"Historicism, Understanding, and Judgment: A Response to Curtis J. Evans"

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Curtis J. Evans and I agree on many things. We agree that Booker T. Washington disparaged the religious life of Afro-Americans in many venues for many years. We agree that he directed his critique not so much at black people themselves as at the wealthy white benefactors before whom he spent so much of his time asking for money. We agree that Washington's criticism of black religion contained a set of assumptions about social life, individual moral obligation, and the ethical efficacy of an individual's participation in the market economy, which today often go under the shorthand of *Victorianism*. And we agree that his criticism cannot be understood apart from the much wider conversation that was taking place around him that he sought to divert, manipulate, and control. We agree on so much that I am tempted to thank Evans for his nuanced and sympathetic response—and leave it at that.

But we have one small point of divergence that I am glad he has given me an opportunity to address. Evans correctly relays my plea for scholars to avoid the question of Washington's culpability. I suggest that we do so in order to focus instead on the structural determinants and system of oppression within which Washington had to live and work. Evans seems to support my call up to a point, noting that white reformers viewed "moral fitness and bourgeois behavior . . . as a precondition of citizenship" that many Afro-Americans ostensibly lacked. Washington's civilizing mission only makes sense within this context. Yet Evans still retains a critical posture toward Washington himself. He claims that Afro-American churches "expressed blacks' culture and aspirations" because they were the sole institutions within black control. Washington's criticism of black churches, given their cultural significance to many southern Afro-Americans, was "tantamount to a denial of their [Afro-Americans'] full humanity and their fitness for any claims to citizenship." Because lynching apologists and segregationists advanced similar claims as they set up the formal and informal structures of segregation, Evans concludes, "I am more than willing to blame this [triumph of white supremacy] partly on his leadership style and his active role as a moral agent who spoke as an interpreter of southern black culture."[1]

It is not that I lack sympathy with such a response. But moral agency is situated in historical context. To assess Washington's responsibility or to evaluate what Evans calls Washington's "leadership style" often closes off more promising avenues of inquiry by deemphasizing the system within which Washington worked and that sought to control him.[2] So as much as I agree with Evans that Washington was "a moral agent who spoke as an interpreter of southern black culture" and therefore bears a certain amount of responsibility for the system of segregation that his statements reinforced, I distrust the impulse to retroactively assign *blame*.[3] It risks judgment without understanding and too often short-circuits the process of historical inquiry. In the gray scale of moral choice that many difficult questions confront, Washington stands as a figure of thwarted intention, pathos, and tragedy. Precisely because Washington was at the interstices of many important issues, he offers historians an entry into some of the most difficult and painful questions of the American past. By avoiding blame we avert the temptation to moralize or to justify. Evans falls victim to neither, but other less sensitive interpreters who have started down the path of assigning blame have ended only with pointed fingers.

It is more productive to bracket the issue of responsibility in order to view Washington as a means of illuminating the wider world of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States. One important aspect of this world that I tried to address in my original essay was the meaning and significance of nineteenth-century liberalism. I argued that Washington's civilizing mission made sense within the classical liberalism of the time, but that classical liberalism often had an elective affinity

for racist paternalism that could be seen in Washington's actions and those of his contemporaries. The nineteenth-century political-economy of liberalism consisted of three essential features: a natural rights philosophy, a representative government, and the advent of the modern capitalist system. We can all agree that liberal market systems require the internalization of certain cultural values for success in those systems, traits like long-range planning ability, the embrace of deferred gratification, the submission to clock-time, and a sense of balance between consumption and savings (money management), among others. One of the abiding questions of nineteenth-century liberalism was: what is the relationship between these characteristics necessary for economic success and the right of political representation in a liberal political system? As Evans rightly points out, many post-Civil War philanthropists seemed to connect personal economic virtues and market fitness with inclusion in the political system. Others treated economic virtues and political representation as two separate issues, connecting political inclusion instead to natural rights.[4]

Bracketing the question of Washington's responsibility and focusing instead, in this instance, on liberalism and its meanings suggests a host of more productive avenues. The tension within liberalism—whether or not political representation was connected to market fitness or to natural rights—goes a long way toward explaining the differences between Washington and Du Bois, for example. Washington seemed to accept the idea that a lack of economic virtues might preclude some people from political representation, but he conversely assumed that the acquisition of appropriate economic characteristics would usher Afro-Americans into political representation and full citizenship. As he explained in his Atlanta Exposition address, "no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized."[5] Du Bois agreed with Washington, at least to some extent, on what he called "the Negro's degradation," that is, ignorance resulting from slavery. But he objected to "the distinct impression left by Mr. Washington's propaganda . . . that the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro" on account of that degradation. Rejecting Washington's connection of economic virtues and political inclusion, Du Bois connected political inclusion to natural rights so that all people everywhere deserved representation and participation in a political system.[6]

