

IDA B. WELLS:
AT THE INTERSECTION OF BLACKNESS AND WOMANHOOD

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HIST 141: U.S. History (1877-1945)
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November 14, 2011

As human beings, we often seek order by defining the relationships among objects in our world. We crave the knowledge of who is the son of whom, which fallen leaf belongs to which tree, and who has influenced our favorite musical artists. Within the realms of logic and statistics, scientists – perhaps the most order-hungry humans of us all – utilize the tool of Venn Diagrams to display visually the interrelationships amongst theories, formulas, and datasets to trace meaningful and relevant correlations. But outside the circles of strict science, the humanities use Venn Diagrams to follow the connections between human ideas, inspiration, actions, and movements. In every human existence, there are many intersecting and overlapping circles of influence, and these circles have the power to exert their forces on the life of a person and/or to be affected by the force of a person's life. Fittingly, it was through the interactions of multiple circles of influence that journalist and activist Ida B. Wells was able to affect and to be affected by such an alteration in American society and history throughout her lifetime, for her unprecedented vision of racial and gender equality required cooperation with ideas and influential leaders in manifold circles. As an African-American, she sought to protect the Negro race from persecution by racist whites, especially with a focus on the prevention of lynching; as a woman, she sought to promote the fair and equal representation of women in politics; and as an African-American woman within the cross-section of both those classifications, she sought to establish beneficial associations with other successful civic organizations, regardless of gender or race. In spite of the challenges she met as a result of her combination of race and gender, Wells' most lasting work arose in the form of civic clubs from the area of intersection between the two circles of blackness and womanhood.

Ida B. Wells' own daughter – who also doubles as the editor of her mother's autobiography – gleaned from the newspapers, magazines, journals, and books of the period

from 1890 to 1931 that her mother was described often as “militant, courageous, determined, impassioned, and aggressive,” which were “uncommon terms for a person who was born to slave parents – and who was herself born a slave.”¹ Wells, spending most of her adolescent and some of her adult years as the sole caretaker of and breadwinner for her suddenly-orphaned, younger siblings, had neither the option nor the time to contemplate living any other way. Her attitude of impassioned determination was what led her into teaching, journalism, public speaking, and activism, often acting as the representative voice for the Negro race on many occasions. Wells’ public career began early and unintentionally when in 1884 – more than seventy years before Rosa Parks sparked a bus boycott in Montgomery – she refused to give up her seat on a train just to be relegated to a black train car that was in existence before the inception of Jim Crow laws. After being literally dragged out of her seat by two grown men, Wells took the offense to the local circuit court and won damages of \$500, only to have the case appealed and overturned at the Tennessee State Supreme Court level. Wells, not yet realizing the importance of her actions, explains that “it was twelve years afterward before I knew why the case had attracted so much attention and was fought so bitterly by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. It was the first case in which a colored plaintiff in the South had appealed to a state court since the repeal of the Civil Rights Bill by the United States Supreme Court....The success of my case would have set a precedent which others would doubtless have followed.”² Though she may have lost in the courts, she had won some self-recognition of a desire to investigate and pressure the mistreatment of black folks, a desire that would remain with her for the rest of her days.

¹ Ida B. Wells. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Ed. Alfreda M. Duster. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970: xiv.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

Wells was naturally a trendsetter and defender of civil rights before she even intentionally meant to be when, soon after her courtroom realization, she began writing her “Iola” series of articles for *The Living Way* religious weekly in Memphis. When explaining her reasons for writing the articles, she revealed that she “had an instinctive feeling that people who had little or no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with their problems in a simple, helpful way...I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people.”³ This deliberate tactic of Wells’ to communicate with her people and her predominantly uneducated, Negro readership in a simple, comprehensible, and influential manner was vastly effective in convincing the population to act in unison as a single, noble people while the sales of the weekly skyrocketed and increasing numbers of black folks were emboldened by her words. Miss Lucy W. Smith, a friend of Wells, gave only praise of her “Iola” articles:

