

# Afro-Analytical Marxism and the Problem of Race

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## **Introduction**

Africana philosophy, in terms of its subject matter and basic questions, cuts across traditional subfields—moral and political philosophy obviously but also metaphysics and epistemology, aesthetics and the history of philosophy. As an area of philosophical research and writing, Africana philosophy is characterized by methodological pluralism and often explicit reflection on method. Indeed, Africana philosophy is methodologically self-conscious in a way that other areas of philosophy typically are not.

This methodological self-consciousness should not be surprising. Many canonical figures of Western philosophy have been openly and deeply prejudiced against Africans and people of African ancestry. Much of what is generally regarded as the “Western” tradition has been an attack on black humanity and, in particular, on black intelligence and rationality. Moreover, due to ongoing antiblack racism, practitioners of Africana philosophy labor under the suspicion that black people aren’t capable of philosophizing, at least not at a level of sophistication or depth that would warrant serious study and critical engagement. Historically, and to a significant degree even now, the discipline of philosophy has been inhospitable to black philosophers, particularly when we don’t conform to mainstream methodological expectations and writing conventions. Within the academic profession of philosophy, reflection on the “human condition” too often does not include the experiences and insights of the peoples from Africa and its broader diaspora.

Those black intellectuals who choose philosophy as their vocation, despite its checkered past and present, are often distrustful of its recognized methods and less

invested in its traditional preoccupations. What qualifies as mainstream philosophy in the academy today is often looked upon by Africana philosophers with skepticism, wariness, and, at times, hostility.

Thus, some have looked to sources of wisdom and methods of reflection found in pre-colonial African societies. Others defer to methods and ideas that have been forged in black resistance movements. Still others have tried to expand the philosophical canon to include more black thinkers, particularly those who don't fit the traditional mold of a Western philosopher. Then there are those who turn to philosophical traditions that focus explicitly on ending group-based oppression. Methods that are strongly anchored in the aim of achieving justice and freedom for the most oppressed—such as Marxism and critical theory—are looked upon with somewhat less suspicion, even when these methods are of European origin.

I have sometimes had this methodological skepticism or experienced this anxiety. I've worried, at times, that I have relied on compromised methods—methods tainted by racism, methods that are inherently conservative, that are insufficiently tied to emancipatory aims, that are largely inaccessible to ordinary black people and so elitist. Yet I must confess that, over time, I have come to feel mostly at home within mainstream analytical philosophy (here broadly construed as a general approach to thinking and writing, not a set of specific doctrinal commitments). This attitude, this sense of relative comfort, calls for explanation if not defense. As Paul Taylor has remarked, "Analytic philosophers [such as Bernard Boxill and Michele Moody-Adams] ... have usually contented themselves with simply doing the work of Africana thought and typically decline to indulge in metaphilosophical reflection on the fitness of their conceptual and methodological resources."<sup>1</sup>

My primary aim will be to explain why I find analytical approaches to Africana philosophy congenial and fitting for the types of problems or questions that Africana

philosophers typically concern themselves with. I've attempted something along these lines once before, with a focus on Boxill's work and the liberal tradition.<sup>2</sup> Here, I offer this explanation via engagement with Marxism, black radicalism, and what Leonard Harris has aptly dubbed "philosophy born of struggle"—that is, philosophy rooted in the culture of social groups who are fighting together for survival and liberation.<sup>3</sup> These are approaches I've sought to synthesize into a general social and political philosophy—what I'm here calling "afro-analytical Marxism."

Recently, philosophy of race has become a recognized subfield in academic philosophy. Some of this work is rooted in, overlaps with, or is informed by Africana philosophy. Some is unrelated. Philosophy of race and Africana philosophy, though often lumped together, are distinct (albeit related) areas of inquiry. Some philosophers, like me, work in both subfields and aim to draw fruitful connections between them and other areas of philosophy, such as political philosophy and epistemology.

There is of course no one philosophical problem of race, not even in analytical philosophy. For instance, there is a lively debate over just what the race concept is and over whether there is reason to believe races exist. There are debates over how best to conceptualize racism, about what it is about racism that makes it objectionable, and about how best to respond to the problem of racism. There is disagreement over whether so-called racial identities are rooted in the illusion of inherent racial difference. And there is a dispute over whether "racial solidarity" is always racist or inimical to the achievement of justice. A secondary aim of this address, then, is to clarify how the afro-analytical Marxist conceives problems of race.

### **Analytical Marxism**

From my first encounter with Marxism as an undergraduate, I was drawn to its critique of economic exploitation, particularly the exploitation of manual labor. This focus is apt for

diagnosing key elements of the black condition. The experiences of peoples of African ancestry in the modern world, from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the present, have been profoundly shaped by the brutal extraction of involuntary labor. This labor exploitation has largely served to enhance the wealth, material consumption, leisure, and power of peoples of European ancestry.

I have also long been attracted to the Marxist theory and critique of ideology. Ideologies, in my view, are widely held systems of belief that function to disguise or misrepresent important social realities and thereby to bring about or reinforce structural oppression. Traditional Marxists have mainly focused on debunking and attacking “bourgeois” ideas, nationalism, religious thought, and fascism. But the basic framework can be applied to racism, too.<sup>4</sup>

Part of what I admire about analytical philosophy is the high value it places on conceptual clarity, logical rigor, and detailed argumentation. Now, these intellectual virtues are sometimes overemphasized or made into ends in themselves. And, at times, they are gained at the cost of the aesthetic virtues and the compelling storytelling found in the best literary nonfiction and historical writing. But the sacrifice is sometimes worth it to garner greater confidence in one’s conclusions.

