
WOMEN,
RACE
& CLASS

ANGELA Y. DAVIS



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4 Racism in the Woman Suffrage Movement

Although this may remain a question for politicians to wrangle over for five or ten years, the black man is still, in a political point of view, far above the educated white women of the country. The representative women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last thirty years to secure freedom for the negro; and as long as he was lowest in the scale of being, we were willing to press his claims; but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see “Sambo” walk into the kingdom first. As self-preservation is the first law of nature, would it not be wiser to keep our lamps trimmed and burning, and when the constitutional door is open, avail ourselves of the strong arm and blue uniform of the black soldier to walk in by his side, and thus make the gap so wide that no privileged class could ever again close it against the humblest citizen of the republic?

“This is the negro’s hour.” Are we sure that he, once entrenched in all his inalienable rights, may not be an added power to hold us at bay? Have not “black male citizens” been heard to say they doubted the wisdom of extending the right of suffrage to women? Why should the African prove more just and generous than his Saxon compeers? If the two millions of Southern black women are not to be secured the rights of person, property, wages and children, their emancipation is but another form of slavery. In fact, it is better to be the slave of an educated white man, than of a degraded, ignorant black one ...¹

This letter to the editor of the *New York Standard*, dated December 26, 1865, was authored by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Its indisputably racist ideas indicate that Stanton’s understanding of the relationship between the battle for Black Liberation and the struggle for women’s rights was, at best, superficial. She was determined, it seems, to prevent further progress for Black people—for “Sambo” no less—if it meant that white women might not enjoy the immediate benefits of that progress.

The opportunistic and unfortunately racist line of reasoning in Stanton’s letter to the *Standard* raises serious questions about the proposal to merge women’s cause with the Black cause that was made at the first women’s rights meeting since the eve of the Civil War. Held in New York City in May of 1866, the delegates to this women’s rights convention decided to establish an Equal Rights Association incorporating the struggles for Black and woman suffrage into a single campaign. Many of the delegates no doubt understood the pressing need for unity—the kind of unity which would be mutually beneficial for Black people and women alike. Susan B. Anthony, for example, insisted that it was necessary “... to broaden our Woman’s Rights platform and make it in *name* what it has always been in spirit—a Human Rights platform.”² Yet the influence of racism in the convention’s proceedings was unmistakable. In one of the major addresses to the gathering, the well-known abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher argued that white, native-born, educated women had far more compelling claims for suffrage than did Black people and immigrants, whom he portrayed in an obviously demeaning fashion:

Now place *this great* army of refined and cultivated women on the one side, and on the other side

the rising cloud of emancipated Africans, and in front of them the great emigrant band of the Emerald Isle, and is there force enough in our government to make it safe to give to the African and the Irishman the franchise? There is. We shall give it to them. And will our force all fall, having done that? And shall we take the fairest and best part of our society, those to whom we owe it that we ourselves are civilized; our teachers; our companions; those to whom we go for counsel in trouble more than to any others; those to whom we trust everything that is dear to ourselves—our children's welfare, our household, our property, our name and reputation, and that which is deeper, our inward life itself, that no man may mention to more than one—shall we take them and say. "They are not, after all, fit to vote where the Irishman votes, and where the African votes?" ...

... I say ... *it is more important that women should vote* than that the black man should vote ...³

Beecher's remarks reveal the deep ideological links between racism, class-bias and male supremacy, for the white women he praises are described in the language of the prevailing sexist stereotypes.

At the first annual meeting of the Equal Rights Association in May, 1867, Elizabeth Cady Stanton strongly echoed Henry Ward Beecher's argument that it was far more important for women (i.e., white Anglo-Saxon women) to receive the franchise than for Black men to win the vote.

With the black man, we have no new element in government, but with the education and elevation of women, we have a power that is to develop the Saxon race into a higher and nobler life and thus, by the law of attraction, to lift all races to a more even platform than can ever be reached in the political isolation of the sexes.⁴

The major issue at this convention was the impending enfranchisement of Black men—and whether the advocates of women's rights were willing to support Black suffrage even if women were unable to achieve the vote simultaneously. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others who believed that because, in their eyes, emancipation had rendered Black people "equal" to white women, the vote would render Black men superior, were absolutely opposed to Black male suffrage. Yet there were those who understood that the abolition of slavery had not abolished the economic oppression of Black people, who therefore had a special and urgent need for political power. As Abby Kelly Foster disagreed with Stanton's logic, she asked this question:

