

Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflections on Cedric Robinson and Others

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This essay will focus on Cedric Robinson's magisterial yet underanalyzed work *Black Marxism*, which has recently been re-released by University of North Carolina Press with both a new preface by Robinson and new foreword by the distinguished historian Robin D. G. Kelley. Robinson's work is my focus in great part because of its incredible ambitiousness, totalizing sweep and scrupulous research (as Kelley notes, the footnotes "could have been a separate book altogether").¹ Unlike those writing in a post-Marxist tradition, Robinson does not reject Marxism by setting mini narratives against grand narratives. Given the unavoidability of "the global," this post-Marxist fetish of the local has itself lost credibility.² Robinson opposes the Marxian grand narrative with a grand narrative of his own. He thus poses a significant challenge to historical materialism, but it is a challenge that historical materialism, properly interpreted, meets.

The point of my essay, quite bluntly, is to show that Robinson is wrong about Marxism and that Robinson is not alone, the errors he makes being fundamental not only to current theorizing about race and class, my two principal concerns, but also to current theorizing about gender, culture, "relative autonomy" and causal explanations of oppression and exploitation. So while this essay focuses on *Black Marxism*, it will, by way of contextualizing it for the present, discuss as well and in some detail the work of Kelley--especially his foreword--and labor historian David Roediger. In my conclusion, I will suggest further affinities between Robinson's work and a wide range of contemporary theorists who in their various ways recapitulate many of Robinson's premises.

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The "relative autonomy" of "race" has been enabled by a reduction and distortion of class analysis. The essence of the reduction and distortion involves equating class analysis with some version of economic determinism. The key move in the critique of economic determinist Marxism depends upon the view that the economic is the base, the cultural/political/ideological the superstructure. It is then relatively easy to show that the (presumably non-political) economic base does not cause the political/cultural/ideological superstructure, that the latter is/are not epiphenomenal but relatively autonomous or autonomous causal categories in their own right--though such causal pluralism often results in the deconstruction of the category of cause. It might be said, at least with regard to the "class struggle in theory," that most critics of Marxism zero in on the perceived conceptual inadequacies of base and superstructure. So I'd like to state my position on this at some length before turning to Robinson.

Marxism properly interpreted emphasizes the primacy of class in a number of senses. One, of course, is the primacy of the working class as a revolutionary agent--a primacy which does not, as often thought, render women and people of color "secondary." Such an equation of white male and working class, as well as a corresponding division between a "white" male working class identity and all the others, whose identity is thereby viewed as either primarily one of gender and race or hybrid, is a view this essay contests all along the way. The primacy of class means that building a multiracial, multi-gendered international working-class organization or organizations should be the goal of any revolutionary movement: the primacy of class puts the fight against racism and sexism at the center. The intelligibility of this position is rooted in the *explanatory* primacy of class analysis for understanding the structural determinants of race, gender and class oppression. Oppression is multiple and intersecting but its causes are not.

As I will show, the *incorrect* understanding of the primacy of class does carry with it for critics of historical materialism both the devaluation of "race" and "gender" as explanatory categories and their devaluation as real people, women and people of color. So when the charge is made against Marxism that it makes race and gender secondary, there is always the sense that race and gender are being treated at once as analytical categories and citizens--with the implication that Marxism in theory is the corollary of a deprivation of rights in practice. On this view, race, gender, class are co-primary,

interacting, intersecting and, to reiterate the confusion I see between the triad as analytical category and person, in dialogue.

In my view, and this is surely controversial, but it also puts Marxism on its strongest footing, the primacy of class means not only that class is the primary determinant of oppression and exploitation but the *only structural determinant*. "Race" and gender (this essay focuses on racism but has implications for gender) are not structural determinants. There is racist and sexist ideology. And there is a racial and gendered division of labor, whose severity and function vary depending on where one works in the capitalist global economy. Both ideology and the division of labor are understood here to be functional for class rule--facilitating profit making and social control. Class rule is itself a form of class struggle. This latter point is crucial. Class rule is never automatic or easy, and there is constant resistance, both to class rule itself and its symptoms. This essay thus strongly rejects that part of the Althusserian thesis on social reproduction that explains class rule as a function of interpellation.[3](#)

So class does not mean the economic in contradistinction to the political or the material in contradistinction to the mental. And class struggle should itself not be seen as a reflex of the primacy of the productive forces over the social relations of production--in this scenario, the working class is not really struggling to emancipate itself but to emancipate "the productive forces." Such a view also legitimates nationalism as a stepping stone to internationalism--insofar as nationalism (through, say, import-substitution) helps develop capitalism enough so that it becomes ripe for the next stage. Finally, class does not mean "objective," defined in turn as "impersonal forces." All agents must face the constraints of a given mode of production--capitalists must obey capital's laws of motion. They must be motivated to maximize profit in order to survive, though the strongest profit making motives in the world cannot prevent the destruction of capital, which is a property of the system. In this sense, the mode of production is objective, not reducible to the wills of individual agents. But processes of class rule always involve subjects (embodied to be sure) who do make choices about how to rule and how to resist.

The primacy of class means that "the economic" and "the political" are inseparable--we must not divide them into the economic base (equated with "class" and "impersonal forces," the two in turn synonymous with "structure") and the political superstructure (just about everything else from law and custom to the agency of ruling and resisting subjects), separate realms that "mutually determine one another." As I've argued elsewhere and will argue below, when you split the economic and the political and then recombine them, you do not have dialectics but an incoherent amalgam of incommensurable categories, or, in E. P. Thompson's words, "barren oscillation."[4](#) Finally, class does not mean capitalism. The tacit equation of the two facilitates the mistaken view, central to Robinson et al., that pre-capitalist sexism and racism pose insoluble problems for Marxism.[5](#)

In Robinson's case, his equation of class analysis with economism or economic determinism is in part what allows him to critique Marxian class analysis from the standpoint of his culturalist alternative which interprets Marxism as an insufficient internal critique of a Eurocentrism rooted in a fundamentally racist and violence-prone Western metaphysic, one point of which is to deny the black radical tradition. This latter tradition, "incommensurable" with the former, is characterized by a "shared epistemology" which "granted supremacy to metaphysics not the material" and whose essence is "the absence of mass violence." Its revolutionary consciousness is a "black" "anti-logic to racism, slavery and capitalism" whose origin is outside and irreducible to Marxism's "mirror of production," that last phrase one of the many employed by Robinson as part of his argument that Marxian accounts of class consciousness are reflexes or mirrors of capital logic.⁶

In the opening pages of *Black Marxism*, Robinson describes capitalism and the Marxian theorizing of it as desiring to be an "objective system," rooted in the "rationalistic thrusts of a economistic world view," global and universal, totalizing in its aims. Yet these aims are simultaneously undermined by the "particularistic psychologies and interests [racism and nationalism among these] which it could not slough off" (Robinson, p. 9). On Robinson's widely shared view of Marxian theory, racism and nationalism, the import of culture and tradition, are aporias that Marxists must continually explain away or deny, either by marginalizing them or dissolving them teleologically in some vague universalist future. Robinson repeatedly refers to Marxist theory as economic determinist or economist. And thus unable to deal with language, culture, tradition, ideology, racism or sexism. Robinson's comment about Marx in the preface to the 2000 edition (a preface which is in tension in certain respects with the text but not on this score) stands in for his views of the Marxian tradition:

Driven by the need to achieve the scientific elegance and interpretive economy demanded by theory, Marx consigned race, gender, culture and history to the dustbin. Fully aware of the constant place women and children held in the workforce, Marx still deemed them so unimportant as a proportion of wage labor that he tossed them, with slave labor and peasants, into the imagined abyss signified by pre-capitalist, non-capitalist and primitive accumulation. (Robinson, xxix.)

This critique is part of the larger argument adumbrated above about Western civilization summarized by Robinson's comment in the preface that "race was its epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce and power" (Robinson, xxxi). Robinson notes Marx's well-known affinity for aspects of Aristotle's thought, taking this affinity to support his thesis that Marxism is part of the "racialist architectonic" to which the black tradition is opposed and with which it is incommensurable. Robinson notes the "obvious genealogy and striking parallel between Aristotle's treatment of slaves and slavery and those of Marx":

Aristotle saw slavery as necessary for the self-sufficiency of the polis and in only rare instances were slaves expected to achieve a virtuous life. Given their marginal intelligence and development, Aristotle found no compelling reason for inquiry into the ethics, consciousness, or desires of slaves, content to state that, "the slave is in a sense a part of his master, a living but separate part of his body." Marx, though he found slavery abhorrent, similarly recessed slaves from his discourse on human freedom: The slave works swayed by fear, and it is not his existence itself which is at stake since it is guaranteed to him even if it does not belong to him. (Robinson, xxix).

Slaves are, says Robinson presumably paraphrasing Marx, an "embarrassing residue" of an old mode of production, "which disqualified them from historical agency . . . in the modern world" (Robinson, xxix).

Note the language: "dustbin," "residue," "tossing into the abyss." The function of this language is to show how Marxism is violent and exclusionary. This position is in turn reinforced by Robinson's repeated references to Marxism as a "theory" imposing itself via its "preformed categories" (read a priori) onto recalcitrant phenomena--like nationalism, or "black social movements," the implication being that Marxism, itself an excrescence of Western civilization, wants to dominate black people. Another function of this rhetoric is to naturalize nationalism, especially the black radical tradition, while associating Marxism with the external, the extrinsic, the dead. Marxism imposes its dead categories on the vitality of the black radical tradition, and on the naturally non-violent African people: as Robinson notes, the persistence of racial domination over African peoples results in part from the fact that "violence did not come naturally to African peoples," the inescapable implication being that it does come naturally to "European peoples" [Robinson, p. 309]. Another way in which Robinson's rhetoric helps to position Marxism as inflexible comes by virtue of his structuralist metaphors--suggesting the relative stasis or stagnation of the Marxian tradition, trapped as it is in the racial architectonic. Thus Marxism is not literally a prioristic (not subject to the dictates of experience) so much as a form of an older, profound collective experience shaped by the racial architectonic, an experience which renders Marxism blind and deaf to the experience of the other.

These comments about Marx are one-sided, undialectical in Marxian terminology. They are even more one-sided about the Marxian tradition, failing to address the debate between productive forces technological determinist interpretations of Marx and the noneconomic determinist Marxian tradition, a debate represented among others by G. A. Cohen on one side and Richard Miller and Alan Gilbert on the other, though indeed a main influence on the latter two was Mao's *Critique of Soviet Economics*. Not surprisingly, that part of the Marxian tradition Robinson excludes emphasizes a Marx and a Marxism much more open to new political experiences than Robinson suggests.⁷

What Marx also says in *Capital*, Volume One is this:

whilst the cotton industry introduced child slavery in England, it gave in the U.S. a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage-earners in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.

Another way of saying as he says later that "labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."[8](#)

Marx's support of proletarian unity and support of abolition was taken up by significant sectors of the English proletariat. Here is one resolution on behalf of abolition, ardently defended by Marx:

Therefore this meeting considers it the particular duty of the workers . . . to denounce the base dishonesty and advocacy of slaveholding . . . and to manifest the warmest sympathy with the endeavors of the abolitionists to bring about a final solution to the question of slavery.[9](#)

What is crucial to note here is that the English (and Irish) proletariat's defense of abolition was rooted in a noneconomic determinist understanding of common interests between the proletariat in England and the anti-slavery cause. By not following their narrow economic interest, the workers endured greater hunger in the short term than they would have had they followed their ruling class in supporting the South. Only a political movement, notes Gilbert in his paraphrase of Marx's endorsement of worker abolitionism, "could defend the long range common interests of the proletariat against shortlived economic gain." As "the Sheffield workmen" put it to Roebuck, the Union leader "who wanted to recognize the South: "Never! We should have a civil war in England" (Gilbert, 1999, pp. 129, 130).

In addition, while in the 1840's, Marx may have tentatively thought the modernizing force of colonialism to be positive and did not emphasize the damage done the working-class movements from racism, he changed his mind in response to new political experience. He ardently attacked English working-class racism against the Irish in addition to his defense of anti-slavery. Robinson acknowledges Marx's views here yet marginalizes them, emphasizing his colonialist attitude toward India, with the implication that his understanding of English and Irish divisions was a function of his Eurocentrism. Yet it should be noted that even as Marx extenuated, but barely, colonialism in India as a modernizing force, he defended the Sepoy rebellion. (Gilbert notes that "Marx opposed English colonialism in India more thoroughly than even Gandhi did until after 1921" [Gilbert, 1999, p. 254].)

The point of my scrutiny of Robinson's rhetoric is not merely to point out its tendentiousness. The real point is that in order to transcend economism, you need to transcend the reification/voluntarism duality of which it forms a part. Like many opponents and proponents of Marxism who claim to be critiquing the really existing economism and reductionism in the Marxian tradition, Robinson repeats the dualism he

wishes to transcend. If class analysis is equated with economism in its various versions, then the other phenomena will almost surely be analyzed as irreducible to it or "out of phase." As Meiksins Wood has put it in her brilliant analysis of the aporias of Althusserianism--which tends to see history as a series of discontinuous chunks and thus complicates the base/superstructure metaphor by seeing base and superstructure accordingly as discontinuous chunks that interact--phenomena like racism almost have to be viewed as "superstructural fragments left over from another mode of production" which "overdetermine" the base or simply come to be viewed as "backward" or "debris." Robinson's language of "dustbin" etc. is thus an accurate reading of one part of the Marxian tradition. As Meiksins Wood shows, the failure to supersede this tradition leads directly to the post-Marxian deconstruction of the last instance which never comes. Thus history becomes either nothing but micropolitics (post-Marxism) or a faceoff between idealist deep structures of mind (Robinson). As I will try to show, Robinson's critique does not dissolve the aporia indicated by what some call "the debris theory," but redescribes it as the autonomy of culture. (See Meiksins Wood, chapter two.)

