INTRODUCTION

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This collection of essays is about political science as seen through the eyes of African American political scientists—their assessment of the subfields, their views about the quality of race-related research and their regrets about the omissions in the literature. The central theme is that race matters in politics, not only nationally but internationally. Because we do not understand race in our own politics, it makes it difficult to comprehend ethnic and racial disputes in other countries. Accordingly, the discipline needs multiple perspectives to keep expanding its blind spaces and to prevent it from becoming too comfortable with itself. Although not all African American political scientists agree with the Perestroika group’s critique of the discipline, most agree that there is a danger of unconscious insularity in methodology and outlook. For this reason we African American political scientists have a special responsibility to rethink the norms, canons, and directions of the discipline.

This collection of essays reflects the concerns of African American political scientists who teach and investigate political behavior. The idea for the volume came to me as I walked through the exhibit hall at an annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA). In many ways, the exhibit hall is one of the most interesting parts of the annual meeting. Attendees get a chance to meet old friends, network with new ones, pitch book ideas to editors, and thumb through books. As I was thumbing through the latest version of Political Science: The State of the Discipline (The State), it occurred to me that it is time that African Americans evaluate the discipline. We have been in the profession long enough to assess whether the discipline is headed in the right direction. At meetings of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists (NCOBPS) we often commiserate about the discipline going off track and not dealing with the critical issues facing the nation. I thought it was time to share these ideas. I approached Temple University Press with the idea, and Peter Wissoker encouraged me to send him a proposal.
The first task was to select the essay writers. I asked both European and African American political scientists for suggestions. One senior political scientist thought the idea would not work because so many senior African American political scientists were too busy writing books, serving on committees, and taking on administrative assignments in their universities. Another complained about the lack of diversity in subfields focused on by African American political scientists. In his opinion, they were stacked in American government. I discovered that the first reservation had some merit, as some potential writers turned me down for those reasons, but the second reservation was groundless. There are several African Americans in comparative and international relations. Granted these political scientists are not very active in APSA or NCOBPS, but they are very involved in area studies associations. It is true, however, that there are few African Americans with primary university appointments as political theorists.

Unexpectedly, the selection process gave me the chance to meet new people. Senior scholars who had never contributed to the earlier versions of The State seemed like a good choice for contributors. Of course, one should never pass up an opportunity to engage younger scholars. The strategy of mixing senior and junior scholars is not without its problems. Some senior scholars were too deep into other projects to write an essay. Others accepted but withdrew as their schedules overwhelmed them. Some young scholars were too busy preparing for tenure to write an essay. After I submitted the first set of names and their abstracts to the publisher, the reviewers suggested other names and topics. A new round of invitations went out to potential contributors. I am recounting the selection process because readers may be interested in the genealogy of this volume.

African American Perspectives on the Political Science Discipline is aimed at the growing interest in diversity in higher education and how African Americans fit into academic departments, as well as the overall purpose of the university. The discourse on the future of political science can no longer be left to European American scholars of whom we minority scholars refer to as the “usual suspects.” There is simply too much at stake to do that. These “usual suspects” have been missing too many nuances, following too many circuitous arguments, and reverting the discipline around its relevant past.

African American Perspectives on the Political Science Discipline intends to make political scientists aware of the vast changes in the demographics of academia and its potential impact on classroom teaching. All of the earlier State of the Discipline volumes have been reference books. None attempted to examine the discipline from a minority perspective. The earlier volumes contain reviews of the literature in the various subfields. Usually they were rather congratulatory essays suggesting that the state of the discipline was good but could be better. The writers in this anthology have promised not to replicate the practice.

Editing a volume about one’s profession can be as narcissistic as it is revealing. Choosing the contributors to this book reminded me of a short essay written by Patrick Dunleavy entitled “So, What Do Political Scientists Do?” He was asked that question at a cocktail party and found himself fumbling for an answer. For me, it is the occasional fellow airline seat passenger who asks that question. On learning that I am a political scientist, most immediately ask me about
national politics. Others ask me if I know some politician, and still others whether I plan to run for office. A few just turn away and stay quiet through the trip. I agree with Dunleavy’s observation that


Like Dunleavy I want to defend all approaches to political science and their subjects. Political scientists do a variety of things and hold a variety of views. The essays in this volume demonstrate some of this diversity.

Overview of the Essays

In assembling this collection of essays, I have solicited a diverse group of contributors who represent different subfields, departments, and generations. One can see that their writing styles are different as are their intellectual agendas. Yet, although they do not necessarily agree with one another, all are concerned about the future of political science and the society that depends on our analysis.


“Going It Alone: Black Women Activists and Black Organizational Quiescence” discusses the political participation of black women. Martin Kilson’s “Political Scientists and the Activist-Technocrat Dichotomy: The Case of John Aubrey Davis” examines the career of Professor Davis as a prototype of the activist/analyst quandary.

Section Four reviews race and American political institutions. Kenny J. Whitby’s “Dimensions of Representation and the Congressional Black Caucus” examines the role of the Congressional Black Caucus and representation. Barbara Luck Graham’s “Toward a Critical Race Theory in Political Science: A New Synthesis for Understanding Race, Law, and Politics” looks at critical race theory as a possible way for the courts to address the race question. Wilbur C. Rich’s “Presidential Leadership and the Politics of Race: Stereotypes, Symbols, and Scholarship” reviews the presidential literature and its neglect of the presidential responsibility in race relations.

Section Five presents overviews of the various subfields of political science. Germaine Hoston’s “Comparative Politics and Asia: Contesting Hegemonic Inter- and Intra-Disciplinary Boundaries” examines why African American political scientists should study comparative politics. Lenneal Henderson’s “Race and the Problem of Equity in the Administrative State” links race with resource allocation and equity. Marion Orr and Valerie C. Johnson’s “Race and the City: The View from Two Political Science Journals” is an examination of the political science journals and their neglect of urban issues. Katherine Tate, Kevin L. Lyles, and Lucius J. Barker’s “A Critical Review of American Political Institutions” raises questions about blacks and the political system. Examining the role that political theory plays in the discourse on race is Jerry Watts’ “Political Science Confronts Afro-America: A Reconsideration.”

Finally, this volume attempts to expose some of the glaring gaps in the field as well as raise new questions for future research. Comments and reactions are welcome.

Note