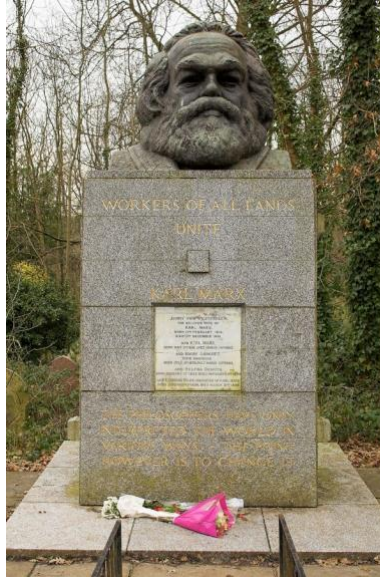


Post-Marxism as Compromise Formation

Gregory Meyerson



Foreword

by E. San Juan, Jr.

Fellow, W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University

Immediately after the historic election of Barack Obama, the first African-American President of the United States, pundits in the mass media and pseudo-public intellectuals claimed that we have entered a “post-racial” epoch. This seems to echo not only the assorted “postalities” (post-modern, post-colonial, post-capitalist, etc.) in vogue but also the slew of “endisms” (“end of history” and “end of ideology”) that distinguished the period from the end of the Vietnam War in 1973 to the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the first Gulf War in the nineties. Such trends betoken profound sociopolitical upheavals characterizing the vicissitudes of the Cold War from the end of World War II up to September 11, 2001, when anti-terrorism appeared to replace anti-communism as the prime ideological weapon of global capitalism. Terrorism, in fact, became conflated with

communism as well as with Marxism and socialism, all anathema to a putative “American way of life.”

In the United States, orthodox anti-communism of course has a long history since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 up to the McCarthyite reaction. It assumed racialized forms in various anti-immigrant laws and foreign-policy interventions to stifle Marxist-inspired decolonizing movements and wars of national liberation (Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Palestine, Iran, Grenada). Its latest embodiments are the Homeland Security State established by the USA Patriot Act, and the infamous Guantanamo prison for “unlawful combatants.” When the neoconservative tide rose with Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, anti-communism mutated and merged with a postmodernist tendency of rejecting the ideals and principles of the European Enlightenment, in particular the meta-narratives of secular progress and egalitarian democracy. This included Marxism as a universal narrative of class struggle, the passage of humanity from the kingdom of necessity to that of freedom. One manifestation of this repudiation of Enlightenment modernism is post-Marxism (represented here by such model thinkers as Stanley Aronowitz, Stuart Hall, Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and others). Post-Marxism is the rubric for the overarching framework within which ideas of post-racialism and post-modernist pragmatism gained purchase during the last two decades of the 20th century. Today, despite the obsolescence of post-structuralist axiomatics and norms (inspired by “masters of suspicion” such as Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, followed by Derrida and Foucault), post-Marxism survives as a residual current channelling radical impulses among academics and media propagandists into illusory reformist, individualist directions. Even Gramsci’s ideas, or their caricatures, have been co-opted by right-wing preachers for sectarian, xenophobic, fundamentalist goals (see Buttigieg 2009).

Despite its eroded prestige, post-Marxism still exerts influence in certain quarters of the “public sphere” and scholarly community. It needs to be confronted and challenged as a deceptive if seductive interpretation of Marx and the Marxian tradition. What Gregory Meyerson brilliantly accomplishes in this long-hibernating critique (first composed in rough draft about a decade ago and revised recently) is a rigorous analysis of the basic premises and assumptions of post-Marxism. Of course, the “post-Marxists” surveyed here cannot all be lumped under one rubric, given their diverse backgrounds

and heterogeneous insertions into intellectual history. What Meyerson strives to accomplish in this richly layered, perspicacious discourse is to isolate those ideas and beliefs that distort or falsify – even with the best of intentions! – the Marxian theory of racism, class, nation, race, and cognate categories and postulates. He focuses on the genealogy of those perversions, uncovering fallacies, half-truths, aporias, inconsistencies, manipulative interests, and unconscionable “bad faith.” Meyerson, however, is not intent in passing judgment on the whole corpus of texts by these authors. His chief motive is to show how the dismissal of the Marxist perspective on race and racism, with all its contentious nuances and complexity, by post-Marxists does not affect the validity, relevance, and potential efficacy of the historical-materialist method applied by numerous thinkers working in an ecumenical Marxian tradition. He is, to be sure, not trying to forge a scriptural, doctrinaire manifesto beloved by FBI/CIA think-tanks. His intent is both critical and heuristic, as much a project of theoretical understanding and empirical investigation as it is a polemical attack on the ideological ramparts of hegemonic Capital.

Meyerson’s incisive critique of “post-Marxism” attempts to diagnose the predicament of progressive thought caught between what he calls individualism/voluntarism and class reductionism/reification. His thesis is compressed in the first four paragraphs of this essay: the solution to racism offered by intellectuals such as Stanley Aronowitz, Cornel West, Stuart Hall, Stephen Steinberg, Slavoj Žižek, Howard Winant, Michael Omi, Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, and others, stems from a rejection of dialectical thought and its historical-materialist grounding. That is, in repudiating what they posit as crude positivist or empiricist notions of class, economy, etc., they fall into the opposite error of irrational metaphysics yielding essentialist and psychologistic formulas detached from the concrete historical dynamics of social life. What unites these varied post-Marxists, with their differing backgrounds, is their common repudiation of the Marxist principles of historical specificity and the need to situate the hypothesized social totality in the evolving contradictions of class society. They reject objective reality for its nominalist versions, scientific foundations for a logic of incommensurability and indeterminacy. Relativizing social phenomena as autonomous, they succumb to an arbitrary pluralism that makes society unintelligible and experience opaque. As Meyerson puts it, “What underlies the supposed supplementation of the Marxian class analytic functionalism by various autonomies is the supplementation of structural

explanation with method individualism.” In short, the post-Marxists have unwittingly abandoned the dialectical method for easy nominalist, eclectic, pragmatic shortcuts. Ironically, they reinforce the errors and excesses they originally denounced as the evils of “Marxism.”

Meyerson’s lucid demonstration of fallacies and inconsistencies in post-Marxist speculation strikes me as sensitively judicious, even-handed, and convincing. It contributes to the expanding field of theoretical discourses (such as those by Terry Eagleton (1996), Samir Amin (1998), Alex Callinicos (1989), Terry Ebert and Masud Zavarzadeh (2008), Peter McLaren, Istvan Meszaros, David Harvey, and others) responding to the Cold War disavowal of Marxism as a viable alternative if not oppositional theory of social change. Meyerson’s text is by choice limited to the salient effects of the “post-Marxist” syndrome to the description and explanation of racism in the United States, though his perspective can be extended to the investigation of peripheral and dependent formations. His exposure of Omi and Winant’s incoherence, as well as li"ek’s deconstructive jugglery (Meyerson’s commentary on li"ek is, to my mind, a *tour-de-force* performance of subtle debunking), is a classic example of Meyerson’s method of demystification. He underscores their self-defeating “anti-communist logic” which “produces not a dialectics of structure and agency but an aporetics and ultimately an apologetics” of predatory global capitalism and its neoliberal barbarism. Instead of explaining racist institutions and practices, post-Marxists obfuscate their sources and mystify their causes.

We can conceive further of nuanced elaborations of Meyerson’s critique useful to understanding this insidious genre of end-of-history, post-capitalist, post-racial apologetics. The style of critical reading shown here was initiated earlier with Meyerson’s two essays that I have personally found pedagogically rewarding and tenaciously provocative: “Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Labor Competition” (Fall 1997) and “Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflections on Cedric Robinson and Others” (Spring 2000), both posted in *Cultural Logic*. (At this point I want to acknowledge here my debt to these texts for enlightenment on the seductive fallacies of post-Marxist authorities some of whom I have invoked in my previous works [San Juan 1992, 2002]). Early this Spring 2009 Meyerson sent me a draft of the present essay. Given the attempt to revive hyperbolic, neoWeberian theories of “race” and “comparative racialization” (e.g., the

October issue of *PMLA*), I urged the author to publish it so as to counter this ideological Establishment farrago. Taken together, Meyerson's texts are cogent, discerning expositions of Marxist principles and modes of analysis applied to conjunctural moments and epochal stages of social development. They will help correct the conventional misconstruals of Marxism and settle accounts with the pseudo-leftist apologists of bourgeois decadence. Their discursive moves exemplify what Bertell Ollman (2003) calls "the dance of the dialectic" immanent in the melody of circumstances. They illustrate Lenin's concept of praxis in versatile operation, as Henri Lefebvre formulates it: "Praxis cannot close itself and cannot consider itself closed. Reality and concepts remain open and this opening has many dimensions: nature, the past, human possibilities. . . . Open to all sides, praxis (reality and concepts) does not, however, stray into indeterminacy. Only a certain kind of thinking, traditional analytic thought, confuses closure with determination, open-endedness with indetermination" (quoted in Leger 2006, 158; see also Callinicos [1989]). Meyerson's diagnosis of the anti-realist epistemology of post-Marxists is accurate and discriminating. I would add that the prevailing trend of philosophical nominalism (an approach sharply attacked by Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of "pragmatism") and neoliberal eclecticism (including the rise of biologism, eugenics, fetishisms of all sorts) is a symptom of the crisis of global capitalism in the last quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of this millennium. (For the historical roots of racism as mass xenophobia, see Hobsbawm [1994].)

"Always historicize!" Fredric Jameson (2000) once exhorted his fellow travelers. Indeed, following a historical-materialist orientation, we need to ground the theses and propositions advanced here in the context of specific historical conjunctures (e.g., the worldwide economic recession in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Reagan's militarism and imperialist aggressions in the eighties, the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, September 11, 2001, and the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the October 2008 financial meltdown). Intricate mediations between these macro-economic sequences and intellectual microprocesses need to be explored before one can hypothesize the nature of concrete, determinate totalities (see Chasin and Chasin 1974; Kolko 1984; Zinn 1990). In any case, Meyerson's work is a salutary beginning.

Let me close this necessarily limited foreword by an appeal to history. Unexpectedly, an instructive sequence of the nation's "racial narrative" intervened while

Meyerson was completing the revision of this essay. My colleague Professor Henry Louis Gates, director of the W.E. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University (where I worked as Spring 2009 fellow), was arrested in his home by Cambridge City police officer James Crowley last July. The illustrious black scholar was handcuffed and jailed for “disorderly conduct,” a code for challenging white supremacy. So much for post-racialism, neo-melting-pot pluralism, and end-of-culture-wars babble. Two commentators – African American scholars, sociologist Glenn C. Loury (2009) and legal expert Lani Guinier (2009) – powerfully argued that class or social inequality in general cannot be divorced from the racial history of the United States. In fact, racist practices and racializing institutions cannot be understood and explained apart from the class-defined economic and political history of the country, and that it is the materialist structures (institutions and practices) underpinning such an incident that give it meaning, resonance, and substantial implications from which to draw lessons. Post-Marxism would be at a loss to provide an intelligent and coherent explanation for it. At best, the “post-racial” compromise president, Barack Obama, can only furnish “small beer, big hangover” (as a *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich quipped) with reference to the president’s attempt to reconcile the warring factions/forces. Empire, class exploitation, and racism are closely intertwined. Class struggles continue in the US and everywhere. As a Filipino scholar from the oldest and most durable neocolony of the United States, the Philippines, where thousands of U.S. marines today continue to violate the Philippine Republic’s sovereignty and continue to wreak havoc on the lives of 90 million Filipinos, I can testify that racism (as ideology and control mechanism) cannot exist and thrive without its enabling framework: class/imperial domination. This incontrovertible insight underlies Meyerson’s vision of class-based internationalism and united-front solidarity to which I pay high respect.

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The critics of the Marxian theory of racism that I wish to discuss in the following pages are all overtly critical of the individualism underlying identity politics while also being critical of class reductionism. These critics include the neo-Gramscians Cornel West, Stanley Aronowitz, Stuart Hall and four neo-Gramscian teams – Michael Omi and Howard Winant; Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel; Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard; and Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield. In addition, I will be looking at the work of Stephen Steinberg and the early work of Lacanian former post-Marxist Slavoj Žižek. Many of these critics claim to offer, in Hall's phrase, a "Marxism without guarantees," with the relative autonomy of race being the key mediating category between the complementary errors of reification and voluntarism.¹ Whatever the differences between the critics I will be discussing – and the difference between, say, Michael Albert, one of the editors of *Z Magazine*, and early Žižek is in certain respects huge – I see them as part of the heterogeneous, often internally contradictory, post-Marxist discursive field.²

I reject the theories making up this field, arguing that their solution to the dual of reification/voluntarism is a compromise formation, eclectics disguised as dialectics. Though they tend as a group to reject the a-causal pure descriptions of some discourse theories (Hall's limited critique of Laclau and Mouffe is representative) and to stress the importance of structural factors, they define the structural in so inaccurate a way as to render their difference from discourse theorists minimal – since they share the latter's "deconstruction of class."

¹ See Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without guarantees," in Morley and Chen, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 25-47. The reification/voluntarism dual is Roy Bhaskar's term for variants on the freedom/determinism false dichotomy. In this context, post-Marxists equate Marxism with reification. I view, along with Bhaskar, the dual itself as a reification, one which this essay tries dialectically to work through.

² By neo-Gramscians, I refer really to post-Marxist Gramscians. Gramsci himself does not participate in the post-Marxist deconstruction of class. For a defense of Gramsci's class analysis, see my "'Hegemonizing' Gramsci: on Kate Crehan's 'Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology,'" in *Politics and Culture*, Issue 3, 2005: <<http://aspen.conncoll.edu/politicsandculture/page.cfm?key=423>>.

The compromise formations I will analyze here repeat those analyzed in my discussion of David Roediger.³ Class analysis is reduced to the “simply” or “merely” economic. This inadequate category then requires supplementation by both discourse theory and psychoanalysis, whose relation is in turn aporetic. Much more so than in Roediger, however, the compromise formations of the neo-Gramscians involve a prominent commitment to anti-realist epistemology, which reinforces both the psychoanalytic components of their theories and the worst elements of the identity politics about which they are overtly critical. So the central component here of neo-Gramscian compromise formation is a commitment to the logic of incommensurability, a commitment that leads to a plurality of problems.

The logic of incommensurability naturalizes racial and or national identity and thus contradicts the explicit social constructionism of the theorists. By placing identity beyond rational justification, the logic of incommensurability promotes respect for difference in the form of the unintelligible, ultimately monstrous other. The discursive field inhabited and reproduced by these thinkers contains in addition an explicit, often virulent, anti-communist rhetorical component. This anti-communism functions to demonize class analysis – along with its internationalist moral and political stance – by equating both with a dominative instrumental reason in turn associated with a cannibalizing and monstrous white supremacy. The use of anti-communism to demonize class functions to mask the irrationality and essentialism of the categories of race and nation, categories resting in turn on the logic of incommensurability, etc. The essentialism otherwise contested by neo-Gramscians is thus tacitly licensed as the irreducibly free other – uncaptured and uncaptureable by the classist gaze.

West/Hall/Aronowitz

In “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression,” Cornel West acknowledges the economics of racism, even its class function of divide and rule, but then says that this analysis is inadequate. He deems Marxism reductionist and replaces it with what he calls a neo-Gramscian analysis of racism owing much to Stanley

³ I have discussed David Roediger in “Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition,” *Cultural Logic*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1997); and in “Rethinking Black Marxism,” *Cultural Logic*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2000).

Aronowitz. West begins his discussion of neo-Gramscianism by reducing Marxism to an a priori economism:

The neo-Gramscian rejection of the base/superstructure metaphors of economism (or logocentric Marxism) entails that it is no longer sufficient or desirable to privilege the mode of production and class subjects in an a priori manner and make causal claims (whether crude or refined) about racist ideology owing to simply economic factors.⁴

Hall too equates class with “the economic” and economic reductionism, which, in his words, “has little or no theoretical room for conceptualizing the political and ideological dimensions let alone . . . other types of social differentiation such as social divisions and contradictions arising around race, ethnicity, nationality and gender” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 418).

In response to this “reductionism,” West (and other post-Marxists) “promotes a radically historical approach in which the economic, political, cultural and ideological regions of a social formation are articulated and elaborated in the form of overdetermined and often contradictory class and non-class processes” (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988, 24). West’s critique, like David Roediger’s, is premised on equating class analysis with the simply economic and then showing how the ideological, cultural and political are necessary supplements. West refers to these contradictory class and non-class processes as “irreducible” logics: the irreducibility of white supremacist logics; the irreducibility of modern scientific discourse, which in turn seems to contain an irreducibly psychological component, an irreducibly racializing epistemological component “which secretes the idea of white supremacy.” Modern scientific discourses have an immanent power, “a life and logic of their own, not in a transhistorical realm but within history alongside yet not reducible to demands of an economic system.”⁵ They are not reducible to ideologies.

⁴ Cornel West, “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 24.

⁵ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An African American Revolutionary Christianity*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 47-65.

The supposed psychosexual logic underlying and partially explaining racism “arises from the phallic obsessions, Oedipal projections and anal-sadistic orientations in European culture that endow African men and women with sexual prowess.” Africans are associated with “dirt, odious smell and feces,” “acts of bodily defecation, violation and subordination” (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988, 23).

I have responded elsewhere to the problematic assumptions undergirding this approach. In short, to recap earlier arguments, this “psychosexual logic” is an ideology that functioned powerfully in the interests of the dominant classes, has been significantly contested by anti-racists, and has lost the hold it once had. One might argue that this psychosexual logic depended on the discourse of white female purity, which, for numerous reasons, is no longer hegemonic. At any rate this discourse has been replaced – though it has by no means disappeared – by other discourses functional for class rule. Despite West’s claim that an examination of these logics constitute detailed historical inquiry, I have tried to suggest that the psychoanalytic premises deriving from anality are irreducibly essentialist and a-historical.