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The heart of Robinson's critique of Marxism stems from his assertion that racism preexisted capitalism. It is assumed from this that class cannot account for race, as the case is often put these days. One mistake Robinson makes (a mistake common to this tradition) is, as I mentioned, to equate class analysis with the analysis of capitalism. But a noneconomic determinist Marxism focusing on processes of class rule and social control offers, I will argue, a superior analysis of both pre-capitalist and capitalist racisms. I'm thinking particularly of Ted Allen's two-volume work *The Invention of the White Race*, which, while focusing on the origins of anti-black racism in the United States, spends a good deal of time analyzing English racism against the Irish. And the recently published work by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra*.[10](#)

I'd like to compare Robinson's analysis of pre-capitalist and capitalist racisms to Allen's historical materialist analysis. I will then broaden the discussion to one of general historical method, where I will compare historical materialism, represented below by Allen, Rediker/Linebaugh, against the kinds of criticisms of Marxism raised by Robinson, Robin Kelley in his laudatory foreword to *Black Marxism* and David Roediger, whose criticisms of Marxism bear noted resemblance to Robinson's.

What's striking here is how similar Robinson's analysis of anti-Irish racism is to Allen's. I will begin with their remarkable rejection of phenotypic or skin color explanations of racism. Both, interestingly, cite and critique Edmund Morgan in similar ways--see him as both approaching and backing off the insight that race has nothing to do with skin color. Robinson notes that Morgan is willing to argue that "in the eyes of unpoor Englishmen the poor bore many of the marks of an alien race." Robinson continues:

In the next breath, however he declares: "to be sure, poverty was not genetically hereditary. The poor were not born of another color than the

rest of the population but legislation could offer a substitute for color." He appears to link specifically racial prejudice to differences in color; that is without color, a prejudice may emerge that is only like racism: "the contempt that lay behind these proposals [the enslavement of the poor] and behind many of the workhouse schemes is not easy to distinguish from the kind of contempt that today we call racism." The parallels he pursues between English domination of the Irish in the sixteenth century and Native Americans from the seventeenth century on, however would suggest otherwise. Here again is an instance where the existence of European racism toward other Europeans is simply denied in both analytical and historical terms. (Robinson, p. 339).

Allen's argument about religio-racial oppression of the Irish is meant to detach racism and race from phenotype. To do this, he, like Robinson, emphasizes the parallels between policy toward English, Native Americans and Africans. In particular the argument is addressed to Jordan's psychoanalytically inspired "blackness within" hypothesis that explains racism in terms of "the English need to be white," or need for white identity. As Allen says, "a need to know they were white" cannot possibly explain the attitude of the English toward the Irish" (Allen, Vol. One, p. 28). The details of English policy toward the Irish, the many changes in policy, from racial oppression to national oppression and back again, and even the odd combination of national oppression in Ireland coupled with racial oppression in Ulster (more on this later) is explained as deliberate ruling-class policy undertaken in response to the particularities of class struggle and social control.

Robinson's first chapter is entitled "Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development." Much of what he argues is consonant with Allen's historical materialism, indeed almost identical. This is clear from among other things the subtitle. Allen's class analytic social control hypothesis argues against economism--the attempt to explain, for example, racial slavery or "white race identification" (this is part of his critique of Timothy Breen's work) via "exclusively objective factors" like the rising price of tobacco in late 17th century Virginia (Allen, Vol. One, p. 20). For Allen, such objective factors are inadequate as explanations for the particularities of racism in the U.S. For Allen, deliberate ruling class policy in a situation not of their own making best explains racism. The difference is of course that because Robinson equates class analysis with economism and "objective factors," subjectivity in history tends to be read as incompatible with Marxism. I'll return to this line of thought in a moment. Right now, I want to pursue the parallels between Robinson and historical materialism a bit further.

In chapter one, Robinson asserts that "the class that ruled, the nobility, by its orchestration of the instrumentalities of the state, imprinted its character on the whole of European society. And since much of that character had to do with violence, the lower orders were woven into the tapestry of a violent social order." He goes on to state that "this was not a simple question of the dominance of the ruling class over the masses" (Robinson, p. 21). Now, a couple things he says here are taken to be at odds with Marxism. The reason this dominance is not a simple question (Marxists are always simple) is that, as he says, the masses as such did not exist, though he appears to

contradict himself on the next page when he asserts that "when it came to the structures of the state, their knowledge of the social, cultural, and historical compositions of the masses was exquisitely refined" (Robinson, p. 22). The point is that strategies of social control were quite sophisticated. And the concept of the masses was in part an ideological invention whose purpose was to mask this social control based on divisions.

In pitting himself rhetorically against Marxism as he has defined it, he makes assertions with which many Marxists would concur:

the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate--to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical (dialect) differences into "racial" ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the third world began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism.

As a civilization of free and equal beings, Europe was as much a fiction in the nineteenth century and later as its very unity had been during the Merovingian and Carolingian eras. . . . From the twelfth century forward, it was the bourgeoisie and the administrators of state power who initiated and nurtured myths of egalitarianism while seizing every occasion to divide peoples for the purpose of their domination.

Old instruments gave way to newer ones, not because they were old but because the ending of feudalism and the expansion of capitalism and its world system--that is the increasingly uneven character of development among European peoples themselves and between Europeans and the world beyond--precipitated new oppositions while providing new opportunities and demanding new "historical" agents. (Robinson, p. 26)

With all of this division in the service of domination, nationalism was required also: international capitalism persisted in competitive anarchy--each national bourgeoisie opposing the others as "natural enemies." These competitive endeavors in turn "required the cooptation of their 'rational' proletariat in order to destroy their competitors" (Robinson, p. 27).

While both Robinson and historical materialists would agree that ruling classes make history though not under conditions of their own choosing, for Robinson, this becomes an *anti-Marxist* hypothesis, putting into question class analysis. For the processes of class rule Robinson talks about above are themselves subordinate to what he will call the Western racial metaphysic, whose primary characteristic is a kind of fundamental violence. Violence, "mechanisms of self-destruction inherent in Western civilization," is

not then a function of class struggle and class rule so much as a function of Western culture that subsumes class rule (Robinson, p. 71).

I noted above that Allen's polemic was directed against the psycho-cultural hypothesis for explaining racism. But this is only half of the polemic. The other part of Allen's polemic is against Edmund Morgan, for the insufficiency or incompleteness of his sociogenic hypothesis. The upshot of Allen's critique is that the incompleteness of Morgan's sociogenic account "spared the life of the innate racism idea that he had so trenchantly attacked as an explanation of racial slavery" (Allen, Vol. One, p. 18). Allen's argument here in essence is that Morgan underestimates class inequality among Europeans. After the line between European and African, indentured servant and slave, was drawn, there were, according to Morgan, "too few free [white] poor to matter" (Allen, Volume One, p. 18). In other words, the deliberate ruling class policy to divide "white" and nonwhite eliminated the basis for class struggle among the European labouring component by putting a ruling race in place of a ruling class, making the latter virtually identical to the former. In Morgan's words, "by lumping Indians, Mulattoes, and Negroes in a single pariah class, Virginians had paved the ways for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class."[11](#)

In addition to this erasure of the European proletariat, Morgan is also guilty, according to Allen, of erasing the revolutionary agency of the African slave. The import of this once again bears on the incompleteness of what Allen calls the "economic" explanations of racism (as opposed to a class rule social control explanation) exemplified in claims that what explains racial slavery was its cheapness. Allen notes the circularity of this argument: "to assume the cheapness is to assume the enslavement." Those in this tradition, from which Morgan incompletely breaks, "have proceeded as if the ability of the plantation bourgeoisie to control the African American bond laborer could be taken for granted" (Allen, Volume One, p. 16). Ironically, this charge is precisely the charge Robinson leveled against Marxism, but as Allen's analysis demonstrates, the charge only holds against an economist Marxian analysis.

Ironically, Morgan's faulty analysis significantly parallels Robinson's despite Robinson's excellent critique of Morgan. Because, according to Morgan, ruling class strategy worked once and for all, in eighteenth century America, thus obviating the need for a system of racial oppression as social control (since there were "too few free poor whites to matter"), the continuation of this mode of control becomes a mystery: thus does Morgan through the insufficiency of his socioeconomic account (problems bound up with economic determinism) invite back the Jordan-Degler thesis he had done so much to dislodge (and thus does Morgan's analysis enable Roediger's, whose racist white working class will come on the scene next and reproduce the system of racial oppression for reasons of their own, not reducible to Morgan's "economic" [read Marxist] analysis).

For Robinson, racism "runs deep in the bowels of western thought," part of its "substratum," which is "unprepared for anything else" (Robinson, p. 76). While this tradition permutes, it persists. In his discussion of American historical thought, Robinson notes, in a rather traditional historical materialist way, that this arrogant and

specious historiography was "an absolute imperative as a cornerstone for the rationalization of a slave society." This rationalization though is seen as the extension of the deeper racial logic--"a logical development of an errant civilization served so long by racial orders." (It should be noted that in this section and throughout, he oscillates between talking of this racialization as serving the ruling class and serving Western civilization.) He notes that there is "an undercurrent" in opposition to this tradition, but it is "overwhelmed by the more constant and morally profound tradition of racism." These metaphors are important, central to his underestimation of class struggles against racism--both the struggles he mentions and those he omits. Instead of class struggles won on balance by the ruling class, he substitutes "undercurrents" overwhelmed by racial tides emerging from deep in the bowels (Robinson, pp. 75, 79).

Even given these dominant metaphors, the history he offers doesn't always rest comfortably within the trope. For example, the racialist ideology directed at Europe's lower orders had to undergo quite a change in the American context where "the hard edges of class divisions, rooted in the European socioeconomic traditions of English gentry and continental European aristocracies, and their lower classes, were softened and obscured by a mythical racial unity." This mythical racial unity ("it was a lie but a terribly seductive one") functioned to cover up just how illusory were the "privileges of democracy." Robinson notes, like Allen does, how the history of indentured servitude is relegated to the margins, how the reliance on white servants is marginalized in order to perpetuate a myth of white egalitarianism, of racial consensus--"the vise of intra-European racialism, religious oppression, and class contempt was lifted to embrace most of them [the white servants]" (Robinson, pp. 76-80).

The question of course is why? For historical materialists, the invention of whiteness became, especially in the aftermath of Bacon's rebellion, a necessity of class rule. Robinson approaches such an insight when he says that such "racial fables" "obscure the related exploitations and oppressions of African, European, Asian and Amerindian peoples during the intervening 200 years" (since the American revolution) (Robinson, p. 80). Yet given the power of the architectonic and the feebleness of counters ("undercurrents," etc.), motivation for these practices seems to be missing--with the racial architectonic so solidly in place, despite its permutations, why would there be a need to obscure common exploitation since the incommensurable architectonics virtually ensure that these common interests--whatever common interests can mean given the incommensurability Robinson posits--would not be realized? As I mentioned and as we'll see below, historical materialists can provide the basis for such motivations but it requires abandoning the racial architectonic paradigm for class struggle paradigm.

What Robinson says about Bacon's rebellion is symptomatic. Speaking of the white servants at the end of the eighteenth century, Robinson notes:

White servants were no closer to liberation at the end of the eighteenth century than were their distracted predecessors who had joined with the rankly ambitious Indian killer Bacon in a desperate attempt to redraw the

boundaries of power and wealth of colonial society in seventeenth century.
(Robinson, p. 78)

While the racism against Indians is highlighted, the multiracial character of the rebels goes unmentioned. But indeed this danger appears to be the basis for the invention of the white race even for Morgan, despite his economist weaknesses.¹² In short, while Robinson and Allen share the view that racism cannot be reduced to questions of phenotype (color doesn't matter), Robinson, like Morgan, in essence repeats the Jordan-Degler psychocultural hypothesis that results from shared economist assumptions.

In his conclusion, speaking here of late nineteenth century white workers, Robinson notes, paraphrasing approvingly Dubois arguments in *Black Reconstruction* (more on Dubois below):

The racism of the American "white" working classes and their general ideological immaturity has abnegated the extent to which the conditions of capitalist production and relations alone could be held responsible for the social development of the American proletariat. The collective and individual identities of American workers had responded as much to race as they had to class. The relations of production were not determinant. Dubois would pursue this issue politically but not theoretically.
(Robinson, p. 314)

For those readers familiar with the arguments of David Roediger, whose connections to the kind of critique of historical materialism undertaken by Robinson I will explore later in the essay, this passage should ring a bell. As Roediger has put it, "to set race within social formations is absolutely necessary, but to reduce race to class is damaging."¹³ Likewise Morgan, backing off his claims about the volatile society (the time prior to the invention of the white race), will assert that perceptions of Africans were different, deriving perhaps from an unthinking racial "decision" (Morgan, p. 314) that Africans could be more severely punished because, in the words of a Barbadian plantation owner, "Africans were a brutish sort of people" (unlike the English view of the Irish!), thus, as Morgan notes, "not subject to the rights of Englishmen." This, Morgan says as prelude to his comment, which takes us straight back to the psychocultural hypothesis, that "the new social order Virginians (!) created after they changed to slave labor was determined as much by race as by slavery" (Morgan, p. 315). (It is interesting to note by the way that in quoting a Barbadian planter on Africans, he assumes that social conditions in the Caribbean were not significantly different from those prevailing in the U.S.--Allen explicitly critiques such assumptions.)

