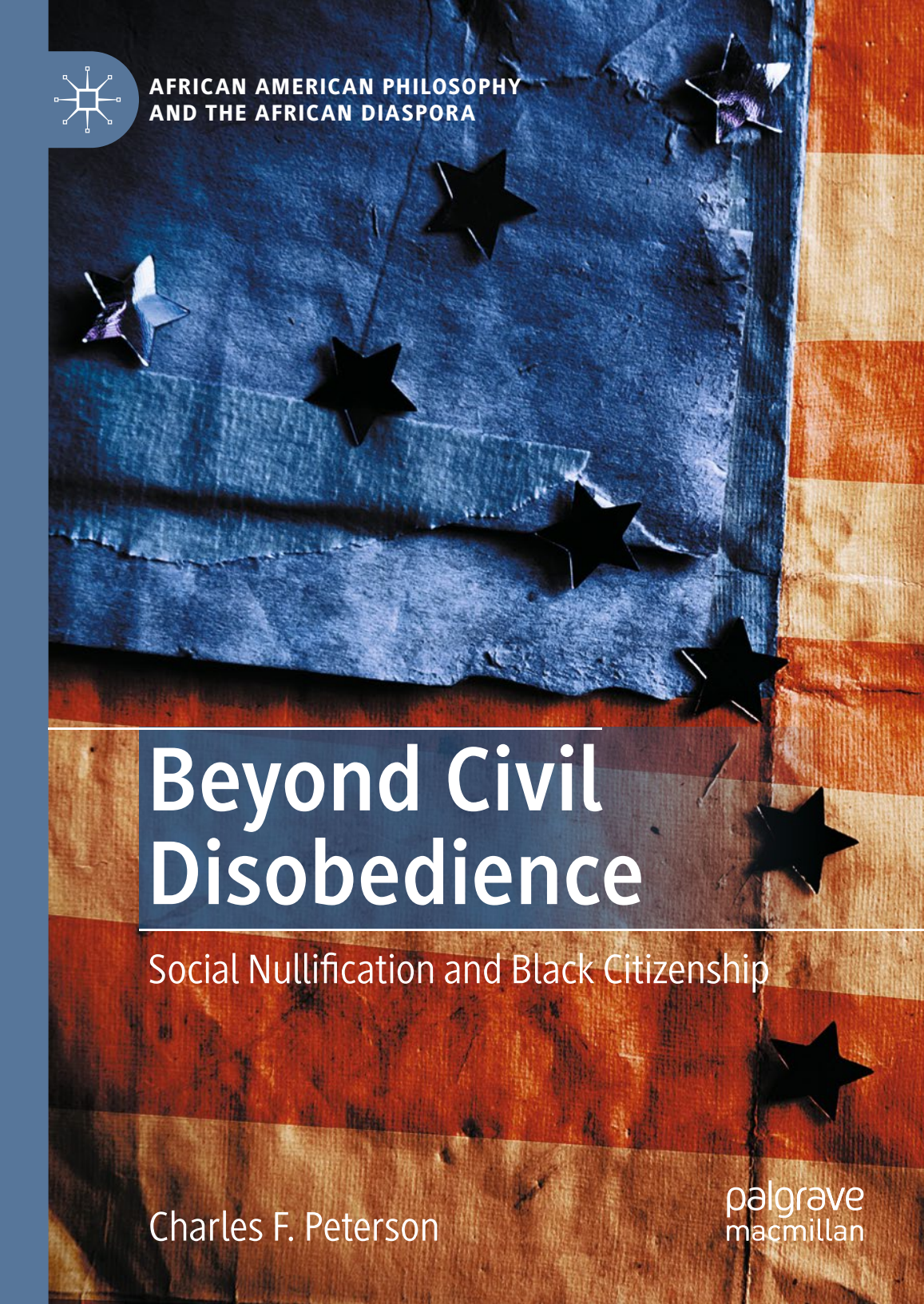
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AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA
Beyond Civil Disobedience
Social Nullification and Black Citizenship
Charles F. Peterson
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African American Philosophy and the African Diaspora
ISBN 978-3-030-77553-7 ISBN 978-3-030-77554-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77554-4

