

BOOKS

BLACK RADICALISM AND THE MARXIST TRADITION

by Cornel West

Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition, by Cedric J. Robinson.
London: Zed Press, 1983. 487 pp. \$14.50

Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* is the most significant challenge to American Marxist and black left thought and practice since Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). Unfortunately, Robinson's book has not yet received the kind of critical attention it deserves. Though published in 1983, the book has already fallen through the cracks—a fate to be avoided if at all possible. This negligence results from the rather disjointed state of the American academic Left and the dismal state of the black intellectual Left: the former has become virtually captive to jargon-ridden discourses in which race receives little or no attention, and the latter is thoroughly disorganized, with no visible means of cultivating and sustaining high-level critical exchange.

Robinson's book is a towering achievement. There is simply nothing like it in the history of black radical thought. It is, in many ways, too ambitious. Yet in trying to do too much, Robinson raises the most fundamental questions facing both the black and white Left in America: to what extent are Marxist explanations of social history capable of grasping the many dimensions of racial oppression? What is and ought to be the relation of black resistance to broader working class insurgency? What is distinctive about dominant forms of black radicalism in contrast to non-black forms? How ought black left intellectuals to relate to the Marxist tradition?

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Though more international in scope and erudite in execution, Robinson's project is similar to Cruse's in that it challenges black intellectuals to reconsider Afro-American thought and practice in light of the specificity of the black radical tradition. Like Cruse, Robinson believes that left black intellectuals tend uncritically to accept Marxist analyses which force them "to surrender the cultural survival of their people, the emergent revolutionary consciousness of black nationalism." (p. 435) Unlike Cruse, Robinson does not reject Marxist analyses but wants to use a Marxist *method* in order to discredit Eurocentric practitioners of Marxism. He concurs that a conception of the forces and relations of production is basic to the critique of capitalist societies—but he also accentuates the importance of cultural terrains of ideological struggle, such as affirming African identities in the face of negative images of blackness in the modern West.

Robinson's fundamental aim is to show that efforts to understand black peoples' history of resistance through the exclusive prism of Marxist analysis are incomplete and inaccurate. This is so because Marxist analyses tend to presuppose European models of history and experience—models that downplay the significance of black people as agents and black communities as conduits of cultural and political resistance. Robinson shows how the conditions of the emergence of Marxism in nineteenth-century Europe affected its formulations of class analysis and revolutionary struggle, illustrates how classic Marxist histories have ignored the role of race in the class formation of modern societies, discusses the content and character of the black radicalism overlooked by most Marxist thinkers, and reveals the ways in which major black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright tried to make Marxist theory more attuned to the black condition in the modern world.

Like that of most contemporary social scientists, Robinson's writing style is a bit off-putting. Yet the fascinating accounts that move his argument along make it well worth the effort. The scope of his scholarship is impressive; the force of his formulations, often persuasive. He takes the reader by the hand and walks him or her through the complex workings of the modern world, emphasizing the way in which capitalist modes of production shaped and were shaped by clashing ethnic, national, and racial allegiances. He then puts forward a critical re-reading of E.P. Thompson's classic *The Making of the English Working Class*, in light of Thompson's glaring omission of racialism. Robinson's criticism is not that Thompson should simply

have added a few remarks about non-British workers to his account of British working class formation, but rather that to take race seriously he would have had to link the formation of British working class consciousness to Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, Irish anti-colonial rebellions (like that of 1798), and the trans-Atlantic African slave trade. Robinson concludes that though working class radicalism is a significant form of resistance to Western capitalism, it is often supportive of certain other defining features of Western civilization such as racialism and chauvinism. In this sense—at the economic, political, and cultural levels—“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.” (pp. 4–5)

After this examination of the origins and limitations of European working class radicalism, Robinson turns to the roots of black radicalism. His basic thesis is that while black radicalism in the New World is situated and located within Western capitalist societies, it cannot be fully understood in light of Western models of radicalism. For Robinson, black radicalism

is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization. (p. 97)

The distinctive features of black radicalism, in other words, must be linked to the traditions of Africa and black people's unique status of being degraded and despised human beings in a racist modern Western civilization. African traditions—religions, customs, folklore, mores—serve as crucial sources for collective resistance against economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural degradation, as Robinson illustrates through detailed examinations of events ranging from the great Palmares settlement in Brazil (1605–1695) to the Haitian revolution (1804).

