Reckoning with the Past, Imagining the Future

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In the wake of the Trump presidency—with its endemic corruption, norm-breaking, and open subversion of the rule of law culminating in an attempted insurrection and ongoing false claims of election fraud—an overdue national conversation about the health of US democracy is taking place. For many, this was their first conscious experience of US democracy as imperiled or in crisis, and it raised pressing questions about whether there was cause to hope rather than despair, and of what the sources of such democratic faith might be. Black political thought has long grappled with the foundational deficits of US democracy; even as Black activists have worked tirelessly to bring about such alternative futures the persistence of white supremacy has made it difficult to hope in the possibility of radical transformation. *Reckoning* provides rigorous, complex answers to the question of how to practice democratic hope and refuse despair without trafficking in easy answers or simple prescriptions. According to Woodly, social movements:

> help members of the polity recover from the cynicism wrought by insufficiently responsive governance. . . . [They] remind us of the power of the public sphere. . . . [They force] governing officials to be responsive to new or neglected constituencies and attentive to their causes. . . . [They] help us to feel that our opinions and political actions matter—that "we the people" have power. . . . [They] make a citizenry both believe and act on behalf of the belief that "another world is possible." (10)

The Biden administration's decision to forgive some student loan debt is an excellent example of the kind of work Woodly believes social movements can do. The roots of this important policy change can be traced to calls for justice for debtors by Occupy Wall St., to the work of movements like the Debt Collective, which influenced the policy positions of progressive presidential candidates such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders who then adopted loan cancellation as a part of their policy platform, and was finally enacted by the more centrist Biden administration. Just as important as the material impact of the policy on the lives of many student debtors, student

loan cancellation might serve as a catalyst to rethink who should pay for education. This kind of transformation in political imagination is central to democratic health and renewal for Woodly. *Reckoning* identifies the arduous work of activists and the philosophical insights of social movements as the grounds for a radically pragmatic form of democratic hope. In this beautifully written and rigorously argued book, Woodly offers us the vision of the M4BL as a roadmap for how we might rethink politics in the twenty-first century.

There are three key contributions of *Reckoning* that are especially important for political theorists. First, social movements are the answer to how to repoliticize democracy. This is notable because while democratic theorists such as Sheldon Wolin have been concerned that the focus on proceduralism and constitutionalism misses the central feature of democracy as a project concerned with the political activity of ordinary citizens, much democratic theory continues to be haunted by fear of the mob. In the late twentieth century, democratic theorists spent a lot of time lionizing deliberation and trying to offer it up as an antidote to the ossification of democracy, but focusing on social movements with the accompanying emphasis on embodied collective action in concert rather than reasoned argumentation as the site for democratic renewal offers a different account of the mechanisms by which genuinely democratic politics is enacted that seem much more appropriate for a historical moment characterized by institutional stalemate and rising radicalization of the Far Right.

Second, *Reckoning* traces the work of political imagination as a key faculty of ordinary citizens. This allows Woodly to show how political transformation happens over time and to value the work of envisioning a different future without ascribing that work to elites, but rather to activists who deploy a pragmatic rather than utopian form of political imagination that begins from where we are to envision where we want to be. This affirms the potentialities and philosophical insights of ordinary citizens.

Third, *Reckoning* is the most rigorous, detailed account of the political philosophy and organizing practices of the M4BL to date, one that importantly relies on the voices of participants and activists to trace the M4BL's innovative ideas and unique philosophical interventions. Many accounts of the movement to date have situated it as the latest iteration of a long tradition of Black political thought on liberation, but this risks minimizing the movement's departures from that tradition and its key innovations that build on the tradition's prior insights, particularly Black feminist theorizing. As Woodly masterfully shows, the radical Black feminist pragmatism of the M4BL centers a politics of care that has important implications for how the movement is organized but also for its goals:

> M4BL is not making political claims based on an appeal to the sacredness of rights, the fairness of redistribution, or the imperative of recognition. Instead, #BlackLivesMatter is an assertion that Black life is a category of social being, historically and practically marked by a brutal history of specific, targeted depravation and devastation, and as such must seek remedy in the form of new social, economic, and political formations.

> These new political formations should serve to enable not only or primar-
> ily equality, but, most importantly, must facilitate the ability to live and
> thrive. (66)

This is an inspiring vision that is cause for hope, yet there are questions that
Woodly could further address that would clarify its implications. The first has
to do with the kind of political organizing which she argues is key to demo-
cratic politics because "its aim is the transformation of political subjectivity
rather than the engagement of interests and capacities that are already devel-
oped" (157). How does her account square with Sally Nuamah's work on
school closures in *Closed for Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)
showing that Black citizens are the most likely to participate, become advo-
cates, and vote following the announcement of school closures in their com-
munities; yet even when they are successful at keeping schools open, the lack
of meaningful transformation in how school policy is made undermines their
belief in the power of political participation? How should we think about this
kind of disillusionment? Is the problem the absence of a social movement
around school closures or that this is participation rather than political orga-
nizing? What is the difference between participation and organizing? And
more centrally, how do we reckon with the costs of activism, especially in
deeply unequal democracies?

Another important question raised by *Reckoning* is that of right-wing social
movements. Social movements provide the dynamism in democracy and
work against its tendency toward oligarchy and corporatization. But that
energy is not only the purview of progressive movements as Woodly
acknowledges when she observes that organizers "can work from left or
right" and that "some people organize to restrict access to human dignity
for others" (139). This is also clear in the account of twentieth-century conser-
vatism that is cited as a parallel to the long-term work of "building ideas,
policy proposals, and political infrastructure" (162) the M4BL is doing on
the left today. As Cristina Beltran argues in *Cruelty as Citizenship*
(University of Minnesota Press, 2020), in many cases white demotic participa-
tion has come in the form of violence and domination. These kinds of demo-
cratic energies are directed to nondemocratic ends. How then can we extol the
role that social movements play in democracy while also being clear about the
dangers some of them pose for democracy, which is one of the reasons that
democratic theory has so often resorted to a kind of proceduralism in
response?

Finally, the fascinating concluding chapter on futurity raises the question
whether Woodly wants to suggest that we need to rethink the meaning of
political failure and success or whether instead the problem lies with our
understanding of temporality. She writes: "The notion of the world to
come, of its fragility, has always animated Black political thought and
culture. This is because to be Black in America puts one in a strange position
with regards to time" (207). Part of this strange position is that "we have been
here—or nearly here—before" (208). Successful Black protest has historically

been followed by backlash. Indeed, the backlash against the racial justice protests of 2020 and calls to defund the police could lead some to be skeptical about Woodly's claim that the M4BL has been extremely successful. In *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) Jeff Tulis and Nicole Mellow argue that movements associated with an ascriptive tradition in US politics have often won in the long term by losing in the right way in the short term. Is this how we should think about the success of the M4BL? Do we need to change our rubrics for what counts as success or failure because what matters is changing political imagination which eventually leads to policy change, and this is a long-term process? Or is the problem one of temporality, because as Black thinkers have argued, racial justice is always untimely? *Reckoning* forces us to grapple with key questions about the nature of political change, to consider how we move from the present to the future we hope for.