Have we any true sense of justice, are we not dead to the sentiment of humanity if we shall wish to postpone his security against present woes and future enslavement till woman shall obtain political rights?⁵

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had urged her feminist colleagues to devote all their energies during the war years to the anti-slavery campaign. Later she argued that women's rights advocates had committed a strategic error in subordinating themselves to the cause of abolitionism. Alluding, in her *Reminiscences*, to the "six years (women) held their own claims in abeyance to those of the slaves in the South,"⁶ she conceded that they were highly praised in Republican circles for their patriotic activism. "But when the slaves were emancipated," she lamented,

... and these women asked that they should be recognized in the reconstruction as citizens of the Republic, equal before the law, all these transcendent virtues vanished like dew before the morning sun.⁷

According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the moral to be drawn from women's (i.e., white women's) Civil War experiences was that women should never "labor to second man's endeavors and exalt his sex above her own."⁸

There was a strong element of political naïvete in Stanton's analysis of the conditions prevailing at the war's end, which meant that she was more vulnerable than ever to racist ideology. As soon as the Union Army triumphed over their Confederate opponents, she and her co-workers insisted that the Republican party reward them for their wartime efforts. The reward they demanded was woman suffrage—as if a deal had been made; as if women's rights proponents had fought for the defeat of slavery with the understanding that their prize would be the vote.

Of course the Republicans did not lend their support to woman suffrage after the Union victory was won. But it was not so much because they were *men*, it was rather because, as politicians, they were beholden to the dominant economic interests of the period. Insofar as the military contest between the North and the South was a war to overthrow the Southern slaveholding class, it was a war which had been basically conducted in the interests of the Northern bourgeoisie, i.e., the young and enthusiastic industrial capitalists who found their political voice in the Republican party. The Northern capitalists sought economic control over the entire nation. Their struggle against the Southern slaveocracy did not therefore mean that they supported the liberation of Black men or women as human beings.

If woman suffrage was not to be included in the postwar agenda of the Republican party, neither were the innate political rights of Black people of any real concern to these triumphant politicians. That they conceded the necessity of extending the vote to newly emancipated Black men in the South did not imply that they favored Black males over white females. Black male suffrage—as spelled out in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments proposed by the Republicans—was a tactical move designed to ensure the political hegemony of the Republican party in the chaotic postwar South. The Republican Senate leader Charles Sumner had been a passionate proponent of woman suffrage until the postwar period brought a sudden change in his attitude. The extension of the vote to women, he then insisted, was an "inopportune"⁹ demand. In other words, "... the Republicans wanted nothing to interfere with winning two million black votes for their party."¹⁰

When the orthodox Republicans countered the postwar demand for woman suffrage with the slogan "This is the Negro's hour," they were actually saying under their breaths, "This is the hour of two million more votes for our party." Yet Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her followers seemed to believe that it was the "hour of the male" and that the Republicans were prepared to extend to Black men the full privileges of male supremacy. When she was asked by a Black delegate to the 1867 Equal Rights Convention whether she opposed the extension of the vote to Black men unless women were also enfranchised, she answered:

... I say no; I would not trust him with my rights; degraded, oppressed, himself, he would be more despotic ... than ever our Saxon rulers are ...¹¹

The principle of unity underlying the creation of the Equal Rights Association was

undoubtedly beyond reproach. That Frederick Douglass agreed to serve as co-vice-president with Elizabeth Cady Stanton (along with Lucretia Mott, who was elected president of the Association) symbolized the serious nature of this search for unity. It seems nonetheless that Stanton and some of her co-workers unfortunately perceived the organization as a means to ensure that Black men would not receive the franchise unless and until white women were also its recipients. When the Equal Rights Association resolved to agitate for the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment—which curtailed the apportionment of Congressional representatives in accordance with the number of *male* citizens denied the right to vote in federal elections—these white women felt fundamentally betrayed. After the Association voted to support the Fifteenth Amendment—which prohibited the use of race, color or previous condition of servitude as a basis for denying citizens the right to vote—the internal friction erupted into open and strident ideological struggle. As Eleanor Flexner put it:

(Stanton's) indignation and that of Miss Anthony knew no bounds. The latter made the pledge that "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman." Mrs. Stanton made derogatory references to "Sambo," and the enfranchisement of "Africans, Chinese, and all the ignorant foreigners the moment they touch our shores." She warned that the Republicans' advocacy of manhood suffrage "creates an antagonism between black men and all women that will culminate in fearful outrages on womanhood, especially in the Southern states."¹²

Whether the criticism of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments expressed by the leaders of the women's rights movement was justifiable or not is still being debated. But one thing seems clear: their defense of their own interests as white middle-class women—in a frequently egotistical and elitist fashion—exposed the tenuous and superficial nature of their relationship to the postwar campaign for Black equality. Granted, the two Amendments excluded women from the new process of enfranchisement and were thus interpreted by them as detrimental to their political aims. Granted, they felt they had as powerful a case for suffrage as Black men. Yet in articulating their opposition with arguments invoking the privileges of white supremacy, they revealed how defenseless they remained—even after years of involvement in progressive causes—to the pernicious ideological influence of racism.

