

Black Social Justice Roots and Enlightenment Philosophy

The Enlightenment period in the 18th century represented a major turning point in western civilization. During this time, Enlightenment thinkers led movements that put reason before irrationality, inquiry before assumption, and tolerance before bigotry. While the movement originated in Europe, the Enlightenment ideals soon made their way to the Americas. The founding fathers of the United States drew inspiration from the Enlightenment when writing the nation's founding document, but failed to extend their ideals to African Americans in the final draft of the U.S. Constitution. Nonetheless, Enlightenment ideals inspired Black leaders to formulate black social justice rhetoric that advocated for freedom and human rights for all people. Black orators utilized lines of reasoning derived from the Enlightenment thinkers that came before them. Now, three centuries later, contemporary black social justice rhetoric continues to be influenced by thoughts, values, and principles pioneered by the Enlightenment period. My research aims to examine the duality of the impact of 18th century Enlightenment thinking on the evolution of black social justice rhetoric. I look to demonstrate how Enlightenment texts strengthened the black social justice argument, but also held the movement back in some respects.

The Enlightenment period accelerated the progression of black social justice movements by providing a template of ideas and speaking points for influential Black orators to study and preach to a mobilized Black (and sometimes white) audience. One such orator was Joseph Sidney. In 1809, Sidney delivered a speech before the Wilberforce Philanthropic Association, titled "An Oration, Commemorative of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the United States." While the speech began by celebrating the end of the slave trade, Sidney soon

pivoted to politics. He condemned Jeffersonian Republicans for the hypocrisy of their words and actions. Sidney remarked, “No people in the world make louder pretensions to liberty, equality, and the rights of man than the people of the South. And yet, strange as it may appear, there is no spot in the United States, where oppression reigns with such unlimited sway” (Sidney 7). The timing of the speech provides important historical context for today’s listeners. The speech was delivered in 1809, a period when the Federalists were yielding power to the Democratic Republicans. The latter party would hold power in American politics for the majority of the Antebellum Era leading up to the Civil War. Looking back, Sidney’s speech proved to be prophetic. He warned that the Democratic Republicans (which at the time was lead by Jefferson) used the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality as a front to win the support of the American populus, while behind closed doors the same party penned legislation that maintained the economic engine of slavery. Sidney's well-formulated arguments stemmed from a clear understanding of Enlightenment principles. At a time when even primary education was denied to Black men, Sidney found a way to decipher and spot inconsistencies in the political rhetoric of American politicians. Sidney also employed the Enlightenment principle of free speech to execute a highly political oration without fear of persecution from the government. So while the Democratic Republicans used the Enlightenment principles for malice, Sidney’s words served as a self-correcting mechanism for American democracy—a counterbalancing force that tipped the scales in favor of social evolution and political justice.

In addition to Joseph Sidney, many other Black orators made significant contributions to the black social justice movement. Professor Stefan Wheelock, in his book *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic* (2015),

identified Maria Stewart and David Walker as two such individuals. Stewart's story is one of perseverance and bravery. Coming from a childhood of indentured servitude, Stewart's attempts to obtain even the most elementary education were denied. In spite of this, she persisted, and after ten years of bondage, she attended free Sunday schools in New England and got her education. Stewart immediately put her education to use by writing and lecturing in academia about racial justice.. While there was no record of the subjects that Stewart studied, it was clear from her papers and speeches that Stewart was heavily influenced by Enlightenment texts. In an 1832 lecture at Franklin Hall titled "Why Sit Ye Here and Die?," Stewart argued that freedom and slavery were mere differences in words unless real change was implemented. She remarked:

Look at many of the most worthy and most interesting of us doomed to spend our lives in gentlemen's kitchens. Look at our young men, smart, active, and energetic, with souls filled with ambitious fire; if they look forward, alas! What are their prospects? They can be nothing but the humblest laborers, on account of their dark complexions; hence many of them lose their ambition, and become worthless. (Stewart 13)

Stewart learned from her studies of the Enlightenment that freedom entailed choice. Her central argument in this speech was that economic freedom and choice was an illusion for African Americans. She reasoned that in a market economy, African Americans must specialize in the job where they were most skilled. Since the only job they have been forced to do for centuries was back-breaking labor, they were essentially stuck in a loop where they were granted "freedom" but would eventually end up back in the plantation fields, only this time under the illusion of freedom. It is important to note that Stewart gave this speech at a time when women were not supposed to express their opinions publicly. Using the same

circular logic imposed on African Americans, men denied women a proper education for centuries, then claimed that they weren't educated enough to produce nuanced opinions and thus should be kept out of educational institutions and the voting booth. Stewart broke this vicious cycle by employing logical reasoning to develop and back up well-formulated arguments—another utilization of Enlightenment philosophy.

