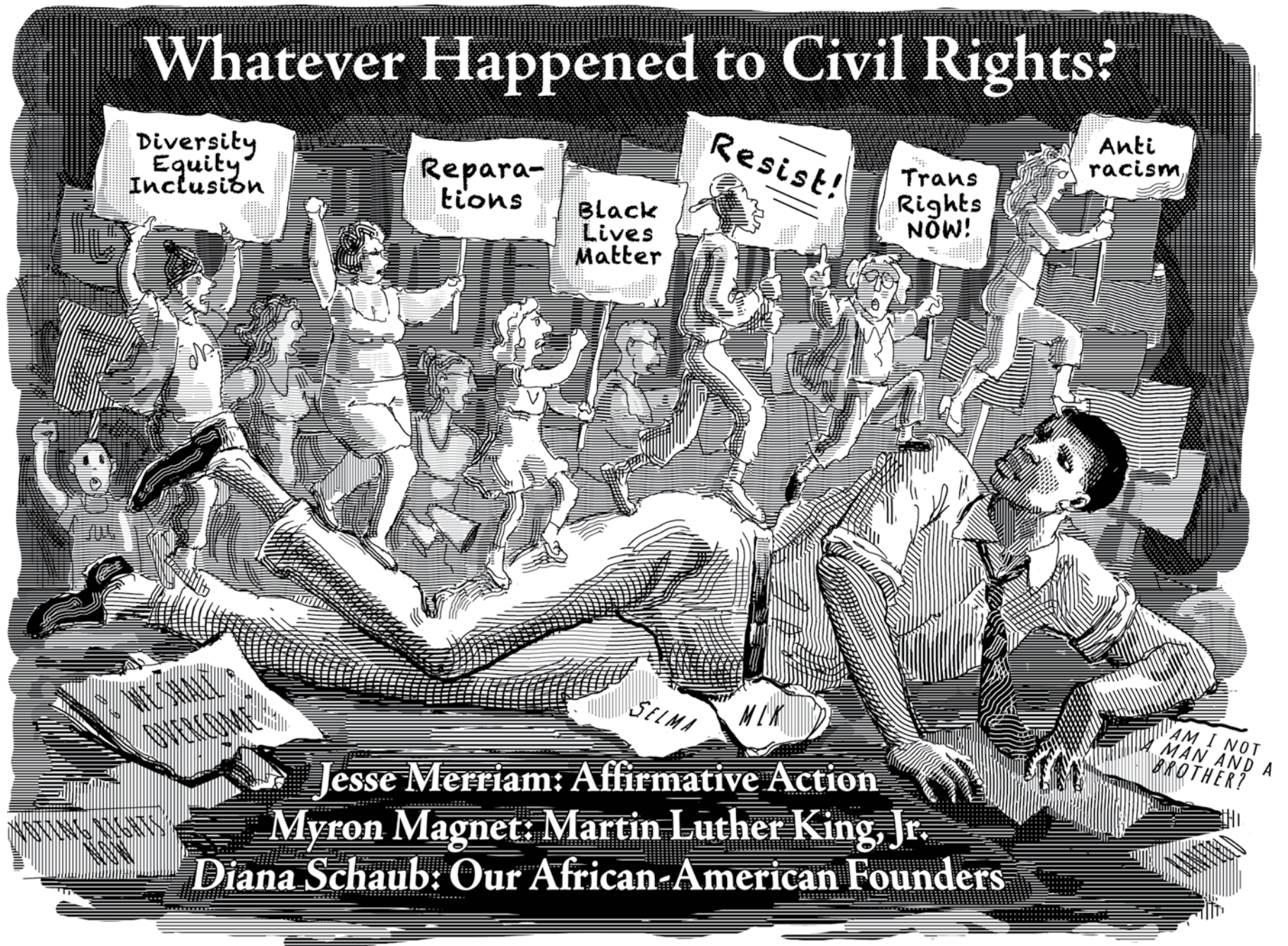


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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Book Review by Diana Schaub

## BLACK POWER

*African Founders: How Enslaved People Expanded American Ideals,*  
by David Hackett Fischer. Simon & Schuster, 960 pages, \$40



**W**HO FOUNDED THE UNITED STATES? Although Americans give special accolades to a few indispensable individuals, we clearly have no single founder—no one like Lycurgus, who gave Sparta its laws and way of life. Instead, we have founders—plural—and often refer to the founding generation or the founding era. This difference between the ancient lawgiver and the modern phenomenon of elected representatives acting on behalf of the people is remarked on by Publius (himself the plural creation of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay) in *The Federalist*: “[I]n every case reported by ancient history,...the task of framing...has not been committed to an assembly of men; but has been performed by some individual citizen, of pre-eminent wisdom and approved integrity.”

