

## 18: Richard Wright

### Realizing the Promise of the West

Tommie Shelby

The enormously influential and prolific American writer Richard Wright (1908–60) was born to sharecroppers, was largely self-taught, and grew up poor in the Jim Crow South (Mississippi and Memphis).<sup>1</sup> At the age of nineteen he moved to Chicago, where he worked as a postal clerk and insurance salesman but read voraciously and wrote poetry and short stories in his limited spare time. In 1933 Wright joined the Chicago branch of the John Reed Club (for which he served as executive secretary), a literary organization sponsored by the Communist Party, and soon after joined the party itself. In 1935 he was appointed to the Illinois Writers' Project, which allowed him more time to write and strengthen his craft. After deciding to pursue a literary career, Wright moved to New York City in 1937. He had an early triumph with his book of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938).<sup>2</sup> His fame, however, rests on two hugely successful books—his novel *Native Son* (1940)<sup>3</sup> and his memoir *Black Boy* (1945),<sup>4</sup> both Book of the Month Club selections. In 1944 Wright broke publicly with the Communist Party in “I Tried to Be a Communist,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1947 he and his family moved permanently to France, where he joined a lively left-wing intellectual community and wrote several more books. Wright died in Paris in 1960.

Wright had a first-rate analytical and independent mind. He was blessed with sociological imagination and uncanny psychological insight. During his early adulthood, he was politically active in the radical labor movement. Yet within the African American intellectual tradition he is primarily known as an author of fiction. In addition to *Native Son*, he published three other novels during his life-

1 For helpful accounts of Wright's life, see Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

2 Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, in *Richard Wright: Early Works* (1938; repr., New York: Library of America, 1991), 221–441. I discuss the moral and political significance of these stories in Tommie Shelby, “The Ethics of *Uncle Tom's Children*,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 513–32.

3 Wright, *Native Son*, in *Early Works*, 443–850, originally published in 1940.

4 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Richard Wright: Later Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 1–365. *Black Boy* originally published in 1945; *American Hunger* originally published in 1977.

time, *The Outsider* (1953),<sup>5</sup> *Savage Holiday* (1954),<sup>6</sup> and *The Long Dream* (1958).<sup>7</sup> *Lawd Today!*,<sup>8</sup> the first novel Wright completed (though he titled it “Cesspool”), wasn’t published until after his death. However, he also wrote a number of important though neglected nonfiction works, including *12 Million Black Voices* (1941),<sup>9</sup> *Black Power* (1954),<sup>10</sup> *The Color Curtain* (1956),<sup>11</sup> *White Man, Listen!* (1957),<sup>12</sup> and *Pagan Spain* (1957).<sup>13</sup>

The primary objective of this chapter is to offer a charitable reconstruction of Wright’s political thought that brings his worldview into focus, indicates key shifts in his thinking over time, and takes his thought seriously as social theory and political philosophy. I say “charitable” to distinguish my approach from commentary on Wright that is largely polemical—that seeks to deflate, debunk, dismiss, or otherwise criticize but without first rendering the target in its most compelling form.<sup>14</sup> Polemical commentary has its place, of course. However, my central aim is not to criticize Wright but to see what we might learn from him, which requires we consider his views in their best light. Moreover, I don’t interpret Wright’s thought through the lens of psychology or explain his ideas in terms some feature of his biographical background or social context.<sup>15</sup> The chapter should therefore be read as philosophical interpretation, not intellectual history. This kind of reconstruction, I hasten to add, need not be hagiographic. Nor is the point to “vindicate” a black thinker, to show Wright is worthy of study alongside, say, Hobbes, Rousseau, or Marx. And my interpretation of Wright, though sympathetic, should not be taken to suggest I agree with all his views, as will become clear in my concluding remarks.

Some commentators attempt to reconstruct Wright’s political thought relying

5 Wright, *The Outsider*, in *Later Works*, 367–841, originally published in 1953.

6 Wright, *Savage Holiday* (New York: Avon, 1954).

7 Wright, *The Long Dream* (1958; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

8 Wright, *Lawd Today!*, in *Early Works*, 1–219, originally published in 1963.

9 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941; repr., New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002).

10 Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, (1954; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 1–427.

11 Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, in *Black Power*, 429–609, originally published in 1956.

12 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, in *Black Power*, 631–812, originally published in 1957.

13 Wright, *Pagan Spain* (1957; repr., Jackson: Banner Books, 1995).

14 See, for example, Sherley Anne Williams, “Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 394–415; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast,” in *Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 173–190.

15 See, for example, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 80–85; and Nina Kressner Cobb, “Richard Wright and the Third World,” in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 228–39.

primarily on his fiction, even sometimes treating his characters as mouthpieces for Wright's political and social-theoretic views.<sup>16</sup> My reconstruction is based largely (though not exclusively) on his nonfiction. I'm reluctant to rest my interpretation of Wright's political thought on his fiction alone, and not solely for the reason that I am a political philosopher and not a literary critic. Certainly political themes and ideas are taken up, sometimes at considerable length, in his novels and short stories. For example, Wright's fictional characters often give long politico-philosophical speeches, dense with theoretical claims. There is the famous courtroom speech given by Bigger Thomas's attorney Boris Max in *Native Son*. There is also Cross Damon's speech to the communist Blimin in *The Outsider* and Tyree Tucker's speech to the lawyer McWilliams in *The Long Dream*. One can't deny aspects of Wright's political perspective are to be found in such works. But a novel, while sometimes presupposing or suggesting theoretical claims, is not a sustained political argument. Though we can sometimes extract a political vision or social critique by reading between the lines (as I will attempt below), we cannot simply assume these fictional characters speak for Wright.

