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PHILOSOPHY, HERMENEUTICS, SOCIAL - POLITICAL THEORY:
CRITICAL THOUGHT IN THE INTEREST OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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BLACK CIVILIZATION AND PHILOSOPHY

by Lucius Outlaw

1. This essay is an attempt to deal with some of the complexities involved in the question "Is there a 'Black Philosophy'?" In a very real sense, it represents one instalment in a continuing attempt to achieve increased self-transparency relative to my participation in some of the various intellectual traditions which we term "Philosophy." The need for doing so rests on the problems involved in attempting to share in these traditions, these enterprises of intellectual practice, on the basis of my being part of the historical development of Black people.

The earliest occasion I had to struggle explicitly with some of these problems in a way which led to this essay was provided by an invitation to speak to the students and faculty of the Department of Philosophy, Tuskegee Institute. Particularly for the benefit of the Black Students who were engaged in their own study of 'Philosophy,' I assumed the responsibility of attempting to shed some light on the subject of a possible stance for Black persons involved in the practice of Philosophy and the responsibilities to be met when doing so. A later occasion for addressing the issues was provided when a sub-committee of the American Philosophical Association-the committee on Blacks in Philosophy-held a series of workshops during regional APA meetings during 1974 and 1975, to address the question "Is there a 'Black Philosophy'?" In slightly different form, this essay was shared in one of those workshops.

The essay is then an "occasioned" piece, part of a wider

struggle with a complex and important issue: the place of Black folk in the enterprise of Philosophy, the degree to which our participation in it might/ought to take particular form and/or direction by virtue of our distinctiveness as an African people in America. The emergence of this issues is not accidental, neither the form in which the question is put ("Is there a 'Black Philosophy'?"), or the responses to it. For what is revealed, on one level, in the endeavors of Black folk to confront the issue of "Black Philosophy" is the expansion of the continuing historical struggles of African people in this country (and elsewhere) to achieve a progressively liberated existence as it is variously conceived. Even more concretely, the emergence of the question and responses to it reflect the increasing number of Black folk entering the ranks of trained academics in the 'field' of Philosophy on the downturn of yet another wave of resurged Black nationalist consciousness,"¹ as many refer to it. Still, this development has been late compared to other fields such as Sociology, Political Science, Law, to name a few. The manner of assertion of intensified Black cultural and political consciousness within Philosophy is thus conditioned strongly by the forms of earlier struggles in other fields: 'Black Studies;' 'Black' Sociology, 'Black' Art; 'Black' Political Science, etc. Particular historical tendencies or developments are often not shared in the same way at the same time in all sectors of complex societies, even when the developments or tendencies involve particular sub-groups. Yet they can and do come to be shared. In this case, the development of intensified self-consciousness shared by many Black folk is now present within academic Philosophy. Thus the question: "Is there a 'Black Philosophy'?" Thus the varied responses to it by folk Black and otherwise.

So far, though hopefully not in the future, the debate has remained meekly academic. This is revealing with respect to both academic Philosophy and Black folk involved in the enterprise (though not necessarily with sufficient critical insight) at this point in the historical developments of the discipline, the social order as a whole. It is with some of the aspects of this complex, yet extremely important, historical situation that I wish to deal.

2. Philosophy, both as notion and as praxis, remains seriously problematic today. To a great degree it has become almost wholly 'academic:' the activity of trained "professionals" whose primary function has been reduced to being overseers in museums of the history of ideas. In itself this is a valuable function, for it insures the preservation of (some) valuable insights and strivings and their perpetuation through the mediation of tradition. Still, it does not represent a fulfilment of a possibly larger historical and social function of Philosophy understood as a dynamic enterprise unifying a different theory and praxis. As an enterprise, Philosophy has suffered from the pervasiveness of the intensified historical tendency toward increasing specialization and the development of narrowness, overconcern with method and discipline immanent matters, and, in some forms, has degenerated in scienticism. Moreover, as a response to the prevailing scheme of values of capitalistic-technological society, the study of Philosophy (i.e. participation in studies in the history of some ideas, almost wholly western) has increasingly suffered from the demands of the 'performance principle' which would have us judge our primary activities, particularly formal education, in terms of their performance potential, that is to say, their market value. Thus are students of Philosophy constantly struggling with the question (and its implied criticism that Philosophy is not useful for anything in terms of 'making

a living'), "What are you/am I going to do with Philosophy?" The most immediate response to that question was, at one time, "....become a teacher of Philosophy...." Since, however, the market situation for post-secondary teachers is poor at best today, Philosophy has become a poor commodity.

