THE CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS TO THE CONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract: Several metaphors such as, "melting pot" or "salad bowl," have been used to describe the American society. Despite these attempts geared towards racial integration, minorities are still living in the margins of the American society and are erased from its history in general. Based on a heroic model, American history speaks about the achievements of the white male middle class and wipes out the significant inventions and innovations of the African-American minority, which have transformed America for the best. This article aims at empowering the African American community by throwing light on its forgotten past. It subverts the idea that there is only one history of the USA that is worth discussing.

Keywords: contribution, history, revision, invention, African-American

Introduction

The contribution of African-Americans[1] in building the United States of America is either poorly known or completely absent from the collective memory. Indeed, cases of theft, violence and murder committed by black youth and mediated by television channels seem to be what readily comes to mind when one refers to blacks. This, perhaps, is supported in part by studies that shown there are more black males in prisons than in colleges[2]. As a result, stereotypes about blacks abound. A recent stereotype has it that black men would rather be sports stars or drug

[1] The term African American is used here in an ahistorical manner, that is, I do not take account of the diversity of terminology used to designate people of blacks in America. The term has undergone a semantic development. First called Negroes by slave masters, the blacks later defined themselves as Black Americans, Aframericans, Afro-Americans and, finally, African-Americans.

[2] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statistics_of_incarcerated_African-American_males, September 18, 2013.

dealers because this is easier[3]. This kind of information tends to make us see African-Americans either as entertainers or as scraps of their society. Of course today, the names of Ron Brown, the late Minister of Trade of Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, Toni Morrison, Denzel Washington, Jack Johnson[4], to name but a few, raise a more positive image. However, even the election of Barack Obama, a black man, to the White House, has not erased the stigma that history has attached to the black race. Commenting on history, Joyce Appleby et al said:

> In a democracy, history involves power and exclusion, for any history is always someone's history, told by that someone from their partial point of view. Yet external reality also has the power to impose itself on the mind; past realities remain in records that historians are trained to interpret. The effort to establish historical truths itself fosters civility. Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to others. All human histories are provisional; none will have the last word.[5]

This paper does not purport to have the last word. After all, as the quotation above underline, "all human histories are provisional". It just seeks to revisit history in order to present some contributions of African-Americans to America's development and find a "just memory"[6] to project a positive image of African Americans. Even though it refers to some famous contemporary figures, it will mostly focus on the contributions of African-Americans of the past, at a time when excelling in a particular area was a challenge for them. Such a choice is certainly

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[3] See http://pullmag.com/2010/10/27/candidate-black-males-would-rather-sell-drugs-than-learn/, September 18, 2013.

[4] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Johnson_(boxer), March 30, 2103. Jack Johnson, certainly less known than the people listed here was the first black heavyweight champion. He won the title 100 years before Obama became the first black President of the United States. Jackson was deprived of his title and sentenced to prison for consensual sexual relationships with a white woman. Senator John McCain and other political leaders called for a presidential pardon and Congress passed a resolution for that purpose.

[5] Joyce Appleby et al. *Telling the Truth about History*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994, p. 10.

[6] Paul Ricoeur. *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil, 2000, p. 97.

arbitrary but is based on the "heroic model"[7] which is the cornerstone of the history of the United States of America. This approach also addresses the need to know the past in order to understand the present and imagine the future. By adopting an approach concerned with rehabilitating, rewriting the past from the perspective of the group concerned, this study will try to evaluate the contributions of African Americans to U.S. history, correct the falsification of history and address widespread stereotypes about African Americans. I want to present a portrait of the group through the acts and individual achievements of African-Americans in a context of hostility.

I / The Problem of the History of the United States of America

Knowing that history always serves the interests of the majority group who write it, African-American historians strove to write their own history. In this endeavor, WEB DuBois, Eugene Genovese, John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame, to name just a few, emphasize the vitality of the contributions of African slaves and African-Americans in various fields[8]. Through this "cultural history," the pioneers of contemporary or past history justify the black man's Americanness by his contributions to the history, economy, and social progress of the United States of America, in other words to the building of the American nation. Despite the political integration of the African-American in his society, his history, meanwhile, remains relegated to the margin of the general history of America.

[7] I am borrowing the concept of historical model from Joyce Appleby et al. who apply it to the construction of history. According to Appleby, European history in general and American history in particular are based on a model.

[8] Through their writings, intellectuals like Dubois, Eugene Genovese, John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame have tried to dispel the negative perception that there is no such thing as an African-American history.