In fact, in his early literary manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright counseled black writers to avoid reducing art to politics.<sup>17</sup> Though a social-theoretic "perspective" should inform their work, black writers, he insisted, should not use their writing to convert the masses to a political ideology. The writer is not a preacher, teacher, or politician. The writer should not be a mouthpiece for a political organization. The autonomous craft of writing defines the writer's vocation. Writers are not simply to depict reality (as if they were social scientists or journalists) but must use their own imagination and feeling in the production of art.

Through his nonfiction Wright offers a clear, fresh, mostly coherent, and highly controversial political perspective. While he was a relentless and perceptive critic of Western civilization and European imperialism, he was also a staunch defender of many Western ideals. He believed Western peoples have committed unspeakable crimes, particularly against peoples not considered "white." Yet the problems the West has bequeathed to us can be solved only by Western ideas and practices. "The West," for Wright, is a set of ideals not yet realized (not even in the Western world) but *worth* realizing.

Wright's general political outlook, I show, rests on an underlying theory of historical development. He viewed history as progressive—as a long story of

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), chap. 11; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 5; and Louis Menand, "Richard Wright: The Hammer and the Nail," in his *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 76–90.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (1937; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1997), 36–49.

humanity's struggle to control both the external environment and the psychological forces within, bringing them under the control of reason, which has its highest expression in science and industrialization. This theory of history, as one might expect, draws on Marxism. But it owes just as much to Enlightenment ideals, Max Weber's theory of modernity, the Chicago school of sociology, and Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>18</sup>

Wright is more astute and profound when diagnosing social ills or identifying obstacles to human flourishing than he is when explaining the core dimensions of the good society or charting a feasible path to such a society. He didn't develop a systematic normative political philosophy. He did, however, have some core moral convictions, including a conception of the good life, and these convictions structured his political opinions. The underlying ideal he was committed to is of a free, secular, and rational world of equals. Wright considered himself to be perceptive and intuitive but also a man of science and an uncompromising rationalist. He regarded religious faith and race thinking not only as superstitions, myths, and mass delusions but also as dangerous forms of ideology that foster irrationality, domination, exploitation, and violence. They must, he believed, eventually both be swept away if a just cosmopolitan global order is to be realized.

To support this interpretation of Wright, my discussion is broken into four parts. The first considers Wright's theory of the condition and emancipation of African Americans in the United States. The second amplifies the first through a brief look at *Native Son*. The third part examines his account of African and Asian decolonization. And the fourth segment outlines the moral perspective that undergirds Wright's prescriptions. In each part, attention is given to Wright's views on the nature of racism, his conception of Western modernity, and his theory of the psychological consequences of racial domination. I also take up his engagement with Marxism, black nationalism, and liberalism, situating his thought with respect to these well-known traditions.

### The Negro in America

The most developed theoretical treatment of the history and condition of African Americans in Wright's nonfiction work is *12 Million Black Voices*. In his review of the book, Horace Cayton says it is "more than just description; it is a philosophy of the history of the Negro in America and a frame of reference for the study of Negro-white relations in this country."<sup>19</sup> The book charts a path from slavery to the doorstep of freedom. As it is key to understanding Wright's early political thought, I briefly sketch the book's main argument.

<sup>18</sup> See George E. Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago: Third World, 1972), 76–97; Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *Black American Literature* 12 (1985): 25–43.

<sup>19</sup> Horace Cayton, "Wright's New Book More than a Study of Social Status," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1941.

According to Wright, black peoples of the West were created by slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, “a weird and paradoxical birth.”<sup>20</sup> The slave trade and Middle Passage constituted a kind of spiritual death, destroying the African tribal identities of the enslaved. White colonialists, and in particular the white landholding class (whom Wright calls “Lords of the Land”), were caught in an irreconcilable contradiction between their commitment to liberty and their practice of slavery. Yet landowners were progressive insofar as they were leaving much of feudalism behind (particularly superstition and social rank by birth) and embracing Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, and technology.

Wright explains that slave traders and slaveholders were motivated by profit and the need to secure labor for the production of cash crops for a global market. Racial ideology and Christian dogma were used to justify this bondage and to pit the white poor against black slaves.<sup>21</sup> Black-white relations were subsequently shaped by white paternalism and white cruelty, which are both a living cultural legacy of slavery and its ideology.<sup>22</sup> But growth in technology (the industrializing force that is machine-based production), aided by land made infertile by over-use, would ultimately destroy the world of slavery and scatter black folk across the nation, mostly to growing cities.<sup>23</sup> Enter the “Bosses of the Buildings,” the Northern finance capitalists and industrialists. Their mode of production was at odds with the Lords of the Land. Thus it was inevitable that these two worlds (the “world of machines” and the “world of slaves”) and these two elite classes (Bosses of the Buildings and Lords of the Land) would find themselves in conflict. Though these white elites clashed, they were in accord that blacks must either emigrate or remain subordinate. Neither group was willing to accept blacks as equal citizens in the United States.

