

**The Limits of the Politics of Respectability:
Disfranchisement, “Manhood Rights” and the 1906 Georgia Equal Rights Convention**

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One of the bitterest ironies of 20th Century U.S. history for African Americans was that the Progressive Era was also the era of Jim Crow. Federal, state and local governments had begun to shoulder a significant amount of the responsibility for caring for the health, welfare and education of its citizens. Public health agencies began inspecting dairies and bakeries to ensure that consumers had healthy bread and milk to eat. Cities throughout the country began investing in waterworks and modern sewage systems, which put running water in the homes of millions of Americans and drove TB, dysentery and other diseases from America’s cities. School construction proceeded at a rapid rate and for the first time, many American children could look forward to getting a free public education through at least the 8th grade, if not high school.

At the same time, southern states and municipalities began to enact measures designed to keep African Americans from the ballot box and drive them from public space altogether. Disfranchisement was often touted as a progressive measure designed to eliminate both the influence of supposedly ignorant black voters along with the corruption and white vigilante violence that had long been used to keep them from the polls. Advocates of disfranchisement offered a way to drive black voters from politics by law, rather than by fraud and violence. As Progressive Era city builders lined the streets with sidewalks, placed sewers under those streets and extended systems of public transit that carried workers to and from their places of employment, they took steps to limit black access to these new public goods. Segregation enabled the South to maintain the prerogatives of whiteness at the same time as Progressive Era urban development was profoundly reordering public space.

These dual legacies of Progressive Era reform and urban development confronted black progressives with a thorny dilemma. At the same time that they desired to embrace the state as a vehicle for reform, the powers of that state were being used to inscribe into the law a second-class citizenship to which black Americans would be relegated. The desire of Progressive Era reformers to rationally arrange the world in the service of human progress was shaped by a racial logic that African Americans had a difficult time escaping. Through their attempts to escape this logic, black progressives in Atlanta, GA profoundly changed the terms of black racial solidarity.

One of the most common strategies that African Americans employed as they confronted the rise of Jim Crow rested upon what has been termed “the politics of respectability.” Historians Victoria Wolcott, Tera Hunter, Kevin Gaines, Deborah Grey White and others are correct in demonstrating the ways in which respectability was a crucial discursive strategy that black men and women employed to combat the racialized sexual and moral stereotypes within which white people sought to box African Americans.

Where I differ from these thinkers is that I am looking primarily at the ways in which the language of respectability is used to frame both intraracial and interracial political solidarity. It is precisely this aspect of respectability that makes it vital to understand the ways in which the Victorian understandings of gender and class that comprised the discourse of respectability changed over time. As respectability changed so would the terms of black political solidarity.

Respectability also formed the basis of a class-bound notion of interracial solidarity between black and white elites. This solidarity would form the basis for negotiations across the color line, especially as African Americans sought to find a way to extend the benefits of Progressive Era development and reform into black communities. However, this strategy would

inhibit the emergence of an independent black politics, capable of acting in opposition to the interests of erstwhile white allies when necessary.

Some historians, most notably Glenda Gilmore and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, make an effort to emphasize the role that respectability played in establishing a basis for interracial diplomacy between elites. Both Higginbotham's path-breaking Righteous Discontent and Glenda Gilmore's Gender and Jim Crow show how black women employed the politics of respectability to define and advance an ambitious reform agenda. These strategies were crucial in carving out a space for political action for both black men and women during the "nadir" of black history. As Gilmore puts it, "black women were given straw and they made bricks. Outward cooperation with an agenda designed to oppress them masked a subversive twist." Likewise, Higginbotham asserts that "the politics of respectability constituted a deliberate, highly self-conscious concession to hegemonic values." I contend that no matter how subversive, now matter how necessary – this tactical embrace of respectability held serious consequences for the development of black politics.

The ability to make a concession to hegemonic values presumes that there is a space free from hegemonic determination. If the politics of respectability is understood as a mask behind which a subversive black agenda can be concealed, then the mask, the face behind the mask and the audience for whom the mask is donned must participate in a shared universe of meanings even as those meanings are contested. This makes a non-ideological, non-hegemonic space impossible. Dissemblance is of course still possible, but it only works if there is at least some shared understanding between the deceiver and the deceived. That is, in seeking to establish a common ground with potential white allies the **politicians of respectability** had to share at some

of the same cultural assumptions about gender, class and sometimes race with the advocates of white supremacy. This made it difficult to stake out a genuinely oppositional position.

