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1828: David Walker delivers a speech before the Massachusetts General Colored Association in Boston, proclaiming that “the dejected, degraded, and now enslaved children of Africa will have, in spite of all their enemies, to take their stand among the nations of the earth” before writing his famous Appeal.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND BLACK SOLIDARITY

David Walker, a black American, was born free in Wilmington, North Carolina circa 1796. As a young man, he traveled extensively through the South, observing the myriad injustices of the slave system, and settled for a time in Charleston, South Carolina, home of a politically active African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church that espoused racial egalitarianism. In Charleston, Denmark Vesey’s insurrectionist plot was uncovered (1822), resulting in severe repression of independent black churches and thus making autonomous black collective action extremely difficult. By 1825, Walker had moved to Boston, where he joined a politically engaged and organized black community. Late in 1828, he delivered an oration to one of the most prominent local black antislavery groups, the Massachusetts General Colored Association, proclaiming the efficacy of “any thing which may have the least tendency to meliorate *our* miserable condition.” Although firm and proud, the speech gave little hint that Walker was already thinking over his incendiary and, soon enough, notorious *Appeal, in Four Articles, together with a Preamble, To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America* (1829).

When it first appeared, the *Appeal* was the most militant anti-slavery document that had ever been published. Article 1 describes the core features of oppression under slavery and argues that blacks have a duty to resist their oppressors, using violence if necessary. Article 2 argues that black ignorance is a key obstacle to a unified fight against racial injustice. Article 3 exposes the ways in which the white Christian ministry upholds the slave system. And Article 4 attacks the American Colonization Society’s scheme to repatriate free blacks to Africa, arguing that the ulterior motive behind this

plan is to remove free blacks from North America so that the blacks who remain will be more securely held in slavery.

Slave rebellions and conspiracies had occurred before the *Appeal* was published, most famously the Haitian revolution and the Vesey plot. But while previous pamphlets had obliquely condoned or excused insurrection, Walker's book was an open defense of such revolts. The book was distributed covertly throughout the South via a loosely associated interracial, though mostly black, communication network and ultimately found its way into the hands of slaves and their allies. When southern officials learned of the book, the response was swift: A bounty was immediately placed on Walker's head; Georgia and South Carolina passed laws against incendiary publications—Georgia made the circulation of such documents a capital offense; North Carolina and Georgia prohibited the teaching of slaves to read; and a number of southern states prevented free blacks and slaves from interacting and blacks from assembling at all without white supervision. Walker was well aware of the dangers involved in publishing such a document, noting in the text that he expected that some would act to imprison or even kill him and that he was willing to die in the effort to free his people from bondage. The *Appeal* was in its third printing in 1830 when Walker died, probably due to tuberculosis, though foul play cannot be completely ruled out.

The *Appeal* is not a formal treatise. It is a rallying cry or manifesto, closer to a sermon than to a learned disputation. Filled with indignation and laments, vitriol and sarcasm, its rhetoric suggests that it was meant to be delivered orally to an audience rather than read privately. Its primary objective was to raise consciousness and provoke action. A secondary aim was to refute Thomas Jefferson's speculations about the natural inferiority of blacks and his claim that American slavery was milder and more benevolent than the ancient slavery of Egypt, Greece, or Rome. Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), in particular its query XIV, was a key source of racist ideology, making the former President, in Walker's eyes, an enemy of blacks.

Contrary to Jefferson's assertions, Walker insisted that blacks in the United States had been treated worse than any other people in the history of the world. The American slave system was nakedly exploitative. Blacks were excluded from all positions of honor, authority, and public trust. They were denied the right to own land or to be secure in their possessions. They were prevented from acquiring even the most rudimentary education. The slave trade broke up families, separating husbands from wives, parents from children. Whites were cruel and violent toward blacks, even murdering them in cold blood. And, to add insult to injury, whites claimed that blacks were subhuman and that God had created the dark race to be the servants of whites. In view of their record, Walker proclaimed that white Christians, from antiquity to the present, were the most unjust, greedy, cruel, hypocritical, and tyrannical people on earth.

Walker was sharply critical of the role that white Christian preachers played in reinforcing the institution of slavery, by, for instance, teaching slaves that it was their duty to obey their masters or invoking the curse of the descendants of Ham. Even when blacks had become Christians, he noted, they still were not granted the same rights as whites. Moreover, the profession of the Christian faith—with its command to treat others as one would wish to be treated—by a people who kept blacks enslaved was pure hypocrisy. Whites had effectively turned the Christian gospel into an instrument for subjugating others.

Nevertheless, Walker remained a devout Christian, rooted in the evangelical egalitarianism of the A.M.E. church. He insisted that Christ's message is universal and should be taught to all peoples across the globe regardless of race. In fact, Walker put Christian theology to liberatory ends, explaining that slavery and racial inequality were inconsistent with scripture. Drawing on black American homiletic oratory, he spoke in the familiar voice of a prophet, even suggesting that God was literally speaking through him. He repeatedly warned whites of God's impending wrath on them for their crimes, and he often referred to blacks as God's people. However, African Americans were

God's people not because they were black but because they were oppressed and God is a God of justice who punishes the unjust and protects the faithful. Walker also foretold the coming of a black messiah who would unify and redeem the African race.

