back to Africa, of doubletalk or code speech in which blacks employ a culturally understood vocabulary that white people do not understand. Slaves called this "puttin' on ole massa" or using deception to trick the slave owner (perhaps best exemplified in the countless retellings of the Br'er Rabbit story). For Gates, signifying is something more than just a literary trope. It is the foundation for an entirely overlooked and in some cases maligned genre of literature. Not only does he resurrect the history of signifying, but he traces that history back to Africa and then incorporates it into American literary traditions.  

*The Signifying Monkey* in many ways continues the trends of black intellectual liberals going back to Pennington and Du Bois. Gates uses a concept familiar to most black people and analyzes it methodically. He notes that signifying serves as an authentic part of the black voice, and in analyzing it in many ways he reauthenticates it. More importantly, he exposes the concept of signifying to the broader American public in general, and white people in particular, and thereby brings it into the broader scope of American literature. As such, Gates went far both in studying an important element of black culture and in reforming white people's understanding of blacks.

Perhaps even more along the lines of the black liberal intellectual traditions discussed thus far was Gates's PBS show *African American Lives*. The show traces the genetic descent of a handful of prominent black celebrities. It purported to move our understanding from the broader undiscovered past of the black community to examine the unknown past of distinct black people. In so doing, Gates reminds us that not only have Americans ignored the history of the black community, but our own familial histories are often
forgotten or unknown. For example, Gates tested the DNA of comedian Chris Rock and determined that one of Rock’s relatives, his great-great-grandfather Julius Tingman, won election to the South Carolina legislature in the nineteenth century. When asked if he ever dreamed that he had an elected official, a politician, in his family, Rock responded, “Never in a million years.” The surprise Rock displayed is understandable, but the point was not to shock. Rather, Gates hoped to reveal the past to those who do not know it. And by displaying this search for discovery on television, a broad swath of the public witnessed this revelation. As the promotional material for the show asserted, “by the end of their journey, guests know more about their family, and themselves.”

William Julius Wilson has also experienced a great deal of public recognition as a black liberal intellectual in the past few decades. A sociologist and professor at Harvard University, Wilson has written and frequently commented on the black community. His earliest work, *The Declining Significance of Race*, explores the black inner-city community and attempts to explain the social class positions of African Americans. Despite the title (and many critical observations of Wilson’s work), he did not argue that race was no longer important or that we live in a postracial society. Instead, he asserted that as the black middle class grew it began to be affected more by class or economic issues as opposed to racism. The black underclass, on the flipside, continued to experience significant problems both with their economic status and with racial issues. What Wilson ultimately demonstrated was that while the Great Society was at least partially successful in elevating the economic position of some black people, it also worked to create rifts between African Americans who escaped to the middle class and those who remained behind in the inner city.

Wilson followed *The Declining Significance of Race* with *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which focuses exclusively on poverty and joblessness in black inner-city communities. He once again tied racial and economic issues together to show their detriment to blacks, but he further asserted that the loss of good-paying factory jobs in the inner core of cities such as Chicago had dealt poor blacks their most devastating blow. He averred that instead of promoting an end to racist hiring practices, the government would be better served by promoting job opportunities and business growth for black Americans. He explores similar themes in his book *When Work Disappears*. Wilson’s most recent, and boldest, attempt to explain the relationship between race and poverty is *More than Just Race*. He shows, for example, that while some black men (particularly those who deal drugs) are seen by society
as shunning hard work, they are in fact working within the confines of what is available to them and most lucrative within the inner city. As opposed to being averse to hard work, Wilson argues, they actually work hard at being good drug dealers. More importantly, lack of opportunity and resources molds the lives of these young men, not societal pressures or a lack of expectations. He also shows that some of the problems in the black inner city, especially crime and poverty, are the result of cultural factors within the black community. While this stance earned him a good deal of criticism, Wilson took culture seriously and explored how a sense of anti-intellectualism and a lack of opportunity could explain social ills in the inner city.

