

Elvira Basevich, Ph.D.
Afro-Modern Political Thought: Historical Survey
(Suggested Course for Successful Completion of the AFAM Major)
Intermediate Level Philosophy/ Africana/ American Studies Course

PURPOSE OF THE COURSE

The noted Du Bois scholar Robert Gooding-Williams writes that what distinguishes Afro-modern political thought from the classical social contract tradition are the following “genre-defining thematic preoccupations”: the political and social organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial ideology, and the possibilities of black emancipation. In this course we will undertake a historical survey of major historical figures in Afro-modern political thought, interrogating these “genre-defining” themes. In traveling through time within the U.S. national context, we will begin in the antebellum period, assessing the struggle for freedom in the context of enslaved Africans on slave plantations and ‘free’ Black communities in the North. We will next consider the moral meaning of African-American civic identity in the Jim Crow era. We will end the course considering major figures during the Jim Crow era, who represent the political goals of African American women in the context of an exclusionary American state.

SAMPLE READINGS

Weeks 1-3:

I. The African-American Struggle for Freedom in the Antebellum Period

This section of the course identifies the possibilities of African American political agency in the absence of the protections of American citizenship. We will explore the politics of emigration and American civic identity in countenancing Black resistance to slavocracy. We will also attend to issues pertaining to racial identity in light of a cultural and historical connection to continental Africa.

- (1) Derek Walcott, “A Cry From Africa”; (2) Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”; (3) David Walker’s Appeal (4) Martin Delany, “Debating Black Emigration”; (5) Frederick Douglas, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (excerpt); (6) Frederick Douglas, “What does 4th of July Mean to a Slave?”

Weeks 4-6:

II. Ambiguous Assertion of African-American Civic Identity

With the Emancipation of enslaved Africans, major African-American political figures analyzed the merit and ambiguity of the moral meaning of American citizenship for the postbellum African-American community. The figures surveyed in this section illustrate

that the prospect of realizing a racially-inclusive democracy attests to black radical hope and the collective assertion of political power. However, these figures also illustrate the challenge of achieving a racially-inclusive democracy in the Jim Crow era. Deferred expectations and stifled ambitions redirect democratic habits away from the state. The politics of black emigration from the U.S. reemerges with Marcus Garvey. This section ends on an optimistic, but sober note, with Martin Luther King's reverie on the meaning of hope and civic responsibility in a *de jure* white supremacist society.

- (1) Booker T. Washington, "The Atlanta Compromise"; (2) W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, chps. 1-4, 7, 11, 13-14, (3) Marcus Garvey, "Redemption of the Motherland"; (4) Du Bois, "Garvey"; (5) Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" & "A Testament of Hope"

Week 7-10

III. Women in Afro-Modern Political Thought: Including African-American Women in the State

We will close the course with a detailed analysis of African-American women's struggle against exclusion from the American state. The section highlights the issues of the ballot, lynching, sexual violence, and desegregation from the perspective of African American women in the Jim Crow era. In focusing on the experiences of African American women, this section challenges a dominant narrative about the women's suffrage movement in the U.S. and demonstrates why political movements against sexism must also be anti-racist.

- (1) Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (selections); (2) Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, "The Negro Woman and the Ballot"; (3) Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, *Violets and Other Tales* (selections); (4) Angela Davis, "Racism in the Women's Suffrage Movement"; (4) Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record* (selections); (5) Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown V. Board of Education*; chps. 4, 8, 9; (7) Sibyl Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship: Including Women in the State*, chps. 5-6