West’s notion of a “scientific racist logic rests upon a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors, . . . Cartesian notions of the primacy of the subject and the preeminence of representation . . . buttressed by Baconian ideas of observation, evidence and confirmation that promote . . . the activities of observing, comparing, measuring and ordering the physical characteristics of human bodies” (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988, 22). He adds to this the neutral and normative gaze, an idea clearly indebted to Foucault’s analysis of normalizing observation. “These forms of rationality and scientificity,” he notes, while “efficacious in the quest for truth and knowledge, prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality” (West, 1982, 48).

There is much to object to here. In these sentences at any rate, West seems to equate in Frankfurt school and Foucauldian manner scientificity with domination. This equation is based on the reduction of science to positivist science in which objectivity is equated with neutrality, a placeless, detached, cruel and classifying normative gaze where observation and evidence are divorced from theory. Though he is aware of the pitfalls of relativism (in the same way that he is aware of the pitfalls of the postmodernist war against totality), he nonetheless basically accepts postmodernist anti-realism.

Stanley Aronowitz has commented that the very concept of a proletarian class subject as an “objective, a priori class itself” is problematic.⁶ This comment is part of Aronowitz’s critique of the scientism of the category of class where science and the Marxian and scientific concept of class are equated with contradictory notions of the given – at once a priori and self evident, prior to experience and nothing but pure experience. Both West and Aronowitz deconstruct the concept of class by tying it to positivism, which is in turn falsely equated with objectivity and realist epistemology. The neo-Gramscians fabricate (in order then to critique) a vulgarized concept of class coupled with a vulgar concept of truth.

The epistemic critique of class is closely connected to the critique of the base/superstructure distinction, a distinction related in turn to the equation of class analysis and economism. The epistemic dimension of the deconstruction of base/superstructure is based in the view that the distinction rests on foundationalist and reflectionist assumptions. To elaborate a bit on earlier comments, the nonpolitical economic base founds the political superstructure, which in turn reflects the base. This is understood to mean that the base “causes” the superstructure – that once you understand the base, the economic character of a society, you can predict its political character.

For Hall, Marxism (before Gramsci) requires that all other determinations “correspond directly and immediately” to the economic, are a “mechanical function” of it. The relation of superstructure to base is one of structural transparency, simple expressive totality, allowing one “to read off ideological and political developments from their economic determinations” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 418). As West puts it, there “is no direct correspondence between non-discursive structures, such as a system of production (or, in Marxist terms, an economic base), and discursive structures, such as theoretical formations (or, in Marxist terms, an ideological superstructure). Rather there are powers immanent in non-discursive structures and discursive structures” (West, 1982, 49).

Aronowitz pursues this deconstruction of correspondence, quoting Przeworski’s comment that processes of class formation “while not arbitrary, are not determined uniquely by the structure of social relations. More than one outcome lies within the

⁶ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 73.

limits set by those relations.” Class can no longer be seen “as objective in the sense of determining uniquely what classes will emerge as classes in struggle.” Aronowitz himself adds, following this general tack, that “the multiplicity of determinations that constitute classes are (in the final analysis) not subject to prediction and control, since historical actors are formed out of complex processes which may be specified (in advance) in their structural limits but not their temporal course.”⁷

In the neo-Gramscian characterization, the truth of class is at once an a priori and teleological guarantee. Insofar as its a priori truth is not immediately recognized, it will then be guaranteed teleologically as the mechanisms of history inevitably reveal themselves in a moment of proletarian chiasm. In Leninist versions, according to this characterization, it is the party that will remove the veil of ignorance from a formerly blind, now wide-eyed proletariat, able to see the truth in the blink of an eye – a truth they have in fact always already known (a priori): as Leia says to Luke after Luke informs her she is his sister: “yes, I knew, somehow I have always known.”⁸ Economic reductionism “brings in its wake” “immediate infallibility” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 419).

This kind of Marxism, in its “spurious search for scientific guarantees,” becomes more and more like a religion as its guarantees diverge from the facts. Such is the status of the concept of the mode of production, which Hall derisively calls a “talismán” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 420, 437). Everywhere associated with the simple, the expressive, the guarantee, Hall’s non-Gramscian Marxism is also associated with homogeneity, as in the predicted homogenization of the class subject following directly upon the homogenization of labor power as itself the expression of the law of value.

Strategically, this concept requires the total domination of the industrial proletariat (the direct strategic counterpart to the domination of the economic): “*all*” struggles to “be subordinated and reduced to an industrial struggle, condensed around the workplace, and a *simple* choice between trade union and insurrectionary or parliamentary forms of politics.” The state, “simply an administrative and coercive apparatus” “stamped with an exclusive class character,” is “a *thing* to be seized,” and “smashed”

⁷ Aronowitz and Przeworski are correct that class struggles are not direct reflections of class structure. The problem here is that they subtly conflate class struggles and class structures. This leads to the full-blown post-Marxist aporia of struggles without structures or structures that are as insubstantial and politically indeterminate as the indeterminate and contingent struggles that constitute them. The citation is from Aronowitz (1981, p. 76).

⁸ I am quoting (from memory) from *The Return of the Jedi*.

with a single blow” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 430, 428). The apocalyptic implications of such single blows are further theorized in the strategic concept of war of maneuver “where everything is condensed into one front and one moment of struggle and there is a single strategic breach in the enemy’s defenses which enables the new forces to rush in and in a flash obtain a definitive victory, win the war once and for all.” The ideological correlate of this war of maneuver is a view in which ideologies are transformed “by replacing one, whole, already formed conception of the world with another” (Morley and Chen, 1996, 426, 434). As Hall puts it in another essay, such an idea involves the overthrow and substitution of “alternative ideas and values in a riot of cultural transvaluation”: “This is the image of the ‘world turned upside down,’ of Trotsky’s ‘their morals and ours,’ of the mutually exclusive worldviews of opposing class cultures” (Morley and Chen, 288).

Needless to say, for Hall such a view is, well, too simple. It is everywhere contradicted by the complexity of reality. To choose one relevant example, such a view is virtually defenseless when faced with “the purchase of racist ideologies within the working class” and “related institutions like trade unions which, in the abstract, ought to be dedicated to anti-racist positions” (Morley and Chen, 439). Hall’s neo-Gramscian rebuttal to his characterization of Marxian class reductionism pits Althusser’s concepts of overdetermination and concrete social formation against economic determinism and the abstract, empty and talismanic mode of production. Corresponding to this division is the rejection of the class-based model of the homogenization of abstract labor in favor of a model emphasizing uneven development (regional unevenness), unstable equilibria, ethnic and racially differentiated labor forces.

Class, in short, is associated with historical inevitability, a priori and teleo-eschatological guarantees, and prediction – with positivist science and dogmatic, even chiliastic, religion and economism. It is this series of equations that, to repeat, produces the need for the relative autonomy of politics, culture, ideology, race, gender, etc. While Hall appears to retain some commitment to the “economic” as perhaps determining in the last instance, Aronowitz – in pure post-Marxist fashion – deconstructs this as well. As Aronowitz puts it, “the last instance never comes” (Aronowitz, 1981, 110). Given the false equation of class with the economy, followed by the shearing off of all that is

relatively autonomous from it, the Althusserian last instance does indeed seem like an act of faith. As numerous commentators have pointed out, overdetermination easily becomes in effect no determination, at least no structural determination. Cornel West has acknowledged that this Althusserian talk of everything overdetermining everything else holds the danger of slipping into “explanatory nihilism” – the refusal or inability to make explanatory commitments about history and society (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988, 24). Overdetermination (in which no process is privileged over any other) plus anti-realist anti-foundationalism leaves us privileging description over explanation. Interestingly, Laclau has commented that narrating the dissolution of foundations “reveals the radical contingency of the categories linked to that foundation.”

“My intention,” he goes on to say, “is revelatory rather than explanatory.”⁹ Let us add that revelation without explanation is pretty patently theological. Thus the theology of a guaranteed Marxism is supplanted by post-Marxist revelation. Indeed, it is difficult to abandon grounds! And as the Laclau example might suggest, if you abandon explanatory grounds rooted in a justifiable epistemology (which, I have been arguing, is a realist epistemology), other (theological) grounds are likely to supplement pure description.

These difficulties with description are related to West’s discussion of scientific discourse, which West appears to take as brute, having a life of its own. Yet the Foucauldian notion of the normative gaze becomes itself rooted I would contend in the a-historical notion of masculinist desire or the male gaze. This is made clear in someone like Iris Young, who appropriates both Kovel’s “aversive” character, with its roots in Freud’s concept of anality, and Kristeva’s concept of the “abject” to explain the classifying mania underlying the “scaling” of bodies that informs the presumed autonomy of scientific discourse. In other words, scientific logic reduces to a psychosexual logic – a reduction that threatens to erode West’s (and Young’s) “neo-Gramscian” pluralism. If the neo-Gramscianism is threatened here, so is the recourse to a psychosexual reduction. Since, in Foucault, for example, the normative gaze is theorized from a Nietzschean perspective that deconstructs normative epistemology, the epistemological foundation of the psycho-sexual-racial logic is undermined. Thus, the epistemic impoverishment of

⁹ Quoted in Andrew Ross, ed. *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 73.

post-Marxist anti-realism engenders a psychosexual foundationalism that the epistemology undercuts.¹⁰

The psychosexual explanation of western science also purports to explain the presumed obsession with prediction and control – scientific discourse as anality. Leaving aside the anality explanation, the post-Marxian association of science (natural and social) with prediction and control is based on equating science with positivism (and not a very sophisticated positivism at that). As far as social science goes, as Bhaskar has noted many times, the social sciences cannot be predictive and so must be primarily explanatory. Some prediction is involved – that capitalism cannot be reliably reformed, that its reforms are in many cases likely to be rolled back where they have been won, that the reforms won cannot be generalized, and those that have been won, while a product of class struggle, have also been accommodated by non-generalizable, contingent, capital expansion which itself relies on uneven (over and underdevelopment) development and thus exploitation and superexploitation elsewhere. But the fine-grained details of uneven development cannot be predicted or scripted. I have argued, rather, that this element of unpredictability is itself derivable from the unstable geography of capital accumulation!

The neo-Gramscian/post-Marxian view that the Marxian account of ideology requires direct correspondence with the base is, as I have exhaustively tried to demonstrate, laughable. Not only is the flexibility and changeability of ideological strategies not automatically derivable from the needs of class rule, this very flexibility is best explained on the class analytic functionalist account I have offered. Also, despite neo-Gramscian claims to historicity and particularity, to “detailed,” “micrologico-political,” “historical analyses,” what we end up with, ironically, is Aronowitz’s assertion of the “transhistorical status of race and nationality”: an idea itself supported by, as I have been arguing from the beginning, a depth psychology account of “the ‘dark side’ of universal human nature” that is in turn the repressed other of an inherently repressive, amoral and calculating rationality. Race (and gender) is the transhistorical product of the up to now eternally repressed white male psyche (Nelson and Grossberg, 23 and Aronowitz, 1981, 98).

¹⁰ See Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chapter 5 and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Aronowitz claims that “racial hatred is an effect of the unevenness and segmentation of American capitalist development.” Immediately, however, he notes that racial hatred is not an effect of economic relations alone (again he has equated class with economic relations alone) – that racism “is an aspect of pre-capitalist relations as well” and while these forms are linked to economic privilege, they remain “relatively autonomous insofar as ideological relations do not develop synchronously with economic and political relations.” Later, Aronowitz makes use of a version of the labor segmentation thesis, with which I disagree, that “certain strata of the working classes are situated in places that make them inherently antagonistic to the interests of the underclasses.” It is clear from the context that this division is racialized. After noting that Marxists try to account for the particularity of racial oppression by deeming it “special oppression,” he nonetheless sees this oppression as fundamentally unassimilable within a class framework. Marxism simply “cannot come to grips with the nationalist contention that race questions are not subsumed under the categories of economic difference or ideological relations, but have connotations that strike to the heart of ‘the deep structure’ of societies marked by social hierarchies” (Aronowitz, 1981, 94, 98).

This deep structure, as I have suggested, is bound up with rationality itself and the will to dominate nature. And the will to dominate nature is inseparable from the domination of women and non-whites, a domination which goes very deep, so deep as to be “pre-linguistic” (Aronowitz, 96). The tie between his defense of the relative autonomy of race and gender and epistemological matters needs even further elaboration. The relative autonomy of race and gender is tied to the transhistoricality of race argument, which is in turn associated with the permanence and ineluctability of difference. This latter idea follows from the epistemological critique of representation – nature and human nature always exceed the controlling efforts of representation. As Aronowitz insists, women and people of color are associated with this uncontrollability of nature – an uncontrollability that simultaneously and paradoxically is part of the exoticizing discourse of representation and what really exceeds it.

In his critique of Leninist representationalism (the claim that the party represents the working classes), which Aronowitz makes clear is a critique of the inherent inadequacy of master discourses, an inadequacy manifest in the crisis of representation (and the crisis of historical materialism), Aronowitz claims that the party can represent

the working class “only by suppressing the emancipatory goal which, in effect, remains unrepresentable in the empirical sense” (Aronowitz, 125). (In *Star Wars*, Leia’s comment to Darth Vader that, to paraphrase, the more the forces of evil – Darth and the commander of the death star – try to control the rebellion, the more the rebellion “will slip through your fingers” captures Aronowitz thinking here well enough.) The crisis of representation haunting Marxism is grounded in “the epistemological assumptions of the party as the repository of scientific knowledge which can ‘reflect’ the will of the unified class, even if the class does not ‘know’ it.” Aronowitz then says that this feature of Marxist theory “has been challenged by the Althusserian school on the basis of its attempt to deny a theory of knowledge as a legitimate aspect of Marxist theory”: “that is, the concept of representation as it is employed by traditional Marxism presupposes the distinction between knowledge and its object, thereby forgetting that knowledge is both constituted by its object and also constitutes the object itself” (Aronowitz, 126).

Several pages later Aronowitz states that “science, including Marxist theory, provides no space for undecidability or indeterminacy” and then transforms the unknowable into a subjective category, showing it to be the result of the experimental method, “rather than a property of nature itself” (Aronowitz, 130). At any rate, undecidability and indeterminacy are now a property of nature – a point consistent with the assertion that links women and blacks with the uncontrollability of nature. Women and minorities become properties of nature that exceed the capacities of (Marxian) representation. This excessiveness Aronowitz elsewhere associates with the unrepresentability of desire, the desire for freedom, a desire that he links with cultural autonomy so that it appears that the nature/culture distinction has been abolished. This emancipatory impulse, unrepresentable, uncontrollable, a property of nature (and culture), and women and people of color but not of the white male western rationalist psyche, cannot itself become hegemonic for it is inherently counterhegemonic: “the aspiration of emancipation is counterhegemonic in nature” for it is of nature. This unknowable and uncontrollable property of nature, this desire, is what lays the basis for the assertion that “morality is objective, rooted in unfulfilled needs” (Aronowitz, 131).

Let us gather our aporias. While, on post-Marxian grounds, Aronowitz rejects any (“necessary” or “unique”) determination of superstructure by base, class consciousness by class position, he nevertheless reasserts a crude base/superstructure

dichotomy in asserting an “inherent antagonism” between white and black labor – rooted in a racial division of labor. And again, contra post-Marxist anti-essentialism, he talks of an “inherently counterhegemonic” emancipatory impulse! There are other problems with this notion as we will see shortly.

The idea that a party could speak in the interests of a group without that group or members of that group knowing it is as we have seen bound up with the charge of elitism directed against Marxism and the concept of false consciousness – the tie to Leninism is made explicit by James Scott when he argues that the concept of false consciousness is the ideology of the Leninist vanguard party whose function is to legitimate Vanguard Party elitism. This point aside, the basic epistemic claim here is that there is no object independent of its concept, a claim which is marshaled to refute the possibility that the masses might not always be in possession of knowledge of their own interests. That a group or an individual for that matter might not know its own interests is ruled out on the epistemic ground that objects (here class interest) are never independent of knowledge. The corollary of this reduction of ontology to epistemology (what Bhaskar has called the epistemic fallacy) is the reduction of understanding to self-understanding.

As I argued above, this characteristic post-Marxist reduction of understanding to self-understanding has as its political function the equation of Marxism with (white) elitism and instrumental rationality and undergirds the autonomy argument for race (and gender). And yet, once the autonomy argument is established, it can be immediately undermined by psychoanalytic premises in which whites for example – with the exception of anti-elitist postmodern intellectuals who can afford therapy – *almost never know what they're doing so ensnared are they by the duplicitous forces of anality*. One of the reasons for this contradiction of course is that the reduction of understanding to self-understanding is totally incoherent, making a very mockery of self-understanding itself – for without a concept of understanding in principle independent of one's self-understanding, the latter loses all sense. If understanding just is self-understanding, then one could *never come to understand oneself* since by definition one would *always be in possession and in understanding of oneself*. And of course there would be no criteria or justification for one's claim to understand oneself since the concepts of justification and criteria entail the very independence of understanding from self-understanding that the hermeneutic reduction denies. Paradoxically, self-understanding would be simply given

– self evident yet simultaneously arbitrary. It is, however, the very category of the self evident that the neo-post-and anti-Marxian traditions claim so often to dismantle.