Putting the issue in this way suggests that their argument was not about leadership style, nor strategic approach, but a basic argument over political philosophy that cut to the core of an ongoing tension within liberalism itself. It would return in slightly different form in the 1965 Moynihan report, which was authored by the future Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, paid for by the Department of Labor, and purported to lay out the next step in post-Civil Rights black progress. The report claimed that it was a "harsh fact . . . that as a group, at the present time, in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life, they [Negroes] are not equal to most of those groups with which they will be competing." Among "the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups" that compete in American economic life, it continued, "Negroes are among the weakest."[7] Because a "tangle of pathology" ensnared Afro-Americans, cultural dysfunction "seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole."[8] So even though the report accepted that Afro-Americans should have political rights, it still fretted that "[w]hat Gunnar Myrdal said in An American Dilemma remains true today: *'America is free to chose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity.'"*[9] Understanding Washington helps us to understand this strain of liberalism.

Likewise, Washington's actions only make sense within what W. Fitzhugh Brundage has called "the 'moral economy' of white supremacy."[10] Segregationism derived moral sanction from religious groups in the North and South, a sanction that was highly articulated, firmly established, and widely shared. Washington worked within this moral economy, sometimes affirming, sometimes resisting, sometimes redirecting its major tenets. In doing so he showed its tensions, its contradictions, and, yes, even its constrained possibilities. Yet because so much scholarship has focused narrowly on the person of Washington and his culpability within this system, these larger issues have often been lost or dissolved into the tired dichotomy of *accommodation* versus *resistance*. My attempt to recast Washington as an indigenous collaborator sought to move us beyond these smaller questions that, it seems to me, have reached a cul-de-sac. My plea is not that we indefinitely suspend moral judgment or fail to draw moral distinctions. Moral pusillanimity is not the goal. But moral judgment without understanding is cheap and too often masquerades in a posture of discernment. Many people over a long period of time regarded segregation as both a morally righteous system and a personal ethical obligation. They used the language of religion and morality to explain white supremacy. Washington worked within this intellectual system. That system is now rejected. We can assume that those with whom Washington interacted were guilty of bad faith, or we can assume that they meant what they said and seek to understand the moral, religious, and intellectual claims that they made in support of segregation. Explaining how people could maintain moral positions that are now repugnant to us is one of the most difficult challenges of history. But to seriously face this question is to fully embrace the historicism that our discipline needs in order to move forward.[11]

Booker T. Washington stands at the conjunction of all these issues. They are among the most important in our history. Why has liberalism so often aligned itself with discriminatory practices? Why did religious people provide such a bulwark for white supremacy? How has the promise of American democracy remained so long unrealized? Embracing historicism allows us to bracket the question of culpability to address these questions. I am afraid that if we pause to blame Washington without considering the wider system in which he worked, we may not address the wider context at all. Then the blame will be on us.

It is a rare thing to find an interlocutor who displays in equal measure such sympathy and critical engagement, so I want to stress again my thanks to Curtis J. Evans for his generous, thorough, and nuanced response. I very much look forward to seeing how he deals with these issues in his forthcoming book, *The Burden of Black Religion*.

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[1] Curtis J. Evans, "Booker T. Washington and the Quest for an Industrialized and Civilized Religion for Black Southerners," *Journal of Southern Religion* 10 (2007), http://jsr.fsu.edu/Volume10/Evans.htm.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] These categories and claims arise out of my extended conversation with David L. Davis about the meaning and effects of liberalism, although Davis may not agree with what I claim here. See David L. Davis, "The 'Negro Question': Philanthropy, Education, and Citizenship in the Gilded-Age South" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2007). On the issue of liberalism and civic belonging more generally, see Mark S. Weiner, *Black Trials: Citizenship from the Beginnings of Slavery to the End of Caste* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
[5] Booker T. Washington, "The Standard Printed Version of the Atlanta Exposition Address," September 18, 1895, in Louis R. Harlan et al., eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (14 vols.; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972-1989), 3:586.
[6] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (1903; new ed., New York: Norton, 1999), 44.
[7] United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1965) [hereafter cited as "Moynihan Report"], http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm.
[8] Moynihan Report, http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/moynchapter4.htm.
[9] Moynihan Report, http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm. Italics original.
[10] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6.
[11] My argument here is very close to that of Thomas L. Haskell, who criticizes proponents of the social control and class hegemony thesis for their tendency "to terminate their inquiry prematurely" when they level the charge of bad faith. See Thomas L. Haskell, "A Brief Excursus on Formalism," *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 308.

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