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Black Radicalism and Black Conservatism as Complementary and Mutually Reinforcing: The Political Pragmatism of Martin R. Delany

> I care little for precedent and, therefore, discard the frivolous rules of formality…conforming always to principle, suggested by *conscience* and guided by the light of *reason*.
> – Martin Delany, *The North Star*, June 16, 1848

Introduction

Black radicalism in America has historically focused intensely on undoing entrenched systems and structures that have been used to legitimize and sustain black subordination, impoverishment and marginalization. Black "radicals" who fought against and sought to overturn the establishment adopted varied and complex strategies (Van De Burg, *New Day in Babylon* and *Modern Black Nationalism*; Robinson; McCartney; Taylor; Abraham; Brisbane). Some advocated or used violence as a means of change. Others, however, did not openly and actively embrace violence, but attempted to subvert the system from within through militant political and social activism and passive resistance. Some, within the latter group, coupled programs of political and social reforms and activism with a willingness to engage in defensive and retaliatory violence (Marine; Seale; Hilliard; Bloom and Martin; Carson; Hogan; Zinn; Jeffries; Umoja). Others still experimented with separatist strategies in the pursuit of an "independent" geo-political space within the United States. To garner support among the black masses for their separatist schemes, they advanced cultural nationalistic and jingoistic ideas. In addition, they publicly displayed an aggressive readiness and willingness to respond with violence if provoked (Hall, *Black Separatism in the United States*, Hall, ed. *Black Separatism and Social Reality*; Carmichael and Hamilton). Instead of a domestic "independent" space, however, some others preferred working to subvert the

system from without through the creation of an "independent" black nation abroad (Griffith; Miller; Uya; Redkey, *Black Exodus* and "Bishop Turner's African Dream"; Lewis and Bryan; Croton; Jacques-Garvey; Carmichael). Religion was, and remains, a critical dynamics of black radicalism. Nat Turner, who led a successful slave insurrection in 1830 in Southampton, Virginia, was a "slave preacher" who claimed divine inspiration (Lincoln and Mamiya; Wilmore; Gray; Styron). Perhaps the modern exemplar of religious radicalism is the Nation of Islam, which uses religion to construct a distinct, anti-American nationalistic space within which adherents cultivate and nurture their futuristic vision of a separate black "nation" which they hoped would emerge from the ashes of white destruction (Tsoukalos and Ellis; Curtis; Singh). Regardless of the vision and strategy, the one consistent theme in the black radical tradition is the quest for change; to overturn the systems and structures of oppression, or as Richard Moore contends, radical politics seeks, "basic change in the economic, social, and political order[.]" The essence of this "radical" vision is, "the thorough-going nature of the ends sought and the means used to achieve these basic ends" (qtd. in Boyd 44).

Black conservatism, on the other hand, by its very nature and, in a counterintuitive sense, some might argue, seeks to "conserve"; to affirm and validate attributes and ethos fundamentally mainstream, and rooted in Judeo-Christian, and Anglo-Saxon worldview. Some deem the concept "Black conservatism" oxymoronic. When the Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin was informed of Black conservatism in America, he "allegedly wondered what blacks in the United States had to conserve" (Eisenstadt ix). Well, what they seek to "conserve," critics suggest, are values which have been used through the centuries to legitimize white domination. In this sense, conservatism seems to privilege sustaining, rather that radically transforming, the manner society has been organized and has functioned. According to Peter Eisenstadt, therefore, "perhaps the most basic tenet of black conservatism is a deep-seated respect for the cultures and institutions of American society and Western civilization; and the related conviction and insistence that blacks through their own resources can make it within American society" (x). Black conservatives emphasize "individual achievement rather than government action and redress," and believe strongly in "the ultimate benevolence of the American social order" (Eisenstadt x-xi). This faith in the redemptive capacity and perfectibility of the American social order led black conservatives to focus on the positive, highlighting "current black accomplishments in the face of obstacles, rather than in emphasizing the hardship of the past, or proposing a radical new restructuring of society" (Eisenstadt xi). From the perspectives of the underprivileged and subordinated, however, these tenets undergird the systems and structures of oppression and inequality. Embedded within the conservative ideal is a *laissez-faire* ethos which identifies solutions to black problems and challenges

with self-improvement and character reform. The implication, therefore, is that those problems and challenges emanate from personal failures and behavioral deficiencies. Since black problems and challenges were ascribed to personal, as opposed to systemic and structural failures, the prescribed solutions, therefore, emphasize reforming "the contents of black character" rather than governmental intervention (Adeleke, "Afro-Americans and Moral Suasion"; Ondaatje; Mwakikagile; Steele). Michael Ondaatje further explains this moral suasion imperative:

> Historically, the generic black conservative argument stipulated a theoretical and programmatic commitment to capitalism as a systemic vehicle for racial uplift. In this formulation, African Americans were to depoliticize their struggle, submit to white cultural power and racism, and display greater thrift, patience, hard work, and moral rectitude to overcome their circumstances. (7)

