

Emma Mullen

Final Paper

Lena Zuckerwise

May 14th, 2017

Respectability Politics

Last weekend my friend Jack visited me at Simmons, and there are a few things you should know about him before we continue. First off, Jack is a non-religious and liberal Democrat, as well as an advocate for Black Lives Matter. Because of these things it is rare for us to argue on heavy political and social topics, but this visit was an exception. My view that gender is a non-binary issue and that people have a choice in the gender they want to identify with and express did not sit well with Jack, despite the fact that he has no problem with straight, gay, lesbian, pan-sexual, and other expressions of sexuality. I have always known him to be overwhelmingly accepting of minority groups but for some reason, a more progressive view on gender is where Jack drew the line. It was then I realized that even people I consider progressive can still be influenced by the bias of cultural norms. This is the root of respectability politics. Respectability politics do nothing but to label groups and people as either socially acceptable or not, and function solely as a tool for elitists of any race or class to elevate themselves above those that respectability politics deems lesser-than.

It is challenging to give a blanket definition of what respectability politics is, as often it is case specific. An overarching theme of it, however, is the use of political strategies so that a group, or person, can (appear to) be more liked by the general public. What was ironic about such a tool in regard to black citizens' use of it during the civil rights movement is that the group blacks were trying to appeal to was the predominantly white public. An excellent example of how respectability politics was used to progress the work of civil rights groups was the choice in

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leadership with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not only was he the face of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but he also is painted in history books as the messiah of black citizens during the late 1950s and 60s. In reality, though he was a figure for the movement, he had a lot of horse power behind him with confidants including Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin.

Both Baker and Rustin worked just as tirelessly for civil rights campaigns as King, but both had qualities about them that were viewed as being less acceptable to the white population and politicians. The same white politicians many civil rights groups were trying to sway in their favor to pass laws for equality. This is shown clearly in Barbara Ransby's, *The Preacher and the Organizer*, when it is said that Rustin could not have been eligible to serve as the executive director of the SCLS, "...given his sexual orientation...and homophobia of the church leaders he would be working closely with... (Ransby, 179)." This sentence does an excellent job of showing the double edged sword of judgement that makes up respectability politics. On one hand, Rustin was not chosen for the position of executive director because religious, southern, white critics of the movement would have leaped at the chance to criticize him for his (thought to be) inappropriate sexuality. What is also important to note, however, is that the black preachers who Rustin would have been working *with* in the SCLC would have also judged him as an inadequate leader for the same reason as the white people their organization was working to influence. Martin Luther King was a straight, religious, well off man, so he became more popular in history books because both white and black people viewed him as more respectable to hold a

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position of leadership. Here you can see clearly how respectability politics is used to elevate certain members within a race or group, in turn putting others down below them.

Now we understand why Rustin is kept out of the civil rights chapters in history books, but what about Ella Baker? She was straight, so why wasn't she given more political and historical attention? Again we can look to the text of Barbara Ransby to answer this difficult question. She explains, "...it was probably King's sexist attitude toward women...that prevented him from having the same kind of collegial relationship with Baker (Ransby, 174)." Here Ransby is expressing why even the civil rights king himself did not want Baker to be as close within his inner circle as other men in the movement. This exemplifies the double sided bias of respectability politics once more. On one side, Baker was not given as much publicity due to the fact that during the middle of the 20th century women were viewed as lesser than, and best kept working in their home with their kids than out campaigning for civil rights. On the other, it displays that within a civil rights group fighting for *equality* there were still sexist attitudes that distinguished men as being above women who they worked with.

The biggest problem with respectability politics is that it constantly enforces a continuous chain of inequality. Maybe you're black, but at least you're more respected than black women. And you may be a black woman but at least you're more respected than black lesbian women. And so it continues. Our textbooks today also do a great job of white washing our history to appeal to white people, specifically white men, even at the expense of truth. An example of how respectability politics alters truth is in the story of Rosa Parks. Until I was far too old I believed,

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along with thousands of other school children, that she was an old mother, maybe grandmother, who was just tired and didn't want to give up her comfortable seat. She then became the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and civil rights movement for her courage. Little did I know that this was just the story crafted about her so that white people whom civil rights groups were trying to sway would sympathize with her story.

