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The Exceptional Exception: Frederick Douglass and the Problem of the Nation

A Negative Theory of Democracy

One way of having a critical purchase on the ideal of democracy is to remind ourselves of the groups and the pole that it excludes. There is a history to be had here, one of equivocations and prevarications deployed to camouflage the gap between the projected democratic image and the historical reality. Issues of class, race, gender and ethnicity would be chapters in this history.

Stipe Grgas, “Democracy and American Exceptionalism”

However we name our moment, as late- (or late-late-) capitalist (the U.S., Euro-America, the West),¹ oligarchical (of the state capitalist variety, Russia, China, Qatar) or neoliberal (a term that can be applied ubiquitously, as though we already know what “neoliberalism” is),² and however we conceive the rise of nativism (Donald Trump, Brexit, Marie le Pen, Geert Wilders) and fundamentalisms and the wars waged in its name by organizations variously labeled ISIS, Al-Qaeda (or any of their franchises, or those “affiliates,” either as loose groupings or condensed into individual sympathizers), or Boko Haram, we can safely say that ours is an age in which democracy is under historic strain. What does it mean today? How much resonance and ideological purchase does democracy have in the contemporary world? In her critique of neoliberalism, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown makes a telling contribution to this debate. Arguing in a vocabulary (but not exactly the spirit) that occasionally echoes Carl Schmitt while putting one in mind of Mosaic law (of the Ten Commandments, only one—“Honor thy mother and thy father”—is

¹ In this regard, see Jeff Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012). Nealon’s work is, as is detectable in the title, a critique in the spirit of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

² In what might be named the “high moment” of neo-liberalism, a moment that many trace to the early-1970s, it is not only presumed that there is largescale agreement about what “neo-liberalism” as such “means,” that is, what constitutes it as a historical moment, but that there is no philosophical or political distinction in how “neo-liberalism” is thought. That is, the theoretical predisposition seems to be toward a flattening of the concept, of the historical moment, a tendency that will not acknowledge that differences between a Michel Foucault and a David Harvey; because of this proclivity, the refusal to think the political and economic complexities, on-going as they are, Harvey’s has, without too much dissent, become the standard, standardized, account of how we understand – apprehend – “neo-liberalism.”

affirmative), Brown proposes a negative theory of democracy. According to Brown, “More than leaving its contents and particulars unspecified, the bare concept of democracy (or the concept of bare democracy) features no continuous or consistent account of why the people ought to rule, only the negative one that we should not be ruled by others” (203). Not the negation of democracy (to eradicate or oppose it), but democracy as founded on a negative principle: “not to be ruled by others.”

It is a negative principle, however, that is replete with affirmation. The determination “not to be ruled by others” is grounded, one assumes, either in the commitment to ruling the self,³ or in the tradition of representation (representative democracy), to assent to being ruled by others for whom one has voted or elected to power; that is, the self—extended into its democratic political self—the member of parliament, the congressional representative, and so on, that political fiction so necessary to the functioning of parliamentary democracy.

The affirmative proclivities of Brown’s negative theory lend to her notion of democracy a dialectical usefulness. A negative theory of democracy,⁴ less astutely conceived, would reduce such a theory to negation, a negation that borders on abjection; a negation, then, that would not produce a Hegelian “advance” on/of history of the kind imagined by Nancy, who argues for a “two-stage” conception of “negation,” only the second of which, the “negation” of the “first” “negation” would secure a Hegelian “outcome” – the “infinite” of possibility enabled by the “negation of the negation.”⁵ In such a theory the people do not know what they want, leaving open to history—to the event, as such—what it is that the people (the “demos”) *do* want. Instead, Brown’s negative theory formulates democracy as an acute awareness of what is not permissible, all the while understanding the political effect of contingency—the event, as such, is the product of political work as much as it is about recognizing the impossibility of determining every political outcome. There is, reductively phrased, nothing remotely formulaic—i.e., predictable—about politics. The work of politics is to “delineate democracy’s positive *political* value” against this negative foundation (Brown 203; original emphasis). At stake in the delineation, which is also a delimitation, of “democracy’s positive political value” is a very specific need: to identify, to stipulate to,

³ The discourse of “self-rule,” of course, iterates a certain postcolonial discourse—the struggle for, say, “self-rule” in the British Raj (“swaraj”) or in Kenya (which is how one might, broadly speaking, conceive of “Uhuru”). The anti- or the postcolonial is hardly Brown’s political target, but her discourse evokes this struggle for “democracy.”

