Rethinking Theory in Black Studies: #3 HISTORY

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Black History Month stamps
Lecture 1: IDEOLOGY

The ideological framework

Identity
Analysis
Commitment
Program
Action
Lecture 2: Methodology

The D-7 Method
D1: Definition
D2: Data
D3: Digitization
D4: Discovery
D5: Design
D6: Dissemination
D7: Difference
What is history? What has been the history of the African American experience?

Can we create a theory of Black history? Yes, and here’s how.
History is written in the present about the past to help create a future.

Charles Tilly  
(1929 – 2008)

“The word history refers to a phenomenon, to a body of material, and to a set of activities. As a phenomenon, history is the cumulative effect of past events on events of the present—any present you care to name. To the extent that when something happens matters, history is important....As a body of material, history consists of the durable residues of past Behavior....What of history as a set of activities? The central activity is reconstructing the past.” (1981)
The races that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in skill and brain power; for this reason, while remaining generally independent they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule others. On the other hand the Asiatic races have both brains and skill but are lacking in courage and will power; so they have remained both enslaved and subject. The Hellenic race, occupying a mid position geographically, has a measure of both. Hence it has continued to be free, to have the best political institution and to be capable of ruling others given a single constitution. (Politics 7.7)
Grand world history and Africa?

Eurocentric ignorance masquerading as knowledge in distorting world history

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936)
*Decline of the West*, 2 volumes

H.G. Wells (1866-1946)
*The Outline of History*, 3 volumes

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975)
*A Study of History*, 12 volumes

Will Durant (1885-1981)
*The Story of Civilization*, 11 volumes
Basic tenets of “Eurocentrism”

1. Reason has its origin in Ancient Greece.

2. Capitalism could only have developed in Europe.

3. Christianity is superior to all world religions.

4. European cultural values are the best.

5. “White” people are destined to rule the world.
Critique of Eurocentrism

Karl Marx (1818-1883)  
*Capital*, 3 volumes

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985)  
*Capitalism and Material Life*, 3 volumes

James Blaut (1927-2000)  
*Trilogy on Eurocentrism*, 3 volumes

*Orientalism*, 1 volume
Basic CRITIQUE of “Eurocentrism”

1. Reason has its origin in Ancient Greece.
   ...Ancient Greece learned from Egypt (Africa)!

2. Capitalism could only have developed in Europe.
   ...Capitalism is not unique to Europe!

3. Christianity is superior to all world religions.
   ...All gods work the same way!

4. European cultural values are the best.
   ...Black is beautiful!

5. “White” people are destined to rule the world.
   ...The sun sets on all empires!
When history meets sociology:

Historical specificity of a social narrative
Everybody learns from a good story

Conceptual causality of social change
Everybody wants to know why
Three kinds of History of Blacks

White history of Blacks
Black history of Blacks
Radical history of Blacks

This is a matter of consciousness not biology.
White history of Blacks: mainstream dominated by racist neglect and lies

Frederick Turner, Harvard (1861-1932)
U. B. Philips, Yale (1877-1934)
Charles Beard, Columbia (1874-1948)

“Turner...was himself a racist...the Beardian Perspective...lent itself to a pro southern Interpretation”  Meier and Rudwick 1986
The liberal approach often relied on a European view. 

Gunnar Myrdal
1898-1997

Alexis de Tocqueville
1805-1859
Progressive mainstream historians influenced by the 1960s began mapping the historical periodization of the Black experience

This was a new beginning
Earl Thorpe (1924 – 1990): Why do we have a Negro History Movement?

“historical writing has been slow to shed its aristocratic tradition and bias”

“to combat the prominence of racial prejudice and stereotypes”

“to inspire Blacks to high achievement.”

(1958)
Carter G. Woodson
1875 - 1950

Father of Black History

Black History Month

Association for the Study of Afro American Life and History

Journal of African American History

Associated Publishers

Leader of a school of Black historians

Published many books and articles
Five periods of Black Historiography

1. From ASALH to 1930s
2. New Deal and WW II
3. War’s end to late 1950s
4. 1960s
5. New scholarship 1967-80
Robert Harris: Five schools of Black historiography

1. Revisionism
2. Hidden hand
3. Contributionism
4. Cyclical
5. Liberalism
Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you’ve got problems, all you have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours. Once you see how their got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight.
“...the main focus of Negro historiography presented only an indirect challenge to the essential concepts of mainstream American historiography. It sought acceptance. Whereas, it seemed to me, those of us who were trying to create what we consciously chose to call Black history came out of the Black conscious movement, out of the Black struggles of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies. In our work, we were seeking... to present a fundamental challenge to the accepted truth of white American society.”