All of these arguments reify race, a move that requires the underestimation of class struggle and other economist errors. For example, in Robinson's quote above, it is clear that over and beyond capitalist production relations alone, the white workers are being shaped by the racial architectonic (for Roediger, the white workers are "creating" themselves). What is omitted are the concrete processes of class rule in the context of class struggle, processes omitted through recourse to "capitalist productions relations

alone," an abstraction from the historical particulars under which these relations always operate. This reductionist account of class rule facilitates and is facilitated by the excision of ideology and its replacement by psychology.

I'd like to close this part of the argument with a parallel between Robinson's argument for the primacy of race versus arguments for the primacy of patriarchy. Recently I had sent to me over the web a summary of Sue Clegg's defense of historical materialism against feminist challenges. Clegg argues that the concept of patriarchy may have ethical force but lacks explanatory power. I received another email defending patriarchy theory, this particular claim rooted in the fact that female labor in the formal and informal sectors of the economy is at the bottom of the world system, founding it, so to speak.

This comment about the world system resting on the backs of female labor is based on a chain of misleading equivalents: On the bottom, therefore foundation, therefore cause. But the cause of the differential rate of exploitation is capitalism and why women occupy the bottom wrung has to do with capitalism making use of what's available. Sometimes, class rule does not make use of what's available but uproots it.¹⁴ Analogous to arguing for the cogency of the category "patriarchy" from the fact that female labor is at the bottom in the informal sector, a sector which "supports" waged labor (coded as male), would be to argue that race is autonomous from class because in the U.S., black labor was at the bottom: that slavery was racialized turns into an argument for the autonomy of race in the following way. Slavery (understood as the "economic" in turn equated with "class") doesn't explain *who* was enslaved. Why was slavery racialized? The implication is that Marxism cannot answer this question. But the question can be answered. It helped legitimate class rule by muting the class question. As Allen put it, "it was only because 'race' consciousness superceded class consciousness that the continental plantation bourgeoisie was able to achieve and maintain the degree of social control necessary to proceeding with capital accumulation on the basis of chattel bond-labor" (Allen, Volume Two, p. 240).

On Robinson's distorted or one-sided account of a necessarily mechanistic and economist Marxism, Marxism remakes the world as an automatic result of the spread of capitalist production; thus the world is a mirror of production. On this view, nationalism, if in step with the universalization of market relations, is supported by Marxists but otherwise viewed as backwards. Ultimately, as the market becomes global, so internationalism is expected as the reflexive (thus the mirror) response to these new production relations. Such a view indeed is inadequate, accounting neither for uneven development nor the failure of capital logic to produce its presumably predicted homogeneity. Nationalism, its persistence (just like the persistence of race, tradition, etc.), is thus the aporia that Marxism tries to slough off as it refuses to dissolve in capitalism's wake.

But as the above account is meant to suggest, this is a gross distortion. Historical materialism in one sense predicts uneven development as it is a property both of the logic of capital and the imperatives of class rule and social control. But the particular shape these imperatives take depends on the particulars of class struggle, particulars which

include the particulars of history, ideology, geography. In America, the white race mode of social control was operative; in the Caribbean, it failed, requiring different forms of social control. As Allen discusses in Vol. Two, some Native American tribes offered structures (the presence of a cacique class) that could be used for purposes of colonial rule; others did not offer such usable structures and so instead were removed or exterminated. As briefly mentioned above, in the case of colonial rule in Ireland in the nineteenth century, national oppression could be the form of rule (with limited Catholic emancipation) in one case while racial oppression operated in Ulster (Allen, Volume Two, chapter three).

"Culture," on a proper historical materialist account, is not the other of class but forms part of a fuller theorization of class rule in different contexts. In colonial contexts, the culture of the dominated is thus very important, partially determining both the form of class rule--its mix of cooptation, marginalization, extermination--and its limits.¹⁵ Robinson's alternative of splitting off culture from class may be necessary in order to justify what I will argue is, contra Kelley's claim (see below), a nationalist fiction. But in making culture autonomous, it almost has to play into the hands of "the culture matters" theorists--from Moynihan to Huntington--who explain development and underdevelopment, violence and nonviolence, wealth and poverty as functions of largely incommensurable cultures. It is thus more than a little ironic that Robin Kelley, who has been an untiring critic of culture of poverty theories, nevertheless accepts or appears to accept one of its central underlying premises--the autonomy of culture from class.

5

At this point I'd like to turn to a remark of Robin Kelley's from his foreword to *Black Marxism*:

Just as the Irish were products of popular traditions borne and bred under colonialism, the "English" working class of the colonizing British isles was formed by Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, a racial ideology shared across class lines that allowed the English bourgeoisie to rationalize low wages and mistreatment for the Irish. This particular form of English racialism was not invented by the ruling class to divide and conquer (though it did succeed in that respect); rather, it was there at the outset, shaping the process of proletarianization and the formation of working class consciousness. (Robinson, xiii)

In other words, if class shaped race; race (prior racialization, the Western racial metaphysic) shaped class. As we'll see in a moment, new work by Rediker and Linebaugh shows to what extent the "English" workers needed to be reminded of their English status. They had to have it continually beaten into them through state terror--so that Kelley's phrase "there at the outset," is at least potentially misleading as are his comments about divide and conquer.

In a December 14, 1998, *Nation* article ("Integration: What's Left?"), Kelley refers to the divide and conquer thesis as "capitalist trickery" before asserting that segregation, therefore racism, is rooted in the fact that whites benefit from it and "people of color pay the price"--thus in my view confusing differential with benefit, a confusion on which I will elaborate momentarily. The Marxian divide and conquer hypothesis does not require, as Kelley seems to imply with his magic (trickery) metaphor, a pristine homogenized (purely class conscious) working class divided like the red sea with a stroke of the wand by a demiurge ruling class.[16](#)

Working classes, like human beings in general, are going to think a lot of things--some good, some very bad, some in their class interests, some not. The job of ruling classes is not to create diverse unities and divisions serving their interests in one fell swoop but, in the messy ways of the historical process (hegemony is after all hard work as Hall says and Robinson implicitly denies), to do their best to insure that movements don't get started and built that threaten the basis of their rule. (As we will see, such movements often got started and built, but were just as often smashed, marginalized, coopted.) The purpose of my historical sketches, up to this point and in what follows, is to show that while it is true that there is no pristine class consciousness (such consciousness is not spontaneous) disturbed from without, it is also false to naturalize racism by saying it's "there at the outset."

The analysis is also empirically problematic. If the critique of historical materialism offered from the vantage point of a nationalism that takes race seriously, refusing to treat it as epiphenomena of other processes, distorts historical materialism theoretically (parodying divide and conquer, assuming that because some members of the differentially oppressed working classes and peasantry are, by virtue of being part of a capitalist division of labor, less exploited than others, that they therefore *benefit* from the greater oppression experienced by those below them), it also promotes not surprisingly a nationalist historiography, one that falsifies history. The theoretical and empirical errors reinforce one another.

As Allen, Linebaugh and Rediker emphasize in their class struggle accounts, racialization is an ongoing process, but it's ongoing precisely because revolutionary counterracialization processes are also ongoing--a "hydra" repeatedly in need of decapitation and cauterization. In other words, Robinson's (and implicitly Kelley's, at least in this instance) particular view of the English working class is itself a product of the suppression of the history of the Atlantic proletariat. Put another way, nationalist historiography, even of a labor flavor, featuring racist European working classes and non-proletarian black traditions, is an inaccurate historiography, suppressing the class struggles that produced what nationalist historiography takes as a given. As the authors Linebaugh and Rediker make clear, this suppression took place again and again.

I will highlight a few points from their research--the international character of the class struggle on both sides of the class divide: the motley, multiethnic, multiracial, international character of resistance to class rule on the one hand and the import of ethnicization, racialization and nationalism in stemming the dangers of the hydra on the

other. My examples will focus (though not entirely) on the English and Irish proletariat because it is their racism that has been emphasized.

Their history begins with the origins of English capitalism, with its founding in enclosures, the dispossession of the commons, and colonialism. The origins of capitalism were incredibly brutal, its victims multiethnic:

In England, the expropriation of the peasantry was accompanied by systematic violence and terror, organized through the criminal sanction, public searches, the prisons, martial law, capital punishment, banishment, forced labor and colonization. (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 49)

Witch burnings as well were an essential part of this expropriation: the European witch hunt reached its most intense ferocity between 1550 and 1650, "simultaneously with the enclosures, the beginning of the slave trade and the enactment of laws against the vagabonds, in countries where a reorganization of work along capitalist lines was under way." This laboring class they note "had been given a new form, a productive one, whether waged or unwaged, but not yet racialized (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 52, 49).

"In all the forty English counties some eight hundred went to the gallows in each year of the seventeenth century," many hanged "for stealing goods valued at as little as eighteen pence" (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 51). As Linebaugh himself established in *The London Hanged*, hangings, continuing throughout the eighteenth century, helped enforce the wage relation on a resisting proletariat-in-process-of-formation.

In Ireland, according to William Petty, 504,000 Irish perished, with many more enslaved and transported, often to the Caribbean. (I will return in a moment to the importance of these "black Irish" in the Caribbean.) The ruling classes during this period repeatedly emphasized the motley character of those needing to be enslaved, disciplined, exterminated. For Linebaugh and Rediker, Francis Bacon's discourse on holy war nicely encapsulates ruling class legitimation of terror. Those rightly subject to terror are categorized as monstrosities, peoples without nation, mere multitudes, "swarms of people." Yet he categorized these mere multitudes precisely and argued they deserved destruction: "West Indians; Canaanites; pirates; land rovers; assassins; Amazons; and Anabaptists." The first group referred to any Native American--"wild and savage people," more like beasts and birds, "the property of which passeth with the possession and goeth to the occupant." "Canaanites" referred to dispossessed commoners--"the many thousands of dispossessed in England, the wild Irish, and Africans." The third group consisted of pirates, those attacking English ships and slave raiding the coasts of England and Ireland--but also those who offered alternative, relatively egalitarian and motley communities or "hydrarchies" to members of the oppressed ship's proletariat. The "landrovers" were the lumpenproletariat. "Assassins" designated primarily regicides. The Amazons were collectives of "armed women" attacking enclosures and the Anabaptists referred to those "who in sixteenth century Munster had held 'all things to be lawful, not according to any certain laws or rules, but according to the secret and variable motions and instincts of the spirit; this is indeed no nation, no people, no signory that God doth know'. . . and Bacon,

for whom the Anabaptists symbolized 17th-century revolutionary Antinomianism wanted to 'cut them off from the face of the earth'" (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 61-5).

This violence and terror was motivated simultaneously by primitive accumulation and counterrevolutionary violence, indissociably the emerging logic of capital and class struggle, which shape each other at every turn. A central point of their research is to show the character of class struggles during the time before the emerging proletariat was racialized, and to show that even after "racialization," the process had to be continually reinforced--thus the significance of the New York conspiracy of 1741, which took place after the "invention of the white race." Class may be raced and gendered and vice versa, but it is misleading to say that the relevant sorts of racialization were "there at the outset." Here are some examples.

The left wing of the English revolution was both abolitionist and egalitarian:

Agitation against slavery was an essential element in the publications and practices of the Levellers. They fought to abolish slavery. . . . A rough definition of slavery at the time would include these features: it began in an act of expropriation and terror; it affected children and young people particularly; it compelled violent exploitation; and more often than not, it ended in death. The hewers and drawers of water, or the laboring subjects of the Atlantic economy, met this definition in an era well before race and ethnicity came to define slavery. (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 111)

Heavily influenced by radical Antinomianism, the left wing of the New Model Army rejected the colonial enterprise against the Irish that came to inform the Cromwellian conquest. As the authors make clear, Cromwellian conquest required the prior smashing of Leveller, Digger, radical Antinomian resistance: "The day after the Leveller leadership had been crushed . . . Cromwell agreed to take charge of the expedition to conquer Ireland" (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 120). Moreover, once "the Antinomian challenge was defeated, the way was open . . . to wage war against the Dutch and Spanish, to stabilize Barbados, to seize Jamaica and to establish slavery more broadly than ever by linking West Africa with the Caribbean" (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 120).[17](#)

The ideological consequence of the victory over the hydra in England was that the abolitionist component was defeated and a racialized nationalism began to take its place: "If the Putney Debates of 1647 revealed the English revolution as an abolitionist movement, a 1659 parliamentary debate on slavery and 'the free born Englishman,' held on the eve of the restoration of the monarchy . . . marked a counterrevolutionary reversal"-- "the development of the English doctrine of white supremacy thus occurred in the context of counterrevolution, the restoration of the monarchy and the advance of the slave trade" (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 132, 134).

