IDA B. WELLS AND THE FORCES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Jane Duran
University of California at Santa Barbara

The work of Ida B. Wells is receiving increasingly close scrutiny today, since her diaries and other writings have been published, making an overall assessment of her accomplishments easier. We often think of her as someone who wrote extensively on lynching, and the republication of many of her pamphlets a decade or two ago has reminded us of how much courage, fortitude and perseverance it took to be able to author the works in the first place. But an important part of Wells's trajectory is her sheer staying power; she was on the same path, so to speak, from her teenage years, and she often felt the need to maintain a true course when others around her were giving way to temptation. It is easy to say that Wells believed in American democracy as a government for all; more remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that Wells also felt the need to be a tireless activist in the sense of being a community organizer. Indeed, it could be argued that the most rewarding part of Wells's lifework was that done in Chicago that resulted in community halls, lending libraries and cross-cultural effort lasting at least a generation or two. Here, as Wells recounts, for instance, in *Crusade for Justice*, she is bent on doing whatever the situation seems to require at whatever the cost.[1]

Although much of what Wells wrote—and a great deal of what she accomplished—was in the direction of a general amelioration of conditions for the Black population, Wells had a special interest in one issue, and this issue recurs again and again both in her writings and in her work. Wells's general tone might be thought to be somewhat feminist (or "womanist" in today's terminology) but she achieves what she does for the Black population at least in part by striking a courageous note in favor of young Black men wherever she is able.[2] In this sense, Wells strikes a grand note for democracy.

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[1] Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, ed. Alfreda Duster, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

[2] Wells's body of work is available as a volume in the Schomburg series, *Collected Works of Ida B. Wells*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Some of what she did fulfills, in a sense, the desiderata set forth by David Walker in his *Appeal*.

I

If the forces at work in America after the Civil War and throughout Reconstruction could be deemed to be such as to have been deleterious to the health of the young Black male, Wells was more than willing to take a stand to do something about the situation. Wells knew that racism was largely responsible for the attempts to pin charges of rape, or other crimes, on Black men in order—in the eyes of whites—to justify lynching, but she also knew that, in the cities, many Black men did not have enough to do. She was particularly concerned about those who might have recently come from the South and gone to the city, where they might become engaged in less than productive behavior.

As was customary with Ida, she took matters directly into her own hands. In *Crusade*, Wells tells about her work with men on the street in Chicago, and her efforts to teach them a better way of life than what she perceived as constant homelessness and drunkenness:

> Very shortly we added a men's lodging house upstairs [at the Negro Fellowship League] where men could get a bed for fifteen cents and a place partitioned off for twenty-five cents. It was the first venture of the kind on State Street and very liberally patronized. At the end of our first year we had a registration average of forty or fifty persons a day who came in to read or play checkers or to hunt jobs.[3]

This sort of activity was a regular feature of Wells's work, added to her writing; she knew that voting could not be promoted without better conditions for all. In addition to forming some of her own social sites, including the use of local buildings and organizational structures, Wells was also involved in a noteworthy activity for a woman of color of her time—work with Jane Addams and the other residents of Hull House. That this happened at all is a remarkable testament to the strength of will of all of the parties, and from a philosophical perspective is indicative of the extent to which Deweyan educational thought had begun to take hold in Chicago. (In itself, this does, of course, represent a democratic stripe of social activity.) During this era of nearly complete segregation, a few Chicagoans were willing to meet to try to forge new movements toward at least minimal integration. Addams herself was very much of the mind that genuine pragmatism required new understandings of the roles played by day to day interaction. Addams and Wells together worked at a level that was more than simply a religious or pragmatic understanding—their

[3] Wells, *Crusade*, p. 306.

goal was to leave a legacy that would allow the poverty-stricken to help themselves.[4]

Wells felt strongly about these issues because what she had seen in the South—and what she reported in her anti-lynching writings—convinced her that Black men were particularly vulnerable to legal charges, and that anything that could be done to better the situation constituted important work. In addition to her special concerns, Wells had an overall prompting about the forces of justice: both her "Southern Horrors" and "Red Record" indicate that the additional problem of the sexual abuse of Black women was seldom addressed. Indeed, it might be said with some justification that what drove Wells was the notion that entire segments of the population were either disenfranchised, or capable of voting but simply not having the requisite social pull to make sure that what transpired at the ballot box resulted in real change.[5]