⁴ It is possible to suggest that Brown’s work, as regards its capacity to figure the political (future, the argument for that future) through the negative, or negation as such, speaks to the on-going resonance of Hegel. The Hegelian turn, or the persistence of thinking the political through Hegel, can in our moment be identified in the work of theorists such as Brown (in her most recent work, as engaged here), Jean-Luc Nancy (2002b), to say nothing of Hegel as rendered in the work of the Ljubljana “Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis” theorists Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič. Dolar, we might say, is the member of the “School” who is most inclined toward Hegel.

⁵ See Nancy’s *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. See also “Lord and Bondage” section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

the political desire that comes after accepting the negative—the opposition to being ruled by others—as the first act of democracy. What, exactly, or even vaguely, is it that the people want democracy to do? How do the people assert themselves, their voices, their political desires? What manner of “reality” do they imagine, in a democracy? Is the bare force of democracy nothing but, as that critic of “bare life” (βάρη λιφε) Giorgio Agamben (1998) insists in his designation of the “homo sacer” (χόμο σάκερ), the struggle against violence, the violence of struggle kept—for however long, but never forever—in abeyance? And if it is not violence as such, there is at least the threat of sovereign violence (that particularly Agambenian thread, derived from Schmitt), against which the demos, understandably, wants to shield itself.

It would seem that this line of inquiry, mapped here through Brown, Schmitt, and Agamben, compels us to begin, once again, with the negative so that we are, as it were, always working in the shadow of Hegel. It is in this way that Stipe Grgas’s essay, which traces the articulation of American democracy and exceptionalism to American literature from the major figures in the nineteenth century (“Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Melville” [“Democracy,” 462])⁶ to the second half of the twentieth century, resonates with Brown’s project on neoliberalism. (A critique of American exceptionalism might be said to be one of the resonant themes in the Grgas oeuvre. In other essays, among them “Where is Postmodernity?” and “Amnesia and the Geographies of Innocence and War,”⁷ Grgas repeatedly turns his attention to the issue of American exceptionalism.) Much as Grgas trains his eye on the exclusionary force of democracy, Brown too draws attention to the systemic failures of democracy. Brown understands that what matters in our thinking of democracy is how democracy is different under the current regime of capital: “hasn’t actually existing democracy always been saturated with class domination and inequality, racial subordination and exclusions, institutionalized sexual difference, colonial and imperial premises and practices, unavowed religious privileges and erasures? Why worry about neoliberal damage to this troubled field of meanings, practices, and institutions?” (Brown 202).⁸ What is

⁶ Grgas derives this figuration of nineteenth-century American literature from his reading of F. O. Matthiessen’s 1941 work, *American Renaissance*.

⁷ Reading William Spanos’s “application of Heidegger in comprehending the development and present of the United States,” Grgas argues that the “United States is no longer able to posit itself as a polity that stands outside the arena of history. In Spanos’s opus it is the Vietnam War that disabled the interpellative work that projected the United States as an exceptional nation” (“Amnesia and the Geographies of Innocence and War,” 232).

⁸ In his essay “Where is Postmodernity?,” Grgas notes, in passing, that the originary moment of modernity begins with an exception. To wit, against the “historical palimpsest” that is Europe, America is a “virgin land” except for the indigenous population: “The implementation of the modern project within the United States was greatly facilitated by the fact that it was not hampered by obstructive remnants of older formations or forces which had a stake in preserving an older order—excepting the Native Americans who, as it turned out, never had an option” (“Where is Postmodernity?,” 266). See also Fredric Jameson’s essay “An American Utopia,” in which Jameson proposes “universal conscription” to achieve a revolution on the order of Lenin’s “dual power.”

it about neoliberalism that should make us more concerned for democratic possibility? How should neoliberalism make us more vigilant and attentive to capital? What kind of Being, Hegel (certainly the Hegel of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, for whom “being-with” is crucial, that Hegel for whom the presupposition of the relationship between consciousnesses is decisive) would want to know, is or is not made possible by neoliberal capital?⁹ (What kind of beings emerge under the aegis of neoliberalism?)

