

african american intellectual movements in politics

African American Intellectual Movements in Politics: Shaping the Nation's Discourse

The rich tapestry of American political thought is undeniably interwoven with the profound contributions of African American intellectual movements. These movements, born from centuries of struggle against oppression and a persistent yearning for liberation, have continuously shaped the nation's political discourse and pushed for a more just and equitable society. From the abolitionist fervor of the 19th century to the Black Power revolution of the 20th and the ongoing pursuit of racial justice in the 21st, African American intellectuals have been at the forefront of critical analysis, strategy development, and the articulation of visions for a transformed America. Exploring these intellectual currents offers vital insights into the evolution of American democracy and the enduring fight for civil rights and political power. This article delves into the foundational principles, key figures, and lasting impacts of these transformative African American intellectual movements in politics.

- Introduction to African American Intellectual Movements in Politics
- The Roots of Resistance: Early Intellectual Currents
- Abolitionist Thought and its Political Ramifications
- The Reconstruction Era and the Emergence of Black Political Philosophy
- The New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance's Political Dimension
- The Civil Rights Movement: Intellectual Frameworks for Change
- Black Power and its Intellectual Critiques of American Society
- Afrocentricity and its Impact on Political Thought
- Contemporary African American Intellectual Movements in Politics
- The Enduring Legacy of African American Intellectualism in American Politics

The Roots of Resistance: Early Intellectual Currents

The intellectual bedrock of African American political thought was forged in the crucible of slavery and the ongoing struggle for freedom. Even before the formal articulation of organized movements, enslaved and free Black individuals engaged in profound intellectual work that challenged the very foundations of American society. This early intellectual resistance often manifested through spirituals, sermons, slave narratives, and clandestine writings. These forms, while not always overtly political in the modern sense, served as vital spaces for cultural preservation, communal resistance, and the

articulation of a worldview that transcended the dehumanizing narratives of enslavers. The inherent dignity and shared humanity expressed in these early works laid the groundwork for more explicit political activism and intellectual development.

Early Forms of Resistance and Intellectual Assertion

Long before organized political movements gained traction, African Americans engaged in intellectual assertion as a form of resistance. Slave narratives, such as those penned by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, were not merely autobiographical accounts but powerful indictments of slavery, employing sophisticated rhetorical strategies to sway public opinion and advocate for abolition. The sermons delivered in Black churches served as centers for both spiritual uplift and political discourse, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. These early intellectuals understood the power of narrative and persuasion in challenging the prevailing racist ideologies that underpinned American political structures.

The Influence of Enlightenment Ideals and Their Contradictions

African American intellectuals grappled deeply with the ideals of the Enlightenment – liberty, equality, and natural rights – highlighting the stark contradiction between these philosophical pronouncements and the lived reality of slavery and racial discrimination. Figures like Benjamin Banneker, a self-taught astronomer and mathematician, corresponded with Thomas Jefferson, using reason and logic to challenge the inherent racism of the era. Their intellectual work aimed to prove Black intellectual capacity and demand the extension of universal rights, underscoring the hypocrisy at the heart of American democracy. This critical engagement with foundational American principles became a recurring theme in subsequent African American intellectual movements.

Abolitionist Thought and its Political Ramifications

The abolitionist movement marked a pivotal era for African American intellectual engagement in politics. Black abolitionists were not merely passive recipients of support but were instrumental in shaping the movement's ideology, strategies, and moral urgency. Figures like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and David Walker were powerful orators, prolific writers, and astute political strategists who used their intellect to dismantle the arguments for slavery and advocate for immediate emancipation. Their intellectual contributions provided the moral and philosophical underpinnings for the anti-slavery cause, influencing legislative debates and public opinion, and ultimately contributing to the seismic shifts that led to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

Frederick Douglass: The Power of the Word and Political Action

Frederick Douglass stands as one of the most towering figures in African American intellectual history. His autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself," was a literary and political masterpiece that exposed the brutality of slavery with unflinching clarity. Douglass was also a brilliant orator, a shrewd politician, and a gifted editor. He understood

that intellectual persuasion needed to be coupled with direct political action. He advocated for Black suffrage, military service, and land ownership, demonstrating a comprehensive vision for Black citizenship and political empowerment. His intellectual legacy continues to inspire those fighting for justice and equality.