The impetus behind Wells's lifelong accomplishments is, in a sense, perhaps more startling than some of the accomplishments themselves. At a time in America when most young women, Black or white, could scarcely think beyond marriage and motherhood as a goal—and "goal" may be an inappropriate word, since these were, at the time, life-defining events—Wells had other plans. Her early diaries, recently published, depict an eighteen-year-old adolescent filled with a sprightly sense of self and determined to do differently.[6] Remarkably, these diaries indicate a desire never to marry (spelled out in full) alongside a desire to try to help her race. Still more remarkably, Wells, at an early age, felt no hesitation in castigating members of her race for their failure to act against what she perceived as the manifest injustices perpetrated by whites, and she was especially stringent in her comments against senior male Blacks in positions of power within the Black community. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that Wells saw democracy as not only the idealized driver of American society but, perhaps more important, as the hoped-for catalyst of Black society—and she was just as hard on her own community in her diaries as she is on the larger community surrounding it.

As Wells matured and traveled throughout the United States and abroad, she has many more opportunities to take action on behalf of the impoverished and to agitate for change. The older, experienced Wells who works with Addams and others in Chicago is simply another version of the young Wells of Memphis—each is determined to try to make the changes that would allow for a fuller participation of Blacks in American

[4] Jane Addams, "The Public School and the Immigrant Child," in *The Jane Addams Reader*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain, New York: Basic Books, 2002, pp. 235-250.

[5] See various works cited in fn. 2.

[6] Ida B. Wells, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995,

life. That participation does not simply mean voting or the standard activities of citizenship (in Illinois, there were already a few Black legislators). It means meaningful participation in school life, church and home and family. This can only be accomplished through a strengthening of mind and will.

One might inquire as to what it was that gave the special focus to Wells's work—before a certain sequence of events she was simply a strong-minded and unconventional young Black woman. After the sequence, she became an intensely driven activist, and one who knew precisely what she wanted to do, and was willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish her goals. As Wells writes in *Crusade,* ". . .there came the lynching in Memphis which changed the whole course of my life."[7] When Wells suffered reprisals for having written not only against lynching, but against the constant blaming of young Black men for sexual crimes, she understood that she needed to take further action. Her newspaper office was burned down; fortunately, she was not in Memphis at the time. In addition to editorializing against lynching, Wells had taken the unusual, courageous and probably foolhardy step of mentioning that many of the alleged sex crimes were probably due to the existence of consensual relationships, at least some of which were initiated by young white women. She must have known that she would pay a heavy price for bringing this topic up in a newspaper, and she did.

The thread that ties together the Wells of the early years with the later Wells is that same thread of courage, lack of concern for opinion, and plain fortitude that shows up in nearly all activists of all stripes. Wells possessed these traits in abundance, and we can do little more than wonder at the interesting mix of intellectual ability, activist skill, and compassion for others that drove much of the effort in Wells's life. But perhaps most noteworthy is her sense that American democracy, during her time, had not fulfilled its promise.

II

In her diaries, edited by Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Wells is more than eager to share the notion that defying convention, refusing to attend parties and get-togethers (except on the rare occasion), and taking a stand against compulsory marriage and motherhood are all important components of her personal make-up. Even here, in these comparatively unguarded comments that are obviously intended only for her own personal reflection, it is clear that a nascent notion of democracy is at work—Wells is thinking of herself as an American citizen of the nineteenth

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[7] Wells, *Crusade*, p. 47.

century, and part of the statement that she is making is that, as a citizen, she would like to be able to make her own decisions about a number of issues. In fact, we might go so far as to claim that a concept later articulated by Wells with respect to lynching, establishing public spaces for the Black population, and so forth is at work here—Wells not only believes in democracy in the largest possible sense, but also believes that democracy cannot be established or instantiated without effort. In a sense her ideal encompasses a bit of that of the Aristotelian magnanimous personality.