In some ways, this approach to understanding respectability risks de-emphasizing the role of race as the determinative factor in the lives of African Americans during Jim Crow. So, it remains important not to lose sight of the fact that one wrong glance at a white woman on a crowded streetcar could easily have meant death at the hands of a howling mob of angry white men. Black southerners lived their lives under a racial sword of Damocles – every decision was made with this threat hanging above their heads. What I am presenting here should not be understood as a dismissal of the importance of race, but rather as an attempt to highlight the ways in which class and gender impacted the terms of black solidarity.

I will provide two examples of how this dynamic worked as African Americans confronted disfranchisement in Georgia in 1899 and again in 1906.

“Wisdom, Justice, Moderation”: The Hardwick Bill of 1899

In 1899, Georgia state representative Thomas Hardwick introduced the first of what would be many bills aiming to disfranchise African American voters. Hardwick worried that black voters in Georgia could constitute a balance of power should white voters split evenly. Thus, he sought an amendment to the state constitution imposing a literacy test prior to voter registration. Enforcement of this law would be in the hands of local registrars who were encouraged to use this as a tool to remove African Americans from the electorate. Further, in order to protect the white electorate from the literacy test, Hardwick also proposed a “grandfather clause,” which would exempt all persons allowed to vote before the Civil War, and any of their descendants from this or any other form of suffrage restriction – a move clearly aimed at a formerly enslaved black population.

Concerned at this threat to their voting rights, the state's African American leadership organized a response. Their strategic options were limited due to the effectiveness of a \$1.00 cumulative poll tax that had been written into the state constitution in 1877. This poll tax was so effective that after two decades in operation, it had reduced Georgia's total electorate by about 50% - disproportionately impacting black voters. Unable to muster opposition at the polls, African American leaders traded instead on their reputations as respectable race leaders in order to prevent the bill from passing the legislature.

The most significant of these efforts was a memorial signed by twenty-four of the state's most prominent black leaders. The authors of the memorial condemned the provisions of the Hardwick bill as designed to proscribe "color" rather than "ignorance, bribery and vote-selling." Nevertheless, they explicitly defended racial discrimination in politics when they felt it was "grounded on a real difference in civilization and intelligence . . . in such case, it is not really discrimination against color, but against ignorance, poverty and vice." They contended that it was both legitimate and desirable to deny the vote to African Americans due to their inferior "civilization." The black elites who authored the memorial invited Georgia's white elite to join them as partners in a civilizing mission to lift the black working class out of the illiteracy, poverty and crime that prevented them from being intelligent and responsible voters.

To launch this civilizing mission, the signatories of the memorial enrolled the assistance of one of the key institutions of the Progressive Era state-building project, the public school. Because "the governed must be intelligent enough to recognize and choose their own best good," they asserted that "it is fair and right to impose on voters an educational qualification, so long as the State furnishes free school facilities to all children." In 1899, then, Georgia's black leadership was willing to negotiate inclusion into a racially stratified state, so long as some of its

benefits would go to the black community. By appropriating this discourse of civilization, they validated and became ever more bound by its terms, seriously hindering the longer term development of a genuinely oppositional discourse that could sustain future claims for equal protection under the laws. In order to prevent the exclusion of all African Americans based on race, they attempted to shift the terms of exclusion from race to class.

On the surface, it appeared that these efforts to defeat disfranchisement were successful. The Hardwick bill lost, garnering only three votes in its favor. On the following day, however, the *Atlanta Journal* printed a cartoon on its front page that illuminated the true limitations of this victory. It depicted a former slave, ballot in hand, standing before an arch inscribed with the words “Wisdom, Justice and Moderation.” He is listening to a former slave-owner tell him, “Though I have the power I will not take from you the ballot. Trust the southern white man as your friend. Work to build up Georgia and all your rights, personal and political, will be safe.” It was clear that the battle to preserve the right to vote could only be waged using the language of mutual regard within a framework of white paternalism, avoiding any contention over the fundamental rights of citizenship. While the state’s black leadership had earned the right to applaud themselves for defeating disfranchisement, it would be prudent not to clap too loudly.

The arch in the *Atlanta Journal* cartoon symbolized the power of the state of Georgia, before which the leading black men of the state made their sacrifice. As long as their citizenship claims did not conflict with the interests of the leading white men of the state, the terms of their sacrifice would be honored and the black citizens of Georgia would retain a qualified suffrage. However, the Progressive Era with its comparatively vast expansion of the influence of the state was about to bring into power a new set of architects. These would topple the arch of “wisdom, justice and moderation” and build a new one christened “Progressivism – for whites only.”