Central to a class struggle historiography is that hegemony is the product of both force and ideology, the combinations varying depending on historical circumstances. Also central to this account is that the revolutionary ideas and practices, however imperfect,

are hard to eliminate--eliminated in one place for a period, they pop up, hydra-like, in another, as in Barbados.[18](#)

In the standard imagery of the ruling class, Barbados was viewed as "the dunghill whereon England doth cast forth its rubbish. Rogues and whores and such people are those which are generally brought here." The "island was inhabited by all sort," the motley crew:

English, French, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Spanish Jews, Indians and Africans. Heinrich von Uchteritz, a German mercenary who fought for Charles Stuart, was sold to a plantation that had "one hundred Christians, one hundred Negroes and one hundred Indians as slaves." (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 124)

Planters here imposed a "puritanical work discipline" on the "multiracial gangs in the canefields" (Linebaugh and Rediker p.125).

The response to these conditions (a response shaped by various traditions with anti-capitalist and cosmopolitan components both European and African) was often rebellion, especially among Irish and African:

The cooperation between such redshanks and African slaves was a nightmare for the authorities.

Rediker and Linebaugh continue:

The Governor's council announced in 1655 that "there are several Irish Servants and Negroes out in rebellion in ye Thicketts and thereabouts," making a mockery of a law passed in 1652, "an act to restrain the wanderings of servants and Negroes." The first recorded group of maroons in Barbados was interracial, as was the case in the capital, Bridgetown, into which recaptured runaways were thrown. "What planters feared most of all was a rebellious alliance between slaves and servants," explains . . . Hilary McD. Beckles. Irish and Africans conspired together in plots of 1675, 1686, and 1692. (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 126)

In response, "the rulers of Barbados separated the servants, slaves and religious radicals from each other," divisions codified in the comprehensive slave and servant code of 1661, which anticipated other such codes including the 1705 code in Virginia which firmly established racial divisions between white and black, divisions dealing a decided blow to the multiracial revolutionary Antinomianism that had "reared its head" between 1663 and 1676, the year of Bacon's (Bacon and his followers were called Levellers, Ranters and Antinomians) rebellion: "The defeat of the servants and slaves and the recomposition of the plantation proletariat coincided with the origins of scientific racism," they note (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 127-8).

The multiracial, international New York conspiracy of 1741 is notable in part because the invention of the white race was well underway. Contra Robinson's metaphor of "imprinting," the white race mode of social control was never entirely successful, its hegemony never guaranteed, always in need of reimposition. (I should note, to distinguish my account from any post-Marxian appropriation, that the fact that hegemony is hard work, never entirely successful, while testimony to the hydra-like fighting spirit of the revolutionary proletariat, does not gainsay the fact of this hegemony rooted in the structural domination of ruling class over working classes, capital over labor.) Describing the life in Hughson's tavern, central to the plot, Linebaugh and Rediker note that "here was a world turned upside down, a place where Africans and Irish were Kings, as they would be in the larger society after the uprising. In New York, they believed, 'there should be a motley government as well as motley subjects.'" The social relations underlying this conspiracy were rooted primarily (though not completely as you can see) in the life of the maritime proletariat:

It grew out of the work of the waterfront, the organized cooperation of many kinds of workers, whose Atlantic experiences became the building blocks of the conspiracy. The rebels of 1741 combined the experiences of the deep-sea ship (hydrarchy), the military regiment, the plantation, the waterfront gang, the religious conventicle, and the ethnic tribe or clan to make something new, unprecedented and powerful. The events of 1741 can be understood only by attending to the Atlantic experiences of the conspirators, in the villages and slave factories of the Gold Coast of Africa, the cottages of Ireland, the Spanish military outpost of Havana, the street meeting of religious revival, and the Maroon settlements of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica and their surrounding sugar plantations. (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 176, 179)

This isn't the place to go into the details of the revolt; the revolt was discovered and snuffed out. Thirty people of color were hanged, and four whites, including Hughson, whose corpse was left to rot. Seventy more Africans were exiled, five Europeans were forced to join the British army at war with Spain "where the conditions of soldiering life likely made theirs a delayed sentence of death": "The authorities approached the solidarity with trident in hand, each of its points carefully sharpened to puncture the prevailing multiracial practices and bonds of proletarian life in Atlantic New York." They attacked the places along the waterfront where multiracial relations form, urging "diligent inquiry into the economy and behavior of all the mean ale-houses and tipling houses within this city," most pertinently those entertaining "'negroes, and the scum and dregs of white people in conjunction.'" The dynamics of the slave trade were also changed by "a series of private business decisions undertaken by the merchants of New York." Slaves began to be imported less from the Caribbean, part of the "Atlantic circuit of rebellion," and more directly from the African coast. Finally, the "racial fluidity" (compare Morgan's volatile society)--where the multiracial conspirators could use the term "white" to refer to

the ruling classes--was deliberately targeted to produce "new discipline and a different solidarity" (Linebaugh and Rediker, pp. 206-10).

They demonized the Europeans involved in the revolt, calling them "monsters in nature," "the disgrace of their complexion." Hughson, the owner of the tavern where the plot was hatched, was "the scandal of his complexion and the disgrace of human nature!" Bad whites and rebellious blacks were the victims of spectacular demonstration hangings. Yet other Europeans involved in the conspiracy were let go--thus Linebaugh and Rediker's comment that the ruling class treated the conspiracy with terror and mercy. New York's rulers thus "divided and weakened the proletariat as they unified and strengthened a fictive community based on whiteness" (209). Once again force and ideology, state and private, repressive and ideological apparatus, combined to decapitate the hydra.[19](#)

Yet another example: According to Ted Allen, the division between Protestant and Catholic in Ireland was the local stand-in for English racism against the Irish, a racism that Allen terms appropriately, given the racializing function of religion in this particular case, religio-racial oppression. The United Irishmen were strong enough in the midst of furious divide-and-conquer policies among the ruling classes as to require 76,000 troops to put them down. Ironically, an irony that is nevertheless understandable on a Marxian class struggle account, in the aftermath of the rebellion, national oppression, involving the recruitment of the Catholic bourgeoisie into the intermediate social control stratum, began to replace racial oppression, "a change in the British system of colonial rule" in order to circumvent "the United Irishmen phenomenon." (See Volume One, pp. 91-6.) Except, Allen notes, in Ulster, where racial oppression was maintained as a necessity of social control--based on "the exclusion of Catholics from social mobility," with all this entails. What the two significantly different arrangements, existing side by side, had in common was the imperative of class rule. In both cases, the arrangements had similar functions. Allen sums up these uneven developments of class and colonial rule:

In coming to grips with the problem of social control, the British colonial bourgeoisie was opting for the admission of the Catholic bourgeoisie into the intermediate buffer social control stratum. But if social control was to be maintained in the Catholic provinces of Leister, Munster, and Connaught by the abandonment of the system of racial oppression, it was equally imperative that racial oppression--Protestant Ascendancy--remain in place in Ulster. Anything other than that would invite a resurrection of the equalitarian notions of the United Irishmen, with all their uncongenial implications for the British bourgeoisie. The maintenance of the racial privileges of the Protestant tenants in Ulster therefore was the necessary complement of the strategic admission of the Catholic lay and clerical bourgeoisie in the rest of Ireland into the system of social control. (Allen, Vol. One, p. 127)

In nineteenth century America, this English-Irish proletarian (racial) divide was of course substantially weakened once again through the whitening process described by

Allen. Division between England and Ireland, unity between Irish and African as evidenced by the former's often ardent support of abolition, was replaced by divisions between white and black, a process really quite unintelligible if examined through concepts like "prior racialization" or the "racialization of class," concepts which describe but do not explain.

One of the central points of the historical materialist Linebaugh and Rediker's work discussed above is that the separation between the narrative of the working class and the narrative of black power, a separation which Robinson does nothing to dislodge, is itself a reifying abstraction, one designed to suppress what Linebaugh and Rediker call an "egalitarian and multiethnic conception of humanity, which . . . represented the grandest possibility of their age [Linebaugh and Rediker speak of the late eighteenth century here] and ours."

This conception (whether part of the same tradition or not is more an issue for authenticity seekers) of the centrality of revolutionary multiracial unity (one to be contrasted with its class collaborationist counterpart represented by today's triumvirate of Bush, Powell, and Rice) has continually raised its hydra heads: John Brown and his multiracial band of rebels, the Knights of Labor, the IWW, the largely Communist Party influenced CIO. And such movements have continued to meet with great repression due presumably to the threat they pose. As Saxton has noted in contrasting the multiracial industrial unionism represented in nuce by the Knights to the racist craft unionism that would be so well represented by Samuel Gompers . . . employer attacks "fell more heavily upon the Knights because they were perceived as more dangerous." And as Robin Kelley has noted about leftist multiracial unionism in the McCarthy period, "It is not an accident that the most militantly anti-racist unions were the main targets of McCarthyite witch hunts" (*Yo Mama's*, p. 120).[20](#)

6

In his foreword to *Black Marxism*, Robin Kelley suggests similarities between it and some of the whiteness studies (Robinson, p. xxiii). In the light of the materialist history sketched above, I would say, to be more precise, that Robinson's historiography is largely opposed to materialist whiteness studies though quite compatible with works on whiteness such as Roediger's seminal *Wages of Whiteness*, which underlies Kelley's own description of Robinson's discussion of the making of the English working class. Just as Roediger emphasizes the white working class's processes of racialized self-making, so does Robinson emphasize parallel processes among the English working class (and other ethnicities--see his comments on Jews to which I refer below). And Kelley, Roediger and Robinson see class formation as involving something more than can be explained by traditional Marxian divide and conquer theories. Roediger, in language similar to Kelley's "capitalist trick," refers to the Marxian construction of white workers "as dupes, even if virtuous ones." Kelley and Robinson would certainly concur with Roediger's comment that racism doesn't just "'trickle down' from the commanding heights of the economy."[21](#)

The Linebaugh/Rediker/Allen material sanctions two points that allow for a critical purchase on the framework in question. First, Roediger, attempting to understand the particular psychodynamics of racialized class formation among the Irish, argues that they responded to their grueling migration to America and recruitment into the exactions of a wage labor regimen, through simultaneous longing for a pre-industrial past and harsh rejection of that very longing, a process that shaped the choice of whiteness and the repudiation of blackness.

One of the many problems with this hypothesis is the failure to problematize sufficiently the process by which black people came to stand in for their (the Irish) former selves. But the other problem is this. The Irish proletariat had been previously subject to dispossession and transport in situations that were certainly as traumatic as the situation faced by early and mid nineteenth century Irish. Those victimized by Cromwellian conquest likely saw relatives killed or starved, had to undergo enslavement and transport to Barbados, where they were subject, not to the exactions of wage labor but the exactions of slavery. No similar psychodynamic occurred. Instead of defining themselves against blackness, the Irish came to unite and fight with their African counterparts and caused such social control problems that the plantation bourgeoisie barred Irish from the militia, choosing African slaves in their stead. Why, given the trauma of being separated from a pre-industrial past and being integrated into an exacting quasi-capitalist labor regimen ("puritanical work discipline," according to Linebaugh and Rediker), did they not make themselves white?

Second: lynching in the U.S. South has often been seen as requiring some sort of psychoanalytic perspective to account for its horror, the depths of its rage and violence. Though Roediger's focus on racial self-making takes place before the infamous period of frequent lynchings, he suggests that the psychodynamic underlying the activity of nonblackfaced racist mobs (who often lynched their victims) was present among those who would dress up in black face and engage in mob violence against African Americans. In referring to such mobs, he's referring, I'm assuming, to not just non-black faced antebellum mobs but post-bellum mobs as well.

A basically Freudian analysis of lynching is called upon to explain the extraordinary violence and rage of the activity. On p. 93 of *Wages*, Roediger quotes Vine Deloria approvingly when the latter says that "the white man must no longer project his fears and insecurities onto other groups, races and countries. Before the white man can relate to others he must forego the pleasure of defining them." Something like this combination of self-definition and definition of the other through aggressive projection and obliteration of that other has come to define the pathology of whiteness in America, and some such hypothesis involving "the prelogical thought of the phobic" was deemed necessary to explain the mob ritual of lynching. This definition of the pathological self bears a fundamental resemblance to Robinson's description of the narcissistic psychic processes underlying Eurocentrism--which establishes itself by erasing the other (blackness). For Robinson, however, this process has nothing particular to do with blackness, but derives from the deeper and prior process ("architectonic") of intra-European racism.

In "Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition" (which discusses Roediger in depth), I suggested that the psychodynamics of ambivalence play no significant explanatory role in the phenomenon of white supremacist violence. The ambivalence thesis, when applied to the post-bellum lynch mob, explains the rape myth as the result of the white man's complex sexual jealousy. This "jealousy only breaks out into the open" post-bellum as, according to Trudier Harris, "sexual competition between black males and white males" was suppressed during slavery. The "communal rape" of black men is rooted in the white man's subconsciously craving what "he is forced to destroy"--the black male penis, which is in turn a symbol for "the white man's craving for power and mastery." This kind of analysis is, as I point out in the above-mentioned essay, attractive in great part because the Marxian analysis of racial violence is reduced to an economic determinism and because the Marxian category of ideology is reduced to some version of a brainwashing thesis. In the case of antebellum blackfaced mobs, Roediger goes psychoanalytic because "it is difficult to think of job competition with free blacks" as central to such mobbing (Marxism has been equated with the labor competition thesis) (*Wages*, p. 106). So a sexual competition thesis supplements (replaces?) a job competition thesis (as Roediger and others insist, this complicated psycho-sexual competition was not just a post-bellum phenomenon, contra Harris).