Neoliberalism demands a specific democratic response because of its political implications. What makes neoliberalism distinct is—has been—that it signals the “vanquishing of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown 207; original emphasis). This is a new subject, one shaped by ruthless economic efficiency (so deliberately critiqued by Michel Foucault in his lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics* [2008] and now familiar to us as the discourse of downsizing, right-sizing, consolidation, privatization, and the auctioning off of state functions and assets to private capital) in which the “value—even the intelligibility—of popular sovereignty is rubbed out” (Brown, *ibid.*). Grgas and Brown are calling for the same “chapters in this history” to be written, the chapters about “class, race, gender and ethnicity,” which would displace “*homo oeconomicus*” (the rationalist creation of neoliberalism) and, once again, make “*homo politicus*” (Platonic man as a political subject first and foremost) the governing subject. Only the human as political subject (the human for whom *Dasein* and *Mitsein* are constitutive), under the various names iterated by Brown and Grgas, can return us to politics because *sans* politics, the economic logic of neoliberal efficiency will triumph. (Both Brown and Grgas recognize, in true Foucaultian fashion, that there can be disarticulation of the economy from politics, but their intent is to reinstitute politics as the first, but never disconnected, mode of critique; the inquiry begins with politics, if only to afford such an interrogation a momentary, and therefore unsustainable, primacy.)

Brown, it can be said, substantiates—in broad but not sweeping historical terms—the excluded constituencies which Grgas offers more categorically. Grgas senses that what exclusion alludes to is a “history to be had”; that is, not a history to be made, as such, but the need to articulate the untold account of those who endure/d the effects of American democracy and exceptionalism; this history, we might say, finds itself itemized by Brown. Hers is the effort to provide the accounts of, *inter alia*, workers, the unemployed, the lumpenproletariat, racial and religious minorities, the colonized, women, and transgendered subjects who constitute the bodies that bridge the “gap between the projected democratic image and the historical reality” of American

⁹ Hegel, in this regard, is important for Martin Heidegger’s thinking of *Mitsein* (let us translate it, for the sake of brevity, as “being-with”) because Heidegger does not turn to *Mitsein* (let us stipulate it as “being-with-the-other”) until he has “expended” his efforts on *Dasein*; the movement to the “plural” must, so the force of Hegel and Heidegger’s logic goes, follow the “singular,” which is, of course, as modern philosophers from Hegel through Heidegger and Nancy remind us, the “singular plural” (in Nancy’s phrase). See Nancy’s long essay, “Being Singular Plural” (2002a) for a brief summary of Hegel (and, secondarily, Heidegger’s) thinking on the “singular/plural.”

exceptionalism. The only way in which to militate against exclusion is to prioritize the interstices, to begin there, as it were, to train the critical gaze there for as long as possible. The “gap” is that political location out of which these names must be extracted, recovered, revived; the “gap,” that, those constituencies who are *entrée-nous*, “between-us,” related to and disarticulated from us in this hierarchized political that we inhabit, out of that which is *entrée-nous* we are able to gain direct access to the name that lays “bare” the face of American democracy; the names consigned to the “gap” are intensely political in their grammatical construction because they are the self-same names that refuse to be “camouflaged” any longer. The name of the “gap,” then, is nothing other than the name that American “historical reality” must be made to bear so that those names can stand against, however precariously and tentatively, the “equivocations and prevarications” that render the names of the “gap”—“class, race, gender and ethnicity”—obscure, even if it cannot eradicate them entirely. In Grgas’s terms, to expose the fallacious political logic that sustains the “equivocations and prevarications” is the work of ideology. For Grgas (whose interventions bear the imprint of Althusserian Marxism, broadly speaking), ideology can be understood as that set of socio-political ideas, reductively phrased, that give life, in the first instance, to the possibility of such obscurantism.

The rule is the exception

. . . the actualities of a political system that, throughout its history, has been plagued by undemocratic practices which are not exceptional but explainable by the contradiction of a socio-economic formation which has, one might say, reached its apogee precisely in the U.S.

Grgas, “Democracy and American Exceptionalism”

. . . it is our error that union amongst us is an essential element of success in our relations to the white race. This, in my judgment, is a very serious mistake.

They say that in union there is strength; that united we stand and divided we fall, and much else of the same sort.

My position is the reverse of this. I hold that our union is in weakness. . . . our position in this country is an exceptional position. The rule for us is the exception.