And what of those of us who "teach" it? We are too often market managers, professionals at that, higher degreed and salaried. That phase of the enterprise-the teaching of Philosophy-has its rightful place in the overall scheme of things, but it has suffered none the less from its professionalization, and we along with it. To the question "How do philosophers exist in the modern world?", William Barret answers:

Philosophers today exist in the Academy, as members of departments of philosophy in universities, as professional teachers of a more or less theoretical subject known as Philosophy... The profession of the philosopher in the modern world is to be a professor of philosophy; and the realm of Being which the philosopher inhabits as a living individual is no more recondite than a corner within the University...The price one pays being, functioning professionally within the Academy, the philosopher can hardly be expected to escape his own professional deformation, especially since it has become a law of modern society that man is assimilated more and more completely to his social function. And it is just here that a troublesome and profound ambiguity resides for the philosopher today.²

This deformation reveals itself in many ways. Particularly there is the deformed historical development of philosophical thought, evidenced by the degree to which too many "problems" in Philosophy continue to be, even in these very problematic times, discipline immanent, witho ut foundation beyond the boundaries of the discipline itself. They have not emerged from the generalized practice of life. Prior, then, to the resolution of the issue regarding "Black Philosophy," the issue of philosophizing, its possibility and meaning today in the west, is in need of clarification.

3. The very debate itself regarding a "Black Philosophy" thus rests on unclarified grounds. We Black folk who would involve ourselves in it would be wise to be cognizant of this situation in its present condition of deformation, and the deformation of those involved, but of those distorted historical developments in the west in general. Our rush to uncritical intellectual integration in a dangerously problematic situation might prove to be our undoing: we could fail to be sufficiently aware of historical tendencies and possibilities which we might struggle with others to realize and in so doing condition a line of historical development which might lead to enhanced conditions of life for all, and for presently "marginal" peoples, in the present order of life, in particular.

It might be asked, however, whether it is the case that this very debate regarding "Black Philosophy" is an attempt to avoid or correct the pitfalls of deformation. To some extent it is, though not necessarily fully so. And judging by some of our present endeavors (i.e. those of Black folk involved), and our history as a class of formally educated Black folk, I would say no. If we Black folk (and others) are to condition a different line of historical development in the practice of Philosophy more in keeping with the needs of Black people, then our involvement in this debate must be conditioned by a number of crucial factors the awareness of which must be reflected in our philosophizing.

We Black folk must, first of all, be clear as to our own being, not only individually, but, most importantly, collectively. Our being must be viewed in its historical sweep, its cultural, socio-political, economic complexities, its future possibilities. Our reflections on our future possibilities as a people must be particularly insightful. The achievement of a seemingly integrated position within the ranks of professional academic philosophers

and teachers of Philosophy, must not leave us blind to the generalized condition of Black people in this country and elsewhere and, most importantly, to the realities of the basis of political-economic power in this country in various groupings. Such power concentrations are not sufficiently grasped by traditional theory regarding the class structure of capitalistic society. An appropriate grasp of this situation must, in turn, be reflected in our struggles to come to grips with the activities which constitute Philosophy. Our personal situations as a class of Black people characterized by our degree of formal study must not lead us into a form of philosophizing which would imply that reason has been realized in contemporary history, that reasonableness had come to pervade the relations among men and women, among different racial, ethnic, religious groups and economic classes in this society, are still struggling against colonialism and neo-colonialism in other parts of the world. So too are other peoples. And there is not sufficient indication the major powers, particularly the U.S., are either moving or are capable of moving toward a world of peace and increased liberation for all peoples grounded in a politics and ethnics involving political, economic, cultural, and social democracy. The struggle of our people continues to be that seeking progressive liberation at a level capable of being shared given the level of development of the culture as a whole. It is too a continuing struggle for many who are non-Black, including many whites. It is, overall, the struggle to harness and direct the capabilities of the society as a whole in the maximum utilization of resources with minimum waste and environmental destruction toward the satisfaction of essential human needs with minimum exploitation and oppression-the struggle for the realization of a life based increasingly on reason democratically envisioned and realized.

Toward this end, however, the concrete realities of the politics of the past, present, and foreseeable future demand that we approach the struggle from the level of a group i.e. ethnic (or nationalistic, as some would say), position, the only viable position in terms of which to achieve limited goals within the present order of things. In order to realize ends beyond the present order, however, it will be necessary to move beyond the important yet limited program of group-centered politics as the prime mode of political activity. The pursuit of progressive possibilities which might lead to the radical transformation of the present order of life, thus, hopefully, to greater benefits for greater numbers of people, will require a social democracy based on pluralistic integration. Even so, we cannot be premature (i.e. unilateral) in this regard.

4. A very serious phase of our preparation for our task of philosophizing in the interest of Black people (and others) includes the need to come face to face with the history of the relationships of Black thinkers to the historical thrusts of Black people and, most importantly, with where this history leaves us today. We Black folk involved in Philosophy must, in other words, become transparent to ourselves as a class in terms of history, our responsibilities, our possibilities.