“Miss Ida B. Wells, ‘Iola’ has been called the Princess of the Press, and she has well earned the title. No writer, the male fraternity not excepted, has been more extensively quoted, none struck harder blows at the wrongs and weaknesses of the race. Her readers are equally divided between the sexes. She reaches the men by dealing with the political aspect of the race question, and the women she meets around the fireside. She is an inspiration to the young writers and her success has lent an impetus to their ambition.”⁴

Years later, in seeking to help answer the “race question” that Smith mentions, Wells would return to the courtroom to argue against the illegal lynching of black men in the south. In a judicial tour de force, Wells was able to prevent a southern white sheriff from regaining his post who originally had it taken from him for purposefully failing to protect a black man from a murderous mob that accused him of raping and murdering a white woman. Wells argued the case

³ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

so well in court that she not only kept the sheriff from power but also gained the respect of every educated man, white or black, within the courtroom during the trial. This judicial action was the result of three of her closest friends, men who undoubtedly proved themselves to be upstanding citizens, being murdered by the hands of lynchers in Memphis without due process of law. It was at this time that Wells took up the cessation of lynching as her personal crusade, and after conducting her own research on the provocations of southern lynchings, she “found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded as a race of rapists, who were especially mad after white women...moral monsters and despoilers of white womanhood and childhood was bound to rob us of all the friends we had and silence any protests that they might make for us.”⁵ Though Wells was unable to save the lives of her three friends, by her tactics of preventing further lynchings and advocating for blacks to escape from a hostile environment, she was able to save other black men and women from such mortal prejudices. She repeatedly called for the mass exodus of blacks to go west and north in her *Free Speech* paper and, for those who could not escape, to boycott using the electric streetcar system as a black demonstration of solidarity and of economic power to prove to the whites their overt dependency upon a race which they did not respect or value. Thus, in trying to educate, advise, and protect the black race through her journalism and courtroom activities, Wells became a trendsetter and defender of civil rights who hypothetically saved thousands of black lives from the noose.

Even though Wells had a great amount of pride and respect in the black race, she still felt a disconnect from at least the male half of her people because of her being legally forbidden to vote. In response to this judicially-mandated inability, Wells took her voice to the masses to promote the fair and equal representation of women in politics. Over her years in the public

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

sphere, she had a multitude of public-speaking engagements, usually in front of an audience of white women, through which she sought to succeed in the tactic of uniting the gender in the name of a civilian right and a common cause. Throughout her tours of public address and advocacy trips, Wells had the opportunity to coordinate with, educate, and learn from two other well-known women's rights activists in the north, Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams, multiple times. Addams and Wells successfully worked together to block the segregation of Chicago's public schools, and Wells speaks fondly of her time spent with Anthony even if they did not always agree on the best method of accomplish a common goal: "Those were precious days in which I sat at the feet of this pioneer and veteran in the work of women's suffrage. She had endeavored to make me see that for the sake of expediency one had often to stoop to conquer on this color question....I felt that although she may have made gains for suffrage, she had also confirmed white women in their attitude of segregation."⁶ Hence, in seeing that Anthony, despite her non-racist thoughts, must exclude black women from her suffrage campaign to avoid scaring off more timid and conservative white supporters, Wells took it upon herself to speak and rally support for women's voting rights to groups in New York City where her audiences included speaking engagements with many leading African-American women, including giving a speech to the Women's Loyal Union of New York.⁷ Ida believed firmly in the power of the vote to effect change for African-American men and women. She saw enfranchisement as the key to reform and equality, and she integrated the Women's Suffrage movement by marching in the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C., with the all-white Illinois delegation. In so far as the 19th Amendment granting suffrage to women was ratified in 1920, Wells' tactic of strategizing

⁶ Ibid., 229-230.

⁷ Ibid., 81-82

with and working alongside Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams was successful. Women won the right to vote by coming together as a united front to demand and convince that their desires must be fulfilled.