Wright emphasizes the degrading sociopsychological consequences for blacks living under Jim Crow. For example, he laments the necessity to perform servility for fear of violent reprisal and the need to guide one’s conduct by anticipating what whites will find acceptable and nonthreatening.<sup>24</sup> These imperatives created an undignified culture of dissembling.<sup>25</sup> To openly protest was to court torture, then death, usually at the hands of poor whites, who generally accepted the ideology of white supremacy. Fear of the white mob and reluctance to retaliate engender self-loathing and recrimination among blacks.<sup>26</sup> Under these oppressive conditions, black religion functions primarily as comfort, hope, and escape. It also softens resentment and indignation and eases psychological pain.<sup>27</sup>

20 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 12.

21 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 16–17, 24–25.

22 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 18, 49.

23 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 25.

24 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 35.

25 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 41–43.

26 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 46–47.

27 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 67–73. These consequences of oppression under the Southern segregation regime are vividly dramatized in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *The Long Dream*.

Within the racialized class structure of postslavery US society, there were actually three classes of whites—landowners, bankers and industrialists, and poor white workers.<sup>28</sup> The masses of blacks had to compete with white workers to survive. Economic and political powerlessness made blacks vulnerable to exploitation from southern landowners. White landowners persuaded poor whites that they were a part of a great white race destined to rule over darker mankind, thus undermining interracial working-class unity and leaving both black and white workers poor and exploited.<sup>29</sup>

Technology in agriculture made sharecropping obsolete and created the day laborer and the migrant worker.<sup>30</sup> The Great Migration (after World War I) was spurred by the demand for labor in the North, supplemented by the black press's characterization of the North as a land of promise.<sup>31</sup> But the black migrants weren't ready for city life in the North.<sup>32</sup> Their families were weak. They still relied heavily on religious ritual and superstition. They had no wealth or property to speak of. They had limited understanding of modern commercial life with its unforgiving, cold cash nexus. The speed and ethnic diversity of city life were alien. They had no experience with political or civic organizations besides churches and burial societies. Their personalities had been distorted by decades of bondage and backward racialized feudal norms, making them ignorant, naive, and fearful of whites.

Poor European immigrants were able to adapt to urban social organization and to achieve some limited upward mobility. But blacks from the South were not. Wright gives a complex two-part explanation for this. First, with limited skills, black migrants were restricted to manual labor and domestic work with no possibility for advancement. White immigrants had skills appropriate for the industrial age. Vocational and professional schools refused to train blacks in the higher skills and trades. White workers wouldn't allow blacks to join their unions, wanted to keep the best-paid work for themselves, yet hated blacks for being strikebreakers and lowering white wages. In addition to being paid low wages, black workers were forced to do the heaviest, dirtiest, and most dangerous work.<sup>33</sup> This conflict between white and black workers was to the advantage of their employers, and thus they encouraged and exploited the antagonism.<sup>34</sup>

Second, whites refused to live among blacks, creating complex forms of residential segregation in ghettos. The Bosses of the Buildings instigated and profited from white racism in the housing market. Wright focused on the urban "kitchen-

28 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 35.

29 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 46–47.

30 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 79.

31 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 86–87.

32 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 93–100.

33 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 118.

34 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 119.

ette” to explain the housing situation of new black migrants. A kitchenette is a one-room apartment with a small gas stove and single sink. Kitchenettes were created by carving up a larger apartment previously inhabited by white families. Those living in a kitchenette shared a bathroom with several other residents. These overpriced and overcrowded apartments were, in Wright’s words, “our prison, our death sentence without trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.”<sup>35</sup> The kitchenette breeds and fosters disease. It invites crime. It destroys families. The concentration of the disadvantaged and the discontent caused conflict and violence.

The “kitchenette” described with such verve and lyricism in *12 Million Black Voices* also serves as a metaphor for racial oppression. Indeed Wright opens *Native Son* with a scene in a cramped kitchenette, where Bigger kills a defiant “huge black rat” and his mother prophesies that Bigger will meet his fate at “the gallows.”<sup>36</sup> As foreshadowed in this scene, the novel ends with Bigger in jail awaiting his execution. In America the kitchenette and the jail cell serve essentially the same function—they are instruments of oppression used to isolate and contain a subjugated group and, often, to torture and kill its expendable members.

Those few blacks with resources to buy their own homes faced discrimination and hostility from white homeowners and neighbors. When blacks did manage to move into white neighborhoods, the whites abandoned their homes, which were then sold to blacks by capitalists at exploitative prices. Restrictive covenants were created in white neighborhoods to keep blacks out, forcing most blacks to reside in racially segregated and deeply disadvantaged neighborhoods. In these restricted black areas, schools were inadequately funded and public services were substandard.