The above characterizations notwithstanding, a generic, all-inclusive definition of black conservatism remains a daunting task. However, as Peter Eisenstadt has argued, "the elusiveness of a comprehensive definition does not free one who wishes to write about black conservatism from the need to provide some framework for discussion" (x). For the purpose of this paper, therefore, I frame black conservatism as an ideology that entraps its black adherents within a disadvantageous and subversive discourse of self-implication and self-condemnation, while absolving the state of any responsibility, either systemic or structural, for the myriad of problems and challenges blacks confront, and must overcome. Thus, implicitly, if not, explicitly, black conservatism validates mainstream pejorative characterizations of black America, de-historicizes black problems and challenges, and places the onus and responsibility for black problems squarely on the shoulders of the victims: blacks. This conception of conservatism is rooted in history and has been a defining character of black leadership in America. At its core is the conviction that solution to problems plaguing blacks called for little, if any, fundamental change, in how society is structured and has functioned.

Nineteenth-century black conservatives identified with, and defended, ideas and strategies meant to appease the mainstream. They privileged reconciling complex and often conflicting interests, with a view to fostering a climate supposedly conducive to mutual progress, especially one in which blacks were expected to reap some benefits. This was the "Accommodationist" or "Compromise" perspective historically associated with Booker T. Washington (Harlan 441–467; Adeleke, *Booker T. Washington*). This genre emphasized interracial harmony, often within a milieu that, according to critics, required disproportionate sacrifices and concessions from blacks. Thus, as some critics contend, black conservatism seems to impose unrealistic demands on an already exploited, impoverished and disadvantaged group. Black conservatives, therefore, identify with, and amplify, ideas rooted in

mainstream discourse of personal responsibility. Blacks are socialized to cultivate habits of self-help, thrift, industry, personal responsibility, and character reform. Adherents do not consider such "conservative" strategy ideological or dogmatic, but instrumental and utilitarian; meant to underscore black compatibility with, and adaptability to, mainstream ideals.

At different epochs in American history, therefore, black conservatives functioned within an instrumentalist, as opposed to a doctrinaire, political universe. They were more focused on the utilitarian benefits or potentials that could result from a strategy meant for harmonizing and engaging discordant elements. They did not consider past negative experiences sufficient justification for discounting the benefits of moderate, conciliatory and accommodating strategies, even when the strategies entailed cooperating with erstwhile oppressors, especially if such cooperation could potentially yield beneficial outcomes. This was the dominant leadership typology in late nineteenth century America. In a contribution to Howard Rabinovitz's *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era*, historian August Meier made the following poignant observation about the character of late-nineteenth century black political leadership:

> Overall, the typical late nineteenth-century black political leader in the South was a moderate; all were practical men who saw the necessity of compromise. They were also ambitious men who needed white support to advance themselves and the interests of their black constituencies. Even the most militant spokesmen… found astute compromise essential to obtain the benefits desired either personally or for the race. The intersection of personal rivalries among blacks, class cleavages, the activities of whites—both Democrats and Republicans—and the very nature of the American political system made inevitable the emergence of a typically moderate political type. (402)

Other scholars have corroborated Meier's contention. In *Black Conservatism* Peter Eisenstadt characterized "one of the distinctive features of southern black social thought between 1865 and 1915" as "the inextricable tangling of conservative and radical elements, often in the social thought of a single individual" (xviii). The essays in this edited volume establish the ideological flexibility and pragmatism of black leadership. Similarly, in his *Saviors or Sellouts*, Christopher Bracey described "The African American Protestant ethic" as "the touchstone of black conservative discourse," (xxii) and offered a compelling analysis of how this ethic shaped the thoughts and reform strategies of not only a known conservative like Booker T. Washington, but also acclaimed radicals such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Louis Farrakhan and their movements. Bracey theorized that these "radicals" combined conservative ideas and strategies, and were much more ideologically nuanced and pragmatic (Bracey, *Saviors or Sellouts*: 1–25,

41–62, 83–112). Thus, these studies underscore the preeminence of a utilitarian and instrumentalist black leadership; raising critical questions about the binary of antagonistic and mutually exclusive discourse ("resistance and accommodation"; "conservatism and radicalism"; "integration and Separatism") that once dominated black leadership studies.

From the nineteenth-century contest between "integrationists" and "emigrationists," right through to the twentieth-century debate between "resistance" and "accommodation" schools, black leaders have been analyzed within a dichotomous mutually exclusive genre. Those supposedly of "radical" and anti-establishment dispositions have confronted others in favor of conservative, conciliatory and accommodating approaches (Miller). In the nineteenth century, it was "militant" Martin Delany against "conservative" Frederick Douglass. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was "militant-activist" William E. B. Du Bois against "conservative and accommodating" Booker T. Washington. For the twentieth-century civil rights struggles, it was "militant" Malcolm X against "conservative" Martin Luther King, Jr. Thus, black leaders have been fitted with ideological straight-jackets. This tradition of framing black leaders as ideologically and mutually exclusive masked the reality that these leaders were never consistently and irrevocably attached to any single ideology or movement. The evidence suggests that they were much more pragmatic and, depending on circumstances, were known to straddle, and experiment with, varied, complicating, and at time, conflicting strategies and ideals. In the process, conservative strategies had at times been used to advance radical ends and vice versa. This was the dominant black leadership typology Meier theorized for the late-nineteenth century; a leadership not blinded or constrained by dogma or ideology, but one guided, in its decisions, choices and political affiliations, by the overarching interests and aspirations of the people. Whatever advanced those interests and aspirations ultimately dictated political affiliations. This pragmatic leadership acknowledged concessions as central to political obligations, and was willing and able to embrace diverse ideals perceived potentially beneficial to the interests of the constituency, even when those ideals contradicted previously held positions. They would jettison any position or ideals, radical or conservative, the moment it ceased to advance the goal.