I also favor analytical philosophy’s reliance on careful scientific studies for its empirical premises. Stories, thought-experiments, personal experience, poetic insight, imagination, moral reflection, and speculation all have their place in philosophical inquiry. But these techniques are no replacement for experimental methods, systematic observation, the careful acquisition and analysis of data, and the rigorous and repeated testing of empirical hypotheses.

Some Africana philosophers find analytical philosophy to be insufficiently self-critical about the methods it deploys. They believe its practitioners are simply falling back on the tradition’s current institutional dominance and mainstream acceptance to legitimate their efforts.<sup>5</sup> There is truth to this charge. For example, there is some methodological

complacency and policing in, say, peer review and hiring. Analytical philosophers don't always ask whether the methods they favor are best suited for every problem they seek to address. And too often we're reluctant to augment our toolkit, particularly when the proposed technique feels foreign or is difficult to master. But I don't believe these flaws are inherent to the approach. Moreover, it is central to the enterprise of analytical philosophy to reflect critically on logic, science, mathematics, and language as tools of inquiry. Indeed, these are recognized subfields in the discipline. It would be a welcome development if more Africana philosophers were to do research in these areas.

In emphasizing the value of analytical philosophy, I am not taking a side in the so-called analytic/continental divide or trying to worsen it. Like most Africana philosophers, I'm ecumenical about philosophical traditions and open to learning from a variety of approaches. Many canonical black radical philosophers—such as Frantz Fanon and Angela Davis—work in the tradition of existentialism or critical theory, and I've learned invaluable lessons from them. Marxism is itself a European continental philosophy, an outgrowth of left-Hegelian materialism. Yet I am suggesting that analytical philosophy and Marxism can be, and have been, combined to good effect. In fact, it was analytical Marxism that ultimately convinced me that analytical philosophy was not inherently conservative.

Analytical Marxism is interdisciplinary. The most prominent analytical Marxists include not only philosophers but also sociologists, political scientists, historians, and economists.<sup>6</sup> I'll focus on G.A. Cohen's conception of the enterprise, as his work is the most overtly philosophical and has had the greatest influence on my thinking. His books such as *Karl Marx's Theory of History and Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* are exemplars of the type of writing about Marxist-inspired questions that I have in mind.

According to Cohen, Marxism does not have a valuable method of its own.<sup>7</sup> Marxists can, and should, make use of mainstream methods in logic, statistics, rational choice theory, mathematical model-building, or other conventional methods in analytical

philosophy, historical scholarship, and the so-called positivist social and behavioral sciences. These techniques emphasize precision in the statement of claims, the necessity for abstraction, the usefulness of counterfactual reasoning, and logical rigor in argument.<sup>8</sup> Of course, clear statement and rigorous argument are not always achieved in analytical Marxist theory. The methodological commitment is a practical aspiration and an ideal. To the extent that it is realized, this will naturally depend on the willingness of others to offer honest criticism, to demand greater precision, and to correct errors of logic and fact. It will also depend on the willingness of the theorist to heed this critical feedback and to rethink matters, even fundamental questions. The achievement of these intellectual virtues is therefore always the product of a cooperative effort, not a matter of individual genius.

I would also note that while I agree we should use the repertoire of contemporary social-science methods and mainstream anglophone philosophical techniques, we should add to this store of valuable resources lessons drawn from the field of Africana studies (sometimes called "Black Studies"). This field not only emphasizes interdisciplinary knowledge but highlights the history, cultures, and politics of black peoples, and focuses on the social and psychological consequences of the modern slave trade and European imperialism, particularly the consequences for those of African ancestry. One of the lessons I've learned from Africana studies is the importance of beginning with a well-defined question or problem and then choosing the method most appropriate rather than allowing one's disciplinary training to dictate method. And I believe that the methodological anxiety and self-consciousness I identified at the start was partly what motivated black scholars and students to establish and develop Africana studies as an academic field.<sup>9</sup>

Analytical Marxism is more philosophical than some variants in the broader Marxist tradition. Its practitioners see much greater value in attempting to identify, clarify, and justify *basic principles*, giving them careful formulation and tirelessly searching for possible

weaknesses in them. These sought-after fundamental principles can be explanatory theses, conceptual truths, metaphysical claims, or moral principles.

Those engaged in analytical Marxist theorizing generally draw from intellectual and political traditions other than Marxism. There's no reason to think that the Marxist tradition possesses the resources necessary to answer all the questions or solve all the problems it poses. And since the time of Marx's research and writing, many surprising social developments have occurred, and we have been faced with disappointments and opportunities that Marx could not have anticipated.<sup>10</sup>

One place where analytical Marxists have found it fruitful to draw upon other traditions is when it comes to answering challenging questions of political morality. Marxism has mostly been silent, evasive, vague, or dogmatic about questions of political morality. I used to believe that the moral case against capitalism and in favor of socialism was obvious and that only those who were intellectually dishonest, morally obtuse, or trapped in bourgeois ideology could deny such self-evident truths.<sup>11</sup> I thought the role of the Marxist theorist was therefore simply to explain the relevant historical and social facts (which many deny or are ignorant of) and to debunk reactionary ideologies. Yet I came to think that the moral truth about political economy was not self-evident and that it was necessary to engage in explicit and sometimes detailed normative argument.