It is worth pointing out that the rape myth was not exactly ready made, already there, for use post- Reconstruction. As many have noted, from Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells to Angela Davis, the first waves of lynch violence during Reconstruction itself were legitimated as responses to insurrection not rape instincts. The rape myth came later in response to the threat of multiracial populism--from the Knights to the various farmers' alliances. Neither Roediger's version of the whitening process of Irish minds nor Robinson's violence-prone European mind explains these processes.[22](#)

Linebaugh and Rediker's facts about the death toll from hanging in 17th century England suggest additional reasons for skepticism concerning appeals to the pathological white male mind, however historicized, to explain mass violence. Horrific as the period of lynching in the U.S. South was, the horrors of 17th-century hanging are easily comparable and lasted far longer. A class struggle approach can explain quite easily both periods of spectacular violence. The Roediger account, rooted in the importance of blackness, claims to explain lynch violence in the U.S. but cannot even offer a plausible story to account for the English violence. Robinson could "explain" both kinds of violence through recourse to the European "collective psychic state" that "extends" from group to group, situation to situation, without being able to explain the particulars--words like "extend" functioning to cover up this fact.[23](#)

Robinson, Roediger, and Kelley are all concerned to stress agency, invention, making--in Roediger's case, he stresses creative, often tortuously complex, working-class self-making which resulted in working-class whiteness. This "making" necessarily involved the white working class in the invention of blackness as a point of contrast. In contrast to (his reading of) the Marxian tradition, which in accordance with its positing of workers as virtuous, will focus on (white) workers resisting racialization, Roediger wants to call

attention to (white) workers *creating* these racist practices: to reiterate, racism doesn't just "'trickle down' from the commanding heights of the economy" (*Wages*, p. 9).

Kelley makes similar points about Robinson, that the invention of the negro implied the corresponding fabrication of whiteness. Recalling Kelley's comment about the English working class above, racism was not an invention of the ruling class that trickled down but was already there--the tension between racialization as invention or making and racialization as "already there" needs exploration and I will explore it in a moment. For now, though, the point I wish to make is that on this view, working-class culture is autonomous in both the English case and the American case. In addition, for Robinson there is of course the "making of the black radical tradition," yet another example of the autonomy of culture.

It is clear that these writers are responding to the perceived inadequacy of the structure/agency split they see inhabiting Marxist theory. It is also clear that they see some notion of the autonomy of culture, the irreducibility of culture to class, as warranted. And there seems to be something like a shared debt to E. P. Thompson, or if not exactly debt then reference point. It has been my point throughout this essay that the class/culture split, however interpreted, is a reification, and thus produces explanatory aporias that historical materialism can overcome.

The reliance on the (relative) autonomy of culture from class covers over an inconsistency or tension to which I have just referred. If this autonomy points to agency and self-invention on the one hand, it points at the same time to processes that are not so much invented as discovered, not so much invented as "there at the outset" (Kelley's description of the raced English working class). The difficulties associated with this ambiguity can be seen if we scrutinize Robinson's discussion of "the creation of the Negro."

Robinson notes that "the creation of the Negro, the fiction of a dumb beast of burden fit only for slavery, was closely associated with the economic, technical and financial requirements of Western Development from the sixteenth century on." If the subject of this process is here Western development, in a few paragraphs he gets more precise. For "only the accumulated interests and mercantile activities of the ruling classes and bourgeoisies of Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Britain could have accomplished such a massive scale of exploitation." And it is clearly this context of massive exploitation that is invoked as explaining "the Negro." The inventive component of the term is foregrounded in Robinson's comment that "this 'Negro' was a wholly distinct ideological construct from those images of Africans that had preceded it," differing "in function and ultimately in kind" (Robinson, pp. 81-2). Historical materialists would agree with this analysis. A more fleshed out account would do what Allen, Linebaugh and Rediker do--show how these racializing processes were shaped in the cauldron of class struggle.

It ought to be said that Robinson himself would not interpret his own lines as consonant with historical materialism in great part due to his conflation of class analysis

with capitalism (understood, as mentioned at the start of this essay, "as an objective process") and his insistence not only that racism preceded capitalism (a point with which, as I've emphasized, historical materialists should agree) but that racism and capitalism did not, in Kelley's words, "break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of 'racial capitalism'" (xiii).

The apparent parallel between Allen's invention of the white race and Robinson's invention of the negro begins to breakdown rather quickly. Because, for Robinson, in spite of his talk of the Negro as "wholly distinct ideological construct," this wholly distinct construct is nevertheless viewed as "the culmination of a process a thousand years long and one at the root of European historical identity" (Robinson, p. 82). The metaphors of culmination, like Kelley's talk of racial capitalism "flowering in the cultural soil of the west," is dubiously teleological and an utter mystification (Robinson, xiii). This *longue racial duree* hides the particulars of the class struggle which explain in turn the particular character of the racialization process. As part of making his argument about the invention of the Negro as the culmination of a long, long process, Robinson notes that "the collisions of the Black and white 'races' began long before the events of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that prefigured modern African slavery" (p. 82). As evidence for this point, he quotes Constantin de Volney on his visit to Egypt:

But returning to Egypt, the lesson she teaches history contains many reflections for philosophy. . . . Just think that this race of black men, today our slave and the object of our scorn, is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences and even the use of speech! Just imagine, finally, that it is in the midst of peoples who call themselves the greatest friends of liberty and humanity that one has approved the most barbarous slavery and questioned whether black men have the same kind of intelligence as Whites. (Robinson, p. 342)

The irony, a point which crystallizes the difference between historical materialism and Robinson's black Marxism, is that the very person Robinson quotes in support of a nationalist historiography rooted in the twin reifications of Western civilization and the black radical tradition himself forged his "egalitarian and multiethnic conception of humanity not in isolation but rather through solidarity and connection within and among social movements and individuals." Volney's anti-racist arguments about Africa were part of an internationalist abolitionism: "he assailed the ruling logic of nationalism," Linebaugh and Rediker note. According to Thomas Jefferson, so Linebaugh and Rediker suggest, "Volney was the principal object of the Act Concerning Aliens of 1798, which was designed to promote 'purity of national character'" (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 342).

Linebaugh and Rediker close their book with the comment that "the early 1790's were an expansive time for redefining what it meant to be a human being. But that time would not last" (Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 352). For as long as there are ruling classes, for present purposes, as long as capitalism exists, class struggles will be ongoing but the ruling classes will have a decided upper hand. In the aftermath of the British expeditions against Haiti, aided by the formation and dissemination of the "biological category of

race," this "multiethnic conception of humanity" became "unthinkable within ethnic and nationalist historiography," a historiography that Robinson strikingly reproduces:

Volney disappeared from radical scholarship, except among the pan-africanists and "ethiopianists" who kept him in print. What began as repression thus evolved into mutually exclusive narratives that have hidden our history. (p. 352)

Though Robinson and Roediger appear to be indebted to Thompson, the splitting off of culture from class which characterizes Robinson's text throughout repeats the very move that Thompson went to great pains to critique. And though Roediger, like Thompson, emphasizes class formation and class experience, his working class appears too autonomous, at times nearly sealed off from ongoing processes of class rule. This autonomy, inconsistently maintained as I have argued elsewhere, requires Roediger to supplant class analysis with psychocultural analysis--a substitution that Roediger's Thompsonianism serves, I think, to mystify.

Though I've here lumped together Robinson/Roediger and Kelley as engaging in a kind of historiography conceptually opposed to the historical materialism of Linebaugh, Rediker and Allen, it should be (and has been) noted that Kelley is often on the other side. Witness his own comments in praise of Linebaugh and Rediker's work:

What would the world look like had the Levellers, the Diggers, the Ranters, the slaves, the castaways, the Maroons, the Gypsies, the Indians, the Amazons, the Anabaptists, the pirates . . . won? (Linebaugh and Rediker, back cover)

Of course, the good guys lost and counterrevolutionary ideological, political and economic structures were imposed, structures that have been stable enough in the face of repeated challenge to maintain class domination. But Kelley's question is a historical materialist question, one that in some sense had to be asked by Linebaugh and Rediker themselves before they uncovered the supporting material. Further, it is a question largely barred from asking within the tradition represented by Robinson and defended by Kelley in the foreword. Had Kelley called serious attention to such movements in his foreword, he would not have been able to offer a defense of Robinson.

Robinson's response, given the logic of his position, to Kelley's comments on Linebaugh and Rediker would be that it is inappropriate to mix together Ranters, Levellers and Maroons inasmuch as the former two and the last operated through rival metaphysics, different racial architectonics. That as a result of this European architectonic, the Levellers and Diggers could not have won--that their resistance could only have been a blip or "undercurrent" (which is perhaps why he doesn't mention it) in an ongoing racializing process (this is how he views the English-Irish proletarian unity of the Chartist movement)--one which had to win as "the substratum of Western thought was unprepared for anything else."

Further, Robinson views the kind of multiethnic class struggle uncovered by Linebaugh, Rediker (and Kelley in other work) as almost perverse, associated with an excessive violence caused either by Africans being influenced by the violence promoting Euro-racial architectonic or by virtue of a deracination from an authentic African culture. The anarchic, deracinated violence associated with "class wars" is to be opposed to the absence of mass violence characterizing the true African tradition: thus in his discussion of such multiethnic class wars against the Spanish ruling class in Venezuela, he notes the absence of any "vision of an African state" (p. 138), such vision presumably being informed by a racial architectonic, a shared epistemology, that is disturbed by other ethnicities. Does this shared metaphysic, disturbed by exogenous forces, not seem to parallel the presumably pure class consciousness imputed to the European working class and always contaminated by the exogenous forces of race and nation?

In chapter two of *Black Marxism*, Robinson chastises materialist historiography when, speaking in the name of "historical inquiry," he notes that "we shall be guided less by what we in the abstract have been led to expect should have occurred [proletarian unity] than by what did" (Robinson, p. 29). I have tried to suggest, to use his terms, that what indeed should have occurred often did occur. In the next section, we will look at the degree to which Robinson's "ought"--the black radical tradition--did and should occur, whether it can withstand the scrutiny of historical inquiry. But before turning directly to the question of essentialism, I'd like to make a closing comment here about Kelley.

The tension in Kelley between the nationalism underlying his uncritical support of Robinson and his admirable internationalism in which he argues in essence that the fight against racism and sexism must be fundamental to class-based struggles and are in the interest of such struggles has its source in an ambiguity over the concept of class interest and in a confusion of identity categories with explanatory categories. In arguing against what he sees as a false dichotomy between class-based politics and identity politics, he opts for the position that the fight against racism is "in the interest of the working class." But he also says, both in the *Nation* article, and elsewhere at least by implication, that white workers benefit from racism. If white workers benefit from racism, then fighting it is not in the interests of the white working class.[24](#)

As for the second point: in my second footnote, I noted my strong agreement with what I called Kelley's moral position--"abolition of every possibility of exploitation and oppression." In his commentary on this line from the Black Women's United Front, he notes that it "resists hierarchies." He goes on:

It refuses to privilege class over race or race over gender, or sexuality over class, race or gender (*Yo Mama's*, p. 104).

This position forms part of his largely correct critique of his antagonist's falsely universalist and economist understanding of class. The false universalism of this particular kind of "class analysis"--"race, gender, and sexuality are particular whereas class is universal"--"presumes that class struggle is some sort of race and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender or sexuality

necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole" (*Yo Mama's*, p. 109) Kelley notes that "class is lived through race and gender," the larger point being that race, gender, class, sexuality are intersecting, no one experience being primary over the others.

As an extension of these points, Kelley links the false universality of this kind of class analysis to an "economism that enables these critics to claim, without evidence, that declining wages are more important to most black people than police brutality or having to wait an hour for a seat at Denny's" (*Yo Mama's*, 115). The point here, a good one, is that moral and political issues--issues of well being and dignity--cannot be separated off from the "hard issues" of economics (not to mention that economics is always about dignity and well being). This kind of point is central to the noneconomic determinist Marxism I have defended here.

But: while it is true that the various identity categories intersect--class is lived through race and gender etc.--and while I am also willing to accept that no experience of oppression should be privileged over another, it does not follow that multiple oppressions require multiple structural causes. I have followed people like Barbara Fields in arguing that "race" is not an explanatory category at all. In other words, "race" doesn't explain racism. Neither does "race" as "relative autonomy." While it makes sense to say that racial oppression is relatively autonomous from class oppression, both, on the account put forward here, result from processes of class rule in the context of class struggle.

While Kelley is clearly more partisan to multiracial unity than Robinson, both posit Marxism as economist, falsely universalist and set against various particulars. If Robinson valorizes one of the particulars--the black radical tradition--Kelley wants to see the universalizing moment in all of the particulars--fine at the level of experience, but a mistake at the level of explanation. And I would speculate that the contradiction over "interest" is related to the multiple causality model to which he implicitly gives assent, for it's easy enough to see how viewing race and gender as separate causes would lead one to posit separate, even conflicting, interests.

7

In his foreword to *Black Marxism*, Kelley suggests that it is incorrect to label Robinson essentialist, as I have been doing in this essay. Kelley's argument is not very convincing, though. He notes that while critics are quick to charge Robinson with essentialism, they are uncritical about the essentialism of terms like "Western civilization." But of course my point has been that both terms are essentialist, and work together in Robinson's discourse. The other argument Kelley makes is that Robinson's notion of a common culture is historical through and through. But that a tradition is historicized does not render it immune to the essentialism charge. For the historiography itself seems in many ways to be "a nationalizing myth," a claim Kelley dismisses as simplistic.