At any rate, as soon as Aronowitz denies the distinction between concept and object, he reasserts it. Only this time, the object is not just independent of the concept but cut off from it altogether – in principle unreachable and unknowable. This unknowability Aronowitz represents as an emancipatory desire (again associated with minorities and women) rooted in unfulfilled needs which can never be known and which are the basis for an unknowable moral objectivity! In reducing object to concept, ontology to epistemology, he reduces being to knowledge but then turns around and, critiquing this very reduction, cuts being off from knowledge and rationality entirely, a move that jettisons “race” and gender into the unknowable realm of the radically other, which nonetheless becomes the utterly mysterious basis for moral objectivity. This all dovetails with West’s comment quoted above that western rationality and scientific discourse produce knowledge and truth yet make the notion of black equality unintelligible: Black equality, following the logic, becomes the other of (western) rationality. If objectivity is the radical and incommensurable other of rationality, then by definition this cannot be known and takes on the role of an arbitrary postulate. So while Aronowitz wishes to make this alterity a property of nature instead of a “subjective category,” he has no basis for drawing the required distinction, so his unknowability becomes in effect not only an arbitrary, subjective wish, but an a priori one. His accusation that Marxism rests on “objective, a priori categories” is not only false – the concept of class interest rests on objective a posteriori (explanatory) categories – but also applies to his own incoherent discourse, lying at the base of his concept of emancipation, a concept that claims to be objective and a priori (not subject to the dictates of experience in any sense).

It would of course be much simpler, more coherent, more explanatory, to argue that racist ideology, disguised as science, rendered black equality unintelligible – that this racist science got it wrong about black people and that this can be empirically (though not self-evidently) demonstrated. That if there is racist ideology disguised as science, there is also anti-racist ideology at least in part rooted in good science – the science of realists like Stephen Jay Gould or Richard Lewontin or Pilar Ossorio. The question then becomes, why does racist discourse in its changing shapes become either the common sense or a seemingly permanent contender for truth despite the existence of devastating

counterarguments? Put another way, why is *The Bell Curve* on the cover of *Time* and not *Not in Our Genes*? As I have tried to demonstrate, a Marxian class analytic functionalism answers this question far better than its supposedly complex and non-reductionist rivals.

The autonomy arguments I have been considering all rely on something like the claim of irreducibility – that whatever factor we are considering, and our focus has been “race,” this factor in some sense has a life of its own. I think this idea is for the most part without merit – a reification in fact. Aronowitz, we recall, making an argument about race that has often been made about patriarchy, says that race cannot be reduced to class, the economy, or capitalism since it is “an aspect of pre-capitalist as well as capitalist modes of production” (Aronowitz, 94). Elaborating, he suggests that the inadequacy of Marxism on race is its inability to grasp that economic, political and ideological relations do not develop synchronously – another way of stating their relative autonomy and irreducibility. I have already argued as part of a defense of Marxism that ideology, for example, does not directly correspond to the economy, though there are powerful forces at work such that at a social level as opposed to the level of particular individuals the production of ideas under conditions of capitalist class rule are very likely to be functional for its reproduction.

The argument here is essentially that “race” and/or gender is older than capitalism, that at least in part or in the main, race and gender are leftovers, stubbornly persisting from older modes of production. Race would be a leftover from pre-capitalist caste systems or primitive practices of scapegoating. Violence against women, especially in third world countries like India, are feudal remains so to speak – widow burning, dowry murders, rape. In Frederic Jameson’s version of this autonomy argument (itself an application of Althusser’s notion of social formation), these feudal remainders are theorized in terms of non-synchronous yet coexisting modes of production – “the co-existence of several modes of production all at once.” He goes on to say – and Aronowitz is making analogous arguments for race – that sexism and the patriarchal are to be grasped as “virulent survivals specific to the oldest modes of production” – virulent survivals that include not only the aforementioned practices but also the gender division of labor as well (as we will see in the next section, Stephen Steinberg makes a somewhat similar argument about the racial division of labor).

What “red feminists” like Ebert and Mies argue is that these practices including the gender division of labor are fundamental to current practices of capital accumulation, “the very basis of capital accumulation.” As Ebert puts it:

This is not to say that the gender division of labor has not also been basic to previous modes of production – but to read it as a residual mode of production coexisting with capitalism is to negate the ways in which the gender division of labor has been radically reconfigured by capitalism and is fundamental to the mode of production and division of labor that is capitalism.¹¹

It is part of the uneven development of capitalism that some (not all) practices originating before capitalism are reconfigured, reappropriated, in Meszaros’s happy phrase, “qualitatively redimensioned.”¹² Why some practices persist and others disappear or why practices which disappeared reappear cannot be explained, or so a Marxian would argue, by the virulence hypothesis. As David Harvey has argued, the reappearance in the core of homework and sweatshops has to do with the changing geography of capital accumulation not the reawakening of older forms – as if these older forms were slumbering volcanoes or sleeping Godzillas from an archaic past brought to life, a life of its own, by, say, nuclear experiments.

In his comments on colonialism, Aronowitz would seem to acknowledge something like the force of the social control thesis yet insists on its inadequacy. He says for instance that the “violence visited upon colonial peoples abroad and upon racially oppressed groups at home cannot be explained exclusively by the categories of economic exploitation and political interest.” However much agents of imperialism act in accord with their interests, “there can be no assertion that each act is justified merely by its economic or political outcome.” The otherness produced to justify the reproduction of exploitation hardens – he borrows Sartre’s terms here – into “a practico-inert.” He asserts that racism “has become a mode of existence of late capitalism, not an extrinsic feature of our society, removable like a coat in summer” (Aronowitz, 103). The

¹¹ Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 142-5. The Jameson references are cited by Ebert.

¹² Istvan Meszaros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996).

idea here is, I think, that past racism, with all its reproductive and justificatory functions, outlives these functions, becomes an inertial force, takes on a life of its own: “having been produced, it takes on the aspect of permanence,” an aspect so “imbedded” as to become pre-linguistic. So race is autonomous, pre-existing capitalism and living on; yet even where it is produced by capitalism for justificatory reasons, it stubbornly outlives these reasons, taking on a life of its own.

The problem here is that Aronowitz acts as if the Marxian hypothesis requires that “each act” of colonial and racist violence be “justified merely by its economic or political outcome” (Aronowitz, 103). Marxism means to explain systemic practices, not “each act.” This is not a trivial point because I think what is at work here are not only different objects of explanation (the systemic character of racial violence versus the racial violence of “each act”) but different, even incompatible forms of explanation.

Marxian macro explanations are not arrived at by summing up the individual motives and interests behind each act. To do so would be to see macro explanations and macro properties as reducible to the sum of individual micro properties. Under the guise of arguing that Marxism is inadequate in accounting for the specificity and particularity of race, Aronowitz smuggles in what appears to be a kind of method individualism – that is to say a reductionist and individualist epistemology utterly inappropriate for explaining macro (and emergent) properties. *What underlies the supposed supplementation of the Marxian class analytic functionalism by various autonomies is the supplementation of structural explanation with method individualism.* But you cannot supplement structural explanation with method individualism in order to make the former more particular, specific, adequate. You’re mixing two incompatible forms of explanation. Method individualist explanations of race would arrive at an explanation by adding up the interests and motives of each act of racism; however, this is not an explanation of racism at all but a potential mystification of it.

If we look at lynching during the Jim Crow era, for example, Brundage argues that most lynchings took place in the cotton belt and were related to the particularities of planter domination and labor control in a cotton-belt economy. He also notes that racial violence and lynchings were a result of whitecapping – land hungry white farmers striking out against black competitors and the planters who hired them. Both the white planters and the land hungry yeomen farmers could view their racist terror in the context

of maintaining racial deference (an ideological climate for which the ruling class was primarily responsible), yet “white employers of terrorized blacks sometimes took steps to suppress whitecapping either by protecting their black employees or by prosecuting whitecappers. . . . Such efforts were bitter reminders that the slogan of white supremacy could not camouflage the contrasting interests of land-starved white farmers and planters.”¹³

In Talapoosa County in 1931, the home of the Communist-led anti-racist Sharecroppers Union, it would be ludicrous to assess the institutional character of the county by adding up each racist and anti-racist act. It would be possible under such a situation that “anti-racist acts” would outnumber racist acts (however these acts would be delineated), yet this would totally distort the fact that the county was racist – that its dominant institutions rewarded racism and punished antiracism. In the same way, the racist character of the cotton belt is distorted if you simply add the racist acts of planters and the racist acts of whitecappers since in certain ways the interests of the two groups were opposed, with the former having hegemonic power such that whitecapper terror could be denounced and punished.

Aronowitz’s “inertia” is a fetish, a reification. Racist acts do not harden to take on a life of their own. Those which reinforce dominant power relations are actively reproduced or, to use the language I dislike, allowed “to have a life of their own.” Racist acts that do not function reproductively are attacked as of course are anti-racist acts. Inertia I would argue results from not looking closely enough at the selective pressures dominant institutions exercise on political struggles. Elsewhere, I have made the point that David Roediger mixes incompatible frameworks – Jordan’s psychoanalysis with Morgan’s social control thesis (after having falsely constructed Morgan as economist). We have the same situation here with Aronowitz mixing Marxian structural explanation and individualist explanation, the latter (paralleling Jordan above), as I have argued, not an explanation at all. In both cases, incoherent eclecticism is rewritten as “complexity” or “scientific pluralism.”

In his argument against Samuel Huntington’s far less “subtle” versions of “cultural autonomy,” where the world shakes out in a clash of incommensurable cultures,

¹³ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 26-7.

cultures whose differences are “ineluctable,” Samir Amin states that while diverse traditional cultural spaces have not disappeared, “they have been deeply transformed within and without by modern capitalism.” And that the depth of this transformation has nothing to do with the “intrinsic force of cultural particularities” (with lives of their own). It is the global dominance of capitalism that emptied ancient cultures of their content: “Where capitalism is most developed, its modern culture has been internally substituted for ancient cultures.” But “in the capitalist peripheries, the domination of capitalist culture did not fully manage to transform radically the ancient local cultures”:

This difference has nothing to do with the specific characters of diverse traditional cultures, but everything to do with the forms of capitalist expansion, both central and peripheral.

While I cannot go into detail here, Amin’s analysis implies a fierce repudiation of theories of atavism or tribalism, even a “return” to various fundamentalisms understood as feudal remains with lives of their own. What Amin is suggesting is that Huntington’s reactionary Weberian apologetics for the inevitable dominance of capitalism have been in effect masked by the pseudo subversive gloss of “difference.” Imperialism and culturalism, for Amin, “are always good bedfellows”:

The choice is this: people either accept imperialism, the end of history, the inevitability of the market or closet themselves in their own “cultural specificities,” a choice where “the dice are loaded” and the west will always win, the others will always be beaten.¹⁴

Another possibility, though perhaps this is just another way of saying the same thing, is that the return to the past becomes a, or the, form of class rule in the periphery, even the means by which to modernize, to compete with the core.

It becomes perhaps clearer at this point what’s wrong with Hall’s critique of Marxism. Though Marxian notions like “uneven development,” “regime of accumulation,” “labor market segmentation” (with its intimate relation to a racial and

¹⁴Samir Amin, “Imperialism and Culturalism Complement Each Other,” *Monthly Review*, June, 1996.

gender division of labor), are certainly contestable, Hall splits these things off from Marxism in a way that mirrors Laclau and Mouffe's splitting off of class struggle from the class structure. Marxists who, as part of explaining the complexities of class rule in the context of ongoing capital accumulation, include such components as the gender and racial division of labor along with sexist and racist ideology in their concrete accounts are decidedly not taking Hall's Althusserian position and reject the causal pluralism implied in the notion of overdetermination.

There are ambiguities. On the subject of the division of labor, for example, Hall says almost what Harvey or Wallerstein or Amin or Mies might say. Though indeed his comments are posited as qualifications of an inherently Eurocentric Marxism (Marxism's Eurocentrism and its supposed homogenization of difference being two sides of the same coin). In discussing Gramsci's "non-reductive approach to questions of class," Hall states:

He never makes the mistake of believing that, because the general law of value has the tendency to homogenize labour power across the capitalist epoch, that therefore, in any concrete society, this homogenization can be assumed to exist. Indeed, I believe Gramsci's whole approach leads us to question the validity of this general law in its traditional form, since, precisely, it has encouraged us to neglect the ways in which the law of value, operating on a global as opposed to a merely domestic scale, operates through and because of the culturally specific character of labour power, rather than – as the classical theory would have us believe – by systematically eroding these distinctions as an inevitable part of a world wide, epochal historical tendency. Certainly, whenever we depart from the "Eurocentric" model of capitalist development (and even within that model) what we actually find is the many ways in which capital can preserve, adapt to its fundamental trajectory, harness and exploit these particularistic qualities of labour power, building them into its regimes. The ethnic and racial structuration of the labour force, like its gendered composition, may provide an inhibition to the rationalistically conceived "global" tendencies of capitalist development. And yet, these distinctions have been maintained, and indeed developed and refined, in the global expansion of the capitalist mode. . . . We would get much

further along the road to understanding how the regime of capital can function through differentiation and difference rather than through similarity and identity, if we took more seriously this question of the cultural, social, national, ethnic and gendered composition of historically different and specific forms of labour. (Morley and Chen, 436)

The one qualification the capital accumulation theorists might make to this account as stated would be to say that the tendencies of homogenization are entwined with the forces of heterogeneity, differentiation, etc. so that through the differentiations of the gendered division of labor for example a certain homogenization results. As Joyce Kolko has put it:

Throughout the OECD countries low-wage jobs are performed by women, minorities and immigrants. Both objectively and intentionally, this situation is lowering the general wage level of all these economies. And the growth of women in the work force has paralleled the growth of service work in the economy. Some 60 to 85 percent of the employed women in the OECD states are in the services. As inflation increased and real wages began to fall, two earners maintained family income and the growth of credit sustained consumption beyond income by nearly one-fifth. In the U.S the percentage of women in the labour force jumped from 36.5 percent in 1960 to 54 percent in 1985, the chief growth being among married women between twenty-five and thirty-four, whose participation rose from 28 percent to 65 percent. In over fifty percent of the families with children, both parents work, including nearly half of all women with children under six years. The gap between the wages of men and women declined after 1978, but falling wages for male workers were the origin of the change. Yet despite more than one income earner, household spending power fell in the 1980s and in 1986 it was below that of 1979 and continued to fall in 1987. The new factories in high-tech and service industries in Europe also moved toward the greater use of part-time, migrant and women workers. This trend

became their means to restructure the economy and increase employment.¹⁵

Teresa Amott reinforces Kolko's point in the following discussion of downsizing:

. . . over the past twenty years, many U.S corporations shifted manufacturing jobs overseas. The creation of this “global assembly line” became a crucial component of the corporate strategy to cut costs. In their new locations, these companies hired women workers at minimal wage, both in the third world and in such countries as Ireland. Poorly paid as these jobs were, they were attractive to the thousands of women who were moving from impoverished rural villages in to the cities in search of a better life for their families. But in the United States, millions of workers lost their jobs as the result of capital flight or corporate downsizing. . . . Over 5 million workers were displaced between 1979 and 1983 and another 4 million between 1985 and 1989. In both periods, women were slightly less likely to lose their jobs than men of the same racial-ethnic group. The overall result was that even though women lost jobs to capital flight and corporate downsizing, they did so at a slower rate than men. In fact, the share of manufacturing jobs going to women rose between 1979 and 1990. Women, in other words, claimed *a growing share of a shrinking pie*.¹⁶

These tendencies continue in the present day. Whatever the similarities here between the Marxian theories of uneven development and Hall, Hall's overall tendency is to harness these theories, thus misappropriating them, in the direction of the very pluralism (causal and liberal) they are meant to oppose. We see this in his uncritical acceptance of the state/civil society distinction, with its pluralist assumptions about the dispersal of power in “modern democratic societies”; his favorable references to Weber's discussions of stratification; his employment of the false dichotomy simple/complex in

¹⁵ Joyce Kolko, *Restructuring the World Economy* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. 315.

¹⁶ Amott quoted in Meszaros, 1996, p. 274.

which simple equals simplification equals Marxism. And in his use of Gramsci's distinction between war of position and war of maneuver.

Hall not only valorizes the former over the latter but for the most part uses the war of position to deconstruct the war of maneuver – instead of seeing the two as part of a dialectic of reform and revolution whose complexities might involve not just the obvious association of the war of position with reform and war of maneuver with qualitative transformation but the role of wars of position *as part of* the revolutionary process in its post-capitalist stages. In Hall's usage, war of position closely correlates with the "complexities" and "hybridities" of micro politics and the domination of "new times"; war of maneuver as already stated correlates with the outmoded oversimplified Marxian problematic. These dichotomies encourage Hall to mystify the extent to which the complexity of new times (which Hall describes in ways that coincide with Harvey's discussion of flexible accumulation but which Hall, as we will see, interprets through pluralist premises) functions as itself a mode of social control and by obfuscating the fact that the class character of the state is not, as in post-Marxism, *deconstructed by complexity but operates through complexity*. Thus Sivanandan's scathing rebuttal to Hall's "New Times":

There may well be all sorts of "resistance to the system," as Stuart Hall suggests, in civil society today, all sorts of new social movements and "a politics of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body." And they may even succeed in pushing out the bounds of individual freedom. But the moment they threaten to change the system in any fundamental way or go beyond the personal politics of health, food, sexuality, etc., they come up against the power of the state. That Power does not need to be used at every turn; just to intimate that it is there is sufficient to change the politics of the new social forces, personal politics, to a politics of accommodation.¹⁷

I would make a final comment on West's claim that discourse contains immanent powers and has thus a life of its own. In a certain sense, West is right. Discourses, from individual sentences to complex webs of ideas to full-blown paradigms, do have

immanent powers and are even *to a degree* self-explanatory (not entirely reducible). The same can be said about agency. Bad ideas, more so with bad frameworks, like scientific racism, need to be critiqued, worked on and over. Murray and Hernstein need to be critiqued by Gould and Lewontin.

Laborious learning processes are involved in this critique; it does not spring spontaneously from the heads of anti-racists.¹⁸ The extent to which both bad ideas and their critiques are work is the extent to which discourses have immanent powers that therefore require resistance. If our goal however is to explain the *persistence* of biological determinism in the face of rather devastating critique, this explanation has nothing to do with “immanent powers,” but with the selective pressures of institutions – like universities and the media – and of ideology. Put another way, the production of truth – the truth about “race” or whatever – is never spontaneous. The question is whether institutions and the interests they, always imperfectly, serve promote the production of truth or systemically block its production and/or dissemination.