However, in the 1960s, the black struggle for civil rights brought to the foreground the dysfunctions of American democracy. In his introduction to *Black Odyssey*, Nathan Higgins warns against "The Deforming Mirror of Truth" in the history of the United States, which marginalizes those who are at the heart of this history. In his argument, Huggins shows that there are gray areas in U.S. history because it is a sanitized history in which slaves, Native Americans, and women have no place. This history is truncated based on the myth of social progress and the American dream. For Joyce Appleby and his co-authors, the history of the United States is full of memory gaps, as it has developed amnesia over its centuries long genocide and slavery. Consequently, they wonder: "How could the tragic stories of the lives of slaves, for example, be incorporated into a single narrative governed by optimism and progress?"[9] I do hope that this paper will also contribute to providing an answer to this question.

In this history that devalues the colonized, blacks are described as lazy, unable to jump on the bandwagon of progress while late comers from recent immigration flourish. For many historians, the historical recognition of minorities can be achieved through the valuing of their stories and especially their multiple contributions to war, science, technology, medicine that have helped to make the United States of America a modern and powerful nation. Very often, the development of the U.S. is seen as the almost exclusive contribution of the white race. Making people understand the contribution of black seeks to restore confidence among the young who shy away from intellectual work. First as slaves, then as segregated and finally as full-fledged citizens, African-Americans have participated in the defense of America and influence of the U.S. in many fields.

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[9] Joyce Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History*. Op. cit., p. 217.

II / Heroes in Chains and Colonial Wars

When we read American history, we realize that the black man has always actively participated in the development of America. He distinguished himself first during the colonial period and the war for the independence and then during the Civil War that pitted the South against the North. Thus, during the colonial period, slaves sometimes fought Indians on the aide of white settlers. These acts constitute the first contribution of slaves to the defense of the colonies. In this regard, the case Dick Pointer deserves to be mentioned. He was a slave who, in 1788, stood up alone to an attack by Indians at Fort Donnelly, Virginia, until the garrison of the city came to his rescue. Point gained his freedom as a reward for his heroism. Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave and sailor by profession, was the first American killed by British soldiers in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. Two years later, Aaron, a black patriot took part in the destruction of an English ship, the Caspee, in Rhodes Island.

In 1775, black soldiers fought bravely in the Battle of Bunker Hill and one of them, Peter Salem, killed an English Major, Pitcairn, with a shot. Salem participated in several other battles and served the army until the end of the war. In 1776, the Marquis Marie Joseph de Lafayette touted black soldiers who covered the retreat of General George Washington in Long Island, New York. However, some patriots opposed the integration of black soldiers. As a result, these black soldiers formed two battalions, which distinguished themselves throughout the war for independence. When the Continental Congress declared the end of the war in 1783, statistics showed that more than 10,000 blacks, both slaves and free men, including 5,000 professional soldiers, have fought to help liberate the English colonies of North America and create the United States.

The American Civil War stands as the second war in which African-Americans' contribution was notable. The war began on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina. In the editorial of his journal, *Douglass' Monthly*, Frederick Douglass demanded that African-Americans be allowed to fight alongside Union forces to go South and educate their brethren still in bondage. This call came after some officers of the Union Army had ordered runaway slaves to return to their masters. Other officers heeded Douglass' call. The same year, General David Hunter, without waiting for an official permission, constituted one of the first regiments of volunteer former slaves, the "First South Carolina." Other regiments emerged thereafter, including the "Second South Carolina," the "First Kansas Colored," the "First Native Guard" and the "Third Native Guard." The first two regiments, the "South Carolina First" and the "Second South Carolina," particularly distinguished themselves by capturing and holding Jacksonville, a city in the state of Florida. In addition to these efforts, which can be described as collective, achievements by individuals showed that across the country, blacks were mobilized for their emancipation. Thus, Harriet Tubman worked as a scout and spy for Union forces, while Susie King Taylor became, at 14 years old, the first black nurse in the history of the U.S. Army. By the end of the Civil War, more than 150,000 blacks had served the cause of freedom and 38,000 had lost their lives.

Closer in time and still in the field of war, the name of Grace Sherian Cadoria deserves special attention. Born in 1940 in Marksville, Louisiana, she was appointed Brigadier General in 1985 and became the highest-ranking black woman in the US armed forces, which then had four women of this standing. She served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969 and held senior positions in the team of the Chiefs of Staff. As a black woman, Cadoria moved some barriers that had

confined women in supporting roles in the army for a long time. The contribution of African-Americans is not just limited to wars. It extends to areas such as science and technology where they have brought many inventions and innovations.