Continuously standing on that platform of unity, compromise, and coalition, Wells established beneficial associations with other successful civic organizations, regardless of gender or race, to advance her own agenda. Wells “urged her female listeners to become more active in the affairs of their community, city, and nation, and to do these things through organized civic clubs,”⁸ and she led by example too. Wells had a direct hand in the creation and running of multiple mutual interest and mutual benefit civic clubs such as the Negro Fellowship League, ran for presidency of the National Association of Colored Women, founded the first black kindergarten in Chicago, organized the Women’s Era Club in Boston, created the Alpha Suffrage Club that was later renamed as the Ida B. Wells Club in her honor, lost an election to become Illinois State Senator, and became a founding member of the National Afro-American Council, which later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Wells had crafted the strategy of pitting civic nationalism – the ideal of becoming a good, contributing citizen to one’s nation coupled with egalitarianism regardless of race, wealth, etc. – against racial nationalism – the assumed inferiority of other races to white, English-speaking citizens – in an attempt to prove the civic value of powerful black leaders and a united black community. However, as she pursued her Wells also encountered the problems of doing activist work with the divided duty of a black woman, and her attempts to coalesce the entire black community from across the nation were sometimes met with apathy, competition from black leaders holding different ideologies, or racist refusal from both black and whites. Wells

⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

remembered herself as embarrassed as a member of the black race at large when she had to ask “Miss Addams to call them together and ask if the influential white citizens of Chicago would do for us what we could not do for ourselves....Would they use that power to help us, the weaker brothers, secure here in Chicago an equal chance with the children of white races?”⁹ Wells expected automatic allegiance and assistance from her race, but she was not able to obtain it as easily as she could contrive it; too many other, more well-known advocates had already crowded the spotlight. In another instance, Wells remembered fear as civic organizer when he had organized a luncheon for Mrs. Josephine Yates, one of the presidents of the National Association of Colored Women Clubs, with influential white women of the community, and, at the last minute, Yates had decided to not attend. Wells went on to explain, “She would humiliate those women who were trying to break down the barrier of race prejudice if she took that stand; that it was not the women who had been invited who considered that they were stooping to meet her; and that she must not forget that white women who try to be our friends risked friendships and social prestige by so doing and that we ought not to add to their burdens by taking a narrow viewpoint ourselves.”¹⁰ Yates did end up attending, but had she not, months of Wells’ work, and a great deal of potential goodwill for future, cooperative endeavors would have been wasted because of a simple, emotional flare. As for being meet with opposition from leading men, Wells remembered a mixed opinion of black community leaders and spoke of only one white man at great length an English Reverend Aked. Even though Wells was an immense supporter and great friend of Frederick Douglass, she often came in conflict with Booker T. Washington and his slow, industrial education approach to the advancement of black people, and even though she

⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 268.

had often worked with W.E.B. Du Bois on many efforts, he tried to exclude her name from the list of the NAACP's founding members.¹¹ Even at the dawn of what has become one of the most prominent and influential black civic organizations, Wells took issue with Miss Ovington, a white woman who held a Chair of the NAACP Executive Committee. Wells thought that Ovington had "basked in the sunlight and adoration of the few college-bred Negroes who had surrounded her, but has made little effort to know the soul of the black woman; and to that extent she has fallen far short of helping a race which has suffered as no white woman had ever been called upon to suffer or to understand."¹² Nevertheless, despite all of the complications she encountered with competing leaders, ideologies, agendas, ignorances, and biases, Wells' tactics and efforts to have the black community and its supporters working in collusion to the same general end – the advancement of the colored people – proved effective. If for no other reason than there being power in large numbers and earning authority that accompanies an endorsement from an important, recognizable community leader, Wells was able to do more together through her civic organizations than she could have ever hoped to accomplish alone.

Crucially, Ida B. Well's analyses of race and gender relations were inculpable. She realized that she had to be militant, courageous, determined, impassioned, and aggressive to accomplish her lofty goals of racial and gender equality in the era she occupied. She recognized the pet agendas that other leaders kept, the secret hypocrisies other activists held, and the overt biases other citizens displayed, both men and women, both black and white. Undeterred by this intimidating battlefield of activism, she was able to navigate these tenuous relationships nimbly while she still remained true to her own causes, partnering with other organizations when it was

¹¹ Ibid., 324, 326.

¹² Ibid., 328.

most beneficial. Wells learned how to operate in that gray area of the overlapping Venn Diagrams, that area between blackness and womanhood where the greatest of risks and challenges were met with the greatest of minds, and their meeting resulted in the greatest of rewards: the outlawing of lynching and the granting of women's suffrage. Womankind has made order once again.

Bibliography

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