Steinberg and the question of interests

Stephen Steinberg’s argument against class reductionism shares central features with the arguments of Aronowitz, West, and Hall. He, like they, vehemently repudiates the individualist analysis of race and embraces socio-structural explanations while claiming that Marxian class analysis is reductionist. Steinberg argues that Marxian analysis is blind to the autonomous role of the racial division of labor and it is, he claims, the racial division of labor that is the structural mechanism underlying the racial oppression of African Americans. Steinberg’s argument is premised on the view that white workers benefit from racism. As he puts it:

The blame for occupational segregation cannot be placed solely on the
doorstep of greedy capitalists, those other villains of liberal iconography.
Workers themselves and their unions were equally implicated in

¹⁷ A. Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 1990), pp. 42-3.

¹⁸ Habermas’s notion of ideology as systematically distorted communication is useful here since it retains the normative dimension of ideological discourse as false and mystifying without suggesting any spontaneist notion of self-evident truths waiting to be revealed if the veils of distortion are removed.

maintaining a system of occupational apartheid that reserved industrial jobs for whites.¹⁹

In fact, I think he goes further and, in line with neo-Marxists like Edna Bonacich, Rhonda Williams, and Steven Shulman, argues at times that corporations have been mildly anti-racist, that anti-racism (real not superficial) benefits corporations, and that the prime beneficiaries of a racial division of labor are white workers – along perhaps with small businesses occupying secondary labor markets. Robert Cherry, analyzing this brand of neo-Marxism, is blunt, but I think accurate: “it is white male workers who benefit at the expense of black and female workers, and white male workers who are harmed when blacks and women rebel.”²⁰ Following this logic, more privileged white male workers should “attack rebelling blacks and women and attempt to return them . . . to powerlessness and subservience”: “In the extreme, majority workers would fight for a caste system . . . to protect themselves from having to compete against cheaper minority labor.”²¹

Carrying this analysis through, if, as a result of the long defunct capital-labor accord, white workers benefit from a caste system, minorities, including white women, do not. Their rebellion against such arrangements might imply that strikebreaking would be in their interest, contrary to Marxist slogans of unity. Whereas Marxists would encourage proletarian internationalism and thus would see common interests between, say, not just white and black workers but black workers and immigrants, the neo-Marxist, as we shall see Steinberg strongly concurs here, should see immigrants as threats to black workers. If the logic of this position involves white male workers enforcing a caste system on non-whites and white women, it further involves black workers enforcing a caste system on immigrants.

Steinberg takes the capital-labor accord (an accord between big capital and big – white male – labor) at face value – similar to the way in which he (and the neo-Marxists) takes corporate anti-racism at face value – as if the capital-labor accord was an agreement

¹⁹ Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 180.

²⁰ Robert Cherry, “Race and Gender Aspects of Marxian Macromodels: The Case of the Social Structure of Accumulation School, 1948-68,” in *Science and Society*, Vol. 55, No. 1 Spring 1991, p. 68.

²¹ Robert Cherry, *Discrimination: Its Economic Impact on Blacks, Women and Jews* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 59.

among equal parties. As Cherry has argued, the accord meant the ruling class trading higher wages for control over work rules, the introduction of new technologies and most importantly the go-ahead to superexploit workers (mostly minority) in secondary labor markets – “the crucial accommodation,” Cherry argues, “made by the unions was to allow corporations unlimited exploitation of disenfranchised workers.” This, Cherry argues, undermined the benefits of the accord (which were at any rate very short lived according to Cherry) “just as the unwillingness of the AFL to organize immigrant workers at the turn of the century undermined the unionizing efforts of all workers” (Cherry, 1991, 71-2). This accord, when we add the crucial role of anti-communism in it, lay the basis for the de-industrialization and union busting of the eighties, nineties and beyond through the promotion of an ideological climate – of patriotism, individualism, labor-management cooperation – making fightback nearly impossible.

Marxists need not and must not – and, as I have tried to show in previous pages, do not – deny the existence of racism among organized labor. We do deny that white workers benefit from racism. Victor Perlo offers an excellent example of such “benefits.” The accelerated hiring of black workers in the Detroit auto industry in the late 60s (resulting from “riots” and an auto boom) was accompanied by a statewide racist campaign against busing. In the auto factory, auto bosses were trying to spread a speed-up campaign that took hold – from the foundries to the auto production line. Jobs done formerly by three or four white workers were given to two or three black workers. Production standards were raised dramatically when black workers were hired in large numbers. Black foremen were employed to increase the speed-up another 10-15%. The black workers protested but the white union leadership and white rank and file did not support the black protest – in part due to the racist climate produced in the busing campaign, a climate made use of in classic divide and rule fashion by management. The work put out by the black workers became the norm; white workers who complained were told if they couldn’t cut it, there were others who could; and “extra speed up became a way of life for the white worker also.”²²

It might be argued, to take another example, that whites benefit from the criminalization of black people since otherwise a greater proportion of whites would be

²² Victor Perlo, *The Economics of Racism* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 172.

locked up. Yet it is easy to see how the criminalization of black males hurts most whites since law and order campaigns in which such criminalizations are embedded blame social problems on scapegoats and divert even more money away from income and health maintenance programs for the majority: “when discrimination lowers the funding of schooling, public transportation and other urban services, this affects privileged majority workers as well” (Cherry, 1989, 60). Marxists argue, in another related example, that the racialization of welfare led naturally enough to attacks on unemployment benefits in the form of taxation on and overall reduction of benefits (and eligibility). Once again, in Cherry’s words:

. . . whereas during the 1975 recession, two-thirds of all unemployed workers collected unemployment compensation, during the 1981-2 recession only one-third collected compensation. (Cherry, 1989, 61)

In the United States (mid nineties), I summarize Holly Sklar here, the top 1% own only slightly less wealth than the bottom 95% – 38.9% to 39.1 %. The average inflation adjusted weekly wage of production and non-supervisory private sector workers (80% of all wage and salary earners) fell 16% between 1973 and 1993 while the income of the top one percent skyrocketed. White workers are being exploited by capital yet this exploitation is mystified through complex material and ideological practices that work to racialize and individualize poverty and thus to render invisible the exploitation of many whites. Or where it is made visible, it is made the fault of the victims – whether it is affirmative action, not downsizing and outsourcing, taking the jobs of hard-working whites or “welfare queens” (stereotyped by the media as black even though whites make up the largest group of AFDC recipients) robbing hard-working whites of their tax money to pay for their babies. As Holly Sklar points out, “AFDC accounts for 1 percent of federal outlays and 2 percent of state yet a poll of 1994 voters found that one out of five thought that welfare was the largest federal expense, larger even than defense.”²³

Differentials do not entail benefit. This “white workers benefit” line seems to be based on nothing more than relative privilege – whites make more than blacks, men make more than women, therefore men and whites benefit from sexism and racism. It is

assumed that higher paid workers exploit lower paid workers, not that capitalists exploit and superexploit workers through a racial and gendered division of labor! Steinberg then goes on to comment on how the revolutionary outlook, with its presumed contempt for “mere reforms,” leaves racist structures intact in the hope for “a revolutionary upheaval which was never more than mere fantasy” (Steinberg, 185). Correspondingly, the Marxian view that short-term benefit might be purchased at the expense of long-term or fundamental interest is seen as a kind of trick of teleology whereby the reference to long-term interest (which like the last instance never comes I suppose) mystifies the “obvious” facts that white workers benefit from racism.²⁴

Steinberg argues that “by reifying ‘class’ and shifting the focus away from ‘race,’ these theorists [leftists] unwittingly undermine the anti-racist movement.” But Steinberg reifies class, reducing it to class experience (“Many of my African-American students also come from middle-class families, and their social outlook is shaped as much by class as by race” – p. 16), an occupational category (where class is defined in human capital and individualist terms as properties of individuals – bundles of skills or their absence),

²³ Holly Sklar, *Chaos or Community: Seeking Solutions Not Scapegoats for Bad Economics* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), p. 96.

²⁴ I’d like to quote Michael Lerner’s critique of the notion of white-skin privilege and assorted other privileges and then comment:

I do believe that white-skin privilege is a category that the ruling class in this country benefits from disproportionately. Perhaps another example will show why I think this category is destructive. I’d like to put forward another similarly destructive category – namely imperial privilege. Imagine if I began to talk about an American privilege that is just as significant economically as white-skin privilege. A black person, I could argue, living on welfare in a ghetto in the United States has social resources available to them that puts them at a higher material level than a large segment of people living in the third world. Those material resources . . . derive from the U.S. having been part of a larger colonialist imperial system that has set up the exploitation of third world peoples, maintains it now thru the supposed impartial workings of an international economic system and the machinations of the International Monetary Fund, and materially benefits from it. So every time a Black person points to inequalities here, if I were to follow this path, I could point out that s/he has been benefitting from an Imperial system. (Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion and Culture in America* (New York: Plume, 1996, p. 71.)

Capital accumulation operates by means of an international division of labor, with multiple tiers of exploitation and oppression. According to critics like Steinberg, those on the lower tiers are exploited by those on slightly higher, nevertheless insecure, tiers, irrespective of their relation to class rule. Those lower than the lower tiers are exploited by the latter, etc. Such a view plays right into the hands of those at the top, as Lerner notes. I would note that the logic by which “whites” or first worlders are on the whole beneficiaries of exploitation is the same logic underlying causal pluralist models of interest I have been criticizing – a separate interest and a separate cause for each category of oppression. These observations don’t make it easy to forge solidarity across the simultaneously close to home and far flung differences

or an economic category, defined in terms of “color blind economic forces” instead of seeing it as a broader concept explaining the dynamics of structural inequality, with racism being a key component in this process.²⁵ For Steinberg, class analysis means “shifting focus away from race” instead of the way to explain (not explain away) racism. As a consequence of his reification of class and race – put another way, as a consequence of his hard-boiled, face up to it empiricism, he capitulates to appearances. This involves blaming immigrants, promoting nationalism or assuming it as a category of analysis, thus ignoring the relation between nationalism and racism and absolving the ruling elites from current responsibility for racism.

Steinberg insists that immigrants take jobs away from African Americans and applauds the immigration restriction policy of other advanced industrial countries. In support of the view, not just that immigrants compete with black labor but that immigrants are to blame for the racial division of labor (along with white workers and capitalists equally), Steinberg writes:

One study of the effect of undocumented workers on labor markets in California between 1977 and 1985 found that there was not only a substantial decline in the number of black janitors, but that hourly wages had plummeted from an average of \$13.00 an hour to just over the minimum wage. (Steinberg, 1995, 188-9)

Focusing on undocumented workers in this way distorts the complex dynamic by which racism gets reproduced, divorcing immigrant labor (and by extension the racial division

constructed in the image (itself flexible enough) of the unstable, always hierarchical and increasingly world threatening capital logic.

²⁵ Steinberg equates class analysis with the work of William Julius Wilson. Wilson is included among Marxist proponents of class analysis because for Wilson “race” is declining in significance, while class is presumably gaining. This “class analysis” bears no resemblance to social control analyses of racism I have offered. Lumping Wilson together with the Marxists, though to be expected given the post-Marxist vulgarization of class, is especially ironic since, for instance, Marxians like Manning Marable and Victor Perlo have singled him out as an apologist both for racism and capitalism. As Perlo puts it, Wilson’s “underclass” is in effect a “racist epithet” that “blames the victims of racism rather than the racist ruling class.” Wilson’s classes “ignore the real class distinctions in society.” There is no ruling class in Wilson’s ranking, and the classes he mentions are those of the culture of poverty theorist Edward Banfield. The omission of the ruling class “makes a mockery of his claim of substituting a class analysis for a racial analysis,” and “leaves the field clear for any and all irrelevant explanations for racial differentials.” See Victor Perlo, *Economics of Racism II: The Roots of Inequality, USA* (New York: International Pub., 1996), p. 273.

of labor) from the international division of labor, capital accumulation and the employer and state racism driving the whole process. Sivanandan in contrast can get it right, but only because of a class perspective, which certainly does not reduce to color-blind economic forces. To quote Sivanandan again:

The Fascist dictatorships and the authoritarian democracies that Western powers set up in the third world countries in their own economic and political interests are also those that provide the West with the flexible labour force it needs to run post-industrial society. Racism is the control mechanism that keeps that labour force within social and political bounds. (Sivanandan, 1990, 159)

It is hard to see how Steinberg's focus on immigrants taking jobs of black people can fail to reinforce a noxious combination of racism and nationalism further obscuring the international class processes fueling "the immigrant problem." In fact, Steinberg suggests that America restrict immigration like its competitors Europe and Japan do. As Sivanandan shows with regard to Europe, however, immigration restriction doesn't cut off the supply of cheap labor so much as terrorize it, rendering such labor, it is to be hoped, more pliable, while building racist ideology in the process (See Sivanandan, 1990, chapter 9).

Steinberg sees that immigration policy is a form of disinvestment and a cheap labor policy affecting native and immigrant alike: "instead of underwriting the cost of educating and training workers, the nation imports workers already educated and trained at another nation's expense." Due to his own nationalism, Steinberg doesn't see this process in terms of a racialization and expansion of the reserve army of labor pulling down the living standards of nearly all workers (though it does this unevenly). He sees rather victims of the racist process of globalization benefiting – even if they are being superexploited – at black people's expense. Thus can Steinberg quote journalist Jack Miles in support of Steinberg's assertion that blacks had been largely closed out of the unskilled labor market by Latinos: "unskilled Latino immigration may be doing to American blacks at the end of the twentieth century what the European immigration that brought my ancestors here did to them at the end of the nineteenth" (Steinberg, 1995, 194, 192).

He further mystifies this process through reified reference to the Nation. As if it is the “nation” that determines the flow of labor and not primarily powerful business interests. But he has let corporate interests off the hook here by his assertion that corporations have been one of the few parties not to buy into the racist backlash. This ends up in effect taking Nike’s own self image at face value. We see its anti-racist image (Tiger Woods), not its underbelly – “the dark side of flexible production.”²⁶ As Sivanandan puts it, describing part of what is a global process, “contracting out the shit work allows [multinational] management to avert its face from its own doings and come up smelling of roses.” Steinberg helps avert our face from what could be racism’s newest form, combining a more diverse ruling class – a Benetton ruling class – and a more segregated, more exploited, and superexploited working class (Sivanandan, 158).

Steinberg’s stance on immigration and his uncritical attitude toward nationalism go hand in hand. Let’s look at the following comments:

For African-Americans who have toiled on American soil for centuries and whose sons and daughters have died in the nation’s wars, the case for national action is especially urgent. Today we are confronted with the spectacle of these oldest of Americans again being passed over by new waves of immigrants. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that present immigration policy not only subverts the cause of racial justice but is also antithetical to the national interest. (201)

When this Nation’s founding fathers betrayed the noble principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and surrendered to temptation and greed by sanctioning the slave trade, they placed the Nation on a calamitous path of racial division and conflict that continues down to the present. Yet the thirteen decades since the abolition of slavery are littered with lost opportunities – golden moments when the Nation could have severed this historical chain, but either failed to do so or did not go far enough in eradicating the legacy of slavery. (205)

²⁶ The phrase is Bennett Harrison’s (1994)

The standard Marxian comment here is that positive references to the national interest inevitably mystify the nature of power relations. Such references also contradict the analysis of the book, which is that white people and white workers benefit from racism. Along the same lines, this moral appeal to a grateful Nation in the first instance or the positing of the Nation as a betrayed regulative ideal leads one to question the status of Steinberg's structural categories. How institutionalized can racism be if it's in the national interest to remove it? Racism implicitly becomes a stubborn prejudice. And talking of the Declaration and Constitution as betrayed regulative ideal distorts the way they functioned ideologically, not to mention that such a view suggests a false relation between American freedom and American slavery. If we follow Morgan, slavery didn't betray these antecedent ideals so much as make them possible! Ironically, Steinberg repeats Myrdal's American dilemma of a "nation" at odds with itself – its racism cutting against its best ideals. Steinberg, like Myrdal, seems to suggest that the ideals can win out – once again, a voluntarism which undercuts his structural analysis and undercuts his opposition to individualist analyses of racism.

Steinberg's pathos-laden call for racial justice based in part on African-Americans having died in the nation's wars rests its emotional appeal on a patriotic interpretation of these wars. It is difficult to see in such a picture exploited black soldiers, disproportionately in the front lines, whose mission was to devastate South East Asia. Such tacit patriotism fundamentally distorts the nature of racism by severing its link to imperialism.

At times, Steinberg seems implicitly to fall back on the analysis he condemns. At the conclusion of his chapter on immigration, Steinberg states that "the job crisis in black America is allowed to fester for one basic reason: because the power elites of this nation regard these black communities as politically and economically expendable" (203). This seems to undercut the corporate antiracism view common to Steinberg and the neo-Marxian position in general (unless corporations are not part of the power elite). I would add that it is not surprising that Steinberg cannot really elaborate on this point given his overt repudiation of class analysis. If indeed they are economically expendable, one reason might be that – as thinkers like Harvey and Meszaros have suggested – the crisis of capital accumulation has reached an untranscendable saturation point such that certain segments of the reserve army no longer fuel accumulation but are a brake on it – are thus

almost literally worthless from the standpoint of capital. Politically, it would be more accurate to say that their expendability is politically indispensable for fueling a scapegoating ideology which, nevertheless (for the ideological field of liberalism is indeed complex) usually works in tandem with a liberal humanism that continues to affirm that all children can become members of the middle class if they get the right education and work hard.

