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NOTE

Theorizing justice from the margins: Black feminist insights on political (protest) behavior

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ABSTRACT

Variations in perceptions of and attitudes towards justice animate how different people decide to engage in politics. In the US, political attitudes typically vary across salient identity markers such as race, gender, and socio-economic class. Drawing on insights from the Black Lives Matter movement, this research note advances a theoretical framework for understanding justice and political protests through a transnational Black feminist lens. Here, I consider political behavior through the Black feminist frame of interlocking identities and the notion of "the personal being political." I examine the diverse ways in which Black feminism provides novel insights for better understanding justice and political behavior in terms of theory, methodology, and praxis.

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Introduction

> Everyone is familiar with the slogan "The personal is political" – not only that what we experience on a personal level has profound political implications, but that our interior lives, our emotional lives are very much informed by ideology. We oftentimes do the work of the state in and through our interior lives. What we often assume belongs most intimately to ourselves and to our emotional life has been produced elsewhere and has been recruited to do the work of racism and repression. –Angela Davis, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement. (2016, 181)

On January 20 2021, President Joseph R. Biden Jr., the 46th president of the US, issued an executive order that explicitly intends to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government (The White House 2021). In line with this order, the president "reversed his predecessor's diversity training ban that restricted the federal government and its contractors from using curriculum that examined systemic racism, white privilege and other race and gender bias issues" (Guynn 2021). In this era of racial reckoning, these initiatives illustrate some of the ways in which critical race theory and theorizations of justice from the margins are informing American public discourse, policies, and politics.

The year 2010 ushered in a decade marked by waves of protests, which took millions of people to the streets (Cidam et al. 2020). Many of these protests, both national and international, have been part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Catalyzed by the

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persistence of anti-Black police brutality in the US but with ripple effects of sustained demands for government accountability and societal reform, BLM is an "organizationally enabled network" with operations online and in the streets (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The movement centers the historically marginalized in order to push for social justice in line with Black feminist ideologies of intersectionality, which in turn has increasingly become a cornerstone in public discourse on racial inequality and justice.

Through protest chants, signage, demands, and speeches, BLM organizers utilize intersectionality as an analytical and organizing tool to support underserved populations and highlight the variety of ways in which multiple oppressions reinforce each other (Perry 2021; Ransby 2018; Thompson 2020; Woodly 2021). This is exemplified in their emphasis of issues that disproportionately affect groups that have been historically side-lined in dominant social movements, including but not limited to the "masculinist bias of 1960s Black politics" (Wallace 1978). They explicitly name and center the salience of oft-overlooked markers of identity such as socio-economic class, (dis)ability, and gender for instance. Building on the ideologies and legacies of Black feminist politicking, the movement utilizes a decentralized grassroots approach to leadership – one that is reminiscent of Ella Baker's style of democratic organizing and theory of indigenous leadership (Inouye 2021). BLM's "leaderfull" organizational structure intentionally deviates from the centralized, charismatic, androcentric leadership structures that dominated the civil rights movement and much of Black politics in the twentieth century (Thompson 2020).

This research note builds on Black feminist theorizations of intersectionality, marginality, and interlocking political economies to understand racial justice in the US. More specifically, this note advances a renewed understanding of how Black feminist theorizations from the margins of society shape public discourse on racial justice and contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on justice. Additionally, Black feminist theories of intersectionality have empirical implications in terms of how we collect, analyze, and interpret data as well as measure the veracity of the core moral foundations of American democracy and beyond.

Here, I use Black feminist insights as an entry point for theorizing justice from the margins of society. Transnational Black and African feminisms, a set of frameworks that elucidate theoretical, experiential, and empirical knowledge on the intersectional nature of identities and power, centers knowledge produced by indigenous Black, African, and African diasporic women. Though the research note focuses on the US context, I draw on African continental insights on diverse forms of political behavior to discuss the epistemological and practical implications of using a Black feminist lens to theorize racial justice.

African diasporic contributions to these insights extend well beyond the US to include rich Black feminist scholarship, activism, and praxis globally, including but not limited to feminist theorizing and resistance politics in Canada, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe (Alvarez and Caldwell 2016; Emejulu and Sobande 2019; Flynn 2014; Mohammed 1994; Perry 2009, 2016; Wane, Jagire, and Zahra 2013). Though the research note privileges a US-centred articulation of Black feminism, there remains the geopolitical question of transnational difference in terms of articulating Blackness and feminism from varied contextual positionalities. Analyzing the diversity of ways in which power is engendered in political protest with a particular emphasis on the US context, the research

note opens possibilities for further theoretical and empirical research on justice, public opinion, and political behavior across time and space.