Cover credit: vithib / Getty Images

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

This work has been an effort blessed by the support and encouragement of my family, friends and colleagues. I thank each one of them for their insights, encouragement, and care. I want to thank Dr. Shannon King, for your friendship and camaraderie through the best of times and the worst of times. I want to thank my old friend and comrade Dr. Trent Hamann for his encouragement and support in the earliest days of this effort. I want to thank my colleagues and friends in the Africana Studies Department and community of Oberlin College. It is a joyous community and I am grateful for their years of encouragement. I also thank the Office of the Dean of Oberlin College for its support in completing this work. I want to thank my good friends Ben Jones and Tim Elgrin for their encouragement and confidence in me. There are no limits to the theoretical possibilities to be discovered in cigars and spirits. I want to acknowledge Dr. Tina F. Botts for her patient attention during the early stumblings of this work. To Dr. Charles McKinney of the Africana Studies Program at Rhodes College, I especially want to thank you for your brotherhood and support. You, your family, and your program provided a booster rocket at the perfect moment of the launch. Also, for his brotherhood, friendship, and mentoring, I want to thank Dr. Paul Taylor. He has been incredibly supportive of this and other projects. And I want to thank the other members of the Thomas Hardy Debonnaires Reading Group. Mark, Eddie, Sully, and Brother West our conversations have been invigorating, enlightening, motivating, and positively demanding. From Arabella to Sylvia Wynter, our fellowship has been "not a crutch but a shoulder to lean on." I want to thank Dr. Anne Eaton for her pure enthusiasm, optimism, and ability to make the

impossible happen. Her spirit is like philosophy itself, “light as a feather, heavy as lead.” I also want to thank my neighbor, colleague, co-conspirator, and friend, Julia Christiansen. Unbeknownst to you, you have been helping me think about the next project. Thanks to my mother-in-law Erma Hinds for her kindness, love, laughter and fishcakes. I want to thank my parents Gladys and Charles Peterson, Sr., for their ever present and constant support and love and my brother Craig Peterson and sister-in-law Jennifer Peterson. I am grateful for your support and belief in me. And I want to thank the crew without whom it would be a very different life, my family. Caleb Cabral, Solomon Sekou, and Senait Rose, the three of you give what I try to do meaning and spark my attempt to aid in creating a better world. Daddy loves you madly! And finally, I want to thank my partner, my wife and love, Dr. Meredith Gadsby for all that she unselfishly does for me in my efforts to be a better person. Because of all of you I am not surprised by evil nor paralyzed by despair. Thanks to you I am able to hold my head up, lighten my heart, and, I hope, continue to fight until the fight is done.

Oberlin, OH, USA
February 2021

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CHAPTER 1

Citizenship and Its Discontents: Introduction to Beyond Civil Disobedience—*Social Nullification* and Black Citizenship

I.

Arguably, the most important concept and category of Modern/Enlightenment political theory is that of the idealized "citizen." Its importance is based on the changes in late feudal, early Modern, Western social organization that its emergence signals. Within this time period, the primary signifier of political/social identity changes from "subject" to "citizen." This semantic change tracks the transformation in the way constituents of Enlightenment societies began to re-conceptualize themselves vis-à-vis questions of social status, political power, and metaphysical grounding. The "subject" (constituent of a monarchy or aristocratic hierarchy) exists in a submissive role in relation to the elite social classes (nobility), the ideological claim of the "right to rule" by descent based political classes and figures (aristocracy, monarchy, etc.). The subject is subjugated to the concentrated coercive power of the structures of the state and its function as a tool of the monopolization of power wielded by the monarch and the structures of the church, elite classes, and economic institutions. The transition from "subject" to "citizen" is an indicator of a conceptual, economic, social, and political reorganization of society through the creation of a new self-aware entity that sees itself beyond the stifling auspices of the monarch, the aristocracy, and the church. The development of the

C. F. Peterson, *Beyond Civil Disobedience*, African American Philosophy and the African Diaspora,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77554-4_1

category of "citizen" is an indicator of a revolution in the way Western European societies began to think and function.

