

A History of 'Saints'

In 1852, Frederick Douglass stood before an American audience prepared to deliver a gripping bait-and-switch. It was Independence Day, and Douglass began—predictably, given the date—by praising the prevailing American narrative of liberty for all, only to point out the contradictory nature of this narrative. Douglass stood before a white audience and decried the “bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy” in America that would “disgrace a nation of savages.”¹ Twenty-eight years later, Douglass spoke at another day of independence—Emancipation Day—seemingly to attempt an identical bait-and-switch, to praise the efforts to date and then strip such effort of its rhetorical trappings, delivering a rousing call to action. However, in this latter attempt, Douglass lapsed into a similar laziness regarding political narrative that typified those he condemned in 1852. In portraying the West Indies emancipation as a moral awakening, a representation of the “thawed...British heart,”² Douglass wielded a constructed history, leading to a wholly inadequate policy prescription: simple material betterment as the primary mechanism of equality for African-Americans.

Douglass’ familiarity with the abolition movement in Britain to an extent explained his fondness for the movement. After all, abolitionists in Britain purchased his freedom, an act Douglass staunchly defended.³ To Douglass, the West Indies emancipation was “a luminous point in human history,” that “stir[red] our hearts, and fill[ed] our souls.”⁴ The abolition of West Indies slavery, Douglass believed, “can never be to us other than memorable and glorious,” as it

¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Essential Douglass*, p. 60.

² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

was “a revelation of the power of conscience and of human brotherhood.”⁵ Evoking perhaps the first recorded instance of domino theory, Douglass asserted that the “downfall of slavery under British power meant the downfall of slavery, ultimately, under American power, and the downfall of Negro slavery everywhere.”⁶ To counter dissent regarding the vastly disparate ways that American and British emancipation occurred, Douglass continued: “the motive and mainspring of the respective measures were the same in both [countries].”⁷ Douglass’ adulatory tones were by no means unique, as evidenced by the fact that Emancipation Day (as celebrated in America) was frequently held on the day of British emancipation. But by wholly buying into this narrative, Douglass assumed that morality had triumphed. The sole exception to this triumph was the “old master class in its wrath.”⁸ In this assumption, Douglass took and upheld a constructed history.

James Baldwin believed that constructed history, a compelling narrative that helps build one’s identity, was a pitfall for humanity which frequently resulted in oppression. Juxtaposing Christianity with the Nation of Islam, he pointed at the absurdity of both religions’ respective histories as they created a dichotomy between the superior and inferior human: “Why, then, is it not possible that all things began with the black man and that he was perfect—especially since this is precisely the claim that white people have put forward for themselves all these years?”⁹ In believing their constructed history, “priests of that church which stands in Rome gave God’s

⁵ Ibid., pp. 250-251.

⁶ Ibid., p. 252.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 256.

⁹ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 326.

blessing to Italian boys being sent out to ravage a defenseless black country.”¹⁰ Believing *their* constructed history, the Nation of Islam lapsed into the same “glorification...and consequent debasement” that constituted “a recipe for murder.”¹¹ Constructed histories came in all shapes and sizes, and were not limited to the religious narratives that Baldwin pointed out, as evidenced by the absolute authority with which he spoke: “An invented past can never be used; it cracks and *crumbles* under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”¹²

The cracks in the history Douglass relayed in 1880 emerge under the slightest pressure. The idea of the ‘thaw of the British heart’ overlooked the long and problematic history of the British abolition movement, which was typified by political opportunism. Slavery was abolished nearly thirty years after the slave trade itself. The slave trade was ended (or at least forbidden) in the wake of the successful Haitian revolution, which drove the French out of their sugar colony of Saint Domingue, eclipsing all previous slave rebellions and displaying the volatility of slavery to the British. In the early 1800s, Thomas Clarkson—a man who was rumored to have met Douglass, and who Douglass mentions as first amongst British abolitionists—relayed a dramatic account of the abolition of the slave trade which lauded the responsible politicians as ‘saints.’¹³ Clarkson emphasized the oratory presence of Wilberforce, for instance, not the decreasing

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 316.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 334.

¹² Ibid., p. 333, emphasis added.

