

A Commemoration of the Disenfranchised: The Significance of Black History Month

by Boran Göher

If you have paid some attention to North American politics in recent times, you might have noticed some talk of Black History Month. This usually confuses the uninformed reader, as it might seem kind of “overkill” to dedicate the entire month of February to a seemingly small subset of society’s nigh-infinite problems. Additionally, people freshly encountering Black History Month have a great tendency to ask some version of “Well then, why don’t we have History Months for all our minorities? Are African-Americans somehow special?”. These are seemingly reasonable concerns and questions, but as we develop historic and societal reasons for the existence and dominance of Black History Month, perhaps we will be able to make the case for the significance of Black History Month. (Also, as a bulletin that chose to only cover Black History Month on its “Spotlight” for February, we have something of a personal stake in this.)

First off, let us get a minor point cleared. Dedicating February to Black History Month does not bar society from dedicating the whole month or parts of it to other causes. This is a trivial observation made as one of the most prominent celebrations of Western Society, namely, Valentine’s Day is held sometime in February, or so I have been told. In the same manner, having this article in “Spotlight” did not stop PRESENT from publishing an incredible article on the 2007 masterpiece Bioshock and how it relates to Ayn Rand’s political philosophy in the “Trivial” section, (also check out that article if you would like). This is a fairly obvious point to make but it is often ignored in debates about the validity of Black History Month.

Now, on to more important points. If you investigate the historical roots of Black History Month, which we will be doing shortly, you will see that a quite peculiar situation originally gave rise to the concept. Nowadays, it is a chance for us to celebrate African American culture and further educate ourselves. Back when it was first introduced, it was not all that, particularly for most people you would have to drop the “further” in the last sentence (along with the entire first half). The very first roots of Black History Month can be traced back to the 1920s when Carter G. Woodson, historian and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, proposed “Negro History Week”.¹ Carter thought that the “crusade” against the flawed education system was even more important than the anti-lynching protests. “This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom.”, he claimed.²

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20110723015934/http://www.asalh.net/blackhistorymonthorigins.html>

² [Feb. 7, 1926: Carter G. Woodson Launched Negro History Week](#)

Negro History Week continued until 1950 and was seen as a very successful project, most US states celebrating it at the peak of its popularity. Later in 1970, Black History Month with its current name was established at the request of some Kent State University students.³ It was quite the popular idea, and it only took six years for the POTUS to recognize it in a public speech as an “opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.”⁴ In short, both Negro History Week and Black History Month were founded as a way to enable black people to preserve their history and were massively popular almost immediately upon establishment. It would be very hard to try to claim that the foundation of either of them was not justified or beneficial, historically speaking.

Yet, that does not have to be the case for us to be able to make the case for Black History Month. If it were not justified, if it were not beneficial or, if it were “overkill”, then surely it would not be this popular. Even if it was some over the top event started by an overzealous man, it had to find some response from the people in order to survive. If it did not get that response it would not be around today. Were I some free market libertarian, I might have called this process “the invisible hand of societal needs” or something equally pretentious, but thankfully I am not, and I will not be needlessly invoking the invisible hand for some random situation because it shows properties of self-regulation. My little diatribe aside, both the historical and concurrent state of beings demonstrate that there should be ample reason that Black History Month is so prominent. But understanding the actual reasons should also provide a basis to understand the significance of Black History Month.

The first step to understand why Black History Month is so significant is to understand “why” black people are. That is a confusing question, but it is not non-sensical. The meaning in the question instantly becomes clearer if you look at the following list of ethnicities: Italian, German, Indian, Armenian, Black. They are all ethnicities, sure. But one of them is different from the others. Black people are nowadays considered one ethnicity, but their ethnicity was not formed by conventional means. The African American ethnic group is a direct result of colonialism, slavery, and triangular trade, and not a result of a group of people of similar features bonding together throughout history. This means that if you are a Black individual, you probably cannot trace your history to more than some 200 hundred years ago when you were brought to America from Africa with very poor or nonexistent documentation, which means there is no way of knowing your original ethnicity. This means that it is much more difficult for Black people to appreciate their history and they need to put in much more effort to do so. And it seems hardly appropriate that they are punished out of the joy of learning their history because they were enslaved in the past, which brings us back to Black History Month.

³ [Milton E Wilson, Jr. papers \(faculty-Counseling\) | Special Collections and Archives](#)

⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20130119095146/http://www.ford.utexas.edu/library/speeches/760074.htm>

It is clear now that Black History Month is “justified”, but is it really beneficial? Well, if we only consider the popularity, then we have to say yes. Major social media platforms such as Instagram have established campaigns to draw attention to the month,⁵ and the commemorations during Black History Month have been celebrated as a part of general American culture and influential pieces of work which elevate the voices of Black people and their accomplishments.⁶ And we are not even mentioning the commemorations that take place in public schools which are no doubt influential in making students realize the special situations of African Americans. And the event has transformed beyond simple history, it has become a celebration of the very existence of Black culture. For example, the theme of 2020’s Black History Month was “African Americans and the Vote” as a celebration of the ratification of the Fifth Amendment in 1870 which granted Black men (and men only) the right to vote.⁷

Yet, there are other criticisms of Black History Month from people who might be associated with “the other side of the political spectrum”. We have previously addressed concerns that Black History Month might be too long, but people are also concerned that it might be too short. The confinement of Black History to one month has garnered criticism from some people who believe that every month should be Black History Month, because Black people of nation are part of the same history as the rest of that nation. In particular, some prominent Black people in the U.S have stated that Black history is same as American History. On such example is Morgan Freeman, who has called Black History Month “ridiculous”.⁸ Other people have noted that Black History Month creates a problem with history education where people only focus on the “heroes to celebrate” within Black history, which paints a false and misleading image of Black history.

Yet, in any case, it is doubtful that abolishing Black History Month would improve conditions for Black people in any respect. The best course of action would be to recognize its flaws and try to avoid and work to eliminate them, all the while also recognizing its benefits and trying to contribute. I imagine most of our readers are not in a position to directly contribute, but even sharing the word is doing good work. We encourage all our readers to keep an eye out during Black History Month to find ways they can help the cause. After all, aiding one of the most disenfranchised groups of history is something we can all get behind.

⁵ [Instagram Celebrates Black History Month with #ShareBlackStories](#)

⁶ [During Black History Month, Enjoy a Slice of American Culture](#)

⁷ [ASALH Announces 2020 Black History Theme, African Americans and the Vote](#)

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20110707102926/http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/10482634/ns/today-entertainment/t/freeman-calls-black-history-month-ridiculous#.TzrCrUxWrTw>