Wilson's work fits in well with the liberal intellectual paradigm of black leadership. His scholarship was both cutting edge and incredibly timely. By concentrating on the immediate post-civil rights period and also on many of the ideas of the civil rights generation, he offers a persuasive series of explanations for the continuation of black poverty and inequality. Most importantly, by commenting on the legacy of the civil rights movement, Wilson was able to probe the successes and failures of the black freedom struggle and explore the progress of racial change in America. As he noted in a 1997 interview commemorating the Brown v. Board decision, "a lot of people back then felt that we would be free by '93 or '83 or '73 just by removing racial barriers. But the problem is that a system of racial discrimination over a long period of time can create racial inequality, a system of racial inequality that will linger on even after racial barriers come down." Some of his solutions to this continuing inequality remain in sync with many of the historical ideas with other black intellectual leaders. For example, he argued that "black leaders [need] to broaden their vision and their imagination in the public policy arena. To continue to push for very specific policies, affirmative action, these things are necessary and important and we need them. But they're also going to have to join with other forces and call for some sort of economic reform." The black intellectual leaders who called for affirmative action and War on Poverty programs in the 1960s would have clearly understood his ideas.

Former New York Times columnist Robert Herbert is another good example of a modern, and very critical, black liberal intellectual. He frequently attacks conservative American ideals and those who continue to view black people as deficient or pathological. Like Wilson, he examines social and racial inequalities. For example, in a recent column on segregated schools and the Brown decision, Herbert opined that "long years of evidence show that poor kids of all ethnic backgrounds do better academically when they go to school..."
with their more affluent—that is, middle class—peers. But when the poor kids are black or Hispanic, that means racial and ethnic integration in the schools. Despite all the babble about a postracial America, that has been off the table for a long time.” Herbert ties the issue of school segregation with recent attacks on educators in Wisconsin. He ends with one of the dogmas of black intellectual liberalism: “I favor integration for integration’s sake. This society should be far more integrated in almost every way than it is now.”

Robert Herbert’s final op-ed with the New York Times in 2011 was perhaps his most poignant defense of the black liberal intellectual position. He reacted to the broad array of problems facing the United States, from the recession to the war on terror. Herbert found the maldistribution of wealth in the United States particularly problematic. “This inequality, in which an enormous segment of the population struggles while the fortunate few ride the gravy train, is a world-class recipe for social unrest. Downward mobility is an ever-shortening fuse leading to profound consequences.” Like Du Bois and several other black liberals before him, Herbert found great contradictions in a society that claims to protect liberties and fight for equality while simultaneously politicians cozy up to big businesses and the rich seemingly get richer. As he had done in previous columns, he called on the United States to renew the vision of a prosperous and equalitarian American for all people.

CONCLUSIONS

Black intellectual liberalism remains distinct from other aspects of black thought. On perhaps the polar opposite from black liberals are the black conservatives. Most black conservative intellectuals emphasize cultural conservatism, patriotism, and the ability of free market capitalism to right black America’s wrongs. One of the best examples of this line of thinking is economist Thomas Sowell. A professor at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, Sowell emerged as a scholar at roughly the same time as William Julius Wilson. Their scholarship could hardly be more different. Take for example Sowell’s The Economics and Politics of Race, in which he criticizes liberal viewpoints, especially those that hold that government aid and social programs can remedy social problems and bring about racial change. Sowell compares the experiences of American blacks with minority groups in other nations and finds that racism and economics cannot alone explain the position of African Americans in US society. Instead, he finds cultural patterns among
black people and white liberal paternalism at fault. African Americans have
not advanced in American society because they have not stressed hard work
and education as cultural norms. At the same time, black and white liberal
elites have coddled the black community, Sowell argues, reinforcing a culture
of laziness. His critique of black culture and his belief in the power of the free
market to redress historical wrongs is what marks Sowell as a conservative.
His other publications follow similar arguments and lines of reasoning. 48

Other black intellectuals do not fit neatly into a mold or model of scholar­
ly thought. Take John McWhorter, a trained linguist who specializes in
the creole language. Like Gates he resurrects a forgotten aspect of the black
past. Like Wilson, McWhorter frequently offers very stinging intellectual
indictments of the African American community. But McWhorter does not
fit neatly into any category. He is neither a liberal nor a conservative, and if he
fits any label it is perhaps “middle course.” 49 In Losing the Race, for example,
McWhorter not only criticized the United States, he laid the blame for some
problems in the black community at the feet of black people. He explored
what he viewed as a “disease of defeatism” and a “cult of victimology” that
plagues African Americans. He further asserted that the failure of integration
rests at least in part on black people. 50 He followed Losing the Race with the
appropriately titled Winning the Race. In this book he continued to criticize
African Americans for problems in the black community, and he called for a
new focus on black achievement. He further argued that racism alone cannot
explain problems in the black community. He suggested going back in time
to claim some of the “family values” of black folks in the 1940s or 1950s, while
simultaneously using those values to move past race. Both Losing the Race
and Winning the Race offer an analysis that is at the same time liberal and
conservative, that produces a moderate course line of reasoning. McWhorter
has been criticized by both liberals and conservatives for his work, as sure a
sign as any that he fits into neither category. 51