Frederick Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem”

Grgas’s literary lens, thinking the political exception through American letters, and Brown’s negative theory of democracy, “we should not be ruled by others,” find a strange conjuncture in the work of Frederick Douglass, especially Douglass’s essay “The Nation’s Problem.” Delivered on 16 April 1886 this was an address commemorating the

abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. It was also, however, a speech designed to reflect upon the perilous condition of the Negro, especially in the South, because of the failure of American society, and especially the judicial system, to enforce the Negro's constitutional protections. In the face of such legal vulnerability, Douglass makes the case that the Republican Party (the party of Lincoln), for all its shortcomings—"The Republican party is not perfect; it is cautious even to the point of timidity; but it is the best friend we have" (1886: 225)—remained the Negro's best political option.¹⁰

However, overlooked in Douglass's critique of American electoral politics is the political philosophy of "The Nation's Problem." Anachronistically phrased, it is the way in which this Douglass address "recalibrates" the Schmittian logic of the exception that lends Douglass's 1886 speech its salience—particularly as it regards his thinking on race and the state. (Carl Schmitt's critique of the sovereign and his notion of the political as articulated in works such as *The Concept of the Political*, of course, were formulated decades after Douglass's address.) For Schmitt, the sovereign is he who decides the exception; in so doing, the exception not only proves the rule but demonstrates how it is that the rule is subject to the exception.

It is in this regard that Douglass's thinking is signal. For the Negro,¹¹ Douglass asserts in his critique of (black) racial unity—"I hold that our union is in weakness," the "rule is the exception" (1889: 414). What is normative for the Negro in Reconstruction America is the Negro's non-normativity. Only in exceptional circumstances does the rule apply to the Negro, does the law, we can safely speculate, work in favor of the Negro. Other than that, and especially in the South, "the natural home of the colored race," the condition of the Negro is such that, Reconstruction or no,

Lynch law, violence, and murder have gone on about the same as formerly, and without the least show of federal interference or popular rebuke. . . . There have also been the usual number of outrages committed against the civil rights of colored citizens on highways and byways, by land and by water; and the courts of the country, under the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, have shown the same disposition to punish the innocent and shield the guilty, as during the presidency of Mr. Arthur.

(Douglass 1886: 215)

In the South, precarity is the normative experience for the Negro on every socio-political level.

Girding Douglass's thinking is a conception of political philosophy that would prove, unacknowledged because it is as unknown as it is ignored, foundational for

¹⁰ "The Nation's Problem" was one of two speeches that Douglass delivered in that moment (the other was an address to the Massachusetts Republicans on 22 May 1886) in which he made his case, reluctantly but not uncommittedly, for the Negro to remain faithful to Lincoln's party.

¹¹ I am using the term "Negro" because it is the one Douglass employs, because it is the name of his moment.

political theory in the next century. The force and clarity of Douglass's political insights is captured in the precision and prescience of his articulation, a phrase that echoes resonantly in our moment—and, in truth, it has been resonating for the last sixty or seventy years. Douglass's is a thinking that can, reductively or evocatively, be distilled to a single phrase, "The rule for us is the exception." (How can we not hear Carl Schmitt or any of his latter-day critics, *inter alia*, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben?) Unlike with Schmitt, where the rule is illuminated, brought to political life, by the exception, for Douglass the position of the Negro is a priori transparent—from before the moment itself, we might say.

Tautologically rendered, the Negro begins from the place of exception. For the Negro, it is the rule to be exceptional, or, to be the exception. The Negro's is a singular exceptionality in that the Negro, in the catastrophic moment that followed the Civil War ("Lynch law, violence, and murder"), a period of broken promises and new modes of violence (the triumph of Jim Crow legislation, attacks on Negro "civil rights," and so on), stands outside of the American polis. Under these conditions, it might be best to begin with the Negro in Reconstruction as a base arithmetical sign: subtraction (–).¹² The Negro is excepted—or, subtracted from, abstracted from, to borrow Alain Badiou's (2009) language—from the American body politic. Reconstruction was not, counter to the promises that followed the termination of the Civil War (what Abraham Lincoln called the "unfinished work" of the hostilities and the promise of a "new freedom" in the Gettysburg Address),¹³ added to the American body politic. On the contrary, the Negro continued, in the main, to stand outside, remaining external to the rule as it obtains to the American polis. The Negro is always subject to the rule as its exception, as the exceptionality that is excluded from the rule as it applies to the citizen. This is where the Negro begins: as subject to, and sometimes as the abjection of (the being presumed to be sans *Dasein*; the "being without Being," as it were), this rule. Or, the Negro as subtraction demonstrates the force of the exception; the force to which the exception is subject.

