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Democracy Born of Struggle

Derrick Darby

The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea. By Christopher J. Lebron. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 216p. $27.95 cloth.

An Impossible Dream? Racial Integration in the United States. By Sharon A. Stanley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 224p. $69.00 cloth.

Struggle on Their Minds: The Political Thought of African American Resistance. By Alex Zamalin. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 240p. $35.00 cloth.

After the bright light of Reconstruction faded over the ominous horizon in 1877, the American South was determined come hell or high water to "keep the Negro in his place" as a second-class citizen. In his first work of history, *The Negro* (1915), W.E.B. Du Bois reports that when the former defenders of slavery arrived at the moral crossroads of allowing blacks to pursue the American Dream with the same obstacles faced by whites or to construct additional ones, they elected to institutionalize racially unequal citizenship. From then forward in the land where all people are declared free and equal, the promises of American democracy could only be achieved for those riding Jim Crow with blood, sweat, and tears.

The election of Donald J. Trump, who rode the high tide of populism and anti-immigration to the White House, has fueled increasing anxiety about the health of American democracy. Liberals have had considerable anxiety over the Trump victory. However, unlike many people I know, I did not shed any tears after the ballots were counted and Trump's vision for "making America great again" was victorious. That's because I do not believe that American democracy is only now under siege, or is experiencing a threat unlike any it has endured before.

Those of us who have been riding Jim Crow longer—before marching against police violence and white vigilante terrorism, against expressions of anti-black hatred on college campuses, and for black lives mattering, became the things to do—know better. Those of us who have been brought up on the wisdom of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde know better. Those of us who have been students of past and present social movements that have placed the suffering and democratic aspirations of black folks at center stage know better.

The heightened state of alarm among anxious liberals suffers from a lamentable lack of historical perspective. Appreciating Du Bois's historical lesson, and the wisdom of black folks that came before and after him, accounts for why some of us do not think that the Trump presidency and the precarious state of American democracy today is anything more than business as usual. This is not to say that we should surrender to tyranny of the wicked without a good fight. Nor is it to deny that there are relative differences in value among government regimes such that we can prefer a lesser of two evils. And I agree with the late Richard Rorty and with Cornel West that we must certainly not let political nihilism tempt us to lose all hope for achieving our country—an America that is worthy of its democratic aspirations. The point is that we have no novel reasons to be alarmed today. To appreciate this insight, we must take up the politics of resistance that has been relegated to the back of the political theory bus.

Against this backdrop, three new books, *The Making of Black Lives Matter* by Christopher J. Lebron, *An Impossible Dream?* by Sharon A. Stanley, and *Struggle on Their Minds* by Alex Zamalin, feature black voices and social movements from the past. Taken together, these books extract valuable lessons from the African American experience for understanding and advancing the resistance struggles of those still fighting to achieve democracy today with blood, sweat, and tears.

Derrick Darby (dldarby@umich.edu) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan.

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People resist many things, including assaults on our dignity, injustice, and inequality. Some of the things we resist (such as sexual harassment and hate speech) are perpetuated by individuals, while others such as mass incarceration and de facto Jim Crow public schools are perpetuated by authorities that have power over us through social processes and institutions that shape our lives from cradle to grave. Zamalin defines "resistance" as the act of contesting authority, but his specific focus is on *political* authority and on *unjust* uses of power. Traditionally, Hegel, Marx, Foucault, and other thinkers have fed the radical appetite for philosophies and politics of resistance—giving us tools for understanding, explaining, and defeating dominating lords, exploiting capitalists, and oppressive penal institutions.

But the canonical Western classics—works of dead white men—are not the only place to turn for radical nourishment. Black slaves resisted white masters, sometimes violently, sometimes quietly. Free blacks resisted Jim Crow. Civil rights-era blacks resisted voter disenfranchisement. And today young black activists resist the denigration of black lives, just as their mothers and grandmothers resisted lynching. To understand these acts of resistance against unjust uses of political authority we must look to the black faces at the bottom of America's well. *Struggle on Their Minds* does this admirably, in Zamalin's words, "[by providing] an intellectual history of when resistance to racial inequality was palpable in key African American political movements" (p. 6). By focusing on these thinkers, he skillfully shows how their work highlights the fact that slavery, segregation, lynching, black ghettos, mass incarceration, and unjust racial inequality—the evils that have occupied black resistance thinkers and movements—are perversions of American democracy.