In assessing the liberal argument that immigrants do not compete with native workers since “immigrants end up in jobs that native workers spurn,” Steinberg comments:

On closer examination, however, this position offers economic justice neither to immigrants nor to blacks. Instead of arguing for raising the minimum wage and extending health benefit to all workers, making these jobs attractive to native workers, these social scientists are in effect sanctioning the creation of a subminimum tier in the labor market occupied by immigrants. (187)

The strategic correlate of such remarks would seem to be for immigrant and non-immigrant to unite and fight in the interests of all workers. This not only undercuts his dominant focus on immigration restriction and immigrants (as opposed to capitalists) taking away jobs and lowering wages but would be (had Steinberg articulated the strategic accompaniment to the above comment) precisely the argument of the left (applied to blacks and whites) that he ridicules earlier in the chapter when he says that “black and white unite and fight” functions to “gloss over the far more pronounced pattern of racial discrimination” in the unions. (Ironically, racist unions justified exclusionary practice on the same grounds used to justify immigration restriction.) It is interesting to note that this same tension exists in Aronowitz, who speaks of the workers in different segments or tiers of the labor market as inherently antagonistic to one another. Yet he also says that “the historical legacy of rivalry must be overcome if a strategy of emancipation is to be forged that recognizes the autonomy and the necessary contradictions for the constituents of a new alliance, but yet insists on an objective basis for their unity against capital” (Aronowitz, 1981, 101).

Omi and Winant and the Concept of Racial Formation

The concept of “racial formation,” with its affiliate, “the racial state,” is an attempt to mediate between the individualism of identity politics and the supposed reifications of a Marxism overly obsessed with (functionalist) structures. As I will show, theirs is an inadequate formulation, a compromise formation that mystifies its embeddedness in a liberal pluralism it overtly repudiates. This formula mixes the problems of identity politics with a faulty structural analysis. It repudiates Marxian functionalism (and all functionalism) by mischaracterizing it, replacing it, incoherently, with a racial functionalism that informs their notion of the racial state. This functionalism, however, is undermined by a post-Marxian vocabulary and conceptual framework that presages the end of racism.

In their critique of Michael Reich’s class analysis of racism, O/W claim that Reich places “much emphasis on the structural nature of inequality.” They then virtually equate structural explanations of inequality and “the objective primacy of class” with economic determinism. In turn, the objective primacy of class “relegates subjectivity to the sidelines,” suppressing “racially defined experience.”²⁷ This is at once an inaccurate reading of Reich, whose class struggle model emphasizes political agency, and a non-sequitur. The non-sequitur rests yet again on a false dichotomy pitting objectivity against not just subjectivity but social and historical construction – a false dichotomy certainly reinforced when Winant comments that “‘several decades of crucial work in social history have taught us’ that ‘‘interests’ are never obvious, never objective, never simply given.”²⁸ The objectivity of, say, ruling-class interests motivating the maintenance of class structures (which elites can never fully control due to the facts of class struggle and the uncontrollability of capitalist contradictions) is easily enough deconstructed if falsely equated with the obvious, the given, the transparent – with positivism or empiricism.

Let us recall Roediger’s critique of Fields where because Fields sees the concept of class as objective, Roediger concludes that class is not wholly historically constructed. For Fields, race is an ideological concept, whereas class is objective *in the sense of carrying explanatory weight – both are historical*. At any rate, where history is, on

²⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), p. 33.

Roediger and Winant's view, objectivity isn't. And given the equation of structural or totalizing explanation with an a-historical objectivity, historicity can only be conceived in the epistemological and political languages of contingency. The social control function of class analysis is erased and class becomes "impersonal economic forces" or in Laclau and Mouffe's widely shared assumption, *a priori*.

These false assumptions about class and objectivity undergird Winant's curt rejection of Marxian functionalism, specifically of Wallerstein's contribution to *Race, Nation, Class*, co-authored by Balibar. Marxian functionalism is "rather lame": "it 'explains' racism by its functionality for capitalism, a very old line of argument that by now – as Wallerstein should realize – has been widely criticized" (Winant, 1994, 100). Widely criticized indeed – through a widespread, one might say systematic, mischaracterization of the argument. Winant claims that because this old line "treats race as an epiphenomenon of supposedly more fundamental class conflicts, it notices very little about race: how racial categories are framed, how they change over time or vary comparatively, their centrality to key discourses of science, religion and politics are all neglected" (100). Winant prefers Balibar (whose own Marxism he pretty much ignores), who, in contrast to Wallerstein's obsession with "adding another piece to his world-systems jigsaw puzzle," is considerably "less concerned with systematization, and therefore more open to complexity" (99-100).

First, the term "epiphenomenon" is misleading, suggesting that Marxian accounts see race as a mere superstructural, direct, perhaps automatic, reflection of the base. I've already dealt with this bad argument. As my discussion of Allen, Morgan and Saxton among others shows, all the charges Winant levels concerning Marxian blindness about race are false. As I have argued (in "Rethinking Black Marxism"), it is Marxism that can explain these "particulars." The concept of "race," in whatever form, including Omi and Winant's "racial formation," explains nothing because, as Fields notes, it is not an explanatory concept but an ideology. The second comment about jig-saw puzzles poses system against openness and complexity – another false dichotomy of a piece with the opposition of structure/class/objectivity versus subjectivity/history/contingency. On this account, there is either class structure with no struggle (functionalism as seamless system's maintenance) or sites of structureless struggle whose character depends upon

²⁸ Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1994), p. 40.

what people decide to call it in their hegemonizing battles to “rearticulate,” or “interpellate” the “popular,” the racializing common sense.

This tension between antinomian conceptions of structure and struggle manifests itself in the notion of the racial state. The term racial state implies that it functions to reproduce white supremacy. This becomes more explicit in Winant’s discussion, to which I turn momentarily, of the racial state as a *racial dictatorship* (a concept whose absurdity has been rendered obvious by the recent election of Barack Obama). This racial functionalism rests side by side with a post-Marxist version of the racial state as contested terrain or unstable equilibrium in which the racial state – equated with Reaganism – is opposed by racially based opposition groups and progressive forces who very well just might seize the state apparatus and rearticulate it in a progressive direction.

Despite their critique of Reich and despite their talk of the state as site of struggle, O/W assert that state institutions persistently adopt policies of “absorption” and “insulation,” policies meaning in short that anti-racist resistance is either co-opted, marginalized or suppressed. And, in a footnote, they state that “there are enormous difficulties involved in breaking with the supposedly consensual aspects of U.S politics: the logic and justice of the free enterprise system, anti-communism, the morality and truthfulness of government (‘we stand for freedom’).” They continue: “These are examples of a hegemonic domain from which challenges are effectively excluded and within which basic political unity is preserved” (81, 171). This is more like a Marxist definition of the capitalist (which is perhaps necessarily racist) state not the racial state – as well as a Marxist definition of hegemony. Yet in light of Omi and Winant’s overwhelming rhetorical emphasis on contingency and hegemony as post-Marxian interpellation, their book’s concluding line – that “the nature of the next racial contest remains open” – suggests that anything could happen, that an anti-racist hegemony could be achieved and racism ended at least till the next election (144). The footnote says otherwise: that the “openness” is tightly bound by a hegemonic domain in which racism is defined in merely verbal terms – whether or not we say “nigger” or “kike.”

Winant is aware of the weakness of identity politics in its essentialist and anti-essentialist forms – so there is much talk in *Racial Conditions* of structure as well as subject, macro analysis and micro analysis. He claims not to do away with class but to dislodge it from primacy of place and “articulate” it to “race.” But as with Laclau-

Mouffe, Winant's reading of institutions repeats his analysis of meanings. Just as meanings are sites of contestation so are macroprocesses – with the term “contestation” understood in pluralist terms. Race and class may be articulated, with both racial meanings and institutions taken into account, but his definition of class is a pluralist one. Winant may talk of class, but he never talks of a ruling class – for him that would be too “structural.” The very idea of a dictatorship of the ruling class would be hopelessly vulgar though he does, and I will discuss this further, talk of a “racial dictatorship” (terminology of a piece with Omi and Winant's “racial state”). As I suggested above, the concept of race is a reification. Winant thinks he needs the concept to explain how class relations are themselves racialized. But as I have argued, the notion of racialization does not conflict with class analysis. In fact, class analysis *explains* processes of racialization whereas the theory of race's relative autonomy merely *notices* racialization (while claiming falsely that Marxism must be blind to it). Winant assumes that Marxism is blind to racialization because of his own misanalysis of class. Racialization of class identities would be anomalous for Marxism only on the assumption that class, like the base, exists prior to race, which then is added on later, like a second floor added to the first or conversely can be taken off, like a coat in summer, as Aronowitz put it. Winant's critique here relies on a particular reading of the base/superstructure metaphor which is almost totally irrelevant for assessing Marxian functionalism.

As a result of denying the existence of ruling classes, he sees no structural barriers to democratization and thus can see Clinton's election as not necessarily but possibly marking the end of the rightist drift – due to Clinton's populist platform, “which raised hopes for left leaning initiatives.” While Winant informs us that “no significant effort to push Clinton's populism to the left has yet appeared,” he is hopeful that a future politics of race will “take the form of democratic solidarity granting equal access to all the institutions of society, recognizing difference and carrying out the commitment made so long ago to rid this nation of the last vestiges of racial dictatorship” (35, 54).

I hope to have shown how misleading, however commonsensical, it is to talk of the U.S as a racial dictatorship instead of a class dictatorship in which racism played and will continue to play a central role, however much the forms of racism change in the context of anti-racist struggles. The notion of “herrenvolk democracy” on which Winant relies is an ideology, not a reality, as any sound analysis of the balance of power between

the classes would reveal. (George Frederickson, who uses the term frequently, clearly recognizes this.) Winant's notion of a racial dictatorship, lasting perhaps hundreds of years and only now breaking up is connected to his distinction between the racial project in the *longue duree* (which is supposed to account for the permanence of race) and the shifting, contingent racial projects. This tension between the macro racial project and the micro racial projects in some sense is to stand in for the dialectic between structure and subject characteristic of Marxism. This dialectic of micro and macro is his version of the dialectic between necessity and contingency, the old and the new, the relatively invariant and the constantly shifting.

Despite the dialectical appearance, there is a deep incoherence at work. What appears as a dialectic, I would argue, is yet again our incompatible mesh of anti-essentialist post-Marxism – in which the language of racial contest and change is couched – with an essentialist psychoanalysis that underlies the “*longue duree*” of the “racial project.” To explain the *longue duree*, Winant has recourse, albeit briefly, to Kovel's stages of white racism. That is to say he utilizes a psychohistorical framework for discussing the permanence of race. And he supplements Kovel with Iris Young's basically identical account in which racism is derived from the white male normalizing gaze which ranks, scales, hierarchizes bodies – this scaling of bodies is in turn derived from Kristeva's concept of the abject where the very formation of the self requires a kind of reaction formation or ritual of purification that becomes the precondition for all hierarchies, all scales. As I have argued, there are many problems with these theories, but as both Kovel and Young have acknowledged, even if they were true, they wouldn't explain the particularities of racism.

What I have argued for throughout this piece is for better, more refined, complex class analysis of racism, which among other things requires that we not abandon the theory of ideology. I have correspondingly rejected post-Marxian and psychoanalytic-based critiques of Marxism. I have also suggested that the post-Marxian alternative is committed to liberal pluralism. The tie to liberal pluralism derives in part from the repudiation and mischaracterization of class analysis. Many on the post-Marxist left reject liberal pluralism, but their rejection is superficial, based almost solely on different metaphors – post-Marxists emphasizing struggle and battle over liberal pluralist harmony and consensus while sharing assumptions about class analysis, which, after all, give

liberal pluralism its reason for being. Though even this difference cannot be taken too far, for a post-Marxian flavor can be found in the writings of interest group pluralists and more than a little harmony can be found in the struggle discourse of post-Marxists – Rorty’s conversation, liberal appropriations of Bakhtinian dialogic. In rejecting the concept of ideology as elitist, post-Marxists accept the main premises of a liberal pluralism that from a Marxian point of view is the very cornerstone of capitalist ideology.

The stakes in this debate are serious. Communists and Marxists have often argued that liberalism paves the way for Fascism (a thesis repulsive to liberals, viewed as reductive and obviously false); that racism hurts all workers; that development and underdevelopment, exploitation and superexploitation, are two sides of the same coin. Marxians see post-als and pluralists disconnecting these processes both synchronically and diachronically, allowing pluralists to be simultaneously perpetually optimistic (Winant on Clinton) and pessimistic (the lesser of two evils every single election) about elections while taking the rule of capital for granted.

Each election period is viewed as contingent, disconnected from the previous discrete and discontinuous period, thus allowing the possibility that the next election will emancipate us, offering something genuinely new and other, an idea startlingly manifest in the post-Marxian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek’s view of elections – that embodiment of the “break” introduced by “the democratic invention” (understood in anti-realist constructivist terms), as the means by which “democratic society” includes as part of its institutional structure “the moment of dissolution of the sociosymbolic bond, the irruption of the Lacanian Real, . . . a moment where the whole hierarchic network of social relations is in a way suspended, . . . opened up to the wholly unforeseen, the irreducibly irrational.”²⁹ Perhaps I am being unfair, but here we see (if I may be teleological for just a moment) the culmination of the processes I have criticized. Constructivist and anti-realist semantics and epistemology yoked to the simultaneously anti-essentialist and essentialist, totally irrational and incomprehensible Lacanian Real.

It is a combination producing a heady even apocalyptic enthusiasm about the possibilities of change through elections along with a belief in the impossibility of direct democracy, which Žižek views as mystifying (the theory of ideology returns but directed against Marxism) “the fundamental antagonism” or “deadlock,” the fundamental

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 147-9.

alienation, that constitutes “the impossibility of the social.” Put another way, direct democracy is Stalinism. Those who I have been calling post-Marxists would and should be horrified by this conclusion in its implications for the fight against racism and injustice generally. But, as I hope to show, !i"ek's logic is in many ways their own.

Incommensurability and Anti-Communism

Like the other theorists discussed above, and those I will discuss below, !i"ek, albeit with his much different Lacanian idiom, psychologizes race and naturalizes nationalism. In the whiteness issue of the *Village Voice* !i"ek writes: “Only by acknowledging that, ultimately, they can do nothing, that the emancipation of African-Americans must be their own deed, only by renouncing the false self-blame of whites, which conceals its exact opposite, patronizing arrogance, can whites do something for African-American emancipation.”³⁰ The assumption here is that whites have no interest in fighting racism – except as a form of narcissism which in essence is a new form of domination. !i"ek here simply assumes both the idiocy and the racism of class analysis. As we will see, in this view, he joins nearly all those I have discussed. Class analysis, like white antiracism (where they are not identical), is a form of direct democracy, which is itself really its opposite – Stalinism, in !i"ek's idiom. Egalitarianism is Communism which is Stalinism which is fascism. And anti-racism is really racism (though the Real we must remember cannot be represented.) What is implied here is that racism “is a black thing,” that to deny this is a form of totalizing and totalitarian narcissism, the total domination of the symbolic, which is Stalinism, etc., which, adding a term from his equivalents, is sado-masochism, which is in turn the death drive, embodied for !i"ek in the character of Norman Bates. Make no mistake, communism and anti-racism are sadistic monstrosities.

!i"ek's analysis of internationalism and nationalism complement what he says above. In !i"ek's view Marxian internationalism denies the unrepresentable particularity of the Real, or the *objet a*. For !i"ek, the nation, or as he puts it, the nation-thing, is one representation of the unrepresentable object. Nations are traumatic kernels that disrupt the internationalist narrative, which is a totalitarian narrative, etc. The direct result of the

³⁰ Quoted in Callari, et al., *Marxism in the Postmodern Age* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), p. 118

attempt to impose internationalism (he's thinking of Eastern Europe – the fact that internationalism was never much aimed at doesn't much deter !i"ek, who is interested in the Real, not reality) is ultimately Bosnia, a proliferation of nationalisms and tribalisms.

Balibar, in *Race, Nation, Class*, has argued that the new racism is not primarily biological but culturalist. He calls it after Taguieff “differentialist racism”:

It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but *only* the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions.³¹

The mixing of cultures and “the suppression of ‘cultural distances’” would mean “the intellectual death of humanity” and might “endanger the control mechanisms that ensure its biological survival.” Paraphrasing this differentialist racism, Balibar goes on to say that the political consequence of the “abolition of difference” is the necessity of “defensive reactions,” “interethnic conflicts and a general rise in aggressiveness.” The rather startling conclusion of this new racism (the product of Right-wing Thatcherism) is that “if you want to avoid that ‘abstract’ anti racism which fails to grasp the psychological and sociological laws of human populations . . . , you have to respect ‘tolerance thresholds’” (Balibar, 1991, 22). Abstract anti-racism in other words is the cause of racism; this is a mirror of !i"ek, though indeed !i"ek, perfectly in accord with the new racists, would add that internationalism (understood as the total domination of the symbolic) is the cause of fanatical nationalism. The new racists are the true respecters of difference, which is cultural in name only, since it is a product of natural law for the differentialists.