Many very significant insights into the history of Black thinkers are to be had in the work by Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.³ A controversial book, to say the least, still its uneven but very often penetrating analyses harbor a core of truth which is, in my judgement, very substantial. From the historical side there emerges from his analyses a picture of essential failure on the part of Black intellectuals (i.e. writers, social critics, artists, etc.) in not having forged a collective vision for Black people based on an appropriate grasp of the

realities of the socio-politico-economic and cultural scheme. For Cruse this failure rests fundamentally on the erroneous commitment on the part of Black intellectuals to the ideal of integration. Even more, the failure of left-looking, 'radical' Black intellectuals, in his judgement, has been/continues to be a non-critical commitment to Marxism-Leninism and to the sufferance of intellectual apprenticeship to white, particularly Jewish, liberal, left-wing intellectuals. The pervasive reality of American life, says Cruse, is that its politics, cultural systems, economics, are group based: power resides in ethnic/national groupings, primarily. The struggle for integration on the part of Black people without having first developed, cultivated, and consolidated our own group solidarity has resulted in-and will continue to result in-the unsuccessful realization of the struggle for equality and 'freedom' within the present scheme of things. The struggle for the most part has not been revolutionary, including separatist schemes (which, argues Cruse, seek to avoid the problem via escape) or those seeking systemic reform.

The arguments advanced by Cruse call for serious critique. However, a number of insights which emerge are immediately clear. Particularly important in the context of this essay is the need, Cruse stresses, for us to be **clear** as to **our** grounding as Black thinkers. That grounding, given present realities and the near and mediate future, is the historical struggle on the part of our people for an increasingly liberated existence. Out of this grounding emerges our first task: the struggle to achieve a critical understanding of our situation, our real needs, and the means by which they might be met. In struggling to meet these responsibilities we must work against the tendencies leading to deformation, and we must, particularly, be prepared to commit

"class suicide" in order that our energies be given unequivocally in service to the historical struggles of our people, here and elsewhere. In this regard there is a particular turn which we must make in our development the importance of which is heightened by the debate regarding "Black Philosophy." That turn of development and its ground of necessity is clearly set out by Cruse:

Every other ethnic group in America, a "nation of nations," has accepted the fact of its separatedness and used it to its own social advantage. But the Negro's conditioning has steered him into that perpetual state of suspended tension wherein ninety-five percent of his time and energy is expended on fighting prejudice will not obviate those fundamental things an ethnic group must do for itself. This situation results from a psychology that is rooted in the Negro's symbiotic 'blood-ties' to the white Anglo-Saxon. It is the culmination of that racial drama of love and hate between slave and master, bound together in the purgatory of plantations. Today the African foster child in the American racial equation must grow to manhood, break the psychological umbilical ties to intellectual paternalism. The American Negro has never yet been able to break entirely free of the ministrations of his white masters of wisdom, into the wastelands of the American desert. That is what must be done, if he is to deal with the Anglo-Saxon as the independent political power that he, the Negro, potentially is.⁴

The insights of Cruse thus uncover our historically conditioned vocation which is fixed for us even more specifically by Vincent Harding:

...the fact still remains that for the life and work of the black scholar in search of vocation, the primary context is not to be found in the questionable freedom and relative affluence of the American university, nor in the ponderous uncertainties of "the scholarly community," nor even in the private joys or our highly prized, individual exceptionalism. Rather, wherever we may happen to be physically based, our essential social, political, and spiritual context is the colonized situation of the masses of the black community in America.⁵

The vocation of the Black intellectual/scholar thusly grounded structures, in Vincent's words, our calling:

...to speak the truth to our people, to speak truth about our people, to speak truth about our enemies--all in order to free the mind, so that black men, women, and children may build beyond the banal dangerous chaos of the American spirit, towards a new time.⁶

5. Still, the struggle to hear our calling, to respond, in part by taking a pilgrimage through the desert in search of wisdom, in part by speaking the truth, all directed by the concern to contribute to the historical movement toward the realization of a more reasonable life, takes us beyond the limited goals which emerge from group consciousness (i.e. nationalism, ethnicity). It will, in fact, drive us beyond the boundaries of the present order of life, and necessarily, bring us into serious conflict with it. Again, many of the more fundamental needs of Black people are shared by many others. And there are, on the other hand, needs to be met in the lives of others which, while we might not suffer them either at all or in the same intensity, do require our concern and attention in the struggle to realize a life of progressive liberation. This world historical struggle thus draws us beyond limited peoplehood to a generalized peoplehood which recognizes peoples in their diversities. It makes for toil to achieve unity in diversity: reasonableness in life as a unity based on democratically agreed upon notions of 'reasonableness' in a diverse, pluralistic, finite world.

Judged against these goals, limited and generalized, the vocation of philosophizing, for those of us who would choose it, takes on decisive meaning: it is to share in the refinement and perpetuation of critical intelligence as a practice of life which has as its goal raising to consciousness the conditions of life, historical practices, and blocked alternatives which, if freed, might lead to life experienced as qualitatively-progressively-different.