August Meier was right. "The very nature of the American politics" in the nineteenth century mandated a malleable and pragmatic black political leadership. In fact, the line separating ideologies such as "conservatism" and "radicalism" was often thin and blurry. This meant that the astute black leader could ill-afford doctrinaire and dogmatic adherence to any single ideology, but was free to explore different options based on a determination of what best served the interest of his/her constituency. More than any other nineteenth-century black leader, Martin R. Delany (1812–1885) exemplified this utilitarian approach to political ideology.

He had strong faith in the "Protestant ethic" as the means for improving the black condition, as well as in the ultimate redemptive capacity of America. Curiously, this dimension of his life and thought has escaped scholarly attention. Instead, scholars have consistently analyzed Delany within the discourse of militancy and radicalism. He has gone down in history as a radical and uncompromisingly anti-establishment black leader (*The North Star*; Ullman; Khan; Cruse; Harding; Stuckey). Some contemporaries portrayed Delany as the quintessence of radicalism. His militant anti-slavery rhetoric led a white observer to conclude that he (i.e., Delany) was "a thorough hater of the white race" (Magdol 308). Delany's authorized biographer Frank (Frances) Rollin described him as a man who "conformed to no conservatism for interest's sake, nor compromises for the sake of party or expediency…. His sentiments partaking of the most uncompromising radicalism" (23). Victor Ullman concurred; in "Delany's makeup," according to Ullman, "there was no compromise with whites" (516). His nationalist "Back-to-Africa" platform of the mid-nineteenth century further solidified this radical image. The above characterizations notwithstanding, there was an equally, if not far more, profoundly conservative and nuanced personality buried beneath the avalanche of radical imageries.

Delany and the Utilitarian Imperative

Delany was born a free black in 1812 in Charlestown, Virginia (now in West Virginia). However, being "free" meant little, for he grew up under the shadow of slavery and like slaves, he experienced the brutalities and inhumanity of the South's *Peculiar Institution*. Growing up under such conditions reinforced the importance of, and desire for, freedom and meaningful equality. In 1831, at the age of nineteen, young Delany left home for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in search of education and it was here that he came under the influence and tutelage of some of the leading black conservatives and moral suasionists whose ideas shaped popular discourses on the meaning of freedom and equality as well as strategies for actualizing those ideals. Moral suasion was a conservative, integrationist ideology that shaped the black abolitionist movement in its early decades. Moral suasion defined the challenges confronting blacks consistent with the views of mainstream white society. It attributed black problems and challenges to behavioral and conditional deficiencies which, *ipso facto*, required moral and character reforms (Adeleke, "Religious Dimensions"; McCormick; Bell).

The Rev. Lewis Woodson, William Whipper, "Sidney," and Samuel Cornish, among many others, debated the pros and cons of this conservative, moral suasion approach to black problems. As a student in Pittsburgh in the early 1830s,

Delany witnessed the debate between moral suasionists and separatists; the former urged blacks to seek reform through education, temperance, thrift, economic development, character reform, and cooperation with whites. The dominant moral suasion worldview depicted America as inherently progressive, and placed immense responsibility on blacks. The latter group favored similar solutions, but within a racial essentialist context which discouraged racial cooperation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, blacks overwhelmingly endorsed a "conservative" (moral suasion) philosophy which advanced, as a solution to black problems, ideas rooted in the Protestant ethic, and consistent with mainstream values. This conservatism became the defining philosophy of the black abolitionist movement and memorialized by the formation of the American Moral Reform Society in 1835; an organization that led the moral suasion crusade for the next decade (Bell). Delany embraced the tenets of moral suasion which became his guiding philosophy as he immersed himself in the abolitionist movement. He joined Frederick Douglass in the late 1840s to launch a vigorous, moral suasion abolitionist crusade spearheaded by *The North Star* and, as the paper's co-editor and roving lecturer, Delany became the standard bearer of moral suasion to free black communities across the Mid-West and North-East (Adeleke, *Booker T. Washington*).