Despite these many constraints and obstacles, black men underwent a modernizing acculturation through industrial labor: “But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. It is when we are handling picks rather than mops, it is when we are swinging hammers rather than brooms, it is when we are pushing levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization.”<sup>37</sup> However, black women, restricted as they were to domestic work, tended to be further removed from a modern outlook and way of life. As Wright remarks, “More than even that of the American Indian, the consciousness of vast sections of our black women lies beyond the boundaries of the modern world, though they live and work in that world daily.”<sup>38</sup> Black women were also, Wright claimed, more attached to the church, as it was one of the few arenas available to

35 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 106.

36 Wright, *Native Son*, 447–55.

37 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 117.

38 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 135.

them for self-expression and emotional release. Black women were more severely oppressed than black men, as sexism, along with racism and class exploitation, left them “triple anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts.”<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding this bleak diagnosis of the black condition in America, Wright did not embrace black nationalism. He did not endorse the program of self-determination in a sovereign territory within the American South, as many of his communist comrades, like Harry Haywood, advocated.<sup>40</sup> He accepted neither solidarity among the “darker races” of the world as a united front against global white supremacy nor socioeconomic cooperation between the black elite and the black working class, two positions W. E. B. Du Bois had defended.<sup>41</sup> Wright also rejected Marcus Garvey’s “Back-to-Africa” scheme, which Wright regarded as embodying a “totally racialistic outlook.”<sup>42</sup> The goal of building a black nation-state in Africa was not feasible, both because Africa was in the tight grip of European colonial powers and because there was an unbridgeable cultural divide between blacks of the Diaspora (who are Western, modern, proletarian) and those on the African continent (who are pagan, primitive, peasants).

Wright was well aware the black masses were sometimes attracted to black nationalist ideas.<sup>43</sup> But he maintained that black people’s distinctive and largely separate way of life was not freely chosen but a response to white supremacy and Jim Crow. Blacks don’t want to live separately, but they don’t want to submit to white power either. So they have built up institutions to enable their survival and to allow outlets for self-expression. While black life and institutions were in many ways inadequate and truncated, black progress had to be sought through them. Wright didn’t think black intellectuals should embrace black nationalism, though. They had to understand it and to some extent participate in its practices. But the goal is to *transform* nationalist thinking and practice into revolutionary thought and militant collective action. Black nationalism is, at best, a necessary starting point (and a deeply flawed one).<sup>44</sup>

Wright was convinced the Great Depression had created new opportunities for

39 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 131.

40 Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (Chicago: Liberator, 1976).

41 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984).

42 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 273.

43 Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 100–101.

44 This interpretation of Wright’s engagement with black nationalism differs from that offered in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 11. Robinson describes Wright’s intellectual journey as one that “took him from Marxism, and through Existentialism, and finally to Black nationalism” (289). He sees Wright as ultimately committed to revolutionary black nationalism, a synthesis of Marxism and black nationalism. As a reading of Wright’s “Blueprint” essay, Robinson’s interpretation has some textual basis (though even in that early essay Wright speaks of black nationalism as something to be “transcended”), but it doesn’t fit Wright’s later writings, not even *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945).

interracial working-class unity. Slowly, white and black workers were coming to see their common interests. White workers had been rendered destitute, and their only hope against the capitalist classes was to admit blacks to their unions and labor organizations, which they ultimately did. Black workers came to overcome their fear of white capitalists, standing up to them in defiance, and became more trusting of white workers. The key to this change was the modernizing force of industrial life, which caused the withering away of a backward feudal culture: “In this way we encountered for the first time in our lives the full effect of those forces that tended to reshape our folk consciousness, and a few of us stepped forth and accepted within the confines of our personalities the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free.”<sup>45</sup> Blacks had to travel the path of Western civilization—from a primitive semifeudal existence to modern industrial life—but with tremendous speed and, tragically, through force.<sup>46</sup> Having become agents of “conscious history,” the black masses were ready to take their place alongside white workers in the collective project of creating a shared life on American soil on terms of freedom and equality.

Sometime during the early 1940s, however, Wright soured on the Communist Party, a disillusionment described in detail in the second part of his memoir *Black Boy* (which was published in full only after his death). Initially he seems to have seen his vocation as a revolutionary artist who would help the communists understand the inner life of common black folk, teach his comrades to speak a language the black masses could relate to, and build trust among black people in the communists’ program.<sup>47</sup> The “glory” of communism, its greatest virtue, is its welding of diverse peoples, across lines of race and nationality, into a unified revolutionary force.<sup>48</sup> But where there is solidarity, there is the ever-present threat of betrayal—the worry that a would-be comrade is actually a traitor to the cause. And the communists did not have the wisdom to distinguish friend from foe. This ignorance and suspicion, combined with intolerance for independent thinking and fear of new ideas, was the “horror” of party life, and Wright found it unbearable, in part because he was frequently its victim.

The Marxist theory of history, with its emphasis on the explanatory power of material conditions, got many things right. But, so Wright thought, it failed to appreciate the sociopsychological dimensions of historical development. The labor movement mistakenly regarded the Negro problem as simply one of economic exploitation and class conflict. But there are racial and cultural dimensions to this problem, and there are dimensions to the problem that are peculiar to the American context. In the introductory essay to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s *Black*

45 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 144.

46 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 145.

47 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 305–6.

48 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 356–57.