The idea of the "citizen" redefines the relationship of the individual constituent to the structures of state and civil power by asserting a consensually participatory relationship wherein the "citizen" does not submit but *consents* to participate in the systems of social organization. Derived from the Middle English root word, *citizein*, and the Old French, *citeain*, its root being the French word, *cite* (city), and possibly associated with *deinsain* (denizen), *citizen* functions as an adumbration of these words and can be taken to mean "denizen of a city." "Formerly, a native or inhabitant, esp. a freeman or burgess, of a town or city."[1] Arising in the late thirteenth century, as the rising merchant/trader classes began to centralize themselves in trading sites that would absorb rural laborers, who, in the transformation from the feudal estate system of production, were gradually being liberated from their traditional lands, the term speaks to the openness of movement, that had become a part of the lives of the rural workers. The *cite* becomes a site of choice, a place that people sought out in which they had the choice of remaining or departing, an empowering position for those late of aristocratic estates. The term and category of "citizen" asserts the power of the individual to make choices regarding their relationship to the state; degrees of consent to established policies, codes, and laws; and through democratic participation, propose, affirm, or deny new or amended policies, codes, and laws. The "citizen" is a willful being, self-aware of their ability to decide to stand with, in opposition, or apart from the state and society.[2]

The final change is the redefinition of the distribution of state power. Whereas the presumption of the "right to rule" by monarchs and aristocrats concentrates the mechanisms of control in the hands of a minority class, the category of "citizen" is imbued with the idea of the theoretical, universal empowered individual that makes conscious choices about the deployment, expenditure, and expression of their social will. The ability to make choices, to deviate from a prescribed role, or to determine that options exist regarding the investment of ones' energies and will is indicative of the presumption of empowerment on the part of the individual. Akin to the positive energy given off by protons in the nucleus of

[1] Webster's New World Dictionary, 2nd College Edition. William Collins Publisher: Cleveland, OH, 1980, pg. 260.

[2] In this sense *civil disobedience* is the most demonstrative example of what citizenship is.

an atom, the citizen has an inherent force that empowers the structures of society.

The issue of association is important to the idea of the re-distribution of civil power, as the citizen can choose to increase their social power, in effect multiply it, by combining, concentrating, or coordinating with other empowered *citizens* to maximize their influence over social, political, and economic circumstances. Association requires the use of the discretionary sense as the citizen critically assesses their surrounding citizens for similarities or differences and a determination as to the possibilities of generating greater bonds of civil-social power by the increase in citizenry.

Two forms are exemplary of the associative capability of the citizen. First, in representative government the creation of deliberative bodies (councils, senates, parliaments, and legislatures) which in effect combine the individual decision-making power into a larger and more concentrated form that asserts itself in association, collaboration, or competition with the governing individual (Queen, King, and President) or body (Executive branch). Ideally this concentration diffuses power and distributes it in such a way where it increases the overall empowerment of the society in the dispersal of power. Regardless this multiplication of individual wills can create a distinct engagement with civil governance, which can offset the singularity of executive vision, will, and action. The second example is the creation of partisan associations or *political parties*, which consciously combine the decision-making capacity of multiple individuals around a single belief or multiple beliefs in order to pursue the implementation of that belief or beliefs through the apparatus of the state's system and apparatus of governance. What is central to all of these aspects of the construction and understanding of the category of the "citizen" is that the citizen exists, functions, and is empowered in the context of organized and formalized systems of civic power. The citizen exists only in the context of a civil organization and order.