David Walker exemplified many of the same characteristics that made Maria Stewart a successful writer and speaker. Walker appealed to sensible logic to make bold claims, and pointed out contradictions in American democracy in an effort to mobilize a society to change its structure for the greater good. In 1829, Walker published his most influential piece of writing, titled "Appeal." In this anti-slavery document, Walker bluntly called for slaves to revolt against their masters. He declared that "it is no more harm for you to kill a man who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty" (Walker 30). Here, Walker addressed the Enlightenment principle of tolerance. Walker's central claim was that there was a vast asymmetry between the tolerance of African Americans towards white people and white people towards African Americans. He interpreted the concepts of equality and progress to mean that progress can be achieved through a demonstration of an equality of tolerance. While most people today would agree that the application of these Enlightenment-derived concepts were perhaps too radical in its resortment to violence, Walker's provocation undoubtedly served as a wake-up call to white moderates, similar to how John Brown provided a catalyst for political mobilization and real change. Through a lifelong pursuit of justice and equality, David Walker and Maria Stewart go down in history as critical thinkers who paved the road for future generations of African American leaders to embark on and continue the fight for social justice.

While praise for the positive influence of Enlightenment thinking on Black oration is appropriate, equally important is the recognition that the Enlightenment itself was marred by inconsistency, hypocrisy, and irony. The most obvious contradiction to any historian or scholar of the 17th and 18th century is the intersection of the age of enlightenment with the peculiar institution of slavery and the persistent, continuous justification for its existence. Andrew Curran attempts to tackle this subject in *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment (2011)*. In his book, Curran describes a “retrospective construction of race,” where scientists start with preconceived notions of African American behavior and use science to confirm their inherent biases. The general empirical and scientific temperament, where authorities use science and not supernatural justifications to draw conclusions, was resolutely promoted by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke. This way of thinking generated a lot of upside for society, but not without its downsides. Specifically, the possibility of individuals who abuse science to satisfy their confirmation bias. Curran’s work is an excellent illustration of the shortcomings of Enlightenment science through the racial lense. Additionally, Curran’s critical work importantly depicts the double-sided nature of historical events. Like the Taoist philosophy of Yin and Yang, nature and its inhabitants tend to reside somewhere between the lines of good and evil.

John Locke and Thomas Jefferson were the most influential Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and the United States, respectively. The scope and duration of their impact on society were indisputable. Locke’s radical notions triggered the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, while Jefferson fueled the push for American Independence by publishing the Declaration of Independence.



(Left: a portrait of John Locke is shown; Right: a portrait of Thomas Jefferson is shown)

John Locke is depicted in history as a great man. In his lifetime, he wrote about individual rights and societal equity. Locke criticized arbitrary authority, and advocated for religious toleration and general tolerance for other individuals. He also promoted the usage of the scientific method to draw conclusions, a practice seen as standard procedure today. While Locke's intellectual accomplishments were significant and positive, his personal history was complicated. In his lifetime, Locke benefitted tremendously from the peculiar institution of slavery. He owned stock in multiple slave-trading companies and was secretary of the Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas, where slavery was constitutionally permitted. The grand irony is that Locke and the founding fathers only had time to propose all their radical notions of freedom and individual liberty by standing on the backs of the slaves who drove the country's economic engine.



(Left: a pamphlet issued by a company partially owned by John Locke; Right: Monticello, a slave plantation owned by Thomas Jefferson)

Thomas Jefferson's legacy is equally, if not more sophisticated than that of John Locke. His most impactful accomplishment, the Declaration of Independence, not only sowed the seeds of American independence, but also of African American freedom. Ever since the publication of the Declaration of Independence, Black orators and other social justice advocates have used Jefferson's words to demand freedom and human rights. Frederick Douglass's 1851 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1848 document "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" are two examples of work that directly reiterate Jefferson's words and reapply his logic onto the oppressive systems that Douglass and Stanton deem unfair. Jefferson himself wrote an anti-slavery passage in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence. Yet the historical events we studied—from the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement—played out the way it did because Jefferson did not

have the courage to oppose either the economic interests of the South or his own. Because of this, history remembers Jefferson as a founding father, an Enlightenment thinker, and an oppressor to millions of African American men and women. The case studies of Locke and Jefferson serve to illustrate the complicated and often conflicting impact of the Enlightenment on the evolution of black social justice—a pattern observed on both the individual and societal level.

My contribution essay connected the roots of black social justice to manifestations in Enlightenment thinking. The primary thesis conveyed was that Enlightenment texts had a net positive impact on the black social justice argument. I chose to structure my subtopics based on notable individuals, each extraordinary in their own way. First, I focused on three Black orators: Joseph Sidney, Maria Stewart, and David Walker. I cited their most famous works, and drew the connection between their rhetoric and the Enlightenment principles. Next, I analyzed a book written by Andrew Curran that challenged my central claim of the Enlightenment being a net benefit to black social justice, and acknowledged that in history there are no absolutes. I dived deeper into this assertion by studying two Enlightenment philosophers: John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. My studies concluded that the nuanced lives of men that took part in Enlightenment history and African American history reflected the broader nature of any argument or observation in said subjects. While the examples in my paper provided readers with a foundational understanding of the roots of black social justice rhetoric, there are countless more individuals and stories that must be explored. Ultimately, the goal of studying Black history and integrating the black lived experience into the story of America is to educate future generations about the value and vulnerability of human rights, freedom, and justice. People learn to care about these values when they learn about the

African American men and women who fought and gave up their lives just for the opportunity to be human. Similar to how a mathematical formula is derived before it is applied, educators must not teach American children the core values of America without first deriving these values from historical demonstration. It is here where Enlightenment thinking and black social justice rhetoric have the greatest potential to synergize and leave a lasting impression on all American citizens.

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