

*Research Africa Reviews* Vol. 5 No. 1, April 2021

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-5-issue-1-april-2021/>

### **Research Africa Reviews Editorial Voice: The Opportunity Cost of Black Activism**

By Mbaye Lo, Associate Professor of the Practice, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies & International Comparative Studies, Duke University.

In economics, the concept of opportunity cost stands for “the anticipated value of ‘that which might be’ if choices were made differently.” This means there is a trade-off between loss and gain in human choices of actions. But, what happens to a community when it is forced to pursue an alternative in which its gain is squarely allocated to the public good?

This is the case of Black Activism in America. Its community invests their most valuable assets to pursue a set of ends in which all other communities equally benefit, while at the same time the community activists are forgoing other alternatives that could have been uniquely beneficial to them. This is what I term in this essay the opportunity cost of Black Activism. The stifling situation in America forces Blacks (as if they have no choice actually) to a primordial space where they have to utilize their political capital for the value of justice. While this act is noble, its gains are public goods; they are equally valuable and distributed to all members of society including those who chose to pursue different alternative gains of private good.

If true democracy is about equality, then this arrangement is bordering on servitude. If our politics were to be framed in economic terms, we would have described this arrangement as a ‘free rider problem,’ a failure of our market economy. In an ideal setting, the public good of justice should be pursued by all members of society. The notes from [The Federalist Papers](#) made it clear that, “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society.” In Alexis De Tocqueville’s [conception](#) of civil society’s role in enhancing good governance and democracy, ensuring and refining such a shared end should be a voluntary act within the purview of associations that are rooted in the initiative of individuals.

Questioning this arrangement is important, and even imperative in the transformative era of social media and globalization. It is high time for us to interrogate the normalized long march of African-American demand for justice in this country, and look for theoretical ways of making this demand urgently attainable, and its outcome more tangible.

Black Activism has been speculatively successful, but laboriously protracted, thus its method is not efficient. It has been admittedly characterized in the literature as a ‘long march’. From a comparative viewpoint, one finds Black Activism abnormally prolonged. Here is a frame of reference for that context within the global Black African resistance against racial hegemony: the opposition to Apartheid lasted for 46 years, from 1948 to 1994. Haitian resistance, revolution and independence in Saint-Domingue lasted for 13 years from 1791 to 1804. European colonialism in Africa (generally speaking) lasted for 75 years from the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885 to the

year of independence in Africa, 1960. However, Black Activism for rights, equality and citizenship in the United States lasted for almost one hundred years from 1865 (the end of the Civil War, and two years after the Emancipation Proclamation) to President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

I am aware of the fact that one may interpret the African-American case as disadvantaged by the logic of minority versus majority struggle, while the other cases occurred in countries controlled by the Black majority. Still, one can also consider the preponderance of democratic norms in America as a mitigating factor; or pinpoint to similar cases of Black minorities in Brazil, Columbia, etc. who achieved full citizenship in shorter periods of struggle. The question remains: why is Black Activism so slow and a “long time coming,” as echoed in recent [studies](#) of the movement?

There is one main reason for the ideas of inefficiency in the method of Black Activism. In its mainstream strand, it has been a rhetorical and humanistic progress, not a reformist, militant movement. In so doing, it limits itself to appealing to public opinions, and humanitarian reform. It stops short of seeking to undermine the mechanism of governance or even raising the cost of accountability for the rest of society. Its trails of changes take place slowly without opening the floodgate of reforming the system.

Since the American system of governance is grounded in a rationalistic and selfish view of human nature as Michael Spicer [argues](#), then appealing for humanitarian reform as Black Activism has sought to do will remain futile and pointless. The system was not built on the promise of responding to the moral allure of ethics. James Madison reminds us in the *Federalist Papers* that we should not trust the mechanism of government to the morality of people, because “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Eugene Genovese highlights beautifully how [The World the Slaveholders Made](#) is built on a paternalistic, class-conscious ruling elite. Thus, in the founding documents of the country, the system ranked rights to protect this economic property over person’s rights to life or liberty. It is no wonder that key destabilizers of the Black Activists’ agenda in US history, encompassing the gentlemen’s arrangement of the 1877 Compromise to the end of the [Reconstruction Era](#), the erection of Jim Crow Laws in early twentieth century, and the 1915 re-birth the Ku Klux Klan as guardians of the fading Southern order, were all economically rationalized. President Woodrow Wilson, the segregationist President, was the first academic scholar to draw a parallel between running a government and running a business. Wilson’s 1887 article, entitled, [The Study of Administration](#), called for “running government like business.” When he was elected to the White House 26 years later, he did just that by appointing KKK members to his cabinet and institutionalized segregation in the federal workforce. President Wilson, the academic theorist of business administration, was one of the [most racist](#), anti-Black presidents in US history.