So conceived, "philosophy explores and evaluates the totality of the human condition in society. It represents society's most general and most fundamental theoretical-critical self-consciousness. No other form of human intellect is as condemned to aspire to totality as is philosophy."⁷ Thus, the social function of Philosophy is to develop critical, dialectical thought, according to Max Horkheimer: "philosophy is the methodical and steadfast attempt to bring reason into the world."⁸, a crucial moment of this process being the radical critique of what is, at a given time, prevalent:

By criticism, we mean that intellectual, and eventually practical, effort which is not satisfied to accept the prevailing ideas, actions, and social conditions unthinkingly and from mere habit; effort which aims to coordinate the individual sides of social life with each other and with the general ideas and aims of the epoch, to deduce them genetically, to distinguish the appearance from the essence, to examine the foundations of things, in short, really to know them.⁹

And the 'dialectical' aspect of critical thought? As Marcuse has characterized it:

Dialectical thought starts with the experience that the world is unfree; ...man and nature exist in conditions of alienation, exist as 'other than they are.' ...Dialectical thought thus becomes negative in itself. Its function is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs.¹⁰

6. For us Black folk who would philosophize, that is to say, who would live a life conditioned primarily by the activity of critical, dialectical thought, a very first task is to bring this activity to bear on the **practice** of 'philosophy' today to the extent that we are to have any contact with its tradition

and practice in the academy. Beyond this, however, the need to be grounded in the historical struggles of our people, in particular, and in the wider struggles of people toward more reasonable forms of existence, in general, sets the tasks we must be about. For the purposes of this essay, the circumstances of its development and presentation, we will limit ourselves to a discussion of responsibilities/tasks to be met as we philosophize in the interest of African peoples.

As a way of going about the tasks of explicating the notion of "Black Philosophy" (more accurately: African-American Philosophy), we can work from some rather general yet essential features which characterize the activity of philosophizing, at least as it is practiced by some in a way we judge correct. We would turn then to the various praxes which in part characterize the life-world (structures and processes) of African peoples in America and elsewhere which to some degree fall within the range of the generalized notion. But we must be cautious: to the extent that the generalized concept may have as its base values, interests, and practices situated in the cultures (life-worlds) of others, it may, particularly in our case, prove to be incompatible, more or less, with the hoped for future historical practices of Black peoples. As a guard against this possibility, we employ the generalized notion heuristically, not as full and final definition.

The generalized notion~~?~~ It was set out above, as, overly simplified, the struggle, via dialectical, critical reasoning, and practices conditioned by it, to bring reason into the world. In ~~this~~ case we are indentifying "reason" or "reasonableness" with an idealized yet possible complex of life conditions and practices which ought to be and could be realized to some degree were particular historical possibilities realized. Thus the struggle to give

clarity to the notion of philosophical activity in the interest of Black folk is grounded firmly and explicitly in a set of value judgements and hopes. Most fundamentally, a positive judgement as to the importance of the continued existence and viability of African people as distinct, enjoying the practice of life at a level possible given the most advanced and "progressive" developments of human cultures and capabilities, to the degree that these developments are compatible with those interests and values which are essential to our continued survival and viability; and the hope that we, African people, and those who join with us in our struggles, will be successful.

Given, then, this generalized (and simplified) notion of the practice of philosophy, the values and hopes which ground it, the further task is that of probing the various forms of expression and practice of Black folk in search of those which reveal our distinct orientations in regard to various matters. Such orientations are given, for example, in the mediated folk tales of our people; in religious practices; in our political language and practices prevalent during various times under various conditions; in our forms of music, poetry, language of common currency, etc. As these forms of expression, in their concreteness as life-praxes, are constitutive elements of the life-world of African-American people, then the meanings they hold, in symbolic and/or explicit form, contain our fundamental orientations. Reclaiming them through acts of reflection will provide us with understandings of the historically conditioned concerns of our people. Such acts of reclamation, that is to say interpretive understanding, constitute the practice of philosophical hermeneutics. It is fundamental for us as it must provide the clarified historical grounds for the orientation of our present and future philosophical activity.

