Review Essay**Back to the future of black struggle in theory and practice**

Justin Rose

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY 14456, USA.

rose@hws.edu

Struggle on Their Minds: The political thought of African American Resistance

Alex Zamalin

Columbia University Press, New York, 2017 xii + 222 pp.,

ISBN: 9780231181105

Black Natural Law

Vincent W. Lloyd *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, xv + 180 pp.,*

ISBN: 9780199362189

Contemporary Political Theory (2020) **19**, S1–S6. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-00288-7>; published online 17 December 2018

The online version of this article is available Open Access

In an era in which black Americans can be killed by white Americans for simply playing loud music or walking around one's own apartment, it is little wonder that a movement has taken hold demanding that black lives do, in fact, matter. It is also little wonder that scholars would return to the rich history of black American struggle against white oppression to provide resources for the contemporary existential battle. Contributing to this effort are two recent texts, *Struggle on Their Minds: The Political Thought of African American Resistance*, by Alex Zamalin, and *Black Natural Law* by Vincent W. Lloyd. In these two similarly structured books, both authors provide us with a timely discussion of a wide range of black thinkers who teach us about the importance of marrying theory with practice. Ultimately, Zamalin and Lloyd make a significant contribution to contemporary political theory by demonstrating the importance of taking black thinkers seriously and highlighting the ways in which they exceed and enhance the arbitrarily defined boundaries of American political thought and natural law theory, respectively.

In *Struggle on Their Minds*, Zamalin mines the works of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis to offer a rich discussion of black American resistance to oppression. Cognizant of the fact that resistance has been used to characterize everything from seemingly apolitical actions as black youth sagging their pants, to full-blown violent revolts, Zamalin observes, ‘Resistance can name many activities. But few terms are as commonly used, misused, and overused as they are poorly defined, are as elastic as they are omnipresent’ (p. 4). Therefore, Zamalin sets out ‘to provide an intellectual history of when resistance to racial inequality was palpable in key African American political movements’ (p. 6). As he explains, ‘If resistance is at once an activity and an experience that resists comprehensive analysis because it has no singular essence – if there is no way ever to develop a fully philosophical definition of the practice itself – we should study moments in which what occurs can clearly be called “resistance”’ (p. 6). However, Zamalin does not merely provide a descriptive recounting of historical moments of resistance, he also ‘challenges the view that African American political thinkers simply embraced the standard ideas of American political culture, which revolves around the public philosophies of liberalism and civic republicanism’ (p. 10). In this sense, Zamalin provides us with an account of black American resistance in theory and practice.

Zamalin masterfully executes these twinned goals by engaging in an in-depth critical analysis and rhetorical exegesis. Zamalin’s multi-pronged approach to the texts of the various authors underscores the experiential, existential, and performative dimensions of these black thinkers. Thus readers are encouraged to understand the importance of cynicism, anguish, and human complexity in the African American tradition of resistance. The dexterity of Zamalin’s text can be seen in the book’s first chapter, where he not only unpacks the philosophical argument of Walker’s *Appeal*, but also explains the importance of Walker’s use of question marks as a rhetorical tool to move black Americans to resist their bondage. Zamalin carries this superb multifocal analysis into his discussion of Wells’s crusade against lynching, and, by the final chapter, he is seamlessly weaving all his thinkers into conversation with Davis.

Despite the book’s many strengths, Zamalin’s attempts to circumscribe such an unwieldy concept as resistance inevitably raise some concerns. According to Zamalin, what unites all of the thinkers he has chosen to examine in his text is that they all ‘fit under the broad umbrella of radicalism’ (p. 7). He then curiously turns to an explanation of why he has not included Martin Luther King, Jr. in his list of thinkers under exploration. While one can always quibble about the inclusion or exclusion of certain thinkers on any given topic, Zamalin’s discussion of resistance seems less at fault for not including King, and more so for not having any significant discussion of a black radical tradition that calls for a complete separation from the American state. In this sense, Zamalin’s discussion could have been enhanced by contrasting those resisters who were committed to the American

democratic project with those who, at least rhetorically, gestured toward imagining a democratic future beyond the American state.