Following other analytical Marxists, I engaged liberal-egalitarian thought because it was far more advanced and sophisticated when it comes to theorizing about justice. I was hoping to learn from its techniques to develop a critique of labor exploitation under capitalism and to defend an account of robust worker rights and responsibilities. This engagement with liberal-egalitarian thought has, I admit, made me more sympathetic to many liberal ideals and concepts, and I have incorporated what I take to be the liberal tradition's insights into my approach to analytical Marxism.

So what attitude do analytical Marxists take toward the theory inherited from Marx and other canonical Marxists? Cohen aptly describes the attitude as “commitment without reverence.” What this means is that analytical Marxists are decidedly non-dogmatic about traditional Marxist ideas and claims. We of course think Marx raised crucial questions about our world that demand answers. We believe that Marx had valuable and still pertinent insights (for example, about ideology, class, history, capitalism, and socialism). And we believe that philosophy ought not limit itself to interpreting the world but can and should play a role in shaping it for the better.

However, we do not believe it is wise or rational to be disposed to conform one’s thoughts to Marx’s. Revision and supplement are absolutely necessary, particularly in light of certain salient facts. For instance, capitalism is not self-destructing; class conflict is far more complex than a struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; and there is no existing form of socialism that we can model our social arrangements after. Fresh thinking is required.

Nevertheless, traditional Marxist theory is sufficiently powerful that we try to defend the core ideas worth preserving. But such defense often requires considerable reconstruction to meet reasonable standards of analytical rigor. Some classical theses have been abandoned altogether. But those core claims that do survive critical scrutiny provide a firmer rational basis for conviction and commitment.

### **Marxism’s Race Problem**

Throughout the development of capitalism into a global system, economic exploitation and racial domination have gone hand in hand. I don’t see how we can make fundamental progress fighting economic injustice—a central aim of Marxism—without simultaneously and directly confronting racial injustice. This insistence on grappling forthrightly with the race-class nexus, in all its various and vexing dimensions, is a basic principle for black radicals and many Africana studies scholars.



Unfortunately, the insights from black radicalism and Africana studies have not, for the most part, been incorporated into the development of analytical Marxism.<sup>12</sup> As much as I admire and have learned from the work of people like Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, and Erik Olin Wright, I'm disappointed that they never developed theories of racism and racial hierarchy to match the depth and sophistication of their treatments of economic exploitation, distributive justice, class politics, and historical change. Nor have they had much to say about the place of black radical resistance in the fight for social justice and a post-capitalist future. In this way, their invaluable work suffers from the race problem that has long plagued both theory and practice in the Marxist tradition.

I am convinced that any workable solution to the problems of race will come from combining insights from Marxism and black radicalism. I also believe that a synthesis of these two traditions could go some way toward reducing the methodological anxiety that is characteristic of Africana philosophy. Yet here the "analytical" in "afro-analytical Marxism" is especially relevant. The same critical gaze that analytical Marxists cast upon the Marxist tradition must also be cast upon the black radical tradition.

### **Two Conceptions of the Black Radical Tradition**

With his classic 1983 book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson offered one of the most detailed and trenchant critiques of Marxism's race problem.<sup>13</sup> I will further explain and defend the afro-analytical Marxist approach by contrasting it with Robinson's influential interpretation of the black radical tradition. *Black Marxism* is not well known among academic philosophers. It is, however, a canonical text for those of us who do Africana philosophy, and it raises precisely the questions I'm trying to highlight in this address.

In my book *We Who Are Dark* (2005), I expressed sympathy for Robinson's idea of a "black radical tradition."<sup>14</sup> I must admit, though, that this sympathy was, and remains, somewhat ambivalent. This ambivalence has four main sources: (1) Robinson's aggressive

critique and almost wholesale repudiation of Western Marxism; (2) his take on what makes the black radical tradition “black”; (3) his conception of the relation between theory and practice; and (4) his interpretation of W. E. B. Du Bois, a pioneering figure in the tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, I believe that *Black Marxism* offers many enduring lessons. I agree with Robinson that there is a black radical tradition that should be embraced and developed. I’ve come to think, however, that there are competing conceptions of that tradition. Here I use Robinson’s important book to distinguish two interpretations of the philosophical foundations of black radicalism.

The conception of black radicalism Robinson advanced claims there is a unique and autonomous black political and intellectual tradition. It is, he claimed, independent of and even opposed to Western radicalism (including Marxism) and to Western philosophy more generally. The conception I favor regards black radicalism as essentially a *syncretic* tradition, one that draws from a range of traditions, including Western ideas and methods, to forge something new.

Robinson did not regard Marxism as entirely bankrupt. He acknowledged that it has some “precious insights.”<sup>16</sup> But his disagreements with Marxism were fundamental. Marx famously called for the workers of the world to unite. Yet, during Marx’s time, so-called working-class internationalism was limited to the European industrial working-class and peasantry. A truly “international revolutionary proletariat” was never more than a theoretical claim. And its prospects have never been terribly bright, not even today. This failure of global worker solidarity calls for explanation, and it’s unclear that Marxism has the theoretical resources to account for it.

Western Marxism has always focused on economic oppression within the metropole, with scant attention to the extremely violent forms of labor exploitation occurring in the colonial territories. But the peoples of Africa and its diaspora have mostly suffered economic oppression away from the metropolises of Europe. When such modern imperialism is taken

up, the racial dimensions of such colonial projects are given only cursory theoretical treatment.