### **Methodological flaws in Black Activism**

The flaw in Black Activism is that it has often elevated the moral order over the economic one, and that is not congruent with the nature of the US system of governance. Thus, the cost benefit principle that governs the US economic order has remained outside its sphere. Dwight Waldo notes in [The Administrative State](#) that in the US’s Great Society, the business communities are the backbone of the state, while in other countries it is the other way around. If that is the case, then one cannot reform the system without raising the cost to its accomplice, the business sector. Thus, rhetoric of changes based on humanist reform will have limited effect. It is therefore not

surprising that President Johnson's Civil Rights Act of 1964 took place following Black Activism's shift through the Civil Rights Movement to new strategies of sit-ins, boycotting businesses and shaming US democracy on the world stage.

There is a historical reason for this Black Activism orientation. Black Activism is the product of the Black church. The Black church is the maker of the African-American community: it forged African cultures in the new world, provided spiritual substance to survive slavery, and it has continuously graduated vanguards in the battle against white supremacy. Nevertheless, it is a church after all, a place where the province of the Golden Rule reigns supreme. It is a tradition of 'turning the other cheek', the higher power and universal love, including the self as well as the nemesis. Its language about human suffering is universal, and its revolutionary potentials were often tamed by a belief in divine punishment. Its justice message is declarative, not interrogative; it is allocated for all human race, not uniquely a communal demand for its members. It is about 'equality,' 'freedom,' 'hands in hands,' 'promised land,' and 'injustice everywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' I have alluded elsewhere [where](#) to the inherent limits within the politics of justice. In settling historical grievances, traditional notions of justice seem inefficient because of their universal appeal. Justice has the tendency to deteriorate to violence when demands are provincial politics. In solving communal problems, justice is not necessarily a superior value among other human virtues: in its presence is the absence of mercy. The 'victim' of justice can morally compensate with the perpetrator's lack of mercy. Justice-oriented politics are problematic. At work, there is the proclivity to manifest itself as an act of forgiveness and mercy in the best case, and as an embodiment of revenge and violence in the worst case, and a case study of 'restorative rhetoric' in the typical. Isaiah Berlin sees this problematic proposition within the incommensurability of values. Not only is there a clash between good and bad values, but there is a clash within the good ones themselves. Thus, I guess in many human discords, justice is an asset for political mobilization, but it is not an efficient or sufficient tool in problem solving. President Obama's 2015 performance at the Charleston shooting service serves as an eloquent example.

Here is the situation: Dylann Roof, a white supremacist and neo-Nazi activist, massacred nine African Americans worshipers at a Bible study gathering inside the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Obama was the President, holding the highest office in the land. But in a much-anticipated visit to the church, Obama symbolically replaced his political authority with that of the church because the latter allowed him to call for forgiveness and mercy. Obama knew very well what the power and leverage of the presidency represented, but he needed to align himself with the humanist tradition of the Black church as eloquently reflected through his [singing](#) of the Amazing Grace. Obama was aware of the other resonances of justice, including the call to prosecute stakeholders of white supremacy, which belongs to the discourse of revenge and violence, a seemingly messy act in governance. So, he chose the ethics in justice over the politics of justice.

To this day, the Black church has a considerable significance for the leadership and the message of Black Activism. Whether championed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or Black Lives Matter, its universalized notion of justice is what makes Black Activism uniquely beneficial to the American democracy. It has made the American space exceptionally universal. Immigrants to this country, for example, find readily-made cultural tools to adopt, belong to and to use in times of making political demands. At the same token, the universality of its dimension is also the source of the slow progress and inefficiency in the method. Perhaps, it calls for a new approach to Black Activism that streamlines

its root causes, and then suggests a new approach to improving its delivery. Reforming its approach will make the movement more efficient and more accountable to its local, national and global constituencies. It has been observed in the recent progress of globalization that healthier local communities would translate to healthier and more equitable global communities.