During this "conservative" phase of his career, Delany's decisions and choices reflected deep and abiding faith in self-improvement and character reform as strategies for the development of blacks, and ultimately the attainment of true equality. He traveled extensively in Ohio, Michigan, Delaware and Pennsylvania delivering anti-slavery lectures and urging blacks to cultivate habits of industry, thrift, economy and moral reform (Adeleke, *Booker T Washington*; Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 40–69). Success in trade and business, Delany argued, would unlock the gate to progress in America. Like his moral suasion mentors—Woodson and Whipper—Delany believed in the perfectibility of America. The obstacles blacks confronted were not insurmountable. They would disappear as blacks became more enterprising and economically successful. Delany's faith in the moral force of economic entrepreneurship is worth quoting at length. He rendered the following poignant observation in an article in the *North Star*:

> You can scarcely imagine the effect it would have over the pro-slavery feeling in this slave holding country, if, in addition to the few business men we have, there were in New York city, Philadelphia, Boston, even Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, Washington city, and Buffalo… Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, and many other places, but one shipping house, wholesale or retail store, the proprietor or proprietors of which are colored men, and one extensive mechanic of any description and trade. Such indisputable evidence as this of the enterprise and industry of the colored man, compared with that of

the white, would not admit of controversy. It would bear with it *truths as evident as self-existence*—truths placed beyond the shadow of a doubt. (*The North Star*, December 5, 1848; emphasis added)

Blacks responded favorably to Delany's crusade for moral suasion. Across the nation, he found and publicized abundant evidence of successful black business ventures. He devoted several pages of his book *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration* (1852) to highlighting the numerous business enterprises in black communities across the nation (49–146). Yet, such "*truths as evident as self- existence*" failed to yield the expected positive reactions from whites. By the late 1840s, Delany and leading blacks had come to a critical crossroads: the realization that "conservatism," represented by moral suasion, had failed to bring about meaningful changes; coupled with the growing appeal of "radical" political and immediatist alternative. Despite self-improvement efforts, despite achievements in education, thrift, economic development, and moral reform, blacks remained marginalized, and the mainstream society seemed determined to keep them in perpetual subordination. Attempts by blacks to overcome poverty and degradation met with violent retributions from whites (Adeleke, "Afro-Americans and Moral Suasion"). Frustrated, some became much more political in their demands and strategies. Delany, however, shifted ideological position and assumed leadership of an emerging "radical" nationalist and separatist emigration movement. Along with a few others, he concluded that freedom and equality were inconceivable within the United States. The preferred solution was now in an independent black nationality. From the early 1850s to the outbreak of the Civil War, Delany led a vigorous domestic and international campaign for an independent black nationality in Africa (Griffith; Miller). This development earned him the reputation of a radical and anti-establishment activist. His political writings and speeches evinced radical and racialized indictment of American society and culture. He discerned a conspiracy by Europeans and Americans against peoples of color worldwide, and advocated delineation of the racial boundary (Delany, "The Political Destiny"; Rollin 313–327, 327–367; Delany, "Political Aspects" and "Political Events"). He seemed uncompromising in his determination to actualize this separatist dream of an independent black nationality. However, not everyone joined the emigration movement. Many vigorously challenged this "radical" solution. Some held steadfastly to moral suasion while others opted for cultural pluralistic strategies of working with mainstream society.

The "radical" emigration phase (1850–1863) marked a turning point when Delany gave up on, and denounced, America. He acquired the reputation of a "radical" and an uncompromisingly anti-establishment leader. Yet, his "radical" ideas were neither consistent nor absolute. In fact, the "radical" ideas were fused

with conservative, moral suasion strategies of industry, self-help and character reform. Those same moral suasion values, once applied to the domestic United States contexts, became the means of structuring an external state. Though Delany's platform of an independent black nationality seemed radical in principle, when analyzed from an African perspective, its "radicalism" immediately disappears. Establishing an independent state in Africa was meant to "appeal" to the moral conscience of Europeans globally by demonstrating black capacity for nationhood, and thus, hopefully, negate the moral force of slavery and racism in the United States. Put differently, Delany reasoned that an economically viable external black state would appeal favorably to the moral conscience of whites, and thus compel concessions to black demands for equality. While to Americans, black and white, Delany's nationalist vision seemed radical, bold, anti-establishment and anti-hegemonic; especially the vitriolic condemnation of slavery and racism; to indigenous Africans, however, who were to serve as the resources (natural and human) for the independent black nationality, his solutions and strategies were anything but progressive. They were rooted in, and derived from, the European imperialist construction of the continent as "Dark," "backward" and "primitive"; a place supposedly in need of character and moral reform: civilization (Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans*). Like his contemporary nationalists, Delany envisioned black American emigrants going to Africa to help "civilize" the "backward and primitive" indigenes (Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans*). Thus, Delany's solution was consistent with, not in opposition to, the imperialist worldview. To indigenous Africans, therefore, Delany seemed retrogressive and reactionary; a "conservative" black American; indeed, an imperialist whose solution to the global black problem reflected and validated key elements of the Eurocentric worldview he professed to oppose. Delany, like other leading black nationalists, did not frontally engage European imperialism. Instead, he sought accommodation with imperial ideology, and seemed eager to work alongside the Europeans in their "civilizing mission" (Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans*; McAdoo). In essence, Delany developed a "radical" movement against American racism and inequality, which he compromised on the international stage when he flirted with the European imperial agenda. The "radical," anti-racist/anti-establishment movement for an independent black nation lost its steam as it accommodated and became entwined with the racist European imperial ideology.