Robinson did not reject historical materialism entirely but regarded it as extremely limited. He argued that the materialist theory of history is incapable of fully explaining racism and ethnic conflict.<sup>17</sup> Traditional Marxists maintain that racial ideology (like nationalism) is merely a way of legitimating and consolidating capital's rule over workers; such racist and ethnocentric attitudes, according to them, are not a primary motive.

Black radicals, according to Robinson, depart sharply from traditional Marxist analysis in that they believe racism partly explains why Africans were chosen for labor exploitation, resource expropriation, and colonization. It was not simply that labor and resources were necessary for accumulating wealth and African peoples happened to be available for plundering. The existence of antiblack racism in Europe, for centuries prior to the development of capitalism as a global system, explains why these exploiters gave no weight to the interests of black peoples and even felt justified in treating them brutally.

In this way, the black radical tradition makes several contributions to radical theory. It offers a diagnosis of the ills of modern societies that identifies racism as a longstanding and deeply destructive malignancy. The tradition represents the most consistent, principled, informed, and serious opposition to racism in all its forms. It aims to transcend a racialized global economic system, where black labor is intensely exploited and black peoples are devalued and stigmatized. And it is committed to anti-imperialism and decolonization, in particular to aggressive and sometimes revolutionary resistance to the colonial subjugation of the darker world by the white world, as Du Bois might have phrased it.

On all these points, I am largely in agreement with Robinson. The form of afro-analytical Marxism I would defend accepts and, I believe, can readily accommodate them. But let me now turn to some places where I depart from Robinson's conception of the black radical tradition.

### **A “Negation” of Western Civilization?**

The early parts of Robinson’s book are largely devoted to establishing that invidious race-thinking suffuses European civilization and that such racialism has been endemic to Western culture long before the birth of capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when capitalism did emerge, racialism permeated its development and social structures. For Robinson, this claim about European culture extends to Western philosophy itself, where even Aristotle is said to have “articulated an uncompromising racial construct” in his discussion of slavery.<sup>19</sup> In fact, a significant part of Robinson’s skepticism toward Marxism is that “at its epistemological substratum, Marxism is a Western construction—a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development that is emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples mediated, in turn, through their civilization, their social orders, and their cultures.”<sup>20</sup>

Black radicalism, on Robinson’s conception, is thus “a negation of Western civilization.”<sup>21</sup> He claimed that black radicalism cannot be, and should not be, understood as a black “variant” of Marxism. And he explicitly denied that Western theory could serve as a “foundation” for black radical thought. Western society, he admitted, had been the “location” and the occasion for its development. However, black radicalism is a “specifically African response” to modern European domination.

I certainly agree that black radicalism evolved through a confrontation with Western civilization and its mistreatment of Africans and peoples of African ancestry. It is a philosophy *born* of struggle. I see no need, though, to defend a black radicalism that insists on being marked off sharply from Western ideas and theory or that self-consciously avoids drawing on European traditions or thinkers. I consider myself—with some ambivalence—part of the Western intellectual tradition, as I think is also true of Du Bois, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, and many others whom Robinson cites as theorists in the black radical tradition.

Of course, no one should receive the Western tradition uncritically—or any tradition, for that matter. And when black radicals do draw on Western thinkers, they should submit

their work to close critical scrutiny. They should, where possible, appropriate these thinkers for the black struggle for freedom and justice, marrying their best ideas with the best of black thinking. There's no reason to believe that every philosophical framework that originates from Europe must function as a way of consolidating or expanding European exploitation of non-white peoples. Indeed, there are ideas in the Western tradition that are valuable for resisting and ultimately overcoming the twin evils of economic injustice and racial oppression. Here Martin Luther King, Jr's writings come to mind.<sup>22</sup>

Isn't it possible to critique and discard the racist and antiblack elements of Western culture and to preserve what is valuable in that tradition? Shouldn't we try to augment that tradition and contribute to developing it in a more justice-promoting direction? This seems obvious. But there are a few reasons why some black radicals might deny this possibility or, at least, refuse to act on it.

Some hold that Western civilization is irredeemably racist and so blacks should, where possible, evade its orbit of influence. Others insist that, to realize self-determination, blacks should build upon and rely largely on their own cultural materials as part of a collective project to fight for freedom and a common life on their own terms, independent of Western ideas and institutions. A possible third reason is that it is not always possible to reliably detect when racist elements are present in Western thought and culture, as these may be subtle or implicit. So, because of the reasonable fear that one might unwittingly incorporate a racist idea into one's thinking and practice, black people should avoid Western ideas (even seemingly "good" ones) whenever possible.

The first two reasons are familiar from the tradition of black nationalism. I won't address them here, as I've taken them up at length elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> The third is more relevant for our purposes. It is another example of the methodological anxiety that disturbs the sleep of many black thinkers. This skeptical stance is, I suspect, more a symptom of black oppression than a genuine epistemological quandary. I doubt that this anxiety can be entirely overcome as long as black peoples occupy a subordinate and stigmatized place in

the world. Only liberation and the rectification of longstanding wrongs could fully remedy it. But attempting to negate the influence of Western culture on our thinking is not only futile but unnecessary. And black radicalism cannot have the emancipatory potential we claim for it if it lacks the tools to reliably diagnose and excise racism wherever it exists.

