



FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Lecture I

Rosetta E. Ross*

Introduction

The U. S. Civil Rights Movement caused sweeping changes in this society's public policies and morality. Deriving from perspectives about what constitutes a good society, this movement was a social practice seeking to realize a vision of specific moral ends. Generally, the moral ends of the movement were to ensure recognition of all persons, especially African Americans, as members of the human community. Recognition is acknowledging persons by others as an expression of recognizing a common humanity. This often is done through inclusion, especially in opportunities to participate in traditions of social practice which reciprocally reflect this commonality. Beyond the general recognition of all persons' membership in the human community, moral ends of the Civil Rights Movement specifically implied recognition of black persons in U.S. society.

In this regard, the movement may be interpreted as a campaign seeking moral ends which had political implications. This included achieving procedural and substantive justice and a form of equality for all persons as citizens of

*Rosetta E. Ross, the 1999 Charles B. Copher Annual Faculty Lecturer and assistant professor of Ethics and Public Policy, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia, is presently the McVay Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, Minnesota.

this country. Even more specifically, political goals of the Civil Rights Movement included full participation in democratic processes of the country; equal access and equal rights to goods, services, and other benefits of citizenship; and ending police brutality and other types of violence and abuse against African Americans. In order to achieve these moral ends and to fulfill these political goals, civil-rights proponents opposed social conventions and engaged public institutions and public policy processes to influence, enforce, and develop means to achieve the broad civil-rights movement goal of a more just society.

Some current discussions of the Civil Rights Movement explore social and political implications of civil-rights activity. Generally, these discussions examine influences of civil-rights campaigns on voting rights/electoral politics and on the continuing debate about affirmative-action policies. While these two areas rightly devolved from original civil-rights goals, they reflect a significantly narrowed movement vision and, therefore, fall short of engaging the breadth of issues related to the overall civil-rights movement goal of achieving a more just society. This narrowed vision dissipated civil-rights activity and helped prevent civil-rights proponents from fully organizing vitalities of the movement, from systematizing civil rights movement practices, and from translating and interpreting broader aspects of the movement into appropriate public policy and social agenda items. As a consequence, there is significant discontinuity of movement achievements with racialized poverty and other contemporary forms of economic deprivation in this country, and with other serious issues facing many black communities, in particular, and poor people, in general. Overcoming this discontinuity requires both looking back to

(seeking to retrieve) the vitalities which engendered the movement, and structuring relevant contemporary practices and systems to achieve relevant contemporary social and political changes. These two lectures examine visions, vitalities, and practices that promoted the Civil Rights Movement to develop an introductory discussion which may inform and guide African American, and especially black religious institutions' civic participation for a more just society. Lecture one explicates the broad vision of the Civil Rights Movement then analyzes sources of movement vitality and categories of movement practice through which persons sought to achieve what was envisioned. Lecture two begins where lecture one ends, describing the 1964 Democratic Convention as a signal event of movement dissipation to frame a context for asking the question: What is the contemporary responsibility of black religious institutions to black people and to the larger society?

The Vision

In a 1967 essay entitled, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?", Alice Walker answers the question posed in her article's title by saying the Civil Rights Movement awakened in persons the possibilities of life. On one hand, for some, these possibilities were quite ordinary: being well fed, having "meaningful well-paying" jobs to purchase and provide upkeep of homes, having liberty to attend college, and the like.¹ Generally, Walker saw the Civil Rights Movement as providing previously excluded persons opportunities to make choices from the normative

¹Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 121.

range of options about their life situations.

On the other hand, the full vision of the Civil Rights Movement, which included attending to the ordinary and the extraordinary, was quite "transformative and inclusionary."² It did seek to address mundane concern about the relatively deprived and oppressed material state of most African Americans. But further it sought full inclusion of persons from all economic stations of society in every level of public life, as well as a reordering of economic structures to redefine the situation of the country's poor people. Although never fully systematized as achievements sought on the basis of particular activities, the civil-rights norm of participatory democracy and the five tenets of the Poor People's Campaign, for example, clearly illustrate inclusion and economic re-ordering as broad-movement goals. The Poor Peoples' Campaign sought:

1. A meaningful job at a living wage for every employable citizen.
2. A secure and adequate income for all who cannot find jobs or for whom employment is inappropriate.
3. Access to land as a means to income and livelihood.
4. Access to capital as a means of full participation in the economic life of America.
5. Recognition by law of the right of people affected by government programs to play a truly significant role in determining how they are designed and carried out.³

²Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 41.

³Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 481.

The original unsystematic nature of the Civil Rights Movement is not unusual. It is the nature of movements, especially those organized around charismatic figures, to be unstructured and sporadic. However, sociologists assert that systematization of movements occur when persons, usually followers of charismatic personalities, develop bureaucratic means to institutionalize movement concerns. Broad goals of the movement, while evident, were inchoate and never self-consciously defined and articulated. Moreover, failure of civil-rights proponents to eventually systematize its agenda contributed to dissipation of civil-rights vitalities.

Why? The Vitalities

Persons caught by the civil-rights vision were motivated by religious and nonreligious perspectives about what makes a good society. Their motivations coalesced to create vitalities which gave birth to civil-rights era activity. These vitalities—motivations, energy, and spirit of the movement deriving from hope, imagination, desire, faith, commitment, and will—birthed and sustained the vigor of civil-rights activities and superseded practices and participants as significant to origin and evolution of the movement.

Specific sources of movement vitalities were hope for a better society, desire to change and make changes, faith in God and faith in greater possibilities of human life and human effort, commitment to a kind of equality and a shared sense of justice, and willingness to take risks. Tens of thousands of people participated in activities replicated around the country, and especially in the south, in order to achieve movement ends. Civil-rights activities, or practices, included mass meetings, voter registration drives, consciousness

raising, teaching, boycotts, pickets, group voting, networking, and other activities. These practices were meaningful because vitalities of the movement connected to these specific practices often executed by large numbers of participants made particular achievements possible. Since injustices and abuses of the period were blatant and ubiquitous, vitalities and practices of the civil-rights era did realize specific achievements. Overt abuses and injustices meant some conventional change was fairly immediate.