Delany's "radical" nationalist ambitions seemed to dissipate with the outbreak of the Civil War. He now embraced integration, which entailed working with other black leaders such as Douglass and Henry Garnet to advance the cause of the Union. Delany's conviction and determination to reconcile blacks to the nation so impressed President Abraham Lincoln that he commissioned him the first combat Black Major in the Union army (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 76–77).

From this point till the end of the Civil War, and the early reconstruction period, Delany adopted and joggled both conservative and radical solutions and strategies. The violent and vitriolic nature of his speeches and utterances in the early years of reconstruction convinced some that he harbored pathological hatred of whites (Magdol). However, viewed from the broader context of national politics, Delany was a "radical" republican; having identified, like most blacks, with the victorious Republican Party and its radical reconstruction platform: the political elevation, enfranchisement and empowerment of blacks, and the broadening of the political spectrum to allow for greater black participation. Many deemed this early Reconstruction phase of Delany's career "radical", largely because in several of his writings and utterances, he advocated "radical" solutions such as land reform and redistribution, and strongly defended the "radical" political reforms of the era embedded in the various Constitutional Amendments: Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth—abolition of slavery, conferment of citizenship, along with equal protection of the law, and the franchise respectively (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* chapt. 4).

When the Civil War ended, Delany was reassigned as sub-assistant commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) and posted to Hilton Head, South Carolina; a position he held from 1865 through the demise of the Bureau in 1868. His Bureau duties included the supervision and management of all abandoned lands and also the dispensation of all matters relating to freedmen and refugees (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 77–90). As a Bureau field agent, Delany had jurisdiction over some twenty-one government plantations. He assumed the task of helping freedmen navigate the slippery and complex terrain of their newly won freedom. He sought to establish a mutually beneficial *modus operandi* between freedmen (former slaves), and planters (former slave-owners) which would keep the plantations functioning under the new dispensation which included adequate compensation for the labor of freedmen. In his plantation district, therefore, Delany developed and adopted a "contract system" predicated on an economic relationship of mutual trust and dependence (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 85). Though employed as an agent of the "Radical" Republican administration, Delany's Bureau duties included, *inter alia*, the fundamentally conservative function of helping the government contain and moderate the "radical" aspirations of, and possibly nihilistic tendencies within, the newly freed black labor force. In this role, some critics perceived Delany as a government stooge; employed and deployed to tame and contain the revolutionary aspirations of freedmen for land redistribution and complete economic freedom; goals he had earlier advocated. This was corroborated by the fact that wherever there was the hint of a possible black dissatisfaction with, or resistance to, government policies, Delany was quickly dispatched by the "radical" republican

government to pacify the situation. He became the government's answer to black agitations, the agent responsible for quelling rebellious tendencies. Delany was effective in executing this "conservative" function, even though he was politically associated with a "radical" republican administration. He helped planters contain free blacks within a contractual arrangement that was fundamentally exploitative and conservative. For performing such conservative role, Delany won praises from the government, but, not surprisingly, was soon alienated from, and victimized by, "radical" elements within the black community.

Delany's conservatism led him to oppose and attempt to contain black political aspirations. Early in the Reconstruction period, while black leaders agitated for immediate and greater political rights, Delany assumed the fundamentally conservative role of curtailing the political aspirations of the black leadership. For instance, soon after the assassination of President Lincoln, a delegation of black leaders including Frederick Douglass approached President Andrew Johnson to demand immediate political reforms and the expansion of black political rights and privileges (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 91–93). In a letter to the delegation, Delany counseled moderation and gradualism. He advised the delegates to "[b]e mild… be respectful and deferential." He closed the letter with: "[b]e patience in your misery, Be meek in your despair; Be patient, O be patient! Suffer on, suffer on!" (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 93; Rollin 283) To his critics, Delany seemed against radically upstaging the existing culture of political inequality. Fundamentally, his call for gradualism derived from a concern that blacks would and could destabilize the political climate and culture through what he deemed reckless, premature and ill-timed political demands. He urged blacks to foster a culture of goodwill toward the defeated, angry and politically humbled southern whites. Through this overture, Delany hoped to reassure southern whites that black aspirations would not undermine the fundamentals of southern culture and worldview. This "conservative" concession would, Delany hoped, guarantee reciprocity and concessions from whites which would allow blacks the space within which to exercise and enjoy the more critical economic rights and privileges. In fact, by the mid-1870s, Delany had abandoned any pretense of "radicalism" and focused more intensely on appeasing the alienated and angry South Carolina state conservatives. He began openly to flirt with the state Democratic Party; party of former slave-owners; those who had fought the Civil War vigorously and passionately to defend and preserve slavery (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* chapt. 4). Why this shift to a "conservative" position for someone who less than five years earlier was in the camp of the radicals? Why this switch in national political allegiance from radicalism to conservatism? In a letter to Frederick Douglass two years earlier, Delany alluded to his growing and developing frustration with radical politics. Angrily denouncing radical republicanism, Delany concluded

that radicalism had only misled blacks, fed them unrealistic expectations and aspirations, exploited their ignorance and gullibility, and further alienated them from mainstream southern society which, he believed, held the key to their future development (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 112–118).

