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In The Shadow of Dubois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America, by Robert Gooding-Williams. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 368 pp.

The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy, by Melvin L. Rogers. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 352 pp.

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American democracy's complex entanglement with domination is obscured by the two prevailing traditions of American political thought. Liberalism, with its one-dimensional conception of power and its fundamental distinction between the public and private realms, often fails to identify structural forms of domination or redress those forms that do not emanate from the public authority of the state. Republicanism would seem to offer a richer understanding of the social and economic preconditions of meaningful political equality and recognize the government's role in securing those conditions. But the oligarchic and paternalistic republicanism that has often governed in the United States has also worked to legitimate dramatic inequalities of wealth and power and weakened democratic accountability. Scholarly preoccupation with these two traditions has, moreover, obscured the dissenting tradition most critically engaged with the entanglement of domination and democracy in America: the radical democratic tradition.¹ Democratic theorists have begun to productively examine this tradition, which can be traced from the self-created authorities of the American Revolution, through the movement cultures of radical abolitionism and American populism, and up to the organizing practices of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Industrial Areas Foundation. The books under review both exemplify and extend this examination, offering robust accounts of the abovementioned entanglement and distinctive radical democratic responses to it—one derived from the work of Frederick Douglass, the other from John Dewey. These works make important contributions to our understanding not only of their central figures, but also of the broader shape and contour of American

political thought, and its potential contributions to contemporary theoretical argument.

Both Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois placed racial domination at the heart of American democracy, the former by examining the deeply embedded “organization of slave power” in the United States and the latter by exposing slavery’s many afterlives, its spiritual and material legacy for those living on both sides of the color line. Robert Gooding-Williams’s new book is one of the best existing studies of Du Bois’s political thought, but its primary aim is to critically interrogate the authoritative political vision that Du Bois bequeathed to black politics, which Gooding-Williams calls a “politics of expressive self-realization” (4). He turns to Douglass, in a single chapter and largely through a brilliant reading of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, to reconstruct an alternative, more radically democratic response to white supremacy, which Gooding-Williams calls “plantation politics” (13). Gooding-Williams invokes Douglass, in other words, to *step out* from “the shadow of Du Bois,” and to reorient and reinvigorate black politics in the post-Civil Rights era. He centers these competing emancipatory visions on three issues that have defined historical efforts to overcome white supremacy in the United States: the understanding of black political agency, the nature of black identity, and the precise mechanisms of racial domination. The contrast of Du Bois and Douglass—rather than Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, for example—not only brings these differing frameworks into sharp analytic focus but disrupts the formulaic distinction between integrationist and separatist approaches to black politics. Gooding-Williams shows that this familiar framework—with Douglass, Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr., on one side of the register, and Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X on the other—actually flows from presuppositions that quietly sustain the expressive, foundationalist, and ruler-based politics he aims to uproot.² Gooding-Williams’s displacement of this familiar distinction, along with his persuasive identification of a distinctive “Afro-modern tradition of political thought,” will likely shape future scholarship and be two of the book’s lasting influences.

This review cannot fully render the richness of Gooding-Williams’s reading of Du Bois. The book is filled with novel insights and arguments that establish unexplored intellectual influences on Du Bois—from William Wordsworth’s appropriation of the Kantian sublime to Gustav Schmöller’s understanding of ethical consciousness and social transformation—while perhaps overlooking others (e.g., Ralph Waldo Emerson). Gooding-Williams recognizes that Du Bois’s agile movement across genres requires a similar agility in his readers, sometimes demanding rigorous conceptual analysis and at other times attentiveness to the text’s rhetorical and formal dimensions. In chapter two, for

example, Gooding-Williams offers a revealing paragraph-by-paragraph examination of an oft-cited passage from the chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in *The Souls of Black Folk* that demonstrates the overlooked importance of Du Bois’s conceptual distinction between “two-ness” and “double consciousness.” In another chapter, Gooding-Williams takes a decidedly literary approach, teasing out allusions to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Wagner’s *Lohengrin* to elucidate an expressivist argument about black leadership that Du Bois resists making explicitly.