The research note is divided into three core sections. In the first section, I synthesize Black feminist contributions to theories of justice. I use the BLM movement as a launching pad to examine Black feminist political philosophies as they relate to justice and intersectionality. In the second section, I discuss the implications of theorizing justice from the margins in terms of how it generates more comprehensive and robust research agendas in political science. In the third section, I examine protest behavior in tandem with other forms of political empowerment employed by diverse communities across contexts. I then conclude by drawing out the key lessons from the research note on how theorizing justice from the margins enriches our understanding of society.

Theorizing justice from the margins

John Rawls' political theory of justice posits that social and economic inequality is to be arranged in such a way that inequalities are to "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged … and attached to the offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (Rawls 1971, 302). The argument here is that inequality is "justified only through merit, whereby individuals are provided the same levels of opportunity and access to offices and positions" (Wood 2014). This theory is developed within a framework that considers an ideal society as one where the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled. Scholars working at the intersection of race, gender, and class, have criticized Rawls' theory of justice by highlighting his lack of an account of inequality embedded in patriarchal social hierarchies (Okin 1989) and ignorance of the historical and contemporaneous realities of racialized oppression (Mills 2009).

Black feminist scholars consider justice from the analytical lens of intersectionality. This Black feminist conception of justice arises from a critical understanding of the intersecting patterns of discrimination as it relates to race, gender, class, and other markers of identity (Simien 2004). Coined by legal scholar and critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analytical framework that considers subordination, discrimination and inequality from the lens of multiple, interlocking systems of oppression. It focuses on the "simultaneous and interacting effects of multidimensional social categories" (Simien and Hancock 2011). When dominant conceptions of discrimination consider disadvantage and privilege through a single axis frame, Black women are otherwise marginalized and erased in " … the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination." since inquiry is limited to " … the experiences of otherwise – privileged members of the group" (Crenshaw 1989, 140).

Crenshaw's ideas of intersectionality draw on the Black feminist tradition of theorizing about world phenomena from real lived experiences and a consideration of how social identities intersect to affect such lived experiences in the world. Though Crenshaw's scholarship propels the concept of intersectionality into popular discourse in the contemporary period, her work is rooted in deep foundations of Black feminist thought. Scholars including but not limited to Hazel Carby, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cellestine Ware, Angela Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara institutionalized multicultural feminist inquiry in earlier times (Carby 1985; Smith 1983; Lorde 1984; hooks 1984; Ware 1970; Davis 1981, 1989, 1998; Bambara 1970).

Even within literary circles, writers such as Michele Wallace, June Jordan, and Ntozake Shange for instance highlighted sexism and gender differences in African American life, which was particularly ground-breaking given the erasure of Black female voices in prevailing feminist work (hooks 1994; Jordan 2007; Shange 1989; Wallace 1978). Reaching back even further, the corpus of Black feminist literature is rooted in the work of activists who used their personal experiences to shed a light on how gender and race shaped concerns over civil rights and political demands. People such as Anna Julia Cooper, the putative mother of Black feminism, Pauli Murray, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hammer for instance, engaged in activism that illuminated the effects of intersecting oppressions (Cooper 1892; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Jones 2020). These activists and intellectuals created gender-enhancing scholarship that critiqued patriarchy and white supremacy in ways that were feminist even if such praxis and scholarship did not explicitly name itself as feminist.

Likewise, African feminists were "feminist before feminism," in that they have been engaged in individual and collective efforts to exercise agency and seek justice as they deemed necessary (Dosekun 2019). In addition to rich histories of matriarchs, anticolonial uprisings, resistance movements, and women's associations, African women were writing about the political causes and consequences of gender salience across diverse cultures. Scholars such as Oyeronke Oyewumi and Ifi Amadiume for instance provided seminal lenses for understanding the construction of gendered power relations across time and space (Amadiume 1987; Oyewumi 1997). Writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba (Aidoo 1988; Bâ 1980), and many others have contributed significantly to the body of scholarship on African feminist political thought through their careful examination of African women's lives within diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

While there are contested definitions of feminism, at the core, feminism is "a movement to end sexist oppression" (hooks 1984, 31). As a movement to end sexist oppression, feminism non-exclusively draws attention to the overlapping systems of sex, race, and class oppression. Black feminist's contributions to contemporary theories of justice confront, center, and uplift the material and immaterial conditions of those at the margins of society. As such, "[B]lack women's situation at the juncture of interlocked oppressions has given rise to a political philosophy that understands justice as a state that can arise only from confronting the lived experience (as opposed to the abstract conditions) of those at the margins of political, social and economic rights, concern, and privilege" (Woodly 2019, 3).