In this way, Douglass lends a historicity and, in so doing, a domesticity, to Grgas's critique of American exceptionalism as a globalizing phenomenon. As Grgas writes, "the issues of democracy and exceptionalism are no longer contained within America as a nation-state" ("Democracy," 472). In his turn, Douglass historicizes the externalization of America's logic of exceptionalism by offering its first articulation.¹⁴ The Ne-

¹² This is, as always when the subject is at the mercy of a violent state, a subtraction that bears perilously close on negation; that is to say, it must live daily with the prospect of being permanently eliminated from the body politic.

¹³ It is telling, of course, that the opening line of the Gettysburg Address is the foundational premise of equality, the very condition denied to the Negro not once but several times over: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (Lincoln).

¹⁴ Here Nancy's explication of how it is that "interiority" can only be affirmed through what is "exterior" to it resonates. Nancy writes, "It is well known that dialectical logic requires the passage through exteriority as essential to interiority itself" (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 30). In other words, the exterior US project, colonization, can be said to at once "validate" the (subjugation of what is) "interior" (first as the enslaved

gro's "exceptionalism" is the historic antecedent within, the foundational exception. It is in America's relation to its own, the Negro, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction, that we can trace the first articulation of American exceptionalism as "–": the literal taking away of citizenship of significant numbers of the newly enfranchised population. Through Douglass's explication of the "Nation's Problem," the stalwart abolitionist reveals a national, racialized interiority to the logic of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism began at home; it began through its encounter with the black body, with the body of the enslaved whose freedom was nominally achieved but by no means guaranteed by the defeat of the Confederacy. In fact, as it turned out, the opposite proved to be true, regardless of which political party held office. (A residue still operative in our moment.)

The self-same force that rendered the Negro exceptional could not, as Grgas notes, be contained by the borders of the United States. The logic of exceptionalism is, by default, always an excessive force: it must extend beyond itself, if only to affirm its exceptionality before the world. The logic of exceptionalism is, per force, the politics of addition: it seeks to add to itself, to make itself more, more than it currently is. It is always rendered as >. How else is the world to know of (the nation-state's) exceptionality if it is not confronted with it? Before there was the "world," however, there was the "nation-state." And within that "nation-state" there was the Negro (the point of, the body of, philosophical first articulation) who lived under that condition where the "rule was the exception." In this way, Douglass is writing of the "chapter on race" for which Grgas calls (before Grgas's call: Grgas, as it were, "hears" Douglass, writes to - and of - the hauntology of Douglass). The Negro is both the exception before the exception, and the exception that proves the exception as the rule of the American political. How polyvalent, how resonant, how (always potentially) fatal, then, is Douglass's pronouncement: "our position in this country is an exceptional position." To be "exceptional" is to occupy a historically necropolitical position; it is to be alive while being legally intimate with (the prospect of) death.

More salient, however, is the exceptionality of "The Nation's Problem" within the Douglass oeuvre. This argument for exceptionality, and against racial unity and pride, is itself unusual among Douglass's speeches and public addresses. Much more frequent is his critique of the American political order (here his three autobiographies take pride of place), producing a call for a reimagined political dispensation—a nation founded upon shared citizenship. In Lloyd Pratt's carefully wrought conception of Douglass, he proposes "strangerhood" as the best way to understand Douglass's political project: "Douglass's writing reaches a form of strangerhood . . . a polis predicated on mutuality rather than either sympathy or disinterested personhood" (249). The intention here is not to claim "The Nation's Problem" as in any way representative of Douglass's work, but to recognize its exceptionality and, precisely because of this, to fully explicate what such exceptionality might entail.

body and then as the political body made abject) and to have its "origin," its "first" iteration, which is of course never a first iteration, in precisely this body/these bodies.