*Metropolis*, Wright claimed that America is divided by “a war of impulses.”<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, it is committed to reason and freedom as universal values, but on the other hand, it is committed to an irrational belief in white domination over “inferior” peoples. These two impulses cannot be reconciled. The ideology of black inferiority, invented to justify slavery and segregation in a world where each individual is supposed to have inherent dignity, cannot do the job. This is Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* argument, which *Black Metropolis* is said to endorse and supplement.<sup>50</sup>

The break with the feudal order was caused by secularization and industrialization, which all but destroyed traditional kinship bonds and religious worldviews. There resulted a deep loss of meaning and purpose in life, causing many to still cling to the obsolete and irrational values of the feudal past, giving rise to a second war of impulses. In other words, Americans were divided within themselves because the meaning of their lives (including its emotional resonance) is rooted in the bygone era of feudalism, which has been crushed under the iron wheels of modern industrialization. This “emotional void” theory is, I believe, an attempt to integrate Weber’s story of modern alienation and disenchantment with Marx’s historical materialism.

Blacks who migrated to urban centers in search of opportunity initially retained the old hope for freedom. But what happens when they discover the freedom they seek cannot be realized in a racist capitalist society? Their frustration, their “hopeless hope” as Wright calls it, will be exploited by fascists and communists or find release in alienated violent rebellion.<sup>51</sup> Wright insisted whites do not understand the realities of Negro life and certainly don’t grasp the inner workings of the black mind (which is shaped by repression and its symptoms), and so they will be surprised by blacks’ violent responses to their plight, even as riots are already happening.

Ultimately, Wright decided to leave the United States and to make his home in France. In the revealing essay “I Choose Exile” (written for the magazine *Ebony* but never published), he explained the reasons behind his decision to emigrate.<sup>52</sup> The essay is not only a Dear John letter to America but also a *lettre d’amore* to European liberalism. He admits he desires to escape American racism and segregation, but his main reason for exiting the American scene is that Europeans value the individual above money and respect individual liberty. He complains that in America the capitalist ethos dominates the whole of life, marginalizing all other motives and ways of living; and despite the country’s high-minded constitutional principles, it does not respect freedom or tolerate difference. The essay strikes a

49 Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Hartcourt, Brace, 1945), xxix.

50 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxix.

51 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxvi.

52 Wright, “I Choose Exile” (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

pessimistic, even defeatist, note about the future of blacks in America: “My first week in Paris taught me that the fight I had made back home for Negro rights was right, but somehow futile. The deep contrast between French and American racial attitudes demonstrated that it was barbarousness that incited such militant racism in white Americans.”

### ***Native Son* and the Meaning of “Bigger”**

Can *Native Son* shed light on Wright’s political thought? In particular, how much (if any) of Max’s notoriously long courtroom speech can be attributed to Wright?<sup>53</sup> What is the political significance of Wright’s most famous literary character? These are difficult questions that have only controversial answers, and I won’t attempt a comprehensive account of the political lessons of *Native Son*. But given the high place of that novel in black letters and American literature more broadly, some discussion is apt.

First, it’s worth noting that many of Max’s claims in his courtroom oration can be found in some of Wright’s nonfiction works. For example, Max declares his courtroom plea to have significance for the future of the nation as a whole, not just for Bigger or the black people.<sup>54</sup> Bigger is a symbol for a complex set of social forces, a social pathology at the heart of US life.<sup>55</sup> Wright repeats such claims in his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, where he asserts, “There is a problem facing us, a bigger one than even that of the Negro, a problem of which the Negro problem is a small but a highly symbolically important part.”<sup>56</sup> Max also explicitly endorses Wright’s explanation of the fall of slavery in *12 Million Black Voices*: “The invention and widespread use of machines made the further direct enslavement of men economically impossible, and so slavery ended.”<sup>57</sup> And Max does not depart from Wright’s views when he suggests that because of repression of resentment and loss of hope, more violence of the sort Bigger committed can be expected, and if drastic measures aren’t taken immediately, mass violence will erupt that will threaten Western civilization itself.<sup>58</sup> Where Max’s argument supports statements Wright makes in his own voice elsewhere, we have some reason to attribute these arguments to Wright himself.

Second, there is of course Bigger Thomas, the main character of the novel, who also expresses, in his own way, positions Wright defends elsewhere. For instance, one cannot fail to notice that Bigger’s attitudes toward religion can be found in Wright’s nonfiction work. There are several striking scenes about Christianity to

53 See Wright, *Native Son*, 803–26.

54 Wright, *Native Son*, 803.

55 Wright, *Native Son*, 804.

56 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxi.

57 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 810.