Gooding-Williams thus reconstructs the politics of expressive self-realization he believes has enthralled later scholars and activists. This framework affirms that (1) black political agency centers on leaders who must elevate the black “masses” and integrate them into Euro-American modernity; (2) black identity is a spiritual folk ethos with unitary coherence antecedent to political struggles against racial domination; and (3) racial domination is an anomalous form of social exclusion that can be overcome through integration or recognition. Some of the criticisms Gooding-Williams elaborates overlap with familiar critiques of Du Bois’s elitist invocation of the “talented tenth,” or with what Adolph Reed has called Du Bois’s theory of “racial custodianship.” But Gooding-Williams ultimately targets a more fundamental presupposition animating the politics of expressive self-realization: the basic equation of politics with a form of rule. He counters this equation with an “action-in-concert” vision of politics that resonates with the work of Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, but that Gooding-Williams elaborates primarily through the writings of Frederick Douglass and, secondarily, Ralph Ellison. These resources enable a more textured and historically situated account of radical democratic politics than that typically found in contemporary democratic theory, one built around “forging and nurturing solidarities through acts of resistance” (12).

The vision of plantation politics Gooding-Williams constructs from these writers offers different answers to each of the central issues listed above. First, while Douglass was the most important black leader in nineteenth-century America, Gooding-Williams shows that he envisioned the political leader as an “initiative taker” who “spurs his fellows to meet and deliberate,” rather than a Moses designated to lead his people to the promised land (187). Second, plantation politics’ race consciousness is based in shared experiences of domination and resistance, in the common purposes that generate and sustain political *solidarity*, rather than antecedently given, expressive, or descent-based political *identity*. And, third, rather than viewing white supremacy as anomalous social exclusion, Douglass understands it as a form of domination “intrinsic to the basic arrangements of society” and sustained by society’s

hegemonic value orientations and practices (252). Overcoming racial domination therefore requires not merely the integration of excluded minorities, but “radical reconstructionism,” a revision of the basic norms and practices of citizenship broadly understood. This last claim will be questioned by those who embrace the familiar portrait of Douglass as liberal constitutionalist, and more time might have been spent anticipating these objections, but in the end I was persuaded by Gooding-Williams’s radical democratic account. On each of these registers—the understanding of political agency, identity, and domination—plantation politics provocatively engages arguments in contemporary radical democratic theory, as well as pressing issues confronting any emancipatory politics of racial equality in a purportedly “post-racial” political era.

John Dewey has also been recently rediscovered as a radical democratic thinker. The once familiar portrait of Dewey as a Progressive-era technocrat with a Promethean faith in scientific solutions to social dilemmas has been displaced by contemporary scholars, most influentially Robert Westbrook, who present Dewey as a tireless advocate of participatory democracy and a radical non-Marxist critic of corporate capitalism. This rehabilitation of Dewey as radical democrat has brought his work into productive conversation with contemporary deliberative democrats and antifoundationalist pragmatists alike. Melvin Rogers’s exhaustively researched and revisionist new book pushes this engagement with democratic theory further, defending Dewey not only against such trenchant critics as Reinhold Neibuhr, Christopher Lasch, and John Patrick Diggins, but also against Westbrook, Hillary Putnam, and Cornel West, all of whom admire Dewey but nonetheless worry about his overriding faith in political “reconciliation through intelligence” (3). Rogers presents Dewey as a thinker attuned to the tragic reality of irreducible conflict in social and political life, and attentive to the ethical resources of human limitation and fallibility in navigating that conflict. If Gooding-Williams’s Douglass enters contemporary debates in radical democratic theory around questions of agency, identity, and power, Rogers’s Dewey engages contemporary radical democrats interested in deep pluralism, weak ontology, and the importance of a contestable democratic ethos to political contexts stripped of a unifying ethical horizon. Rogers’s Dewey resembles the radical democrats of the “ethical turn.”