The writer identifies four sources of movement vitalities: hope, faith, a sense of justice, and a commitment to equality.

1. The hope of the Civil Rights Movement is among the most important of sources that contributed to movement vitality. Theologically, hope may be defined as an "expectation of a good future which rests on God's promise."⁴ The basis of theological hope is experience of God's historic liberating action and expectation of God's continued action in history. Alongside theological hope in the Civil Rights Movement was human hope as desire for what is believed possible of realization. Both theological hope (depending on God's intervention) and human desire (based on potential achievement depending on human will) were suppliers of the hope that nurtured the Civil Rights Movement. Both benefitted from human imagination. The end of civil-rights hope was a society imagined to be better than one in which there is need and exclusion. Significant to this end was assertion of attention to the most marginalized as the measure of a good society.

2. Deeply connected to civil-rights movement hope was faith. At least two strains of faith were operative in persons'

⁴*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1983 rev. ed., s.v. "Hope" by Jürgen Moltmann.

activism during the civil-rights era. On one hand, there was an expectation of different possibilities based in trust of God. Deriving primarily from the tradition of Western Christianity, this theological faith in the Civil Rights Movement understood God as original "initiator and agent of change."⁵ Civil-rights practices were expressions of faith as response to God's activity in their lives. From this perspective activity of civil-rights participants, religious was duty: understood in both personal and communal terms. Individuals described themselves as "doing God's work" and as "dependent on God" in the civil-rights practice. Furthermore, the important role of community meetings during various direct-action campaigns was to motivate persons in the work of the movement through speeches, songs, and sermons which often described the Civil Rights Movement as the movement of God in history. Moreover, God's movement was understood not only as requiring and motivating individuals and communities of religious believers who supported the civil-rights cause, but also as operating in the lives of persons, believers, and nonbelievers, who opposed the general vision and particular activities of civil-rights participants. This latter perspective is demonstrated in the words of an elderly woman whom Andrew Young records articulating God's providing safe passage through fire trucks and fire hoses in Birmingham: "Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one mo' time!" she shouted.⁶

⁵Manning Marable, "Religion and Black Protest Thought in African American History" in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 333-334.

⁶Young, *An Easy Burden*, 223.

Other nonreligious civil-rights participants were compelled by faith in greater possibilities for human life resulting from "the sheer force of our collective determination" and effort.⁷ In this case, social transformation was solely dependent on the collective work of persons. The interaction of these two perspectives underscore a query often raised about the efficacy of reliance on traditional theological perspectives as the principle sustainer of social transformation, especially for African Americans. Black religious traditions have included both social protest thought as a response to racial discrimination and explications of the afterlife as a response to angst about existential/ontological belonging. However, a question that continues to bedevil black religion in the United States (particularly black Christianity) is this: Is African-American religion, particularly Christianity, too deeply invested a religious ideology heavily focused on the supernatural and afterlife? This question presupposes that such deep commitment eclipses pragmatic attention to social structures and material conditions, and supports impractical commitment in certain static religious institutional figures and configurations. Nevertheless, religious faith and faith, which may be described as positive humanism, were both sources of movement vitality.

3. While the civil-rights vision belonged to a broad, plural constituency, there was a sense of justice that dominated it, relating particularly to improving the material existence of African Americans as a social group and all poor people as a social class. As a contributor to civil-rights vitality for African Americans, a particular sense of justice evidenced in civil-rights participation as a social group "reflected a

⁷Marable, *African American Religious Studies*, 333-334.

collective identity shaped by historic conditions and social reality. . . . Group solidarity and a general mistrust of the fairness of resource allocation increased the likelihood of political participation. [Furthermore, g]roup consciousness connected conceptions of efficacy to political participation."⁸

As the movement evolved, the sense of justice became more clearly articulated, including "poor people" generally. The sense of justice envisioned during the Civil Rights Movement did not include attention to issues of gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, or any number of other determinants of persons' exclusion in society. It is, however, accurate to assert that challenges to traditional notions of inclusion and exclusion brought by the Civil Rights Movement made way for assertions of recognition by many other persons previously marginalized in this society and for a more comprehensive conception of justice.

4. Intricately connected to the shared sense of justice was a generalized movement perspective about equality. Far from the oft-debated question of whether equality means sameness, equality of the Civil Rights Movement related to circumstance. It reflected a "vision toward a redistributive agenda [that] promised an equality of condition not just freedom from overt discrimination."⁹ As a function of human dignity and citizenship, this equality relates to the opportunity of persons to make choices from a context of situations similar in value and meaning to those of other human beings and fellow citizens. In practice, and representing the best of the civil-rights vision, equality meant participatory democracy. Much more than simple full

⁸Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority*, 45.

⁹Ibid., 46.

enfranchisement, participatory democracy meant full and mutual recognition of persons as citizens. Participatory democracy values all voices and especially makes room for entrance into democratic decision-making processes by voices most marginalized from the center of public debate. In this regard, a significant achievement of the movement enabled persons like Fannie Lou Hamer, Amzie Moore, Mae Bertha Carter, Victoria DeLee, Unita Blackwell, and others to participate in public debate, influence public policy, and hold public office. This achievement is noteworthy because these persons were different from the norm of public participants on the bases of their race, level of education, economic class, and/or gender. Participatory democracy, which originated in women's traditions in civil-rights programs, reflects the most significant point of attending to gender during the movement era. As a norm, it clearly reflects women's influence, and as a practice, it enabled women's participation.¹⁰

How? The Practices

Understood as endeavors which occur habitually or customarily and which express some sense of coherence, the term practice implies both individual and group congruity. Generally, practices are understood as activities that help to sustain traditions and to enhance their vitality. In the Civil Rights Movement, however, practices performed two functions. On the one hand, they sought to sustain and enhance

¹⁰See Carol Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of 'Participatory Democracy'" in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers*, ed. Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse, and Barbara Woods (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 51-70.

historic protest, survival, and quality of life traditions of African Americans. On the other hand, they sought to transform local communities and the U.S. society by disrupting another set of activities and traditions. Consistent with historic protest, survival, and quality of life activity among African Americans, civil-rights practices evidenced an improvisational nature, orientated toward matters at hand and expressed a capacity of persons to act appropriately and pragmatically in particular situations.