Zamalin's concise history of the black struggle for democracy begins with a reading of David Walker's "Appeal" for black freedom in the early nineteenth century. It then excavates the anti-slavery philosophy of Frederick Douglass before moving on to the anti-lynching writings of Ida B. Wells, the Black Power praxis of Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, and ending with the prison abolition activism of Angela Davis. Walker condemns tyranny and exploitation as undemocratic, and argues that sowing division and discord among the voiceless and powerless is how the powerful sustain racial domination and inequality. Violence, especially extra-legal violence, is another weapon for keeping the downtrodden on the ropes and violating their dignity. Douglass teaches us that we must sometimes fight back with our fists to reaffirm our dignity, and Wells says we must shine a public spotlight on illicit violence to awaken public sentiment against anti-democratic practices and inequality. Newton and the Panthers highlight the importance of community self-determination in weathering the raging storm that state violence has inflicted on black ghettos, while Davis exposes how the prison-industrial complex denigrates black lives, maintains an unequal racial order, and disenfranchises its victims.

The focus on a black politics of resistance that says "no" to anti-democratic practices and calls for direct action and critiques of the system may well be a unique site of political theory, as Zamalin insightfully tells us—one that is not a knock-off of liberalism or civil republicanism. However, the thinkers, ideas, and movements occupying this space demand a more nuanced, balanced, and dare I say, more radical treatment than he offers us. For instance, it would have been useful to have more direct engagement with how the thinkers and movements considered in *Struggle on Their Minds*—and some of the ones overlooked—understand the role of class politics in the struggle for democracy. This would have been possible by attending to thinkers such as King, who made the dignity of labor an object of democratic struggle, or with a more serious treatment of the Panthers' Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation of labor than we get in the slim chapter on Newton.

Black resistance movements have been a permanent feature of American society, and the thinkers Zamalin discusses have all been written about before. So, what's fresh in his book? He is especially concerned with black political resistance movements "from below," or from what we might call politics from the grassroots. Such movements seek democracy in the radical transformation of the basic structure of society, which is constituted by the institutions regulating the economy, law, family, education, and others that shape and order our lives. Grassroots movements also seek equitable redistribution of resources including public goods, rights, and liberties as well as seeking genuinely democratic political rule, as the great Ella Baker taught us. However, according to Zamalin, these thinkers are not committed to working within the system to collect on America's broken democratic promises. Thus, he supplies us with the *black radical hidden transcript*, a look at "radical" black thinkers and movements not constrained by either formal politics or politically acceptable forms of protest. This is a provocative contribution.

Black radicalism, we are told by Zamalin, can be characterized by its "uncompromising, unruly, irreverent, and militant" focus on the structural dimensions of socioeconomic and political inequality with an "intensity of pitch and commitment" absent in more moderate thinkers and gradualist movements. To be fair, Zamalin does not set out to offer us anything more than a snapshot of the history of black radical resistance but, as he says, "my concern is with people who resisted racial inequality, which has been and still is catalyzed by the ideologies of white supremacy and racism" (p. 7).

Placing the emphasis on this dimension of black political thought highlights one aspect of the tradition. Still, the list of figures Zamalin chooses to include and omit is instructive. The reason why there is no chapter on

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King, he tells us, is that King was not a black radical for much of his political life. He was more interested in abolishing legal discrimination, winning black integration, and urging Americans to love one another (as if these were not radical goals at the time, or now). And he would have us erroneously believe that King was not occupied with the pressing question we face today: "How do we address the vast racial structural and socioeconomic disparity—from jobs to income to life expectancy—that continues to create a system in which black citizens are marginalized" (pp. 168-169)?

The history of black struggle for democracy is full of important figures, indeed too many to feature in a short book. So, we cannot fault Zamalin for omitting King from the book. But we can take issue with this misleading reason for excluding him. Long before King entered the final years of his life calling explicitly for a "Poor People's Campaign," he appreciated the importance of both a class struggle and of mitigating racial inequality, and of linking class and race in the battle to achieve American democracy. From his early intellectual engagement with the pros and cons of Marx during his college and graduate school years, to his reflections on why positive normalcy could never be attained without economic justice during the Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma battles, King was very radical in his efforts to shape a new world.