!i"ek himself notes the possible parallel between his Lacanian analysis of racism and nationalism and this sort of conservative cultural critique. He argues, however, that the parallel, while containing a grain of truth, is misleading since Lacan's thought “radically subverts this whole perspective” (there's a pun here: “whole perspectives” – the phrase itself intentionally oxymoronic – contain a fundamental split, are filled with

holes). But the difference comes down to this: both the nostalgic desire for ethnic purity and the desire for internationalism, which on this view is a desire for the elimination of ethnic particularity, are versions of purity that deny the constitutive split and fundamental alienation at the heart of human being. Both, in trying to improve on formal democracy in the attempt “to fill out democracy with concrete contents,” “will succumb sooner or later to the totalitarian temptation.” The project of international solidarity, in trying to fill the unfillable hole in our being by paradoxically dissolving all concrete substantial ties, inevitably produces “the eruption of the national thing in all its violence,” which always takes “the devotees of international solidarity by surprise” because the irreducibility of the nation thing is rooted in the a priori status of the *objet a*’s absolute particularity.³²

!i"ek's naturalization of both race and nation (incoherently coinciding with an anti-realist semantics that renders utterly mysterious the stark political conclusions drawn from the nature of the *objet a*, which cannot be represented) is not surprisingly the flip side of his naturalization of class exploitation achieved by converting surplus value into the Lacanian category of excess – *jouissance*, or surplus enjoyment, the *objet a*, the ineliminable stain. For !i"ek, all attempts at community, universal or otherwise, rely on an ineliminable “ethnic moment.” This moment is, as I suggest, produced by a logic of incommensurability always underwritten by anti-communism. I want to suggest though that this same logic to varying degrees informs the discourse of the other thinkers under consideration here whose emancipatory intent is much more obvious. This logic undermines their own critiques of essentialism/identity politics, undermining also any intent on the part of these thinkers to bring together structure and agency. This anti-communist logic of incommensurability is what I have been calling “relative autonomy.” And it produces not a dialectics of structure and agency but an aporetics and ultimately an apologetics.³³

³¹ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 21.

³² Slavoj !i"ek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 162-3.

³³ Since the early nineties, !i"ek, we now know, has made an about face without ever facing up to his early writings. Faced with the horrors of global capitalism, !i"ek has filled his categories with new content. If in the early work, ethnic particularity is the Real, the ineliminable stain, in his recent work, class is now the Real. That said, the change of content to class has led !i"ek to perform some brilliant class analysis (where the Lacanian categories, even if present, play no explanatory role). Early on in his recent book, !i"ek does about as impressive a deconstruction of the Wall Street/Main Street, left- and right-wing populist response to the financial crisis as anything I've seen (he notes that under capitalism, “there is no way to separate the

The concept of relative autonomy follows in part as I have argued from the reduction of class analysis to the economy or to an economic determinism. But it also results from a rhetoric common to all I've discussed here which associates class analysis and, by extension, internationalism with whiteness. If Marxists deconstruct certain notions of universality like "the national interest" as masks for class interest, neo- and post-Marxists turn class interest into a cover for white supremacy or, in a related maneuver, turn rational justification itself into, to use Gordon and Newfield's phrase, "White philosophy."³⁴

The phrase comes from their review of Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America*. Michaels' main argument is that culturalist or social constructionist interpretations of the concept of race, while claiming to oppose an essentialist or biology-based interpretation of race, nevertheless rest on assumptions of racial essence it seemed to contest. Moreover, Michaels argues that the problem with the category of race (and by extension of nation as well, subject to similar racializations) is not that it is essentialist or anti-essentialist but that it makes no sense, that it is false or rooted in false assumptions.

Toward the end of his book, he even suggests that the social constructionist notion of race per se is nonsense. I think he is wrong here for reasons I will get to in a moment. His insight, though, is that much identity talk – essentialist or anti-essentialist – is tautological, its own justification. But, given the rejection of foundationalism, since reasons cannot be self-justifying, this tautological identity talk is unreasonable, arbitrary. Summing up the culturalist interpretation of race, Michaels notes that "In order for a culture to be lost, it must be separable from one's actual behavior and in order for it to be separable from one's actual behavior, it must be anchorable in race."

Put another way, "For racial identity to become a project, it must turn to culture; for cultural identity to become a project, it must turn to race." Both points boil down to the following: "it is only if we think that our culture is not whatever beliefs and practices we actually happen to have but is instead the beliefs and practices that should properly go with the sort of people we happen to be that the fact of something belonging to our

two"). Add to that some really fine work deconstructing new forms of liberalism – green capitalism, paradigm shifts (to green capitalism), the brain as distributed neural network that mirrors the new capitalism of "no one in charge" even as concentration of wealth through bailouts augments; and some great work on the charming technocrat as new face of fascism. See *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 13.

culture can count as a reason for doing it.” The cultural construction of race is, according to Michaels, tied to theories of racial pluralism, which assert that there is no such thing as racial superiority/inferiority. Races are neither better nor worse, just different. Michaels sees the pluralism of the twenties anticipating today’s identity politics – both share the assumption that race is its own justification. That Michaels sees this as an intensification of racism, whatever its overt political allegiance, is indicated in his discussion of Lothrop Stoddard, the notorious white supremacist author of *The Rising Tide of Color*, who is nonetheless quite easily able (much like the differentialist racism discussed above) to give up the references to white supremacy in favor of difference:

“Let all parties realize that at bottom the problem is that of difference. We Americans have built up Our America, and we cherish it so supremely that no one should blame us for our resolve that it shall be kept American.”

Asserting that races are different from each other without being either better or worse, the pluralist can prefer his own race only on the grounds that it is his. . . . The particular contribution of pluralism to racism is to make racial identity into its own justification.³⁵

Michaels’ insight, limned but not elaborated, is that our identity politics should be at least broadly justifiable. I’ll explain what I mean in a moment.

Gordon and Newfield are disturbed by the implications of Michaels’ argument. They argue that to subject identity talk to an epistemic criterion is elitist, a-historical, transcendental, a-political – all of which rationalizes white supremacy. G/N’s critique extends, by implication, to the Marxian position on internationalism I have been defending. It is implied throughout their essay that insofar as Michaels subjects identity politics to a criterion of reason, he is excluding history, politics and culture from his analysis. Making race an epistemic issue means that “a controversial subject like race can be protected from the realm of politics and power without this protection being itself a political issue. The ‘truth’ of race will then not vary depending on where the analyst

³⁴ Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, “White Philosophy,” in Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Appiah, eds. *Identities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 137.

stands in a network of racializing systems.” This means that “the analyst exists in a field of reason rather than a discontinuous terrain of social antagonisms.” The ideological function of this appeal to reason is to “allow the analyst to disavow his or her social position” and “to mask one’s whiteness in the garb of transcendental reason.” White philosophy “assumes the power of epistemology to make the rules for political or ethnographic arguments,” “presumes its ability to settle the rules of discourse and judgment.” But “the superiority of epistemological over political identity claims” is itself a symptom of supremacy which makes “racialized experience” irrelevant to “authentic knowledge” (Gordon and Newfield, 398-9).

There are false dichotomies running throughout Gordon and Newfield’s critique, whose political function is to disable the kind of internationalist project I have been suggesting but which would function to disable any political project worth pursuing. The basic false dichotomy is, once again, the one of truth versus power, with a-historical truth (legitimizing and mystifying whiteness) on one side and contingency, politics, struggle, contestation, power, history on the other. If I am right, Gordon and Newfield can talk of history but cannot justify their talk. For them, following Foucault, they set up a disabling disjunction – not the knowledge of politics but the politics of knowledge.

On this view, we evaluate the concept of race not in terms of its truth or falsity but in terms of the interests it serves. What interests it serves depends upon its use, depends upon its role in networks of power. But how do we identify those networks of power much less explain them without presupposing some epistemology? With epistemology opposed to politics and history, how do we acquire knowledge of history and politics? How identify the social environment in which race and racism get deployed? How identify oppressive power relations? On the Nietzschean grounds relied on here, the very act of identifying the power relations within which “race” functions would itself be an act of power, an appropriation, a use, without justification, which is to say its own justification. The reduction of truth to power, itself deriving from a false dichotomy that sees them as mutually exclusive, guarantees the very manipulation it opposes.

It is in fact true that biological determinism can be put to different uses. Langston Hughes’ flirtation with primitivism that led him to defend and illustrate Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*; Dubois in early writings like *The Conservation of Races* and *The Souls of Black Folk* valorizing the notion of racial gifts; or Stowe’s romantic racialism

(Frederickson's term), which valorizes the natural docility of Africans to the point of seeing in them a natural Christianity, these are all uses of the basically biological concept of race different from theories of outright inferiority. They have been rightly rejected as racist, whatever their use, in great part because they are false. Gordon and Newfield claim that "race philosophy [white philosophy] . . . assumes the power of epistemology to make the rules [themselves non-political and transcendental] for political or ethnographic arguments . . . and presumes its ability to settle the rules of discourse and judgment" (398). What is implied here is that what is political cannot be settled because the political is a site of contestation; that, conversely, what is settled cannot be political, all of which is a way of divorcing politics from truth. Such a divorce, as I've suggested, is both false and bad politics.

Without epistemic criteria, essentialism is nearly unavoidable, for what essentialism and anti-essentialism would have in common – if epistemic talk is rejected in the way I discuss – is their arbitrariness, put another way, their self-evidence. The uses of truth, whether the truth of race or anything else, can only be evaluated rationally through recourse to the concept whose specific uses we are assessing. In other words, we cannot evaluate the uses of truth without using it.

This holds true for assessing identity politics. Gordon and Newfield construct yet another false dichotomy when they pit all talk of identity against reason. Recourse to epistemology does not (to turn their rhetoric against them) in and of itself rule out identity talk. Identity talk is unavoidable and irreducible. But it must be justified; it cannot be its own justification and this justification is simultaneously political and epistemic – the notion of the "superiority" of epistemological over political or identity claims is a disabling false dichotomy.

It is important to acknowledge that this dichotomy of a-historical epistemic critique versus politicized identity talk is licensed to some degree by Michaels. The example is instructive. Michaels wants to or seems to want to discredit the social construction of racism tout court. He quotes Adrian Piper: what makes blacks black is rather "the shared experience of being visually or cognitively identified as black by a white racist society and the punitive and damaging effects of that society" (Michaels, *OA*, 133). This seems to me to be at least a plausible component in a definition of racism. Though I would add that a racial and gender division of labor that de facto relegates

certain populations to greater unemployment, under employment, superexploitation, etc. is a fundamental part of racism even in the absence of identifying mechanisms – like an explicit caste system.

But Michaels argues that this social constructionist definition of race/racism is incoherent just like other attempts to define race culturally; his evidence for this is that Piper herself seems to resurrect the essentialism that her definition denies:

She is made to feel that she is passing for white and since passing for white seems to her a really authentically shameful thing to do, she is led to strenuous efforts to identify herself as black. But what consequences must these efforts have for her non biological definition of racial identity? The point of that definition is that being black means being identified by a white racist society as black. On what grounds then can someone who is not identified by that society as black be said to be black? (134)

Michaels attributes this obvious incoherence to Piper's social construction of race/racism instead of attributing it to a contradiction between a coherently stated social constructionism (rendered intelligible as I have argued above by a class analytic social control thesis) and essentialism – motivated by Piper's sympathy with the victims of racism, a sympathy heightened by family connections. Perhaps this anti-racist sympathy takes the distorted form of essentialism because it is the only discourse available for combating racism given the existence of forces excluding anti-racist internationalism (anti-essentialism becomes essentialism when things get serious). The “really authentically shameful thing to do” is to go along with racism. She interprets this whole thing in terms of the notion of passing, which Michaels rightly sees as problematic. My point would be that “whites” should have that same sympathy and anger – should strategically construct themselves as anti-racists or as black (something the concept of passing disallows) in the same way as the Dutch constructed themselves as Jewish by wearing stars, etc.

Piper and Michaels are mistaken – a mistake easy enough to make in a society where the category of race is so thoroughly naturalized that recourse to it seems like a reason when it is not. People study history because of “who they are” all the time; it is

difficult to see anything objectionable in this or more precisely to see that the reasons they give for their activity are not good ones. Compare the following reasons: One, I study Irish/Black/Jewish history because I'm Black/Jewish/Irish and I want to know my history, to know who I am. Two, I want to study racism because I, and many people I care about, have been victimized by it. Understanding it is necessary to ending it.

Similarly, compare, one – I study labor history and the history of communist movements because I'm a communist – to two: I study labor history and the history of communist movements because I want to help construct a just society and this requires a critical knowledge of past attempts to forge such a society. The first and the third responses are not reasons; the second and fourth, I think, are good reasons – that is to say they can be part of a rational justification of one's identity politics. Rational justification, here, involves nothing abstract or transcendental, contra Gordon and Newfield, nor does it rule out identity politics. To argue that it does rests on a false dichotomy that splits objective from subjective.

Another way of getting at just how race is naturalized as to become its own justification is to examine the recourse to “experience” in post-Marxian argument. According to Gordon and Newfield, the epistemic standpoint (again, a-historical, unaware of its situatedness) renders “racialized experience” “irrelevant.” This idea that whiteness – whether in the form of rationality (a-historical, a-political) or class-based internationalism – excludes (with the connotation of doing violence to) racialized experience is central to the critique of Marxism (and realism). For example, Maynard and Brittan write that class cannot “explain the xenophobia, the extreme hatred and violence, with which racism has historically been expressed”; cannot deal with the “strength of feeling frequently expressed in black nationalist movements,” nor acknowledge that oppressed groups conceive of their oppression “in racial rather than class terms.”³⁶ It denies “the very experience of being black in white society, . . . denigrates their histories and cultures and implies that the significance and distinctness of these will disappear on the road to a ‘rational’ and classless society” (M and B, p. 44).

Albert and Hahnel express nearly the same sentiments in nearly the same language. For them, an adequate social theory must be woven out of four relatively autonomous components – economics, politics, kinship, and community. The four

³⁶ Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard, *Sexism, Racism and Oppression* (London: Blackwell, 1985), p. 49.

categories correspond to class, state, gender and race respectively. Community has what we might call negative and positive moments. The negative moment refers to white racism – which, they insist, is too deep to be explained by the divide and rule hypothesis (which is intentionally oversimplified in accord with their prior reduction of class to the economy), and so must have independent roots.³⁷ On the other hand, communities – whether racial, national or religious – contain their own irreducibly unique specification of human needs. Such uniqueness Albert and Hahnel model on the category of the aesthetic. Community, like art (Albert and Hahnel are following Marcuse’s Kantian aesthetic), is universal and non-cognitive. In other words, there is a universal need for racial/ethnic identity whose felt rightness is unjustifiable, irrational. To deny the incommensurability (relative autonomy) of community is indeed to commit murder – to deny people’s irreducible particularity. As I will show, in their view, Marxists are especially prone to such atrocities.

The specificity of people’s oppression does not license a separate causal category for every experience. Experience, here, though linked to the so-called non-reductionist concept of relative autonomy and, in Albert, part of a non-reductionist totality, is a self-evident, self-ratifying category. That oppressed groups conceive of their oppression in racial or religious terms doesn’t negate class analysis any more than strong nationalist or patriotic sentiment negates a class analysis of imperialism. Further, though relative autonomy is meant to be an explanatory category, it is not clear to me what these references to the sanctity of experience help explain. Earlier in this section, I referred to West’s claim that bourgeois science rendered black experience unintelligible. This is the claim in essence being made by Albert, Maynard, Brittan, Gordon and Newfield – *in inverted form. The “black experience” for them really is unintelligible. For these critics, Marxists deny “the black experience” by virtue of trying to make it intelligible.* The concept of relative autonomy has licensed something like a deeply felt and uncriticizable notion of experience that is just another version of incommensurability. For all the sophistication here, and good intentions, I’m not sure what they’re saying is far different from “it’s a black thing/white thing/Jewish thing (fill it in), you wouldn’t understand,” not much different from the most essentialist appeal to roots. And we should note in passing that the statement “it’s an x thing, you wouldn’t understand,” in

³⁷ Michael Albert & Robin Hahnel: *Marxism and Socialist Theory* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

fact demands to be understood and is thus a blatant performative contradiction. *And if, in fact, that very statement is an “x thing,” it could not be understood by someone non x and so would be pointless to utter to them.*

Constructivism and essentialism are two sides of the same coin – though they “feel” very different – since constructivism connotes “agency” and “theory” where essentialism or empiricism connotes “already thereness,” “brute facticity.” Critiquing someone’s constructions doesn’t sound as bad as critiquing their experience (“You’re denying my experience” sounds a lot worse than “you’re denying my construction”). Both, however, deny the possibility of critique and are thus self ratifying. The basic problem, here, is the problem of standpoint theory. While it is methodologically and ethically sound to scrutinize the experience of the margins in any hierarchical society – because it is far more likely though not guaranteed that the oppressed as opposed to others will act on their human interest in not being exploited and degraded and because they are likely to have insights about exploitation less available to others desiring an emancipated society – it is dogmatic, arbitrary, tautological, to equate truth with experience. And there is nothing a-historical in saying so.

Also, both post-Marxian essentialism and anti-essentialism are basically uncritical of nationalism while ruling out internationalism. Anti-essentialism once again seems different because of its recourse to an activist language not normally associated with essentialism – contestation, accenting, articulation, and re-articulation. The point of constructivist anti-essentialism is to deny that nationalism has an essence. The way this works out in practice is to argue that while it may have functioned in a politically retrograde way, it need not, for it has no fixed meaning; therefore it can be rearticulated. But given that internationalism *isn’t rearticulated*, and, in post-Marxist analysis, is fixed to economism as well as fixed to certain connotations like bloodless abstraction and artificiality – even as anti-essentialism proclaims the artificiality of all constructions – it is hard to see the essential difference between essentialism and post-Marxist anti-essentialism. It is a given that nationalism can be rearticulated; it is a given that internationalism cannot.

I would like to recall the charge against class analysis that it denies particularity, “the black experience,” etc. I have argued that this is false. What I want to make clear though is that there is a sense in which this criticism is meant to suggest that Marxism

excludes while post-Marxism includes. This is also false. There is a contradiction between the two and their strategic correlates, nationalism and internationalism. The point is not that discourses rule out – for all in fact do. Discourses are necessarily selective. The real question is, which selection can be justified – nationalism or internationalism?