III / The scientific and Technological Revolution

Science and invention are also areas where blacks have always been present. A few examples will illustrate this point. Benjamin Banneker, who lived from 1731 to 1806 in Ellicott, Maryland, was an astrologer, philosopher, mathematician and inventor. He is the father of the first clock built entirely in the United States. This clock was so precise that it marked the time for 40 years without breaking down. It is no wonder Benjamin Banneker was able to predict the solar eclipse of 1789. In addition, his research resulted in the establishment of a table showing the positions of the planets, which he used to make almanacs that he published and distributed. In 1791, Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, wrote to him to express his hope that blacks would improve their lot and his opinion that they were entitled to freedom and education, just like all other human beings.

Ten years after this letter from President Thomas Jefferson, in 1891, another black man, John Standard, amazed the world by inventing the refrigerator. The following year, a black woman, Sarah Boone invented the ironing board, and Thomas W. Stewart and John L. Love, two other black men, invented the mop and the pencil sharpener in 1893 and 1897 respectively. Employed as chief designer in 1870, Lewis Latimer drew the telephone for Alexander Graham Bell. In the same area, Granville T. Woods obtained a patent in 1885 for a device called "telegraphon" which combined both the telegraph and the telephone. This device eliminated the need to use Morse

code and allowed everyone to send telegraph messages. Later, in 1887, he developed a system enabling trains to communicate among themselves and with stations. Woods became a prolific inventor and received patents for an electrical relay and an electrical egg incubator.

The same year, Archie Alexander became the most famous engineer in the State of Iowa and built at the University of Iowa a heating plant at a cost of one million dollars. In 1897, another engineer, Andrew J. Beard, invented the system that allows the coupling of two train cars. He received $ 50,000 for this invention that helped reduce the number of deaths and injuries resulting from this operation when it was performed manually. The first hair straightening products were the work of Garrett A. Morgan when in 1909 he invented his “GA Morgan Refinery Hair Cream,” that is, the hair cream. Following on the trail of his success, Morgan, in 1923, invented the automatic lights system that he later sold to General Electric. As for Alice Parker, she distinguished herself in a related field. Indeed, in 1919, she received a patent for a heater that uses gas instead of coal. Beyond the inventions that have profoundly improved and facilitated daily life, innovations by blacks in medical science relieved humanity of many ailments and diseases.

IV / Medical Innovations: From Root to Scalpel

In the field of medicine, Caesar, a slave who became famous for his knowledge of healing herbs and roots, was the first to stand out. His formula against poison was published in 1792 in the *Massachusetts Magazine*. The Assembly of South Carolina purchased his freedom and granted him an annual pension of 100 pounds. We can also report the case of Charles B. Purvis, the first physician to treat President James A. Garfield when he was the victim of an assassination

attempt in 1881. Daniel Hale Williams in 1893 began the first ever open-heart surgery at Provident Hospital in Chicago. Another surgeon, Curtis, was invited in 1896 to be a member of the Cook County Hospital's staff and became the first black American to work in a mixed hospital. As for Louis Wright Grange from Georgia, he became a member of the medical corps of the U.S. Army as a lieutenant in 1917 and introduced vaccination against smallpox, which was later adopted by the world of medicine.

Seven years later, in 1924, Fannie Elliott Knoxville officially became the first black nurse to work for the Red Cross. The reverse of her cross had a mark that reminded people that she was a person of color. The Red Cross put an end to this practice only after the Second World War. still in 1924, Mary Jane Watkins graduated as a dentist doctor and became the first female African-American dentist in the U.S. Army. The building of Douglass Hospital in 1900 in Kansas City, Kansas, for African Americans, also deserves special attention here because it was the first hospital to accept all patients regardless of their race. In 1964, two black surgeons, Samuel Kountz and Roy Cohn, wrote their names in the book of medicine. They succeeded in transplanting a kidney from a mother into her daughter. This constituted the first transplant ever conducted on human beings who are not twins. Equally important was the surgical operation, which Benjamin Carson performed in 22 hours when he separated two German Siamese twins in 1987.

Despite racial segregation, African-Americans fought to show their ability to invent, innovate and therefore exist in the American society, a society eager for progress and new markets. Having demonstrated their humanity and their Americanness, African-Americans went on with the struggle to instill democratic values, which the U.S. claims to be endowed with, namely

freedom and the right for all to be happy. Thus, black people in America worked to change the democratic values, equality and racial justice that the U.S. tries to get the rest of the world to emulate today.