Rogers presents his “undiscovered Dewey” through a reinterpretation of Darwinian evolution’s influence on Dewey’s conception of “inquiry,” which Rogers places at the very center of Dewey’s epistemology as well as his moral and political philosophy. Rogers situates Dewey in the context of Darwin’s broader “impact on the American religious imagination” (60), arguing that Dewey was more deeply engaged in theological controversy

than is sometimes recognized, and that this engagement left an indelible mark on later developments in his thinking. Dewey derived from Darwin a chastened appreciation for the possibilities of human agency in a world of radical contingency: “Darwin centralized contingency,” Rogers writes, “as opposed to order, harmony, and regularity, as the essence of existence, and Dewey exploited its significance to outline a vision of human enlightenment that at once encouraged self-assertion and cautioned epistemic and practical humility” (6). The first part of Rogers’s book elaborates the impact of these insights on Dewey’s understanding of epistemology, science, and inquiry; the second part explores its far-reaching consequences for Dewey’s understanding of religion, morality, and democratic politics. The first part is more contextual in approach, the second more directly engaged with contemporary political theory. Both sections are firmly grounded in Dewey’s texts, and the overall result is a radical democratic Dewey that speaks productively to the concerns and preoccupations of contemporary democratic theory.

Of course, Dewey is widely recognized as America’s most prominent twentieth-century philosopher of democracy, and for decades now he has been celebrated by neo-Pragmatists as a post-foundational thinker for whom there exists “no human independent authorities that can adjudicate once and for all between rival [political] claims” (17). Rogers, however, brings Dewey closer to the value pluralism of thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams than most previous accounts. Dewey’s “inquiry” is not a means for transcending the political conflicts that spring from deep pluralism, Rogers argues, but a means of deepening appreciation for their intransigent and tragic qualities, and a reflexive resource for navigating them. What Rogers calls the “all-important normative character” of Dewey’s account of inquiry is derived from an empirical description of the practices of critical judgment and mutual responsiveness that emerge from social interaction itself (57). Drawing parallels with Aristotle’s *phronesis* and George Herbert Mead’s social pragmatism, Rogers argues that Dewey’s appreciation for the “immanence of normativity in our social practices,” tempered by a Darwinian awareness of their ultimate contingency, becomes the basis for Dewey’s distinctive democratic ethos. This ethos is based in “piety” for the customs, traditions, and norms that shape human agency and judgment, “faith” in the critical capacities for ongoing experimentation and revision, and “responsiveness” to others with whom we engage in these wide-ranging projects of democratic reform. “Giving and asking for reasons is at the heart of Deweyan inquiry and democracy,” Rogers writes, and, as others have done before him, Rogers persuasively demonstrates the parallels between Dewey and the work of contemporary deliberative democrats. Rogers, however, also emphasize the

differences, especially through his nuanced account of democratic deliberation itself, an account engaged by imagination, “dramatic rehearsal,” and sympathy (170-83). While deliberative democrats may also affirm democracy as “that regime which instantiates reason giving as the fundamental principle for legitimating its ongoing affairs,” and even affirm the “inescapable incompleteness of democratic politics” (xii), Rogers’s book seeks to both demonstrate Dewey’s relevance to democratic theory after the deliberative turn and to reveal some of the basic limitations of the new paradigm.

