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Still the Long Journey: Thoughts Concerning the State of Afro- American History

by

Charles Pete T. Banner-Haley

The following was a presentation given by Professor Banner-Haley at a forum at the University of Massachusetts at Boston on February 22, 1990.

Now that Afro-American history is within the mainstream of scholarly discourse, it has become important to take a serious look at the contributions that the last three decades have produced. Of course, that would take more time than I have today, but it may be useful to talk of the latest developments and what they portend for future studies in the discipline and how they have affected my own research and thinking.

The areas that I would like to look at today concern the revision of the recent past, the re-emphasis of the centrality of Afro-American history, and the evolving use of gender in recent studies. First, the revision of the recent past.

The 1960s saw a virtual explosion of interest in the study of the black experience in America. To be sure much of this was due to the civil rights and black power movements. Yet it is important to note—as do Meier and Rudwick in their interesting if not totally satisfying work, *Black History and the Historical Profession*—that there have been many who have toiled in the vineyards of this discipline and who have laid the foundations for the studies that we are so fortunate to now have before us. Thus, it is important to pay homage to Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Rayford Logan, among others, who were in the forefront of the more modern studies of black history.¹

It is also important to note that Afro-American history is deeply entwined in the political atmosphere of the nation. How could it not be, given that one of Afro-American history's primary intentions is to present the chronicle of a people brought here forcibly, who were enslaved and who resisted that enslavement and created a unique Afro-American culture, and who upon emancipation sought to hold the nation to its professed ideals and become full American citizens? Even this superficial rendition demonstrates that Afro-American history is immersed in political concerns.



And we have not even considered the notions of class, gender, and the conscious quest for political power within black communities and in relation to the white communities of this nation. Nor have we considered the rich perspective that Afro-American history can bring to American Studies, for if black history is anything it most certainly represents what all good history is about: reconstructing the past through interdisciplinary methods. Much of the interest in the study of the slavery period—a subject that preoccupied scholars during the sixties and seventies and continues to do so—was greatly influenced by the struggles of black people for civil rights and later for black power and self-determination. These studies, however, also demonstrate how American history can be enriched and enhanced by Afro-American history. One need only look at the work of Lawrence Levine, John Blassingame, Leslie Owens, Julius Lester, and Eugene Genovese to see in their studies the rich use of literary, folkloric, and oral materials as well as the sophisticated use of psychology, anthropology, and sociology.²

In the late seventies and eighties, there was an increase in the number of studies of black education; the excellent work of James Anderson and Ronald Butchart among others can be cited.³ These works emerged within a charged political atmosphere in which the gains of the sixties were threatened by a presidential administration hostile to the needs of the black community and in which there was a significant rightward shift in the ideological temperament of the nation.

Likewise, the increasing interest in black women's history is reflective of the influence of the women's movement and the political gains that women have made in the seventies and eighties. Here too the influence that these studies have had can be fruitful for American studies and American history.⁴

Thus, the political nature of Afro-American history should not be surprising. Of course, for professional historians it can be troublesome as we attempt to prevent the prevailing political winds from under-

mining our efforts to arrive at a clear and accurate picture of the African-American experience in American history.

As with all historical enterprises we are now witnessing a revision of the work and the past that has gone before us. I have in mind here the very recent works that have appeared in the sixties (those of Todd Gitlin, Maurice Isserman, Taylor Branch, and James Miller, among others) that try to set the record straight in these days of reigning conservatism.⁵ Of course, it is clear in my mind that no history of that period can successfully be recorded without appreciating and delving deeply into the civil rights and black power movements. To their credit, the above mentioned scholars do just that—especially Taylor Branch.⁶ Other writers, David Caute and Allen Matusow for example, seem peculiarly mean-spirited in their accounts and tend to see the movements as the cause of all the ills that face us today.⁷

Whatever political affiliation one has, the fact of the matter is that black history is integral to our general knowledge of United States history.

