

INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to map the historical and intellectual contours of the encounter of Marxism and Black radicalism, two programs for revolutionary change. I have undertaken this effort in the belief that in its way each represents a significant and immanent mode of social resolution, but that each is a particular and critically different realization of a history. The point is that they may be so distinct as to be incommensurable. At issue here is whether this is so. If it is, judgments must be made, choices taken.

The inquiry required that both Marxism and Black radicalism be subjected to interrogations of unusual form: the first, Marxism, because few of its adherents have striven hard enough to recognize its profound but ambiguous indebtedness to Western civilization; the second, Black radicalism, because the very circumstance of its appearance has required that it be misinterpreted and diminished. I have hoped to contribute to the correction of these errors by challenging in both instances the displacement of history by aeriform theory and self-serving legend. Whether I have succeeded is for the reader to judge. But first it may prove useful to outline the construction of the study.

In Western societies for the better part of the past two centuries, the active and intellectual opposition of the Left to class rule has been vitalized by the vision of a socialist order: an arrangement of human relations grounded on the shared responsibility and authority over the means of social production and reproduction. The variations on the vision have been many, but over the years of struggle the hardest tradition has proven to be that identified with the work and writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and V. I. Lenin. Obviously here the term "tradition" is used rather loosely since the divergencies of opinion and deed between Marx, Engels, and Lenin have been demonstrated by history to be as significant as their correspondence. Nevertheless, in common as well as in academic parlance, these three activist-intellectuals are taken to be the principal figures of Marxist or Marxist-Leninist socialism. Marxism was founded on the study of the capitalist expropriation and exploitation of labor as first taken up by Engels, then elaborated by Marx's "material theory of history," his recognition of the evolving systems of capitalist production and the inevitability of class struggle, and later augmented by Lenin's conceptions of imperialism, the state, the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and the role of the revolutionary party. It has provided the ideological, historical, and political vocabulary for much of the radical and revolutionary presence

emergent in modern Western societies. Elsewhere, in lands economically parasitized by the capitalist world system, or in those rare instances where its penetration has been quarantined by competing historical formations, some sorts of Marxism have again translated a concern with fundamental social change.

However, it is still fair to say that at base, that is at its epistemological substratum, Marxism is a Western construction—a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development that is emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples mediated, in turn, through their civilization, their social orders, and their cultures. Certainly its philosophical origins are indisputably Western. But the same must be said of its analytical presumptions, its historical perspectives, its points of view. This most natural consequence though has assumed a rather ominous significance since European Marxists have presumed more frequently than not that their project is identical with world-historical development. Confounded it would seem by the cultural zeal that accompanies ascendant civilizations, they have mistaken for universal verities the structures and social dynamics retrieved from their own distant and more immediate pasts. Even more significantly, the deepest structures of “historical materialism,” the foreknowledge for its comprehension of historical movement, have tended to relieve European Marxists from the obligation of investigating the profound effects of culture and historical experience on their science. The ordering ideas that have persisted in Western civilization (and Marx himself as we shall see was driven to admit such phenomena), reappearing in successive “stages” of its development to dominate arenas of social ideology, have little or no *theoretical* justification in Marxism for their existence. One such recurring idea is racialism: the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the “racial” components of its elements. Though hardly unique to European peoples, its appearance and codification, during the feudal period, into Western conceptions of society was to have important and enduring consequences.

In the first part of this study, I have devoted three chapters to explicating the appearance and formulation of racial sensibility in Western civilization and its social and ideological consequences. Chapter 1 reconstructs the history of the emergence of racial order in feudal Europe and delineates its subsequent impact on the organization of labor under capitalism. Racism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the “internal” relations of European peoples. As part of the inventory of Western civilization it would reverberate within and without, transferring its toll from the past to the present. In contradistinction to Marx’s and Engels’s expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness, the obverse occurred. The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term “racial capitalism” to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency. The second chapter, as it rehearses the formation of the working classes in England, looks pre-

cisely at this phenomenon. Since the English working classes were the social basis for Engels's conceptualization of the modern proletariat, and conjoined with the *sans-culotte* of the French Revolution to occupy a similar place in Marx's thought, their evolving political and ideological character is of signal importance in reckoning the objective basis for Marxist theory. Of particular interest is the extent to which racialism (and subsequently nationalism) both as ideology and actuality affected the class consciousness of workers in England. In the intensely racial social order of England's industrializing era, the phenomenology of the relations of production bred no objective basis for the extrication of the universality of class from the particularisms of race. Working-class discourse and politics remained marked by the architectonic possibilities previously embedded in the culture.

But the appearance of European socialism and its development into a tradition was, as well, somewhat at odds with socialism's subsequent historiography and orthodoxies. The third chapter pursues among the middle classes the obscured origins of socialism and the contradictions that weakened its political and ideological expressions. It was indeed nationalism, a second "bourgeois" accretion, that most subverted the socialist creation. Nationalism, as a mix of racial sensibility and the economic interests of the national bourgeoisies, was as powerful an ideological impulse as any spawned from these strata. As an acquired temper and as a historical force met on the fields of social and political revolution, nationalism bemused the founders of historical materialism and those who followed them. It was to overtake both the direction of capitalist development and eventually the formative structures of socialist societies as they appeared in the present century. The historical trajectories of those developments, again, were almost entirely unexpected in a theoretical universe from which it had been discerned that ideology and false consciousness were supposedly being expelled. When in its time Black radicalism became manifest within Western society as well as at the other junctures between European and African peoples, one might correctly expect that Western radicalism was no more receptive to it than were the apologists of power.

