Nicholas Buccola: The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty. (New York: New York University Press, 2102. Pp. x, 214. $49.00.)

Nicholas Buccola’s recent monograph is a welcome addition to the growing field of scholarship devoted to Frederick Douglass. In particular, Buccola’s study takes Douglass from the margins of political philosophy and establishes him as an important and original contributor to the liberal political tradition. As Buccola argues in chapters two and three, although Douglass accepted many of the central tenets of classical liberalism, his liminal experience as a slave moved him to articulate and develop a more consistent, inclusive liberalism. “In order to close the gap between the promises of liberalism and the realities of American life, Douglass infused his political philosophy with an egalitarian ethos of inclusion and a robust conception of mutual responsibility” (p. 12). For Douglass, freedom is not understood merely negatively as the ability to act without constraint; true freedom must be construed positively as the freedom to flourish and to develop one’s potential in community with others. Thus, human freedom entails a social dimension; it is expressed and lived concretely in relation with others and requires both citizens and statesmen to live an “I am my brother’s keeper” ethos. In short, fellow citizens must embrace their obligation to stand for those suffering injustice and to stand against institutions and practices that promote and maintain social, political, and economic inequalities.

In chapter four, Buccola shows how Douglass’s experience as an abolitionist and social activist compelled him to develop and to defend a political philosophy whose central components consist in mutual responsibility and a sense of obligation for the other’s good. Then in chapter five, we see how Douglass weds two philosophical types—the Reformer and the Self-Made Man—in order to set forth a balanced political philosophy that simultaneously upholds social and personal responsibility. Chapter six is devoted to Douglass’s thoughts on the proper role of the state: in particular, the state’s responsibility to cultivate educated and virtuous citizens (p. 13). In his final chapter, Buccola summarizes his view of Douglass as operating squarely within the liberal tradition yet “occupying a ground somewhere between liberalism and its communitarian and republican critics” (p. 161). In other words, Douglass does not fit neatly within the established scholarly categories of classical or reform liberalism. As Buccula observes, on the one hand, Douglass is firmly committed to core classical liberal values such as individual rights. On the other hand, he is equally committed to central values of reform liberalism—values that stress an attentiveness “to the ways in which injustice and unfairness threaten the capacity of individuals to flourish” (p. 169).

By refusing to oversimplify Douglass’s thought and by allowing its religious, humanitarian, and communitarian themes to emerge, Buccola argues convincingly in his final chapter not only for the complexity of Douglass’s thought but also for its potential to speak to issues that continue to confront liberal political theory and practice. For example, by embracing a positive view of freedom, Douglass was compelled to insist upon a political philosophy of social interdependence and obligation. For Douglass, a robust freedom cannot turn a blind eye to those suffering injustice; my freedom to flourish as a human being is intimately tied to your freedom for the same. Our belonging to one another and the maintenance of our individual virtuous character *require* that we act on behalf of others. Failure to do so injects a pollutant into our shared “moral ecology,” and this pollutant can in turn poison the social body as a whole. Douglass’s experience as an ex-chattel slave made him acutely aware of the detrimental effects of overexposure to a contaminated moral environment.

Reminding us of Douglass’s warning in his 1860 essay, “The Prospect in the Future,” that we not allow our selfishness to blind us to the contradiction of proclaiming liberty for all while denying fundamental human rights to some, Buccola suggests that we might inhabit the “spirit of Douglass’s political philosophy” by constantly interrogating ourselves with the questions Douglass sets forth in his essay. Specifically, we do well to ask ourselves: “[how] is our own love of liberty haunted by narrow and wicked selfishness and how can we close the gaps between the ideal of liberty we claim to love so much and the realities that surround us?” (p. 169). Our willingness to engage in this ongoing individual and collective questioning, coupled with the courage to act on our findings, aligns us with the rich legacy of Frederick Douglass.

Buccola does an excellent job of highlighting the complexities of Douglass’s thought—complexities that allow a grammar of “rights and liberty” to harmonize with “a robust moral vocabulary of virtue and obligation” and which make Douglass a fruitful conversation partner for contemporary discussions in political theory and practice (p. 162). Given the direction of my own work on Douglass, I found myself drawn to those passages where Buccola highlights Douglass’s egalitarian, humanistic, and communitarian “each for all and all for each” strands. I also appreciated Buccola’s attention to Douglass’s important role in the women’s suffrage movement. Tensions arose between Douglass and women’s rights advocates such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton over whether to support the Fifteenth Amendment. Stanton refused to support the Amendment because it granted the right to vote to black males only and not to women. I agree with Buccola’s suggestion that Douglass’s support for the Amendment need not call into question the authenticity of his universalism. Douglass was, after all, an astute statesman, who understood that social progress often requires strategies and compromises that are temporary and “second-best.”

Let me illustrate Douglass’s rhetorical sophistication and his awareness of the multiple power relations constituting his 19th century body politic by turning to some of his womanist and feminist critics. In so doing, we add another layer to the complexity of Douglass’s thought that complements Buccola’s conclusions. Richard Yarborough and Kimberly Drake describe how Douglass employed and was influenced by white constructions of masculinity. Womanist theorists bell hooks and Gary L. Lemons also argue that Douglass accepted key components of the dominant narrative of what it means to be a self-made *male*, and they highlight tensions in Douglass’s position on black female subjectivity. Certainly Douglass, like all human beings, was shaped by his social context, which in addition to being racist was also patriarchal. Even so, one can acknowledge Douglass’s social conditioning and also argue that as statesman-orator extraordinaire he was especially cognizant of the “listening abilities” of his white (male) audience. In other words, while Douglass succumbs at times to hegemonic constructions of masculinity, he also employs gender narratives in subversive ways and for strategic purposes. As an excellent student of culture and politics, Douglass understood that social advances—particularly in oppressive contexts such as nineteenth-century America—require a special deployment of the dominant cultural tropes for the purpose of reforming America’s cultural consciousness. Had Douglass used the accepted “feminine tropes” of his day to describe his physical altercation with Covey, it is unlikely that his narrative would have had the impact that it did. (Recall, Douglass describes his physical struggle with Covey as having restored his sense of *man*hood.) Likewise, even though Douglass was firmly committed to women’s suffrage (or as his womanist critics observe, to *white* women’s suffrage), he realized that the patriarchal society of his day had neither the “ears to hear” nor the will to endorse a genuinely *universal* suffrage bill.

Highlighting Douglass’s attunement to his multiple audiences via an analysis of his sophisticated politico-rhetorical strategies would complement Buccola’s well-argued study. Those such as myself who are interested in furthering the dialogue between liberalism and its critics will find Buccola’s book on Douglass’s rich legacy an invaluable resource.

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