### **Toward a Wisdom-based approach to Black Activism**

According to the oral tradition of the Senegambian philosopher Kotch Barma (d.1655), wisdom is the sole guarantor of endurance; and that wisdom is about wit, judgement and ongoing interrogation. Wisdom is not overly concerned with solving a problem or answering a question. Applying such a wisdom-based approach urges us to interrogate the relationship between Black Activism and anti-Black racism and prejudice; the root causes and manifestations of anti-blackness, and the proper location and orientation of Black Activism. Furthermore, as the US becomes more diverse and consisting of a coalition of minorities, will framing the problem along the color line of Black and White continue to serve Black Activism? Will the space between Black and White (the poles of the classical problem) become a safer bet in electing leaders or hiring workers? Certainly, this paper cannot tackle all these questions, but we will discuss the first two.

It seems to me that there are two sources for the problem of anti-Black racism and prejudice. Both are related to historical trades in black subjects. This includes the transatlantic slave trade, and trans-Saharan and Indian ocean trade. Although there is a difference between these two forms, they both wrote color prejudice against Blacks into the global human society. They both displaced and alienated millions of Africans whose enduring suffering constitutes one of the sources of anti-Black racism. Professor Paul Lovejoy's scholarship in this matter has helped us understand its detrimental legacy on Africans. In its moderate manifestations, anti-blackness tolerates Blacks as petty elements of risk, and in its active outburst, anti-blackness partakes Blacks as endangering public and communal safety, and it thus sought to render them by all means invisible.

If the manifestations of anti-blackness are conspicuously global and its root causes so dispersed, Black Activism will be misguided if it claims to remain in historicism. As humans, we should cope with changes and interrogate them in order to create new forms of knowledge. In the current age, the cause of Black Activism is anti-Black racism and prejudice that suffocate public and private spaces in the US and beyond. Consequently, Black Activism should create meta standards beyond the current confinement to the reactionary mode occasionally stirred by white supremacist hegemony. Involving wisdom in this approach entails framing the movement into two directions: national and international.

### **National dimensions of activism**

Activism is as old as the local experience of every African-American community. It is reactionary to what is done to the humanity of the person. In his classical political autobiography, *Die Nigger Die*, H. Rap Brown recounts the painful story of Black Activism in the US, it "is the story of what has been done to him and how he reacts to that." (p. 33). The danger in this situation is that Black Activism has become a life journey to provide answers posed by hegemonic forces of white supremacy. In this reactionary arrangement, the latter is invariably defining the former. Thus, except in few cases such as the short-lived Garveyism of 1920s, and Malcom X as well as Black Panther Party's erupted visions of the 1960s, Black Activism has been often declarative about solutions for these recurring problems, but not interrogative about their formulations and ramifications. Because of the magnitude of the problem, it might be wise to disregard the

traditional color line framework approach and invest in a long-term, issue-based strategic approach that requires interrogating all sources and causes of anti-Black racism. Wisdom also calls for a proactive vision, and not reactionary answers. Alain Locke was right on noting in [The New Negro](#) that we should move beyond the “realization of the shortcomings of others.” Black Activism should adopt a policy-oriented and issue-based approach of a community-empowerment agenda. The challenges that face the community are conspicuous. There are collected data and observed evidence on their geneses, manifestations and consequences. They are evidently rooted in institutionalized injustices and disadvantageous arrangements that cannot be resolved by one single group. It requires a coalition of universities, the private sector and influencers. Universities and businesses were benefactors of past injustices of slavery and segregation; therefore, it should be a fair game to put them in a position of shouldering the cost of readdressing them. African-American influencers from both the faith community and the entertainment community should use their position of power to suffocate the public with the images of institutional ‘wrongdoing,’ while using acquired electoral power to strengthen communities and enrich individual capacity.