The scholars and writers who have recently treated this period have, not surprisingly, had their affect on the popular culture, as witnessed by the recent interest of Hollywood and television in that era. Unfortunately though, most of the recent movies and the television shows that claim to depict that era have placed black people in the background when they should be in the foreground.⁸

It would be easy to dismiss most of these efforts as either sixties nostalgia or sixties bashing and ideological pandering to the right. They should not be dismissed, however, because what is at stake here is the second item that I would like to address: the need for a continued re-emphasis on the centrality of black history to American history. Notwithstanding my colleagues and brothers and sisters who profess to an Afrocentric model and whose conscientious scholarship seeks to recast all of history through an Afrocentric lens, the harsh reality is that within black people in America there continues to exist two warring souls, to grossly paraphrase W. E. B. Du Bois. African Americans are at once Americans and a people who remain apart. Afro-Americans have created a unique culture that has greatly enhanced and shaped American culture. And here, Sterling Stuckey's challenging and provocative work, *Slave Culture*, is not only one of the better black nationalist historical works, but also one that truly attempts to understand the process of the creation of Afro-America.⁹

I would also like to suggest here that while I applaud the Reverend Jesse Jackson's call for black

people to now be referred to as African American, that declaration must be considered within its proper historical context. We all know that the dominant culture in this society has long seen fit to "name" black people, whether through good intentions or derogatory intentions. Now, when black leadership chooses to proclaim the right to reclaim the heritage of African Americans, it appears to be a sign of freedom on the one hand and confusion on the other. By this I mean that, while it is certainly important for those diasporic Africans to know their origins, it is also important for African Americans to know the unique creations that have been fostered in the making of the American Republic. Thus I think that many historians, black and white, are correct to speak of an Afro-American culture and society. After all, America would most certainly have been a different place without the presence of Afro-Americans.

At the same time, of course, the larger American culture has influenced and shaped black Americans, whether in regard to the individualism so inherent in the society or in the social and political values that have been inculcated in all its people. This means, as we no doubt realize, that Afro-American men can be just as sexist, black people can be just as prejudiced towards immigrants, and, unfortunately, African Americans can be just as anti-Semitic as other Americans. This last item is one that should deeply concern us all because black people have traditionally enjoyed warm relations with Jewish people. During the last 20 years, however, and with increasing intensity in the last five, those relations have deteriorated. Jonathan Kaufmann's book *Broken Alliance* presents us with a much needed examination of that breakdown.¹⁰ Likewise, Julius Lester's third autobiography *Lovesong: On Becoming a Jew* presents not only an interesting overview of recent history by one who participated in it, but is also an honest attempt at beginning a much needed healing process between the two groups.¹¹ For professional historians this sad chapter in Afro-American history deserves serious historical analysis so that we as Americans can strive to become better citizens and people.

Another concern that must be addressed by African-American historians is the paucity of studies done on black intellectuals. It was bad enough that Allan Bloom, in his vitriolic attack on black studies and women's studies, dismissed black intellectuals in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*. But when a notable leftist scholar and historian like Russell Jacoby makes no mention whatsoever of notable African Americans in his book *The Last Intellectuals*, then we know that there is still a lot of work yet to be done.¹²

It is puzzling to me how a talented scholar like Jacoby could write an otherwise laudable book on the

demise of public intellectuals in the late twentieth century and not mention such past black intellectuals as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, to name just a few. Certainly a case can be made for broadening the definition of a public intellectual so as to include outstanding works of literature and drama that have shaped our perceptions and inspired positive change. With such a definition, we should then include on that list prominent African Americans such as Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, and Ralph Ellison. Perhaps most significantly, though, I am tempted to believe that Jacoby's lack of recognition is somehow purposeful, for had he dealt with these individuals (especially Du Bois) their presence would have undermined his argument: that there have been no real public intellectuals in the late twentieth century. Such a contention is certainly not true from the standpoint of Afro-America today when one considers the contributions of individuals like Roger Wilkins, Julius Lester, June Jordan, Cornel West, Michele Wallace, Thulani Davis, and Playthell Benjamin.

I would argue that this regrettable lapse would not have occurred had we had more strong studies in Afro-American intellectual history of the high caliber of Waldo E. Martin's *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*.¹³ Each of these foregoing examples, in fact, points to some of the revisions of the recent past that must be further pursued and analyzed.

The field of black women's studies and history is rapidly gaining ground as the historical profession finally, if slowly, comes to terms with the concept of gender as an historical construct.