Against Unity

As regards exceptionality, then, we might treat this (Negro) rule, this rule that applies (only) to the Negro, as a *fait accompli*, as what we already know. The real force of Douglass's argument resides elsewhere. Specifically, in his understanding of the Negro's subjectivation (–) as subjugation (–), Douglass turns not so much against the rule—he seems more interested in alerting us to it—as much as he rejects the prevailing logic of “strength in unity”—“My position is the reverse of this.” In the face of subjection, the proper—the most politically efficacious—response is not to bond together and to seek strength, and possibly solace too, in that union, but to recognize, in a peculiar phrasing, that “our union is in weakness.”

The particular subject that Douglass's “our” designates is unclear. Is he referring to his critique of the Negro tendency to support, for its own sake, often without any self-reflexivity, other Negroes? Negro causes? Is this Douglass's refusal of the political truism that “in union there is strength; that united we stand and divided we fall, and much else of the same sort. My position is the reverse of this”? Or, does his “our” signal a universal assessment of an American “union” that is “weak”? The latter position appears less likely because Douglass's focus seems to be on Negro political expectation, tradition, and practice. There is, of course, an unarguable logic to advocating that a people unite for the sake of race. Strength in and through unity is an entirely plausible political strategy; it is not simply a truism but a political strategy that has served several communities well over the centuries, at least as far back as the uprising that was led by that Thracian gladiator-made-slave Spartacus, Σπάρτακος, *Spártakos*, against the Roman Empire, and, as political legend would have it, the rebellion of the slaves against the Roman oligarchy. (As cinematic irony would have it, Spartacus is played by that other American Douglas, the one of Russian descent, Kirk. We are never free of the quirks of history, history as the law of return, as Nietzsche might phrase it; or, we are always subject to the laws of hauntology, in Derrida's [1994] rendering.)

However, what is salient is Douglass's phrasing, signal in no small measure because of its ambiguity: “our union is in weakness.” The less plausible possibility is that he is suggesting that the Negro “union” is “weak,” that this union is politically inefficacious, a judgment that would have been more easily rendered in the declarative: the Negro union is weak. There is, however, a much more politically suggestive reading lurking in this sentence, a meaning that turns on the preposition *in*: the “union is in weakness.” The only way for the Negro (and, possibly, by extension, everyone else) to be fully in the union is to enter into this union from the position of weakness. (Here Pratt's notion of “strangerhood” is especially evocative because if—all Americans’—“constant state of coming-into-being necessarily forbids identification,” then theirs is a shared “strangeness” to the nation and, as such, to themselves [Pratt 249].) That is, to be a Negro who commits to this union requires the willingness to expose the black self to the logic of precarity: to join this union is to acknowledge the risk that the Negro is willing to expose her- or himself to; it is an act conscious of the potential

violence, humiliation, degradation, and yes, even death that the Negro is prepared to confront in the cause of joining the union. There are no guarantees of acceptance, immunization from violence, or protection against attacks on the Negro psyche. The union is joined, submitted to, we can even say, *in* weakness. This is the a priori condition of politics: risk, to commence the struggle for that which is not on the grounds of inequity. It is fair to assume that the symbol $>$, which of course evokes Brown's negative theory of democracy, is the only grounds for politics.

There is no struggle that is truly political that begins from a position of equality. Politics adheres, per force, to the logic of the symbol $>$: one force is greater than the other. The force being engaged is greater $>$ (let us call it A, or white America; for Spartacus, its equivalent would be the Roman Empire) in resources (this could range from control over the media to military superiority) than the force that seeks to engage (let us call it B, the Negro, in Douglass's phrasing; Spartacus and the slaves); that is, the force that seeks to produce another polis, an articulation of self that is not commensurate with the extant mode of being. (The Negro struggles to be a citizen in America, Spartacus and the slaves are determined to go home or to end slavery or . . . to march on Rome.) Politics can be summed up as follows: $A \neq B$; B commits itself to reversing the inequality so that $B = A$. (It is in this way that the exceptionality of "The Nation's Problem" within Douglass's thinking manifests itself most resonantly. Under these conditions shared citizenship is almost impossible to achieve. Again, to invoke Brown, it might be that any notion of an "equal" polity is the first fiction of democracy.) (Or, as Nancy argues in *Being Singular Plural*, the One that is at the base of the political is always an impossibility.) That, formulaically rendered and in conventional terms, is the logic of politics; it is the logic of political struggle; it is the logic out of which the event, which can variously be known as the "revolution," the "rebellion," the "riot," the "strike," or the "march" can emerge. "Right thinking," says Douglass, "is essential to right acting" (1889: 412). Douglass sequences politics as a matter of thinking: it is acting that follows thinking. (It is not that Douglass seeks to sever acting from thinking, it is that he assigns first place to thinking. On this ground alone, then, it becomes clear why Douglass would reject political truisms such as "united we stand and divided we fall." It is too easy, too commonsensical, even, to adhere to the politics of racial unity. This, for Douglass, is a position that is in "error" because it proposes a conception of politics in which it is the lack of solidarity among Negroes who cannot conceive of a politics that begins in weakness. It is thinking as such that makes it possible for him to imagine a position such as "our union is in weakness.") "Right acting" can only be achieved by—or through—"right thinking." It is imperative to think politics correctly, properly, if the "right" outcome is to be achieved. The "right" political outcome cannot be secured, Douglass insists, without the "right" thinking that precedes and grounds the political act. (There is, of course, no guarantee that the former will secure the latter, but for Douglass, all politics follows from "right thinking.") For Douglass this means that, in order to conduct politics, it is necessary, at the very minimum, to understand the terms on which the struggle—for equality, for a restructuring of the socio-economic order—is about to be, is already being, con-