V / Political, Social and Economic Change

War and medicine are not the only areas where blacks have made significant contributions. Besides the well-known figures of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the names of Mr. Thurgood Marshall and Ms. Rosa Parks must feature prominently in the African American's struggle for civil rights. Thurgood Marshall was the lawyer who, before the Supreme Court of the United States and on behalf of the NAACP, won the famous decision in the case of Brown against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, in 1954. By this decision, the Court recognized that the doctrine "separate but equal" was unconstitutional. Mr. Marshall later became the first black member of the Supreme Court.[10] This victory achieved before the highest court in the country had to be tested on the ground, so strong was resistance to its implementation.

When she refused to give up her seat one day in 1955 in Montgomery, in the State of Alabama, Mrs. Rosa Parks gave the signal for the fight that led to the implementation of the decision of the Supreme Court. In fact, her arrest and the ensuing boycott that lasted 381 days was the true beginning of the civil rights movement that changed America and made it a better place to live for both whites for blacks. Having lost his job as a seamstress in Montgomery, Mrs. Parks moved to Detroit, Michigan, where for 25 years she worked as special assistant to Senator John

[10] After he retired, Mr. Marshall was replaced by another black man, Clarence Thomas, who was nominated by President Bill Clinton.

Conyers. Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Park are certainly historical figures and models of integrity and struggle for the democratic ideal that the USA claims to be.

In spite of the radical changes that blacks have instilled into the USA, it is sad to see that crime is widespread in the black American community where the use of drugs and unemployment have reached intolerable heights. The majority of homeless people are African Americans. This information is alarming, of course, but some statistics may shed light on this picture that tends to lead to pessimism. The *Black Enterprise* magazine conducted a six-month survey and reported that in 1998, the United States had a total of 19 million CEOs, directors and managers of companies, of which 7.25% were black, compared to 5.65% in 1988[11]. On the other hand, black owned companies have increased in number from 424,165 in 1987 to 620,912 in 1992, a 46% increase, while revenues went from 19.8 to 32.2 billion dollars, a 63% increase. By comparison, the total income of all U.S. corporations increased from 1995 to 3324 billion dollars, a 67% jump in the same period[12]. Progress has certainly been made. In addition, some of these managers, both women and men, are decision makers and sometimes the only decision makers in their companies although these companies do not always belong to blacks.

That economic progress would not have been possible without the contribution of pioneers such as William Leidesdorf, Clara Brown and Sarah Breedlove McWilliams, to name only a few. William Leidesdorf was the first black millionaire in the USA. In 1840, before the gold rush, Leidesdorf, a merchant and real estate developer, built the first hotel in San Francisco and

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[11] Marjorie Whigham-Desir and Robyn D. Clarke, "The Top Blacks in Corporate America," in Black Enterprise, vol 30, no 7, February 2000, p. 107.

[12] "Black Owned Businesses: Strongest in Service," Infoplease.com. © 2001 Learning Network. http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104623.html, February 8, 2010.

became the first collector of the city. As for Clara Brown, she was the first black woman to establish a chartered bank, the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, and to become its president. Sarah Breedlove McWilliams was the first black woman millionaire in the United States. She set new standards in hair care products and showed thousands of women that they, too, could succeed. Present on the political front, she gave thousands of dollars to fight against the lynching of blacks. She built a country house on the outskirts of the city of New York. That house is still a treasure today. In addition to these individual actions, community initiatives deserve to be mentioned. The most striking example is that of the First World War veterans who created a district dubbed the Black Wall Street in the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Black Wall Street included medical clinics, law firms, companies and various newspapers. These veterans also campaigned for civil rights and economic independence for blacks. The Black Wall Street was attacked and destroyed by a crowd of whites on May 30, 1921.

Conclusion

Now, what will be the future of African Americans? Will historians still be as assertive when in 50 years or more they deliver the results of their research about the late 20th century and early 21st century? Is the accession of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States not the tree that hides the forest? Has the environment not become more difficult for minorities, especially African Americans with the removal of the affirmative action system, which gave an edge to these minorities?

For me, the challenge of the future will be the ability of the new African American leaders. In the past, wealth was defined in terms of infrastructure, properties. If you had the

means of production, then you were wealthy. If we refer to this definition, then black Americans had no wealth. The qualities that have enabled them and their leaders to move ahead are strength of character, oratorical skill, charisma, sensitivity, aesthetic, song, dance, and improvisation. These skills may be summarized as the spirit of jazz in its unpredictable and inspiring aspect. These leaders came from churches, faculty, the bar and the grassroots. Bill Gates stands one of the most inspiring men in America today. His success is based on intellectual property. A change of mentality and attitude must take place in the African American community, because the skills listed above will no longer suffice. The new leader must also be a technocrat and a manager. Therefore, if African Americans train in the best schools, if they adjust to the new culture of technology and to the new environment, they will still be able to contribute effectively to the development of their country.

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