A more robust discussion of an alternative approach to resistance would have strengthened one of Zamalin's more insightful observations, found in his Conclusion. There he asserts that African American resisters continued to engage the languages and ideals of American exceptionalism, in part, because 'they were pragmatically aware of the way American politics is limited by them' (p. 150). He then notes, 'Here lies one fundamental paradox of resistance: Without the new vocabulary resisters create, the possibility of radical change will always be dismissed in favor of gradual reform. Yet the more effectively resistance carves out a new vocabulary for politics, the less likely it will be heard' (p. 151). One can argue that every epoch of major black resistance is better characterized by a 'both/and' approach to resistance, rather than an 'either/or.' That is, black Americans were able to strategically deploy the language of American exceptionalism and not accept gradualism, precisely because there were always more radical alternatives giving voice to a form of resistance that exceeded the bounds of American exceptionalism – a point not captured robustly enough in Zamalin's discussion.

The boundedness of Zamalin's discussion is perhaps best seen in his chapters on Newton and Davis. Although Zamalin briefly mentions Newton's critique of American nationhood, this is a very minor point in the chapter. Instead, Zamalin chooses to spend more time discussing Newton's resistance to police violence. Similarly, he largely limits his chapter on Davis to her opposition to the prison industrial complex. Absent, for instance, is an in-depth exploration of Newton's mature thoughts on revolutionary intercommunalism and of whether this is properly understood as resistance – or at least an explanation of why Zamalin omitted it from consideration. Again one wonders how Zamalin's project could have been enhanced by reconciling or contrasting Newton's commitment to the American democratic project, with his calls for imagining a future beyond the American nation state.

In *Black Natural Law*, Lloyd also explores the works of a collection of authors with whom most readers will be familiar: Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Lloyd captures his decision to explore the work of these thinkers when he says, 'Each of these authors staged performances for his or her audience that sought to evoke reason, feeling, and imagination. Each sought to give readers or listeners the capacities to discern their own human nature, and so to give them the motivation to participate in ideology critique and in social movement organizing' (p. xii). Like Zamalin's discussion of the ubiquity of resistance, Lloyd is cognizant of the fact that 'natural law means many things to many people – though proponents of any particular brand of natural law often act as if they are the only champions of it' (p. viii). With this in mind, Lloyd argues that 'African Americans have their own tradition of ethical and political reflection; European concepts and practices need not be imported and

applied to the African American context' (pp. viii–ix). Lloyd, however, takes this limited claim a step further and argues that 'black natural law offers the best way to approach politics, not just for blacks but for everyone' (p. ix). Lloyd, then raises the ante, when he argues that 'blacks have privileged access to natural law. In other words, all ethical and political theory ought to start with the insights of blacks, rather than relegating them to a final chapter or to an example of one of many types of difference' (p. xiii). The ambition of Lloyd's project is to be commended. For far too long, black American thinkers have been relegated to the margins of canonical discussions.

Lloyd's book is a collection of detailed discussions of each author, in which he venerates emotion as something to be praised and valued. In fact, Lloyd contends that what sets the black natural law tradition apart from other natural law traditions is its emphasis upon emotion as something that, when included, gives us a fuller understanding of the entire human being. In this sense, emotion is complementary to and not the antithesis of rationality, as is the commonly held belief of many European natural law thinkers. Thus Lloyd's greatest contribution is his ability to push beyond secular or rationalistic readings of each thinker, and to offer a novel and refreshing approach to engaging their thought and action. For instance, rather than 'read King's later work as increasingly radical,' Lloyd argues, 'It is by appreciating King's distinctively theological and distinctively black voice that the most powerful political insights can be harvested, and this distinctive voice is most evident before King starts speaking with increasing frequency to a secular white audience' (p. 89). By rereading past thinkers through the lens of black natural law tradition, Lloyd simultaneously not only challenges conventional narratives about popular thinkers, but also highlights their longstanding commitment to a black radical tradition.

