Roads Taken and Not Taken: Post-Marxism, Antiracism, and Anticommunism[1]

Barbara Foley

Ralph Ellison

As I approach--no, acknowledge--midlife (this being one year short of the 25th anniversary of my first MLA convention!), a recent empty nester finding her way through Dante's dark forest, I find new truth in the old trope of roads not taken. No, this is not a Lentricchia-esque recantation; I am an unreconstructed 60s radical, if anything hating capitalism more than I did 25 years ago, and considering words like "class" and "revolution" still to have great explanatory power and emancipatory potential. But in referencing Frost I am voicing a midlife recognition that choosing to do one kind of thing--in this case, scholarship--rules out doing another. Ten years ago I considered myself, as a student of literature, to have one leg in the camp of theory and one in that of history; now I primarily work under the rubric of cultural and political history and look to others--Neil Larsen, Greg Meyerson, Teresa Ebert--to supply the "cutting edge" insights in theory. But putting together this talk--where I'll discuss African American writers and the left, and the impediments posed to the study of their interrelation by anticommunism, in both its Cold War and post-Marxist variants--has reminded me that one cannot talk about history without being theoretical, or, conversely, engage in a theoretical practice that does not bear historical traces.

An additional prefatory comment. I have undertaken my investigation into African American writers and the left for both academic and political reasons. That a significant number of 20th-century black writers have been profoundly affected by the left is one of the best-kept secrets of U.S. literary history, and adept younger scholars like Anthony Dawahare, Bill Mullen, and Bill Maxwell are making startling discoveries in this largely

unexplored field. What is at stake in such inquiries, however, is more than purely academic. For racism is, in my view, the linchpin of both exploitation and political rule in the capitalist system; the development of class-conscious antiracism, in both theory and practice, is the principal challenge facing any politics serious about motivating change. Yet central to the discourse of American anticommunism--from Harold Cruse to Eric Sundquist--has been the notion that communists have always been white; that they have manipulated and used blacks; that "class" is a mainly white concern; that insisting upon the primacy of exploitation means turning people of color into second-class citizens (Meyerson); and that the relation of race to class is conjunctural, not structural, with the terms "coalition" and "alliance" describing the limits within which this relation can be articulated. The above propositions are, in my view, deeply and injuriously untrue, and anything that can be done to dispel them contributes to the project of emancipation. Hence the importance of scholarship uncovering the hidden--one might say, stolen--history of black socialism and communism.

My work on Toomer--author of *Cane* (1923)--has impressed upon me the willful blindness resulting from literary critics' widespread contempt for left-wing politics. I have discovered that, while the near-universal (one might say, "party") line on Toomer is that his brief youthful flirtation with socialism ended when he worked in a shipyard for 2 weeks and experienced the "real" working class, with one of his autobiographies being routinely cited in support of this proposition, another autobiography--which has been sitting up in the Beinecke for years but is practically never cited--discusses this experience for fifty or sixty pages and reaches quite different conclusions. I have also found that Toomer's first four published writing--included in none of the bibliographies of his work--appeared in the left-liberal and socialist press, and that one is a commentary on the 1919 race riots written from an explicitly Marxist perspective, albeit within the limits of the Socialists' economistic jobs competition thesis. I have also found that *Cane* contains multiple references to rebellions against debt peonage that situate it in the discourse of class-conscious New Negro radicalism. Rather than an African American high modernist preoccupied with roots both racial and symbolic--or, as has been more recently argued, a protodeconstructionist demonstrating the arbitrariness of "race"--Toomer was , I have discovered, highly knowledgeable about, and engaged with, contemporaneous left-wing thought.

Yet my point is not simply that Toomer "really was" a closet socialist. After all, as manifested through its almost obsessive engagement with the trope of roots and soil, seeds and fruit, *Cane* also proclaims its affinity with the post-romantic cultural nationalism of Young America and the Harlem Renaissance. But the postwar left was itself beset by contradictory pulls--between, on the one hand, the powerful call for proletarian internationalism issuing from the Bolshevik revolution and, on the other, the felt necessity of accommodating to one form or another of nationalism--whether the presumably revolutionary nationalism of colonial self-determination or the exceptionalist nationalism of American pluralism. In the U.S., the left was torn between theorizing the proletariat as rootless, made "alien" by alienation, and showing that, contrary to the doctrines of nativists and eugenicists, the "seed' of immigrants and Negroes "belonged" in the "soil" of America as much as did that of the Anglo-Saxonists. My point is thus that

the contradictions in Toomer's work are far richer when seen through the palimpsest of leftist debate; his preoccupation with his characters' "roots" neither reflects racial essentialism nor, anachronistically, anticipates current views of race as socially constructed, but engages with the nationalist/internationalist dialectic informing contemporaneous political discourse. The casual anticommunism of most Toomer critics--manifested in the tendency simply to "disappear" the many evidences of his leftism--ends up impoverishing our understanding of both his moment and his text.