The *Appeal* was addressed explicitly to blacks. But it is clear that the book was also written for whites. It was, in part, a jeremiad that urged whites to become just before God took his vengeance—probably in the form of a violent black insurrection or a civil war. Although Walker encouraged whites to mend their ways, he doubted that many would do so. He thought whites had been corrupted by avarice, arrogance, and racist ideology; and he spoke of them as having a “hardened heart” like the Biblical Pharaoh who refused to free the people of Israel. In more measured passages, Walker referred to the oppressors of black people as white slaveholders and their abettors. But at times he wrote as if *all* whites were oppressors, frequently referring to them as “devils” and “natural enemies” of blacks. However, these unqualified verbal assaults were invoked merely for rhetorical purposes, for Walker explained white depravity, not as an inherent trait, but as the result of correctable pride and greed. In fact, he welcomed the assistance of white abolitionists (provided they were not associated with the American Colonization Society), and it is clear that he received such assistance with the publication and circulation of his book.

Walker did not find whites alone blameworthy for black oppression; he also harshly criticized blacks whom he felt were servile, treacherous, and cowardly and therefore complicit in their own oppression. He regarded ignorance as the principal cause of these vices. What blacks were ignorant of was not so much their group history or national culture, but God's will. In particular, they did not properly understand the divine moral law. Many failed to recognize that whites had no right to hold them in bondage or to treat them as less than equals. Among the negative consequences of such ignorance were that blacks were made more vulnerable to pro-slavery propaganda; that they were prone to self-hatred and servility; that disunity was easily fostered; and that

some were misled into collaborating with the enemy. Educated blacks should remedy this widespread lack of moral knowledge among their people; they had a duty to educate the young and the benighted. And one of the ways that Walker would have them carry out this obligation was to circulate the *Appeal* among (or read it to) those ignorant of its urgent message. He does not appear to have been concerned that this stance was elitist or condescending or that the differences in the status between free blacks and slaves would undermine the collective effort. Indeed, the *Appeal* encouraged all blacks, slave and free, to work together to end their oppression at the hands of whites. He argued that the abolition of slavery was a necessary condition for blacks anywhere to have freedom, prosperity, and dignity.

Walker held that there was an absolute duty to fight against injustice and that being oppressed was no excuse for shirking it: “The man who would not fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom and of God...ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his *cruel enemies*.” Moreover, he advocated the use of political violence if whites refused to change their ways. Indeed, he pointed out that the right to revolt against an unjust regime is asserted in Jefferson’s own *Declaration of Independence* (1776): “But when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their *right*, it is their *duty*, to throw off such government.”

Rebutting the charge that blacks were inherently docile and thus unlikely to fight for their freedom, he claimed that blacks in fact had a repressed urge to kill whites, which, once released, would be difficult to contain. Whites were all too willing to murder blacks to keep them in bondage—or for mere amusement—and therefore blacks must be prepared to take white lives if necessary. Blacks needed to find the courage to risk being killed rather than remain enslaved. With injunctions such as these, Walker was articulating an ethics of the oppressed: if blacks were to regain their self-respect and

freedom, then they had to become a more self-reliant, educated, unified, militant, courageous, and proud people. Without these virtues, they could not gain God's full approbation and their oppressors could not be defeated.

In considering the legacy of the *Appeal*, some commentators have described it as the founding black nationalist document. There is some truth in this, but it is also misleading. First of all, the *Appeal* was antedated, by a few months, by Robert Alexander Young's lesser-known, nationalist-oriented *The Ethiopian Manifesto: Issued in Defence of the Black Man's Rights in the Scale of Universal Freedom* (1829). More importantly, to see the *Appeal* as only a black nationalist document would miss that it is also a key text in a different tradition of African American political thought. Black nationalists, such as Martin Delany, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X, have regarded America as an incorrigible white supremacist nation and thus have urged those of African descent to work together to build a separate black polity. But there is a tradition, sometimes called "integrationist," that, while also favoring black solidarity, has insisted that such solidarity be used to transform the United States into a true democracy, where blacks and whites can live together on terms of equality and mutual respect. The canonical figures in this latter tradition include Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Walker did not advocate black emigration to Africa or to anywhere else. Rather, he insisted that the United States was blacks' "home" and "native land" and that they had as much right to remain in the country as did whites. He made no unambiguous call for black collective self-determination in North America, at least not beyond urging political solidarity based on a common oppression and a commitment to overcome it. He did claim that Egypt was the cradle of civilization and that the ancient Egyptians were black or "colored." However, this was meant to rebut the charge (by Jefferson, among others) that blacks had made no great achievements and to build a sense of pride in a group that was constantly denigrated. The publication of the *Appeal* in itself makes clear

that Walker favored open political protest. Although he defended violent rebellion and explicitly rejected tactics of accommodation, he nevertheless engaged in moral persuasion and called on whites to repent. In terms of fundamental political values, Walker was not a racial separatist. He believed racial reconciliation in America was still possible and desirable: "Treat us then like men, and we will be your friends. And there is not a doubt in my mind, but that the whole of the past will be sunk into oblivion, and we yet, under God, will become a united and happy people. The whites may say it is impossible, but remember that nothing is impossible with God" (88-89). But, it should be added, Walker insisted that this reconciliation could not, and should not, occur until blacks and whites were treated as equals and the nation acknowledged its past injustices.

Bibliography: Bernard Boxill, "Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992-1993): 119-135; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, rev. ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Darryl Scriven, *A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations with David Walker* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Sterling Stuckey, ed., *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); and David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed., Sean Wilentz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

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