Sojourner Truth and the Intersectionality of Justice

Sojourner Truth, another formidable abolitionist and women's rights advocate, brought a unique intersectional perspective to early political discourse. Her powerful "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, delivered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention, challenged the prevailing notions of womanhood and racial inferiority, highlighting the interconnectedness of racial and gender oppression. Truth's intellectual contributions lay in her ability to articulate the experiences of Black women, demanding that the fight for equality be inclusive of all marginalized groups. Her directness and moral authority resonated deeply, making her a powerful voice for justice.

David Walker's "Appeal" and Radical Resistance

David Walker's "An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World," published in 1829, was a radical call to action that electrified the abolitionist movement and terrified slaveholders. Walker's intellectual framework was rooted in biblical prophecy, natural rights, and a searing critique of American hypocrisy. He argued forcefully for the inherent right of enslaved people to resist their bondage, even through violent means if necessary. His Appeal was a potent intellectual weapon, urging Black people to take agency in their own liberation and to demand their freedom with an unyielding spirit. Its clandestine distribution and the subsequent backlash it generated underscored its profound political impact.

The Reconstruction Era and the Emergence of Black Political Philosophy

The Reconstruction era, though ultimately undermined, witnessed an unprecedented surge in African American political participation and intellectual output. For the first time, Black men could vote and hold office, leading to the establishment of Black institutions and the articulation of distinct Black political philosophies. African American leaders during this period developed sophisticated arguments for civil rights, education, economic opportunity, and self-governance. These intellectuals understood the complexities of nation-building and sought to ensure that the promise of freedom extended beyond mere emancipation to encompass full citizenship and political power.

Black Legislators and the Fight for Civil Rights

During Reconstruction, over 1,500 African Americans held public office, including two U.S. Senators and a dozen U.S. Representatives. These Black legislators were not simply token figures; they were active participants in national policy debates, championing legislation for civil rights, education, and economic development. Their speeches and proposals articulated a vision of a multiracial democracy and highlighted the persistent challenges faced by Black communities. The intellectual work of these elected officials provided a crucial Black perspective within the federal government, advocating for

policies that would dismantle the vestiges of slavery and promote racial equality.

The Development of Black Institutions and Intellectual Leadership

The Reconstruction era also saw the rapid establishment of Black churches, schools, and colleges. These institutions became crucibles for intellectual development and leadership training. Academics, clergy, and community leaders utilized these spaces to foster critical thinking, disseminate knowledge, and articulate a cohesive Black political agenda. The founding of institutions like Howard University and Fisk University provided essential platforms for African American intellectuals to engage in scholarly pursuits, develop pedagogical approaches, and produce scholarship that challenged prevailing racist narratives and advanced the cause of racial justice.

The Backlash and the Intellectual Response

The violent backlash against Reconstruction, including the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the erosion of Black political rights, spurred a new wave of intellectual analysis. African American thinkers meticulously documented the violence and disenfranchisement, exposing the systemic nature of white supremacy. They developed arguments for the necessity of federal protection of civil rights and critiqued the compromises made by the federal government. This period demonstrated the resilience of African American intellectualism, which continued to analyze and resist oppression even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

The New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance's Political Dimension

The "New Negro" movement, flourishing in the early 20th century, and the subsequent Harlem Renaissance were profoundly political in their orientation. This era witnessed a conscious effort by African American intellectuals and artists to redefine Black identity, celebrate Black culture, and assert Black humanity in the face of Jim Crow segregation and widespread discrimination. Intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson provided critical frameworks for understanding the Black experience and advocating for social and political change. Their writings and activism challenged stereotypes, championed racial pride, and laid the intellectual groundwork for future civil rights movements.