### **International dimensions of activism**

One of the travesties of the academic vocation after the Civil Rights years is the alienation of Africa from the African-American agenda. The Black experience in America has often been introduced within the frame of slavery or the Atlantic world. John Hope Franklin’s [From Slavery to Freedom](#) was partially a product of this method. Although the book is vigorous as is its author, it unsettled an older textbook on the same topic. [The Negro in Our History](#) by Carter Woodson offered a different method that rooted the African-American experience in Africa. Even if he titles the discussion as “the Unknown African Origin,” he has kept Africa as (the origin), and certainly not slavery (the invention, the development). The ramifications of this divisive framing is unmistakable in the works of many icons of the African-American canons. One remembers James Baldwin’s rage in [The Fire Next Time](#), telling Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam that, “the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other-not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam.” On surveying this tradition, Joseph Winters recently [claims](#) that black studies have become an expression of melancholic historicism, and that “those qualities that invoke feelings of sorrow, loss, alienation, pleasure, joy, and ambivalence within the context of black people’s strivings, have the potential to alter and show the limits of traditional conceptions of politics and political resistance.” This assessment is only plausible in the absence of Africa, and the ramification of such a view is also evident in the work of many African-American activists who tend to overlook Africa in their global message of justice.

There is much evidence to support the view that Black Activism for justice seldom allocates space for Africa or its Black diasporas. When Black Activism goes global, Africa is often unseen or overlooked. A good example is President Obama. He gave a [speech in Cairo](#) in 2009 in which he admitted and rightfully apologized for the West’s wrongdoing to the Muslim world, noting that, “More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations.” Less than a month later, Obama was telling African leaders in [Ghana](#) that, “The West has often approached Africa as a patron or a source of resources rather than a partner. But the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants”. Obama repeated the same message to his African guests at the White House six years later telling [Africa](#) to “stop blaming history for its economic problems.” When talking to Africans, Obama

used the blame-the-victim strategy, which has been historically used to scold helpless victims who have no control on the context of their victimization that was enabled by external forces. Obviously, there is no other people or land that suffered from colonial and postcolonial onslaught more than the African continent. The victimized residents in the inner cities of America are not categorically different from those citizens of Haiti, Jamaica as well as many African cities.

It goes without saying that the weight of what we discussed as historical constraints hovers forcefully on these people's daily lives. Black activists, therefore, should use their voice and vocation to support civil society groups, transparency in governance, and developmental projects in these constituent groups in Africa and beyond.

### **Acknowledgement**

The Editor-in-Chief expresses as usual his appreciation to each and every member of RART for their various inputs at different stages of the process. He records his thanks to RA's team namely Wallace Peaslea, Zhuri Bryant and Hadeel Hamoud as well as Elise Mueller at Duke Learning Innovation, who assisted in finalizing this particular issue. As RAR enters its fifth year of existence, the review team would like to seize this opportunity to thank various book publishers who regularly send books to our network of reviewers. We would like to particularly thank Justin Cox of African Books Collective for his ongoing collaboration with RAR reviewers. In addition, the Editor-in-Chief also wishes to express his gratitude to other academic publishers such as Duke University Press, Oxford University Press, Brill and Palgrave for their collaboration with RAR reviewers.

### **Review Team**

Editor-In-Chief & Associate Editors:

- **Muhammed Haron**, Associate Researcher ,University of Stellenbosch ([haronm@ub.ac.bw](mailto:haronm@ub.ac.bw)).(Editor-In-Chief);
- **Wendy Wilson-Fall**, Associate Professor and Chair, Africana Studies Program Oeschle Center for International Education, Lafayette College ([wilsonfw@lafayette.edu](mailto:wilsonfw@lafayette.edu));
- **Hassan Juma Ndzovu**, PhD. Senior Lecturer of Religious Studies, Department of Religious Studies, Moi University, Kenya ([hassan.ndzovu@gmail.com](mailto:hassan.ndzovu@gmail.com));
- **Yunus Dumbe**, PhD. Religious Studies Department, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Accra, Ghana, ([ydumbe@gmail.com](mailto:ydumbe@gmail.com));
- **Badr Abdelfattah Badr**, PhD. Assistant Professor of Curriculum & Instruction, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt ([badr\\_elkafy@edu.asu.edu.eg](mailto:badr_elkafy@edu.asu.edu.eg));
- **Bamba Drame**, Dar El Hadith El Hassaniyya Institute, Rabat, Morocco, ([ndrame.online@gmail.com](mailto:ndrame.online@gmail.com));
- **Mbaye Lo**, Associate Professor of the Practice, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies & International Comparative Studies, Duke University; ([mbayelo@duke.edu](mailto:mbayelo@duke.edu)).

### **Research Africa**

**Copyright** © 2021 by Research Africa, ([research\\_africa-editor@duke.edu](mailto:research_africa-editor@duke.edu)), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990