Creative Conflict in African American Thought

Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey

Building upon his previous work, Professor Moses has revised and brought together in this book essays that focus on the complexity of, and contradictions in, the thought of five major African American intellectuals: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus M. Garvey. In doing so, he challenges both popular and scholarly conceptions of them as villains or heroes. In analyzing the intellectual struggles and contradictions of these five dominant personalities with regard to individual morality and collective reform, Professor Moses shows how they contributed to strategies for black improvement and puts them within the context of other currents in American and, more broadly, Western thought, including Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, Social Darwinism, and progressivism.

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An inestimable portion of the thought, labor, and passion that generated this work was provided by my wife, Maureen. We dedicate this book to our two sons, William and Jeremiah.

Contents

Acknowledgments

Two chapters on Frederick Douglass have been previously published. They have undergone some revision here to accentuate the relation of their central themes to the present volume. "Where Honor Is Due: Frederick Douglass as Typical Black Man" was originally published in *Prospects*, the American Studies Annual, published at Columbia University by Cambridge University Press. "Writing Freely? Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racialized Writing" appeared in Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Critical Essays,* also published by Cambridge. "Frederick Douglass: Superstar and Public Intellectual," while original in form and content, incorporates a number of paragraphs originally published in a state-of-the-art paper in *Resources for American Literary Study.* These paragraphs have been drastically altered, documentation has been markedly enhanced, and footnotes have been added. "The Conservation of Races and the American Negro Academy: Nationalism, Materialism, and Hero Worship" was first published in *Massachusetts Review*. I wish to thank the original publishers for permission to bring them together in this volume. Special thanks are due to Jennifer Carey for her patient editorial assistance and to Lewis Bateman, without whose kindness this project could never have been brought to completion.

Preface

Struggle, Challenge, and History

In the puerile slang of the present age, "struggle" seems to mean no more than floundering or flailing. When a sportscaster refers to a football team as "struggling," it is equivalent to describing them as culpably deficient. To an earlier generation struggle was a necessary ingredient of progress and the mark of moral virtue. In Theodore Roosevelt's Darwinian conception of the "Strenuous Life" any individual who was not struggling was contemptibly weak – unfit for survival. The five thinkers addressed in these pages celebrated their own conception of "the strenuous life," for they believed moral fitness to be inseparable from constant moral struggle.

The words "challenged" and "history" likewise underwent bizarre transformations in the late twentieth century. To describe someone as "challenged" became tantamount to declaring that they were retarded or deficient. In teenage slang, the clause "he's history" implied that someone had been destroyed or rendered irrelevant. But in the romantic idiom of the late nineteenth century, "struggle" implied *Sturm und Drang* – storm and stress – the characteristic and necessary drive of the "world-historical figure" to meet the challenges of a heroic destiny. The hero of Goethe's *Faust* knows that he is damned if he even momentarily relaxes from struggle, or apprehends a happiness so great that he wishes the moment to endure forever; the Hegelian or Emersonian hero recognizes no higher praise than the description "He's history!"

The presupposition of this book is that all active thinking runs unavoidably into contradiction; that original thought is generated by the tragic and heroic struggle to reconcile conflict; that mythologies represent the spontaneous struggle of the human mind to encompass opposing

ideas within a single thought-image. Any bright adolescent can discover contradictions within another person's thinking. It is the task of the historian to discover the processes by which thinkers seek to reconcile or, as some would say, to rationalize their own contradictions. This work is tacitly, or expressly, concerned throughout with identifying such attempts at reconciliation. Obviously, within this context, "contradiction" is not a term of opprobrium; in fact the term "contradiction" need not imply any value judgment at all – except the value judgment implicit in my acknowledgment that the thinking of a given author contains sufficient tension or friction to generate life-giving struggle and to awaken my interest.[1]

To deny the joyful necessity of struggling with contradiction is foolish and potentially wicked. This book addresses varieties of contradiction represented in, but by no means peculiar to, African American thought. It focuses on two varieties of contradiction – the inevitable conflicts between proponents of opposing ideas and the equally inescapable contradictions that exist within the minds of individual thinkers. I am not primarily concerned with "pragmatic contradictions," inconsistencies between theory and practice, but rather with the collision of ideas. How, for example, does Alexander Crummell reconcile his reverence for the English language with his commitment to the development of a Liberian culture and sense of national pride? How does he reconcile his belief that black people need to develop a spirit of individualism with his belief that they must develop a tradition of collective consciousness? How does Marcus Garvey reconcile his racialized pacifism with his conception of God as a War Lord?