W.E.B. Du Bois and the Ideology of the Talented Tenth

W.E.B. Du Bois, a towering intellectual figure, was instrumental in shaping the discourse of the New Negro era. His concept of the "Talented Tenth" advocated for the education and uplift of the most capable African Americans, who would then lead the race forward. Du Bois was a prolific writer, sociologist, and activist. His seminal work, "The Souls of Black Folk," explored the psychological impact of racism and articulated the concept of "double consciousness." He was a co-founder of the NAACP and a lifelong advocate for civil rights, using his intellectual prowess to critique racial injustice and organize for political and social change.

Alain Locke and the Cultural Renaissance as Political Act

Alain Locke, the "Dean" of the Harlem Renaissance, championed the idea that Black artistic and intellectual expression was inherently political. In his influential anthology, "The New Negro," Locke argued that a cultural renaissance would foster a new consciousness and demand for equality. He believed that by celebrating Black creativity, history, and intellectual achievements, African Americans could dismantle racist caricatures and assert their rightful place in American society. Locke's intellectual framework positioned art and culture as vital tools for political empowerment and social transformation.

The Political Activism of Harlem Renaissance Figures

Beyond their artistic and literary contributions, many Harlem Renaissance figures were deeply involved in political activism. Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston, while celebrated for their literary genius, also engaged in political discussions and supported various causes. Artists and intellectuals used their platforms to critique racial injustice, advocate for economic fairness, and foster a sense of solidarity within the Black community. The shared experience of migration to Northern cities and the intellectual ferment of the era created a powerful synergy between cultural expression and political aspiration.

The Civil Rights Movement: Intellectual Frameworks for Change

The mid-20th century Civil Rights Movement, arguably the most impactful period of African American intellectual engagement in politics, was guided by profound theoretical frameworks and strategic innovations. Intellectuals developed the philosophical underpinnings for nonviolent resistance, legal challenges, and grassroots organizing. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, and Ella Baker provided the intellectual leadership and strategic direction that mobilized millions and fundamentally altered the American legal and social landscape. Their ideas on justice, equality, and nonviolent direct action continue to resonate and inform contemporary social justice movements.

Martin Luther King Jr.: The Philosophy of Nonviolent Resistance

Martin Luther King Jr. was not only a charismatic leader but also a brilliant theologian and philosopher whose intellectual contributions provided the ethical and strategic foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. His embrace of Gandhian principles of nonviolent civil disobedience was deeply rooted in Christian theology and a profound understanding of political strategy. King's speeches and writings, such as "Letter from Birmingham Jail," offered eloquent defenses of protest and unwavering critiques of segregation. His intellectual framework emphasized moral persuasion, the power of love, and the creation of a "beloved community" as essential tools for achieving social justice.

Bayard Rustin: Strategic Architect and Advocate for Social Justice

Bayard Rustin, a masterful strategist and organizer, was a crucial, though often unsung, intellectual force behind the Civil Rights Movement. His expertise in nonviolent direct action, political strategy, and coalition building was indispensable. Rustin was instrumental in organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. His intellectual work extended to advocating for gay rights and democratic socialism, demonstrating a broad commitment to social justice that transcended racial lines. Rustin's pragmatic yet principled approach provided essential guidance for effective political action.

Ella Baker and Grassroots Democracy

Ella Baker, a veteran activist and organizer, emphasized the importance of grassroots democracy and participatory leadership. She believed in empowering ordinary people to lead their own struggles, rather than relying solely on charismatic figures. Baker's intellectual contribution lay in her critique of hierarchical structures and her advocacy for decentralized, community-based organizing. Her philosophy of "strong people, not strong leaders" informed the development of organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), fostering a generation of Black activists grounded in democratic principles and community empowerment.

Black Power and its Intellectual Critiques of American Society

Emerging in the mid-1960s, the Black Power movement represented a significant evolution in African American intellectual thought, challenging existing strategies and articulating a more radical vision for Black liberation. Intellectuals associated with Black Power, such as Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), Malcolm X, and Angela Davis, offered profound critiques of systemic racism, economic exploitation, and cultural oppression. They emphasized Black self-determination, racial pride, and the need for Black people to control their own institutions and political destinies. This intellectual current broadened the scope of the struggle, linking civil rights to broader issues of economic justice, international solidarity, and revolutionary change.