II

1. Hermeneutical Understanding in General:

Having identified some of the various Life-World praxes and forms of expression constitutive of the Life-World of Black folk, how are we to interpret them? In general, notes Aron Gurwitsch, the task is to:

find and lay bare the acts of consciousness which in their systematic concatenation and intertexture make this specific world possible as their correlate. Answering this question for a particular cultural world amounts to understanding that world from within by referring it to the mental life in which it originates.¹¹

Even more, we are to grasp not only the 'mental life' in which the life-praxes/forms of expression have their origin, but the relevant historical circumstances as well which provide the ground and context of their development. For us Black folk who would philosophize, this task should be one which we can meet easily, for doing so constitutes self-understanding: we seek to understand our own life-world. Yet the process of hermeneutical understanding, if it is to be appropriately carried out (the issue of "appropriate" to be worked out in what follows), must first be understood. We are assisted in the achievement of this understanding by the work of Richard Palmer.¹²

In general, hermeneutical understanding in an experiential encounter with a heritage, a tradition, which speaks through the work (say a text) or, as we have been saying, life-praxis/form of expression. The nature of this "experiential encounter" is complex, but involves, among other things, first, hearing the question (s) (and/or issues) which give rise to the work/praxis/form of expression. The process of achieving hermeneutical understanding is thus a dialogue between interpreter and object to be understood: the interpreter must be oriented by a fundamental questioning which

seeks to hear the question of the work. For this is the first canon to be met if hermeneutical understanding is to be authentic, that is, if the understanding achieved is to involve a grasp of the text/practice/expression for what it says. Doing so, i.e. hearing the text, requires that the interpreter effect a merger of horizons (of meaning/being): the horizon of the question of the work/practice/expression and the horizon of the interpreter, constituted by the questions asked. Thus, "hearing" the work requires that one, as interpreter, come to share, by way of the appropriation of meaning, the world which the work in its language/praxis reveals. Such revelations manifest, say, the time and space conditions of the person/people who ground the world of the work; for example, the relative degree of their freedom/expression; how their work is conditioned-the nature, forms, and perpetuators of their oppressions and in short, how life in their world goes or fails to go. It reveals, then, a heritage, a tradition; or a break in tradition, say, revolution.

The creation therefore of a common horizon between the work and the interpreter is both a condition and achievement of hermeneutical understanding. This is made possible by each-both interpreter and work-belonging to a language and a history, a heritage. The more closely the horizons encompassing the worlds of both can be fused, the greater the achievement of hermeneutical understanding.

2. Hermeneutical Understanding in Particular:

In a social order complicated by, among other things, a plurality of life-worlds of different racial, ethnic, national, and class groupings of people, and a continuing heritage of various forms and degrees of discrimination and oppression, the achievement of hermeneutical understanding across the boundaries of these various life-worlds is a serious and difficult task. This is

especially the case when horizon of understanding of the interpreter is conditioned by the assumed superiority of his/her heritage, of the heritage mediated in the framework of understanding of a given people, or group of peoples, who may be socially dominant, and who thus attempt to generalize these frameworks as the only valid and authentic modes of understanding. Thus we are painfully aware of the degree to which the notion of an "American Culture" has served as the ideological cover for the imperial domination of the cultures of other peoples in this country and elsewhere in the world.

On the other hand, the situation is equally problematic when the interpreter is objectively a member of the life-world he/she seeks to explicate, but, in terms of frameworks of understanding, share those of other people(s) including the implicit or explicit value/reality assumptions. Such is the case when, say, a Black thinker, having not yet broken through the intellectual chains resulting from the colonization of his/her mind, carries through a hermeneutic of works emerging from the life-world of Black folk and denies the claims which are advanced--in short, does not hear the work or negates the authenticity of the question put by the work. Such would be the case when/if, say, Black spiritual music were to be denounced as the product of a misguided people who wrongly appeal to a "White Man's God" and to other world (i.e. "heaven") rather than to their own affairs in a concrete fashion. Such a hermeneutic is itself inauthentic: it has not fully heard the question put by the experiences which ground spirituals, nor has it fully grasped the answer the music seeks to be.

The struggle to achieve an authentic hermeneutical understanding of the life-world of African Peoples cannot be unmindful

of frameworks and traditions of understanding which, implicitly, rationalize (that is to say, justify), and thus contribute to, the stabilization and perpetuation of our oppression, our blocked progressive development.

Authentic Hermeneutic-another value judgement? Yes! And again, explicitly so. The value judgement structures the orientation we take in the process of interpretation. As such it provides the framework for that understanding, the indices as to how it is to proceed, what will constitute a satisfactory answer to the question put which one seeks to understand. It is actualized in the dialogical encounter with the work, in a probing beyond the work to see, hear, question. What the work itself may not see, hear, question, but which conditions and grounds it. Hearing Black spirituals, for example, would entail moves into and through the music and lyrics to the conditions of life which ground them, our people's responses to them, and the mode of being which the spirituals carry: not resignation in the face of oppression, perhaps, but a form of struggle against oppression which, even though symbolic, becomes a source of strength to endure, to survive, to provide the foundation for future viability here and in the "other world." The struggle to achieve authentic hermeneutical understanding is a struggle to place the work, in its horizon of meaning, within the horizon of the heritage, needs, and aspirations of a living people, within their tradition of the heritage, needs, and aspirations of a living people, within their tradition and/or their break with tradition--within their revolution they struggle to realize, or the decline which intends their death.

