

*The Importance of Uniqueness:  
Attempting to Define Characteristics of African  
American Political Culture*

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“What is it that makes it difficult for the philosophy of nationalism to spread among the so-called Negroes? Number one, they think they have a stake in America. They think they have an investment in this country.”

- Malcolm X, Washington Heights, NY,  
March 29, 1964

Speaking in 1964, Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X rhetorically asked why African Americans were so hesitant to support black nationalism in large numbers. The answer, he suggested, lay in the tendency of African Americans at the time to feel that they were a part of American society. This feeling, he pointed out, was entirely justified, for African Americans of course *did* have a stake in America. “It is,” he explained, “that 310 years of slave labor that was my and your contribution into this particular economy and political system.”<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X’s famous and pointed explanation of how African Americans would collect that debt – “it shall be the ballot or the bullet” – somewhat masked his original point. African Americans as individuals and as a group believed then, and continue to believe, that they have a stake in the United States and that they are an important part of modern American society and culture. What, however, is the role and position of African Americans in that society and that culture? Malcolm X declared that African Americans had paid into the United States political system – but how do African Americans as a group fit into that political system? More specifically, are African Americans a seamlessly integrated part of American political culture, or do they instead have a separate political culture of their own?

“We argue,” writes Charles P. Henry in *Culture and African American Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), “that there is a distinct black politics based on a unique style and combination of worldviews that informs black political behavior.” (Henry 1990, 11) Henry is echoing various scholars, including Matthew Holden, Jr., who in 1973 suggested

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X, “It shall be the ballot or the bullet,” Washington Heights, NY, March 29, 1964. Text of address available at [http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/m\\_x\\_s1.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/m_x_s1.html).

that African-American language reflects five themes that reflect and define a separate African-American culture “somewhat averse to the sustained coordination required by scarce resources.” (Holden 1973, 17) Both Henry and Holden argue quite strongly that African Americans do have a separate political culture, and that that political culture strongly affects how African Americans view United States politics, frame political issues, and participate in politics, but Holden in effect simply observes that such an African-American political culture – presumably separate from “white” political culture – exists, and fails to prove its existence, while Henry seems blindly to accept Holden’s argument as a key premise in developing his own work. Holden’s definition of African American political culture is thus curiously weak and unfounded, while the derivation of Henry’s own definition is unclear. The questions remain unanswered: is there such a thing as “African American political culture?” If so, what are its characteristics? How might it be defined?

### **Theoretical Definitions: Matthew Holden and Charles Henry**

Matthew Holden, the former president of the American Political Science Association, presented his understanding of African American political culture in a chapter he wrote on “Centrifugal Influences in Black Politics.” (Holden 1973) If any two groups differ significantly in residence, cultural styles, outlook, and the like, he suggests in that article, then “it may be quite reasonable to describe them as separate ‘nations’.” (1) In order to demonstrate, as he would like to, that African Americans represent a “separate nation” within the United States, Holden must first examine and define African American cultural styles – for by his definition, unique cultures are prerequisites of separate national identities. Accordingly, Holden focuses on African American language in order to determine whether he might identify common traits among African Americans. “The ordinary language of Afro-Americans,” he writes, “expresses

*five themes*, as we see it, which reflect a culture . . .” (17) Those five themes, he concludes, reflect five characteristics: the hope for deliverance, the wish for defiance, Dionysian independence; moralism; and cynicism-and-fear.

Holden argues that the most prevalent characteristic of African American culture is a belief in either temporal or ethereal salvation. “Perhaps the single most common theme in all Afro-American culture is the hope for deliverance some day.” (17) As evidence, he cites the fact that for years older people have claimed that God will deliver them and also the repetition of this theme during and after World War II and then during the Vietnam era. “One suspects,” he writes, “[that] one could have heard it about the Spanish American War and World War I.” (18) The second most important characteristic of African American political culture, he adds, is the theme of defiance. “The spirit of defiance serves a need that prudence has usually forbidden people to gratify: to compensate for the pervasive insults and humiliations of past and present by telling ‘the white man’ where to go and what to do, and making him go and do it!”(18) This sort of defiance, Holden adds, is characterized by stories of oppressed African Americans who strike out violently against their tormenters, even knowing that such resistance is futile and will mean their deaths. Holden’s repeated use of exclamation points and similar devices in making this point demonstrates that he himself is either quite taken with this idea or else that he is attempting to reflect the emotions of those who harbor this wish for defiance.

