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Returning to the Principles and Practice of Black Struggle

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In an era where black people can be killed by white people for just listening to loud music or walking around their own apartment, it's no surprise that a movement has sprung up demanding that black lives matter. It's therefore no surprise that scholars would turn to the rich history of black Americans' struggle against white tyranny for inspiration in the face of today's existential crisis. Two recent texts have contributed to this endeavour, Struggle on Their Minds: The Political Thought of African American Resistance, by Alex Zamalin, and Black Natural Law by Vincent W. Lloyd. Both writers present a contemporary study of a wide range of black philosophers who teach us about the significance of marrying theory and practise in these two similarly structured volumes. Finally, Zamalin and Lloyd contribute to contemporary political theory by demonstrating the importance of taking black thinkers seriously and highlighting the ways in which they go beyond and enhance the arbitrarily defined boundaries of American political thought and natural law theory, respectively.

Zamalin draws on the writings of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis in In Struggle on Their Minds to provide a detailed overview of black American resistance to injustice. 'Resistance can designate numerous behaviours,' Zamalin argues, recognising that the term has been used to describe everything from seemingly apolitical actions such as black adolescents sagging their pants to full-fledged violent revolts. Few phrases, however, are as widely used, misunderstood, and overused as they are ill-defined and omnipresent'. As a result, Zamalin's goal is to "provid[e] an intellectual history of when racial inequality opposition was evident in significant African American political formations." 'If resistance is at once an activity and an experience that resists comprehensive analysis because it has no singular essence – if there is no way to ever develop a fully philosophical definition of the practise itself – we should study moments in which what occurs can clearly be called "resistance", as he explains. Zamalin, on the other hand, does not simply recount historical moments of resistance;

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he also "challenges the view that African American political thinkers simply embraced the standard ideas of American political culture, which revolves around the public philosophies of liberalism and civic republicanism." In this way, Zamalin gives us a theoretical and practical description of black American resistance.

By engaging in in-depth critical analysis and rhetorical exegesis, Zamalin effectively accomplishes these two goals. Zamalin's multi-faceted approach to the writings of the numerous authors emphasises these black philosophers' experiential, existential, and performative components. As a result, readers are urged to appreciate the value of scepticism, pain, and human complexity in the African American resistance heritage. The book's first chapter demonstrates Zamalin's virtuosity, as he not only unpacks Walker's philosophical argument, but also analyses the significance of Walker's use of question marks as a rhetorical weapon to encourage black Americans to reject their enslavement. This outstanding multidisciplinary analysis is carried over into Zamalin's consideration of Wells' campaign against lynching, and by the last chapter, he has effortlessly woven all of his ideas into dialogue with Davis.

Despite the book's many positive aspects, Zamalin's attempts to define such a difficult topic as resistance unavoidably raise some issues. What all of the ideas Zamalin has chosen to analyse in his text have in common, according to him, is that they all "come under the broad umbrella of radicalism." He then on to explain why Martin Luther King, Jr. was not included in his list of thinkers to be investigated. While one can always argue about the inclusion or exclusion of certain thinkers on any given topic, Zamalin's discussion of resistance appears to be more at fault for not including King than for having no significant discussion of a black radical tradition that calls for a complete separation from the American state. In this sense, Zamalin's argument may have been strengthened by comparing those resisters who were devoted to the American democratic goal with those who, at least verbally, hinted at a democratic future beyond the American state.

One of Zamalin's more perceptive conclusions, found in his Conclusion, would have been bolstered by a more rigorous exploration of an alternative way to resistance. He claims that African American resisters continued to embrace the vocabulary and concepts of American exceptionalism in part because they were "pragmatically

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conscious of the way they limit American politics." 'Here is one essential paradox of resistance: without the new lexicon resisters generate, the potential of dramatic change would always be ignored in favour of gradual transformation,' he continues. However, the more effectively opposition creates a new political lexicon, the less likely it is to be heard'. One could argue that a 'both/and' attitude to resistance, rather than a 'either/or,' characterises every epoch of substantial black resistance. That is, because there were always more radical alternatives giving voice to a form of resistance that exceeded the bounds of American exceptionalism, black Americans were able to strategically deploy the language of American exceptionalism and not accept gradualism – a point not adequately captured in Zamalin's discussion.

Zamalin's discussion is likely best exemplified in his chapters on Newton and Davis. Although Zamalin cites Newton's critique of American nationhood briefly in the chapter, it is a minor point. Instead, Zamalin spends more time talking about Newton's resistance to police brutality. Similarly, his chapter on Davis focuses mostly on her opposition to the prison industrial complex. An in-depth investigation of Newton's mature thinking on revolutionary intercommunalism, and whether this is correctly regarded as resistance – or at least an explanation of why Zamalin left it out of consideration – is missing, for example. One can wonder how Zamalin's effort might have been improved if Newton's dedication to the American democratic project had been reconciled or contrasted with his appeals for conceiving a future outside the American nation state.

Lloyd also delves into the writings of a group of authors who will be familiar to most readers: Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Each of these authors produced performances for his or her audience that tried to evoke reason, feeling, and imagination,' Lloyd writes of his decision to investigate the work of these intellectuals. Each aimed to empower readers or listeners to recognise their own human nature, and hence to inspire them to engage in ideological critique and social movement organisation.' Lloyd recognises that 'natural law means many things to many people – but proponents of any specific brand of natural law sometimes act as if they are the only advocates of it,' as Zamalin does in his explanation of the ubiquity of resistance. In light of this, Lloyd contends that

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"African Americans have their own heritage of ethical and political inquiry; European notions and practises do not need to be imported and adapted to the African American context." Lloyd, on the other hand, expands on this limited argument, claiming that "black natural law offers the finest way to approach politics, not just for blacks, but for everyone." Lloyd then ups the ante by claiming that "blacks have privileged access to natural law," which means that "every ethical and political theory should begin with blacks' insights, rather than relegating them to a last chapter or an illustration of one of many sorts of difference." Lloyd's initiative is commendable in its ambition. Black American philosophers have been consigned to the outskirts of canonical discussions for far too long.