Publius allows that in some cases an ancient founder seemed to have the support and authorization of the people, as with Solon of Athens. The boldest, however, had to resort to violence and superstition to impose their singular plans. One advantage of the modern founding by committee is that the procedure

can be more “strictly regular,” because based on consent. Publius notes the disadvantage as well: “discord and disunion among a number of counsellors.” This danger of the pluralized, democratized founding argues against repeating the experiment of “new-modeling the constitution.” At the same time, the examples cited by Publius indicate that founding is not a one-and-done event. He says that Numa and Tullus Hostilius “completed” the work of Romulus; he credits Brutus with a “reform” that “substituted” consular administration for kingship; finally, he gives an instance of a “second” birth—the re-founding of the Achaean League by Aratus after its “first birth from Achaeus.”

**A**S A COMPLEX AND LONG-RUNNING phenomenon, the American Founding featured both the few and the many. The prime movers made sure that posterity knew who they were, affixing their “John Hancock” to both the Declaration and the Constitution. But who were “the good People of these Colonies,” said to constitute “one people” in whose name independence was declared, and who then went on to speak for themselves,

in the first person—“We the People of the United States”—when they undertook to ordain and establish a (second) frame of government? At various points in our past, there have been some who believed the term “people” was more exclusionary than it sounds. Yet whenever such appeared, voices were raised to defend this people’s inclusivity—either conservatively, as in accord with the original meaning, or progressively, as the trajectory of the nation’s future. Here, for example, is Frederick Douglass’s commonsense explication of the term (from his speech in response to the exclusionary *Dred Scott* decision):

Neither in the preamble nor in the body of the Constitution is there a single mention of the term *slave* or *slave holder*, *slave master* or *slave state*, neither is there any reference to the color...of any part of the people of the United States.... [Emphasis in the original.]

“We, the people”—not we, the white people—not we, the citizens, or the legal voters—not we, the privileged class, and excluding all other classes but

we, the people; not we, the horses and cattle, but we the people—the men and women, the human inhabitants of the United States, do ordain and establish this Constitution.

DAVID HACKETT FISCHER'S LATEST book, a magisterial volume provocatively titled *African Founders: How Enslaved People Expanded American Ideals*, fits within this welcoming template of founding as a widely shared and ongoing process. The University Professor of History Emeritus at Brandeis University and a Pulitzer Prize winner for *Washington's Crossing* (2004), Fischer has explored in his distinguished career both singular events and broad cultural trends. Here, his claim is that the American experiment emphatically and provably included African founders: men and women, some remarkable, some ordinary, who brought ideas, dispositions, and skills from their African countries of origin and who, despite their enslavement or their descent from enslaved forebears, organized their own communities, as well as intermingled with the other peoples of the Americas, both European and Native, to define and achieve freedom and create a culture of vibrant institutions and practices.

This is a massive, close-to-a-thousand-page book. Summary is imperative and Fischer provides it in his conclusion:

Racism in its infinite variations will always exist in America and elsewhere. But to condemn the United States as a racist society is fundamentally false. It misses the successful efforts of twelve generations of Americans, and especially the role of Africans born in slavery, and the children of slaves, in enlarging fundamental rights in New England and through the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To overstate the negatives in American history is to miss its positive achievements and its central dynamics.

It really should not come as a surprise that the part of the population that was enslaved, amounting to one eighth of the whole, should have had an influence commensurate with their presence. Slavery may attempt to brutify human beings, but the human spirit is resilient enough that the enslaved remained persons, bearers of memory, creatively acting upon and transforming the nation. What does come as a surprise are the fascinating details of that influence.