My work on Ralph Ellison has involved me in quarrels of a somewhat different kind. In part my research has been, again, recuperative: I have discovered a pro-Communist Ellison (perhaps even a Communist Ellison) whose embrace of left politics extended not only to the production of a significant body of proletarian short fiction and cultural commentary but also to the active defense of the CP line on world War II, through its various 180-degree twists and turns, between 1939 and 1944. In part, however, my research has entailed combatting the almost universally accepted notion that, in his portrayal of the Brotherhood as authoritarian, manipulative, and racist, Ellison "got it right" about the CP. Here I've had to deal not only with cold War-era New Critical symbolistic criticism, which revels in the dense thematic patterning paralleling southern Jim Crow racists with Northern Communists, but also with postmodernist commentary celebrating Ellison as bricoleur and trickster, the proto-Foucauldian engaged in subverting the totalitarian certainties of communism and capitalism alike. I've had to demonstrate that scholars abandon the usual standards for evidence and argument when they deal historically with U.S. communism; I've had to argue that their appreciation of the "complexity" and "play" of *Invisible Man* is premised largely upon the novel's reductionist treatment of Communism, as well as their own formalistic complicity in this reductionism. Where anticommunism, effacing Toomer's leftism, has reduced the richness of *Can*e, it has, embracing Ellison's cynical postleftism, falsely inflated the richness of *Invisible Man*.

But even as I've found myself defending the World War II era CP from Ellison's distortions--his attacks from the right--I've also had to preserve a space for critique from the left. For while it is not true that the CP just "dropped" Harlem--and the antiracist struggle--during WW II, as Ellison charges in *Invisible Man*, the CP certainly did cool its pro-worker and anti-racist heels in the name of national unity; the wartime dissolution of the CP into the CPA (Communist Political Alliance) shows something pretty rotten in the state of American communism. When the invisible man proclaims the virtues of American philosophical and political traditions in the novel's epilogue, then, he is not simply espousing Cold War rhetoric; his flinging American democracy in the face of American communism is the CP's own Popular Front rhetoric come home to haunt it.

What I've found in my work on black U.S. writers and the left, in short, is that anticommunism is alive and well in literary scholarship--not only in "traditional" scholarship bound to Cold War-era formalism but also in more recent scholarship inflected by postmodernism and critical race theory. I've become convinced of the need for a historically informed scholarship that, rather than approaching this literature with

shallow notions about U.S. Communism--either aprioristically dismissive or sentimentally approving--understands and respects the specificity of the political.

But what has all this to do with post-Marxism, you may be wondering. (My definition of a post-Marxist, by the way, is pretty unrigorous: a postmodernist who retains a lingering fondness for the category of class.) First, the scholarship I'm calling for needs to be a "left" scholarship--coming from a position of general sympathy with the project of human emancipation through the abolition of exploitation and classes. But much post-Marxist discourse is, in my view, premised upon anticommunism. Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, arguably the manifesto of post-Marxism, is suffused with an anti-Leninist animus that conflates politics with epistemology in an irrevocably linked chain of signifiers: the authoritarian party equals class reductionism equals logocentricity; totality equals totalitarianism. If one were to read only Laclau and Mouffe--or listen only to Cornel West (I think here of various speeches I've heard him give about "radical democracy")--one would have to conclude that the entire 20th century project of creating egalitarian societies run by the producers was doomed in advance by the Marxist claim to possession of a "master narrative." Other post-Marxist statements--like those gathered in the recent anthology *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*--may use a kinder, gentler rhetoric than Laclau and Mouffe, but for most of the contributors "class" clearly signifies subject position rather than the basis for systemic critique. As Ebert and Zavarzadeh, among others, have exhaustively demonstrated, the post-Marxist call to "think globally and act locally" results in a pragmatist fetishization of particularity that precludes systemic critique and coherent action. In this context, the detachment of class from gender and race, while presumably intended to liberate the latter two from Stalinist "class reductionism," effaces the centrality of sexism and racism to bourgeois hegemony; moreover, it reduces exploitation to the presumably parallel but in fact nonsensical (and completely un-Marxist) category of "classism." Although the explicit post-Marxist assault upon class analysis has--fortunately--been largely confined to the academy, we should not underestimate its trickle-down effect in the culture at large, especially as part of a fashionably decentered, and identity-politics-laden, postmodernist mass culture. In any even, this assault certainly functions to discourage scholars--particularly younger scholars otherwise acquiring a somewhat radicalized political consciousness in the current jobs crisis--from joining the fray as conscious advocates of revolutionary, as opposed to merely piecemeal and reformist, change.