Malcolm X: Black Nationalism and Self-Defense

Malcolm X's intellectual journey, from his embrace of the Nation of Islam to his later evolution, provided a potent critique of American society and a powerful advocacy for Black nationalism and self-defense. He challenged the efficacy of nonviolence in the face of brutal oppression and emphasized the importance of Black pride, self-reliance, and the right to self-defense. Malcolm X's speeches and writings, characterized by their sharp analysis and powerful rhetoric, resonated deeply with Black communities and offered an alternative vision of Black liberation that prioritized autonomy and empowerment.

Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and the Call for Black Power

Stokely Carmichael, as a leader of SNCC and later the Black Panther Party, popularized the slogan "Black Power," which encapsulated a new era of Black consciousness and political assertiveness. His intellectual contribution lay in articulating a sophisticated critique of American racism as inherently systemic and requiring a fundamental shift in power dynamics. Carmichael argued for Black political and economic self-determination, advocating for the creation of Black-led institutions and the assertion of Black cultural identity. His call for Black Power galvanized a generation and expanded the understanding of the Black freedom struggle.

Angela Davis: Intersectionality and Political Radicalism

Angela Davis, a scholar, activist, and philosopher, has been a leading intellectual voice advocating for the intersectionality of social justice movements. Her work critically examines the interconnectedness of racism, sexism, classism, and the prison-industrial complex. Davis has consistently linked the struggle for Black liberation to broader movements for human rights and liberation globally. Her intellectual contributions, rooted in Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory, have provided a comprehensive framework for understanding and dismantling systems of oppression, making her a pivotal figure in contemporary African American intellectual discourse.

Afrocentricity and its Impact on Political Thought

The intellectual movement of Afrocentricity, prominently articulated by scholars like Molefi Asante, sought to recenter the African experience in historical and cultural analysis. Afrocentricity argues that Eurocentric perspectives have distorted understandings of history and culture, and that a Black-centered approach is necessary for intellectual liberation and political empowerment. This framework has influenced various aspects of African American political thought, from educational reform and cultural preservation to the articulation of self-determination and the reclaiming of African heritage as a source of political strength and identity.

Molefi Asante and the Reclaiming of African History

Molefi Asante is credited with popularizing the term "Afrocentricity" and developing its core principles. His work emphasizes the need to understand history and culture from an African perspective, correcting the omissions and distortions of Eurocentric scholarship. Asante's intellectual project aims to instill a sense of pride and agency in Black people by reconnecting them with their rich African heritage and intellectual traditions. This grounding in African history and culture serves as a vital source of political consciousness and empowerment.

Afrocentricity in Education and Cultural Politics

Afrocentricity has had a significant impact on debates surrounding education and cultural politics. Advocates argue for Afrocentric curricula that highlight African contributions to civilization, challenge negative stereotypes, and foster a positive racial identity among Black students. In the political arena, Afrocentric thought informs discussions about cultural preservation, community development, and the importance of recognizing and celebrating Black cultural distinctiveness as a source of collective

power and resilience. It provides a lens through which to analyze and critique cultural imperialism and advocate for cultural self-determination.

Contemporary African American Intellectual Movements in Politics

Today, African American intellectual movements continue to evolve, addressing new challenges and adapting existing frameworks to contemporary political realities. Scholars and activists are engaged in critical analyses of mass incarceration, economic inequality, voter suppression, and the ongoing struggle for racial justice in the digital age. Movements like Black Lives Matter, while primarily grassroots, are deeply informed by intellectual traditions that emphasize systemic analysis, intersectionality, and calls for accountability. Contemporary African American intellectuals are at the forefront of developing innovative strategies for political engagement and social change.