ducted. That is what it means to think about politics in the “right” way, the ways in which thinking prescribes—and, as such, proscribes—the act.

In this regard, for the Negro, a fundamental element of the American political can be articulated as the negation of Brown’s negation. To think about it in the “right” way is, for Douglass, to accept the impossibility of democracy as a negative. The fact is that the Negro will be ruled by someone else: ($A > B$). As Douglass makes clear in his argument about the indivisibility of sovereignty: “A nation within a nation is an anomaly” (1889: 415). The Negro cannot achieve sovereignty as a people within the United States except on the (singular) terms of their, to coin a phrase, exceptional weakness. Not for Douglass was the ambition to found a nation for free blacks in Africa which motivated the politics of figures such as the Episcopal minister Alexander Crummell or, later, the inspired the back-to-Africa fervor of a Marcus Garvey; or, later still, the separatist imperatives of the Nation of Islam or even, we can speculate, the drive for “self-protection” that motivated the Black Panthers’ politics in the 1960s and ’70s. (As W. E. B. DuBois writes so lyrically of Crummell, “He fought among his own, the low, the gasping, and the wicked, with that unbending righteousness which is the sword of the just. He never faltered, he seldom complained; he simply worked, inspiring the young, rebuking the old, helping the weak, guiding the strong” [163].)

It is not only that the nation could neither be abandoned nor divided. Politically speaking, it is something more than that: it is the recognition—a recognition that demands a “right thinking,” the construction of an argument, thereby producing a theory of the Negro in America as the exception—that for the Negro the nation could only be entered upon unfavorable—exceptional—terms. As Douglass puts it,

It shows that in the reconstruction of our national institutions upon a basis of liberty, and equality is not yet accepted as a final and irrevocable settlement of the Negro’s relation to the government, and of his membership in the body politic. There seems to be in a lurking disposition, a looking around for some plausible excuse for dispossessing the Negro of some part of his inheritance conceded to him in the generous spirit of the new departure of our government. (1889: 408)

It is upon these exceptional terms, $B <$, that Douglass seeks to conduct politics. Inequality as such ($A > B$) is not the formula that Douglass follows because for him all politics that the Negro undertakes in America is, a priori (before the event of America exceptionalism), “exceptional.” “Liberty and equality,” as the history of Jim Crow laws convey only too vividly, remain unsettled matters—“not yet accepted as a final and irrevocable settlement of the Negro’s relation to the government” (1889: 408). The Negro’s place in the American “body politic” remains precarious, vulnerable before the force of “dispossession.” The Negro’s claim upon his “inheritance” is unsure. The “new departure” of the United States government, Reconstruction, remained tinged with the practices of its antebellum self—neither the Civil War nor the Freedmen’s Bureau proved effective counters to the force and history of American racism.