If the context of authentic hermeneutical understanding is structured by these orientations, what is to be achieved by it? The end, in short, is enlightenment, growth, and, as a consequence, progressively liberating existence. As noted by Palmer:

When the author of a great work (expressions of various forms, we might add) opens up a possibility of being, we are interested in it not because he experienced it nor for anything it shows about himself (generally speaking) but because of our rootedness in existence, which furnished the deeper reference point for the assertion and the ground for its significance.¹³

More specifically, the goal of hermeneutical understanding for us would be increased self-transparency, a broadening and intensification of our personal and collective self-understanding, as a condition necessary for structuring our present and future projects. Critical decisions regarding where we must/should go, as persons, as a people, what it is we must be about in the context of reasonable, concrete possibilities, require that we know whence we have come. What forms of life-praxes are liberating can, to a great extent, be decided more reasonably only to the extent that we have understood well the range of forms of oppression suffered by our people and the conditions within which they did so, they continue to do so. Likewise, our stability and viability as a people require that the various joys and forms of happiness which have sustained us be grasped and preserved as guides to future endeavors, particularly in the context of the social world in which we live, which administers forms of entertainment which serve to pacify us in a situation of administered unfreedom. The achievement of hermeneutical understanding is thus enrichment through an encounter with the sedimentation of tradition resulting in an enlargement of possibilities of existence on the personal level, and, on a social level, with the communication and affirmation of the revealed possibilities. As a form of understanding, hermeneutics is grounded in a practical interest: a value grounding cognition as a commitment to the restoration and refinement of human consensus, to the mediation of tradition. Such an interest has at time served to ground the human or cultural sciences.

Thus:

Hermeneutic human sciences study the objectifications of human cultural activity... with a view to interpreting them, to find out the intended or at least the expressed meaning, in order to establish a co-understanding or possibly even consent which has not(yet) been obtained or repairing the ~~same-such~~ which has been disturbed; and, in general, to mediate traditions so that the historical dialogue of mankind may be continued or resumed, and also deepened.¹⁴

We must note that such a view of hermeneutics as an endeavor grounded in a practical interest involves the commitment, by virtue of that interest, to struggle against the tendencies which might lead to group-centered theorizings and practices as an end. The ideal is the realization in history of reasonable forms of life which condition progressively liberated existence for all peoples. Thus the endeavors in hermeneutics in the interest of African people is to be understood as a necessary movement in the worldwide struggles for emancipated human existence!

In much of the work of the revolutionary black psychiatrist Franz Fanon we have a particular strong example of the way in which hermeneutics can serve the interest in emancipation, that of African people and their European oppressors.

The practice of psychoanalysis stands out as an endeavor in hermeneutics which serves also the interest of emancipation: by way of the dialogue of the psychoanalytic situation, the patient is assisted in the achievement of liberation, in terms of increased self-transparency, from unconscious motives and various repressions which lead to illness, i.e. an imbalance among the dynamic structures of the person. It (psychoanalysis) has thus become a model of the development of knowledge as hermeneutics.¹⁵ Much of the work of Fanon is very striking confirmation of this (i.e., the emancipatory thrusts of hermeneutical understanding). This is particularly the case in "The Negro and Language,"¹⁶

wherein he probes the grounds of personality change experiences by black people of colonized countries who visit the "Mother Country." Fanon focused on the strenuous efforts of some African people-in this case from the Antilles-to learn the French language, the language of the master, as the completion of their (the "Natives") being:

The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter-- that is, he will come closer to being a real human being- in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. I am not unaware that this is one of man's attitudes face to face with being. A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.¹⁷

For Fanon, this struggle to master the French language was at basis an attempt thereby to achieve acceptance and, supposedly, liberation within and in terms of the world of the French, i.e. the oppressors. It was a struggle to be by being like the oppressor. The uncovering of this as the true motive for ~~the~~ activity of the "Native", the effort to bring it into full view that it might be confronted and affirmed as one's own motive in the process of being overcome via negation-the raising of it to the level of critically reflective consciousness so that it could be grasped for what it was as a process of radical self-denial, a struggle towards inauthenticity of person and people, from which we must be freed-this was an act of understanding in full service to the interest in emancipation: enlightenment as a necessary condition for correct praxis.