In addition to engendering a political philosophy of justice that arises from the consciousness of people rendered invisible by inequality and injustice, Black feminism pushes a praxis of restorative healing. Restorative justice in this theoretical context moves beyond individual crime and victimhood to address the root causes of structural violence in Black lives. The BLM movement is the largest social movement in US history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). Highlighting the sanctity of Black lives from the womb to the tomb, the BLM movement has developed an organizational philosophy and praxis that seeks to "institutionalize both the recognition and treatment of racial trauma and the margin-to-center conception of justice that has long animated black women's political thought, into a set of beliefs and practices that participants call healing justice" (Woodly 2019, 4). The movement draws on Black feminist traditions of analyzing the root causes of seemingly intractable social problems from an intersectional and

restorative lens. Through the BLM movement, Black feminist ideas of justice have shaped anti-police brutality rhetoric and practice both nationally and globally.

Implications for political science research

Researchers, educators, the media, politicians, organizations, and the general public rely on public opinion data to comprehend the dynamics of race relations in society (Wilson 2010). When the voices and experiences of those at the margins are not critically examined in political science, there is the risk of misdiagnosing the intricacies of race relations and interlocking issues in American society. Given its commitment to a form of inquiry grounded in intersectionality, Black feminism aids in making the invisible visible. A Black feminist analytical framework necessitates a multidimensional examination of individuals and groups instead of treating interlocking identities as additive variables.

Black feminism, which asserts a foundation in liberation, survival and a commitment to social justice, stems from the "political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives" (Combahee River Collective 2015). Learning from this tradition, research on public opinion and political behavior can better assess and interpret contemporary racial attitudes and racial justice from the perspective of those at the margins and by extension, have a more comprehensive account of justice. Centering the insights and experiences of Black women serves as a catalyst for broader conversations on overlapping oppressions and leads to conversations on forms of justice that are committed to restoration and empowerment. This not only matters for robust research design and interpretation, but also for pedagogy and public discourse.

People's political perceptions are connected to their social identities, and what political elites put into the information environment matters for the nature of public attitudes (Cramer 2020). Beyond political attitudes, people often formulate their perceptions of justice and policy preferences within the context of the identities or groups to which they belong, including race and ethnicity (Crowder-Meyer 2021; Wilson 2021). Thus, an intersectional lens of analysis such as that advanced by Black feminism, sheds light on the multidimensional nature of social identities, attitude formation, and people's experiences with and responses to injustice.

Black women's voices, experiences, and insights are underrepresented in political science literature (Alexander-Floyd 2014). The sidelining or omission of Black feminist voices, in particular, "causes survey researchers to ask the wrong questions and base their empirical and conclusions on uninterrogated assumptions- that, for instance, all of the women are white, and all of the blacks are men" (Simien 2004). A Black feminist lens lends itself to complicating and enriching our understanding and interpretation of political behavior research.

Intersectionality as a normative theory and empirical paradigm posits that the intersection of categories such as race, class and gender for instance is more than the sum of their parts. An intersectional lens also examines categories of difference at multiple levels of integrative analysis – at the individual and institutional levels. It moves beyond content specialization to interrogate the interaction between categories and analytical poles as identities are mutually constitutive at both individual and institutional levels (Hancock 2007). The Black feminist roots of intersectionality necessitate robust engagement with the ideological and ontological precepts of Black feminism in order for

intersectionality to be used as an inclusive and liberatory empirical paradigm. This is important given the tendency of erasure of Black women "as quintessential subjects of intersectionality" and in the knowledge economy more broadly (Jordan-Zachery 2013; Hancock 2016).