In this regard, civil-rights practices are activities that arose out of dispositions which generated and organized actions "coherent and compatible with the objective conditions" of African Americans.¹¹ Activities repeated during the civil-rights period are characterized as civil-rights practices because they became established through proven functional value as improvisational activity which sought to address matters at hand. Activities of the Civil Rights Movement may be chiefly characterized as "protest" or "enfranchisement" practices. Issuing from movement vitalities, these practices reflected appropriate and useful but nonsystematized and nontheorized activity. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the widespread, generalized, persistent exercise of civil-rights practices reflected the willingness of persons to move outside the familiar (and in some cases comfortable) and to take risks, to actively trying to realize what was envisioned as a better world.

Protest thought and practices have permeated black religion throughout the presence of Africans as oppressed persons in the Americas. They have reflected what generally

¹¹Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53, 86.

may be identified as the black-freedom movement. In many instances, preceding, and often alongside attempts to ensure citizenship rights through enfranchisement practices, were practices protesting formal and informal systems of domination and oppression of black persons through privately-owned institutions and conventional-social systems. These protest practices opposed segregation and discrimination, particularly in schools, eating places, public transportation, and employment. Anti-segregation protest practices addressed the array of formally and informally structured traditions and conventions which made it taboo for black and white people to mix, a taboo that seemed ultimately derived from fear of what has been termed "miscegenation." Protest practices also opposed discrimination in public and private employment. Anti-discrimination protest practices addressed the legacy of domination and oppression deriving from the slave era whereby blacks were relegated to menial, under-compensated work.

In addition, protest practices opposed various other forms of domination and oppression in everyday life. Civil-rights protest practices, then, may be described as those related to a broad range of social rights comparable to norms experienced by average fully recognized citizens. (See UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights on "social rights.") Protest practices expressed dissent from and objection to exclusionary social norms. Civil-rights protest practices included, but were not limited to, canvassing communities, various types of organizing, public speaking, mass meetings, consciousness raising, picketing, boycotting, various forms of demonstration, teaching, marching, sitting-in at lunch counters, civil-rights litigation, and other activities.

Although protest practices to secure social rights con-

tinued throughout the Civil Rights Movement, disfranchisement became a main focus by the early 1960s, making enfranchisement practices the major focus of the movement. Deriving from the Kennedy administration's preoccupation "with incremental reform" and the belief of some movement activists that voting rights were substantially significant to local empowerment, voter registration and electoral political participation became the primary means of achieving the civil-rights agenda.

In her 1994 text, *The Tyranny of the Majority*, Lani Guinier outlines three "generations" of practices to ensure full inclusion and participatory democracy. In each of these "generations," there developed various enfranchisement practices which opposed disfranchisement in particular, but also sought to address formal absence of full civic recognition in general. The first generation focused on opposing disfranchisement or securing the right to vote, specifically seeking to secure and ensure for African Americans political participation as fully enfranchised persons. Activities that coincided with this generation included voter education and registration, voting, and participation in local, county, and state political party activities. After voting rights were secured, there remained exclusion of significant black participation and representation because of policies and procedures that prevented African Americans from holding elective office.

The second generation of attempts to ensure full participation focused on integrating legislative and other elected bodies. Because these activities moved beyond the strict resistance of formal and informal modes of denying citizenship through disfranchisement and instead attended to participation rights not strictly ensured by the U.S. Constitution,

but determined by political activity, e.g., holding office, activities of this generation focused primarily on electoral politics. Specific practices included block voting and litigation to secure majority or substantially black single-member districts at local, state, and federal levels. Yet simple election of a limited number of minority representatives to any legislative body, neither ensures authentic representation of minority groups, nor attends to the absolute shut out of minority groups when voting against "fixed majorities."

The third generation of enfranchisement practices, initiated recently, has begun to attend to policies which preclude meaningful minority participation even when election of minority representation to the body politic occurs. While these practices are in the realm of electoral politics, they attend to procedures for determining full and fair participation in electoral politics and move into the area of public policy, so they may be called practices of politics and policy.¹²

Notwithstanding the generally shared vision of a good society and shared participation in creating and responding to movement vitalities, for black persons taking part in the movement, the ever-present duality represented in integrationist and black nationalist positions caused division among movement participants and eventually contributed to dissipation of movement vitality. Generally, reflecting, among other things, conflicts about loyalty to the country and loyalty to the race,¹³ integrationists and nationalists may be distinguished by their differing allegiance to moderate reform and advancement by incorporation into mainstream social life versus allegiance to more radical reform and

¹²Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority*, 1-20.

¹³See Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

advancement by determination of relatively independent political, social, and resource development.

The enfranchisement focus of the Civil Rights Movement may be said to have derived from integrationist perspectives which did not significantly question but sought to become part of the existing political system. Some black nationalists also took part in voting rights and political participation activities since political participation represented a form of political activity that nationalists saw as a means to black liberation. Exclusive and partial commitment (for integrationist and nationalists, respectively) to political participation within the existing political system appears to represent a form of what Peter Paris calls "political idealism." For African Americans generally, and black Christians in the United States in particular, this derives from two unresolved moral dilemmas. These dilemmas—conflict between loyalty to the race and loyalty to the nation, and conflict between loyalty to one universal church and loyalty to a racially separate church—both reflect an arrested black political agenda because of allegiance to a vision of an ideal, harmonious society. "Political idealism," Paris says, "has often been associated with utopianism. It portrays and promotes a final goal for society that is characterized by perfect harmony, a goal that is not a matter of deliberation."¹⁴ In spite of or perhaps because of idealistic perspectives about social possibilities, by the early 1960s participation in the existing political structures focused almost exclusively on enfranchisement, becoming the norm of civil-rights activity.