Before delving into Fischer's discoveries, a word about his method: As a first-rate

practitioner of the historian's trade, he is distressed by the ideologization of his discipline. He recommends a return to "the school of Herodotus," which understands history as an "inquiry": open-ended, truth-seeking, and empirical. Though old-fashioned in its fidelity to the "evidence of experience," this approach embraces the new tools of quantitative research, in addition to the traditional immersion in dusty primary materials ("Sitzfleisch in a library chair," as Fischer puts it). The best of the new digital resources is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which has extensive information on "nearly 35,000 transatlantic slave voyages from 1501 to 1867." The database covers about 80% of the entire trade and, among much else, tracks numbers of slaves embarked from which locales and numbers of slaves landed at which American destinations. Fischer is generous in acknowledging the contributions of these innovative scholars who are revolutionizing the study of slavery.

AS IT TURNS OUT, THE STUDY OF SLAVERY is always at the same time the study of freedom, as another massive project shows. The genealogist Paul Heinegg has collected ancestry records, prior to 1820, for thousands of free African-American families—"most of these lineages descended from unions of male African slaves with female servants of British, Irish, and European origin." Such unions were fairly common during the colonial period, when indentured whites lived and worked alongside enslaved Africans. Under English law, the status of the child followed that of the mother. We are all aware that slaveholding fathers produced enslaved offspring—"forced concubinage" was what Abraham Lincoln called this abuse. Less well-known is the consensual race-mixing that contributed to the formation of free people of African ancestry. What Fischer goes on to demonstrate is the outsized influence of free people of color in making the maxim of "liberty to all" a reality.

A representative example would be Kofi (Coffe/Cuffe) Slocum, born on Africa's Gold Coast, enslaved as a child, and brought to New England in the 1740s as a young man. Kofi soon managed to purchase his freedom from his conscience-troubled Quaker owner. Adopting, out of gratitude, the surname of his former owner, Kofi married a Wampanoag woman, became a prosperous farmer, and passed along to his long and distinguished line of descendants his syncretist Akan/Puritan/Quaker belief in "doing well" by "doing good." His son Paul Cuffe (who renamed himself by taking his father's Akan day name as the new family name) was an active Federalist and the

prime mover behind the successful lobbying efforts in Massachusetts in 1783 to secure voting rights for all free male citizens without regard to color.

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK HIGHLIGHTS the word "founders," and I began the review by accepting the term on the understanding that it is being employed democratically, with considerable latitude. Nonetheless, Fischer's inquiry might be more accurately described as an investigation into the African "point of departure." This is the phrase that Alexis de Tocqueville uses in *Democracy in America* when he examines the Puritan beginnings of the eventual United States. Tocqueville focuses not on the political deed of founding, but on the general spirit that acts as a first cause, shaping passions, habits, and laws. It was the Baron de Montesquieu who taught Tocqueville to downplay "founding" and instead explore the deeper matter of national character. Describing the Anglo-American character as a unique combination of two distinct elements (the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion), Tocqueville argues for the tremendous diffusive power of this combination:

New England's principles spread at first to the neighboring states; later, they gradually won out in the most distant, and in the end, if I can express myself so, they *penetrated* the entire confederation. They now exert their influence beyond its limits, over the whole American world. The civilization of New England has been like those fires lit in the hills that, after having spread heat around them, still tinge the furthest reaches of the horizon with their light.

Just as he tips his hat to Herodotus, Fischer acknowledges Tocqueville, and his traveling companion Gustave de Beaumont as well. What he takes from the French duo is not the insight into the marvelous Puritan combination, but instead the paradox, stated most forthrightly by Beaumont in his novel *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*, "that there is so much bondage amid so much liberty." By the time the two Frenchmen arrived stateside in the 1830s, slavery had become restricted to the southern part of the Union, but also vastly expanded by the sheer number of those enslaved and the political strength of the enslavers. The ongoing struggle between the spirit of 1776 (or if you prefer, the Pilgrim spirit of 1620) and the spirit of 1619 took on an increasingly powerful and divisive regional dimension.