Scott et al. 2021s empirical research on Black women's political efficacy for instance uses intersectionality as a lens to examine Black women's social location and how this informs their political behavior. They consider how Black women's unique positionality as raced, gendered, and classed subjects and agents within the American political system leads to unique political attitudes, ambitions, and forms of engagement. Using multiracial survey data, they find that Black women are more likely than other groups to use the path of political participation in the forms of grassroots activism as a pathway to seeking elected office (Scott et al. 2021). Their work demonstrates how critically examining the diversity of ways in which intersecting identities inform Black women's positionality and thus, political engagement provides a better understanding of a group's political efficacy and behavior more broadly. Intersectional lenses employed in empirical research account for historical narratives and social locations in understanding political behavior, which enhances research that seeks to better explicate the political behavior of women of color as well as other groups (Brown 2014; Holman and Schneider 2018).

Intersectionality as an empirical paradigm is multimethodological in scope and includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Sustained qualitative fieldwork as well as civically engaged research, for instance, improves research by incorporating the underspecified perspectives of historically marginalized communities and addressing unequal operations of power (Jackson, Shoup, and Howell Williams 2021). Rich ethnographic innovations that take into account contextually appropriate language and behaviors can also improve survey design, implementation and analysis across contexts (Thachil 2018). In quantitative approaches, an intersectional analysis could look like the inclusion of multiplicative interaction terms and their main effects in logistic regressions in survey data analysis (Dubrow 2008). It could also look like conducting multilevel regressions including context as a higher-order level of analysis (Scott and Siltanen 2017).

In addition to quantitative methodologies, Black women and other women of color's contributions to methodology center diverse forms of epistemic inquiry. This includes but is not limited to autoethnographies, discourse analysis, thick description, participant observation, testimonios, poetic theorizing, etc. The use of such qualitative tools for analysis of complex, multidimensional issues affecting women of color with overlapping identities is demonstrated in the works of feminist writers and scholars working across disciplines such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrıe Moraga, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, amongst many others (Hill Collins 1990; hooks 1981; Lorde 1988; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981).

These distinctive approaches to analyzing the multi-layered relationship between the personal and the political in the lives of those at the margins is encapsulated in this excerpt from a critical dialogue on living activists' struggles to end social injustice:

> Black feminist ideas are constituted of the dialectic and the dialogical; the dialectic is that Black feminist concepts are born out of Black women's intersectional experiences of racist oppression, in order to confront that very same intersectional racist oppression.

> The dialogical is that Black feminist ideas are born out of a continual dialogue with struggles for intersectional anti-racist social justice – and this is what sets Black feminist methodologies of activism apart from other methodologies (Sheehy and Nayak 2020).

The dialogical and dialectical nature of Black feminism is such that comprises of debates on the appropriate labels for diverse Black women's experiences including questions about womanism(s), negofeminism, motherism, stiwanism, and femalism (Acholonu 1995; Dosekun 2019; Hill Collins 1996; Hudson-Weems 1995; Nnaemeka 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Ogunyemi 1985; Opara 2005; Walker 1983). These different branches of feminism constitute the body of knowledge emanating from the personal and political experiences of Black women in Africa and the diaspora. These kinds of debates contribute to a more robust understanding of Black women's experiences transnationally. In essence, Black feminism and its attendant frameworks, serves as both theory and method in terms of its approach and impact. The implication of Black feminist theories and methods is such that it not only centers the experiences and knowledge of those at the margins, but also produces a more robust analysis of society at large.

Political protests and Black feminist' "Infrapolitics"

From the abolitionist movement of the mid-1800s to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s to the BLM movement of the 2010s, Black communities' engagement in protest behavior makes up the very fabric of American democracy. In order for democracies to sustain themselves, citizens need to have a representative government with a means through which to hold the governing entities accountable. Protests are a necessary and healthy feature of strong participatory democracies with some scholars arguing that social movements are a democratic necessity (Barber 1984; Woodly 2021). Given the interwoven nature of racial injustice and the foundations of American democracy, protest behavior is a significant form of political engagement in Black and other marginalized communities.

Constructionist theories and culturalist empirical frameworks indicate that the range of individual-level factors that lead members of disadvantaged groups to engage in protests include social identity, perceptions of efficacy, the expectancy-value of rewards, and feelings of anger, guilt, sympathy, empathy, moral outrage, and shame (Sweetman et al. 2019). With greater public discourse on anti-Black policing, mass incarceration, and other socio-political and economic inequities affecting the Black community, more citizens are developing a political consciousness that informs their political engagement. Seminal work such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Era of Colorblindness* for instance has "forced policymakers, scholars, and the public to confront the problem of mass incarceration in important new ways" (Hinton and Cook 2021). Protest as a tool for political expression and government accountability serves as "political resources" (Lipsky 1968) that under certain conditions and contexts, can prove to be effective at achieving its objectives (Gamson 1990). While protest does not always achieve substantial or complete policy successes, protests often influence public opinion and modify political behavior, particularly voting behavior (Rucht 2007).