Black Lives Matter and the Politics of Racial Justice

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, while a decentralized social movement, is underpinned by sophisticated intellectual analysis of racial injustice, police brutality, and systemic inequality. Scholars and activists associated with BLM have drawn upon critical race theory, feminist theory, and the legacies of previous civil rights struggles to articulate their demands. The movement's intellectual contribution lies in its direct confrontation of state-sanctioned violence, its emphasis on intersectionality, and its global call for racial justice. BLM's online organizing and its ability to frame national discourse represent a modern evolution of intellectual activism.

Critical Race Theory and its Political Implications

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic framework that examines how race and racism have shaped legal systems and societal structures in the United States. African American intellectuals have been central to the development and application of CRT, which posits that racism is not merely individual prejudice but is systemic and embedded in institutions. The political implications of CRT are vast, informing legal challenges, policy debates, and educational initiatives aimed at dismantling racial inequality and promoting a more equitable society. The ongoing debates surrounding CRT highlight its power to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for transformative change.

The Role of Black Women Intellectuals in Contemporary Politics

Contemporary African American intellectual movements are significantly shaped by the contributions of Black women intellectuals. Figures like Kimberlé Crenshaw (who coined the term "intersectionality"), bell hooks, and Brittney Cooper are providing crucial analyses of gender, race, and power. They are re-examining historical narratives, critiquing contemporary political structures, and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable vision of justice. Their work often highlights the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black women, demanding that feminist and racial justice movements be truly intersectional.

The Enduring Legacy of African American Intellectualism in American Politics

The intellectual movements pioneered by African Americans have irrevocably shaped the course of American politics and continue to be vital forces for progress and justice. From challenging the moral legitimacy of slavery to advocating for civil rights, economic justice, and systemic reform, African American intellectuals have consistently pushed the nation to live up to its founding ideals. Their commitment to critical inquiry, their strategic brilliance, and their unwavering pursuit of equality have provided enduring frameworks for social change. The legacy of these movements is not confined to historical accounts; it is a living tradition that continues to inspire and guide contemporary struggles for a more just and democratic society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are some of the most influential African American intellectual movements in American politics today?

Contemporary influential movements include Critical Race Theory (CRT), which examines how race and racism have shaped legal systems and societal structures; Black Lives Matter (BLM), a decentralized movement advocating against police brutality and systemic racism; and various strands of Black feminist thought, which analyze the intersection of race, gender, and class.

How has the intellectual legacy of the Civil Rights Movement continued to shape contemporary African American political thought?

The Civil Rights Movement's legacy continues to inform contemporary thought through its emphasis on nonviolent resistance, grassroots organizing, and the pursuit of legal and social equality. Ideas around voter rights, desegregation, and economic justice remain central, often reinterpreted to address new challenges and systemic inequalities.

What role do Black feminist intellectuals play in current political discourse?

Black feminist intellectuals, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (coining 'intersectionality') and bell hooks, have been instrumental in highlighting how race, gender, and class interlock to create unique forms of oppression. Their work informs discussions on social justice, reproductive rights, economic inequality, and the experiences of marginalized women within and beyond the Black community.

How does Critical Race Theory (CRT) inform analyses of contemporary racial disparities in the US?

CRT posits that racism is not merely individual prejudice but is embedded within legal systems and societal structures. It informs analyses of contemporary racial disparities by examining how historical policies and ongoing systemic biases contribute to inequalities in areas like housing, education,

employment, and the criminal justice system.

What are the primary goals and strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement?

The Black Lives Matter movement aims to eradicate systemic racism and violence against Black communities, particularly police brutality. Its strategies include protests, advocacy for policy reform (like police accountability and criminal justice reform), community organizing, and raising public awareness through digital platforms and media.

How have African American intellectuals contributed to debates on economic justice and reparations?

Intellectuals have historically argued for economic justice as integral to Black liberation, pointing to the lasting economic impact of slavery and discrimination. Debates on reparations often draw on the work of scholars who have detailed the wealth gap and proposed various forms of compensation or restorative justice for historical injustices.