FISCHER ADOPTS AND BROADENS TOCQUEVILLE's regional focus. *African Founders* is a "companion volume" to his earlier *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (1989), which set forth the array of differences among the New England Puritans, the Virginia Cavaliers, the Pennsylvania Quakers, and the Appalachian Scots-Irish, further positing that each folkway left an enduring legacy. The central claim of *African Founders* is that the African origins and folkways of the enslaved people were similarly varied and consequential. As slaves were distributed across North America's regional landscape, complex interactions developed. In meticulous detail Fischer examines three Northern regions (New England, the Hudson Valley, and the Delaware Valley); three Southern regions (Chesapeake Virginia, and Maryland; Coastal Carolina, Georgia, and Florida; Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Gulf Coast); and three frontier regions (Western, Maritime, and Southern). Each is distinct in terms of its Montesquieuan factors: climate, geography, means of production, laws, religion, maxims of government, history, manners and mores, and mix of populations. There were different white populations, different native populations, and different black populations.

As a result, slavery during the colonial and early republican periods was far from monolithic. Take the example of the Dutch and the Angolans in New Netherland. The first settler on Manhattan Island was Juan Rodriguez, a free "black Mulatto" who left a Dutch ship in 1613 to set up as a fur trader, becoming "Manhattan's first merchant." Being polylingual, as many Africans were, and having taken a Native American wife, Rodriguez often acted as an intermediary between Indians and Europeans. The small colony of New Netherland, which existed from 1624 to 1664, was unique in being wholly owned by a Dutch corporation, whose sole purpose was wealth. Individuals from other ethnic groups arrived, but the newcomers usually shared an adventurous and entrepreneurial spirit, less tempered by the religious compunctions that marked the neighboring regions.

Other than the Dutch themselves, the largest ethnic group were African slaves, mostly from Angola. This was part of a substantial "Angolan Wave" throughout the colonies. Although West Central Africa was a vast region, comprising Loango, Congo, and Angola, the people there spoke related Bantu languages and shared other characteristics. Predating the period of European contact, agricultural and industrial production were already far advanced, with a dense and extensive market economy. These peaceful lands were invaded

by a violent highland tribe—the Imbangala—who allied with the Portuguese from 1611 to 1641 to sell their captives. For a few decades, the usual pattern of the African slave trade was reversed. It had been the norm for foreign slavers to purchase those who were already lowly or enslaved in their homelands. By contrast, the Angolan and Congolese captives were prosperous farmers and artisans, many of whom had converted to Christianity over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries.

THIS MEETING OF CAPITALIST DUTCHMEN and entrepreneurial, but enslaved, Angolans in the Hudson Valley led to striking innovations in the institution of slavery. In the Dutch settlement, most slaves were owned by the West India Company rather than by individuals. The close-knit group of Angolan slaves quickly learned that anything was available for a price. Lacking a formal slave code, but with a strong attachment to the customary right of petition, Dutch corporate masters were willing to bargain with slave leaders, called "Big Men" or "Captains of the Blacks," striking deals that granted slaves particular privileges in exchange for greater efficiencies and profits. This flexible system led to slaves having rights to join churches and marry, to be paid for labor on public projects, to gain land as recompense for military service, and, over time, to acquire a status of *halve vrydom*: half-freedom.

Fischer is careful to stress that this permutation of slavery (and others elsewhere) did not entail any lessening of the rigors of slavery. Dutch masters were harsh. Horrific evidence from Manhattan's African Burial Ground (where slaves were buried from 1632 on), studied by forensic pathologists, reveals bodies "severely deformed by hard labor": men with "major skeletal destruction" to spines, joints, and bones; women with "ring fractures" at the base of the skull from bearing heavy loads on the head; and children with "severe neck and back injuries."

Even though Anglo-Dutch hostilities brought an end to the brief period of Dutch control, the influence of the compound Dutch-Angolan origins continued to ripple through English New York. Before the British warships arrived, the half-free Africans petitioned for full freedom, knowing that the British would not recognize their anomalous status. To their credit, Director-General Peter Stuyvesant and the Council agreed, issuing certificates of manumission and land grants to the company slaves (who settled in the Land of the Blacks, now Greenwich Village and SoHo), but not to privately held slaves. Those individual Dutch slaveholders proved to be

tenacious in their property-holding. Less influenced by Puritan and Quaker criticism of slavery, the institution lasted longer in New York and New Jersey than in other Northern colonies/states. Despite the increasingly multiethnic character of the great metropolis, the largest proportion of slaveholders, especially large slaveholders, remained Dutch: in the census of 1790, "in New York County on Manhattan Island, of all families with ten or more slaves, 80 percent had Dutch surnames."