In the end, Robinson cannot plausibly or consistently argue that Western civilization is simply the "location" for the development of black radicalism, as if the surrounding culture had no substantive impact on the consciousness of black radical resistance. The deployment of Christianity among black abolitionists and the messianic black nationalism of the nineteenth century clearly suggest otherwise.<sup>24</sup> Robinson himself says, "the evidence of the [black radical] tradition's persistence and ideological vitality among the Black slave masses was to be found not only in the rebellions and the underground but as well in the shouts, the spirituals, the sermons, and the very textual body of Black Christianity."<sup>25</sup> Now, if a syncretic "Black Christianity" can be part of the black radical tradition, I don't see why there couldn't also be a syncretic "afro-analytical Marxism."<sup>26</sup>

### **"The Negro," "the African," and Black Peoples**

Robinson regarded the early-modern European category "Negro" as an "invention," as an "ideological construct."<sup>27</sup> This construct, based on longstanding and self-serving myths, had three key features. Black Africans were viewed as so fundamentally different from white Europeans that they were treated as not fully human. Negroes were also viewed as a cheap labor resource that could be permissibly exploited because, so it was thought, they were not made worse off by subjecting them to grueling, unrewarding, and involuntary work. And, finally, Negroes (like the indigenous peoples of the Americas but unlike "civilized" Europeans) were regarded as "savages," as lacking the intelligence and temperament necessary for self-governance. This racial ideology, rooted in European culture, was used to justify enslaving and colonizing Africans.

Robinson operated with a distinction between “the Negro” and real Africans. But since there were and are various peoples in Africa—with different languages, customs, religions, and forms of political organization—how did Robinson justify speaking of “African people” as if they were a cohesive civilization capable of grounding the black radical tradition?

There is way of telling black history which treats the Middle Passage, and the African slave-trade more generally, as merely the capture, coerced movement, and commercial exchange of useful black bodies. Yet Robinson insisted that these “cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality.”<sup>28</sup> These black workers were not “deculturated” but managed to conserve crucial elements of their native consciousness and to reproduce key parts of their cultural heritage despite the racial domination and enslavement they endured. And it is on this foundation of “Africanity,” Robinson tells us, that black opposition to “racial capitalism” was built and sustained.<sup>29</sup> This conserved native African consciousness constitutes the raw materials of a black philosophy born of struggle—“the materials constructed from a shared philosophy developed in the African past and transmitted as culture, from which revolutionary consciousness was realized and the ideology of struggle formed.”<sup>30</sup>

However, as Cornel West has pointed out, Robinson gave us a mythical, romantic, homogenized conception of “Africanness.”<sup>31</sup> He never provided enough specificity to these African cultural resources that we might judge whether they are all that different from or preferable to European ones. Nor did Robinson precisely locate their origins in historical time or geographical space so that we might investigate these cultural resources for ourselves. Leonard Harris, largely in agreement with this assessment, has also objected that Robinson reified the category “African people” when he treated these extremely diverse populations as a cohesive historical subject with undifferentiated interests.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, war, conquest, ethnic conflict, social stratification, and economic exploitation were not unknown

in Africa before the Europeans came. And thus "Africanity" cannot play the epistemological grounding role that Robinson wanted it to serve.

To be sure, Robinson rightly pointed out how Europeans (and others) created the ideological construct of "the Negro," and this invention is not of African origin. However, there is an ever-present temptation to fall back on a variant of that degrading construct to establish a philosophical foundation for Pan-African solidarity. This is a powerful urge but must be resisted, as Anthony Appiah has counseled.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, Robinson succumbed to it, as have many others before and since the publication of *Black Marxism*.

Let me briefly sketch an alternative conception of the "black" in the "black radical tradition." We should think of global black peoples *themselves* as having been forged through struggle and resistance. Prior to the encounter with European imperialism, we were not there to be discovered as a distinct "black" people, though the ingredients were present. Blacks as a whole could not have been understood as a single Pan-African civilization or culture or people if not but for that very confrontation. "The Negro"—both as ideological construct and as a proud, self-conscious set of peoples—was created through this encounter. To suggest otherwise would be to reify the notion of race and to deny the immense cultural diversity of Africa.

We reject the ideological construct "the Negro"—a people with no past or civilization, without reason, morals or art, as all the same, as subhuman and savage, as merely useful tools for the enrichment of more "enlightened" peoples. But our *treatment* as "the Negro" has, over many generations, led us to become a set of related peoples with a rich and valuable array of diasporic cultures. We have also built, again over many generations, a sense of solidarity, which is rooted in our common experience of great and systemic injustice and our joint commitment to ultimately triumph over it.

African Americans in particular have a long-standing and inspiring tradition of political struggle. Sometimes we have relied on the traditions of our African ancestors, at



times without even knowing we were doing so. But just as often, we have taken the items we have found among our tormentors and crafted them into weapons of self-defense and instruments of emancipation, and sometimes into sources of meaning and joy. This is perhaps most evident in our musical traditions, where we have bent the instruments, techniques, and songs of European origin and turned them into audiovisual delights that are black-affirming, beautiful, and worthy of emulation in their own right—from the spirituals to hip hop.

Analytical philosophy—though often dull and needlessly abstract and technical—is, or at least could be, one of those found instruments, one of those corny songs that can be made into something black and funky. Charles Mills has already enlivened it with black humor and repartee. More is possible, I believe.

It is easier to trust ideas and methods that have been formed in the context of successful resistance to oppression. In this way one lessens the anxiety that one might be unwittingly in the grip of an ideology, duped by a set of beliefs that legitimizes and entrenches one's low social status and material disadvantage. This faith, if you will, is not rooted in an inherited shared identity nor in a common culture. It is rooted in meaningful forms of solidarity. It's the common objective of liberation and the mutual commitment through sacrifice, loyalty, and cooperation to realize that objective that is the basis of this faith. And this faith is strengthened through victories, large and small, that are achieved through collective struggle. One trusts the gods that have helped you to survive and that give you hope of victory over your oppressors.