Holden’s three remaining characteristics of African American political culture – Dionysian independence, moralism, and cynicism-and-fear – are somewhat less important than either the hope for deliverance or the wish for defiance, and so receive somewhat less attention in Holden’s work. These characteristics are, however, still important, Holden argues, and reveal much about African American political culture. Dionysian independence and individualism, he

explains, are important themes for younger African American males. “The *standard*,” he explains, “is a ‘culture of swagger.’” (21) Far more universal among African Americans is the understanding that African Americans have a greater sense of moralism than is standard in the population as a whole. “The ordinary conversational language of black people,” Holden writes, “seems to express the self-image that black men, in contrast to white men, possess a greater ‘sensitivity,’ a greater ‘humaneness,’ or (in one version), ‘more soul.’” (23) Still more prevalent in the African American community is a sense of cynicism-and-fear regarding the United States government and political system. African Americans, Holden points out, have been treated harshly by the government and have no particular reason to trust governmental officials.

These five characteristics, then – the hope for deliverance, the wish for defiance, Dionysian independence; moralism; and cynicism-and-fear – frame for Holden the definition of African American political culture. Charles P. Henry, the former president of the National Council for Black Studies, presented his own view of African American culture in his 1990 work, *Culture and African American Politics*. Although he writes that he argues that there is a distinct black politics “based on a unique style and combination of worldviews that informs black political behavior,” Henry seems to simply assume that a separate African American culture exists and makes no real effort to *prove* that it does. Presumably he bases that assumption on the work done by Holden and others, though he differs somewhat in what he believes are the characteristics of African American culture.

Like Holden, Henry believes that in order to identify African American culture scholars must examine African American language. “The search for a black ideology,” he explains, “must begin with the oral tradition and must encompass all types of black beliefs.” (7) Accordingly, he adds, he attempts to examine the cultural values of “the black masses” by

examining the oral traditions of the black community and by analyzing those traditions both for content and also for form and style of presentation. By examining such traditions as the blues, black folklore, and the communications of black leaders and black institutions, Henry attempts to identify trends in black culture and black cultural values. “In summary,” he writes, “we have been arguing that lower-class black Americans are not a people without a culture.” (35)

Henry’s definition of African American culture is not as clearly explained as is Holden’s, but it appears to mirror Holden’s in many important details. Like Holden, Henry identifies some sort of belief in deliverance (“God was alive and working for the oppressed”) and a wish for defiance (“the continuing legacy of the black bad man”). Henry also implies that he accepts notions of African American independence and cynicism-and-fear, though he does not state that acceptance explicitly. He also adds several characteristics to a definition of black political culture, including the presence of Jeremiads in African American religion, the importance of African roots for folktales and proverbs, and the existence of simultaneous loyalty to individual and community. This last point seems especially important to Henry: “The ability of blacks to combine individualism and community as well as the sacred and secular,” he writes, “is a hallmark of black politics and distinguishes it from mainstream politics.”<sup>94</sup> Henry never explicitly sets out his definition of African American political culture, but it is clear that he has such a definition in mind and that he fully believes African American political culture to be separate and distinct in American political society.

### **Weaknesses and Flaws in Holden and Henry**

Neither Holden’s nor Henry’s definition of African American political culture is sufficient. Holden’s in particular has several major flaws, the most important of which are a lack of proof or evidence to indicate that the five characteristics he identifies are indeed prevalent in

the African American community and a failure to demonstrate that there are no additional characteristics to be taken into account. Holden's lack of evidence is particularly startling: readers of this chapter are struck by the sense that Holden is not so much making a point as offering an entirely untested, unproven theory. The only evidence Holden himself has on which to base his hypothesis is his personal experience and supposed common knowledge – i.e. “what everyone knows”. Writing about the wish for defiance, for instance, he notes, “These stories are too widespread in black folklore to underestimated” – but he offers only one example of such a story. (18) A long footnote to this sentence mentions the importance of studying folklore carefully, but offers no further suggestions on how readers might go about finding such stories. In short, Holden's argument is overly broad, unspecific, and (though not necessarily unfounded nor untrue) entirely unproven.

The most damning point along these lines is made by Holden himself when he attempts to describe how he came up with his five characteristics: “The five themes,” he writes, “seem to us regularly perceptible in the common speech of Afro-Americans.” (25) In a footnote to this sentence, however, Holden admits again that he has no empirical basis for suggesting his theory. “We have not done the research which the argument implies, so the argument is purely hypothetical. We *believe* (hypothesize) that this is what one would find . . .” (40) Perhaps Holden expects his audience to be familiar with the overwhelmingly powerful presence of such language and such comments in the African American community, but he provides no data, no statistics, and indeed no qualitative or apocryphal examples. While it is not unreasonable to suggest that African American culture is characterized by, for instance, a hope for deliverance, Holden's failure to provide any evidence for this, “the single most common theme” of African American political culture seems unusual.