The struggle over ideological contradictions offers a vitalizing challenge for an individual or a group to strengthen intellectual muscle. The methodology of challenge and response, called *disputatio* among medieval scholars, was a traditional means of seeking truth through the use of contradictions, as were rabbinical traditions of dialogue and debate.[2] Contradiction is, in fact, vital in many philosophical systems including those

[1] I sit on my deck and detect a motion at the corner of my eye; I turn my head and see a squirrel playing in the leaves; I have not made a value judgment as to the importance of the squirrel or its activities; I have simply made a reflexive response. So too, when I respond to contradictions in the thought of a given author or thinker, I am not making any necessary or immediate value judgment, but simply responding to evidences of sentient life.

[2] Joseph Piper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), pp. 72–82. Needless to say the rabbinical tradition of Talmudic discourse and the West African tradition of palaver instance the universality of disputation as a method for the investigation of truth.

of West Africa, where the tradition of "palaver" exists to the present day. The thinking of African American intellectuals, who were born in the nineteenth century, was necessarily contradictory, for contradiction is a universal aspect of the human condition. As I have said elsewhere, black American thought has inevitably mingled the particulars of black nationalism (and Pan-Africanism) with the more, *and* less, cosmopolitan processes of emulating Eurocentric civilization. It has simultaneously blended ethnocentric boosterism with conscious and unconscious striving toward economic and social integration in America. Its cultural mythology has betrayed the contradictions of United States nationalism, in which African Americans have identified simultaneously with the Children of Israel in Egyptian bondage and with the Afrocentric mythology of pharaonic Egypt.[3]

The persistence of such contradictions among any class of thinkers represents a particularistic manifestation of universal human experience. I think it is self-evident that all ethnochauvinistic doctrines are inescapably caught up in the contradiction of asserting both the singularity and the universality of their group's peculiar experiences. All human societies insist that their joys and sorrows are unique, but they usually invoke an abstract humanistic ethos of fairness, calling on the entire world to sympathize with them in their aspirations, and, with rare exceptions, they appeal to the universal justice of their claims on "inalienable rights."[4]

Our mental and emotional lives manifest many other varieties of conflict, and these may sometimes appear incongruous even to ourselves. *First*, we all experience internal conflicts because every person's attitudes and dispositions vary unsystematically according to time and circumstance; *second*, we experience conflicts between our own thoughts and those of other persons with whom we supposedly identify; *third*, but of lesser interest to this discussion, we experience pragmatic contradictions between our professed beliefs and our actual behavior. This book focuses on

[3] The ambivalence on whether to identify with the biblical Hebrews or with the Egyptians who held them in bondage is readily observable in the first African American newspaper, the New York–based *Freedom's Journal*, April 6, 1827, where the editors appeal to both myths. See also Wilson J. Moses, *Afrotopia*, pp. 39–95, and note especially pp. 45 and 85.

[4] The American Declaration of Independence claimed "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" and appealed even to the higher authority of natural rights. Frederick Douglass alluded to this point in his famous speech of July 5, 1852, "The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro," printed in Philip Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. 4 (New York: International, 1950), pp. 181–205.

controversial and contradictory elements in the thought of several exceptional individuals, whose contradictions embody the "constant anxieties" and "agonized strain" that Alexander Crummell viewed as essential to the condition and destinies of "men and angels."[5]

The complicated individuals who are subjects of this study were selected on the basis of their self-evident contradictions. These have either been minimized by their gushing admirers, or pounced upon by their enemies among past and present African American intellectuals. Frederick Douglass, for example, has sometimes been lionized as the "Heroic Slave" who fearlessly voiced the aspirations of the freedom struggle, but at other times has been viewed as an unconscious white supremacist who attacked racial pride and betrayed his true ideology by marrying a white woman.[6] Some have heroized Alexander Crummell as a "father of Pan-Africanism," but others see him as an apologist for European cultural hegemony. Some have venerated Du Bois as the major black intellectual of the twentieth century – an untouchable, irreproachable saint, but others regard him as an embarrassment, an elitist snob, who from pure spite joined the Communist Party and apologized for the butchery of Joseph Stalin. Some have seen Booker T. Washington as the "builder of a civilization," urging his people to develop skills, accumulate capital, and develop self-respect, but others see him as an accommodationist to segregation and a buffoonish teller of "darky stories" to condescending whites. Some view Marcus Garvey as a tragic hero who projected a dream of international black economic power. Others see him as the Quixotic promoter of a back-to-Africa scheme, an incompetent businessman, a megalomaniac, a diversionist, or even an embezzler.