What legitimizes the citizen's authority, or rather its power to make demands upon the state/governing apparatus, is its obligation to the governing structure (idea) be it the documentary/legal authority of the polis, state, nation, or empire or rather to the governing entity itself (polis, state, nation, or empire). Explicit in the construction of the "citizen" is its obligation to the state/nation. This obligation, which varies in expectation from nation to nation, is linked to a set of "rights," protected practices, behaviors, and expressions that are available to the citizen. In the language and thought of Liberal Political ideology, these rights are *inherent* to the

personhood of the citizens. The social and cultural freedom woven into the concept of citizen by the transformation of late feudal society by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had taken on metaphysical aspects as *citizenship* and its aspects had become the civil manifestation of the very being of the person.

This transformation of the personhood of the, now, *Western* subject cum citizen took place within the epistemic re-ordering of feudal societies informed by the secularized environments of economic, territorial, and militaristic expansion of the colonial-imperial complex. The new being that would arise in this revolution of conceptualization would be *Man*. This new anthropocentric order and ordering of knowledge, time, space, culture, and geography[3] would find as its self-aware referent, "its new 'descriptive statement' of Man as a political subject."[4]

In this new arrangement Man/Citizen consents to observe a set of obligations in service to the maintenance of the state which then in turn allows the state to provide the conditions which create space for the individual/citizen to achieve/exist in circumstances that expand/maintain their civil, social, political, and economic power. These obligations can range from subjection to taxation, conscription, performance of loyalty, to obeisance before the state's laws and policies. Through the citizen's choice to commit a portion of their power to the state's maintenance, the state in turn commits to providing services, opportunities, and rights to the citizen that theoretically, outside of the state structure, could be procured with their inherent agency. This is the essence of the Classical Social Contract. The choice to participate in the state's functioning through voluntary association, the commitment to the laws, regulations, and policies of the state, and the state's commitment to meeting the requirements of civil life and participation demanded by the citizen of the state are the terms of the social contract. In short it is a set of theoretically agreed upon and coercively enforced expectations that realize mutual fulfillment. This is the social contract of an ideal world. This work's concerns lead us to another world.

The presence of enslaved Africans in the North American experiment in democratic self-governance presented the most fundamental

[3] See Blaut, James. *The Colonizer's Model of the World*. Guilford Press: New York, 1993.

[4] Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Freedom/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall 2003), pg. 266.

contradictions of Enlightenment political theory, rhetoric and propaganda. The founding rhetorical and governing documents of the new nation, the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution of the United States of America (1789), were explicit examples of the performance of the principles central to the category of citizenship. The ideas of voluntary association, inherent civil and social agency, and the derivation of state power from constituent provision for the mutual achievement of state stability and individual preservation are the first applications of Modernist political theory, at the state level, to the realm of practical governance. And at the same time these documents though disruptive in their geo-political-economic impact upon British imperial expansion reinforced the foundational project of the erection of the new secular being, further adding to the interwoven existence of the categories of Man/Citizen, by politically disenfranchising women, First Peoples, and *maintaining the legal category of slavery for three-fifths of all other persons.* "In the wake of the West's second wave of imperial expansion, pari passu with its reinvention of Man in now purely biologized terms, it was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the 'racially' inferior Human Other,"[5] and thus becoming the perfect dark reflection of the ontological, racial, and political identity of the empowered constituent in the New World, the *white man*.

The enslaved African commodified through the global trade in abducted human labor, objectified through regimes designed to undermine subjective consciousness and create a perfect thralldom, rationalized into a super-exploitative regime of agricultural labor, despite the lofty rhetoric of the secular re-conception of the place of the person in the natural and civic body, proved the articulation of the *human* and *citizen* in this context to be self-consciously contingent, narrow, market-driven, and cynical. The answer to the iconic abolitionist movement motto, "Am I not Man and Brother?" was a resounding "no."

Under the terms of freedom, agency, and liberation laid down by the republican assumptions of the United States, the African had no claim to inherent rights of humanity. This is not to say that the African was without recourse to *some* claim to freedom, agency, and liberation. Within the cultural memory and critical functioning of African peoples lay, in values and practices, a conception of the human and freedom that ran parallel to and

[5] Ibid.

in contradiction with the construct of humanity and freedom proposed by the leaders of this revolution.