58 See Wright, *Native Son*, 823.

be found in *Native Son*. Despite facing the death penalty and his mother's desperate pleas for him to turn to the Lord, Bigger denies God's existence, the efficacy of prayer, and a life after death.<sup>59</sup> When Max asks Bigger why he didn't seek a sense of "home" in black churches, he replies, "I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn't want that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us."<sup>60</sup> In another scene Bigger symbolically rejects the call of the gospel by angrily throwing away, three times, a necklace with a cross charm.<sup>61</sup> And if the point wasn't already clear, Bigger tosses hot coffee in the face of a priest who had come to pray with him after he'd been sentenced to death, and as a result of this aggressive act, feels a sense of self-worth for having refused "the consolations of religion."<sup>62</sup>

Less than two weeks after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright delivered a lecture at Columbia University titled "How 'Bigger' Was Born," which was included as an essay in subsequent printings of the novel.<sup>63</sup> Wright explains that Bigger Thomas represented a personality type he knew well from his time growing up in Mississippi and his early adult life in Chicago. There are, he insists, millions of "Biggers," some black, some white. To give a concrete sense of the type he has in mind, Wright describes five Biggers he had known. Biggers are "bad," violent, unremorseful, and full of resentment; their violence can be directed toward the oppressor or the oppressed (consider Bigger's murder of Bessie). Refusing to live without the things the privileged possess, Biggers take what they want without regard for whether their actions are right or wrong. They are not afraid of conflict, not even violent confrontation, and are prepared to risk their lives to satisfy their desires. Biggers are eager to break the rules and willing to suffer the consequences. But they are also, Wright notes, prone to depression and mental illness. And their lives typically come to a violent end. Despite this grim characterization, Wright confesses he identifies with the Bigger type<sup>64</sup> and secretly desires to act like a Bigger but is too timid to do so.<sup>65</sup> And, importantly, he claims the only acts of rebellion he ever saw from blacks in the South were carried out by Biggers.<sup>66</sup>

Wright is concerned to explain that Biggers are not naturally "bad" but are creatures of their environment.<sup>67</sup> They live in a segregated world, deprived of political and economic power and humiliated by Jim Crow prohibitions and taboos. They are not permitted to acquire a decent education and are prevented from occupying good jobs or honorable public roles. A reigning ideology of white

59 Wright, *Native Son*, 724–26, 778–79.

60 Wright, *Native Son*, 778.

61 Wright, *Native Son*, 760–63.

62 Wright, *Native Son*, 839.

63 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in *Early Works*, 851–81.

64 Wright, *Native Son*, 874.

65 Wright, *Native Son*, 855.

66 Wright, *Native Son*, 859.

67 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 857–59.

supremacy is used against them to justify retaliation for breaking the regime's rules. All these practices are instruments for keeping blacks "in their place"—subordinated to whites. Some blacks adapted to these oppressive circumstances through religion. However, the Biggers, having rejected the "compensatory nourishment" of religion and frustrated at being denied the benefits of modern industrial life, could only revolt.

Max also voices this point of view in his courtroom defense of Thomas. He explains that hate and fear have been molded into Bigger's consciousness by white civilization. In search of some way to express these emotions, he and others like him are in a constant state of spontaneous protest, even rebellion.<sup>68</sup> He insists that killing a person like Bigger will not make whites any safer or stamp out the way of life he represents. Killing Bigger or others like him will only tighten the grip of oppression, unleashing an even longer and less controllable violent response.<sup>69</sup> Max argues that religion, gambling, and sex function as truncated modes of escape from the crushing force of oppression, redirecting rebellious energy. Otherwise there would be many more like Bigger.<sup>70</sup> A refrain in the speech is that the oppressed resent that their interests are treated as unimportant and that they are denied opportunities others have to pursue their ambitions. The memorable phrase used is "the resentful millions."<sup>71</sup>

The plot of *Native Son*, according to Wright, is simply the story of what made Bigger who he is and the significance of his social type.<sup>72</sup> He insists, "From start to finish, [*Native Son*] was Bigger's story, Bigger's fear, Bigger's flight, and Bigger's fate that I tried to depict."<sup>73</sup> But Wright wouldn't have gone to the trouble to write Bigger's story if the character were not "a meaningful and prophetic symbol."<sup>74</sup> Wright tells us, "I am not saying that I heard any talk of revolution in the South when I was a kid there. But I did hear the lispings, the whispers, the mutters which some day, under one stimulus or another, will surely grow into open revolt unless the conditions which produce Bigger Thomases are changed."<sup>75</sup>

Surprisingly, Wright says almost nothing in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" about the character Max. He mentions that "the lawyer's speech" and Max's presence in Bigger's cell at the end of the novel were examples of his showing what others thought of Bigger.<sup>76</sup> Yet he maintains, "Throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger's."<sup>77</sup> However, I don't see how Wright can show the symbolic meaning of

68 Wright, *Native Son*, 821.

69 Wright, *Native Son*, 812–13.

70 Wright, *Native Son*, 815.

71 Wright, *Native Son*, 826.

72 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 874.

73 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 878.

74 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 860.

75 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 864.

76 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 878, 880.

77 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 879.

Bigger, his broader political significance, if limited to only Bigger's standpoint. Bigger is inarticulate and grasps his situation only dimly and intuitively. He certainly doesn't understand the broader historical significance of his "type." Moreover, Wright claims that he became aware of Bigger's symbolic significance only after he was familiar with the labor movement and its philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Bigger doesn't join the labor movement (despite Jan's attempt to recruit him) and doesn't understand its program, so he can't express its point of view. In fact, Bigger doesn't even comprehend Max's speech, though "he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max's voice."<sup>79</sup> There is the omniscient voice of *Native Son's* narrator, who is able to survey Bigger's inner life. But to rely exclusively on the narrator to tell rather than show would not make for compelling art. So it seems that Max is absolutely critical to the fulfillment of Wright's stated literary ambitions.