Wells's beginning efforts in her political work are mainly of a piece—seemingly unbound by tradition, and unafraid of adverse commentary. Wells does remarkable things. At a time when many young women of any color would be fearful of undertaking a long trip unaccompanied, Wells takes a train through Colorado and to California (taking notes on the way), and teaches for a brief period in Visalia, California, to the children of the very small Black population there.[8] We are struck by the sheer statistical rarity of her accomplishments, and surprised again that, apparently, she herself does not find them so worthy of comment.

In examining Wells's early life, it is apparent that, in a sense, she used herself as an exemplar of that force of democratization that she espoused. In other words, if democratic procedures ideally enable all to participate—as the Founders had envisioned for at least the propertied white males—Wells was one of the first participants in many ventures to be simultaneously Black and female. Of her, it may truly be said, that Anna Julia Cooper's remark "When and where I enter, the whole race enters with me," applies.[9] What Wells is guessing is that the very acts that she so despises—the lynchings, blaming of Blacks for various crimes, and general acts of disrespect—will fall dramatically if enough Black citizens are enfranchised. So writings such as "Southern Horrors" are wake-up calls to everyone, Black and white alike, that at least one individual has noticed what is going on and is willing to testify to it, while her later works of community organization (which we have mentioned at an earlier point) are the very kinds of hands-on activities that are needed to keep the forces of access to the ballot box moving.

It might be argued that almost anyone could have tried to do what Wells did, but the truth is that very few were courageous enough to make the effort. In other words, trying to create a more open society was so difficult—and time-consuming and frustrating—that Wells was *during*

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[8] Wells, *Memphis*, p. 105.

[9] This phrase, widely cited in a number of places, is the title of Paula Giddings's well-known work on the history of Black women in America. (Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, New York: Morrow, 1983.)

her early years pretty much alone in what she set out to do. What better way to demonstrate, for example, that there should be no barriers to a young Black woman traveling by herself than to set out on such a journey? How better to demonstrate that a young woman need not marry than to forswear marriage for years? (To be fair, Wells did eventually marry.)

As the editor of Wells's Memphis diaries writes, Wells was a complex person who not only found others difficult, but who also struggled to come to terms with what she knew about herself. Reading her work can sometimes be perplexing since her take on what was needed to achieve social justice was unremitting, and her personal writings are often painful and confusing to peruse. DeCosta-Willis notes:

> The summer of 1886 is also a time for reflection and deep introspection, a time for confronting, openly and honestly, the complex woman whom she has become. Although Wells writes enthusiastically about "enjoying existence," she often feels lonely and isolated from others. . ..[S]he describes her longing for the "might have been" (the education she did not complete), [and] her feelings of inadequacy. . ..[10]

Wells notices that she seems a great deal more driven than many of those around her, and although she often faults others—she expresses frequent frustration at the acquiescence of many Blacks to their lot—she also finds fault with herself. To give Wells credit, she seems to know that if she is to achieve what she wants, which is a greater measure of justice for the Black population, she must work on herself as well as everyone around her. It is an irony that, in the attempt to try to make America more democratic so that another young Black woman or man can have some of the same opportunities that she has pushed herself to create, she also has to move back, as it were, and ask herself if, in creating these opportunities, she has sometimes gone too far. The relentless pursuit of a goal that characterizes Wells's life leads to these reflections.

As soon as Wells began to write for publication—and this was at an early point, when she was in her early twenties and had the equivalent of what today would be considered a secondary school education—she started to publish pieces that castigated her fellow citizens of color for their failure to live up to larger expectations and, again, to instantiate a set of democratic practices, even with respect to their own people. In an early article titled "Functions of Leadership," Wells is explicit about what she views as the failures of leaders around her:

[10] Wells, *Memphis*, p. 72.

> I look around among those I know, and read up the histories of those I do not know, and it seems to me the interest ceases after self has been provided for. . .. I would like very much for [the author of a letter to the editor of the Cleveland *Plaindealer*] to tell me what material benefit is a "leader" if he does not, to some extent, devote his time, talent and wealth to the alleviation of the poverty and misery, and elevation of his people?[11]

Once again, Wells took a chance in publishing this material, intended for a Black audience, in a local Black church venue in Memphis, *The Living Way.* One might be tempted to say that Wells gives new meaning to the phrase "democratic voice" when she, as a young woman and a comparatively unknown person in her community, attempts to castigate others who are very much her senior and have much more prestige and power. Although contemporary political philosophy, in a Rawlsian vein, invites us to think of a society in which we do not originally know our place, and then to hypothesize about its requirements, few would imagine themselves as a young woman of color in a society that had only recently abolished slavery. And yet, if one were to hypothesize along these lines, the activity level of someone like Ida would be a goal at which to aim.