Slave rebellions, which Robinson sees as essential to the tradition or its carrying out, are part of African heritage but not the European. It's not clear why this should be so. The UNIA is seen as a part of the radical tradition, the black anti-logic to capitalism. The African Blood Brotherhood also, but less so, presumably due to its connections to the essentially European CP USA. Black communists are viewed as still less authentic. The connection of Garvey to the Klan and his admiration for Hitler and Mussolini, his claim that he influenced them, is screened out in Robinson's necessarily selective account of the tradition. Interestingly, C. L. R. James, who is in the tradition, says of Garvey, who's also in the tradition rooted in the absence of mass violence, that "all the things that Hitler was to do so well later, Garvey was doing in 1920 and '21." As Garvey noted himself: "we were the first fascists. We had disciplined men, women and children in training for the liberation of Africa." Obviously, the essence of fascism involves if not mass violence then violence against the masses. While it's a mistake to reduce the complexity of the UNIA--they were quite big on the Bolsheviks--that Robinson leaves this unpleasantness out of the tradition is evidence of its arbitrariness, thus its lack of explanatory power.[25](#)

In talking about the Obeah influence in the Haitian revolution, Robinson doesn't critique the limits of this tradition or how it could be taken up by fascists like Duvalier, and made part of a culture of violence. Mobutu, who united with South African fascist mercenaries and who, like Duvalier, was for years a bulwark of U.S. foreign policy, is left out of the African essence, despite his commitment to an Africanist "authenticite."[26](#)

Dubois' history (chapter nine) must be read in light of the nationalist politics of the black radical tradition, so that in his study of Reconstruction, Dubois can be interpreted as "returning" to the African heritage of revolt. His move subsequent to '35 in the direction of the Communist Party position on the common interests of the white and black proletariat has to be slighted or viewed as a transgression of the tradition.

Some of the problems here impact on the claim that the black radical tradition is rooted in the absence of mass violence. In order to make this concept plausible, Robinson has to construct fictional unities out of historical material, excluding Dessalines, for example, because he's too violent. And he'd have to exclude the Simba, African radicals whose racial terrorism was itself a response to the far greater terror of the U.S. and South Africa backed Mobutu in the aftermath of Lumumba's assassination at Mobutu's hands. Yet for Robinson, insofar as blacks are violent, they are drifting away from themselves, one last striking example of this being Robinson's use of Gerald Mullin's comment that "'the more slaves came to resemble the indigent freeman whom they displaced, the more dangerous they became'" (Robinson, pp. 309, 168).

What is especially noteworthy is that here the violence of the slaves is chalked up to presumably European acculturation. Yet Gabriel's rebellion (influenced by Jacobinism) and Nat Turner's insurrection are chalked up to the freedom inducing power of the African tradition. In the former instance, this distortion of history which constructs blacks in multiracial rebellion as somehow duped by "white culture" blends nicely with the tacit anti-communism of this kind of nationalism, which typically reads black participation in this tradition as yet another example of whites (or Jews) duping Blacks.

It is thus not all that surprising to see Robinson basically defending Harold Cruse's comments about Jews, Blacks and Communism. Robinson's point here is an extension of his core point that Western civilization cannot slough off its "particularities," its deep-rooted racializing and ethnicizing tendencies. Here, it is Jewish communists who exemplify this trait. Communism, like capitalism, both of them aiming at universality and both being part of the European mind, cannot slough off its particularistic tendencies:

Cruse argues that in the first three decades of the movement, the party's most successful period, ethnic nationalism defeated the attempt at Americanization: "it evidently never occurred to Negro revolutionaries that there was no one in America who possessed the remotest potential for Americanizing Marxism but themselves. Certainly the Jews could not with their nationalistic aggressiveness, emerging out of eastside ghettos to demonstrate through Marxism their intellectual superiority over the Anglo Saxon goyim. The Jews failed to make Marxism applicable to anything in America but their own national-group social ambitions or individual self elevation. As a result the great brainwashing of negro radical intellectuals was not achieved by capitalism or the capitalistic bourgeoisie but by Jewish intellectuals in the American Communist party."

Robinson, to support Cruse's analysis, then quotes (Cruse quoting) Melech Epstein and Arthur Leibman, who "inadvertently confirm Cruse's reconstruction" (Robinson, p. 387). Universality is really a form of ethnic particularity that functions to suppress incommensurable particulars.

There is a subtle logic at work here (the logic of anti-communism) whereby the Marxian hypothesis of divide and conquer is not only simplified, turned into a conspiracy theory involving ingenious bosses and both black and white dupes, but then viewed as a theory rationalizing *their* (read white or Jewish communists) duping of blacks (who once again, by definition, cannot really be communists). Thus does the logic of nationalism at once reject Marxism on the grounds of it being a brainwashing theory (capitalist duping workers) while tacitly importing its own brainwashing theory--substituting (white or Jewish, European) communists for bosses in this role (how perfectly this corresponds to the logic of that classic anti-communist novel, *Invisible Man*).

Robinson claims that the black radical tradition is rooted in a shared epistemology. Though Kelley and Robinson in his updated preface hint that the black radical tradition can be shared with others who are non-black, the most obvious interpretation is that this is not so. Robinson does not discuss the possibility in the text itself of nonblacks sharing the tradition or learning from it. And this leads to my second problem, one in turn tied up with the relativist implications of the notion of incommensurable traditions. While Robinson talks about carrying the black radical tradition forward or "the ability to imaginatively re-create a *precedent* metaphysic" (just as he talks of the Western racial architectonic being extended), he does not talk about critiquing it or revising it. This suggests to me that it is what it is and while it can be transmitted, it cannot be revised or

critiqued. This is a problem endemic to if not quite constitutive of ethnicized or racialized versions of identity politics, where, as I see it, politics is rooted in belonging instead of the other way around, where identity is rooted in a revisable, criticizable, justifiable politics.

Marxists tend to look askance at identity politics. I would tend to say that that it is unavoidable and irreducible, which is not the same thing as endorsing racial politics or nationalist politics. Communist internationalism strikes me as implying an identity fully as much as any identity politics. But our identities need justification. As Satya Mohanty puts it (and he defends identity politics in the conventional sense whereas I do not), "good social and cultural identities are quite simply based on good explanations of the social world."[27](#)

With these comments in mind, I would like to say a few things about what is called standpoint theory. In certain ways, Robinson's black radical tradition seems like a version of standpoint theory. If I may idealize, standpoint theory is a theory of society that asserts that groups are constructed so as to be differentially positioned and that this differential positioning has epistemic consequences. Those who are victims of oppression occupy standpoints that both promote and partially instantiate, without guaranteeing, insight about social relations of oppression and exploitation. Very simply, victims of racial oppression, gender oppression and class oppression are on the average both more insightful about these processes and more motivated to understand such processes than those who benefit from these social relationships.[28](#) The black radical tradition comes out of a common history of oppression, a common fund of experience, that affords a vantage point from which to critique "Western civilization." Standpoint theory, best interpreted realistically and my thumbnail sketch of it was a realist sketch, nevertheless runs the risk of relativism and this is certainly the case with Robinson. The problem is nicely exemplified in Terry Eagleton's critique of Lukacs' theory of class standpoint.

As Eagleton notes, Lukacs' standpoint theory (and this is true of standpoint theory in general, I think) attempts to avoid the dilemma of positivism and historical relativism by theorizing that a certain kind of historical embeddedness or situatedness affords potentially universal knowledge. As Eagleton puts it, in a nice paraphrase of some of the key insights of standpoint theory, "oppressed groups and classes need to get some view of the social system as a whole simply to be able to realize their own partial, particular interests. If women are to emancipate themselves, they need to have an interest in understanding something of the general structures of patriarchy." Lukacs, however, solved the positivist/relativist dilemma "by introducing the category of self-reflection." The problem here is that Lukacs has equated knowledge about real social processes with the "universal subjectivity" of the proletariat so that universal subjectivity, put another way, group self-knowledge, is in effect identical with objectivity:

If the working class is the potential bearer of such class consciousness, from what viewpoint is this judgment to be made? It cannot be made from the viewpoint of the (ideal) proletariat itself, since this simply begs the question; but if only that viewpoint is true, then it cannot be made from

some standpoint external to it either. As Bheiku Parekh points out, to claim that only the proletariat allows one to grasp the truth of society as a whole already assumes that one knows what the truth is. It would seem that truth is either wholly internal to the consciousness of the working class, in which case it cannot be assessed as truth and the claim becomes simply dogmatic; or one is caught in the impossible paradox of judging the truth from outside the truth itself, in which case the claim that this form of consciousness is true simply undercuts itself.[29](#)

For Robinson, it is implied that the journeys of C. L. R. James and Dubois through the Marxian tradition to the Black radical tradition is a journey, beyond the distorting veil of Eurocentrism, to black self-discovery. The problem here is not with self-discovery per se but ethnicized self-discovery. Though this formulation too would meet both Eagleton's and Mohanty's independent or realist epistemic criteria if the knowledge afforded by the black standpoint was rooted in a justifiable theory of interests. This theory of interests would be that the process of racializing subjects as black benefits whites, and thus for a racialized (black) subject to discover the black radical tradition is also to discover who benefits from racial oppression and how to oppose it. One's identity (as a member of the black radical tradition for example) is good not because it is good to discover one's blackness but because this process of self-discovery affords insight into universal, justifiable properties of well being suppressed by racism. This essay has argued both that Robinson's theory of interest and identity are false. That Robinson's black radical tradition is not rooted in good explanations of the social world, that his "shared epistemology" is not an epistemology at all but a nationalist mystification.[30](#)

At any rate, the difference between the two versions of standpoint theory is that Lukacs unambiguously makes claims to universality, while the other may in fact reject it, though there is ambiguity here as well. Is the black standpoint, the black radical tradition, true outright? True only for blacks? Thus false for Europeans? Is it true outright but only intelligible for those who are part of the tradition? (This concept falls prey to the aporias of incommensurability.) Is there a difference between the shared epistemology of the tradition and black identity or are they in effect the same? in which case knowledge just is black self-reflection, or self-knowledge as collective self-recognition, and thus dogmatic just in the way proletarian self-knowledge would be. (How do you know when you've discovered the tradition? You just know, by looking in the mirror of the collective self.)

Robinson, as discussed earlier, speaks convincingly of the role of nationalism and nationalizing myths in securing class rule (though it needs pointing out that these myths are imposed through a process of class struggle--thus the importance of Linebaugh and Rediker). Yet as I have tried to show, a double standard is at work. Nationalism secures class rule for Europeans but not for Africans. For the latter, nationalism is self-knowledge not ideology. This essay has contested this view of nationalism. I would add here that the double standard is literally sanctioned by the doctrine of incommensurability, for if the two traditions are incommensurable (I put aside here the incoherence of the notion), there are indeed two standards (of evidence, of truth, of value).[31](#)

In his preface, Robinson notes that "the shared past [which anchors the shared epistemology] is precious, not for itself but because it is the basis of consciousness, of knowing, of being." Later, he notes, speaking of black collective identity, that "The distinctions of political space and historical time have fallen away so that the making of one black collective identity suffuses nationalisms. Harboured in the African Diaspora there is a single historical identity which is in opposition to the systematic privations of racial capitalism" (Robinson p. 317)

Thus, it might appear that his defense of black collective identity is rooted in good explanations of the social world. But if this identity is politically justifiable, based on good explanations of the social world, then non-blacks can be a part of it, in which case there is nothing particularly black about it. One reason this is so follows from good theories of knowledge. The best explanation of a good explanation involves its universality (thus its sharability); explanations that literally cannot be shared are untranslatable or incommensurable, and the concept of incommensurability is profoundly incoherent, saturated in relativist assumptions and therefore incompatible with the best explanations of explanation itself--a concept which is staunchly realist.

If the identity transcends its explanatory content, then it is indeed essentialist. If the argument is that only black collective identity can truly oppose racial capitalism, then the argument is circular--not susceptible to empirical demonstration. This too follows from the premises of incommensurability--where evidence is not theory dependent but theory determined, a tautology of the theory or world view. If only members of the black radical tradition, who must be black, can oppose racial capitalism, based on an understanding to which nonblacks do not have access, it is not surprising that members of this tradition, who transcend the corruptions of the Western metaphysic, can themselves not really understand its (the western) standard of human conduct. Its "nastiness" can only be characterized as "inexplicable": "the depths to which racist behavior has fouled Western agencies transgressed against a world consciousness rooted in our African past" (Robinson, p. 308).

The essence of this identity, I would argue, is not its opposition to racial capitalism but its belonging, its being "harboured" (with the word's implications of shelter, refuge, home, anchor) in the African diaspora. That the shared epistemology is nothing but the shared past is suggested in Robinson's comment that this shared past "contains philosophy, theories of history and social prescriptions *native* to it," that it is "a construct possessing its *own* terms, exacting its *own* truths [my emphasis]." Knowledge and truth have indeed, pace Eagleton's critique of Lukacs, become nothing but collective self-ownership. Understanding has indeed become equated with group self-understanding, a claim "which cannot be assessed as truth and is thus simply dogmatic." I would note that the relativism haunting Robinson's formulations becomes clear here in the notion of "own truths"; what is also clear I hope is that despite its associations with tolerance, relativism, by virtue of its dogmatism, is inseparable from absolutism. Last, this is a rather nice example of how the rights-based language of self-determination (with its Enlightenment roots) can merge almost imperceptibly into what amounts to little more than the fetish of

ethnicized or racialized truths. But there are no racial truths in the same way that there is no such thing as proletarian science--there are better or worse theories of racism and better or worse science. Some groups are more likely to support the good theories. Good theories of racism, if available to large numbers of people, are more likely to be supported (and generated) by its primary victims. But good theories of racism are not equivalent by definition to what its primary victims think.