In numerous writings and speeches, Delany warned of the imminent return to power of South Carolina conservatives and advised blacks to respond pro-actively by deemphasizing, and disengaging from, radical politics, and securing the goodwill of the resurging conservatives. He now saw the interests of blacks better served through reconciliation and affiliation with the conservatives. From 1874 till 1876, Delany pitched his tent with the state conservative flag-bearer, the Democratic Party, and became a vocal spokesperson for reconciliation and accommodation. He did not perceive conservatism as necessarily negative and evil. Judged by the conciliatory tone of the public utterances of leading state Democrats, Delany believed that conservatism now held the future for blacks and promised greater opportunities for elevation and eventual empowerment. Conservatism now offered greater protection of those rights blacks had won since the end of the war. He urged blacks to give the state conservatives and conser-vatism a chance. From 1873 through the end of radical reconstruction Delany was a vocal advocate of the conservative option. He actively campaigned for the Democratic Party in the crucial 1876 election. In his campaign speeches, Delany emphasized the practical benefits of the Democratic/Conservative platform, and the pledge by the Democrats to respect and protect the rights and privileges of blacks. He described the Democrats as; "Men of character and intelligence who could be trusted to keep their words" (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 155, chapt. 5).

Not surprisingly, the mainstream black political leadership did not respond kindly to Delany's ideas, and from the very beginning, he found himself deep in hot waters. His speeches and campaign activities ruffled feathers and led to bitter opposition and condemnation and, on one occasion, there was a violent attempt on his life. The radical black political leadership rejected and repudiated his ideas and, at every opportunity, he was politically obstructed, intimidated and ostracized. Fellow blacks opposed and thwarted Delany's political aspirations; most notably during his senatorial bid in 1872, and the race for Lt-Governor of South Carolina in 1874. In the former, they rejected his candidacy. In the latter, they voted overwhelmingly against Delany, resulting in his defeat by a fellow black, Richard Gleaves, with a margin that underscored the depth of black resentment to his ideas—ninety-seven votes to eleven (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 111–127). Less than a year after this defeat, Delany was charged with, and found guilty of, grand larceny and was sentenced to incarceration, a charge that he and his supporters deemed politically motivated and false. Matters came

to a head at a joint Republican-Democratic campaign rally in Cainhoy, Berkley County, South Carolina. Delany narrowly escaped death when a black militia fired at a Democratic speaker named McKinley who was mistaken for Delany. Delany's public repudiation of radicalism in the campaigns leading up to the compromise of 1876 was considered by many the ultimate act of political betrayal of fellow blacks, for which he was further ostracized (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 137–141, 156–157). Though compensated with appointment as Trial Justice for the city of Charleston by Gov. Wade Hampton and the triumphant state conservatives in 1877, Delany's reputation as a black leader seemed to have suffered irreparable damage. His tenure as Trial Justice was brief and marred by hostility from fellow blacks. Ultimately, he was removed after a petition by some "citizens of Charleston" accused Delany of conducting the office "in a manner discreditable to the present administration of the state… and repugnant to the feelings of both races in this community" (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* 165). The vast majority of blacks in South Carolina did not share Delany's faith in the Democratic Party. They had difficulty believing that those who fought a bitter Civil War to protect and preserve slavery could in so short a time have abandoned that worldview.

Delany's political philosophy clearly underscored a utilitarian and perhaps even cynical approach to political ideologies and movements. Political affiliations should not serve as wedges or fences. Rather, they exist to advance the interests of members. Black political affiliation, therefore, should be dictated by this pivotal utilitarian consideration. What mattered was not the ideology, but the aspirations of blacks and, in the pursuit of those aspirations, no strategy should be rejected for purely political or ideological reason, even if it entailed associating and co-operating with erstwhile oppressors and enemies. The definition and meaning of an ideology in popular imagination was less significant. Of more relevance was its capacity to advance the goals and aspirations of blacks at any given moment. Thus, an ideology with negative experiential attributes could potentially yield positive results. The futuristic potentials should trump past negative attributes. Thus, radicalism may once have advanced black aspirations, but by the mid-1870s, Delany argued, it had become a negative and potentially destructive force. In contrast, conservatism, though represented by the Democratic Party, and might have been associated historically with slavery and racism, had by the mid-1870s, based on its electoral platform, become more promising for blacks (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* chapt. 4).