¹⁴Ibid., chap. 4 passim.

Focus on disfranchisement materialized in the early 1960s, reflecting a major shift from protest to politics. Black voter registration and political participation gradually became the movement's dominant vehicle for implementation of its legislative agenda. Although some activists initially failed to appreciate the dramatic potential of voter education and registration, particularly in light of headlines generated by nonviolent integrated bus rides, electoral participation soon became the way to redeem southern politics."¹⁵

On the heels of civil-rights focus on enfranchisement came the related focus on "black electoral success." "The theory of black electoral success," Guinier says, "supplanted the more transformative and inclusionary vision of the original civil-rights activists."¹⁶ Both reflect a significant narrowing of the civil-rights vision. The former suggests that the broad range of social rights and civic recognition are accomplished through acquiring the right to exercise the franchise. This obfuscated the meaning and potency of the broad range of protest practices which, while not themselves offering a final response to the large civil-rights vision, consistently called attention to a variety of specific places in the society where the traditions of domination and marginalization were practiced.

The latter represented an even more narrowed perspective by deflecting attention away from the significance of full participation of formally excluded persons as a guiding norm to election of black representatives as a goal. This

¹⁵Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority*, 44.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

focus obstructed potential attention to nurturance of values like civic responsibility and participation as accompanying enfranchisement rights and, more importantly, as of a piece with the broad civil-rights vision of full inclusion and participatory democracy.

In addition to the voting-rights focus as a narrowing of the civil-rights vision, various other events and factors contributed to dissipation of civil-rights vitalities, specifically, and the movement generally. Among events that occurred during the movement that fostered this was the compromise and patriarchal hierarchal practice which orchestrated a shut-down of the most promising movement challenge to change conventional practices. This compromise at the 1964 Democratic National Convention effectively silenced grassroots activist Fannie Lou Hamer and suppressed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) potential gift of a new possibility.

Founded as a protest against absolute exclusion of African Americans by traditionalists of the Mississippi Democratic Party, the MFDP organized a legitimate challenge of the all-white Mississippi delegation to the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Arguing that failure of the traditionalist delegation to allow inclusive participation, the MFDP announced intentions of its challenge in advance of the convention. Going into Atlantic City, it had secured sufficient support from other state conventions around the nation to raise as a realizable possibility the unseating of the traditionalist, all-white Mississippi delegation to be replaced by the MFDP delegation consisting of black sharecroppers, students, ministers, and other black and white progressive professionals.

Controlled from the White House by President Johnson,

who understood seating the MFDP delegates as threatening his bid for election as president, the insurgent challenge was rejected. During the negotiations, however, a compromise was offered in which the MFDP would accept seating of two persons from their party (a white man and a black man) in a special section outside the regular Mississippi location. A statement by Fannie Lou Hamer, uneducated daughter of sharecroppers, and herself a sharecropper, represented the perspective of most MFDP delegates and symbolized the growing divergence among what may be characterized as integrationist and nationalist movement perspectives. After the MFDP vote to reject the compromise Hamer said, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats."¹⁷

After rejection of the compromise, Walter Mondale, a member of the Credentials Committee who had been assigned by Johnson to resolve the matter, and to a lesser degree Joseph Ruah, an important original architect of the challenge who had been threatened with loss of employment as United Auto Workers Washington attorney if the compromise were not accepted, returned to deliberations of the Credentials Committee. Although negotiations continued with MFDP members and representatives in the secluded hotel room of Hubert Humphrey, in the credentials room Mondale responded to excitement that arose in the Credentials Committee meeting as a window of opportunity and extracted a vote. Although there were objections, Mondale announced unanimous acceptance of the compromise on national television, accomplishing by power politics what Hubert Humphrey symbolically stated as President

¹⁷Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), [456]-476 passim.

Johnson's position on the MFDPA and especially Fannie Lou Hamer back in the hotel room: "The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak on the floor of the convention."¹⁸ The significance of this compromise, which also may be cited as a salient point of clarifying distinctions between integrationists and nationalists, may be understood as the virtual end of hopes for achieving the movement's vision of full inclusion as a significant agenda item in U. S. politics.

In addition to the focus on enfranchisement and the actual and symbolic devastation resulting from events at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, the recent intense rise in what Cornel West calls "market mentalities"¹⁹ also has contributed to dissipation of Civil Rights Movement vitalities. The United States is among, if not the epitome of, examples of twentieth-century development of advanced post-industrial capitalism. In this country, the expectation of continued economic growth and a globally interconnected free-market system have combined to produce what is perhaps the most consuming social consciousness on the planet. The unchecked production of more and better goods and services continuously whet, cultivate, and enlarge North American appetites for undisciplined and uncritical consumption. From this has developed not only a larger capacity for things, but also a perspective which sees individual choice as limited only by economic factors and as related to all facets of social life. Ironically, this market mentality with its emphasis on unlimited individual choice has evolved in a context and at the expense of millions of persons who live

¹⁸Ibid., 470.

¹⁹See Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993); also Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

daily with severely narrowed life choices that result from the expansion of capitalist markets.

The height of the Civil Rights Movement came at a time in U.S. history when African Americans were experiencing for the first time significant yet abridged entrance into the middle class. Many of the persons who were a part of this entrance pushed the movement forward in remarkable ways while at the same time their vision of the civil-rights movement was limited to "analysis and praxis within liberal capitalist perimeters."²⁰ This perspective of the new black middle class was contrary to that of large numbers of African Americans, especially poor black persons who continued to be strongly excluded from full participation in the society and who wanted fundamental structural change. Unfortunately, as events in Atlantic City foreshadowed, the new black middle class became associated with the developing partial recognition of African Americans in the society. Allegiance of this group to liberal capitalism and the generalized continuing intensification of capitalist consumerism have been collaborators in stifling civil-rights practices and vitalities and increasing class- and race-based exclusion. At this juncture, we are confronted with the following question: Have market mentality, integration, and the narrow focus on electoral politics totally eclipsed the broad civil-rights vision and agenda?