GERC and “Manhood Rights”

The architects of this new Georgia were swept into power following a bitterly fought gubernatorial race, which pitted the progressive Hoke Smith against the conservative Clark Howell. Although both men agreed that the South’s strict racial hierarchy ought to be preserved, they nevertheless took different positions towards the further disfranchisement of black voters. Howell was convinced that the current tools through which Georgia disfranchised its black citizens – the poll tax and the white primary – were sufficient. By contrast, Smith thought it necessary to impose a literacy test and a property requirement on those seeking to register to vote. The difference between the two men was that Smith, the progressive candidate, sought to drastically expand the powers of the state, whereas Howell – a fiscal conservative – sought to restrain the scope of state intervention. The extension of the protections of the state to farmers and workers held the potential for leveling the playing field between black and white Georgians. In Smith’s calculus, the Progressive state made white Democracy vulnerable. Both Smith and his supporters feared that African Americans would use these extensions of the state to leverage power for themselves as they had during Reconstruction.

In response to the disfranchisement campaign, Rev. William Jefferson White, editor of the influential *Georgia Baptist*, and Atlanta University professor W. E. B. Du Bois issued a call gathering several hundred black leaders from across the state to attend The Georgia Equal Rights Convention (GERC) in Macon in February of 1906. Given the magnitude of the threat they faced, the organizers of the Convention urged black Georgians to set aside all rivalries and unite upon a shared understanding of manhood. As White and Du Bois wrote in their call: “Let us speak as men for ourselves and thus maintain our manhood whether we secure the enjoyment of

manhood rights or not.” This notion of manhood they sought to defend was rooted in the class and gender suppositions of the politics of respectability.

The supporters of the GERC found themselves in much the same position as had the signatories of the memorial against the 1899 Hardwick Bill. Lacking the political power to resist disfranchisement at the polls, they sought allies among the respectable white elite. Prior to the meeting, Rev. White wrote Du Bois about plans for the upcoming convention. He was “anxious to send forth a statement that will tell among the whites of Georgia and the balance of mankind . . . We do not want bitter expressions but good strong, manly expressions.” The statement White and Du Bois ultimately drafted would call for equitable distribution of school taxes, access to jury privileges, the abolition of peonage and the convict-lease system, unfettered access to employment, and most importantly an end to the recent moves to disfranchise black Georgians.

White characterized the statement he wanted to make as a “plea,” adding “I use the word plea thoughtfully.” This choice of words highlights the contradiction at the heart of the politics of respectability. The word “plea” is closely associated with “pleading” or “begging,” both terms related to supplication before a higher authority. Viewed from this angle, White sought to appeal to white men whose economic and political power were far greater than he could muster within the black community. At the same time, “plea” also represented another form of “appeal” – borrowing its meaning from the notion of an appeal under the law before which black and white men were technically equal. In this sense, the “manly expressions” comprising his “plea” were intended as an appeal by black men to the manhood of the white race.

When the GERC assembled in Macon, GA on 13 Feb 1906, they represented a significant cross section of the state’s black elite. They included seventy-six clergy, twenty-five educators, seven doctors, four businessmen, four social workers, three lawyers, three planters, three

newspaper editors, and one former state-militia captain. Standing before this august assembly, White called on them as “the colored yeomanry of Georgia [to] ... decide what is best for them as a race to do and then as true men stand together.” He urged them to unify behind an appeal to the “fair-minded” white people of Georgia in order to establish among “the children of a common state with a common destiny ... a deep and abiding friendship.” This friendship could not rest on the basis of “unjust laws and practices.” Rather, the GERC would “present our case to them ... in a straight forward, manly way, with assurance of our readiness to cooperate with them for the highest good and best development of this grand old commonwealth.” White urged the yeomanry of Georgia – black and white alike – to address the grievances listed in his call.

This appeal to “fair-minded” white Georgians was in part a tactical decision. After all, White and the other supporters of the GERC could not rely upon an already largely disfranchised black electorate to help them oppose the new disfranchisement measure. However, they also harbored serious concerns over not merely the material condition of the black working class, **but also its moral character and fitness to vote.** Both of these factors encouraged them to view their primary allies to be Georgia’s white elite. Although they actively supported the abolition of the convict lease system and other reforms that would help the black working class, the GERC could not comprehend them as real allies in this struggle. Just as white opponents of black suffrage feared the black vote as corruptible, black elites viewed the political judgment of the black working class as morally suspect. As seen earlier in 1899, this caused the black middle-class to accept disfranchisement as a means of “improving” the black electorate.

Among the greatest fears of the GERC was that the rise of Jim Crow would leave black men powerless to defend their families. As a result, they called on the black men of Georgia to defend the right to vote in order to fulfill their responsibilities as black fathers and husbands.