An assessment of the dynamics of power was fundamental to Delany's notion of political affiliation and ideology. He believed that a black leader should not be guided solely by ideology, be it radical or conservative, but by a determination of power relationship. The choice should be the one position or ideology that both empowers and had the capacity to advance the cause. Even then, one's loyalty

to any ideology terminated when the power dynamics changed. Thus, Delany seemed to give individuals the latitude to switch ideological positions based on their determination of the power dynamics. A black leader should never be found enslaved to an ideology of powerlessness and vulnerability. For Delany, no political ideology or affiliation should hold one unswervingly hostage to a dogmatic option that could prove detrimental and destructive to one's existential interests. This meant if one's affiliation, informed by utilitarian consideration, became threatening, destructive and disadvantageous, Delany strongly suggested the reasonableness of decamping. As he once declared at a 4th of July rally in Charleston, South Carolina, underscoring the utilitarian underpinnings of the Black-Radical Republican Party alliance, "I want you [i.e., blacks] to stick to them [i.e., radical republicans] until you find the odds too heavy against them, then get away as fast as you can" (*The Daily Republican*, July 5, 1870, 2; July 27, 1870, 2). To command the unswerving loyalty of its members, therefore, a party, according to Delany, should not only provide material benefits but also protection. This was true of the political realities of the mid-1870s, by which time, according to most historian and political critics, radical republicanism was *radical* in name only. Political power relations had changed in the South. For Martin Delany, radical republicanism had failed in its overarching goal—the nurturing of an atmosphere of reconciliation between blacks and southern whites (their former oppressors). Nationwide, angry and alienated southern conservatives were on the political rebound, and with a vengeful disposition toward blacks. Correspondingly, the zeal with which the federal government had defended black rights had dissipated. This bore ominous consequences for blacks. Thus, in Delany's judgment, it was time to switch allegiance. Republican Party "radicalism" was no longer a positive force (Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race* chapt. 5).

Delany's career, therefore, reflected a proclivity to switched political allegiances and affiliations. He vacillated between radical and conservative options, and each time, *his* conviction, *his* determination of what best advanced the interests of blacks informed *his* choices. It should be noted, however, that Delany's flirtation with South Carolina conservatives was a strategic means of securing a space for blacks which, he hoped, would enable them eventually destabilize and obliterate the entire structure of inequality. In other words, he sought a *radical* end through, and within, a *conservative* context. Delany's political philosophy had no room for irreconcilable positions or zero-sum ethos. The astute politician must be willing to embrace, and experiment with diverse, even conflicting options and strategies; must be open to working with anyone with the potential to help achieve positive results, even erstwhile enemies. Changing circumstances could dictate reconciliation, and developing common grounds, with even those with whom one had once bitterly disagreed. It should be underscored, at this juncture, that

this seemingly contradictory political philosophy was not a uniquely Delanyean phenomenon. Black leaders, who had established reputations as "radical" and "anti-establishment", even "anti-American", often flipped and embraced erstwhile ideological opponents. One such was Delany's own fellow "militant nationalist" Henry McNeal Turner, who was "famous for his blistering radical condemnation of the racism of American society". Yet, "he always expressed a surprising sympathy with both the social and political views of southern white conservatives." According to Eisenstadt:

> After 1880 Turner generally voted Democratic, and he was the first of a series of black nationalists and separatists—including Marcus Garvey, Elijah Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan--to seek a quixotic common ground with white segregationists. Turner's ambiguous attitude toward the South and southern democrats was characteristic of southern black leaders of his generation. (xix)

This ambiguity, or more appropriately pragmatism, was central to Delany's political thought. He had no permanent political opponents. His choices were informed by his determination of whether or not they would advance what *he*, at that critical moment, determined were in the best interests of blacks. Thus, while the goals he pursued remained fairly constant: freedom, justice, equality—the shifting political contexts dictated reassessment and realignment. An astute political leader, therefore, had to know when it was strategic to switch between radical and conservative alternatives, and at times, the situation could dictate juggling both ideologies; each reinforcing the other.

Thus, though black conservatives seemed to defend establishment values and relationship, very often their ultimate goal was to destabilize the system. In this regard, Delany's support of South Carolina Democrats in the late 1870s was not, in his judgment, an acknowledgment of their right to subordinate blacks *ad infinitum*. It derived from a realistic assessment of emerging realignment of political power relations in the entire South. As a correspondent of the *New York Times* observed, commenting on emerging political realignments in the South, "[p]arties are now getting mixed in the South. Other questions than those raised by the war are now making their way into politics… which do not leave old party lines clear…. Republicans are found acting with Democrats and vice versa" (*The New York Times*, November 27, 1870). Given this reality, Delany concluded that blacks were better served by deemphasizing radicalism; an ideology that no longer was actively and effectively supportive and nurturing of their rights and privileges. Like future conservatives such as Booker T. Washington, Delany might have been naïve in reposing so much faith in accommodation as a means of radically transforming the *status quo* of inequality. His choice of a conservative approach, at any given moment, derived from a strong conviction that it was the

best option for advancing the cause of freedom and equality. This was the least to hurt blacks. In other words, such conservative choice, just like his embrace of "radicalism" in the late-1860s, situated blacks in a position of strength.