Both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony interpreted the Union victory as the *real* emancipation of the millions of Black people who had been the victims of the Southern slaveocracy. They assumed that the abolition of the slave system elevated Black people to a position in U.S. society that was comparable in almost every respect to that of middle-class white women.

... (By) the act of emancipation and the Civil Rights Bill, the Negro and woman now had the same civil and political status, alike needing only the ballot.¹³

The assumption that emancipation had rendered the former slaves equal to white women—both groups equally requiring the vote for the completion of their social equality—ignored the utter precariousness of Black people's newly won "freedom" during the post-Civil War era. While the chains of slavery had been broken, Black people still suffered the pain of economic deprivation and they faced the terrorist violence of racist mobs in a form whose intensity was unmatched even by slavery.

In the opinion of Frederick Douglass, the abolition of slavery had been accomplished in

name alone. The daily lives of Black people in the South still reeked of slavery. There was only one way, so Douglass argued, to consolidate and secure the new “free” status of Southern Blacks: “Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot.”¹⁴ This was the basis for his insistence that the struggle for Black suffrage ought to take *strategic* priority, at that particular historical moment, over the effort to achieve the vote for women. Frederick Douglass viewed the franchise as an indispensable weapon which could complete the unfinished process of liquidating slavery. When he argued that woman suffrage was momentarily less urgent than the extension of the ballot to Black men, he was definitely not defending Black male superiority. Although Douglass was by no means entirely free of the influence of male-supremacist ideology and while the polemical formulations of his arguments often leave something to be desired, the essence of his theory that Black suffrage was a strategic priority was not in the least anti-woman.

Frederick Douglass argued that without the vote, Black people in the South would be unable to achieve any economic progress at all.

Without the elective franchise the Negro will still be practically a slave. Individual ownership has been abolished; but if we restore the Southern States without this measure (i.e., without the ballot), we shall establish an ownership of the blacks by the community among which they live.¹⁵

The need to defeat the continued economic oppression of the postwar era was not the only reason for Black people’s especially urgent claim for the vote. Unabashed violence—perpetuated by mobs encouraged by those who sought to profit from the labor of the former slaves—would undoubtedly continue unless Black people achieved political power. In one of the first debates between Frederick Douglass and the woman suffrage proponents inside the Equal Rights Association, Douglass insisted that Black suffrage took precedence because “with us disfranchisement means New Orleans, it means Memphis, it means New York mobs.”¹⁶

The Memphis and New Orleans riots took place in May and July of 1866—less than a year before the debate between Douglass and the white women took place. A U.S. Congressional committee heard this testimony from a newly freed Black woman who was a victim of the Memphis violence:

I saw them kill my husband; ... he was shot in the head while he was in bed, sick ... there were between twenty and thirty men who came to the house ... they made him get up and go out of doors

... they asked him if he had been a soldier;.... Then one stepped back, ... put the pistol to his head and shot him three times; ... when my husband fell he scuffled about a little, and looked as if he tried to get back into the house; then they told him if he did not make haste and die, they would shoot him again.¹⁷

In both Memphis and New Orleans, Black people and some white radicals had been killed and wounded. During both massacres the mobs who burned schools, churches and Black dwellings also raped, singly and in groups, the Black women whose paths they crossed. These two Southern riots had been foreshadowed by the New York violence of 1863, which had been instigated by pro-slavery, anti-draft forces in the North and had claimed the lives of some one thousand people.¹⁸

In light of the widespread violence and terror suffered by Black people in the South,

Frederick Douglass' insistence that Black people's need for electoral power was more urgent than that of middle-class white women was logical and compelling. The former slave population was still locked in a struggle to defend their lives—and in Douglass' eyes, only the ballot could ensure their victory. By contrast, the white middle-class women, whose interests were represented by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, could not claim that their lives were in physical jeopardy. They were not, like Black men and women in the South, engaged in an actual war for liberation. And indeed, for Southern Blacks, the Union victory did not really mean that the violence of war had been entirely halted. As W. E. B. DuBois observed:

It is always difficult to stop war, and doubly difficult to stop civil war. Inevitably, when men have long been trained to violence and murder, the habit projects itself onto civil life, after peace, and there is crime and disorder and social upheaval.¹⁹

According to DuBois, many observers of the postwar situation felt that “Southern people seemed to have transferred their wrath at the Federal Government to the colored people.”²⁰

In Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, it was said in 1866: “The life of a Negro is not worth much there. I have seen one who was shot in the leg while he was riding a mule because the ruffian thought it more trouble to ask him to get off the mule than to shoot him.”²¹

As far as Black people in the postwar South were concerned, a state of emergency prevailed. Frederick Douglass' argument for Black suffrage was based on his insistence that the ballot was an emergency measure. However naïve he may have been about the potential power of the vote within the confines of the Republican party, he did not treat the issue of Black suffrage as a political game. For Douglass, the ballot was not a means of ensuring Republican party hegemony in the South. It was basically a survival measure—a means of guaranteeing the survival of the masses of his people.

The women's rights leaders of the post-Civil War era tended to view the vote as an end in itself. Already in 1866, it seemed that whoever furthered the cause of woman suffrage, however racist their motives, was a worthwhile recruit for the women's campaign. Even Susan B. Anthony detected no apparent contradiction in the advocacy of woman suffrage by a congressman who was a self-avowed white supremacist. To the great dismay of Frederick Douglass, Anthony publicly praised Congressman James Brooks, who was a former editor of a pro-slavery newspaper.²² Although his support of woman suffrage was clearly a tactical move to counter the Republicans' sponsorship of Black suffrage, Brooks was enthusiastically lauded by Susan Anthony and her colleagues.

In representing the interests of the former slaveholding class, the Democratic party sought to prevent the enfranchisement of the Black male population in the South. Thus many Democratic leaders defended woman suffrage as a calculated measure against their Republican opponents. Expediency was the watchword of these Democrats, whose concern for women's equality was imbued with the same dishonesty as the Republicans' announced support for Black male suffrage. If Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had more carefully analyzed the political situation of the post-Civil War period, they might have been less willing to associate their suffrage campaign with the notorious George Francis Train. “Woman first and Negro last is my program”²³ was the slogan of this unabashedly racist Democrat. When Stanton and Anthony met Train during their 1867 Kansas campaign, he

offered to cover all the expenses of an extensive speaking tour for himself and the two women. “Most of our friends thought it a grave blunder,” wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton,

... but the result proved otherwise. Mr. Train was then in his prime—a gentleman in dress and manner, neither smoking, chewing, drinking, nor gormandizing. He was an effective speaker and actor ...²⁴

George Francis Train was also described as a “crack-brained harlequin and semi-lunatic,”²⁵ as Stanton acknowledges in her *Reminiscences*.

He is as destitute of principle as he is of sense ... He may be of use in drawing an audience, but so would a kangaroo, a gorilla, or a hippotamus.²⁶

That was the opinion of William Lloyd Garrison, whose assessment of Train was shared by such figures as Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell. But Stanton and Anthony were hurting for support, and since Train was willing to assist them, they welcomed him with open arms. With his financial backing, they founded a journal which—at his insistence—was called *Revolution*. The paper bore the motto—also at his insistence—“Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less.”²⁷

By the time the Equal Rights Association held its 1869 convention, the Fourteenth Amendment—with its implication that only male citizens were unconditionally entitled to the ballot—had already been passed. The Fifteenth Amendment—prohibiting disfranchisement on the grounds of race, color or previous condition of servitude (but not sex!)—was on the verge of becoming law. On the agenda of this ERA convention was the endorsement of the Fifteenth Amendment. Since the leading proponents of woman suffrage passionately opposed this position, it was clear that an open schism was inevitable. Although the delegates recognized that this would probably be the Association’s final meeting, Frederick Douglass made a last-minute appeal to his white sisters:

When women, because they are women, are dragged from their homes and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms and their brains dashed upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have [the same] urgency to obtain the ballot.²⁸

As blunt and polemical as this argument may have been, there was a lucidity about it that was unmistakable. Its vivid visual imagery demonstrated that the former Black slaves suffered an oppression that was qualitatively and brutally different from the predicament of white middle-class women.