Numerous black intellectuals have commented on the African American
experience and focused on race and culture. It is not really that surprising
that liberals, conservatives, radicals, and moderates have come to different
conclusions about the black past and the black future. Black liberals and con­
servatives, for instance, both have a profound and fundamental belief in the
power of American ideals and the Constitution to remedy social problems,
but they differ in how those ideals should be viewed and how the Constitu­
tion should be used. For liberals, the power of the federal government can be
used as a wedge against racism, and the Constitution can be employed as a
weapon to correct social ills and bring about racial change. For conservatives,
government aid is corrupting, and only free market capitalism can help black people. Using the Constitution as a weapon, conservatives hold, runs counter to the ideas of the founders and is an abuse of government power. Black liberals and conservatives—as well as moderates, radicals, and Afrocen-trists—also comment on culture. For many liberals black culture has many positive attributes. It has reinforced the black psyche and imbued African Americans with pride. For conservatives, black culture is often viewed as moribund, lacking positive features and reinforcing social problems that harm black people. Again, black intellectuals look at a similar subject but from widely varying points of view and modes of analysis.

Black liberalism clearly has had a long history in the United States. The black liberal intellectual tradition extends back in time to the late eighteenth century and continues today. While it has gone through many evolutions, the basic tenets of black liberalism have remained consistent for more than one hundred years: the need for a fair society, the exercising of democratic freedoms, the fundamental belief in the Constitution, the elevation of black status in the United States, and the eradication of racism. Most importantly, black intellectual liberals firmly believed in and fought for racial change. The idea of racial change remains the most consistent aspect of black liberalism because it connoted a transformation not only of black society, but of white society as well. African American leaders knew that for black people to make real progress, they not only had to improve the lives of blacks, but they also had to change the opinions of whites. For black intellectual liberals, scholarship and study provided the most effective method for redressing wrongs. By studying black people seriously, these scholars could counter much of the basis for American racism. And by including black people in the long history of the United States, these scholars could bring about racial change by reforming the identity of black people and the ideas white people had about blacks.

While it has accomplished much, black liberalism has also tended to be slow and its victories only partial. We can give black liberals credit, for example, for bringing about racial change during the civil rights movement, African Americans still have to deal with many problems related to race and racism. Black political liberals tried for generations to achieve legislative victories banning lynching, but they never succeeded. While the election of Barack Obama and other black politicians has certainly vindicated black liberal ideals, the racism Obama has faced signals that much work remains to be done.\textsuperscript{52}


5. James W. C. Pennington, The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States (London: Charles Gilpin and Bishopsgate Without, 1849).


10. The number of lynchings in the United States declined precipitously in the 1930s. See Waldrep, African Americans Confront Lynching, chap. 4.

21. Ibid., 144.
31. On black religious leadership, see White, *Black Leadership in America*; E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America: The Black Church Since Frazier*

32. For a copy of King's dissertation, see http://mlk-kppoi.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Volz/550415AComparisonOfTheConceptionsOfGod.pdf (accessed May 10, 2011). This draft of the dissertation also has an explanation of the plagiarized portions of the text. See also David L. Chappell, A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow (Chapel Hill, 2004).

33. Martin Luther King Jr., Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 136–38.


47. For a good discussion of black conservatives, see Michael L. Ondaatje, Black Conservative Intellectuals in America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).


49. On the history of middle-course leadership, see Brian D. Behnken, “‘Count on Me’: Reverend M. L. Price of Texas, a Case Study in Civil Rights Leadership,” Journal of American Ethnic History 25, no. 1 (Fall 2005).


51. See John McWhorter, Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America (New York: Gotham, 2005).