This hermeneutic of the passage of African people through the language forms, hence, all too often, the life-forms, of other peoples in a way which denies who we are, which prevents us from becoming what we must be, is but a part of wider endeavor called for if our people are to enjoy progressive enlightenment as a condition for the revolutionary moves we must be about. Such

a wider endeavor I would term cultural hermeneutics, in general. For without question one of the most significant aspects of the multifacted struggle on the part of African peoples for liberated existences has been and is the struggle to achieve cultural integrity: i.e., to embrace where available, to costruct where unavailable, those productions and expressions of meaning which serve to reflect the self-affirmations of black people, our views of the world, in concepts and life-forms which we have projected for these purposes.¹⁸

This is decisive. What is at issue is the meaning (and meaningfulness) of our existence and, subsequently, the nature of our being in terms of how that existence is described. The struggle, then, for cultural integrity (i.e., for a level of cultural development, and an understanding of it, which affirms and reflects our history, our present, and our future possibilities as a people, as a people among others), given the history of the various forms of oppression which have been, are being, directed against us, involves, in the words of one brother"--a counter-movement away from subordination to independence, from alienation through refutation, to self-affirmation..." by way of a process of "reflection" which "...creates a different (and opposing) constellation of symbols and assumptions."¹⁹ Thus the cultural struggle calls for endeavors in symbols reversal (reversal of symbolism)²⁰ whereby one moves, on the levels of symbols meaning, (and, it is hoped the levels of existence) from imposed determinations of a people's existence to those generated by the people themselves-or others in their behalf-in the process of living as affirmations of that existence in its authenticity.²¹

Hermeneutics, grounded, as we understand it, in our interest in enlightenment and emancipation, is a continuous task to be performed within the context of a number of our people's forms of

expression: the various music of jazz, blues, pop, spirituals; literature and poetry; religious language, folklore, etc., etc. We must remember, however, that hermeneutical understanding is always achieved within the context of the historical situation of the interpreter. The question, then, of serving an emancipatory interest in hermeneutics is a critical one; it emerges as a question of the self-understanding of the interpreter. Whether in fact the hermeneutical endeavor serves the interests of enlightenment and emancipation, as against serving the interests which would work to secure continued oppression, can in large part be determined by way of a critique of the forms of self-consciousness we experience in terms of which we orient ourselves and effect our various forms of praxis. The only sure way that we can act in accord with an interest in emancipation is to be self-conscious about our liberation: our praxes, even as acts of critical understanding, as in hermeneutics, must be guided by theory-critical understanding which has as its primary interest the liberation of black folk, and other humans, from domination, to the greatest extent possible.

III

Critical Thought in the Interest of Black Folk

1. The elaboration of social theory in the interest of the liberation of African people is itself a very serious and yet to be completed task. A review of the history of our struggles in this country reveals very clearly weakness, mistakes, wrong turns, etc., in our modes of organization, patterns of leadership and forms of practice as a result of serious deficiencies in our understanding of our situation and subsequent deficiencies in theories of struggle.²² Given the history of our presence in this country, the dominant theoretical framework out of which we have struggled has been that provided by the Declaration of Independence, the

Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. While progressive achievements have been realized as a result of struggles conditioned by a commitment to the Utopian vision of this framework, particularly in the areas of civil and political rights, this same framework provides the ideological cover for a non-democratic economic order and the concentration of political and economic power and socially produced wealth in fewer hands. Particularly, this framework, and its supporting beliefs, especially the commitment to reasoned persuasion and evolutionary reform and occasionally non-violent direct action as the only acceptable forms of struggle, have conditioned our struggles to such an extent that rarely have we broken through the veil of this cover to focus our struggles on the centers of power which will have to be broken through if progressively liberated existence is to be realized.

We have been slow to learn from our mistakes along these lines. The moves during the sixties from the struggle to achieve civil rights to the struggle to consolidate Black power reflect the incorporation of understanding which brothers and sisters achieved as a result of concrete experiences in struggle. Still, the theoretical weakness, hence, misguided political praxes, in terms of strategies and tactics, were evident. And, again, the critical insights of brother Cruse (Rebellion or Revolution?) were on time. For certainly, among other things, there was the obvious failure of historical continuity: the underdevelopment of our historical understanding, of ourselves and the world, led to the premature acclamation that the struggles at that point were in fact "the revolution." We harbored, generally, a rather naive, non-dialectical conception of historical change. In the face of the counter-moves by the established powers, many of us were left convinced of the impossibility of revolutionary change in America.

Conditioned by the "pepsi, generation" mentality of youthful America, we had wrongly expected "instant revolution."

On the other hand, there were many positives gained during this same period, not the least of them being the intensification of our consciousness as an African people with the subsequent developments in educational, political, and social dimensions. And we even came to recognize our limitations in our theoretical understanding, though to a large extent the result was a quick scramble to embrace uncritically the theoretical/ideological developments of other peoples developed in other times and places: we imported the theories without being able to import the historical conditions within which they were developed, within which they served as the guides to praxis.

The present lull, in this country at least, in the activities of struggle provide the much needed opportunity to correct this deficiency in our theoretical understanding of historical change. A fair share of our attention must be given to the development of critical understanding which is global, that is, which encompasses the totality of dimensions of our life in their interconnection (political, economic, social, cultural, i.e. art, religion, etc). Let us look at this briefly.

2. Some Elements of the Critical Thought:

An elaborated social-political theory in the interest of African people must have as its guiding aim our achievement of progressively liberated existence, the same for all humans, at a level in keeping with just distribution of the socially produced wealth and culture of the Nation/World.