Here, again, Douglass's exhortation, his thinking of the "Nation's Problem," returns to his first principle of politics as it pertains to the Negro: "The rule for us is the exception." This rule, in Grgas's terms, derives from the "actualities of a political system that, throughout its history, has been plagued by undemocratic practices which are not exceptional but explainable by the contradiction of a socio-economic formation which has, one might say, reached its apogee precisely in the U.S." ("Democracy," 468). In the arc of his work, which spans somewhere from, shall we say, Walt Whitman to Don de Lillo, that is, from antebellum America to postmodernity, and in which issues of American particularity (that is, if we want to step away, momentarily, from the discourse of exceptionality) are pursued with some consistency, Grgas's thinking underscores Douglass's political reality. "Undemocratic practices" constitute the "actualities of the political system" that Douglass struggled against. Chief amongst these were the structural obstacles that made equality unattainable—Jim Crow legislation, state-supported violence, indifference to violence against the Negro—and the political logic—that "search for some plausible excuse" to dispossess the Negro—that ensured that the "Negro's relation to the government" would be experienced as an unfulfilled promise.

One cannot but wonder in bemusement, if this is the spirit of the day, at Douglass's ironic tone: "in the generous spirit of the new departure of our government" (1889: 408). Douglass delivered his address "The Nation's Problem" in 1886, almost a quarter century after both the end of the American Civil War (1861–65) and the founding of the Freedman's Bureau (1865). A "new departure" was yet to emerge, and it can hardly be said that a "generous spirit" obtained in the relation of the United States to its Negro population—one cannot pronounce, without equivocation, the Negro a citizen.

The Negro remains, instead, the exception. It is, as Douglass insists, precisely how things have always been for the Negro: to begin from the exception, to understand exceptionality—which can easily be understood as "exclusion"—as the rule of American life for the Negro. If, as Grgas argues about the role of the United States in the contemporary moment (having debunked the notion of American exceptionalism and the ways in which U.S. discourse yokes, forcibly, exceptionalism to democracy), "there is nothing exceptional, extraordinary about the behavior of the USA in today's world," then, in a strange and (even) unexpected way, it becomes possible to configure Frederick Douglass as one of the first American theorists of the exceptional ("Democracy," 472). And, as such, Douglass and Grgas can be seen to work together to critique precisely the discourse of exceptionalism.

In so doing, they both subvert this discourse. Douglass from the inside, as the Negro who theorizes "weakness," who raises questions about how, where, and in what moments, exactly, the nation might be "weak," and Grgas from the outside. Grgas, writing as he does in the twilight of the American empire, and only, mind you, the twilight—to phrase this as Cecil John Rhodes, the famed British colonialist, might have—because those on the inside cannot imagine that the sun will set on the empire. Or, to put the matter in the terms that Douglass delineates, they cannot conceive of

such an end because they cannot concede that their “union is in weakness.” They do not understand how to conduct politics under the sign of <; they do not know how to hold a position that is the “reverse” of A >. This equation, contracted here, demands a kind of exceptional thinking, the kind that understands that the Negro’s “position in this country is an exceptional position,” but will then not follow the logic of identity politics. Douglass, as we know well by now, repudiates any call for Negro solidarity or what he calls “race pride.” (Douglass abjures this: “I see no benefit to be derived from this everlasting exhortation by speakers and writers among us to the cultivation of race pride. On the contrary, I see in it a positive evil” [1889: 411-12].)

As much as Douglass theorizes Negro exceptionalism, he simultaneously refuses to metastasize it as a political force into ontological exceptionalism. Politically precarious, physically vulnerable, Douglass’s Reconstruction Negro nevertheless evinces not so much “weakness,” etymologically understood, but theoretical resilience. Only the exceptionally weak, to phrase the matter poorly, can understand the political imperative of risk. Only those denied democracy as a negative force may, in the end, be able to rehabilitate it so that it may, to misappropriate Grgas, “function as something other than a political commodity” (“Democracy,” 461). As much as any nineteenth century American thinker, Douglass grasps the machinations of “political commodities.” More than any other thinker, it is possible to claim, he is able to invest key American concepts—concepts integral to American self-definition—with theoretical difficulty. Who other than Douglass can transform the “weakness” of the Negro into so arresting a theoretical complication? Douglass alone makes of “weakness” a theoretical >. Only when the “union is in weakness” can it produce a thinking of itself. Only when the “union is in weakness” does it create the conditions for the “right” thinker of exceptionalism.

It is, then, “weakness,” not strength, the willingness to risk the self rather than assert “race pride” that provides the possibility for such a perplexing critique of American exceptionalism. To phrase the matter dialectically, we might say that it is only when a political theorist such as Douglass holds a “position in reverse of this” that exceptionalism can be properly apprehended. From an inside that is indefatigably “right thinking.”

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