Lloyd's book is a series of in-depth examinations of each author, in which he extols passion as a virtue to be admired and appreciated. Indeed, Lloyd claims that what distinguishes the black natural law tradition from other natural law traditions is its emphasis on emotion as a factor that, when taken into account, allows us to have a more complete knowledge of the entire human being. In this sense, emotion is complementary to, rather than diametrically opposed to, rationality, as many European natural law philosophers believe. Thus, Lloyd's greatest contribution is his ability to go beyond secular or rationalistic interpretations of each individual and offer a creative and exciting way of engaging their thought and activity. Rather than reading King's later work as becoming increasingly radical, Lloyd argues that "the most powerful political insights can be harvested by appreciating King's distinctively theological and distinctively black voice," and that "this distinctive voice is most evident before King starts speaking with increasing frequency to a secular white audience." Lloyd challenges traditional narratives about popular philosophers while also highlighting their longstanding commitment to a black radical legacy by rereading prior thinkers through the lens of black natural law tradition.

Lloyd believes that the black natural law tradition disintegrated during the civil rights struggle, in addition to his lofty normative claims regarding its relevance. Lloyd speculates that Clarence Thomas was a victim of sorts as a result of this assertion. 'Rather than saying that Thomas undermines the black natural law heritage, I argue that following the civil rights movement, the tradition fell into incoherence,' he writes.

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Only nonsensical shards remained for Thomas to grasp, which he linked together with conservative, politicised understandings of natural law in his ultimately incoherent political philosophy'. To be clear, Lloyd does not say that black natural law vanished as a result of the civil rights movement; rather, he claims that it was separated from the black natural law legacy. Lloyd makes several questionable assumptions about those who follow the tradition and those who do not in order to further his thesis. 'How, therefore, can Du Bois be regarded as a natural law theorist?' Lloyd wonders after recognising that 'it frequently looks as though [the latter] Du Bois has no ethical or philosophical framework as he weighs in on matters of the day.' 'Du Bois does offer long thoughts on human nature,' he explains. He makes normative judgments as well. It is crucial to establish that Du Bois' normative judgments flow from his studies on human nature in order to show that he belongs to a natural law tradition.' 'It is not necessary to establish that Du Bois himself argues in this way; all that is required is to demonstrate that this explanation of human nature is capable of supplying reasons for the normative judgements he presents,' he says. Lloyd goes on to say that researchers' attention to Du Bois' concept of race and double consciousness is a "distraction" from his "most significant insights," which revolve around his belief that black people have special access to God. Because he 'charges blacks with using their insights to alter the world for the better, and he tacitly contends that this can be done by seeking to implement natural law,' Du Bois is a member of the black natural law tradition. For inclusion in the black natural law tradition, this initial proclamation appears to be a rather low threshold to clear.

Despite the fact that there is a very low bar for what constitutes participation in the black natural law tradition, Lloyd believes it has crumbled since the civil rights struggle. Many thinkers spring to mind who seem to carry on this tradition, but James Cone's exclusion is odd. To be clear, Lloyd does not dismiss Cone entirely. Instead, Lloyd incorporates Cone, who is regarded as one of the foremost black theological thinkers of the post-civil rights era, into a discussion with Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey. Despite the fact that Cone's evident Christian vision of human nature goes beyond the secular and rational and gives an ideology criticism, Lloyd claims that he is not considered a part of the

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black natural law tradition because he was not involved in social movement organising. "Cone utilises Christian theological terminology to argue that blackness and liberation might offer such a critical political practise," Lloyd explains, "but Cone's thinking stays at a distance from the practicalities of politics." It's difficult to reconcile how Du Bois, who only implicitly argues that blacks should change the world by attempting to implement natural law, is included in the black natural law tradition while Cone, whose explicit invocations of natural law have had a significant impact on post-civil rights political movements, is not. Because the originator of Black Liberation Theology is not included, the reader is left to wonder who or what makes up the black natural law heritage, and what relevance it has in today's struggle against oppression. Lloyd's great goals appear to outweigh his capacity to perform in this regard.

The paintings of Zamalin and Lloyd can be defined as acts of political resistance in and of themselves, especially in light of the constant racial brutality committed upon the black body. Because they place black thinkers at the centre of contemporary political thought, they reassert the dignity and humanity of black lives. Furthermore, rather than dismissing black Americans' emotional reactions to their repressive circumstances, they show that emotion has always been an important part of the black liberation struggle. However, their works also contain a few cautionary notes. The first is that the black resistance and black natural law traditions' utility may be harmed by their widespread use. For example, if anything can be considered an act of resistance, the term loses its meaning. The second word of caution is that efforts to reduce their pervasiveness may unintentionally marginalise sectors of the black community. In Zamalin's example, his attempt to narrow the definition of resistance left out a long history of black American resistance to the American democratic goal. Meanwhile, Lloyd's attempts to limit the black natural law tradition's ubiquity demonstrate that, without a clear boundary, deciding who is included or excluded appears arbitrary at best. Finally, by creating the conceptual basis, Zamalin and Lloyd have given readers a solid foundation on which to engage in the inevitable debates about who best reflects these political traditions.

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