Again, for our struggle, our theoretical understanding must be firmly grounded on the recognition of who we are: African people, in America, with the correct orientation to our peoples in Africa.

and their struggles-against colonialism and neo-colonialism; for a united Africa.

Thirdly, we must understand, as fully as possible, the unfoldings of human histories, in general, western and African history in particular, in terms of their dynamics and motive forces. Especially must we be increasingly clear regarding the unfolding of the history of the relationships of Africa, Europe, America, and increasingly, Russia and China. We, particularly, must give much serious attention to the historical development of capitalism in all its forms, and our place within it.

We must, then, be diligent in our efforts to understand our present situation, our situation in contemporary history; to grasp the dominant tendencies which, together with subordinate ones, structure the present situation, which, if they continue, will structure the future. Most importantly, we must search out concrete possibilities which we might struggle with others to realize and in so doing condition a line of historical development which intends the achievement of a life of greater well being for oppressed peoples at all levels.

Were we to be successful in these endeavors, another major task will involve the movement from theoretical understanding to concrete political practices. Involved here will be matters dealing with organization, leadership, tactics and strategies. Here too the notions and values which condition our visions of the yet to be achieved revolution must be at work conditioning our praxis. We cannot expect to achieve an authentic revolution through means which are contradictory to the standards of success of the revolution, the way of life which is to be its culmination. The standards must give rise to an ethic which conditions our relations to each other, other peoples, such that the making of the revolution and the life it ushers in are one.

The tasks of theorizing and praxis are not to be completed by one person, one group, no matter how "vanguard." A conscious division of labors unified by discipline and the progressive values of our people, of liberated human kind, is necessary. The elaboration of theory itself is a praxis which requires, as one of its moments the achievement of a correct synthesis from the dynamics of theorizing by various groups/persons. The impending events of southern Africa, of the whole of Africa, as well as the cascading changes within the west in general, demand this if our survival and viability as a people among and in concert with others who value and struggle for human existence at a progressively higher level, is a supreme value. Humans do not control historical development totally. But we, especially, must be about exerting greater conscious, rational, progressive influence if we are to insure, as best we can, our well-being. There is no other task for critical understanding in the interest of African peoples which is (self) conscious of its mission.

NOTES

¹John Bracey, Jr., et. al., Black Nationalism in America, Bobbs-Merill: New York, 1970.

²Irrational Man, Doubleday & Co., Inc.: Garden City, N.Y., 1962, pp. 4-5.

³William Morrow Co.; New York, 1967.

⁴Ibid., p. 364.

⁵"The Vocation of the Black Scholar," Education and Black Struggle: Harvard Educational Review, edited by the Institute of the Black World, Monograph No. 2, 1974, p. 6.

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Svetozar Stojanovic, Between Ideals and Reality: A Critique of Socialism and its Future, translated by Gerson S. Sher, Oxford University Press: New York, 1973, p. 12.

⁸"The Social Function of Philosophy," Critical Theory, Herder & Herder: New York, 1972, p. 268.

⁹Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁰Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic," Reason and Revolution, Beacon Press: Boston, 1968, p. ix.

¹¹Aron Gurwitsch, "Problems of the Life-World," Phenomenology and Social Reality, Maurice Natanson, ed., Martins Nijhoff: The Hague, 1970, pp. 53-54.

¹²Hermeneutics, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Ill., 1969.

¹³"Phenomenology and Literary Interpretation," Cultural Hermeneutics, Vol. 1, No. 2, July, 1973, (pp. 207-223), p. 219.

¹⁴Gerard Radnitzky, Contemporary Schools of Metascience, 3rd edition, Henry Regnery Co.: Chicago, 1973, p. 214.

¹⁵Cf. ibid., chpt. IVF4 ff; Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, trans. by Denis Savage, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1970.

¹⁶Black Skin, White Masks, Charles van Markmann, trans., Grove Press: New York, 1967.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸Lucius Outlaw, Language and Consciousness: Toward A Hermeneutic of Black Culture," Cultural Hermeneutics, Vol. 1, No. 4, February, 1974 (pp. 403-413), p. 403.

¹⁹James Turner, "The Sociology of Black Nationalism," The Black Scholar, 1, 1969, p. 18.

²⁰Carolyn F. Gerald, "The Black Writer and His Role," The Black Aesthetic, Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., Doubleday & Co: Garden City, N.Y., 1971 (pp. 370-378), p. 376.

²¹Outlaw, op. cit.

²²Cf., e.g., Cruse, Crisis, op. cit.; June Sochen, The Unbridgeable Gap: Blacks and Their Quest for the American Dream, 1900-1930, Rand McNally & Co.: Chicago, 1972; Robert Allen, "Racism and the Black Nation Thesis," Socialist Revolution, No. 26, (Vol. 6, No. 1), Jan.-March, 1976, pp. 145-150.