If Wright's political philosophy can be discerned through a reading of *Native Son*, it can be discovered only through an examination of both Bigger and Max and, crucially, of the interplay between them. Indeed the speech Max gives must be understood in light of his prior prison cell conversation with Bigger.<sup>80</sup> Max puts a battery of questions to Bigger, listens carefully to Bigger's responses, and promises to tell the judge how Bigger feels and why he feels that way.<sup>81</sup> His speech draws heavily from what Bigger says (though it goes far beyond Bigger's remarks). Moreover, Bigger feels strongly that Max was really listening to him and understood his feelings: "He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max's asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before."<sup>82</sup> As a result of this conversation, Bigger comes to have a "new sense of the value of himself."<sup>83</sup> We might therefore be able to glean Wright's political outlook from Bigger's emerging higher consciousness and Max's social theory. Between the two, we get an account of individual self-affirmation and freedom through justified rebellion (from Bigger) and a theory of modern social development and its sociopsychological consequences (from Max).

### Colonialism and Its Consequences

By the time Wright composed *Black Power* (a travel-writing treatment of Nkrumah's Ghana during the country's revolutionary period), his break from communism would appear to have been complete. He says there that he rejects the

78 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 860.

79 Wright, *Native Son*, 826.

80 Wright, *Native Son*, 767–81.

81 Wright, *Native Son*, 780.

82 Wright, *Native Son*, 782.

83 Wright, *Native Son*, 783.

aims of communism because communism does not respect individual freedom.<sup>84</sup> Communism, at its best, is the realization of Western ideals, particularly its ideals of justice, which the Western world has mostly abandoned and never consistently practiced.<sup>85</sup> But communism too often devolves into nothing more than the will to power. He continues to use Marxist analysis to interpret modern history and Africa's place within it, but he no longer wants to be understood as endorsing Marxist practical philosophy.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, as with his treatment of the Negro in America in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright takes up the condition of colonized peoples of the "Third World" against the background of a theory of history of broadly Marxist provenance.<sup>87</sup>

For Wright, colonialism is, in essence, about maintaining labor discipline, resource extraction, and keeping the native population economically dependent on European powers: "a colony, therefore, became a vast geographical prison whose inmates were presumably sentenced for all time to suffer the exploitation of their human, agricultural, and mineral resources."<sup>88</sup> And as with the subjugation of blacks in America, colonialism in Africa and Asia also brings in its wake far-reaching cultural and psychological consequences.

For instance, in *White Man, Listen!* Wright insists that "white Western Christian civilization" destroyed the traditional cultures of African and Asian peoples, a social transformation to which these peoples are struggling to adjust.<sup>89</sup> European imperial encroachments in Africa and Asia created a "spiritual void" in the lives of the people, a deep and passionate longing for meaning.<sup>90</sup> Imperialism is not only labor exploitation and theft of resources and land; it also robs the natives of the meaning-making beliefs and practices that they have long relied on to make sense of their lives.

Europeans justified their domination over Africans and Asians with racist ideology, thereby fostering irrational racial consciousness among these peoples. Wright claims to know that from a scientific point of view there are no races.<sup>91</sup>

84 Wright, *Black Power*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 9–10.

85 Wright, *Black Power*, 10–11.

86 Wright, *Black Power*, 12.

87 I agree with John Reilly's statement that "in his non-fiction beginning with *Black Power* and continuing through *The Color Curtain* and *White Man, Listen!* Richard Wright undertook an adaptation of conventions that eventually converted journalism into a vehicle for a theory of contemporary reality inspired by a vision of a new people entering history." See John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-fiction: Stepping Out on the Stage of the World," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 416. But I do not accept Reilly's claim that the method Wright relies on in these works is autobiography, as the basic elements of historical materialism continue to be salient.

88 Wright, *Black Power*, 27.

89 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 651–53.

90 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 688–91.

91 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

Biology is not what matters, though. Talk of “the white man” has meaning only “from a historical or sociological point of view.”<sup>92</sup> “Race” is an issue for Asian and African peoples because some Europeans stake their claim to colored peoples’ resources, land, and labor on the superiority of “whiteness.”<sup>93</sup>

In *The Color Curtain* (a quasi-journalistic report on the 1955 African–Asian unity conference in Bandung), Wright provides a brief but fascinating discussion of the consequences of racism.<sup>94</sup> It begins with an anecdote about how an Indonesian official, noticing that Wright was black, gave him preference over a white journalist when issuing press passes. Wright insists that this was “racism” and compares it to the Jim Crow prejudice that he had experienced in the American South. He found it disturbing and “loathsome,” even “evil.” But his point here was not to condemn or excuse it. He was interested in how easy it is to adopt racism or tacitly accept it when one is advantaged by it. And he worried that if nonwhite nations embraced it uncritically, they would become a menacing force in the world.