[5] Alexander Crummell, "The Solution of Problems: The Duty and Destiny of Man," in Wilson J. Moses, ed., *Destiny and Race: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell, 1840–1898* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 31–44. I assume each of my subjects to be a unique individual, but sharing with others certain broadly comparable emotional experiences, which are the basis of human sympathy and of all appeals to morality. Thus, I believe the experience of each individual to be emblematic of a common human condition, regardless of such specific determinants as gender or ethnicity. Hazel Carby emphatically rejects this position in *Race Men: The Body and Soul of Race, Nation, and Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[6] See Allison Davis's chapter entitled "Douglass, the Lion," in his *Leadership, Love and Aggression* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). Negative reactions to Douglass' marriage to Helen Pitts are discussed elsewhere in this volume. Also see Thomas Dixon's venomous reaction to Douglass' second marriage in "Booker T. Washington and the Negro," *The Saturday Evening Post* (August 19, 1905), 1–3. Present-day African American negativism is more subtle; see Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1987), p. 8.

I suspect that some readers will be relieved to see that many of their heroes and heroines are excluded from this study. Heroic proportions imply statuesque dimensions – ample surfaces for Brobdingnagian blemishes. Each of the five figures I have selected may be described in the words once applied to Du Bois: "Remarkable man; ambiguous legacy."[7] So it must be with every great intellectual, statesman, artist, or religious leader throughout history. "World-historical figures" are always caught up in "internal and incurable contradictions."

The greatest philosophical problems are unsolvable – as unanswerable as the questions of Job, and history is a "dismal science," fundamentally incompatible with America's compulsory cheeriness. My approach, alas, implies a tragic conception of history, indigestible to the American mind, whether liberal, conservative, or Marxist. The American "civil religion" is based on an upward and onward teleology in which the Kingdom of God can be realized in our lifetimes through the honest application of will and reason. Popular history has no place for tragic challenges, irreconcilable struggles, or incurable contradictions.[8]

Great societies may eliminate hunger, mitigate disease, and exalt the arts and sciences, but they will never abolish meanness, extinguish superstition, or defeat ignorance. Reality is not a series of dialectical oppositions and voluntary choices. It is a process of simultaneous struggles – incoherent, multifaceted, and permanently irreconcilable. Therefore, this work is not intended – in either the formal or the vernacular sense – as an exercise in "dialectics," a term I have avoided as much as possible. It is based on Alexander Crummell's idea that struggle is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, and happy is the person who has the luxury of enjoying the challenge. Crummell anticipated Theodore Roosevelt's idea that the strenuous life must be a permanent feature of worthwhile human existence, and both reiterated an ancient wisdom.

The theme of contradiction in this work derives not from "books I read in college," but from the content of the materials produced by the

[7] Irving Howe's mixed emotions are revealed in the title of his article, "Remarkable Man, Ambiguous Legacy," *Harpers* (March 1968).

[8] Hegel's concept of the world-historical figure resembles Carlye's or Emerson's representative man. Engels finds an "internal and incurable contradiction" in Hegel's system because it rests simultaneously on dialectical relativism and idealistic absolutism (*Anti-Dühring*, Introduction: I. General). Engels also admits that Hegel has presented a problem that is insolvable, "*eine Aufgabe die keine einzelner je wird lösen konnen.*" If Engels is correct, and he seems to be, then Hegel, presumably a world-historical figure, illustrates the presumption of my work, that contradictions must surface within the intellectual productions of great minds.

five authors whose work I have treated. I do not deny having struggled to understand Hegel, Marx, Engels, and Nietzsche, sometimes in the original German, but Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Blake have been stronger influences. From early childhood, I learned – as many children do – that there are oxymoronic contradictions in the thinking and behavior of perfectly intelligent and rational people. Thus, I experienced no startling revelation when I encountered Richard Hofstadter's technique in *The American Political Tradition*, which highlights contradictions in thinkers and traditions but seeks to understand how these contradictions have been reconciled, or at least rationalized.