White and the GERC linked the vote to both the defense of black women's honor as well as the economic independence necessary to "keep them at home and support them there." The manly ideal with which they sought to unite black Georgians was defined by an economic independence that would allow black men to keep their wives and daughters away from the harsh realities of segregation, and the exploitation of the labor market. This would allow them to maintain the respectable households necessary to establish their standing as bourgeois men.

Although many black families from all class backgrounds sought to establish this sort of household, the limited employment opportunities open to black men made this difficult. At the time the GERC met, roughly 67% of black households in Atlanta contained working women and nearly half of all black households (46%) were headed by women. Thus, their defense of the ballot constituted an appeal to the men assembled to unite on the basis of a shared understanding of Victorian middle-class manhood that bore little resemblance to reality.

This notion of respectable manhood as the practice of Victorian middle-class virtues made it difficult for the delegates to fathom the extent to which black "manhood rights" had already been compromised by the cumulative poll tax. In his speech to the Convention, White gave his audience a choice: "Shall we as helpless children sit down and cry over what we regard as wrongs ... or shall we as men, in a manly way, protest?" To "stand as men among other men" required every black Georgian to "qualify ... to use the ballot." White never raised the question of how a sharecropper perpetually in debt to his landlord would ever find the cash needed to pay his annual \$1.00 poll tax. Instead, White insisted that the poll tax was a burden which every citizen should be compelled to bear and felt that "no man should be allowed to avoid paying his tax as his price of disfranchisement." By embracing the poll tax as a means of excluding from

politics those whom White deemed the “worthless” and “shiftless element,” the GERC made the ability to pay one’s poll tax a test and demonstration of individual manhood.

Those who failed this test of responsible manhood frequently became scapegoats for the problems facing black Georgians. By contrast, those who passed the test of could share “the elective franchise” alongside responsible white men, establishing common ground on “the highest type of American manhood and citizen sovereignty.” The leaders of the GERC thought of their political community as embracing the “best men,” black and white, of Georgia. And, in 1906, their political strategy was to establish solidarity with the white middle-class. This then would lay the foundation for racial equality within the framework of shared bourgeois manliness.

The politicians of respectability accepted the limitations placed on citizenship by Jim Crow even as they rejected the notion that U. S. citizenship ought to be stratified by race. Rather, those exclusions would depend upon the class and gender discourses that comprised the notion of respectability. By embracing an idea of the citizen that was bounded by the correct performance of bourgeois gender roles, it became possible to use the politics of respectability to assert a formal equality with other respectable *white* citizens. In a way, they hoped to de-racialize citizenship by embracing instead its stratification by gender and class, an embrace that would open the door to using the respectability as the basis for interracial political solidarity.

However, this strategy also made it impossible to imagine a broader foundation for black political unity. In order to understand the black working class as an ally rather than a liability, African American leaders would have to re-imagine their relationship to the black working class. What hindered the emergence of this new relationship was that the discourse of respectability made it difficult to understand class without using the language of gender and respectability. One of the most important obstacles facing the development of black political strategy at the

dawn of the 20th century was precisely this inability to understand *class as class* and not as the manifestation of some other category. Until this understanding emerged, any effective strategy that involved marshalling black political power in defense of “first-class citizenship” would be nearly impossible to conceive, let alone execute.

Conclusion

The story of the GERC forces us to rethink two narratives. The first of these is the old standby that the excesses of the Gilded Age led to the reforms of the Progressive Era. A story that reassures us that America responds to injustice with justice. Progressives, both black and white, were either willing or compelled to accept injustice for the many in order to secure the benefits of Progressive Era reform and development for the few. The link between disfranchisement and reform in the South suggests that this narrative needs to be reconsidered.

The second narrative deals with the notion that black racial solidarity in the face of injustice is somehow automatic. The ways in which both the signatories of the Hardwick Memorial and the GERC chose to respond to disfranchisement represent a failure of black solidarity – rooted in the tactical embrace of respectability as a means of building alliances with white elites. The GERC’s bid to avert disfranchisement would of course fail. Ironically, the sort of relationship that they sought to establish with the white elites of Georgia would only become possible after middle-class black Georgians were able re-imagine their relationship with white elites in more oppositional terms permitting them to compel the respect of their erstwhile white allies. This in turn would depend upon their willingness to renegotiate their relationship with the black working-class. Nevertheless, this initial response to disfranchisement in Georgia demonstrates what our commentator, Paul Ortiz, has written, that “solidarity ... is [not] an automatic reaction to oppression.” Rather, solidarity “must be organized.”