As Frederick Douglass argued for the ERA’s endorsement of the Fifteenth Amendment, he did not counsel his supporters to entirely dismiss the demand for woman suffrage. On the contrary, the resolution he submitted called for the enthusiastic ratification of “... the extension of suffrage to any class heretofore disenfranchised, as a cheering part of the triumph of our whole idea.”²⁹ Frederick Douglass envisioned the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment as the “culmination of one-half of our demands”³⁰ and the grounds for

accelerating “our energy to secure the further amendment guaranteeing the same sacred rights without limitation to sex.”³¹

Two years earlier Sojourner Truth might possibly have opposed the position of Frederick Douglass. At the 1867 ERA convention, she had opposed the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment because it effectively denied the franchise to *Black* women:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before.³²

By the final meeting of the Equal Rights Association in 1869, Sojourner Truth had recognized the dangerous racism underlying the feminists’ opposition to Black male suffrage. In Frederick Douglass’ words, the position of Stanton’s and Anthony’s supporters was that “... no Negro shall be enfranchised while woman is not.”³³ When Sojourner Truth insisted that “if you bait the suffrage-hook with a woman, you will certainly catch a black man,”³⁴ she issued yet another profound warning about the menacing influence of racist ideology.

Frederick Douglass’ appeal for unity in respect to the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment was also supported by Frances E. W. Harper. This outstanding Black poet and leading advocate of woman suffrage insisted that the enfranchisement of Black men was far too vital to her entire people to risk losing it at such a critical moment. “When it was a question of race, she let the lesser question of sex go.”³⁵ In her speech at the last convention of the Equal Rights Association, Harper appealed to her white sisters to support her people’s struggle for liberation.

As women, Frances E. W. Harper and Sojourner Truth were outnumbered by those who were not persuaded by Frederick Douglass’ appeal for unity. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were among those who successfully argued for the dissolution of the Equal Rights Association. Shortly thereafter they formed the National Woman Suffrage Association. As supporters within the ERA of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, Lucy Stone and her husband were joined by Julia Ward Howe as founders of the American Woman Suffrage Association.

The dissolution of the Equal Rights Association brought to an end the tenuous, though potentially powerful, alliance between Black Liberation and Women’s Liberation. In all fairness to such feminist leaders as Stanton and Anthony, it must be said that the former abolitionist men in the ERA were not always shining advocates of sexual equality. Indeed, some of the Association’s male leaders were intransigent in their defense of male supremacist positions. The Black leader George Downing was really asking for a fight when he claimed that it was God’s will, no less, that man should dominate woman.³⁶ While Downing’s sexism was absolutely inexcusable, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s racist response was no less unjustifiable:

When Mr. Downing puts the question to me: are you willing to have the colored man enfranchised before the women, I say no; I would not trust him with my rights; degraded, oppressed himself, he would be more despotic with the governing power than ever our Saxon rulers are. If women are still to be represented by men, then I say let only the highest type of manhood stand at the helm of State.³⁷

Although Black men in the ERA could not claim a spotless record as advocates of women's equality, such utterances as Downing's did not warrant the conclusion that Black men in general would be more "despotic" toward women than their white male counterparts. Moreover, the fact that Black men might also exhibit sexist attitudes was hardly a sound reason for arresting the progress of the overall struggle for Black Liberation.

Even Frederick Douglass was sometimes uncritical of the prevalent stereotypes and clichés associated with women. But his occasionally sexist remarks were never so oppressive as to depreciate the value of his contributions to the battle for women's rights in general. By any historian's estimate, Frederick Douglass remains the foremost male proponent of women's emancipation of the entire nineteenth century. If Douglass deserves any serious criticism for his conduct in the controversy surrounding the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, it is not so much for his support of Black male suffrage, but rather for his seemingly unquestioning faith in the power of the ballot within the confines of the Republican party.

Of course, Black people did need the vote—even if the prevailing political climate prevented women (Black and white alike) from simultaneously winning the franchise. And the decade of Radical Reconstruction in the South, which was based on the new Black vote, was an era of unparalleled progress—for the former slaves and poor white people as well. Yet the Republican party was basically opposed to the revolutionary demands of the Black population in the South. Once the Northern capitalists had established their hegemony in the South, the Republican party—which represented the capitalists' interests—participated in the systematic disfranchisement of Black people in the South. Although Frederick Douglass was the nineteenth-century's most brilliant proponent of Black Liberation, he did not fully understand the capitalist loyalties of the Republican party, for whom racism became no less expedient than the initial push for Black suffrage. The real tragedy of the controversy surrounding Black suffrage within the Equal Rights Association is that Douglass' vision of the franchise as a quasi-panacea for Black people may have encouraged the racist rigidity of the feminists' stand on woman suffrage.