What are some prominent African American intellectual traditions that inform political action?

Key traditions include the Black Nationalist movement (emphasizing self-determination and racial pride), Pan-Africanism (advocating for solidarity among people of African descent globally), and the intellectual lineage of abolitionism and the Civil Rights Movement. These traditions provide frameworks for understanding power, identity, and strategies for liberation.

How do contemporary African American intellectuals engage with the concept of 'intersectionality' in their political analyses?

Contemporary intellectuals widely utilize 'intersectionality' to understand how various social identities (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.) overlap and create distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. This framework allows for more nuanced analyses of political issues and the development of more inclusive strategies for social change.

What challenges do African American intellectual movements face in the current political climate?

Challenges include facing organized opposition and backlash (particularly against CRT), combating misinformation and the politicization of academic theories, maintaining internal cohesion and diverse ideological viewpoints within movements, and securing adequate resources and platforms for their ideas to reach a wider audience.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to African American intellectual movements in politics, with short descriptions:

1.

The Souls of Black Folk

W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work explores the African American experience in the post-Reconstruction era, focusing on the concept of "double consciousness." He examines the social, economic, and political realities faced by Black Americans, advocating for intellectual and political uplift. This book profoundly shaped the discourse on race and identity in America, influencing generations of activists and thinkers.

2.

Between the World and Me

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes this powerful and deeply personal letter to his teenage son, dissecting the realities of race and racism in contemporary America. He argues that the American Dream has historically been built upon the exploitation of Black bodies, creating a systemic and enduring struggle for Black liberation. The book calls for a re-evaluation of the historical narrative and a commitment to understanding the lived experiences of Black people.

3.

Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880

W.E.B. Du Bois meticulously details the often-overlooked contributions of African Americans during the Reconstruction era. He challenges the prevailing historical narrative that blamed Black people for the failure of Reconstruction, arguing instead that white supremacy and capitalist interests were the primary obstacles. This work reclaims a crucial period of Black political agency and intellectual engagement.

4.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

As told to Alex Haley, this autobiography chronicles Malcolm X's journey from a troubled youth to a prominent leader of the Nation of Islam and later, a more nuanced advocate for Black liberation. It provides a raw and compelling account of his evolving political and philosophical views, particularly his critique of systemic racism and his advocacy for Black self-determination. The book remains a vital text for understanding Black nationalism and resistance.

5.

The Color Purple

Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel offers a poignant and powerful exploration of the lives of Black women in the early 20th century American South. Through the protagonist Celie's struggle for independence and self-discovery, the novel addresses themes of domestic abuse, sisterhood, and

resilience. It highlights the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, and the emergence of Black women's intellectual and emotional autonomy.

6.

Race, Rights, and Power: The Civil Rights Movement in America

Edited by scholars like Robin D.G. Kelley, this collection of essays offers critical perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement. It moves beyond a celebratory narrative to examine the complex intellectual currents, internal debates, and radical underpinnings of the movement. The book delves into the philosophical justifications for activism and the evolving strategies for achieving racial justice.

7.

The Crisis of Color: Race and Democracy in the Age of Trump

A collection of essays by contemporary Black intellectuals, this book analyzes the resurgence of racial anxieties and the challenges to democratic norms in the Trump era. Contributors examine the political and intellectual responses to systemic racism, voter suppression, and the erosion of civil liberties. It offers critical insights into the ongoing struggle for racial justice and the future of American democracy.

8.

From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans

John Hope Franklin's comprehensive history traces the African American experience from its origins in Africa to the modern era. This widely respected text meticulously details the political struggles, intellectual advancements, and cultural achievements of Black Americans. It provides essential context for understanding the historical development of Black political thought and activism.

9.

The Wretched of the Earth

Frantz Fanon's influential work offers a groundbreaking analysis of colonialism and its psychological impact on the colonized. He discusses the role of violence in liberation struggles and the post-colonial challenges faced by newly independent nations. This book has been profoundly important for understanding anti-colonial thought and the intellectual frameworks for Black liberation movements globally.

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