Second, however, post-Marxism is implicated in anticommunism to the extent that it dialectically emerges from, and in reaction to, the deficiencies and limitations of the left itself. While the post-Marxist animus against master narratives and totalities in part reproduces ruling-class Cold War rhetoric, it is not simply a capitalist plot, but instead an attempt to supersede the inadequacies of inherited left discourse--without, however, succeeding in transcending the horizon of that discourse. Post-Marxism cannot simply be dismissed by name-calling or, conversely, interrogated by immanent critique; its blind spots and shortcomings--its aporias, if you will--need to be historically situated with the "Marxism" to which it proposed itself as "post."

On the face of it, it may seem absurd to suggest that post-Marxism, with its fondness for transgressing borders and its antipathy to large totalities, emerges, even in part, from the nationalist problematic that is so central to the contradictions informing the work of Toomer and Ellison. And yet we may find this to be the case if we examine post-Marxism's political and intellectual pedigree in both the Old Left and the New Left (a task I originally thought I might take up in this paper, but that quickly proved far too large). Nationalism--to make a grandiose statement--has been the Achilles heel of communist movements in the 20th century. For nationalism posits that some social entity other than the international proletariat can and should, at various junctures, inspire working-class allegiance and identification. It posits, moreover, that whether one purchases or sells labor power constitutes no insuperable barrier to belonging--having "roots"--in this community; nationalism is thus inherently class-collaborationist. To the general rule of class antagonism, then, nationalism--for the Marxist--proposes that an exception can be made for a particular, local circumstance, however large may be the actual social entity--the nation--embodying this circumstance. (In his Popular Front-era formulations of "new Democracy," in fact, Mao at great length theorized nationalism under the category of the "particularity of contradiction.") At different times this nationalistic "localism" has taken different forms, but all in my view ultimately resulting in disaster. In the aftermath of both world wars, it entailed a call for, and defense of, third-world movements for national self-determination--a strategy resulting tragically in the support of scores of oppressive regimes, from Egypt to Indonesia. In the fight against anti-black U.S. racism, it entailed a construction of African Americans as an oppressed nation and a call for self-determination in the black Belt--a slogan greatly confusing the CP's simultaneous call for multiracial working-class unity. In the context of late 1930s anti-fascism, it bred the hard-even-now-to-utter slogan, "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism." In contrast to the post-Marxist claim that twentieth-century left movements have been ruined by their unrelenting focus upon the class struggle, I'd suggest that these movements have been hampered by a "softness on nationalism," itself the practical expression of the theoretical reluctance to keep the class contradiction front and center at all times. Indeed, in what may strike some as a perverse move, I'd suggest that those features for which the Old Left is lambasted by the post-Marxists--class analysis, dialectical totalization, interracial class unity, all routinely dismissed as "class reductionism," "imposition of master narrative," and "denial of difference"--may in fact be among the stronger aspects of the Old Left's legacy.

I shall conclude, then, with the somewhat polemical proposition that the post-Marxist enshrinement of the local as the site of "resistance" is the *reductio ad absurdam* of the twentieth-century left's "softness on nationalism." For it recapitulates the worst aspects of the Old Left's nationalist weakness in the absence of both the urgent historical conditions and the heroic political agency that often mitigate our--or at least my--negative assessment of that weakness. Post-Marxist multiculturalism recalls the Popular Front's often bland cult of authenticity and diversity without the felt necessity of fighting lynch violence and building antifascist unity. The post-Marxist invocation of subaltern speech feebly echoes the Third International's rhetoric of self-determination--without any accompanying advocacy of anti-imperialist struggle, much less a Leninist strategic attack upon weakest links in the imperialist chain. Even recent calls for "transnationalism"

represent not a dialectical negation of the nationalism but post-Marxism's confession of its own impotence and its accession to contemporary capital's self-interested self-representation as some kind of global Great Blob which nonetheless remains firmly centered in the old metropoles. In the post-Marxist articulation of particularity as the site of analysis and localism as the site of resistance, then, history repeats itself as farce. In an irony that Marx for one would have appreciated, indeed, the past errors of communist movements come back to haunt us in the spectral guise of post-Marxist anticommunism. Forward-looking citizens of the world, in my view, need to detach themselves from post-Marxism's exhausted paradigm, go back to the juncture where the road to nowhere began, and pursue the road not taken. As individuals, in our allotted existential span, none of us can retrace roads traversed in time; but collectively we can and should track backward as needed in order to move ahead.

Editor's Note

1 This essay was originally presented at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, December, 1997, in Toronto, Canada.