The true Rosa Parks was not matronly, old, or "just tired". She was a spit fire activist who had been advocating for civil rights and equality in the judicial system for years. Her true story is explained in Danielle McGuire's, *At the Dark End of the Street*, when McGuire writes how Parks courageously reported on the rape case of Recy Taylor. Parks risked being arrested or worse by the town Sheriff who was "...a mean man with a propensity for violence... (McGuire, 6)". Parks took this chance and later brought back information on Taylor's case to Montgomery to organize a campaign to aid her in a biased court. So, why is this side of Parks not talked about? Two words, respectability politics. Parks would have received far less sympathy if she was known as a courageous activist because white citizens would have probably felt threatened by her savviness for equality. Unfortunately, history sacrificed truth for respectability politics, and now women are subjected to the false belief that it is best to be a tired old woman than an intelligent activist if they wish to see change in the world.

Along with depicting history incorrectly as to not ruffle the feathers of egotistical white men, respectability politics has some other flaws as well. One of its greatest flaws can be best represented by the metaphor of picking dodgeball teams in a school yard. White men would get

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picked first, then the white women and black men, next the black women, all continuing down the chain white silently telling those picked last that they are less wanted. America would be the chooser of teams in this situation, and due to respectability politics throughout our history it has expressed to black women that they are less valued as members of our society. This is well exemplified in politics. There are mostly white men, the occasional white woman, even fewer black men, and it is exceptionally rare to see black women holding a political office position. This is because political parties and voters want to represent themselves with mostly white men who are most respected in our society. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates explains what kinds of emotions such discrimination can cause when he writes, "...being named "black" was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah (Coates, 55)." It is exceptionally troubling that our ancestors *brought* black slaves to this country, and hundreds of years later our society treats them as unwanted, and less respected than whites.

Now that its function and short-comings have been explained, I would like to make it clear that it does not take leaders of huge civil rights movements to still reflect how respectability politics are used in society. In fact, a lot of people hold personal biases that form their own opinions on different groups, therefore making respectability politics a personal issue as well. Take my friend Jack, who believes in equality for many minority groups but still struggles with accepting non-binary gender conforming people. So, if respectability politics is a societal problem *and* individual one, how can we go about limiting its use and harmful effects? To solve

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this issue, it is crucial to analyze the structure of the social rights group, Black Lives Matter (BLM).

BLM does have three founders, who are still leaders and chief organizers for the group. These brave women are Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Before continuing it important to remember that these women are still the primary leaders of the movement. What makes BLM so exceptional, though, is that it goes against respectability politics by allowing its supporters to hold power in the group's work, and doesn't just paint these three women as messiahs for all the group members to idolize. Because of this structure, many different genders, races, and religions can identify with BLM and aid in their work for social equality and justice. In a Glamour article written by Collier Meyerson he expressed the various factions and accomplishments of the diverse BLM by stating, "...Black Lives Matter groups have taken on inequality, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia (Meyerson)." Thanks to social media and the structure BLM's leaders established from its birth, the group has been able to attract activist with various social identities, but who can join together for a common cause of equality.

Black Lives Matter has defied the stigmas respectability politics enforces due not only to the fact that its leaders are lesbian black women, but also because these leaders have given freedom, and power, to all and any of its supporters. No one race or gender within the movement has tried to elevate themselves above others working for the same cause, and this has helped the BLM movement expand into different schools, churches, and homes across the country. It has also modeled that respectability politics are no longer needed in civil rights groups, and I would

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even go as far as to say that respectability politics no longer has a function in our society. All it does is continue the oppression of minority groups. No matter what race, gender, religion, or sexual preference, all of America's citizens should be respected, and deserve equal power in our continuous advancement towards social equality.