²⁰West, *Keeping Faith*, 271.

Lecture II

Introduction

The first lecture identified the broad vision of the Civil Rights Movement as advocating full inclusion, economic change, and participatory democracy. Explicated sources of movement vitality and categories of movement practice suggest both why and how persons pursued the vision and how and why the broad vision narrowed and dissipated. The second lecture addresses the question that ended lecture one. The intent here is to discuss potential continuities of Civil Rights Movement vitalities with contemporary black religion and to explore the potential significance and relevance of black religion for issues facing African Americans as we enter the twenty-first century.

Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Fannie Lou Hamer

In 1964, the National Democratic Party Credentials Committee was challenged with responding to a charge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) that they were authentically the delegation representing all democrats in Mississippi. Freedom Democrats based this charge on black persons being shut out of participation in regular democratic proceedings across the state. By bringing the issue to the national party with national media attention, Freedom Democrats challenged not only Democratic Party politics, but also placed the following question squarely on the national agenda: Can persons from the margin meaningfully participate in the center of civic life in this society?

Discussion of what would happen with MFDP delegates

during the 1964 Atlantic City Convention was public deliberation about forms of exclusion and lack of recognition the broad civil-rights vision sought to overcome. Various players examined and negotiated possibilities (including Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Moses, Joseph Ruah, Walter Reuther, Roy Wilkins and others); however, two persons central to the debate and most symbolic of the positions center and margin never actually spoke with each other, nor did they participate directly in talks that determined the outcome. Their indirect participation resulted from a choice made by one of these persons and from exclusion of the other. Dynamics of their individual participation as well as their physical proximity to what actually occurred is symbolically telling of how this society has defined and *continues* to define who belong at the margin and center of civic life.

In 1964, the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, was at the center of the Democratic Party. Having assumed office after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Mr. Johnson was expected to easily win the party's nomination since he was the incumbent president. As president of the country, he also was at the center of the society. In contrast to President Johnson, MFDP vice president and one of its vocal leaders, Fannie Lou Hamer was at the margin of the Democratic Party as a member of an alternative group that challenged traditional Party practices in Mississippi and in the country. As a poor, uneducated, black woman from the rural South, Hamer also was at the margin of U. S. society.

From the White House, Mr. Johnson influenced Credentials Committee deliberations. He worked feverishly in advance to avoid a convention debate over the MFDP. He reject-

ed as ludicrous the idea of seating both delegations. . . . He told Senator Humphrey that 'if we mess with the group of Negroes. . .we will lose fifteen states without even campaigning.' He instructed his political friend James Row to identify and target every MFDP supporter on the convention's Credentials Committee.²¹

In his position at the center of society, on the one hand, controlling the decision from afar without seeming to be in the center of it, Mr. Johnson determined the outcome of the debate from Washington where he stayed until the Freedom Democrats were defeated.

Mrs. Hamer, on the other hand, could not significantly impact the outcome even though she was a leader of the MFDP and was present in Atlantic City where she had traveled expressly for the purpose of influencing deliberations and being seated during the convention. Fannie Lou Hamer did not significantly participate in negotiations. During the one negotiation meeting in which Hamer was present she scolded Senator Hubert Humphrey who, seeking to secure his nomination for vice president, served as a mediator. "[Y]ou're a good man, and you know what's right," Hamer said to the senator. "The trouble is, you're afraid to do what you know is right." After that direct challenge of Humphrey, Hamer was excluded from further negotiation sessions.²² Although she did not play an influential role in negotiations, Hamer did participate in national public debate about inclusion as a result of media attention brought to her and the

²¹Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 448.

²²Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 125.

MFDP cause. Hamer's role in national debate resulted from the norm of participatory democracy operative in the broad civil-rights vision. The final outcome of the MFDP challenge—a liberal compromise offering two “special” seats to two men not chosen by Freedom Democrats—not only excluded Mrs. Hamer, but also effectively barred the entire MFDP delegation from participation in the 1964 Convention.

This formal action by the Democratic Party helped circumscribe the broad civil-rights vision and decenter its participatory norm. There has not arisen any other such grassroots participation in this level of national politics nor has there been a return of Freedom Democrats since the 1964 challenge. One effect of this was the loss to persons most marginalized and to our society of their opportunity to be a meaningful part of civic life. The 1964 compromise was, in reality, a negation of Freedom Democrats. Coupled with the narrowed focus on electoral politics and increased attention to market forces, the 1964 compromise pushed forward and reified exclusion of persons in circumstances similar to Mrs. Hamer from public debate and social life.

A loss correlative to the exclusion of Mrs. Hamer and Freedom Democrats is the absence of many persons in inner cities from meaningful civic participation. Moreover, in rural and urban areas, persons most marginalized and most in need of the affirmation of civic participation also live daily in material conditions far from comparable to normative life situations in this society. Their exclusion from civic life and the material reality of their everyday circumstances reflect social neglect and is a source of what Cornel West has called “justifiable rage” resulting from “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.”²³ In view of these realities, do reli-

²³West, *Race Matters*, 14.

gious vitalities like those of the Civil Rights Movement, rooted in social justice traditions of black religion, have any response to or responsibility for addressing continued marginalization and material deprivation?

Black Religion's Relevance for Social Life

For persons of African descent, scholars assert that, traditionally, sacred and secular realms permeate each other, and, in fact, generally are insignificantly distinguishable.²⁴ Beyond this generalized assertion of religious permeation of African peoples' lives is the more specific assertion that in North America, religious institutions have served the role of framing a "surrogate world" for black people, providing a haven from social and political exclusion and denigration.²⁵ Forty years ago, the nation's practice of socially segregating and politically excluding African Americans meant the role of black religious institutions as surrogate world and safe space was particularly important. Even though, as womanist theologians remind us, there was and remains discrimination within the surrogate world. At that time, black religious structures continued the antebellum, reconstruction, and early twentieth-century tradition of serving as primary institutional space providing affirmation and participation opportunities for many African Americans in contradistinction to denigration and exclusion emanating from racism in

²⁴See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay in African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (London: Cambridge, 1995); and Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁵Paris, *The Social Teaching of Black Churches*, 6.

the larger society. It is not surprising that black religious institutions and black persons with religious self-understanding played central roles in the major movement which sought to expand inclusion and participation of African Americans in the U.S. society. Because many persons participated in civil-rights activity on the basis of religious convictions, some black religious institutions played quite significant roles in achievements of the Civil Rights Movement.