ALTHOUGH ABOLITION WAS SLOW TO make headway in the Hudson Valley, the outlook of the Afro-Dutch slaves continued to have an impact. Unlike an isolated plantation, the urban environment enabled slaves to congregate for all manner of purposes, from educational gatherings to criminal gangs. The new English rulers strongly objected to these freewheeling, associative ways. What emerged was growing repression met by growing resistance from the slaves, whose numbers had been greatly augmented by arrivals from Africa's Gold Coast, from Madagascar, and from the West Indies. Modes of black resistance multiplied, from simply running away to the murder of individual masters and even organized armed revolution. New York's 1712 slave revolt, one of the first on record in North America, was led by Asante warriors. A few decades later in 1741, a more extensive insurgency took place, followed by a savage crackdown. Eventually, a turn to less dramatic methods of freedom-seeking appeared, with a focus on literacy, specialized and marketable skills, and litigation.

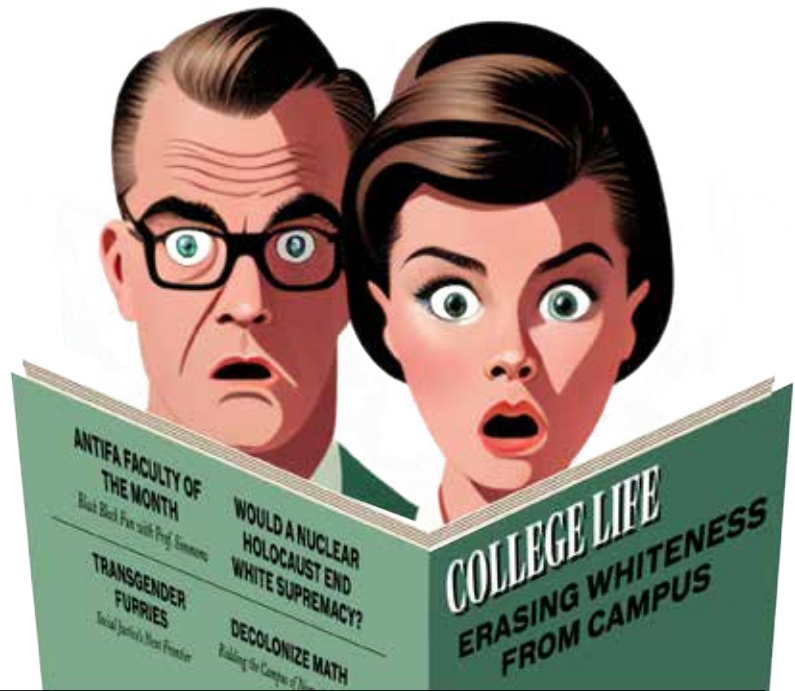
In New York, as in other cities like Baltimore and New Orleans, where both slaves and freedmen were present in significant numbers, joint endeavors were possible. Fischer points out that before 1776, voluntary associations (other than churches) were uncommon. Post-revolution, the art of association flourished. Tocqueville famously regarded the phenomenon as an American specialty: "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite." On Tocqueville's analysis, this salutary habit of association counteracts the weakness of individuals—weakness that is the natural effect of equality itself, which levels and separates people. Even once released from bondage, however, blacks did not enjoy full civic and political equality. For them, associations had a double potential, serving not just to overcome the isolation of democratic equality but, more importantly, to achieve equality by targeting slavery and social exclusion.

The New-York African Society was founded in 1784. Among the aims of this first-ever "ethnic" association was to prepare the en-

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slaved for freedom. It also undertook to provide a place for blacks to worship, without the insult of segregated communion—a quest that culminated in the founding of African Zion, better known as Mother Zion, the first of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches. Working together across racial lines with the New-York Manumission Society, whose guiding spirit was John Jay, the New-York African Society also established the first African Free School. Black women then stepped up, founding the African Dorcas Association, to ensure that poor children had shoes and clothes for school attendance.