The question of what, and who, counts as radical is a point of contention between Zamalin and Lebron. And, as we shall see, it also informs Stanley's efforts to identify a more promising conception of integration. Yet Lebron and Stanley's books, while having other virtues, also pay insufficient attention to class matters in the black radical tradition.

In *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, Lebron makes room for King in his exposé of the black radical transcript, and does so by arguing that King's call for love and nonviolence is a genuinely radical entry in the black struggle for democracy. This is an important virtue. Zamalin uncritically accepts the romantic image of Black Power advocates being more radical than King and other nonviolent civil rights warriors. But Lebron offers evidence that the "House Niggas" or "Uncle Toms" epithets leveled by these advocates do not stick because critics such as Malcolm X misunderstood the radical nature of nonviolent resistance. Lebron quotes King: "It must be emphasized that nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist. If one uses this method because he is afraid or merely because he lacks the instruments of violence, he is not truly nonviolent . . . This is ultimately the way of the strong man" (p. 120). According to Lebron, "radicalism is the imagination and will to think and act outside the bounds of the normally acceptable" (p. xx). And by this standard, King, Baldwin, Hurston, and Lorde were also radicals, as were Douglass, Cooper, Wells, and Hughes; they all used their imagination in claiming an authority to advocate for black lives that was denied them by society.

Lebron makes clear that these eight radical black thinkers also all endorsed the ideal of democracy as a worthy aspiration while denouncing "the distortions and corruptions of *American* democracy without compromise" (p. xxi). Understanding their legacies offers hope, not despair to those marching for black lives today. And the source of this hope, according to Lebron, is the conviction that we can awaken the moral consciousness of "good and conscientious people" (p. xiv) to assume their duties to help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. "Black lives matter," he tells us, "are three words often used as a lament, as a signal that our democracy has been, is, and seems likely to continue failing 12 percent of its population" (p. xiv). The radical black voices speaking from the bottom of America's well help us understand the democratic struggles of the 12 percent, why American democracy has failed them, and what they and others must do to redeem it.

As Lebron shows, the strategic use of shame, or shameful publicity, is a crucial tool used by black radicals for the moral re-education of white America. "Shame is the moral emotion or sensibility," says Lebron, "we ought to feel when we realize our actions, beliefs, or attitudes in fact conflict with some prior held principle" (p. 132). Although Lebron dwells on the role of shameful publicity in Douglass's treatment of slavery and Wells's critique of lynching, this is arguably the same strategy we find in the other six thinkers he considers. Each thinker, in their own way, calls attention to the hypocrisy of American democracy, preaching freedom, equality, and justice for all on the one hand, while denying the promises of democracy to black folks on the other.

For example, a familiar tactic for explaining away this hypocrisy, trying to resist shame, and turning a blind eye to white supremacy and black subordination is to assume that blacks are inferior to whites in mind, body, and soul. Yet black radical artists such as Hughes and Hurston used art to push back against these derogatory and baseless portrayals of black humanity. And thinkers such as Cooper and Lorde teach us that because the 12 percent is comprised of women too, not just men, as well as persons with different sexual orientations, the democratic struggle for black lives must find common cause with struggles against domination based on gender and sexuality.

Lebron also identifies another worry about King. "The struggle in the South," said King, "is not so much the tension between white people and Negro People. The struggle is rather between justice and injustice" (p. 122). Here King flirts with the idea that race is not central to the struggle for justice and democracy in America. It would certainly be misleading to read King as being unconcerned with race; however, it would be equally misleading to neglect his efforts to develop a politics of resistance that was able to transcend the racial divide. Not only did he

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appreciate the links between race and poverty, as did many other black radical thinkers, King was also moved by Marx's critique of capitalism and the damage that it inflicted on the poor and on low-wage workers of all races. The exclusive focus on white supremacy, and the ways in which it is sustained within American democracy, neglects this penetrating analysis and obscures the need for a broader coalition between blacks and the white working class to work together in achieving our democratic promise.