But what can we expect today? Can black religion be relevant to social life as we enter the twenty-first century? Can black religious institutions reclaim, reinvent, and revitalize their traditional role as centripetal force in African-American social and cultural life? Along with some other religious scholars and social scientists, this writer believes black religious institutions can continue to play an important role in the lives of African Americans and in social life in the United States. The question is whether black religion can be relevant without deep interrogation of the theological substance and practical quality of what black religion offers. Yes, black religion has provided a kind of refuge from the denigration and abuses of racism. But the failure in our congregations (African-American Christianity primarily) to seriously engage theological critiques and constructions of black and womanist theology leaves us clinging to Christian theological formulations from an unsympathetic white Christianity. Internally, black churches are independent as Peter Paris has written: externally black churches maintained continuity with the white church traditions from which they derived,²⁶ including continuity with the meaning, role, and responsibility of ministry.

²⁶Paris, *Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 41-49 passim.

The remainder of this talk describes “moral responsibility in mission and ministry” in which systematic persistent activity is necessary if black religion will play a significant role in enhancing black life and in improving our common quality of life. These are interrelated and may provide greatest possibility through simultaneity and vigor of practice.

First, black religious institutions can enhance black life and improve our common quality of life by developing practices which invigorate civic life. Although it goes against normative ways of thinking in contemporary U.S. society, attention to the common good is ultimately good for everyone. The Civil Rights Movement vision of a more just society, proposing norms of inclusion and participatory democracy, presupposed that full participation in civil society—the opportunity for persons to be citizens—was broadly important to human flourishing and to the quality of all human life. This view about the value and meaning of citizenship, deriving from our mutual participation with others, may be seen on two levels. On the one hand, our appreciation for and our understanding of the meaning of human life arises in community. This perspective is embodied in both ancient African and ancient Greek notions about human personality. The African saying, “I am because we are,” evokes the belief that the emotional and ontological meaning of human identity is not realized or understood apart from other humans with whom we are in community. Similarly, the Aristotelian conception of citizenship asserts that human well-being is realized through meaningful participation in—contribution to and deriving affirmation and benefit from—a common social life.

On the other hand (also evoked in African and Greek philosophy), the material possibility and quality of human

life are enhanced in community. The simple logic of this assertion is that humans accomplish more cooperatively than as individuals. Beyond this simplicity is the socio-cultural assertion that human communities corporately define and produce material goods commonly understood to enhance the quality of life in society.

The view that human identity derives value and meaning from democratic citizenship depends on a certain vitality—originating in human desire, motivation, and energy—which collaborates with participation giving substance to human cooperation and interaction as citizens. This vitality is often called “public spirit.” Public spirit is “a certain disposition among participants in the political process—the disposition to take serious account of the good of others and not just of oneself when acting in public life. . . . [P]ublic spirit [is] the opposite of self interest.”²⁷ Like ethical behavior, public spirit cannot be legislated, because “[a]t the base of both public spirit and the disposition to behave ethically is valuing and respecting other people.”²⁸

Participation as citizens is possible without public spirit. Many persons in our society bemoan discussions of diversity because they mistakenly believe that by accentuating differences such discussions detract from their status and preclude our bonding as a society. These persons may participate in practices of citizenship, e.g., voting, public debate, etc. while at the same time seeking to repress or exclude others. However, historic definitions of democratic

²⁷Steven Kelman, “Cooperationist Institutions in Public Policymaking,” in *Resolving Conflict: Strategies for local Government*, ed. Margaret S. Herrman (Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 1994), 21, 23.

²⁸Ibid.

participation respect and value differences based on the presupposition and expectation that every difference represents a unique gift to common life. It is such value and respect, and not a romanticized, monolithic unity that proponents of diversity pursue. The concern of these proponents of diversity is to encourage mutual recognition of persons as valuable human beings.

In this case, the categories of citizen and other, subject and object always are reflexive. Human relating in this way, means a meeting of persons unlike each other is not an encounter of citizen and other or person and stranger. Rather, what occurs is that two (or more) strangers encounter each other. In such interactions of reciprocity, gifts of one person are understood, respected, and valued as comparably present in the other.²⁹ It follows that in our valuing and respecting others is an enlightened self-interest which motivates us to attend to one another;

when we value and respect others, we take their concerns into account in deciding how to act, whether in public or in everyday life. This connection proceeds through the logical implications of what it means to say one values something: If we value something, we must wish that it will survive and flourish. . . . [I]nstitutions promote public spirit by encouraging participants to value and respect others.³⁰

Conversation (sitting down to talk with and listen to other persons) across boundaries of diversity helps persons value

²⁹Ibid., 23.

³⁰Ibid.

the humanness of others and overcome artificial boundaries based on race, class, gender, education, sexual orientation, ability, or other categories of distinction. Mutual valuing and respect were tenets of participatory democracy.

Black religious institutions may improve civic life by seeking to elevate—as valuable—the norm participatory democracy. In addition to asserting value and respect of others, participatory democracy (as it originated and evolved in the Civil Rights Movement) lifted up the importance of recognizing and giving special attention to the most marginalized and asserted as necessary seeking out and determining mechanisms to include such persons.³¹ During the Civil Rights Movement, practice of participatory democracy meant persons with relative power went into areas of marginalized persons to create space for and relinquish power to indigenous persons. Hundreds of people left relatively safe spaces of school, work, the “North,” for example, to go to Mississippi and other areas of the South to empower, give voice to, and to make space for those most marginalized. Black religious institutions, and especially churches, can find in Christian scripture resonance of the parable about the lost sheep with the practice of participatory democracy wherein persons sought out the most marginalized. This is how Fannie Lou Hamer’s courage and wisdom became a contribution to our national life.