Part II takes up this other radical tradition, Black radicalism, the conditions of its historical emergence, its forms, and its nature. This exposition begins in chapter 4 with the reinvestigation of the past relations between Europeans and Africans, a past that has been transformed by Europeans and for Europeans into a grotesque parody, a series of legends as monstrously proportioned as Pliny's *Blemmyae* "whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders." The obscuring of the Black radical tradition is seated in the West's suppression of Europe's previous knowledge of the African (and its own) past. The denial of history to African peoples took time—several hundreds of years—beginning with the emergence of Western Europeans from the shadow of Muslim domination and paternalism. It was also a process that was to transport the image of Africa across separate planes of dehumanization latticed by the emerging modalities of Western culture. In England, at first gripped by a combative and often hysterical Christianity—complements of the crusades, the "reconquests," and the rise of Italian capitalism—medieval English devouts recorded dreams in which the devil appeared

as “a blacke moore,” “an Ethiopie.” This was part of the grammar of the church, the almost singular repository of knowledge in Europe. Centuries later the Satanic gave way to the representation of Africans as a different sort of beast: dumb, animal labor, the benighted recipient of the benefits of slavery. Thus the “Negro” was conceived. The Negro—whose precedents could be found in the racial fabrications concealing the Slavs (*the slaves*), the Irish and others—substantially eradicated in Western historical consciousness the necessity of remembering the significance of Nubia for Egypt’s formation, of Egypt in the development of Greek civilization, of Africa for imperial Rome, and more pointedly of Islam’s influence on Europe’s economic, political, and intellectual history. From such a creature not even the suspicion of tradition needed to be entertained. In its stead there was the Black slave, a consequence masqueraded as an anthropology and a history.

The creation of the Negro was obviously at the cost of immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies in the West. The exercise was obligatory. It was an effort commensurate with the importance Black labor power possessed for the world economy sculpted and dominated by the ruling and mercantile classes of Western Europe. As chapter 5 indicates, the Atlantic slave trade and the slavery of the New World were integral to the modern world economy. Their relationship to capitalism was historical and organic rather than adventitious or synthetic. The Italian financiers and merchants whose capital subsidized Iberian exploration of the Atlantic and Indian oceans were also masters of (largely “European”) slave colonies in the Mediterranean. Certainly slave labor was one of their bases for what Marx termed “primitive accumulation.” But it would be an error to arrest the relationship there, assigning slave labor to some “pre-capitalist” stage of history. For more than 300 years slave labor persisted beyond the beginnings of modern capitalism, complementing wage labor, peonage, serfdom, and other methods of labor coercion. Ultimately, this meant that the interpretation of history in terms of the dialectic of capitalist class struggles would prove inadequate, a mistake ordained by the preoccupation of Marxism with the industrial and manufacturing centers of capitalism; a mistake founded on the presumptions that Europe itself had produced, that the motive and material forces that generated the capitalist system were to be wholly located in what was a fictive historical entity. From its very foundations capitalism had never been—any more than Europe—a “closed system.”

Necessarily then, Marx’s and Engels’s theory of revolution was insufficient in scope: the European proletariat and its social allies did not constitute *the* revolutionary subject of history, nor was working-class consciousness necessarily *the* negation of bourgeois culture. Out of what was in reality a rather more complex capitalist world system (and one to which Marx in his last decade paid closer attention), other revolutionary forces emerged as well. Informed as they were by the ideas and cultures drawn from their own historical experiences, these movements assumed forms only vaguely anticipated in the radical traditions of the West. In the terms of capitalist society they were its negation, but that was hardly the source of their being. And among them was the persistent and continuously evolving resistance of African peo-

ples to oppression. The sixth chapter rehearses the history of this Black radical tradition in the African diaspora and to some extent in the African continent itself. As both this and the seventh chapter attempt to demonstrate, the record of resistance for four centuries or more, from Nueva Espana to Nyasaland, leaves in no doubt the specifically African character of those struggles. Resistances were formed through the meanings that Africans brought to the New World as their cultural possession; meanings sufficiently distinct from the foundations of Western ideas as to be remarked upon over and over by the European witnesses of their manifestations; meanings enduring and powerful enough to survive slavery to become the basis of an opposition to it. With Western society as a condition, that tradition almost naturally assumed a theoretical aspect as well.

The third and final section of this study traces the social and intellectual backgrounds of the processes that led to the theoretical articulation of Black radicalism. The conditions for modern Black theory were present first in the African diaspora. Far from Africa and physically enveloped by hostile communities, Black opposition acquired a penetrative comprehension. But it was a social and political as well as a historical process that nurtured theory. In the pursuit of that process I have identified three seminal Black radical intellectuals: William Edward Burkhardt Du Bois, Cyril Lionel Robert James, and Richard Nathaniel Wright. They have been chosen for detailed treatment not only because they made substantial contributions to the theoretical text, but because their lives and circumstances were prisms of the events impending on and emanating from the Black radical tradition. Their reactions to their confrontation with Black resistance, the very means used for their expression were distinct but related, characterized by circumstance, temperament, and training. Though their lives were very dissimilar—only Wright could be said to have been directly produced by the Black peasant and working classes—they all came to that tradition late (and hesitantly, as I will argue with respect to Du Bois and James). For all three, though, Marxism had been the prior commitment, the first encompassing and conscious experience of organized opposition to racism, exploitation, and domination. As Marxists, their apprenticeships proved to be significant but ultimately unsatisfactory. In time, events and experience drew them toward Black radicalism and the discovery of a collective Black resistance inspired by an enduring cultural complex of historical apprehension. In these concluding chapters I have attempted to demonstrate how and why this was so. Taken together, the efforts of Du Bois, James, and Wright consisted of a first step toward the creation of an intellectual legacy that would complement the historical force of Black struggle. Their destiny, I suggest, was not to create the idea of that struggle so much as to articulate it. Regardless, the Black opposition to domination has continued to acquire new forms. In a very real sense then, the present study follows.