Political empowerment entails participation in politics extending beyond explicit interactions with the state to include expressions of power in social and institutional

environments. The personal, as well as the social, can be political when there is "an uneven distribution of power, wealth and resources, which may, or may not, be (explicitly) contested … " (Akram 2014). Including insights beyond the US context, Black and African feminist scholars have highlighted diverse modes of participation to include seemingly personal experiences as political expressions. An insight arising from Black and African feminist literature on women's political empowerment is a consideration of non-conventional ways of political engagement beyond protesting, voting, and running for political office.

An intersectional feminist approach to understanding political behavior amongst African women, for instance, highlights the politics of everyday experiences. The diverse tactics that marginalized groups use to survive, exercise voice, or undermine repressive domination is sometimes understood as "everyday resistance" or "infrapolitics" (Scott 1989; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). It refers to the stealthy, hidden transcripts of everyday political expression, which form the foundational building blocks of political life. Everyday forms of political dissent are not limited to women in politics but are often practiced amongst racial/ethnic minorities as well as other marginalized groups that have been systematically excluded from spaces of power (Hanchard 2006; Scott 1989). Empirical research suggests that marginalized groups are likely to engage in political behaviors that rely on collective action or activities that are more subversive in nature as a response to structural inequities (Akram 2014; Gray 1994; Holdo and Bengtsson 2019).

Grounded in historical and contemporary Black African traditions of infrapolitical behavior, some of these stealthy modes of political expression include, but are not limited to: women talking through men and influencing the political decisions of male kin and friends, evoking the supernatural with the aid of spiritual leaders in order to access power, rumor spreading, and hissing (to show opposition) or ululating (to show approval) at community meetings (Hirschmann 1991; Ogunyemi 1985). Many of these infrapolitical practices aggregate to lead to more visible forms of political dissent such as mobilizing socio-political support through religious fellowships, organizing community protests through markets and various spaces of associational life, employing naked protests to seek redress, the practice of "sitting on a man," music, theatrical performance, and using social media as well as other media to creatively affect governance (Alozie 2020; Chuku 2009; Damodaran 2016; Hirschmann 1991; Johnson 1982; Mikell 1997; Prestage 1991).[1]

Black and African women working towards socio-political change across contexts present an analytical point of entry for theorizing political behavior beyond the conventional political science canon. Paying close attention to diverse practices and strategies of political expression that might be employed by women with intersecting identities reveals the innovations employed by those at the margins of society to engender their own political empowerment.

Conclusion

This research note advances an understanding of inequality and justice that draws on Black feminist insights. Beyond its implications for public opinion and political behavior research, Black feminism informs praxis. Its theories and methodologies inform the

ideological buildings blocks of the BLM movement, one of the largest social movements of the twenty-first century. Through its decentralized grassroots leadership structure and their explicit centering of people at the margins of racialized, gendered, and classed categories of difference, the BLM movement has propelled Black feminist insights to a more centered position in mainstream American politics. This has implications for political behavior discourse and analysis beyond the US as everyday resistance and social movements led by Black women are informing studies of political protest behavior globally.

A marker of socio-political movements in the twenty-first century is the confluence of online activism and offline, street protests. Contentions in the form of organized political protests tend to benefit the working class and bring about economic equality and political empowerment across various domains (Davenport et al. 2019). Given the Black community's experiences of systematic racial violence and terror at the hands of the American state, whether through the slave economy or the contemporary prison industrial complex, political protests serve as a form of political expression and empowerment. Black anger channeled into politically productive organizing and protest behavior teaches us about "how we might draw on insurgent strands of black political thought to conceive and enact more radical democratic subjectivities" (Hooker 2016).

With this in mind, Black feminist theorizations of justice from the margins help us not only see the macro-level structures shaping inequality, but the micro-level agentic factors shaping political efficacy. Our ability to see and center Black women's political agency contributes to enhancing our understanding of the world around us. In addition to illuminating how our personal lives inform our political lives and vice versa, Black feminism directs our attention to knowledge produced by those on the margins of society and challenges us to continually question our centers.

Note

1. Sitting on a man refers to the Igbo practice of women gathering at a man's compound to hurl insults at him due to domestic violence or violations of women's market rules (Van Allen 1972).

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