THROUGHOUT *AFRICAN FOUNDERS*, Fischer mostly employs the term “African” rather than “African American” or “Black.” It takes a little getting used to, but he has his reasons. The first of them is that “African” was the term chosen by these earliest organizations to denominate their common striving. Additionally, much of his focus is on the specific African origins of the enslaved people: the Fante and Asante in New England, the Mandinka and others from the North Guinea coast in the Delaware Valley, Igbos from the Bight of Biafra in the Lower Tidewater, Fulani cattle herders on the western frontier, and so on. He traces the fascinating and convoluted consequences of these tribal differences, especially when interlaced with different European traditions (e.g., the French in Louisiana with their 1724 *Code Noir* as contrasted with the Spanish, whose laws on slavery dated to the 13th century and yet were “more enlightened and progressive than modern slave laws”).

Interestingly, Fischer does cite the earliest known appearance of the term “African American,” which turns out to be linked to the shift from the colonial to the national period. In Philadelphia’s *Pennsylvania Journal* on May 15, 1782, “African American” was the neologism created to describe “an African writer who celebrated the American victory at Yorktown.” This ethnically-inflected, hyphen-

ated patriotism gave rise to a variety of names: Africo-American (1788), Black American (1818), Afro-American (1830), Afric-American (1831). More groups followed suit: German-American (1824), Irish-American (1832), and innumerable others over the next two centuries. Thus, Fischer credits Africans with formulating the pluralistic model of a “dual ethnic and national identity.”

AFRICAN FOUNDERS’S RICHNESS OF conception and detail is difficult to convey. Although I don’t want to bang the polemical gong too hard, it does seem to me that this book could (or at least ought to) serve as a counterweight—and a hefty one—to the reigning idea of the African-American national experience, especially among hyperwoke and ill-educated young people. When I taught African-American Political Thought at Harvard in the fall of 2020, I was surprised at the hostility black students expressed toward Frederick Douglass. One selection in particular “triggered” them: the 1848 editorial entitled “What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” in which Douglass called on the free portion of the black population to become more involved in the anti-slavery cause and to transform their individual lives through the virtues of industry, sobriety, honesty, and self-respect. He spoke sternly, admonishing existing elite entities like New York’s Zion Church and the Odd Fellows societies and Masonic lodges not to be so hidebound and apolitical. He called on the churches to speak in favor of “mental culture” and the fraternal groups to set aside “the glittering follies of artificial display” in favor of “solid and important realities.” The students who objected thought it was simply unfair to ask anything of an oppressed group—and, in the lingering heat of the George Floyd summer, they didn’t think much had changed between then and now—“the white devils” were still in control and Douglass’s emphasis on “character” showed he had bought into the giant fraud of middle-class values. Thus did they dismiss the great-


est of all the African founders as an unwitting tool of white power.

Those in the grip of an ideologized version of history see only oppressors and victims. For them, the only acceptable justice is retributionist. Henry James in *The Bostonians* (writing of radical feminism, not critical race theory) described the aim this way: “It must triumph, it must sweep everything before it; it must exact from the other, the brutal, bloodstained, ravaging race, the last particle of expiation!” James diagnoses the militants who view the world this way as “morbid.” Alas, this once-rare perturbation of soul is spreading. The most worrying attribute of students today is not their easily offended sensibilities or their willingness to censor speech but their grim hopelessness. The black struggle in America has always been able to draw upon deep reserves of hope and an unshakable conviction of black belonging. (The few who saw no hope in the United States found hope elsewhere in projects of emigration and repatriation.) Seeing only suffering, and insisting on seeing only suffering, closes off access to these essential wellsprings of improvement.

One way to restore belief in an American future might be to restore receptivity to and knowledge of the American past. Despite the lip-service paid to “black agency,” concrete evidence of such agency—as, for example, the ability of enslaved people and their descendants to find room for maneuver within circumstances ranging from constrained to dire (and the inspiring role played by the demand, made by black leaders generally, that it was their duty to do so)—is today overlooked, denied, or even resented. David Hackett Fischer’s book is an antidote to race pessimism, for it provides irrefutable evidence of the resilience, creativity, and contribution of the nation’s African founders.

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