III

It might prove instructive to compare Wells's work and thought to that of another prominent nineteenth-century Black thinker, Anna Julia Cooper. Although there is no question that Cooper's work was progressive, it is probably a mistake to think of Cooper as someone who outshines Wells, or who puts Wells in her shadow. Cooper wrote on a number of topics, and is the author of essays such as "What We are Worth," and "Woman vs. the Indian," which at least some contemporary authors find radical.[12] But there is a strain in Cooper that is elitist, class-bound, and not always friendly to the poverty-stricken Black woman who, at least toward the end of the century, was most likely to be a sharecropper in the deep South. Cooper frequently writes as if most of her audience (and statistically speaking, this may well have been the case) were upper-middle class Blacks whose main concern was which school their daughter could attend, and whether she could receive an education on a par with that of the better-off young Black men of her time. In the essays to be found in *A Voice From the South*, she uses such

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[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

[12] Vivian May is one of these. See her *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: a Critical Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2007.

phrases as "I ask the men and women. . .that they give the girls a chance!" and "The three R's, a little music and a good deal of dancing. . .are quite enough generally to render charming any woman. . . ."[13] These comments were made at a time when, as Cooper well knew, most young Black women were not able to go to school at all.

Wells experienced no such influence of class. Because of the fact that Wells came from a background that was itself a poverty-stricken one, Wells had no difficulty identifying with sharecroppers, small-time farmers or laborers. Indeed, Wells had herself experienced interrupted schooling when she cared for her younger brothers and sisters for several years after the death of her parents, and slavery was still in force at the time that Wells was born. An idea of democracy, then, can be instantiated in many ways—or one can attempt to do work toward its instantiation following a variety of paths. Anna Julia Cooper took the unusual route of recommending for young Black women what many of the white suffragists were attempting to recommend for young white women insofar as formal education was concerned; what she had in mind was a curriculum that paralleled that available to young men (to be sure, not many young Black men did themselves have access to such levels of education, although a few did). Wells, however, took a different path. She tried to work with members of the community who, statistically speaking, represented the bulk of the group, and she tried to assist them in obtaining the services, goods, and education that they could reasonably expect to achieve at that time. Ironically, in some circles Cooper's name presently has greater resonance—but that may well be because we have difficulty understanding what America was like in the nineteenth century. It is Wells's work, after all, that represents the Deweyan force of democratization.

In addition to her writings on lynching and her work in Chicago, Ida B. Wells also authored some other material that sheds light on the complexity of her thought. In a piece titled "Iola on Discrimination," she wrote: "Consciously and unconsciously we do as much to widen the breach already existing and to keep prejudice alive as the other race."[14] What Wells meant was that every time members of the Black population requested special accommodation—even if it was largely to avoid harassment from the white population—they fed into the underlying belief systems, and forwarded ideas that meant, ultimately, further lack of progress. Wells had noticed that this sort of mindset took place in Visalia, where the small Black population itself was at least partly responsible for

[13] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 72, 75.

[14] Wells, *Memphis*, p. 187.

the separate school, and she saw it under many other sets of circumstances.

Clearly, when comparing Wells to Cooper, or examining Wells's overall work with an eye toward her main goal, one can see that Wells always championed the downtrodden and, indeed, often failed to identify with the small group of better-off Blacks. If democratization as a process means that more and more individuals are eventually enfranchised, Wells was able to retain this as a goal, and she did not lose sight of its importance. At a time when Blacks in the North could vote—and many did—Wells would not have been particularly interested in the questions of education and class posed by Cooper, since it is clear that they had little to do with the reality of life for many Blacks throughout the nation. Thus it is paradoxical that Cooper has been seen by some as more of a champion of her people than Wells, because although both women wrote extensively, much of Cooper's writing does not really address the needs of the vast majority of Blacks. The children of Visalia were in some sense lucky to attend school at all—and that is a fact of which Ida B. Wells would not have been unaware.