At the same time, these examples point to the centrality of Afro-American history in the American experience, which is the second area I would like to examine here. A prime example here that reaches into the past but has great importance for us today is Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*.¹⁴ This massive synthesis of Reconstruction studies that have been done over the years is noteworthy because it places the black experience at the heart of the matter. While there is much in Foner's book that will need more extensive treatment elsewhere (for example, I am not totally convinced that Foner has analyzed the intraracial class dimensions satisfactorily and much work remains to be done on Reconstruction's effects on the free blacks of the North), it is nonetheless a tremendous achievement that vindicates W. E. B. Du Bois's classic work *Black Reconstruction*.¹⁵ Even more im-

portant are the lessons that can be culled from the book regarding our own times. The failure of America to redress racial inequalities during Reconstruction continues to haunt us today. Foner's retelling of the story not only sets the record straight in terms of what happened but also enables us to see a little more clearly why Reconstruction ultimately failed even though this country at first seemed to be on the way to becoming a truly interracial democracy.

Despite its inherently political implications, black history is important for more than political reasons. It is important, for example, to the historical profession as that discipline continues to attempt to redress the distorted (and in many cases invisible) portrait that historians in the past have painted of black people in the nation's history. Whatever political affiliation one has, the fact of the matter is that black history is integral to our general knowledge of United States history. We cannot begin to understand the meaning of such abstract terms as freedom or states rights, or the basic meaning of the Constitution, if we fail to include the experience of African Americans. Likewise, recounting the history of slavery, the Civil War, or Reconstruction seems incomprehensible without seeing and knowing how black people participated, thought, and lived during those periods. Moreover, the inclusion of black experience should help white Americans understand their particular role in creating this nation. Afro-American history, when truly understood as integral to American history, challenges us as historians and citizens to begin to reconceptualize American history. For there is a symbiotic relationship going on there. And in a large and significant sense the growth of women's history and women's studies alerts us to that symbiosis and perhaps can deepen and enrich Afro-American history and our rethinking of American history.

This third area of importance, the inclusion of gender as an historical construct, along with the growth of black women's history, as mentioned above, had its impetus from the gains brought forth by the women's movement and the rise of women's studies programs at colleges and universities throughout the country. The field of black women's studies and history is rapidly gaining ground as the historical profession finally, if slowly, comes to terms with the concept of gender as an historical construct.

I would argue that the best work in this area in recent years is that of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Deborah G. White, Trudier Harris, Hortense Spillers, and Darlene Clark Hine among others. There are, of course, also many other women completing projects that will enhance our understanding of the role that black women played in the making of American and Afro-American history.

I am particularly intrigued with Fox-Genovese's book *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*.¹⁶ While this volume is a model of historical scholarship, even more impressive is the care and skill with which Fox-Genovese weaves gender throughout her study. Given the quality and import of Fox-Genovese's book, it is hard to imagine how any serious history could be written from now on without adequately taking gender into consideration as an important force in the lives of people, black and white. And here again Fox-

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Genovese has recognized the importance of the centrality of black history within the whole of American history. Without a doubt there are those who will disagree with some of Fox-Genovese's formulations. For example, she is not enamored of the separatist arm of the women's movement, which espouses complete autonomy from men, nor is she entirely convinced of the Afrocentric perspective. Yet, her own argument is so well supported by the evidence she mounts that it will take equally serious scholarship from those in opposing quarters to offset it. In addition, Fox-Genovese has carefully made distinctions between her own perspective and that of various schools of thought around issues of the social oppression of women, the questions of patriarchy, the role of class and race, and the use of primary materials in recovering the past. And this is all in the first chapter.¹⁷ I am not sure that will happen in the foreseeable future. At this point we have a work of prodigious scholarship that most likely will set the trend for quite a few years to come.