### **Inherited Theory and Mass Movements**

No matter how these issues about the autonomy, provenance, or content of the black radical tradition are settled, the question remains: how should those who have inherited the tradition practically relate to it?

According to Robinson, the task and obligation of black radical thinkers is to rediscover, make explicit, preserve, and develop the essence of the black radical tradition.<sup>34</sup> The tradition makes its initial appearance in the consciousness and joint action of the revolutionary masses. The spontaneous aim of black resistance is to conserve the radical consciousness inherited from our African past, which has been transmitted down to us through cultural practices across the generations. Robinson imagines black radical intellectuals—perhaps after wandering awhile in the wilderness of Western radicalism—to be giving voice to the spirit of black resistance as embodied in this cultural heritage. These intellectuals are not so much setting out original basic principles, critiquing long-held though misguided ideas, or offering new theoretical frameworks. Their role is to articulate something that's already immanent or latent in generations of black resistance. Black radical thinkers didn't create the black radical tradition. They were created by it. Their responsibility is to communicate the ethos of the tradition publicly, to make black resistance more self-conscious of its aims and coherence.

A key thesis of Robinson's book is that the black masses of the past were disposed to be revolutionary and that a radical black intelligentsia was formed in response to mass action, rather than the other way around. But he goes further. The critique of Western civilization by black radical thinkers is said to be "grounded from below in the historical consciousness of the Black masses."<sup>35</sup> The idea is that black radical theorists' objections to Western society or traditional Marxism are derived from the consciousness of ordinary black folk engaged in active dissent. And the implication appears to be that any would-be black radical thinker should defer to the spontaneous actions of the black masses rather than to any theories of the black intelligentsia. Robinson is at pains to deny that black radical theory has any autonomy from mass struggle or black social movements.

I have several questions and concerns about this way of thinking about black radical theory. First, there is something fundamentally conservative about it. On this conception,

the “tradition” is not something the black intelligentsia is to interrogate or reevaluate. It is something that we, black inheritors of the tradition, are to honor and keep faith with. In this way, it refuses to take up the same self-critical attitude toward black radicalism that analytical Marxists take toward the theory and practice of Marxism.

No doubt, many powerful objections to Western society and to Marxism are drawn from first-hand experience with, or observations of, on-the-ground black resistance. But some are presumably based on black radical thinkers’ own critical reflection and independent study. Why not say instead that there should be a productive *interchange* between spontaneous resistance and radical theory, each strengthening the other? Otherwise, it’s unclear what it would mean to “develop” the tradition, as Robinson called for. In speaking of the development of a collective consciousness, was Robinson talking merely about the *spread* of a rediscovered political culture, or did he allow for its possible growth in depth and sophistication? In general, I am unsure how Robinson ultimately conceived of the dialectical relationship, if you will, between the rediscovered African consciousness and the ongoing struggle for freedom by Africans and the peoples of the African diaspora.

Robinson’s focus on the “rediscovery” of an old and venerable tradition can obscure the fact that traditions change in response to internal debate and altered sociohistorical circumstances. The leading thinkers in a tradition can sometimes adapt it so that it helps us better face new challenges. Moreover, one can strongly identify with a tradition and yet seek to alter core elements in that tradition in various ways with the hope of improving it. Think of how radical black feminists—Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and others—have developed frameworks for better understanding the complex relationship between race, class, and gender (or between racism, capitalism, and patriarchy).<sup>36</sup> And, importantly, one can identify with, and be the product of, more than one tradition—say, Marxism, liberalism, black nationalism, and feminism.

We cannot simply defer to and articulate the collective consciousness of spontaneous black resistance. For one thing, that consciousness is not sufficiently unified, stable, or

consistent to be the basis of theory building. We cannot defer to the black social movement, in part because there is generally more than one black resistance struggle going on at any one time, struggles with different aims, tactics, strategies, and diagnoses of black oppression. Think of the differences between the mainstream Civil Rights movement (led by organizations such as the SCLC and NAACP) and the Black Power movement. Or consider the wide variety of Black Power ideologies—from black capitalism to revolutionary black nationalism.<sup>37</sup> But more importantly, not every widely shared idea that emerged through common struggle and that might have been practically useful merits our endorsement after systematic reflection and careful study. Consider some varieties of black Christianity (prosperity gospel) and black Islam (Nation of Islam) that seem more a capitulation to racial capitalism than resistance to it.

I agree that black radical theorists should not operate as neutral observers, as if they were contemplating the True and the Good simply for the enlightenment it might bring. As engaged social critics, they must have some commitment to principles or ideals of justice. But they can draw on a particular tradition out of a sense of commitment without endorsing every social movement that identifies with that tradition. Even when one shares broad objectives with a movement, whether one should commit to the movement itself (as opposed to simply endorsing its goals) will depend on the degree to which that movement operates in accordance with sound political ethics, has reliable leadership, and exhibits sufficient fidelity to the ideals it professes. The history of communism should make plain the necessity for such independent judgments.