Standpoint theory, it should be noted, need not be relativist. As Eagleton points out – as part of a discussion of Lukács’ standpoint theory whose insights could be extended to race and gender versions of it:

to claim that all knowledge springs from a specific social standpoint is not to imply that any old standpoint is as valuable . . . as any other. If what one is looking for is some understanding of the workings of imperialism as a whole, then one would be singularly ill advised to consult the governor general or the Daily Telegraph’s Africa correspondent who will most certainly deny its existence.³⁸

It is a mistake, however, to equate the standpoint of whatever marginal group is in question with truth, which is in essence what the folks I’ve been discussing are doing even as they verge on viewing the concept of truth itself as experience denying. For whether, as in Lukács, truth is equated with some idealized proletarian experience or whether it is seen as the antithesis of it, experience is self-confirming, dogmatic, uncriticizable. As Eagleton puts it, “truth [or the validity of experience] is either wholly internal to the consciousness of the working class [or other marginal groups] in which case it cannot be assessed as truth [or valid experience] and becomes simply dogmatic; or one is caught in the impossible paradox of judging the truth from outside the truth, in which case the claim that this form of consciousness is true simply undercuts itself” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 97).

If racial or religious or national identity is seen as an irreducible, felt need, if, frankly, there is something like a need for a black identity (unintelligible to “others”), this implies that there is equally a need for white identity (which then brings us full circle back to Winthrop Jordan’s “need to be white” so devastatingly critiqued by Theodore

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 97.

Allen). A rather unpalatable conclusion for most neo-Marxists as it dovetails too nicely with the differentialist racism discussed above. Ironically, though the tacit workings of incommensurability can aid in disavowing this point, that whites would have such a need *too* would deny incommensurability. Or, perhaps the incommensurable other has a need for identity that “we” must respect. We, however, don’t have this need. This is the double standard of poststructuralism – a corrosive and sophisticated anti-essentialism for the West (itself an essentialist term if ever there was one); a strategic essentialism for the rest.

The concept of incommensurability underlies the racialization of epistemology and its flipside, the non-cognitivist view of community identity. The concept, at least as epistemology, has come in for wide criticism, but for the purpose at hand, Hilary Putnam’s critique of incommensurability is especially apt in its anticipation of postmodern aporias and ironies:

If the thesis were really true, we could not translate other languages – or even past stages of our own language – at all. And if we cannot interpret organism’s noises at all, then we have no grounds for regarding them as thinkers, speakers, or even persons. In short, if Feyerabend (and Kuhn at his most incommensurable) were right, then members of other cultures . . . would be conceptualizable by us only as animals producing responses to stimuli.³⁹

In the postmodern context, the concept of incommensurability morphs into the Lacanian Real, or the Kristevan abject, both “concepts” at once epistemic and ethical. “We” cannot know the other (epistemic); moreover, we should not know the other (ethical). Respect for the other means conceiving the other as unknowable, unrepresentable, unrecognizable. We see the ironies of this kind of respect in its purest form in recent leftist postcolonial theorizations of the other where, as Marilyn May Lombardi has pointed out, critics like Sommers and Beverly theorize third-world texts as allegories of the !i"ekian/Lacanian Real. They do this as a way of guaranteeing the text’s subversiveness over and against an inherently cannibalizing western discourse that,

³⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Boston: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 114.

it would follow, threatens the integrity and autonomy of the third-world text (and the authentic person – like Rigoberto Menchu – the text “expresses”). Ironically, the Real is represented as the force of dissolution and disintegration, thus undermining the function of safeguarding the other’s integrity. This contradiction is negotiated by tacit recourse to the concept of authenticity as well as “expression.” The Real in Lacan/ !i"ek is what subverts, perverts, or stains all representational, meaningful schemes, themselves associated with narcissism. Though presumably unrepresentable, the Real is nevertheless constantly represented as something grotesque, obscene, inhuman, monstrous – and almost always female.

Beverly, as May Lombardi points out, sees Menchu as a !i"ek ian other – “not at all our fellow creature, but a ‘mindless monster’ and an ‘inhuman partner,’ with whom no empathy is possible . . . utterly ‘incommensurable.’” Beverly’s depiction of Menchu as subversive other corresponds uncannily (as is appropriate) to !i"ek’s depiction of Norman Bates. Bates, like Menchu, is the traumatic kernel or thing, a machine resisting meaning and subverting identification. It is an “unbearable” and “radical otherness,” embodiment of *jouissance*, the death drive. Beverly refers further to this subversive thing as a virus, that is to say a non-cognitive, invasive force.⁴⁰

This paradoxical coupling of Bates and Menchu as functioning analogously to subvert and ruin processes of co-optative identification pervades !i"ek’s early writings. !i"ek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, allegorizes the tension between the Real (represented above by Bates and Menchu) and the symbolic as the tension between Christianity and Judaism; between Antigone and her sister, Ismene; between Sade’s Juliette and her sister Justine; finally, between the Red Army Fraction terrorist and her sister. Each case is an example of the symbolic “domesticating” or “gentrifying” the Real. However much this domestication/gentrification is associated with love and sympathy (identification), it is viewed as self-deception. In discussing Antigone as a model of a psychoanalytic ethics, !i"ek says that “we must oppose all attempts to domesticate her, to tame her by concealing the frightening strangeness, ‘inhumanity,’ a pathetic character of her figure, making of her a gentle protectress of family and

⁴⁰ Marilyn M. Lombardi, “The Crying Game: Rigoberta Menchú and the Responsibilities of Testimonio Criticism.” In Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano, eds. *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004. p. 26.

household who evokes our compassion and offers herself as a point of identification.” Antigone ““doesn't give way to her desire”” – but persists “in the death drive.” This refusal to cede one’s desire, this persisting in the death drive is what unites Antigone, Juliette, and the terrorist sister. li"ek comments on this strange combination of at first sight totally incompatible figures, though certainly a combination no less strange than Bates/Menchu:

Lacan enables us to recognize in all three the same ethical position, that of “not giving way on one’s desire.” That is why all three of them provoke the same Che vuoi?, the same “what do they really want?”: Antigone with her obstinate persistence, Juliette with her a-pathetic promiscuity, Gudrun with her “senseless” terrorist acts: all three put in question the good embodied in the State and common morals. (*SO*, 1989, p. 117).

Let us take note of the political load of the terms “domestication” and “gentrification” and how this reinforces a certain racialization of the Lacanian categories utterly consistent with our analysis above. The processes of co-optative identification are themselves tacitly identified with yuppies moving working-class people (most likely of color) out of their neighborhoods, abjecting them while purifying the neighborhood through urban renewal. (On the other hand, as domestication/gentrification is also associated with love, sympathy, solidarity – these desires are thus discredited as forms of inauthentic desire.)⁴¹

A few pages later, li"ek extends the Real/Symbolic opposition in his brief discussion of the contrast (incommensurable) between evolutionary idealism, associated explicitly with “Stalinist” historical necessity, and Benjaminian “creationist materialism.” As in the above oppositions, Stalinist historiography is associated with over-symbolization, which li"ek also terms “over-historicization” or the total domination of

⁴¹ “White” people’s anti-racist solidarity, as I discussed briefly above, becomes analogous to the totalitarian desire for direct democracy. It is really a form of narcissism, paternalism, co-optation, cannibalism, gentrification, domestication. Of course, the ban on “speaking for the other,” which presumes not only the objectionable concept of the other but that one is indeed speaking for and not to or with “the other,” leads to a ban on speaking “about the other” and to a hankering to represent the other as impossible trauma and the ruination of white fantasy. The ban on representation following upon the ban on solidarity produces the desire to represent the other as unrepresentable, ultimately it seems as inhuman.

the symbolic. Benjamin's creationist materialism is associated on the one hand with the oppressed classes and the class struggle itself, excluded by evolutionary historiography, the history of the victors. On the other hand, in the Lacanian idiom, it is associated with the death drive, with the non-historical traumatic kernel that disrupts and makes possible all historicization.

While appearing to pit the struggle of the oppressed against the history of the victors, class struggle against official historiography's denial of it, revolution against evolution, !i"ek converts the former historical categories into a-historical exemplars of the death drive, the fundamental deadlock, repeating here his Lacanian transformation of surplus value into surplus enjoyment, of exploitation into the non-expungeable traumatic kernel. This collapsing of the distinction between historical and a-historical mirrors the process, analyzed above, by which the category of race is made precise, particular and historical by means of the a-historical supplement of a (Freudian) psychoanalysis so that the Lacanian supplement is no less aporetic than its – from the Lacanian perspective – precritical Freudian predecessor.

At any rate, !i"ek's defense of revolution, here, is really an assertion of its impossibility, and another example of !i"ek's categories collapsing into their opposite. !i"ek reads creationist materialism as a return of the death drive and opposes it to Stalinism; elsewhere, it is Stalinism and Fascism that are themselves embodiments of this irreducible return. In his Hitchcock essay, the opposition between the symbolic and the real, law and the obscene or the perverse, automaton (the system of meaningless signifiers) and tuche (the traumatic encounter) upon which !i"ek's ethics is based utterly breaks down. In !i"ek's vertiginous specifications of these terms, the Klan, Stalinists and Norman Bates are associated with each term and its opposite. Bates, as mentioned, is in turn startlingly associated with Menchu. What we then have, here, is, in Girardian terms, a proliferation of monstrous doubles or the typical deconstructive dynamic in which self and other, sameness and difference are at once incommensurable and identical.⁴²

⁴² !i"ek (1989, p. 50) and Slavoj !i"ek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 211-72.

Any politics based on dizzying defamiliarizations that erase the distinction between victim and victimizer, oppressor and oppressed, and subvert by dehumanizing should be rejected. It is a further irony of the logic of incommensurability that, intended to safeguard the particular from co-optation, it not only merges the two categories (through the repeated collapse of the symbolic/Real distinction) but in *li"ek*, the very sign of particularity, the *object a*, that which resists symbolization/hystericization, is indeterminate, anamorphic, without particularity. Let me be clear: I use *li"ek* as a striking example of the consequences of a logic of incommensurability. West, Aronowitz, Gordon and Newfield, Albert and Hahnel, Maynard and Brittan wish to humanize the other, yet by associating in a variety of ways whiteness, internationalism, class, reason, narcissism, and cooptation and by setting these against the incommensurable and unintelligible, they license the bizarre equation of dehumanization with respect, and thus fulfill Putnam's insight that incommensurability depersonalizes.

In a way, *li"ek*'s devaluing of any kind of solidarity as a form of narcissistic self deception and totalitarianism is a more honest, if not more authentic, rendering of the logic of incommensurability, a logic whose irrationality and essential anti-humanism – embodied in the proliferation of monstrous doubles – is mystified by the concept of relative autonomy (with its dubious claims to explanatory status) and its specifications – like Albert and Hahnel's "community," whose feel-good fuzziness masks its Real *li"ek* ian core. This masking function in turn relies on a pervasive anti-communism shared by all of the critics discussed here.

Anti-Communism

I have asserted in several places that anti-communism has played a significant role in discrediting class analysis and the whole internationalist project by equating it with whiteness or white supremacy. I would like to elaborate. Such argument often relies on stereotyped cold-war characterizations of the Communist Party. This kind of cold-war rhetoric is nicely summed up by James Prickett:

non-communists win union elections but Communists "capture" a union.
Non-communists join Unions; Communists "infiltrate" or "invade" them.
A non-communist states his or her position; a Communist "peddles the

straight party line.” Non-communists influence or lead groups; Communists dominate them. A non-communist political party passes resolutions or makes decisions; but a Communist party invariably issues “directives.”⁴³

The dominant stereotype, implicit in all of the above, is the stereotype of Communists using people, a rhetoric employed pervasively when it comes to the relations between blacks and reds (the latter assumed to be white). And even where white communists are not portrayed as monsters, the communist ideal of black and white unite and fight is nevertheless viewed as a form of white domination.

Albert and Hahnel cite Harold Cruse, who argues, in what I would assert is a representative comment, that “what the Marxists called Negro-white Unity within their organizations was in reality, white domination.” Albert and Hahnel editorialize that such unity was at best an “assimilationist unity which presumed the superiority of white norms and the expendability of ‘Blackness.’” This strategy entailed and entails “a loss of dignity and self-respect and a denial of legitimate separate history and culture.” Internationalism means “desiring to see the Negro group as an appendage” to be “used” “as recruiting grounds, or to be controlled and brought in line.” They quote Wright in *American Hunger* describing black communists as grotesques:

While engaged in conversation, they stuck their thumbs in their suspenders or put their left hands into their shirt bosoms or hooked their thumbs into their back pocket as they had seen Lenin and Stalin do in photographs. Though they did not know it, they were naively practicing magic; they thought that if they acted like the men who had overthrown the czar, then surely they ought to be able to win their freedom in America.

In speaking they rolled their “r’s” in continental style, pronouncing “party” as “parrtee,” stressing the last syllable, having picked up the habit from white Communists. “Comrades” became “cumrrrades,” and “distribute,” which they had known how to pronounce all their lives, was twisted into “distrribuuute,” with the accent on the

⁴³ Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Madison: Associated

last instead of the second syllable, a mannerism which they copied from the Polish Communist immigrants who did not know how to pronounce the word. . . .

An hour's listening disclosed the fanatical intolerance of minds sealed against new ideas, new facts, new feelings, new attitudes, new hints at ways to live. They denounced books they had never read, people they had never known, ideas they could never understand, and doctrines whose names they could not pronounce. Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met Communism.⁴⁴

Black Communists become, in Wright's version, little more than left-wing Zip Coons. It is a portrait dovetailing almost perfectly with Ellison's classic cold war portrait of black communists in *Invisible Man* as dupes and sambos and the white communists behind the scenes as literally mechanical men. Depicting the Communist Party simultaneously as insane, mechanistic (if not literally mechanical) yet, in the familiar paradox, the acme of white rationality rhetorically guarantees the reasonableness of black nationalism, even as Albert and Hahnel read "community" as an irreducible fundamentally irrational need for identity.

The anti-racism of the Communist party U.S.A. brought to light in the 1990s renders suspect the standard anti-communist narrative. Autobiographies of black communists like Hosea Hudson, Harry Haywood (likely, Wright's Zip Coon), Nate Shaw, Ben Davis and William Patterson and the work of historians – like Mark Naison on the Communist Party in Harlem, Robin Kelley on the Sharecroppers Union and on

University Presses, 1988), p. 18.

⁴⁴ Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *Marxism and Socialist Theory* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), pp. 237, 245-6. In Ellison's novel, Brother Tarp carries around a chain to remind him of the tie to slavery. But by the end of the novel, when he mysteriously disappears, becomes invisible, the reader sees the chain as representing communism as well. When Tod Clifton loses his marbles just prior to the Harlem riot, he dangles a black sambo puppet before passers by to dramatize his treatment by the brotherhood and by implication the status of blacks in the Party. What precipitates Clifton's loss of sanity is his fight with the black nationalist Raz. It is an allegory of Clifton's rejection of blackness and precedes the Brotherhood's expulsion/demotion of Clifton, which in turn allegorizes, in Albert's words, the expendability of blackness to the Brotherhood. The fight itself repeats the famous fight of blindfolded black youth in front of white racists at the novel's start and cements the parallel between communists and racists, both of whom turn blacks against one another and are responsible for literal and figurative lynchings.

African-Americans in the Lincoln Brigades, Gerald Horne's study of the Civil Rights Congress, a mass organization headed up by William Patterson and patterned after the ILD, the International Labor Defense of Scottsboro fame, documents collected on American Communism by Phillip Foner – while by no means romanticizing the movement, do significant damage to the cold-war vision of white communists “using” blacks. It is a vision meant to suggest that multi-racial unity is a sham, a mask for white domination, whether by abolitionists, carpetbaggers, communists, or white unions. This is a view held in common by a, to say the least, wide range of groups and individuals on the political spectrum – from the Klan, to the NAACP, to social democrats like Aronowitz (before his return to class), Robert Allen, Albert and Hahnel, Omi and Winant. Class analysis is on this view not only elitist but racist.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990) and *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?* and *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (1993), (1994); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik* (1978), Hosea Hudson (1987); Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

The manipulation thesis takes it as axiomatic that nationalist and/or mainstream organizations respect people instead of using them, like the communists do. Robin Kelley's commentary on the ILD and the black elite's response to it is, therefore, worthy of notice:

The ILD's presence aroused an equally passionate, though much different, response from black Alabamians [much different from the white elite's violence toward the ILD]. The party had already built a strong base of support within black working-class communities because of its relief campaign, but once the ILD entered the Scottsboro case, the CP quickly earned a reputation as a “race” organization. Although the move grew out of a pre-existing policy to defend all “class-war prisoners,” the ILD suddenly found itself immersed in the world of race politics. Through their participation in the Scottsboro defense as well as a panoply of local cases involving poor black defendants, ILD activists directly challenged the leadership of Birmingham's black elite.

Once Scottsboro hit the daily newspapers, Birmingham's traditional black leaders at first dissociated themselves from the case and berated the Communists for meddling in Southern affairs. The Birmingham World, in an editorial entitled “Cast Down Your Buckets Where You Are!” supported Alabama's legal system 100 percent. “Birmingham,” the writer reported, “has proved [sic] that a man can get a just and fair trial in the Southland regardless of color.” While questioning the evidence presented in court, Oscar Adams . . . nevertheless felt the defendant's testimony carried little weight because they were “poorly trained, [and] primitive when we think of intelligence.” NAACP national secretary Walter White also expressed some skepticism at first. Adopting a wait-and-see attitude, he did not send a lawyer to Alabama until the nine defendants had been convicted. White questioned the ILD's intentions, suggesting that the organization was interested less in the defendant's welfare than in revolution ordered from Moscow. Furthermore, he believed the ILD *duped* (my italics) the parents into accepting its support since the families were, in White's words, “of humble background and with meager educational and other advantages.” When White “recognized that black public opinion was beginning to shift to the ILD,” he tried to “wrest control of the case from them.”

It is interesting to speculate on the connection between the charge that Communists see workers as dupes of false consciousness and the anticommunist elitism that sees workers as duped by communists due to their ignorance. See Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 80.