II.

The arrival of enslaved laborers from indigenous societies on the "African" continent, despite the horror of their transportation and the re-location to uncertain locations and conditions, though traumatizing, was not the total erasure of their personality or social alienation some have argued. The circumstances under which the captives[6] were held created opportunities under which fundamental connections and linkages between "Africans" from various societies/nations could develop and maintain linkages that created new ways of understanding themselves. Central to these connections were the general similarity of spiritual conceptions and practices between the captives. The spiritual systems practiced by many of the captives recognized a hierarchy of spiritual beings arranged in an ascending order from the entities of the material-natural world up through various categories of being ending with the Supreme Creator Deity of reality. Despite the presumption of superstition and magic that underlies the foreign perception of these systems, built into these cosmologies were the ideas of the agency attendant to the devotee. The various forms of spiritual practice and ritual performance woven into these beliefs were dependent on the choices made by the believer as opposed to the idea of an over-determining destiny or fate. The paths of the lives of the believers were based upon their choices regarding their relationships to the various metaphysical forces. "African" belief systems or rather a common feature of the belief systems embraced by enslaved Africans, held as a central tenet an inherent idea of freedom, as demonstrated by the role of conscious choice and agency in their spiritual composition, in the human personality. The idea of contending or even alternative conceptions of humanity expressed by peoples brought under the domination of the Western imperial complex, the array of self-constructions, and definitions of the human, Walter Mignolo calls a "pluralversity."[7] These conceptions of personhood constructed by the peoples beyond the scope of Western self-awareness (the West's Other) lay at the foundation of their social/political

[6] Rediker, Marcus. *The Slaveship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

[7] "Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to Be Human?" *Sylvia Wynter: The Human Being as Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick, ed. Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2016, pp. 106–123.

structures.[8] Like the changes in the societies and cultures of Western Europe that led away from a sacred conception of humanity to the Renaissance/Enlightenment-based conception of Man, as the rational center of a mechanical universe, the "African" assertion of what a person is and what is the role of the person in structures of social organization merge ontological concerns with social/civic outcomes. What is defined as human directly informs and shapes the nature of socio-political status and participation. And moreover, *whoever* defines what is a human, defines *who* is a citizen. The Enlightenment construct of Man, carried over to the colonial outposts of European states, maintained an idea of Man/Citizen grounded in the imperial complex which argued the lack of humanity of peoples at the borders of European empire and cosmology (specifically Africans and the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere) as rationalization for the exclusion of the peoples from the burgeoning political states of the Americas. States El Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm X), "If we're respected as a human being, we'll be respected as a citizen; and in this country the black man [sic] not only is not respected as a citizen, he is not even respected [defined] as a human being."[9]

The movement of Africans in America toward the embrace of the rhetoric and practice of mainstream political life in the United States was not a question of African (Americans) "learning" democracy or "freedom" from the supposed exemplars of representative government. Arguably every community of African peoples across the diaspora was in command of and invested in their own conceptualization of human freedom and

[8] Mignolo provides as an example of "pluralversity": Iranian Philosopher Ali Shari'Ati's Koranic-based distinction between Bashar (Being) and Ensan (Becoming). I quote at length, "the difference between Ensan, Bashar and all the other natural phenomena such as animals, tress, etc., is that all are 'beings' except Ensan who is becoming. … But man in the sense of the exalting truth, towards whom we must constantly strive and struggle in becoming, consists of divine characteristics that we must work for as our ideal characteristics." "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" pg. 119. To further illustrate the point Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu writes that for some African societies personhood (humanity) is based on ethical behavior; he writes, "Personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed." "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy and Orality," *Research in African Literatures,* Vol. 40, No. 1, Oral Literature and Identity Formation in Africa and the Diaspora (Spring, 2009) pp. 8–18, (16).

[9] "Universal Dimensions of Black Struggle II: Human Rights, Civil Rights," *African Philosophy: An Anthology*. Edited by Emmanuel Eze. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford UK 1998, pg. 110.