Apart from not offering evidence for the characteristics he identifies as being important in African-American political culture, Holden fails to discuss why he has identified only five such characteristics and why he suspects there not to be any others. How has Holden identified these characteristics? “The ordinary language of Afro-Americans,” he writes, “expresses *five themes*, as we see it, which reflect a culture . . .” (17) If these characteristics are simply those expressed *in language*, then isn’t it possible that there might be additional characteristics of African American political culture expressed through political participation, *lack* of political participation, or in some other way apart? The problem again is a lack of rigorous analysis: Holden’s definition is not sufficient because he makes no real effort to *make* it sufficient.

Perhaps we should not criticize Holden so harshly for not doing something he has not set out to do – hypothesize *and test* a clear, comprehensive definition of African American political culture. He states several times that he is simply theorizing with no evidence and no research – but the problem is that he presents his hypothesis as *if* it is a tested theory. Only by looking at the footnotes to this chapter do we see that he himself understands his definition of African American political culture to be the political science equivalent of “beer talk.” Unlike Holden, however, Henry has specifically set out to define and test (or at least demonstrate the efficacy of) characteristics of African American political culture. Criticism we ultimately deem too harsh for Holden – who is, after all, actually trying to do something different in his work – are entirely justified when applied to Henry.

Henry’s definition is somewhat less problematic than Holden’s, if only because Henry *does* attempt to offer and test a theory, and so offers some empirical proof. Henry’s definition too is flawed, however, in that it is unclear and is supported primarily by anecdotal, as opposed to statistically significant, evidence. Henry seems to derive his understanding of African

American political culture at least in part from Holden's definition (or at least definitions offered by other authors); he does not, however, explicitly *state* that that is what he is doing. Instead he announces that there is a separate African American political culture and proceeds to talk about some elements of that culture. We are thus certain by the end of his work that African American culture is at least reflected in (if not defined by) Jeremiads, community-feeling, "bad man" stories, African heritage, and an important understanding that god is working for individuals, but past that point we do not know what else his definition includes. At no point does he combine all the characteristics of African American political culture into one coherent definition, and so leaves his readers confused as to the single most important point of his entire work. If a separate African American culture exists in American society – and Henry certainly says that it does – then should he not be able to explain clearly exactly what it is and how it can be identified?

Unlike Holden, Henry does attempt to "test" some of his characteristics, but his offers of proof tend to rely upon the apocryphal rather than rigorous analysis of empirical data. Henry thus attempts to demonstrate the cultural characteristics inherent in rap music or the blues by quoting specific lyrics. It is unclear from where he is getting these lyrics and whether he is accurately sampling the lyrics available. Has he organized a database of all lyrics and searched within it? Is he simply combing through his or his children's music collection to see what he finds? Henry repeatedly makes the point that these lyrics demonstrate some of the core cultural values of African American politics – but he never explains why he is sure that that is the case. Similarly, Henry attempts to demonstrate the important characteristics of African American political culture reflected in leadership styles by quoting the words of Jesse Jackson. He leaves it unclear, however, how he selected those words and how representative they are of Jackson's presentations.

Henry's use of evidence is not restricted to quoting the lyrics of Run-DMC or indeed the speeches of Jesse Jackson. His other evidence, however, is even less rigorous than his apocryphal use of individual songs or speeches. *Culture and African American Politics* has in it six graphs in total, one of which is a straight breakdown on Jackson's primary votes by race and state. The first two tables are intended by Henry to demonstrate the importance of African roots to African American political culture and the relationship between the number of blues records published in a year and black unemployment respectively. The first table is at least informative: Henry describes some African American cultural parables and then points out from where in African tradition they originated. He does not explain whether this list represents *all* African American parables, and perhaps he does not need to do so – all he needs to do in this case is demonstrate that some part of African American culture derives from African roots. This first table is thus an example of a non-rigorous yet still informative presentation of information. The second table, however, is entirely ridiculous: Henry attempts to demonstrate a linear relationship between the number of blues records published and African American economics in any given year. His analysis completely disregards all other factors in record publishing, the availability of other sorts of music, and perhaps even the expansion of radio and television. This analysis is somewhat akin to a political scientist noting that both the number of golf courses in the country and the rate of divorce rise each year and thus postulating a relationship between the more golf individuals play and higher incidence of divorce. It is a meaningless table, and its inclusion (as one of the only tables of empirical data) is revealing of the weakness of Henry's empirical analysis.