The task now before black historians is one of elucidating the transformation of a diasporic African people into Afro-Americans and exploring the ways in which that transformation helped to not only create a unique Afro-American culture but also an American culture. More attention will have to be paid to the settlement of black people in areas outside of the urban landscape, particularly in the northern rural areas like upstate New York and New England so that similarities and contrasts can be drawn with the experiences of southern blacks.¹⁸

Black historians will also have to continue to give serious attention both to questions of class — and to blacks' relations with other ethnic groups in American society. My research on the black middle class in Philadelphia, upstate New York, and nationally suggests that there is much of importance here especially when we consider how black people in that class (or the working class for that matter) have

viewed themselves. I am finding that their ideas about their class position are not akin to what many social scientists have offered to us. Here the growth of comparative studies in slavery will have to be extended into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to look at such areas as Reconstruction, Progressivism, and the triumph of corporate capitalism internationally.

And, of course, black historians will have to immerse themselves in the gender construct that Fox-Genovese and other women historians, black and white, have put forth so as to enlarge their scope and understanding of the active role that black women have played in the course of history.

A final word needs to be said about the future generations of African-American historians. While at first glance the prospects look grim, a closer examination reveals that the gains made in the profession through scholarship have been of such high quality that it seems unlikely that African Americans will ever again be shrouded in invisibility. To their credit, much of that excellent work has been undertaken by serious and committed white scholars. However, if it is argued, as Thomas Holt does in his excellent introduction to Darlene Clark Hine's important collection of essays *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, that "an Afrocentric perspective is essential to any attempt to reconstruct the Afro-American experience but that simultaneously one must locate that experience within the context of larger American, and indeed global developments," then we are going to need more young people of color to enter the profession.¹⁹

Indeed, the question of whether there will be a fifth generation of black scholars is a haunting one. Given the material conditions of the African-American populace and the pernicious political atmos-

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phere of the past decade and the present, any hopes for a fifth generation are pretty grim. For example, in 1989 only 811 doctorates were awarded to Afro-Americans in all fields (as compared to 1,056 in 1979), and the latest figures reveal that blacks comprise only four percent of all faculty in this nation's colleges.²⁰ What's more, it does not seem likely that this situation will change in the near future; the latest figures show a marked decline in the enrollments of black males in the nation's colleges. It is important, then, that the profession create opportunities

for young black scholars, men and women, to train, teach, and write history. Whatever good purpose there may be in understanding the centrality of black history in American history and in furthering our rethinking of American history, it is of no use at all if it is not accessible to young people, black and white. That means we need scholars who are willing to study and teach black history and scholars who

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are willing to make black history, and history in general, available to the public at large.

An example of the foregoing may spell out what I mean more clearly. In April of 1988, I was invited to make a presentation at the Chemung County Historical Society's Symposium on African-American History and Culture in upstate New York. Since I have been working for quite sometime on a history of Afro-Americans in that region, I was excited about the opportunity to meet some of the people who were beginning to do work in that area (it has oftentimes felt very lonely doing this study). As it turned out, the affair was a great success primarily because it was open to the public. I learned again what we all, as professional historians, probably already know: that our profession has become so specialized in the past two decades that we have almost lost the intelligent lay audience to whom we should be writing and speaking. It was therefore a wonderful surprise to find genuine interest in the work I was doing. Moreover, it reaffirmed my belief that as historians we have a responsibility to not only put our work before our colleagues but also to present it in a manner that can have real meaning for the general public.²¹

In other words, younger generations of both blacks and whites can only benefit from our labors in the fields of research if we are willing to make that history accessible to them. That is yet another one of the primary aims of black history—to make the past experiences of African Americans easily known and available to all. But our goal must not simply be to help them to know what the contributions of blacks were; rather it must be to let Americans know the Afro-American past so that they may better see the whole picture of our nation's past as a means of improving themselves as citizens and as human beings. Studies such as those I have mentioned here have gone a long ways toward accomplishing this goal, but there is still much work to be done if we do not want to enter the twenty-first century historically il-

literate. That is a disaster that must be avoided at all costs.

Endnotes

¹Meier, A., & Rudwick, E. (1987). *Black History and the Historical Profession*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. In my opinion, a better overview of this topic can be found in chapter 12 of Novick, P. (1988). *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²There are numerous texts that can be cited here. I will only mention some more well known historians: Peter Wood, Gary Mullins, Vincent Harding, Sterling Stuckey, George Rawick, Orlando Patterson, Franklin Knight, Deborah G. White, Willie Lee Rose, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Albert Raboteau. A fairly judicious guide to the various schools in slavery studies is Parish, P. (1989). *Slavery: History and Historians*. New York: Harper & Row. Another work that has been much underrated yet, from my reading, is a major achievement in synthesis, analysis, and reinterpretation is Fogel, R. W. (1989). *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*. New York: W. W. Norton.

³Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The Education of Black People in the South: 1865-1965*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Butchart, R. E. (1977). *Northern Teachers, Southern Blacks and Reconstruction*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

⁴I am thinking here of the 19th century novels written by southern women that many southern women's historians are currently using. In a similar manner, the study of novels by black women has seen a resurgence that cannot help but energize contemporary Afro-American history.

⁵Gitlin, T. (1987). *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam Books; Isserman, M. (1987). *If I Had a Hammer . . . : The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left*. New York: Basic Books; Miller, J. (1987). *Democracy Is in the Streets*. New York: Simon and Schuster; Farber, D. (1988). *Chicago '68*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶Branch, T. (1988). *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon and Schuster. This is the first volume of a two-volume study that is destined to become a classic in the growing field of civil rights histories. The second volume is entitled *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1968*. My own forthcoming work, *The Fruits of Integration: The Evolution of the Black Middle Class, 1920-1990*, examines the crucial role that the black middle class played in that era.

⁷Caute, D. (1988). *The Year of the Barricades*. New York: Harper and Row; Matusow, A. (1984). *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York: Harper and Row. Other writers, mostly liberals turned neo-conservatives, have been negatively reassessing the sixties for most of the eighties. Such persons include Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, and Michael Horowitz. For a fine series of critical essays examining the sixties see Sayres, S. et al. (Eds.). (1984). *The 60's Without Apology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸This is especially true of the widely commented on motion picture, *Mississippi Burning*. Hollywood is putting more of these films out, thus it seems imperative that black historians and the profession as a whole be alerted to the dangers of distortion. Even more interesting is the fact that the television industry has produced more accurate portrayals than has the motion pictures industry. See, for example, *Eyes on the Prize II*. (1990). Henry Hampton, producer, Blackside Productions; and *Murder in Mississippi*. (1990). David Wolper, producer: NBC.

⁹Stuckey, S. (1987). *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰Kaufman, J. (1988). *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America*. New York: Scribner.

¹¹Lester, J. (1988). *Lovesong: On Becoming a Jew*. New York: H. Holt; see also Lester, J. (1976). *All Is Well*. New York: Morrow. Lester is currently compiling a book of his essays from the seventies and the eighties entitled *Falling Pieces from a Broken Sky*. This forthcoming work should elicit some fruitful comparisons with an earlier collection of his columns from the *Guardian*, *Revolutionary Notes* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

¹²Bloom, A. (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster; and Jacoby, R. (1987). *The Last Intellectuals*. New York: Basic Books.

¹³Martin, W. E., Jr. (1984). *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

¹⁴Foner, E. (1988). *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper & Row.

¹⁵Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). *Black Reconstruction*. New York: Russell & Russell.

¹⁶Fox-Genovese, E. (1988). *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

¹⁷This first chapter alone will hopefully stir years of fruitful discussion regarding the importance of gender construction in history. More importantly, it is hoped that the rich discussion of the interplay between race, class, and gender will push us all further down the road to looking at American history in a more inclusive and total manner, rather than narrowly divided and subdivided abstract specialities.

¹⁸See for example my article: Banner-Haley, C. T. (1989, January). An Extended Community: Sketches of Afro-American Culture and Family in Three Counties Along New York State's Southern Tier, 1890-1980. *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 13, 1. I am also presently

engaged in writing a two-volume history of Afro-Americans in upstate New York, the second volume of which will be devoted to a comparison of the growth of that region's black communities with that of southern and western Afro-American communities.

¹⁹Hine, D. C. (1986). *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

²⁰American Council on Education. (1989). *American Council on Education 1989 Report*. Washington, DC: Author.

²¹It is my hope that a volume of those essays, as well as essays from the conferences held in April 1989 and 1990, will be compiled and edited by myself for publication.

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