Although Lebron offers us a more radical King than Zamalin, neither of them offers us a perspective on the democratic socialist King, or the King who was unwilling to adjust himself to the inequalities of an unjust economic system rigged to rob the masses so that the upper classes could live lavishly. Because Lebron's account of the black radical transcript frames the struggle for democracy too narrowly as a battle against white supremacy, we get no lessons on what the black voices of the past thought about the politics of class, and its potential to shame the nation to fulfill its democratic promises to the 12 percent. If shaming white America in the way that Lebron hopes for were possible, and I have long had my doubts about this, perhaps the nation could finally realize an elusive goal. Still, a broader multiracial politics of class is also essential to achieving a truly democratic society.

Racial integration is typically put forward as the goal of democratic struggle in America. Yet too many people have been willing to believe that racial desegregation (allowing blacks to enter places and spaces previously reserved for whites in Jim Crow America) realizes this aim. When *Brown v. Board of Education* and post-*Brown* cases ended *de jure* American apartheid, a rift emerged in the courts over whether prohibiting legally mandated racial segregation was enough, or whether society also had an obligation to undo *de facto* segregation to achieve integration. With the emergence of a conservative Supreme Court majority, racial imbalance not mandated by law is now treated as constitutionally permissible, and what Sharon Stanley calls a minimalist approach to desegregation prevails. More aggressive legal approaches to desegregation, typically championed by liberal Justices, which call for targeting historical patterns of racial imbalance not proscribed by law, have not entirely disappeared from constitutional jurisprudence. But today they are more likely to crop up in dissenting opinions. Although she prefers the latter over the former, Stanley argues that neither model of integration addresses the problem that "any worthy model of integration must dismantle" (p. 16): the problem of white supremacy.

An Impossible Dream? places a normative concern with undoing white supremacy and black subordination at the core of a model of racial integration that we should pursue. It then asks whether achieving this ideal is wishful thinking. Focusing on racial imbalance, and seeking merely to move blacks into white spaces, as many conscientious liberals call for, is not radical enough to realize these more ambitious ends. If we take the aim of integration to be achieving racially mixed spaces and institutions, we can realize this goal while leaving the evils of white supremacy and black subordination untouched.

John L. Rury and I argue in *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice* (2018) that this is precisely what we find in nominally desegregated K–12 schools today. They are racially mixed but have systemic sorting practices associated with tracking, discipline, and special education that reinforce racist ideas and white supremacy to the detriment of black student achievement. In a similar spirit, Stanley argues that "if desegregation secures physical mixing, but fails to transform either explicit and implicit racist beliefs and inclinations," then in reality "it does not fully redress the injustices or the democratic pathologies of segregation" (p. 38). This is well said, and I certainly agree with it.

In staking out a more promising form of integration, one that does not take "proximity to white people as the goal and prize of integration" (p. 35), Stanley takes her cue from a notion of black radicalism that pitches a tent large enough to include Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael. Integration worthy of our democratic struggle, she rightly reminds us, goes beyond putting blacks and whites in the same neighborhoods, churches, schools, jobs, and families. It requires changing the terms on which whites and blacks interact, aiming to make them fairer, more egalitarian, and genuinely democratic. But, as she incisively argues, achieving such radical racial integration requires two things that have proven difficult to secure in America, given its racist history and the enduring effects of historical injustice: it requires "internal transformation that achieves psychic conversion, and the redistribution of power" (p. 42).

The central argument of her book is that because these things are so difficult to come by, blacks are justified in their pessimism, and if a new, more radical, form of integration is to be possible, whites have more work to do than blacks to bring it about. White Americans must work harder to develop a new sense of self, and a new sense of black worth that rejects the false view of white superiority and black inferiority. They must also acknowledge white privilege and take steps to undo structures of power distributing wealth, housing, education, and other resources along with rights, duties, and liberties that sustain it. Stanley concludes that "it is white privilege itself that stands as the strongest and most intransigent obstacle to true integration" (p. 143).

Stanley's book is, in many ways, the most militant of the three under review here. It puts the onus for achieving radical racial integration squarely on the backs of whites. White people must take the steps needed to secure reparations, criminal justice reform, education reform, housing reform and all the other reform policies needed to

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redistribute power and deconstruct white privilege in America. And they must do so wholeheartedly enough to convince blacks that they are serious about psychic transformation, redistribution of power, and relating to blacks as moral and social equals. But Stanley's militancy, which is rooted in taking white supremacy to be the root of all evil, comes at a cost: it leaves no room at all for us to consider a democratic politics that takes us beyond race and lays the groundwork for interracial coalitions that target those who stand to gain the most materially from democracy's discontents.