In addition to Lloyd's ambitious normative claims about the centrality of the black natural law tradition, he also asserts that it folded after the civil rights movement. This claim leads Lloyd curiously to suggest that Clarence Thomas was a victim of sorts. He posits, 'Rather than arguing that Thomas betrays the black natural law tradition, I argue that the tradition collapsed into incoherence after the civil rights movement. All that was left for Thomas to grasp were incoherent fragments, and he bound these together with conservative, politicized understandings of natural law in his ultimately incoherent political philosophy' (p. x). To be clear, Lloyd does not claim that black natural law disappeared after the civil rights movement, just that it became divorced from the black natural law tradition. To advance this argument, Lloyd makes some unconvincing claims about those who belong to the tradition, and those who do not. For example, after acknowledging that 'it often seems as though [the later] Du Bois has no ethical or philosophical framework as he weighs in on issues of the day,' Lloyd asks, 'How, then, can Du Bois be understood as a natural law theorist?' (p. 59). He explains 'Du Bois does offer extended reflections on human nature. He also makes normative judgments.

To show that Du Bois is part of a natural law tradition, it is necessary to show that the normative judgments flow from the reflections on human nature' (p. 59). He continues, 'It is not necessary to show that Du Bois himself argues in this way; it is simply necessary to show that this account of human nature is capable of offering reasons for the normative judgments he advances' (p. 59). Lloyd goes on to declare that scholars' focus on Du Bois's concept of race and double consciousness 'are a distraction' from his 'most powerful insights' (p. 59), which revolve around his belief that blacks have a privileged access to God. Du Bois is thus a member of the black natural law tradition because he 'charges blacks with using their insights to change the world for the better, and he implicitly argues that this can be done by attempting to implement natural law' (p. 59). This tentative declaration seems to be a pretty low bar to clear for inclusion in the black natural law tradition.

Despite this very low bar for what qualifies as participating in the black natural law tradition, Lloyd still maintains that it has collapsed after the civil rights movement. Many thinkers who seem to carry on this tradition come to mind, but the omission of James Cone is quite puzzling. To be clear, Lloyd does not completely ignore Cone. Instead, Lloyd folds Cone, who is one of the preeminent black theological thinkers of the post-civil rights era, into a conversation with thinkers such as Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey. Though Cone's undeniable Christian view of human nature pushes beyond the secular and rational, and offers an ideology critique, he is not considered a part of the black natural law tradition, according to Lloyd, because he was not a member of social movement organizing. As Lloyd explains, 'Cone uses Christian theological language to suggest that blackness and liberation may offer such a critical political practice, but Cone's discussion remains at a distance from the practicalities of politics' (p. 160). It is hard to reconcile how Du Bois, who only implicitly argues that blacks should change the world by attempting to implement natural law, is included in the black natural law tradition, and Cone, whose explicit invocations of natural law have greatly influenced post-civil rights political movements, is not. The exclusion of the founder of Black Liberation Theology leaves the reader to ponder who or what comprises the black natural law tradition, and what is its ultimate value to the contemporary struggle against oppression. In this sense, Lloyd's noble ambitions seem to outstrip his ability to deliver.

Against the backdrop of incessant racial violence visited upon the black body, the works of Zamalin and Lloyd can be described as acts of political resistance in their own right. For they reaffirm the dignity and humanity of black lives by positioning black thinkers at the center of contemporary political thought. Furthermore, rather than denigrating the emotional response of black Americans to their oppressive conditions, they demonstrate that emotion has always been an essential aspect of the black freedom struggle. However, their works also provide us with a few notes of caution. The first is that the utility of the black resistance and black natural law traditions can be undermined by their ubiquity. For instance, if

everything can be an act of resistance, then the term has no real meaning. The second note of caution is that attempts to limit their ubiquity may unwittingly have the effect of marginalizing segments of the black community. In Zamalin's case, his effort to circumscribe what he meant by resistance, excluded a rich tradition of black American resistance to the American democratic project. Meanwhile, Lloyd's attempts to limit the ubiquity of the black natural law tradition show that, if a bright boundary is not drawn, then the determination of who is included or excluded seems arbitrary at best. Ultimately, by laying the intellectual groundwork, Zamalin and Lloyd have provided readers with a sturdy foundation upon which we can engage in the inevitable contestations over who properly embodies these political traditions.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.