Seeking to understand how historical figures have attempted to reconcile contradiction does not make one a "consensus historian." Hofstadter asserted "that conflict and consensus require each other and are bound up in a kind of dialectic of their own." More cuttingly, he observed that "the important ground on which consensus as a general theory of American history should be quarreled with is not its supposed political implications, but its intrinsic limitations as history." Hofstadter insisted "that the idea of consensus is not intrinsically linked to ideological conservatism." It has been observed that Louis Hartz, the exemplary consensus historian, represented a liberal, not a conservative, tradition, and the Marxist historian Eric Foner suggests that Hartz presented American history in a critical, rather than an aggrandizing, mode.[9]

As have the subjects of this study, I use African American history as a means of discussing larger aspects of the human condition. Especially in the chapters on Garvey, I have been tacitly concerned with a fundamental paradox in Western thought, the problem of destiny, in both its Calvinistic and its Marxist forms. If social forces exist, whether created by God, or by material conditions, or by human thought, then what is the relationship of these social forces to the individual human will? Orthodox Christianity addresses the question by asserting that although nothing can occur unless God wills it, men and women paradoxically manage, nonetheless, to violate his will – hence, their pervasive depravity and deservedly frequent damnation. Benjamin Franklin confronted the question when as a young man he putatively rejected the puritan-rationalist form of

[9] Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage, 1948), and Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians, Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 451, 452, 463. The historian, Eric Foner, overcomes his own Marxist values to praise Hartz's liberal consensus interpretation of American intellectual tradition as "brilliant and sardonic." See Foner, "American Freedom in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* (February 2001), pp. 1–16.

predestination, only to replace it with an eighteenth-century mechanistic form of determinism.[10]

Marx denied, unconvincingly, that his economic history was deterministic, but he made the following equivocal and evasive statement: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[11] He thus places himself in company with St. Paul, John Milton, and other Christian mystics who want to preserve determinism while trading liberally in free will. The boundaries of my freedom to interpret the works of my five subjects were determined long ago by the authors themselves. Their works, like those of all major thinkers, are thoroughly permeated by challenging contradictions, without which they would be unspeakably dreary and not worth reading.

A splendid example of the contradictions in African American thought is the previously mentioned Exodus myth. As I have said elsewhere, the myth of Moses and Pharaoh exemplifies the universal poetic function of mythology to reconcile the irreconcilable, or – as one preacher expressed it – to "screw up the inscrutable." In an earlier work, *Afrotopia* (1998), I observed that the Exodus myth exposes the conflicting identities of African American people, manifest in the desire to be Ramses II and Moses at the same time. The first issues of *Freedom's Journal*, published in 1827, asserted Afrocentric pride in the heritage of ancient Egypt, while simultaneously telling Pharaoh to let my people go.[12] The idea that mythology reconciles

[10] See Franklin's *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* . . . , written in 1725, and his restatement of the problem in "Letter to Theophilus," 1741, which should be compared to the ambiguous and unconvincing reconstruction of his religious prilgimage in the *Autobiography,* Part Two.

[11] Karl Marx makes this statement in the first chapter, second paragraph of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Hamburg, 1869), available in plentiful editions. It represents his struggle with a seemingly irrepressible paradox in Western thought, seen in John Milton's theological attempt to reconcile determinism with free will, and Thomas Jefferson's implicitly deterministic frontier theory. Friedrich Engels in Chapter 3 of the *Anti-Dühring* (1878) argues that socioeconomic forces, historically the determinants of human behavior, can someday be bent to the human will.

[12] I speak of myth as the attempt to reconcile contradictions in the preface to *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*. I wish I could take sole credit for this insight. Unfortunately, I must confess that Plato discusses the concept by way of the two manifestations of Aphrodite in the *Symposium*. Renaissance humanism also exploited the contradictory manifestations of Aphrodite, according to Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1953); also see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958). My discussion of the Mosaic myth in *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998),

contradictions was central to my book *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1982). I made the obvious point that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., symbolized *both* resistance to, *and* accommodation to, American racism.

My interpretive frameworks are dictated – I repeat because I have learned that there is safety in repetition – by the five authors, who are my subjects, and not by artificial applications of unquestionably fascinating, but long-dead, Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophers, or German historians. William Blake and Ralph Waldo Emerson have influenced me more than any of them, but again, not to the same extent as the five authors themselves. Nonetheless, I confess to the influences of Biblical fatalism, Mediterranean classicism, and Germanic romanticism – as have my subjects, whether verbally or in practice. I acknowledge, as they have, the mutability of reality, the unreliability of appearances, and the inevitability of contradiction.

pp. 47–53, is more complicted than Benjamin Mays' passing allusion in *The Negro's God* (New York: Chapman and Grimes, 1938), p. 9, or Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), which do not discuss African Americans' strong identity with Pharaoh. Miles Mark Fisher's treatment in *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953) is more satisfying, but still neglects any Egyptocentric interest. Eddie S. Glaude's *Exodus: Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) is a well-researched, well-written, and imaginative discussion of the Exodus theme, but despite the author's solid treatment of *Freedom's Journal,* the contradictions between mosaic and pharaonic mythology are not addressed.