In sum, Wells envisaged an America where the changes wrought by the Civil War and the various constitutional amendments that accompanied it genuinely amounted to something, and one of her primary concerns had to do with voting and civil rights for the Black populace. Although Wells was well aware of the Jim Crow laws, such as poll taxes, that prevented Blacks from voting in the South, her concerns had to do with those who could vote in the North, and whether or not they were aware of their rights and were able to exercise them. In this, Wells showed herself to be an ardent Constitutionalist, and, as we have said, a virtuous spirit whose tireless work for others brings to mind many of the characterizations of the ancients about the best sorts of personalities. Insofar as young women were concerned, Wells was very much ahead of her time, because although she was not primarily interested in women's suffrage (perceived as a movement led largely by whites), she was aware of the strains placed on young women by the concerns of marriage and childbearing. Finally, in the spirit of both Addams and Dewey, Wells was community-oriented, and determined to make good on the various pledges that might be thought to spring from any community organization—to help others, render assistance, make stress more tolerable, and so forth. As has been argued here, this determination showed up early in Wells, and can be seen throughout her writings in the newly-published and edited *Memphis Diary*.[15] It is, of course, the case that Wells remains well-known for her strong writings against lynching, and it was the fear

[15] At times the reader is tempted to take issue with Wells, who seems almost too outspoken for her own good.

of lynching and various physical attacks that kept many Blacks from using the few rights that they did have, meager though they might have been at that time. Ida B. Wells tried to make a decided change in these matters.

IV

I have been arguing that Ida B. Wells was a sharp observer of what was constitutive of democracy in her time, and that she took a special effort to try to extend that democracy to the Black population. In addition, I have argued that, more than for most, this tendency to respond to those left out of the various forms of social activity and greatly in need was an intrinsic part of her personality that manifested itself at an early point, as is shown in the diaries she wrote from the age of eighteen on. Finally, and especially pertinent from the standpoint of philosophy, I have argued that Wells's work embodied the spirit of both Addams and Dewey, and that it was an attempt to give Black voice to that spirit.

When we remember the various hands-on tasks accomplished by Jane Addams, and for which she is famous, we can see still another version of that spirit in Ida. Ironically, Ida disliked teaching, probably because she was all too aware of the defects of classroom instruction as pointed out by Dewey in *The School and Society.* We can recall the passages in which Dewey displayed bewilderment at the students sitting in rows of desks; this same feature is most likely what drove Ida out of the classroom. But what she did outside of her teaching activities is what she is most noted for, and her attempts not only to write effectively but to organize the lives of young men in particular, especially in Chicago, were quite remarkable. Those who worked with Addams remember her lack of condescension; Ida B. Wells was another such person.[16] We can guess that commentary made about her work after her life had ended would be similar to rather glowing commentary left about Addams.

Why be concerned about the work of Ida B. Wells today? After all, it could be argued, the goals for which she worked were met years ago, and she is simply too far back in time for her trajectory to speak to us now. Although it is accurate to say that the bulk of what Ida worked for was accomplished in the 1960's—the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, to name two pieces of legislation that are related to her work—it is more the spirit of what Ida did that is relevant. Ida B. Wells was an unstoppable force, and she refused to quit even when she was presented with what would appear to an outside as overwhelming obstacles. Her newspaper office was burned down shortly after she wrote the

[16] Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Framework*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

editorial that blamed many Black/white relationships on white women, but Wells kept on working, although she moved to the East Coast and then to Chicago. Many of her efforts in Chicago did not at first bear fruit, and her tendency to be a "do-gooder," particularly where individuals' daily lives were concerned, led to ridicule and condemnation in many instances. We can only hazard a guess, for example, as to how many young Black men did not want to be saved from the pool hall, and would have preferred to be left to their own devices.

But the beliefs that led to her early writings, such as "Iola on Discrimination," held in good stead throughout her life, and she never wavered from them. For Wells, the forces of democratization could not be tapped or put into place unless enormous effort was made, and she was willing to make the effort. Time spent away from the pool hall might be spent reading or leafletting—Wells had plans for the young individuals whose lives she hoped to alter. She knew that only a committed and determined citizenry could make a difference at the ballot box, even when voting became the norm. Those democratic ideals are more than useful to us today.