Vincent Harding
The refutation of Eurocentrism was advanced as Afrocentrism, placing ancient Africa as our main point of beginning.
Ideological mission of Black Studies: Academic excellence and social responsibility

UIUC Black historians are among the best representatives of the Black Studies tradition of criticizing mainstream views and finding a way to give priority to the Black voice. Here James Anderson, Sundiata Cha Jua and Lou Turner are among leaders of the sixth stage of Black historians. In our class we are preparing anthologies of their theory work.
Radical Black history is found within Marx “...the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”

“In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded.”
Capital concentration in the US economy

The main issue focuses on the economic structure of the country and how different interests contest for power.

The US experience of the workers versus the capitalists has been impacted by the unique experience of the middle classes.

It is clear who rules!
There is a Marxist analysis of African American history. These texts are from the “old” communists.
Black Belt Nation Thesis:
“A nation is an historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make up manifested in a common culture.”

Was down “home” a nation? Who was in the nation?
Black worker insurgency gave rise to a rebirth of a communist movement in the US and a renaissance in Marxist analysis of Black history.
Toward a theory of Black History
The basic questions:
1. What are the basic categories of the Black (human) experience?
2. What is the role of technology (productive forces)?
3. What is the role of class struggle?
4. What is the logic of social change (stages of development)?
5. Does this add up to a new paradigm for Black history?
The basic categories of society

**Superstructure:**
- Consciousness
- Cultural relations
- Social relations
- Demography

**Base:**
- Production relations
- Production forces
Describing the Black subject

Superstructure:
Consciousness
Cultural relations
Social relations
Demography

Base:
Production relations
Production forces

The Black experience is usually described in terms of how many and where Black people are, what kind of social and cultural life they have and what they think.

Black people have survived based on what work they do – this is fundamental and defines ones quality of life possibility.
Critical technology in the Black experience

The cotton gin (1793) increased demand for labor, but the mechanical cotton picker (1936) ended it.
Critical technology in the Black experience

Assembly line production:
From people to robots
Change comes from the politics of class struggle
The logic is dialectical.

The Black experience goes from Modes of social cohesion to Modes of social disruption.
Modes of Social cohesion

Africa
Slavery
Rural
Urban
Information

Modes of Social disruption

Slave trade
Emancipation
Great migrations
Crisis

The basic difference is trans-generation continuity
Toward a macro-theoretical model of the African American (USA) historical experience

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<tr>
<th>Logic of change</th>
<th>Social cohesion</th>
<th>Africa</th>
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<th>Rural Life</th>
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<td>Emancipation</td>
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The slave trade disrupted every aspect of Black life.
**Fellow Citizens:** I accepted your invitation to speak to you on the great question of these days, with very little consideration of what I might have to offer; for there seems to be no option. The last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun. We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air. I have a new experience. I wake in the morning with a painful sensation, which I carry about all day, and which, when traced home, is the odious remembrance of that ignominy which has fallen on Massachusetts, which robs the landscape of beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour. I have lived all my life in this state, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws, until now. They never came near me to any discomfort before. I find the like sensibility in my neighbors; and in that class who take no interest in the ordinary questions of party politics. There are men who are as sure indexes of the equity of legislation and of the same state of public feeling, as the barometer is of the weight.
Emancipation = Abolition + Civil War + Reconstruction

FREEDOM!

William Lloyd Garrison  John Brown  Abigail Kelley
We were “free”, but being lynched, still on our knees picking cotton!

In segregation we became an organized community!
A push and a pull:
Black people moved North in Great Migrations

Down South was getting rough

Up South (North) was a little better
The city became the Black community home
Crisis becomes a way of Black community life.
A revolution is underway: The information society

Who is computer literate?
Who has access?
Who faces the digital divide?

What is the nature of the Black Freedom Struggle in the 21st century?

We mainly have questions, not answers.
Texts based on the theory of historical periodization

http://www.eblackstudies.org/intro/
Theory and research

Macro: What are the major features of the modes of social cohesion and social disruption across all aspects of society?

Micro: What is the historical periodization of every specific aspect of society?

From empirical detail to abstract concepts, and always remember that method is key!
## Theory and intellectual history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Carter G. Woodson</th>
<th>W. E. B. DuBois</th>
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<tr>
<td>Slave trade</td>
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<td>The Supression of the Slave Trade (1896)</td>
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<td>Slavery</td>
<td>Free Negro Families in the US in 1830 (1925)</td>
<td>John Brown (1909)</td>
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<td>Emancipation</td>
<td>The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis 1800-1860 (1926)</td>
<td>Black Reconstruction (1935)</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>The Rural Negro (1930)</td>
<td>The Negro Farmer (1904)</td>
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<td>Migration</td>
<td>A Century of Negro Migration (1918)</td>
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Theory and popular discourse

If this model of theory of Black history is accurate then it is the basis for an active popular discourse in every community church, barber shop, union hall, or street corner.

New societies have been created, revolutions

We are living at the beginning of a new revolution.

The final question: How can we become revolutionaries and advance the freedom struggle?
Lets get theoretical.
Its time for vision. Lets do this!
Thank you for watching.

Please send comments to

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