³¹This is contra John Rawls’ “least favored positions” and the Catholic “preferential option for the poor” both of which privilege the poor without necessarily attending to issues of power. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1971) and U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). The civil-rights practice of “participatory democracy” created space for and recognized the need to relinquish power to indigenous, marginalized persons.

Enhancing the lives of African Americans by uplifting the value of participatory democracy would help renew civic life for all persons in this society. Beyond the promotion of mutuality by strengthening public spirit, black religious institutions also may enhance civic life by encouraging civic responsibility, including encouraging and supporting community organizations and stressing the need for persons to exercise participation opportunities and to engage in volunteerism. Moreover, for these institutions, there exists the challenge not only to promote "public spirit" among all persons, but also to cultivate a kind of intra-race "public spirit," or attitude of mutual recognition. Black religion could attend to the places of absence of value and respect of African Americans for each other across boundaries of class, sexual orientation, gender, ability, education, skin color, and other differences.

A second area of "moral responsibility in mission and ministry" through which black religious institutions can enhance black life and improve our common quality of life is participation in focused efforts to circumscribe effects of capitalist market forces. A common and central factor in life circumstances of the most deprived persons in North America and around the globe is the comprehensive grasp and sometimes stranglehold of capitalist forces on human beings. All too often these are poor, poorly educated, rural and inner city persons of color. They experience most starkly the deprivation and suffering caused by unbridled/free market capitalism. Yet all persons—from individuals to well-developed governments—experience market forces as a form of oppression. Our ability to create and to thrive as reflections of natural human agency and potential is severely confined by economic considerations. This is reflected in

the pervasive common concern about having enough, in the fairly ubiquitous codification of all aspects of human life as commodities for consumption, and in the extensive influence and control of market forces on human-decision making. Taken together, these factors color and confine human reasoning to the area of market rationality.

Individual and family life reflect the influence of market rationality in countless ways. Our daily decisions and the ways we structure our existence must attend heavily to market forces. Movement of industry and lack of local opportunity in employment, for example, often either limit our ability to relate or to relate fully to "loved ones," or influence our need to create and recreate family and communal life with temporary proximate persons. Furthermore, response to market forces in employment effectively narrows the conception of family to mean a nuclear unit of parent/parents and child/children or spouses.

Economic demands disrupt the existence of and continuity in communal life by requiring mobility of persons, and further influence the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities by location of industries on the basis of economic motives as opposed to human flourishing. For poor and poorly educated persons living in inner cities and rural areas, this often means disappearance of work because of distance or skills and contending with various forms of industrial disturbance and pollution. In civic life, market rationality means public officials from local to national levels have significantly lost the ability to govern to market forces. One striking example of this in the United States is the inability of federal officials to determine a minimum universal standard of health care because of market reasoning and capitalist ideology. In addition, market forces not

only determine how persons govern, but also, primarily, through campaign financing, determine who will govern.

To limit ourselves to behaviors which are no more than reaction to market rationality—seeking simply to maximize participation in and profit from capitalist market economy—is to negate human agency and creativity and to neglect what may be understood as a theological responsibility to actualize both. Moreover, to concede that human agency is limited to simple mimicking of or reaction to market rationality is to accede, if not to sanction, the tendency of capitalism to ignore and even debase and oppress the weak. In view of the reality that our era is one of advanced capitalist development and the correlate that economic standing translates into quality of life issues, antiquated, romantic, and idyllic notions about religious life and the meaning of ministry and theological belief are inadequate.

Religious responses to coercive forces of market reasoning must be sophisticated and radical. During the civil-rights era, integrationists and black nationalists expressed different concerns about the relationship of religion, religious sophistication, and radicalism. Concerns of both groups may be addressed by contemporary religious response. Similar to the 1950s and 1960s civil-rights era in which the quite ordinary request for equal treatment was understood as radical, in 1999, in advanced capitalist society, authentic and systematic exercise of our intellectual capital—having original ideas, being creative, dreaming outside the box, imagining things differently—may be understood as both sophisticated and radical. The question is: Is there left in black religious life any vitality similar to that of the civil-rights era through which we may be radical enough to imagine a world different from the one in which we live?

And if we *can* imagine a different world, do we have the moral will to develop systematic strategies and practices through which we seek to create it? For black religion, failure to do so, including failure to interrogate the growing black identity tied to our appetites and ravenous consumerism among African Americans, may be a failure equal to feeding the beast that is eating us.

Finally, religious institutions may play a role in enhancing black life and improving our common quality of life by attending specifically to the broad area of material and emotional/existential realities of the most marginalized persons in society. Material crises affecting many African-American communities include hardship caused by poverty, drugs, unemployment, underemployment, inadequate health care, and other physical distresses in black life. In addition to and sometimes the mutual and direct result of physical distresses are emotional/existential crises deriving from lack of recognition within black communities and in the larger society.

Material crises, although they are not solely dependent on material responses, do require material solutions. This is, perhaps, the place where religious institutions historically have been most consistently active. Traditions of home missions, especially relief work, by these institutions reflect significant attention to persons' material conditions. Localized efforts and agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and various assistance through emergency funds do provide immediate relief. However, in contemporary times, appropriate relief work of religious institutions is collaborative and systematic. The intense deprivation caused by economic crisis requires comprehensive remedies. Social analysis seeking to identify and quantify various community issues should provide direction for

determining comprehensive community development initiatives. Moreover, community development collaboratives offer possibilities for more widespread relief. Such institutional collaboration also enhances public spirit since, in institutional terms, this also is an assertion of the perspective that we are able to accomplish more cooperatively than separately. Notwithstanding the significance of comprehensive, systematic, collaborative community development work, such efforts continue to fall into the category of immediate remedy and even reaction.