8

In my conclusion, I'd like to engage in what I hope is some instructive tradition building of my own. I want to suggest that Robinson's *Black Marxism* be itself included in a tradition that includes a rather ethnically heterogeneous and interdisciplinary bunch: Edward Said, Cornel West, Stanley Aronowitz, Houston Baker, Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Derrida, Michael Omi and Howard Winant. I could of course add more names to this list. What ties these names together is a complex conceptuality combining, if I may idealize, the following components: an economic determinist reduction and misinterpretation of Marxian class analysis; a turn to psychoanalysis, often (though not always) viewed as supplementing the inadequacies of the supposed Marxian fetish of the economy; a tendency toward anti-realism, taking the form of notions of incommensurability and especially, radical alterity; a tendency to anti-communism. I have engaged in this regrouping exercise, lifting Robinson's *Black Marxism* out of his "black radical tradition" in order to show that it in fact can be seen as partaking in a tradition that has no ethnic essence.

Let me begin this closing riff with Said, in part because Kelley himself notes the parallel between Said and Robinson, though he does not subject the parallel to critical examination. As Aijaz Ahmad has noted about Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Said, like Robinson, folds the Marxian tradition into the ethnocentric West, which has defined itself by defining the orient as the dangerous, inferiorized civilizational other--as with Robinson, "all European knowledges of non-Europe are already contaminated with this aggressive identity formation."³² As this urge to self-definition, a version of Jordan's "need to know they (Europeans) were white," constitutes the European imagination (compare Robinson's references to the "European mind"), colonization became just an offshoot of this discourse or this imagination just as racial capitalism was an extension of racial metaphysics. First came the inferiorization of the orient in discourse, then came colonization (Ahmad, 181). Ahmad asks the question that needs to be asked of Robinson: "Why has Europe needed to constitute itself in this manner?" The answer Ahmad suggests requires psychoanalysis: Orientalism appears to be a compulsive drive inherent in Europe's unitary psyche, "a form of paranoia," to quote Said (Ahmad, 181-2).

So that one should not be surprised that others who do like Robinson and combine economic determinist misinterpretation of Marx with the relative autonomy of race require it. West, Aronowitz, Winant, Baker, and Omi/Winant equate class analysis with economism (class reductionism, mechanical materialism, implying a reflectionist epistemology--superstructure directly reflecting the base) of some sort and Aronowitz,

West, Omi/Winant in turn further associate class analysis with epistemological foundationalism, a priori dogmatism.

In every case, this reduction of class to the economic sanctions a psychoanalytic turn. For Aronowitz, and West, whose own account follows Aronowitz closely, race questions strike to the heart of "the deep structure of societies marked by social hierarchies." This deep structure is bound up with Western 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" and as he put it "transhistorical." (The depths of this at once psychic and epistemic mind set recall Robinson's reference to the bowels of Western culture.)

The parallel with Robinson is strengthened by the fact that the violent othering force of the Western mind comes up against a radical alterity it cannot master, which Aronowitz calls the "ineluctability of difference."³³ 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 which simultaneously and paradoxically is part of the exoticizing discourse of representation and what really exceeds it. Like Aronowitz (West), Winant introduces depth psychology into his account after having dismissed Marxism as economist. He describes the seeming permanence of race and white racism as "the *longue duree*," which he suggests (he really does not go into much detail) can be explained through the kind of depth psychology proffered by Joel Kovel in his *White Racism*. As I've discussed at some length elsewhere, Roediger too turns to Kovel when he makes his psychoanalytic turn.

Kovel's psychoanalytic theory relies heavily on the Freudian concept of anality and the anal character. Insofar as the psychoanalysis of racism relies on something like the white mind or the European mind's anality, its reaction formation against its shit, which it then projects onto those whose color presumably resembles excrement, I'd raise the following counterfactual. The theory quite clearly implies that if our (humans) shit were white the history of racism would be completely different. An implausibility which in isolation might not discredit the theory, but it doesn't do it much good.

It should be said, this is in accord with his rejection of phenotypic explanations of racism, that Robinson rejects explanations for colonialism based on "a sort of mass psychology of chromatic trauma" (Robinson, p. 67) On the other hand, not only is his explanation often couched in the language of mass psychology ("a civilization maddened by its own perverse assumptions and contradictions is loose in the world" and other references), but, as an interesting side point, I would note that Robinson at times defines the opposition between African and European mindsets as one of materiality versus spirituality (Robinson, p. 318). In the Freudian analysis of the European mind, materialism is itself the result of the anal character, most spectacularly manifest in the Western obsession with money, which is sublimated excrement, filthy lucre. Both the Freudian analysis and the Robinson analysis focus on basically psychological purifying mechanisms, as I have previously noted.

Houston Baker, in his essay on Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*, argues that the discourse of historical materialism is what explains Wright's sexism, his exclusion of black women performed by the narrative: "the negative account of black women in *Twelve Million* is not simply a function of a simplistic assignment of occupational roles. . . ." It was the result of a lack and "what he lacked was immunity to the lure of a peculiarly materialist historiography."[34](#)

Baker reads Marxism as a technological determinism that not only marginalizes black women but murders them, eliminating their reproductive function, thus performing a kind of hysterectomy. In the narrative of historical materialism, women are superfluous even for reproduction since "if the way of class consciousness implied by a Marxian critique is pursued then the future will produce an afroamerican modern man birthed in mechanical glory from the womb of the machine." The machine is the "sign of the possibility of male proletarian bonding across racial lines." A bond that necessitates "a violent repudiation of the domestic black woman" and all women for "a Marxian problematic forces the writer to devalue women." Conversely, "if a nationalist history is privileged, black men of the future, as well as those of the folk past, will continue to be of woman born" (Appiah and Gates, p. 218).

This opposition of the mechanical and the human is reiterated in Baker's comment (a comment found in more than a few left nationalisms, including Robinson's) that Marxism cannot account for "the persistence of felt nationalism," as Marxism can only narrate an impersonal unfeeling process. The complexities of Marxian class analysis are reduced to an impersonal, mechanical, technical and economic process split off from the cultural/political/ideological realm where feelings reside. From Baker's rhetoric it is clear that Marxism's incapacity concerning nationalism is but a special case of its incapacity before particularity, especially the particularity of deep feeling. The similarity with Robinson is striking, opposing class analysis to cultural nationalism, aligning the former with impersonal processes, the latter with human particulars that Marxism must slough off; aligning the former with death and violence and the latter with life; aligning Marxism with (white) brainwashing that, in Baker's case, prevents black men from coming home to mama.[35](#)

With Marcuse and Derrida, the purifying mechanism dividing West and East is one-dimensionalizing consumerism and logocentrism or phallogocentrism: psychoanalysis, epistemological breaks (incommensurability), radical alterity are embedded in both conceptions. In Marcuse, a certain technological determinism as well. The other of the West in Marcuse is quite clearly people of color, especially those coming from the third world (He refers to people of color as "elementary forces" "whose opposition hits the system from without.") For Derrida, the force threatening the West's logocentrism is described as a radical trembling coming wholly from outside or without. In his writings on South African Apartheid, Apartheid is viewed as the product of the "west as a whole," and its resistance is "altogether other."[36](#)

I have tried to demonstrate in this essay that the complex amalgam, this package of often interlinked concepts, is deeply problematic and in its explanations of racism and

inequality does not fare all that well against a properly interpreted noneconomic determinist historical materialism. I think this particular rival package to historical materialism does underwrite nationalisms of various sorts. In his essay on racism from the same issue of the *Nation* that produced Robin Kelley's comments discussed above, Manning Marable acknowledges his own ambivalence towards nationalism, arguing that while nationalism is essential in the fight against racism, it nevertheless means "mobilizing people around a concept that is morally repugnant and shouldn't exist."³⁷ It does exist of course. And it is very much felt. But it is hard for me not to see Marable's own comment as evidence of the incoherence that surrounds the concept of nationalism in our time--for, in essence, it is morally repugnant and shouldn't exist because it performs all the functions of racism, yet is simultaneously necessary to the fight against it. I have tried to suggest in this essay that one big reason for the power of nationalist discourse is that it rests at least partially on an uncharitable reading of historical materialism that amounts to a serious mischaracterization.

What we desperately need is a felt class-based internationalism which operates by making the fight against racism and sexism itself basic. I have tried here to further the ongoing process of clearing the conceptual ground for this felt internationalism.

Notes

¹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, with a new foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley, and new preface by Robinson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. xii. I'd like to thank Barbara Foley and Bill Mullen for reading this rather long article at different stages (five or six stages) and offering helpful criticisms along the way.

² The reference is to the by now paradigmatic postmodern view most associated with the work of Jean Francois Lyotard that grand narratives are no longer credible.

³ The criticism has often been made that Althusser's concept of interpellation in the service of social reproduction is a kind of bad functionalism, allowing no resistance. I think this criticism is just though it must be said that the essay in question on ideology is quite contradictory. See "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).

⁴ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995,1999), p. 67.

⁵ See Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Eagleton (1990) for an excellent analysis of some of the problems with the concepts of base and superstructure. Their critiques are to be clearly distinguished from those of the post-Marxist variety, most paradigmatically that of Laclau and Mouffe and repeated ad

infinitum. Eagleton and Ollman's critiques help to strengthen class analysis, maintaining the primacy of class. See also Meiksins Wood's work cited above, excellent as well.

I want to distinguish my position from the kind of class analysis that Robin Kelley so rightly skewers in his essay from *YO' Mama's DISFUNKtional!*, "Looking Extremely Backward." Kelley's argument has several components. He wishes to critique the kind of class analysis that repudiates identity politics for a class politics that can unite people instead of dividing them. He finds this analysis specious. For one, it replaces identity politics rooted in the fight against racism and sexism with an identity politics presumably rooted in universalist concerns--here the referent is either the Enlightenment or class as a unifying category--but really rooted in its own identity politics--one taking whiteness and American patriotism as normative. Kelley rightly takes these particular defenders of "class analysis" to be collapsing class analysis with "majoritarianism"--and "the majority of Americans we are told are white and heterosexual."

Kelley sees the call for class over race and gender identity concerns to be in essence a call to marginalize racism and sexism in order to unite on a class basis (a basis itself based in patriotism, etc.).

Both Kelley's position and my own wish to make racism and sexism fundamental to class struggle--as he puts it, speaking of the L.A.-based Bus Riders's Union--"rather than see race as a problem for working-class unity," we should see the struggle against racism as "in the interest of the class." Kelley's moral center can be found in the statement of the Black Women's United Front": Abolition of every possibility of exploitation and oppression." With this I heartily concur. My position differs from Kelley's in important respects and later I will suggest that Kelley's analytical categories rest uneasily with the above position. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *YO' Mama's DISFUNKtional!* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 118, 154.

[6](#) Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, pp. 3, 168-9, 29, 240-1. Further references in text.

[7](#) As Meiksins Woods shows, E. P. Thompson's criticisms of Althusser's attempts to get beyond economic determinism contain the lineaments of a cogent defense of historical materialism and class analysis.

[8](#) Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, trans. Ernest Untermann (Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1906 rpt. New York: Modern Library), p. 833 and p. 329.

[9](#) Quoted in Alan Gilbert, *Must Global Politics Constrain Democracy?: Great Power Realism, Democratic Peace and Democratic Internationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 128-9. Further references in text. For Gilbert and Miller's critique of productive forces determinism, see Alan Gilbert, *Marx's Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981); see also Gilbert's *Democratic Individuality* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) and *Fact and Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)

[10](#) Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso, 1995); *The Invention of the White Race, Volume Two: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). All further references incorporated in text.

[11](#) Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 386. Note both the tacit racism and nationalism involved in designating without critique the new ruling race as Virginians. As Allen shows in Volume Two, this line between European and African was not analogous to the line between servant and slave. In the early and mid 17th century, there was a significant proportion of free black property owners, a proportion incompatible with racial oppression. Blacks could own European indentured servants.

[12](#) On Bacon's Rebellion see Allen, Vol. Two, chapter 11.

[13](#) David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991), p.8.

[14](#) Sue Clegg's article is called "The Feminist Challenge to Socialist History," from *Women's History Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1997.

[15](#) Particular anti-colonial nationalisms might help mobilize the people against the colonial aggressor as in Vietnam even as this same nationalism helps lay the basis of its future capitulation to imperialism.

[16](#) Robin D. G. Kelley, "Integration: What's Left?," in *Nation*, 12/14/98. Kelley says the racial divisions are caused neither by capitalist trickery nor "some innate fear of the other," yet, I will suggest that the latter thesis is very much what is involved in Kelley's defense of Robinson, protestations to the contrary.