Delany deemed a "radical" posture in the early years of reconstruction rational because blacks had on their side, the force and authority of the federal government, supporting and guaranteeing their exercise of rights and privileges. This position of strength made radical republicanism a logical and realistic option. By the mid-1870s, however, that federal power and authority was disappearing and Delany felt that radicalism was bereft of any positive attributes and thus had become disadvantageous. With the gradual dismantling of federal authority in the South in the late 1870s, Delany became convinced that blacks would be powerless to confront their erstwhile enemies who had been angered and infuriated by radical politics. This strategic calculation dictated his switch to the Democratic Party in the mid-1870s. He had come to the conclusion that the conservative option now offered blacks a better chance. As indicated above, this utilitarianism shaped nineteenth-century Reconstruction black leadership. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suggest that in black American history, political ideologies (radicalism and conservatism) have not always been mutually exclusive, zero-sum entities. This has changed significantly in the modern Civil and Post-Civil Rights contexts. Political ideologies and affiliations have assumed inflexibly jurisdictional character; reflective of the deepening crisis of racial politics. A subset of this discourse is the affiliation of black conservatism with the modern Republican Party, especially its extremity. Delany therefore personified political pragmatism which embodied utilitarian construction of political ideology. He deemed the good and astute black politician neither consistently conservative nor consistently radical. He/She is at times one and/or the other; someone who does not hesitate to embrace, and be publicly identified with, whichever option promised to advance the interests of blacks. Today, such a leader would be deemed a charlatan, a political prostitute or pimp. In Delany's times, however, the ever-shifting terrain of black political history rendered that leadership typology much more realistic; or more appropriately, pragmatic.

Conclusion

Delany's career, therefore, was characterized by what could rightly be described as a political/ideological eccentricity informed by utilitarian consideration. This underpinned the dizzying frequency with which he changed political allegiances and ideological positions; often bedazzling, confusing, disappointing and, at time, alienating supporters and detractors alike. But he was unmoved. Despite

these oppositions and intimidations, Delany remained steadfast in his political pragmatism. He switched positions and allegiance whenever he deemed it politically prudent. For Delany, radicalism and conservatism were not sacrosanct ideologies, but flexible options for advancing the interests of blacks. Those interests should dictate, and take precedence over, the ideology, and not the reverse. The individual, guided by determination of what was in the best interest of the black community, should freely experiment with either conservative or radical options. The astute and savvy black leader must know when such pragmatism dictated switching ideological positions.

Delany's concern was not so much with how *others* felt about his choices, but whether those choices truly reflected *his* convictions about what *he* deemed was in the best interest of blacks. As he once declared; "I care little for precedent, and, therefore, discard the frivolous rules of formality…conforming always to principle, suggested by *conscience*, and guided by the light of *reason*" (*The North Star*, July 16, 1848). Put differently, the decisions and choices Delany made were dictated more by *his conscience*, guided by the light of *his reason*, and less by dogmatic allegiance to some radical or conservative ideology. Thus, his political thought was rooted in a pragmatism that allowed him the flexibility to make choices and decisions based not on blind allegiance to some dogma or political principles, but *his* determination of what would best advance the interests of *his* constituency at any given political moment. Though Delany embraced, advocated and experimented with "radical" solutions and strategies, he was not averse to switching and adopting "conservative" solutions and strategies when he deemed necessary. For Delany, the strategy/approaches mattered less. The goals were far more profound and consequential and thus dictated the strategies. Paradoxically, the force of Delany's "radical" personality has historically overshadowed the other and equally profound "conservative" identity hence, the reluctance of many scholars and critics to engage the latter.

Delany's conservative strategies underscore both the complexity of black conservatism and its mutually-reinforcing relationship to radicalism. One, therefore, concurs with Peter Eisenstadt that "black conservatism transcends the usual division of integrationists and nationalists. Those of conservative disposition can be found as much among militant nationalists as among committed assimilationists." In fact, the central theme of Eisenstadt's volume is, "[t]he ambivalence of southern conservatism and its tendency to vacillate between accommodation and radical nationalism." Many of the "distinctive southern black conservatives" including Turner and Delany tended "to alternate between phases of supine accommodationism and militant nationalism or emigrationism" (Eisenstadt xix).

At different times in his career, Delany has been tagged a conservative who compromised, and at times, a radical and an uncompromisingly militant leader.

In truth, he exemplified all attributes, often combining and juggling them within contiguous historical contexts and struggles. He rejected any blind allegiance to an ideology or ideal, be it radical or conservative and seemed opposed to an existentialist conception of political ideology as an absolute category which established boundaries and set values and goals deemed inviolable. Delany was not overly concerned about political labels, whether radical or conservative. He believed that the goals trumped ideals and labels: one could be consistent on goals and yet flexible and pragmatic on ideology and strategies. This utilitarian ethos shaped the conservative phase of his career. Thus, for Delany, utilitarian consideration determined political group identity and affiliations. The critical consideration was whether such affiliation would advance the people's aspirations. As the Rabinowitz anthology established, this utilitarianism characterized black leadership in the nineteenth century, and Martin Delany, this article contends, was the perfect exemplar. Being "conservative" or "radical" was often a utilitarian, rather than an existential choice. The underlying consideration was not the meaning of, or images embedded in, the ideology, but the potentialities (radical, moderate or conservative) for achieving the desired goals.

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