Robinson is right to accentuate the non-European sources of black resistance—as have progressive anthropologists like St. Clair Drake and Michael Taussig. Yet Robinson fails to give historically specific and socially pertinent accounts of the precise nature of those sources. Instead, he throws out phrases like “the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system which had never allowed for property” (p. 243) or “a shared philosophy developed in the African past and transmitted as culture.” (p. 443) Such

allusions to the cosmological and moral dimensions of African cultures are fine, yet they prove insufficient if we are to grasp the complex relations between communities, resistance, and commitment in the intersections between black and white peoples. Leonard Harris has made this point in his intriguing attempt to reformulate Robinson's talk about preserving the collective being or ontological totality into a conception of black nationalism as an African mode of collective being-in-the-world shaping and being shaped by prevailing capitalist processes.¹ The ultimate danger here is to fall prey to a romantic, idealized conception of a monolithic and homogeneous African past free of social contradictions, cultural blindnesses, and economic injustices. Robinson does not actually fall into this trap, but he comes close when he claims that indiscriminate violence and brutality "did not come naturally to African peoples" due to the resolution of conflict in Africa by means of migration and resettlement rather than by fratricidal warfare as in Europe. (p. 443)

The last section of Robinson's work, which composes almost half of the book, is the most controversial. It focuses on the black left intelligentsia. Robinson tries to show the continuities between "the black rebellions of the previous centuries and the first articulations of a world revolutionary theory in the present century" (p. 252) by examining the major works of three towering black intellectuals who struggled with Marxist theory: W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. Robinson's treatment of each of these figures is problematic, not only because he fails to convey the complexity and richness of their thought, but also because they don't fit well into his project of upholding the radical depth and cultural density of revolutionary black nationalism. Du Bois, James, and Wright have little to say about this tradition, and what they do have to say is highly ambiguous and equivocal in relation to Robinson's project.

Robinson's readings of Du Bois, James, and Wright are always intriguing and informed. Yet they are neither persuasive nor convincing. Robinson's W.E.B. Du Bois—"one of the two most sophisticated Marxist theorists in America" (p. 266)—fails to ring true. Du Bois's links to the black revolutionary nationalist tradition were always tenuous, even as a Marxist influenced historian in the 1930s and thereafter. Robinson does not distinguish between Du Bois's appreciation of the black culture of resistance and his distance from a black nationalist perspective. So in his reading of Du Bois, Robinson must conclude that the black nationalist heritage appeared to Du Bois's "Westernized eyes [as] part legend, part whimsy, part art." (p. 324)

Robinson's C.L.R. James is a fascinating figure who goes beyond European radical thought in response to the 1934 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. "From this point on his work would lead beyond the doctrinaire constructions of the anti-Stalinist Left and Engels and Marx themselves. The force of the black radical tradition merged with the exigencies of black masses in movement to form a new theory and ideology in James' writings." (p. 382) But what was this new theory and ideology? From what Robinson says, it amounts to calls for self-determination by any means necessary. This is a courageous and convincing slogan, but it is neither a theory nor ideology. James remained, for the most part, a creative thinker within and a loyal member of the Trotskyist tradition with only *strategic* relations to the black revolutionary heritage Robinson highlights. Robinson ends his chapter on James with praise for James' thorough criticism of Western Marxism in his *Notes on Dialectics*, yet ignores James own comment that he always remained a "black European" and "[his] whole life was toward European literature, European sociology." (quoted in Robinson, p. 396)

Lastly, Robinson lauds the black peasant roots of Richard Wright (in contrast to the petty bourgeois origins of Du Bois and James) and credits him with providing the most powerful existing black nationalist critique of Marxist theory in his fiction and essays. This account of Wright is nearly unintelligible to me. I find little sense of black collective insurgency in Wright's work; rather, it is an expression of individualistic revolt, taking the forms of violent assault or personal attack. This sense of revolt is based upon a self-contempt and even self-hatred, candidly acknowledged by one who has undergone intense de-humanization. Robinson's attempt to view Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940) as anticipating Frantz Fanon's work in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1960) is also unconvincing—especially given the fact that Bigger murders not only the white woman Mary but also his black girlfriend Bessie. This is no move toward community but rather an atomistic assertion which negates any belief in affecting the powers that be through collective action with oppressed peoples. There are no such depictions of any such black collective agency in Wright's corpus—even in his powerful short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, written in the 1930s when he was a Communist Party member. Furthermore, Robinson's silence regarding Wright's later writings on African nationalism and black power—both devalued and demystified by Wright as props for the petty bourgeoisie—renders his argument even more vulnerable. In short,

Robinson lauds a Richard Wright I simply don't recognize—a Wright who stands in sharp contrast to the basic drift of his corpus.

Despite my disagreements with Robinson's treatments of these three key figures of the black radical intellectual tradition and my skepticism about his search for *the* negation of capitalism (be it the proletariat or black radicalism), Robinson has written a major book that warrants serious scrutiny. His ultimate aim is to contribute to the freedom struggle of oppressed people by exploring the ways in which the Marxist tradition—indispensable for the struggle—may impede it through its Eurocentric focuses. The same holds true for patriarchal and homophobic people who, with dogmatism and false orthodoxy, refuse to deepen the Marxist tradition. Robinson's efforts make us recognize that this deepening in regard to race is the only avenue to follow if Marxism and black radicalism are to be vital in the years to come.

NOTES

1. Leonard Harris, "Historical Subjects and Interests: Race, Class and Conflict," *The Year Left 2: An American Socialist Yearbook*, edited by Mike Davis, Manning Marable, et al. (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 90–105.

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