To be sure, the evidence Stanley supplies in Chapter 6, "Confronting White Privilege," on whites' reluctance to take these steps, and their willingness to settle instead for demonizing blacks, paints a dismal picture of the prospects for such a politics. Nevertheless, the convergence of interests has proven a powerful motivating factor in past democratic struggles, which managed to secure such coalitions. And if things are as dismal as she suggests, with whites being virtually inseparable from their privilege, we have little reason to believe that a groundswell of white support for black reparations is on the horizon, no matter how beautifully crafted an essay Ta-Nehisi Coates can make for the case.

Each of these books dwells on the battle against white supremacy in the black radical struggle for democracy. They feature different black voices. There is some overlap and some disagreement over just how radical some of these voices are. For instance, Lebron and Stanley find evidence of a radical King, where Zamalin passes over King as insufficiently radical. Nevertheless, the irony in all three of these books is not that they fail to highlight the confrontation with white supremacy in black democratic struggles, but rather that this focus is all-consuming. The black radical tradition is a rich one, and combating white supremacy has certainly been part of it. But fighting back against the anti-democratic tendencies of capitalism, imperialism, indifference (including elite black indifference) to poverty, and insufficient attention to intersecting types of domination has also been central to this tradition. It would have been good to get more of this story onto the table.

These timely books are thus valuable—yet narrow—contributions to political theory. They illustrate the relevance of black radical thinkers and movements to the ongoing struggle for democracy in America. While we should applaud them for this, we must also be critical of their failure to find a politics of resistance in the black voices and social movements of the past that takes us beyond a politics of race—indeed beyond a politics of white supremacy. Admittedly, this is a surprising thing to ask for in this age of Trump, where symbols of white supremacy are poisoning the American landscape, and neo-Nazis and white supremacists are on the march. But if one thinks that this age is only about race and not money, it will be very difficult to make sense of the new tax bill smuggled into law at the end of 2017 to the sound of popping corks on Wall Street.

The road beyond race is one we must travel to build a broader coalition to defeat those who are operating with stealth to save capitalism from democracy. Historian Nancy MacLean, in *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (2017), provides compelling evidence for why we should be worried about this. The plutocrats, and politicians on their payrolls, have relied on their own politics of resistance and hidden agenda. And combating this alchemy calls for a politics of resistance that can build productive coalitions between groups of people with different social identities where each group—from blacks housed in inner city ghettos, to Latinos relegated to dilapidated barrios, to poor whites corralled in rural trailer parks—is being abused by the stealth manipulation of democracy's rules to make America "great" again for the rich by making American democracy less democratic.

When democracy is under siege we must ask who are the winners and losers. Any answer to this question that does not distinguish between the rich and the rest of us will be utterly unsatisfactory. Black radical thought clearly provides resources for appreciating this point, and in these dark days when so many are trying to achieve our country with blood, sweat, and tears, we would do well to draw lessons from the black voices in the back of America's bus urging us to save democracy from the tyranny of the rich. Unfortunately, a crucial question that each book leaves unanswered is how do black voices and social movements of the past, including ones from other parts of the African diaspora, provide insights for moving us beyond a black radicalism rooted in a narrow preoccupation with white supremacy to inform thinking on how to save democracy from capitalists?

The call for a politics of resistance that takes us beyond race is not naive, nor does it diminish the importance or radical nature of identity politics. On the contrary, it encourages us to take to heart points made by Ella Baker, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and other black democratic warriors. To achieve our country, groups must not only assert their particular interests, as the Combahee River Collective did on behalf of black feminists, but they must also form political coalitions with other groups struggling for democracy's promises. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of black women's identities, which can implicate the matrix of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class oppression, shows the inadequacy of plotting a course to a brighter democratic future that focuses too narrowly on white supremacy.

A genuinely radical politics of resistance should indeed direct our attention to black voices and movements of the past and present. But only when it moves us beyond a narrow concern with white supremacy are

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we able to glimpse what kind of politics transcends black radicalism itself, why such a politics of resistance should be more central to contemporary democratic struggles, and how Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—three young black activists, following in the footsteps of democratic visionaries that came before them—courageously moved America in this direction in 2013 when they created #BlackLivesMatter.

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