## The Problem of Uniqueness

Henry's failure to explicitly lay out his definition of African American political culture and Holden's failure to present any real evidence – and thus his presentation of unsupported and unsubstantiated musings as theoretical framework – do not in fact represent the most significant problem with both of their theories: the question of uniqueness. In asking whether Henry's and Holden's definitions are useful and sufficient, we should ask whether their "definitions" actually *define* African-American political culture, or whether they instead simply describe some possible traits of that culture. Just how rigorous *are* these definitions?

A definition, according to one dictionary, is "a statement conveying fundamental character" or "the act of making clear and distinct".<sup>2</sup> Proper definitions must therefore describe not only the characteristics of the thing being defined, but also how the thing being defined can be distinguished from other, similar things. The definition of a dog as "a four-legged mammal with fur" is thus improper, because that definition is not *unique*; cats, rats, mice, and warthogs would all fit under the same definition. This definition of a dog does nothing to describe what makes a dog unique, and what therefore distinguishes it from all those other types of animals; without this description of distinctions, the definition is simply description, and is thus effectively useless.

Holden's and Henry's definitions seem to suffer from the same problem as the insufficient definition of "dog". Holden even sees the problem himself: writing about how the ordinary language of black people seems to express greater moralism in blacks than in whites, he notes, "this is not to say that such concerns are not present in other languages, but that they are acutely present in the current language of the black Americans." (39) In a footnote to this sentence he adds that "if we are to believe the social historians," the sense of moralism was very

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<sup>2</sup> American Heritage Dictionary, online at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

important in the evangelical culture of the nineteenth-century English. In other words, at least one of Holden's five characteristics is *not* unique to African American culture. Like "mammal," "moralism" serves to describe any number of organisms or communities. Holden's other characteristics are similarly present in other languages: polling data seems to demonstrate that at least since the era of Watergate and Vietnam *all* Americans have harbored serious mistrust of their government – surely the equivalent of cynicism-and-fear. In describing the hope for deliverance, moreover, Holden noted that the notion of deliverance itself also figures prominently in evangelical religions of all sorts. Can the hope for deliverance truly be unique to African American political culture if the great majority of white anglo-saxon Protestants harbor that hope in the same form as well?

Henry's definition suffers from the same problem, but again his work is less problematic than Holden's, primarily because Henry begins to describe some characteristics that are becoming sufficiently specific that they might indeed be unique to the African American community. Jeremiads, the blues, comments and styles of African American leaders – all, it seems, might be present in African American political culture alone. Still, however, Henry has not *demonstrated* uniqueness, and so his definition *might* be critically flawed. In demonstrating that African American political culture is somewhat rooted in African culture, for instance, Henry points out the commonly-used African American parables are mirrors of African parables. At least some of these parables, however, might be used in the *white* community as well. If that is the case – if indeed whites say with some frequency that "one rain won't make a crop" – doesn't that mean that white culture too is derivative in part from African culture, and so that a "defining characteristic" of African American political culture is indeed not a defining characteristic at all, but is instead a descriptive one?

## **A Suggested Remedy**

These analyses of Henry and Holden have been particularly harsh; I have suggested that their definitions are incomplete and flawed and that they are supported by nothing other than smooth rhetoric – for both Henry and Holden are indeed good writers. Perhaps some of this criticism is unwarranted or too harsh; still, however, both Henry and Holden proffer defining characteristics of African American political culture that they fail to test and thus fail to prove. This does not, of course, mean that their definitions are wrong, but rather that their definitions are hypotheses, and that they (to paraphrase Holden) have not yet done the research implied by their writings. Henry’s and Holden’s theories, then, are flawed from the standpoint of rigorous analysis and compelling proof.

This conclusion leaves us with our original questions: is there such a thing as “African American political culture?” If so, what are its characteristics? How might it be defined? The works of these authors, as we have observed, give us very little empirical guidance in answering these questions. Still, however, I suspect that both Holden and Henry have hit upon important points and characteristics. It seems clear – under the same loose definition of “I know it when I see it” – that there is a separate African American political culture, and the problems with Henry’s and Holden’s definitions lie in their lack of evidence, not all of the actual criterion upon which they settled. In essence, I would not be surprised if elements of their definitions turned out to be correct. I think, however, that in order to truly explain their definitions – and to guarantee “uniqueness” – Holden and Henry need to add an additional criterion to their list of characteristics: the group understanding of a specific history of oppression and slavery in what is supposed to be the nation most committed to equality. Holden and Henry both seem to assume cultural grounding in the African American community in their readers, and so perhaps conclude

that they *have* offered some compelling form of proof. Perhaps by suggesting that the specific history of African-Americans in the United States – or at least some form of cultural *sense* of that history – is one characteristic of African American political culture, they could put their assumption into words and so produce a true “definition” for that which they seek to define.