¹³ *Essential Douglass*, p. 252.

economic viability of the slave trade—and slavery—for the British empire. In short, “the story was dramatic, the motives clear, and the ending happy.”¹⁴

The motives, however, were ambiguous at best: “The economic indicators clearly pointed to a decline of profit during the years immediately preceding abolition.”¹⁵ Furthermore, overproduction and inefficiency hamstrung the sugar industry and “confidence in the sugar industry began to falter in 1803.”¹⁶ Saints or no, there was little doubt that the British abolition movement was not wholly a moral exercise. It was able to gain and maintain traction by riding a rhetoric of morality. Laudatory narratives were a key element to the reimagining of the British Empire as a moral world leader, and overlooked the flaws of British abolition: the movement grew out of opportunism in the face of declining profits from slavery; the abolition of the slave trade did not in fact halt the trading of slaves in British colonies, a fact that prominent abolitionists like Wilberforce attempted to conceal;¹⁷ finally, that abolition occurred nearly thirty years after the first victory of the ‘saints’ that Douglass praised. By portraying British abolition as an absolute moral triumph—and compounding this error by likening abolition in Britain to that in America—Douglass used a constructed history, creating disastrously wrong policy suggestions in the face of failed reconstruction.

¹⁴ Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999), p. 356.

¹⁵ David Ryden. "Does Decline Make Sense? The West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the Slave Trade." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (2001): 347-374.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Michael J. Turner, "The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the 'African Question', C. 1780-1820." *The English Historical Review* 112, no. 446 (1997): 319-57. pp. 348-356.

When Douglass eventually pivoted from praise into criticism in his 1880 speech, he called attention to new variations of slavery such as sharecropping: “the old master class... retained the power to starve them to death, and wherever this power is held, there is the power of slavery.”¹⁸ In the face of this ‘new slavery,’ which would eventually birth Jim Crow, Douglass insisted on material reparations. The slaves fell into new slavery because “they were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends, and without a foot of land upon which to stand.”¹⁹ Poverty was the root of racial inequity to Douglass, as “an exceptionally poor and dependent people will be despised by the opulent, and despise themselves.”²⁰ But “with money and property comes the means of knowledge and power.”²¹

Douglass’ rationale depended on his constructed history. The moral victory had already been won, the hearts of men had been thawed, or at least so the story went. Thus, beyond the ‘old master class,’ African-American oppression was a function of poverty. To bolster his argument, Douglass likened African-American poverty to that of the former serfs in Europe, who, no longer destitute, were supposedly respected. His example of material reparations after the end of Russian serfdom as an equalizing force was a matter of debate, but was completely overshadowed by his next case study, which aged particularly terribly: “The Jews, only a century ago, were despised, hated, and oppressed, but they have defied, met, and vanquished the hard

¹⁸ *Essential Douglass*, p. 255.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²¹ *Ibid.*

conditions imposed upon them, and are now opulent and powerful, and compel respect in all countries.”²²

There is little doubt that material reparations have validity. However, to place the sole impetus for racial equality on African-Americans and “the importance of saving your earnings” was an insufficient bulwark in the face of Southern paternalism and Jim Crow.²³ Douglass’ assertions in the face of Southern resistance to reconstruction-era reforms assumed an end to the need of *moral* reforms like those Douglass had championed on Independence Day decades before, and throughout his career. Douglass’ mistake can be attributed to his acceptance of prevailing abolition narratives, which used a constructed history to argue that some form of moral enlightenment had already occurred. However, in Britain and the United States, there were no dominoes to topple, and there was no great awakening. Some fought for abolition morally, others pragmatically. To assume that a landmark in the struggle for freedom marked the end of immorality and abuse solely based on skin color is to accept a constructed narrative that preserved the American power structure, a pattern mirrored over the past two centuries. Doing so is to ignore the assumption Baldwin stated was ‘helplessly believed’ by white Americans: that “at least they are not black.”²⁴ The idea of material gains as sufficient reform helped ensure that “a hundred years after his technical emancipation, he [the African-American] remain[ed]...the most despised creature in his country.”²⁵ Thus, the constructed history Douglass tried to use in 1880 inevitably crumbled.

²² Ibid., p. 256.

²³ Ibid., p. 257.

²⁴ James Baldwin, "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?" (speech, March 7, 1965).

²⁵ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, p. 335.