When viewed from the perspective of Douglass’s plantation politics, however, the similarities between Rogers’s Dewey and contemporary deliberative democrats are more pronounced than the differences. The “balanced perspective” that Rogers identifies in Dewey’s vision of democratic possibility, and that distinguishes it from the oligarchic minimalism of Walter Lippmann and Joseph Schumpeter, on one hand, and the action-in-concert approach affirmed by radical democrats like Wolin, on the other, nonetheless sustains the basic commitment to politics as rule that plantation politics rejects. Rogers defends Dewey against the familiar charge of epistemic elitism and argues that Dewey instead offers a “vision of democracy that . . . acknowledges the need for an epistemic division of labor, but one that does not allow inequalities in information to undermine the necessity of [popular democratic] deliberation” (202). In the final chapter, Rogers presents a Dewey not only attuned to the dilemmas of deep pluralism, in other words, but “preoccupied with power and domination” (21). However, Dewey’s concern with the myriad forms of domination that shape everyday experience and practically undermine the legitimacy of formal democratic institutions—and especially the economic and cultural domination Dewey identifies with corporate capitalism—nonetheless falls short of the hegemonic understanding of power asserted by plantation politics.

Interestingly, both Gooding-Williams and Rogers turn to Phillip Pettit’s republican theory of “freedom as non-domination” to conceptually elaborate the understanding of domination and its democratic overcoming they associate with Douglass and Dewey. In both cases, however, Pettit’s influential theory struck me as a poor fit. In Rogers’s case, I was not convinced by the attempt to place Dewey within Pettit’s republican frame because Dewey’s conception of “freedom as reflective self-control” seems to have more in common with a positive conception of freedom than Rogers acknowledges (219-24); in Gooding-Williams’s case, plantation politics not only seems a poor fit for Pettit’s “freedom as non-domination” but provides critical resources to reveal the limitations of that theory. Gooding-Williams rightly emphasizes the centrality of enslavement to the republican theory of domination. But Pettit’s focus on *arbitrariness* as the defining element of

domination fails to capture the hegemonic conception of domination Gooding-Williams finds in Douglass. Neither does the transformative experience of agonistic collective action central to Douglass's "radical reconstructionist" account of political agency have an equivalent in Pettit's theory. Rather than offer a historical illustration of that theory, Gooding-Williams's book suggests to me both the limitations of its understanding of domination as "perfected caprice" and of the primarily juridical politics the book affirms to overcome it.³

These books provoke additional questions about the interpretations they offer of their central figures and the normative democratic visions they derive from these interpretations. Rogers, for example, recognizes that his discovery of a tragic radical democratic Dewey will appear dubious to readers who recall the latter's insistence that the "evils of present life" can be remedied by a "steady and systematic effort to develop that effective intelligence named scientific method."⁴ Gooding-Williams's wholesale rejection of political expressivism obscures other versions of expressivism that are not geared to cultural authenticity and identity but instead animated by layered and material conceptions of cultural inscription incompatible with romantic invocations of spirit (like those conceptions influentially elaborated, for example, in the work of Gilles Deleuze).

Far outweighing these lingering questions, however, is the sense these books engender that political theory is currently experiencing a renaissance of interesting work in American political thought. Even as these books offer deeply specific and revisionist portraits of their key figures, they deepen our broader understanding of the protean diversity of political reflection that makes up that discourse. Disenthralled from paradigms that have captivated so much of the historical and normative scholarship—and in fact resisting the trap of this very distinction—these books exemplify an approach to political theorizing that is historically nuanced and conceptually rigorous, attentive to context and productively engaged with contemporary theoretical debates. They enliven our appreciation of the radical democratic tradition in America, and clearly demonstrate the promise serious theoretical engagement with this tradition holds for future research.

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Notes

1. See Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

2. Bernard Boxill, "Two Traditions in African American Philosophy," *Philosophy Forum* 24, no. 1-3 (1992-1993): 119-35.
3. See Patchen Markell, "The Insufficiency of Non-Domination," *Political Theory* 36, no. 9 (2008): 9-36, 13.
4. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946), x.

About the Author

Jason Frank is Associate Professor of Government at Cornell University. He is the author of *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Duke, 2010) and *Publius and Political Imagination* (Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming). He is currently editing *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* (University Press of Kentucky, forthcoming) and beginning a new project on political aesthetics.