I contest the empirical references to communism not just because they are often wildly inaccurate but more importantly because they function rhetorically as self-evident objective correlatives of class analysis. Communism means whites using blacks; class analysis means subordinating race and gender to class. Analytical categories are anthropomorphized, with race, class and gender viewed less as explanatory categories than as citizens: to accord explanatory primacy to one of them is to abridge the civil rights of the other two. That a class analysis of racism thus renders race subordinate or secondary is tantamount to arguing that black people are at best second-class citizens and at worst Zip Coons manipulated by grotesque one-eyed Jacks.

This graphic imagery of anti-communist iconography – white communists robbing blacks of their autonomy – helps cement the tacit relation between the category of relative autonomy and the tradition of natural rights (liberalism). The category of relative autonomy, which, I have been arguing, is in the neo/post-Marxist context, a reification, takes on a powerful felt rightness. Violating the relative autonomy of race is like violating the sacred rights of the person. The role of anti-communist discourse is to make abstractions like race and nation feel self-evident.

I have argued throughout this essay that the relative autonomy of race is both a reification and a compromise formation. It is a compromise formation in that it constructs class as an aporetic economic determinism that requires supplementation yet these very supplementations supplement each other's inadequacies or aporias. But the category is a compromise form in yet another sense. The post-Marxian category of race claims to be not just an explanatory category but a structural one; yet this explanatory category receives its felt rightness from the philosophical categories of bourgeois individualism – reinforced by anti-communism – it presumably spurns. The othering of the same produces a monstrous wholly other as respect. If rationality is white rationality that renders black people unintelligible, if it is a form of cannibalistic narcissism and sadism whose ultimate expression is class analysis – the apotheosis of the same as monstrous other – only what is incommensurable with such monstrosity could be human: yet it is just this incommensurability that dehumanizes!

Such a dynamic rests side by side with another incompatible formation that consists in confusing revolution and class analysis with the apocalyptic incommensurability that a class analysis rooted in Marxian moral realism rejects and that

post-Marxist discourse itself cannot avoid. In addition, as the critics I have discussed associate truth with instrumental rationality or reduce truth to *use* (see Gordon and Newfield above), the charge that white philosophy or class analysis is *manipulative* either loses its force or retains its critical purchase only by reintroducing an essentialist, mystical, intuitionist moral realism at odds with the rationally justifiable, genuinely fallibilist version of moral realism I have argued for here.

This lengthy discussion has set out to examine the web of assumptions in the post-Marxist discursive field that naturalizes nationalism and renders class analysis and internationalism inadequate. And yet this same discursive field, when viewed from a slightly different angle, shows some significant attraction to internationalism. I'd like to conclude this section with some comments on this tension between nationalism and internationalism and I want to use Lerner and West's *Jews and Blacks* as a focus.

West and Lerner refer to their positions as progressive black nationalism and progressive Zionism respectively. Both are at times harshly critical of nationalism. West notes the logic that ties black nationalist to white supremacist. Lerner notes the ways Jewish neo-conservatism and black nationalism reinforce one another and the role that moral relativism – the notion of incommensurable discourses – plays here. Consistent with this critique of relativism, he understands that identities require rational justification. And his quick critique of the notion of white-skin privilege matches much of what I have said in these pages. Their critique of internationalism and class analysis rests less on the overt racialization of these categories and more on their link to totality and reduction: but as these latter involve the denial of an irreducible and concrete ethnic particularity in favor of abstract unity, one might well argue that whiteness is not far behind.

West, like Lerner, argues for nationalism on the grounds of defensive necessity and on the grounds that, in his Christianized discourse, in order to love the other one must love oneself. Black nationalism is interpreted as a form of black self love prior to love of others. Nevertheless, he notes that “any kind of nationalism will end up dehumanizing folk,” and in several places re-iterates, following Hobsbawm, that it will almost always serve elites – though then again he immediately notes that while Marxism can critique nationalism, it doesn't have the tools to deal with “the deeper [psycho cultural, as he puts

it elsewhere] issues of community and identity.”⁴⁶ And he’s aware of the difficulties involved in being able to get past the nationalist first stage on the way to internationalism. As he puts it, holding on to a nationalist identity in the name of a universalist ideal puts one “on a very slippery slope because most nationalists are going to cut so radically against your prophetic universalist ideal that, unless you keep them at work, you can easily end up being an apologist for destructive forms of nationalism” (Lerner and West, p. 96).

It is Lerner who takes up the issue of class-based internationalism only to dismiss it as empty, unrealizable, irrelevant – ultimately, in favor of a seeming hybrid: a nationalism which is simultaneously internationalist. Many of his reasons are – similar to Albert’s rejection of internationalism – purportedly empirical. His example, like Albert’s, is the Communist party, with its vision “of transcending national boundaries and creating an international community.” But this vision, as it does for Lik, turned into its opposite. I quote Lerner at length:

Jewish attraction to Communist internationalism had deep roots in Jewish religious themes. Some were also attracted because they realized they weren’t going to get real acceptance into existing national societies and the only solution to the Jewish problem would be an internationalism by which all nation states were dissolved.

Under Stalin, the Bolsheviks had a definition of the “national question” that validated national groupings for everyone except the Jews. The Jews alone were not defined as a nation state since they didn’t own territory. Those who held on to their Jewishness were really holding onto a petit bourgeois prejudice. This way of thinking led to the suppression of Jewish institutions and religious practices, to treating Zionism as an enemy rather than as a liberation movement, and finally to the killing of Jewish intellectuals. It also led to a deep suspicion and anti-Semitism in the Communist Party which culminated in the eradication of most Jewish Leaders of World War Two resistance movements. The experience of Jews in both Stalinist Russia and then in

⁴⁶ Lerner and West (1996, 96) and Cornel West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993) pp. 64, 135.

the Soviet Union was of oppression, of negation of their particularity. In fact, the struggle inside the Communist Party against Trotsky was in part waged against him as Jew, despite the fact that he himself, as the supreme internationalist, totally renounced his Jewishness.⁴⁷

He adds that the efforts of left-wing partisans “often proved more anti-Semitic than anti-Nazi”:

In incident after incident, culminating in the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion, Jews struggling against Fascism could not get the support of the non-Jewish resistance fighters, Communists, and socialists, who turned their backs from a fear of losing their own base through association. (Lerner and West, 119-20)

With regard to Poland, Kolko appears to lend defense to Lerner’s remarks: “Like everyone and everything in Poland during the reign of human anarchy the Nazis created, a very great deal the Resistance did was ambiguous, even debatable, not only in relationship to the Jews, whom they essentially abandoned to their own devices, but to each other.” Yet as even this comment makes clear, the abandoning of the Jews to their own devices took place in a context of unbelievable anarchy. Nazi terror was “overwhelming and capricious . . . and the means for evading it far more limited than elsewhere”:

Poland’s social organization, and the human bonds and obligations upon which a normal society is based, disintegrated to such an extent that widespread collaboration became integral to the antisocial context which suffused the nation. The population was to an extraordinary degree

⁴⁷ The charge that the attack on Trotsky may have been motivated by anti-semitism is hard to believe since Kaganovitch – one of Stalin’s closest allies – was a Jew. See also extended discussion below. There was, contra Lerner, an autonomous region for the “Jewish nation” though most Soviet Jews were not much interested in it: Birobidzhan. See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birobidzhan>>.

desocialized and reduced to the most private existences as individuals and their families sought ways to survive.⁴⁸

The specifics of the Poland experience cannot be generalized as Lerner suggests. For example, in the Netherlands, in February 1941, young Jews, “working principally with the Communists, fought and badly bruised NSB thugs sent into Amsterdam’s Jewish area to harass them.” The Nazis cracked down in response and the Communists promptly called “a one day strike to protest the abuse of Jews, managing to bring out many of the shipyard and metal workers and sufficient others to paralyze much of the city” (Kolko, 1995, 245).

Though in post-Marxist discourse, the anti-semitism of the Soviet Union is taken for granted, several points should be made. As a counter to Lerner, I will summarize Arno Mayer’s discussion of anti-semitism in the Soviet Union between the Bolshevik Revolution and World War Two. The Russian Revolution in Mayer’s words, “brought with it the instant emancipation of what until 1917 had been Europe’s largest and most oppressed Jewish population” – though indeed Mayer does say that the high level of assimilation and acculturation of Jews “entailed a more rapid crumbling of the religious foundations of Jewish Culture in Soviet Russia than in any other country.” The Revolution saved Jews from the Whites, led by Admiral Kolchak, who was “an undisguised ideological warrior who publicly endorsed *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.”⁴⁹

“With the end of ethnic discrimination,” Mayer tells us, “Jews took jobs in factories and agricultural communes” and worked in the expanding state apparatus as “technicians, engineers, administrators, doctors and academics.” From 1926 to 1939 the Jewish population increased from 2.7 to 3 million, mostly as a result of a falling infant-mortality rate. Seventy percent of employed Jews earned wages and salaries, “half of them as skilled workers, technicians and managers in the fast-growing industrial sector.” Jews in white-collar positions expanded from 7 to 37 percent; in the Professions from 3 to 13 percent. They made up 13 to 15 percent of University students. A “disproportionate” number of Jews served in the secret police or as political commissars

⁴⁸ Gabriel Kolko, *A Century of War: Politics, Conflicts and Society Since 1914* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 254, 235.

⁴⁹ Arno Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (New York, Pantheon, 1988), pp. 56-7.

in the service (Mayer, 1988, 59-61). During the war, as Alexander Werth has shown, the Soviet Union had over a hundred Jewish general officers (general and above) whereas the Allied militaries were in fact openly anti-Semitic.⁵⁰ Also, as John Arch Getty notes in his study of the “purges” (the quotation marks are not there to deny their existence, but to deny the automatic equivalence between purge and execution or arrest), about 10% of the purges were, according to internal records, for anti-semitism.⁵¹

The flip side of these processes was that despite an initial commitment to a secular Yiddish culture, assimilation gained the upper hand and according to Mayer, “the Soviets [many of them Jews] began to intensify their strangulation of Jewish nonconformity along with that of all other religions and national minorities,” a process animated “by militant materialism rather than anti-semitism.” There were “no steps” taken to “reduce the very considerable presence of Jews in state and party.” In the aftermath of the police actions of the late 30s (which, while indeed draconian and unjust, bear no resemblance to the cold-war account shared frankly by most of the left), “Jews retained their historically unprecedented place in Russia’s bureaucracy and armed services and also their unexceptional position in the Bolshevik Party” – “in stark contrast with the acute deterioration of the condition of Jews in eastern, east-central and central Europe” (Mayer, 1988, p. 61). Lerner’s comment about resistance movements seems to me almost slanderous: The Communist Parties had Jews in the leadership in all countries. In Poland, the head of the Communist Party during the war was a Jew – until he was killed. As Hilberg has pointed out, the main fighters in the Warsaw Rebellion were Communists – along with left-wing Bundists.⁵²

Both Lerner and West are social democrats, with West sometimes calling himself a socialist. Neither Lerner nor West, however, abandons social democracy as a result of its (far more) widespread collaboration with Fascism, a collaboration that discredited both social democrats and socialists in the early postwar years while the communists enjoyed prestige as a result of having become, ironically, the best patriots. Nor do Lerner and West abandon nationalism. Class-based proletarian internationalism, once again, and in contrast to other positions, cannot, it seems, be rearticulated.

⁵⁰ Alexander Werth, *Russia At War: 1941-1945* (New York, Basic Books, 1999 [1964]).

⁵¹ John Arch Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵² Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985).

Lerner poses the issue as one of communist internationalism crushing the particularity of the Zionist liberation movement. But the notion of a Zionist liberation movement is certainly questionable, given the significant attraction Fascism held for a number of Israel's founding fathers – from Jabotinsky to Shamir. Not to mention that one of the founding fathers of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, to a significant degree, actually shared the Nazis' view of Jews. "Rootless" Jews did, according to Herzl, often act like the Nazi stereotypes – because they did not have a homeland.⁵³

Another questionable assumption underlying Lerner's response – and numerous others discussed along the way – is that internationalism demonstrably failed and is thus irrelevant or turned into its opposite and must, therefore, be avoided. But internationalism was not practiced in a sustained or systematic enough way to be either tested or refined much less repudiated. There were, of course, noteworthy examples of internationalism – most obviously the Lincoln brigades (and it is worth noting that the Soviet Union did lend significant aid to the republicans – unlike the other allies. To the U.S government the Lincoln volunteers were law breakers). Even here, the Republicans (the opposition for which the Lincolns fought) had no intention of breaking with the capitalist system. For the most part, the CP paid little attention to proletarian internationalism. I refer obviously to the popular front line of aligning with the "progressive" bourgeoisie. A foreign policy consequence of this line is that, as Kolko argues, the Soviet Union followed British, French, and U.S dictates in order to purchase security for itself: leaving the communists to their own devices (abandoning them, in Lerner's terms) in Greece to satisfy Churchill, subordinating the resistance to the anti-communist de Gaulle in deference to both Britain and the U.S.⁵⁴

As in the previous discussion of Albert and Hahnel, I query Lerner's account of actually existing communist movements not because there is not much to criticize here. Rather his factual errors are linked to a rhetorical strategy designed to discredit class-based internationalism (save as empty regulative ideal) by yoking it to a construction of Communism as Stalinism and Stalinism as sheer horror. This figure of sheer horror, or monstrosity, in turn, as I have argued, legitimates and naturalizes nationalism.

⁵³ See the works of Lenni Brenner.

⁵⁴ Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1990 [1968]), esp. chapter 17.

West's accounting of the relation between nationalism and internationalism is also questionable. While it is almost surely true that self-love is the condition for a healthy love of others, West's notion of "black self-love," however commonsensical, seems essentialist in the ways I discussed above. If a black person loves herself in part due to her own anti-racist practice, but not due to any love of blackness per se, is this a form of denial, or of self-hatred as essentialists are pretty much committed to arguing? West moves imperceptibly from self-love as a condition for love of others to the questionable corollary that nationalism is the first step toward internationalism. But if internationalism is "in the last instance," the last instance, indeed, will never arrive.

West's tacit essentialism is reinforced by his commitment to community identities with deep psychocultural roots. These beliefs render his anti-nationalist protests empty – since these deep-rooted identities amount to in essence a kind of tragic tribalism, a tribalism that is frankly difficult to distinguish from original sin. This view is buttressed by his sense that both elitism and markets are irreducible, making his repeated emphasis on non-market values sheer idealism. I'd add that it is impossible to understand how nationalism could ever be overcome given the irreducibility of the competitive market, an irreducibility either assumed, or rooted in the far from unquestionable work of Alec Nove. Interestingly, as Meszaros points out in his critique of Nove and market socialism, Nove's arguments for the inevitability of the market are based in a kind of epistemological skepticism, a skepticism rooted in the unreliability of information, or the inevitability of bias that would make any project for a society based on meeting human needs impossible. Thus do epistemological issues return, with once again the link between anti-realism and freedom so central to post-Marxian discourse.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See West, BEM Vol. One, pp. 17 and 102 and BEM, Vol. Two, 129, 214-15, 221. Stephen Steinberg has criticized West for overemphasizing the nihilism of young urban black males. As Steinberg notes, West uses the term "to refer to destructive and self-destructive behavior that is unconstrained by legal or moral norms." Steinberg goes on to say that such a view "comes dangerously close to the prevailing view of ghetto youth as driven by aberrant and anti-social tendencies." In other words, West comes close to a modern-day Moynihan in certain regards. The source of this nihilism as West makes clear in his writings is market morality saturating the black community. Insofar as West sees markets as irreducible, as a, though not the, guarantor of freedom, the social basis of this market morality is let off the hook. He asserts that blacks must develop or reconnect to the non-market values that sustained a vibrant black community in the past. These values, both market and non-market, are ultimately irreducible to "the market economy" (which as I've said West sees as itself irreducible). As a result of West's sophisticated, non-vulgar analysis, "it takes," to quote Steinberg's acid summation, "hairsplitting distinctions that do not bear close scrutiny to maintain that West's view of nihilism is different from the conservative view of ghetto culture as pathological":

I have argued throughout that the arguments against class analysis and a politics of class-based internationalism are weak. I have also tried to suggest, albeit not very concretely, that a class-based internationalism is both morally just and strategically necessary – contra the view that such a theory and practice is at best nice sounding but irrelevant or at worst a recipe for totalitarianism. As I suggested at the start of my discussion of Lerner and West, the post-Marxist field itself contains a significant internationalist impulse. This attraction to internationalism takes various (inadequate) forms. The concept of hybridity involves of course an explicit critique of essentialist identity politics but such critique nevertheless springs from individualist, thus liberal, premises about power: thus its tie to Laclau and Mouffe’s critique of class. We have in addition the occasional lapses into a discourse of unity based on common interests, a discourse usually harshly critiqued; and we also can see a moral commitment to internationalism grounded in a people’s capitalism (William Greider’s work, for example) that reappropriates the dynamic of capital accumulation to serve progressive interests.

Such kernels of internationalism are not particularly surprising given the destructive dynamic coupling the globalization of capital with the construction of new militant particularisms (involving the redimensioning of older ideologies, not the latter’s atavistic return) that verge on or simply are Fascist. We should not rest content with this tension, this ambiguity, this ambivalence, between nationalism and internationalism. Ambivalence is often at the very heart of the reproduction of oppressive social relations. Put another way, the function of ambivalence is not ambivalent: ambivalence reproduces a whole lot better than its less hybrid versions the exploitation and superexploitation – with the racism and sexism this implies – that characterize our dominant social relations of production. The contradiction needs to be resolved, totalized, in favor of class-based internationalism: though indeed this will not be brought about by fiat – however urgent. Fiat, however, is a start.

The problem is that he presents social breakdown and cultural disintegration as a problem, *sui generis*, with an existence and momentum independent of the forces that gave rise to it in the first place. (Steinberg, 1995, 126-34)

“Relative autonomy” leads down the “slippery slope” to dehumanizing, victim-blaming nationalism, to Moynihanism with a human face, and lots of style. On Nove, see Istvan Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996).