If Africana philosophers have a role to play in black freedom struggles, it cannot be simply to systematize black common sense, even as it draws wisdom and inspiration from it. Philosophers do sometimes play the role of popularizer or public intellectual. I have no objection to this. It has its value. But I would insist on the need to maintain a distinction between a philosopher and an ideologue. Philosophers are called, even fated, to think for themselves. They may change their minds because of dialectical exchange, but they cannot

simply defer their judgment to others on basic principles. Our primary task is to think through fundamental questions as carefully and critically as we can—yes in dialogue with others, yes always responsive to criticism. Yet we have to arrive at our own conclusions.

### **W. E. B. Du Bois: Afro-Analytical Marxist?**

Let me close with a few remarks about W. E. B. Du Bois. Just about everyone who identifies with the black radical tradition or with Africana philosophy claims Du Bois as an intellectual ancestor. In *Black Marxism*, Robinson treated him as an exemplar of the committed black radical intellectual.<sup>38</sup> I do not believe, however, that Du Bois fully fits the conception of black radicalism that Robinson articulated, particularly along the three dimensions I have highlighted—the tradition's relationship to Western Marxism, the "Africanity" of the tradition, and the relation of theory to practice.

Du Bois was, as Robinson noted, one of the first to draw attention to Marxism's race problem. In a 1933 *Crisis* article titled "Marxism and the Negro Problem," Du Bois praised Marx as a "genius" and gave a brief summary of Marx's social theory and political philosophy, including his theory of historical change.<sup>39</sup> Du Bois's primary concern, though, was to explain the limits of Marxism for understanding and solving what he would often call "the Negro problem."

Du Bois agreed that blacks suffered greatly because of the capitalist system. He also acknowledged that capitalists encourage and benefit from racism and ethnic conflict. But he insisted that white worker racism against black workers represented a serious problem of injustice in its own right. As he says, "It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions, expels him from decent houses and neighborhoods, and heaps upon him the public insults of open color discrimination."<sup>40</sup> White workers did have a sense of class consciousness and solidarity. It was just limited to workers who are white.

Du Bois maintained that because of capitalist imperial expansion and colonial subjugation, a global colored proletariat emerged. This increased capitalists' power by providing them with new raw materials and labor to exploit. Many from the white working class had been co-opted into this enterprise because they were given higher wages and managerial authority over the darker races. Many white workers also had dreams of personal wealth and took pride in their whiteness, with its elevated social status.

What all this means, according to Du Bois, was that workers of color could not meaningfully cooperate with white labor, for too many white workers were unwilling to sacrifice their relative advantages within the capitalist system. Interracial unity on equal terms was necessary if the working class was to successfully resist capital's dominion. But white working-class racism prevented such solidarity from flourishing. This analysis led him to maintain that black solidarity and black in-group self-help were still necessary. This much of Du Bois's outlook is perfectly consistent with Robinson's conception of black radicalism.

Yet Du Bois took a rather different approach to inherited theory and social movements. Although a fierce and tireless champion of black interests, Du Bois was an independent, eclectic, and cosmopolitan thinker.<sup>41</sup> He often went against the tide of black opinion and sometimes opposed popular black social movements, including the Garvey movement, which Robinson praised as a paradigm of black radical resistance.<sup>42</sup> No follower of the black masses, Du Bois attempted, through his various writings, to provide intellectual leadership for black peoples, often attempting to draw them away from ideals and political ethics that he regarded as reactionary, illiberal, inegalitarian, or undignified.<sup>43</sup>

In his 1940 book, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois developed the ideas merely sketched in "Marxism and the Negro Problem."<sup>44</sup> Here we find him criticizing a range of familiar black political ideas and modes of resistance but also drawing insights from Marxism and black radical thought. He weaves these insights together to defend what he regards as a new philosophy, which calls for a

black cooperative commonwealth that would provide in-group support in a racist world while also prefiguring democratic socialism.

The syncretic approach to black radicalism I've defended would likely strike Robinson as unduly Western and as insufficiently critical of narrow European (for example, "Kantian") conceptions of reason. To be sure, Du Bois was deeply critical of many aspects of Western society. He also had a deep attachment to Africa—consider his 1947 book *The World and Africa*—and he ultimately emigrated to Ghana, where he is buried. Yet he did not seek anything approaching the "negation" of Western civilization. Rather, throughout his long life, he frequently drew on and defended many ideas and practices of European origin, including Marxist theory and Western philosophy.

In "Marxism and the Negro Problem," Du Bois proclaimed, "There are certain books in the world which every searcher for truth must know." Two of the four books he mentions are the Bible and *The Origin of Species*. But the other two are by Western philosophers—Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Marx's *Capital*. And even as he sought to rework and discard aspects of traditional Marxist theory, Marx's writings continued to have a deep influence on his thought. Indeed, in the Foreword to *The World and Africa*, Du Bois said he regarded Marx as "the greatest of modern philosophers."<sup>45</sup>

Du Bois's role in advancing the fields of sociology, history, and Africana studies is now widely recognized. But his relation to the field of philosophy is not as well known. In June 1890, Du Bois earned his bachelor's degree, with honors, from Harvard in philosophy. In his last autobiography (published shortly after his death in 1963), Du Bois tells us "As an undergraduate, I had talked frankly with William James about teaching philosophy, my major subject. He discouraged me, [saying] there is 'not much chance for anyone earning a living as a philosopher.'"<sup>46</sup> Du Bois continues, "I knew by this time that practically my sole chance of earning a living combined with study was to teach, and after my work with [Albert Bushnell] Hart in United States history, I conceived the idea of applying philosophy to an historical interpretation of race relations."<sup>47</sup>

Although Du Bois ultimately chose sociology and history, and not philosophy, as his primary scholarly vocation, many of us who do Africana philosophy have drawn inspiration and learned much from his extraordinary writings and vast oeuvre. In many of his major works, one can easily discern a philosophical cast of mind, reflecting on the great human aspirations for Truth, Beauty, and Justice. The questions about the human condition that exercised Plato and Kant were also ones that preoccupied Du Bois.