Public Policy Engagement and Black Religious Institutions

In his book, *The Social Teaching of Black Churches*, Peter Paris presents an important critique of black Christianity as heavily focused on events and prophetic preaching while failing to develop structures to institutionalize programs or to carry forward prophetic assertions. A similar critique has been made of this march. While the Million Man March "has become a marker in black politics and black life" and while there are credible accounts of local and grassroots events effected by the march, it remains the case that the march, and the majority of related energy of it, focused on a single event without determining quantitatively correlative systems of meaning and structure for progress.³² Interrelated to and simultaneous with immediate remedies and compelling events, black religious institutions may more substantially enhance African-American life by becoming involved with public-policy processes through which deter-

³²Clarence Lusane, *Race in the Global Era: African Americans at the Millennium* (Boston: South End, 1997), 198-199.

minations are made that provide long-term relief from material crises.

Public policy is the set of decisions by government aimed at accomplishing some defined goal or solving some specific problems. It is the mechanism for determining how the benefits and burdens of social resources are distributed or for deciding "who gets what, when, where and how." For example, local and regional transportation policies determine access to newer jobs located in suburbs. Policies of cities, towns, and counties determine that toxic and other waste sites often are placed in poor urban and rural communities of color. Actions of Congress set the amount of the minimum wage which has direct bearing on the ability of some families to stay together. National, state, and local policies even define parameters and possibilities of community development. Public policies may be determined both by legislative bodies (groups of persons elected or appointed to make such decisions) or by public agencies (formal institutions which have oversight for specific areas of social life).

Deriving from the narrowed civil-rights vision, in recent decades African Americans, including black religious institutions, have focused heavily on electoral politics (practices of registering voters, getting out the vote, block voting, engaging candidates and the like) as a primary means of civic participation. Historically, this focus has been on immediate election results. Moreover, in spite of recent mid-term election results, chiefly favoring democratic candidates and in many instances due to heavy African-American voter turnout, the electoral political focus of black religious institutions has been largely piecemeal and has failed to assert the dynamic role black people, generally, and black religious institutions, in particular, can play in public policy

discussions and in determining local, state, and national policy agendas. Black religious participation in public policy processes relates both to how religious institutions can enhance civic life through qualitative African-American electoral participation and to how these institutions can influence policy decisions of legislative bodies and public agencies. The two areas are related but are not the same. Participating in electoral politics and influencing decisions of governmental bodies represent two steps in a set of activities by which black religion, in particular, and African Americans in general, may more fully interact with local, state, and national political agendas.

One of these steps is electoral political participation. However, the potency of African-American involvement in electoral politics is directly related to the consistency and qualitative structuring of electoral political practices. With the decline of the Civil Rights Movement and its enthusiasm for voting rights, various forms of direct action, and social protest, there also has been dramatic decline in black public participation. This decline, including a sharp decrease in black voter participation, mirrors apathy in voter turnout of the entire U.S. population. However, since white privilege is embedded in and protected by current political practices and structures, there is not a correlative mirroring in the extent to which minority and majority members of the society are affected by decreased public participation. Because the material condition of African Americans, generally, is more tenuous than that of the majority American population, black people have a greater incentive for qualitatively and quantitatively higher participation in electoral politics and public policy processes.

Black religious institutions can help ensure this by serv-

ing as mechanisms assisting in systematizing African-American electoral political participation. This means re-envisioning ministry as inclusive of qualitative political involvement and moving beyond the mediocre and piecemeal nature of its current manifestation of irregular voter registration drives or candidates standing and waving during worship a few months or weeks before elections. Mundane practices like voter registration, getting out the vote, block voting, and candidates' fora can become part of systems of ministry and instances of churches collaborating to intensify political participation. Furthermore, monitoring elected officials' performance also can be done consistently at local and state levels.

Coupled with more systematic electoral political participation, black religion may attend to the material conditions of African Americans and improve the common quality of life by developing mechanisms to consistently and proactively influence and determine public-policy agendas. The types of policies developed and supported should have substantial relationship to views about conditions of African Americans deriving from historical and structural social analysis. That is to say, African-American involvement with public policy development must have roots in reasoned empirical analysis if we are to avoid forever being in the reactionary mode of protesting conservative institutional strategies through single events. This means systematic engagement of legislative bodies and public agencies and includes formal and informal lobbying by creating and building relationships with policymakers and conducting social science research in order to develop policy initiatives and proposals. The significance of collaboration in comprehensive, systematic political strategies among religious

institutions is equally (if not more) important in public policy engagement as in collaborating to provide immediate material relief.

Conclusion

Emotional/existential crises facing African Americans arise from lack of full social recognition and a related malady—lack of civic participation. For African Americans, these crises generally relates to the legacy of legislated negation of full recognition of black persons as humans. Including various statutes related to enslavement like the three-fifths compromise and the prohibition of black literacy, this legislated negation both prevented or severely encumbered civic participation and enscribed in U.S. law the perspective that black people are not fully human. These legislated negations may be identified as racism. A major accomplishment of the Civil Rights Movement is its mitigation of formal barriers to and conventional attitudes about African Americans issuing from racism. However, the majority of civil-rights practice attending to racism focused attention on issues and forces external to African-American communities. Perhaps the greatest challenge for black religious institutions today is to develop a momentum of energy attending to emotional/existential crises internal to African Americans while at the same time revitalizing and systematizing traditions of social activism addressing external sources of material and existential crises.

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

The history of the United States is a story of growth and change. It begins with the first settlers who came to the shores of North America in search of a new life. These early pioneers, including the Pilgrims and the Puritans, established small communities that would eventually grow into the great cities and states we know today. The struggle for independence from British rule led to the birth of a new nation, one that was founded on the principles of liberty and justice for all. Over the years, the United States has expanded its territory and influence, becoming a world power. It has faced many challenges, from wars and economic crises to social and political movements. Despite these difficulties, the United States has remained a beacon of hope and a land of opportunity for people from all over the world. The story of the United States is a testament to the power of the human spirit and the ability of a nation to overcome adversity and build a better future.