[17](#) Of course, Linebaugh and Rediker suggest an international component to Leveller politics--not just in its implications but in its influences. One striking example of this would be the reciprocal relation between Leveller politics and Masianello's revolt in Naples. At the time when revolutionary Antinomian resistance was at its height in England, the peasant Masianello and his comrades took over Naples in what could be viewed as a precursor of the Paris Commune. The rebellion was marked by egalitarianism, anti-racism and anti-slavery according to written accounts, written for ruling classes as warnings of the dangers of the motley crew in England. It was likely influenced by the politics of the Levellers and was in turn inspiration for Leveller egalitarianism. The flipside of course was that it was greatly feared by the ruling class.

This information brings to mind how it is that I used to teach *Othello*. I hope the

relevance of this anecdote to the discussion will be clear enough. A while ago, before I finished my Ph.D. I taught Intro to Lit courses at Northwestern night school. The first thing I taught was *Othello*. I was involved at the time in a militant anti-racist organization, The International Committee Against Racism, which was thoroughly multiracial in membership and leadership and had a primarily working-class base. Multiracial unity was our watchword. Anyway, to teach *Othello*, in a Marxist and anti-racist way, I first wished to rebut Frank Kermode's comment (based clearly in a whole ideology of the aesthetic concerning how great art can transcend its time and place and achieve the truly human) that Shakespeare's treatment of Othello transcended racism because Othello was "ennobled."

As we all know, racist discourse can ennoble its objects in a certain manner. At any rate, as a corrective, I used Winthrop Jordan's chapter on *Othello* from *White Over Black*. I spliced together this account with some Genovese (*The World the Slaveholder Made*, I believe). And my point was that while slavery institutionalized racism, before slavery was institutionalized, there was "colour prejudice." I took on this notion of Jordan's without any critique. It never occurred to me to interrogate the status of this notion. It was part of the English mind. So there was a precapitalist, preslavery prejudice which really took root post-slavery. In later years, pre-Ph.D., when I taught this play, I finessed this account in an interesting yet still inadequate way. I took up Kermode's comment about ennoblement and noted that Shakespeare changed the character (Othello) significantly compared to the original Italian play, which was far more racist. And I suggested that the racism of the original play was inseparable from interimperialist rivalry going on at the time between the Italian city state and the Ottoman empire over places like Cyprus. Shakespeare's "softer racism" was enabled by different institutional circumstances. No state imperative informing Shakespeare's racism, just colour prejudice, natural ethnocentrism. On my combined account, racism, I think I argued, emerged with capitalism, but it had its relatively autonomous preconditions in what I was calling pre-capitalist England. It is now clear to me that this kind of analysis, impressive in its own way, is dead wrong and rests upon simply denying the complexities of the class struggle revealed by historians like Linebaugh. As I've argued here and elsewhere, combining the Marxist and the psychocultural is ultimately incoherent and also unnecessary once Marxism is put on a thoroughly non-economic determinist footing. And even in my analysis of the racism of the Italian original, I was tacitly engaging in a bad functionalism--it really did not occur to me that the lower classes might be questioning this sort of propaganda in a fundamental way as we saw 80 years later in Masianello.

I brought up my political involvement because I think now my politics and theory are in line with each other but they were not back then--my theory should have inclined me to support some form of nationalism even though my lived experience suggested its inadequacy.

[18](#) At a Rethinking Marxism conference in the early nineties I heard Richard Lewontin give a talk which included a discussion of the organization, Science for the People, and its battles with Jensenism. Lewontin described his group at first as firemen and women, putting out the fires of racism so to speak whenever they would sprout. But in continuing

he changed his metaphor to the hydra to suggest that when one fire was extinguished, or head cut off and cauterized, another would spring up in its place because, he implied, racism could not be eliminated piecemeal. The many-headed hydra, as Linebaugh and Rediker note, while at first predominantly a metaphor of the ruling class, became a metaphor used in working-class struggles against the ruling classes. The point of course is to eliminate the cause of the hydra phenomenon and not in a post-Marxist vein become enamoured either of the metaphors' reversability or of the ability of the pesky and trickster oppressed continually to grow new heads, only to have them cut off, etc.

[19](#) This division of the whites would be repeated over and over in subsequent years-- think of the divisions between honest workmen and dangerous classes, especially in the aftermath of the 1877 upheavals. Or in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, in the scientific racist language of people like Lothrop Stoddard, "whites" joining forces with the rising tide of color were viewed as racial renegades and monsters.

[20](#) It remains to be seen how a leftist or revolutionary multiracial movement would be treated in the present. It is interesting to note, however, how difficult it is for the media even to see militant multiracialism. I was involved in a communist-led multiracial protest against a klan/nazi rally in Chicago. It got brief but national coverage. The protesters were described as black communists even though the picture of the protesters clearly showed their multiracial character. In the L.A. riots, its multiethnic character was replaced by "black rage." The Saxton quote comes from his conclusion to *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (New York: Verso, 1990).

[21](#) David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994), p. 9.

[22](#) The Trudier Harris quotes come from "White Men as Performers in the Lynching Ritual," quoted in David R. Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), pp. 299-304. On populism, farmers' alliances and the knights, see Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (New York: Verso, 1986) and Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). "Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition" can be found in the first volume of *Cultural Logic*, Vol. 1, no. 1.

[23](#) Michael Parenti offers what I think can be rightly viewed as an interesting parallel to any analysis relying on some mass psychology (that may undergo extensions and permutations). Responding to the view that the violence of U.S. foreign policy can be explained by "militarism" (or, in bourgeois feminist accounts, a "macho mentality"), Parenti notes that "it is not militarism that creates U.S. foreign policy but U.S. policy that generates militarism--which is not to deny that militarism may then have a feedback effect of its own, but it will be in directions *that do not conflict in any essential way with the interests of [U.S.] global capitalism.*" He goes on to say that "the need to play the policeman of the world and try to control the destinies of other countries may be a compelling one for policy makers, but it operates selectively in a direction that is compatible with the interests of global capitalism and inimical to socialist revolution." Thus Reagan could terrorize Nicaragua until it cried Uncle but show no such bullying

toward the "repressive Chun government of South Korea" or the then white supremacist South African government with which it constructively engaged. (Michael Parenti, *The Sword and the Dollar*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 129-30)

Today, we have similar principles of selection at work to explain (genocidal) intervention in Iraq and Yugoslavia but not Rwanda or Turkey or Saudi Arabia or Columbia. American Mentality explains nothing here, whether that mentality is described in malign terms as militaristic or benign terms as democratic. To some, the persistence of death-dealing sanctions against Iraq seems irrational yet as Parenti suggests in a recent article, "the Iraqi leadership could turn U.S. policy completely around by uttering just two magic words: free market":

All they would have to do is invite the IMF and World Bank into Iraq, eliminate free education and free medical care, abolish the minimal food ration that goes to every Iraqi, abolish the housing subsidies and transportation subsidies and hand over the country's oil industry to the corporate cartels. To lift the sanctions, Iraq must surrender to the tender mercies of the free-market paradise as Yugoslavia has recently done under the newly minted, Western sponsored president, Kostunica, and as so many other nations have done. (Z, February. 2001, pp. 31-5)

[24](#) In chapter nine of *To Make Our World Anew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), the chapter co-written by Kelley, Earl Lewis and Vincent Harding, Kelley et al. write, describing the politics of DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement based in Detroit), the following:

DRUM members knew that racism limited the ability of white workers to unite, and that white workers, as well as black workers, were hurt by this. But they also argued that white workers benefited from racism in the form of higher wages, cleaner and safer jobs, and greater union representation (p. 536).

I am assuming that the three authors basically endorse this position. As stated, the position is contradictory, with racism hurting white workers yet benefiting them. A couple of questions could be raised. For the interest point to hold (white workers benefit), the higher wages and safer jobs need to be more precisely defined. Higher and safer in relation to what? Superexploited black workers? a united working class that made the fight against racism central? An egalitarian society without exploitation that could only come about through multiracial unity? If interest is defined as differential, then white workers "benefit" from black superexploitation--in which case I'm not sure what the meaning of "hurt" would be. More importantly, if differential is benefit and the capitalist international division of labor is constituted by uneven development and differential exploitation, than those higher up in the pecking order benefit from those below them. Blacks in America benefit from the exploitation of Guatemalan Indians or black Africans and should thus be pro-imperialist and nationalist just as white workers should want something like a caste system. I think this position is not only false--this division of labor

benefits capitalists and hurts workers--but, for what this point is worth, non-Marxist, suggesting a Weberian instead of a Marxian understanding of class.

[25](#) Quoted material on Garvey is from Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Boston: Harvard University Press) p. 231. In his various and helpful responses to this essay, Bill Mullen made an interesting point, which follows:

This [reading the essay] put me in mind of this recent passage from Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, something I had not entirely "heard" the first time I read it. This is the last paragraph of his opening chapter on "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity":

I have already implied that there is a degree of convergence here with other projects towards a critical theory of society, particularly Marxism. However, where lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory of slavery insists on the priority of the former. Their convergence is also undercut by the simple fact that in the critical thought of blacks in the West, social self-creation through labour is not the centre-piece of emancipatory hopes. For the descendants of slaves, work signified only servitude, misery, and subordination. Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poesies and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms--autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language, and, above all, the music. All three have overflowed from the containers that the modern nation state provides for them. (pp. 39-40)

I see this as an argument to reclaim "nationalism" as cultural internationalism. This for me is a decoding of "hybridity." I think it is a post-Robinsonian move, in that even Gilroy's misunderstanding of Marx comes partly through Robinson (personal communication).

First, I think this division of black people taking their pleasure through culture and Europeans taking their pleasure through rewarding work is more than a little questionable (reifying through synecdoche the slave experience for black people and "the artisan experience" for Europeans).

The experiential versus the systemic is a false dichotomy that some of the best Marxian work soundly deconstructs--Thompson being a notable example. It is a close relative of the culture/class split this essay critiques. Plus, the whole point of politics as I

see it is to achieve or realize common interests that are nevertheless rooted in somewhat disparate experience.

[26](#) Many of the particulars concerning the politics of the Congo from a U.S. standpoint can be found in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, which is historically accurate in many particulars. What's interesting though is that despite a fairly nuanced account of social forces involved in the making of Mobutu and the unmaking of Lumumba and in spite of her intertextual polemic against that great essentialist text *Heart of Darkness*, the novel seems to valorize an essential African spirit that renders "it" unconquerable, a spirit that seems more an emanation of the land than of human beings. For an excellent Marxian analysis of the role of imperialism in the Congo, especially for its comparative scope in showing how Marxism accounts for the particularities of imperialist rule and interimperialist rivalry, see David Gibbs, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). The Kingsolver novel is *Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Flamingo, 1998).

[27](#) Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.238.

[28](#) See Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[29](#) Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, pp. 96-7. See also p. 121 for a similar point. My critique of the coherence of Robinson's tradition as a causal concept does not mean that the concept cannot continue to be used descriptively as long as these concepts do not become quasi-causal or essentialist. Descriptively, we will continue to talk of a Black Radical Tradition as well as American Radical Traditions and English, French, Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese. My point is not necessarily to stop using such language but to be aware of the pitfalls of reifying what are in many ways arbitrary notions.

[30](#) Kelley supports my argument that Robinson's epistemology is relativist in his assertion that "Robinson believed all universalist theories of political and social order had to be rejected" (Robinson, p. xvi.).

[31](#) For critiques of the concept of incommensurability, see Mohanty above; Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (New York: Verso, 1986); Dudley Shapere, *Reason and the Search for Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984); Alan Gilbert, *Democratic Individuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Larry Laudan, *Beyond Positivism and Relativism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1986) and anything by philosopher of science Richard Boyd. All of these thinkers offer rational (though not rationalist) theories of justification--most of those listed call themselves scientific realists, and Gilbert, Boyd, Bhaskar and Mohanty offer robust defenses of

moral realism (moral objectivity). All of the above thinkers insist on the theory dependency of our knowledge, interpreting this theory dependency as itself inconsistent with relativism whereas in relativist and constructivist traditions, theory dependency is often treated as a refutation of realism, scientific or moral.

[32](#) Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (New York: Verso, 1992), p. 182.

[33](#) See Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (New York: Praeger, 1981) pp. 94-8. For relevant works by West, see his essay "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," in Nelson and Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and *Prophesy Deliverance* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1982).

[34](#) Houston Baker, "On Knowing Our Place," from Henry Louis Gates and K. A. Appiah, eds., *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Amistad), p. 213.

[35](#) In Baker's poststructuralist theory of the sign, word and concept can always be refunctioned, unfixed and rearticulated, with the exception of the concept of historical materialism. Baker would never say nationalism forced anything. I see, despite the different particulars, a similarity between this view in which Marxism means the domination over women and the view that Marxism--Marxian internationalism, class analysis--means white (or Jewish) domination. This is a version of Robinson's double standard noted above. We might say that the poststructuralist theory of the sign more and more needs a fixed point, an other against which to define its plasticity and that other is historical materialism. For a view of black women in CP-influenced movements that acknowledges both CP masculinist iconography and the important role these women played in the movement, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1990.

[36](#) See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 256-7; Jacques Derrida, "Les Fins de L'homme," in *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972); and "Racism's Last Word," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., "Race," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 338. Derrida is inconsistent on epistemological breaks, sometimes arguing vociferously against such possibilities: but it is possible to interpret the contradiction in the following way: the West is trapped in logocentrism and can only engage in interminable analysis while the East actually does break from logocentrism.

[37](#) Manning Marable, "Beyond Color Blindness," *Nation*, Dec. 14, 1998.

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