As a philosopher and an Africana studies scholar, I am, in more ways than I can recount here, a Du Boisian. The questions he raised about race, racism, identity, class, self-respect, resistance, solidarity, and justice, these are also my questions. And his answers are often—though not always—my answers.<sup>48</sup> There is no thinker to whom I owe a more profound intellectual debt. Du Bois is, as Robinson noted, the preeminent black radical thinker. He is also an early exemplar of afro-analytical Marxism.<sup>49</sup>

### **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul C. Taylor, "A Future for Africana (Post-)Analytic Philosophy," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108 (2009): 501-517, 503.

<sup>2</sup> Tommie Shelby, "Reflections on Boxill's *Blacks and Social Justice*," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (Fall 2010): 343-353.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Harris, *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> See my "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (Fall 2002): 411-420; "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *Philosophical Forum* 34 (Summer 2003): 153-188; and "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism," *Du Bois Review* 11.1 (2014): 57-74.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Lewis Gordon, "African American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis Gordon and Jane Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 51-84.

<sup>6</sup> A representative sample of such writing can be found in John Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen, ed., *Analyzing Marxism: New Essays on Analytical Marxism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1989).



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<sup>7</sup> G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Expanded Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xvii-xxviii.

<sup>8</sup> There is a narrower sense of "analytical" that is sometimes associated with analytical Marxism. Some insist that social phenomena must be explained in terms of the micro-constituents and micro-processes that compose or underlie grosser social entities and processes. They reject "holism"—the idea that social phenomena obey laws that are not a function of the behavior of their constituent individuals. This narrower sense of "analytical" is thus committed to methodological individualism. The version of analytical Marxism that I would endorse is not committed to this methodological principle.

<sup>9</sup> For a superb history of the development of the field of black studies, see Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*. (University of California Press, 2012). Also see Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> "Marxism" was not Marx's preferred name for his philosophy and social theory. He and Frederick Engels (his longtime collaborator) called it "scientific socialism." This theory was built on historical materialism and a critical engagement with British political economy. He criticized classical (or "bourgeois") political economy but did not reject it altogether and built on what he took to be its best elements and insights. I take a similar position with respect to analytical philosophy and so-called positivist social science.

<sup>11</sup> See Tommie Shelby, "Marxism and the Critique of Moral Ideology," (PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Mills expresses a similar lament (though more vehemently) in *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), chap. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000.)

<sup>14</sup> Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Belknap Press, 2005), 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> I also have strong disagreements with Robinson's interpretation of Richard Wright, another key figure in the black radical tradition. See Tommie Shelby "Richard Wright: Realizing the Promise of the West," in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 413-438.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xxix.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen does acknowledge that a serious weakness in historical materialism is that it cannot adequately explain humans' deep need for social identity. His main examples are religion and nationalism. See G. A. Cohen, "Reconsidering Historical Materialism," *Nomos* 26 (1983): 227-251.

<sup>18</sup> The key to Robinson's somewhat unorthodox approach to racism is to notice that he thinks there was (and perhaps still is) "intra-European" racialism (e.g., between the English and the Irish) and so has an expansive conception of "race." This is consistent with Du Bois's "Conservation of Races" address, where he identifies four European "races": Slavs of Eastern Europe; Teutons of middle Europe; English of Great Britain and America; and the Romance nations of southern and western Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xxxi.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> See the collection *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). For a deep dive into the radical side of King's philosophy, see Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018). Also see Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (University of Pennsylvania, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> See my *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 311.

<sup>26</sup> Cornel West defends such a black radical Christianity in his *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 308-310.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 309.

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- <sup>31</sup> Cornel West, "Black Radicalism and the Marxist Tradition," *Monthly Review* 40 (1988): 51-56.
- <sup>32</sup> Leonard Harris, "Historical Subjects and Interests: Race, Class, and Conflict," in *The Year Left 2: Toward a Rainbow Socialism*, ed., Mike Davis, Manning Marable, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinkler (New York: Verso, 1986), 91-106.
- <sup>33</sup> For a detailed diagnosis of this tendency, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1993.)
- <sup>34</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 170-172.
- <sup>35</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 315.
- <sup>36</sup> See Claudia Jones, *Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Essays, and Poems*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies (Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2011); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage, 1983); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second edition (Routledge, 2000). Also see Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (UNC Press, 2017); and Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
- <sup>37</sup> See Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990); and Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, Third Edition (New York: Palgrave, 2007), chaps. 5-6.
- <sup>38</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 9.
- <sup>39</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," *The Crisis* (May 1933). Reprinted in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David L. Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), pp. 538-544.
- <sup>40</sup> Du Bois, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," 541.
- <sup>41</sup> See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- <sup>42</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 213-215.
- <sup>43</sup> See Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- <sup>44</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1984).
- <sup>45</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), ix.
- <sup>46</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 148.
- <sup>47</sup> Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 148.
- <sup>48</sup> My book *We Who Are Dark* owes more than its title to Du Bois. A similar thing could be said about my book *Dark Ghettos*, which engages debates—about racism, segregation, class, unemployment, the family, and urban crime—that Du Bois took up in *The Philadelphia Negro*. And "dark" was one of Du Bois's favorite and often used literary tropes.