He also emphasizes that whites had created racism as an instrument of subjugation, and Asians and Africans learned it from their oppressors. He expects Asians and Africans—particularly the uneducated and fearful among them—to practice racism against whites. Europeans initiated racial consciousness, a socio-psychological process several centuries old. It presently constitutes a tradition in its own right. And the fact that many whites now reject or regret it will not make it disappear.<sup>95</sup>

In a Freudian twist to the usual Marxist-Leninist story of modern imperialism, Wright claims that Europeans, freed of the restraining force of tradition, were in search of a place where they could feed their repressed libidinal desires. They found this in Africa and Asia: “Living in a waking dream, generations of emotionally impoverished colonial European whites wallowed in the quick gratification of greed, reveled in the cheap superiority of racial domination, slaked their sensual thirst in illicit sexuality, draining off the damned-up libido that European morality had condemned, amassing through trade a vast reservoir of economic fat, thereby establishing vast accumulations of capital which spurred the industrialization of the West.”<sup>96</sup> And yet when modern Western man looks at Africa, he also sees himself—and he hates what he sees.<sup>97</sup> This self-loathing, this sense of inferiority, a projection of his soul onto Africa, makes him want to destroy the continent as personal vindication.

However, Wright’s most insightful (if speculative) and extended commentary

92 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

93 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

94 Wright, *The Color Curtain*, in *Black Power*, 519–21.

95 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 521.

96 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 654–55.

97 Wright, *Black Power*, 197.

on the condition of Africans and Asians concerns how the combination of racism and colonialism affected the psychology of the oppressed. He claims that non-white peoples are often ashamed of physical features that make them look different from whites—especially their skin color and hair texture—and they are ashamed of the fact that they are ashamed.<sup>98</sup> Colored nations also measure their social progress in terms of how close they are to Western nations, or how far away, which also makes them feel inferior, as does the inability to fully identify with either Western culture or their native traditions.<sup>99</sup> Colored peoples see and feel Europeans and their descendants, no matter the differences between them, as part of an indivisible white collective agent.<sup>100</sup> They conceptualize time in terms of *before* and *after* the White Man came.<sup>101</sup> They hate talk of natives “evolving” toward civilization, for it suggests that they may never quite measure up, and they hate how some whites romanticize “primitive” life among colored peoples.<sup>102</sup> There is a general suspicion that Europeans don’t want Asians and Africans to “catch up” with them, a sense that whites are secretly attempting to block parity in a “racial” race to the top.<sup>103</sup>

These effects of racial consciousness, Wright believed, were tragic, a distortion of human personality. He did not, however, blame people of color for being slow to overcome them. And he didn’t think whites had the standing to blame colored people for not having recovered from them. The time when truly human relations beyond race are widespread would likely take awhile to reach us, if it ever does.<sup>104</sup>

Wright did feel a sense of solidarity with African and Asian peoples. But in identifying with the darker peoples of the globe, he sought to avoid reifying “race.” For example, in Wright’s speech (which Kwame Nkrumah invited him to give) at the Convention People’s Party rally in what was then the Gold Coast, he said: “I’m one of the lost sons of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of his forefathers. In a superficial sense it may be said that I’m a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your heart and my heart beat as one.”<sup>105</sup> Wright doesn’t fall back on racial identity here but rather notes the common experience of European domination and exploitation connecting blacks of the Diaspora with blacks on the continent. Moreover, he does not appear to embrace Pan-Africanism, at least not as a set of basic principles. After his visit to Ghana, Wright wrote to Nkrumah, “I felt an odd kind of at-homeness, a solidarity that stemmed not from ties of blood or race, or from my being of African descent, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embed-

98 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 578–81.

99 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 584.

100 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 658–60.

101 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 660–61.

102 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 663–64.

103 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 665–66.

104 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 586.

105 Wright, *Black Power*, 102.

ded in the lives of your people, from the hard facts of oppression that cut across time, space, and culture.”<sup>106</sup>

Despite Wright’s distaste for both religious belief and racial consciousness, he believed, surprisingly, that the full and permanent emancipation of colonized peoples would and should rely on these ideas and sentiments. He argues that African and Asian elites, educated in the West, who come to lead the national liberation movements in their native homelands inevitably fuse indigenous religion with nationalism to mobilize, organize, and direct the masses to their freedom.<sup>107</sup> Race and religion are exploited in demagogic fashion because the ideas of individual liberty and self-redemption associated with the West do not yet have appeal to the African and Asian masses. Though romantic racial nationalism must ultimately be transcended, nationalism in Africa and Asia can help to bring about industrialization.<sup>108</sup>

Wright argues that Africans cannot pass from the traditional to the modern until the “African personality” embodies a new *Weltanschauung*. A psychological shift must occur that is even more important than economic modernization. This change will not come about through direct Western influence (or if it does, it will come at the cost of economic independence) but must be accomplished by Africans themselves under stern leadership and rapidly.<sup>109</sup> This means, at a minimum, breaking down the hierarchical tribal kinship system and eliminating religious “mumbo-jumbo.”<sup>110</sup> Wright seems to have thought that gradual modernization under democratic governance would take so long that other reactionary elements would have a chance to undercut progressive movement and draw out the inevitable suffering. Or the communists would take hold, bringing Africa under a different type of European rule. Instead he notoriously advocated *forced and rapid industrialization under strict social discipline*, what he calls a “militarization of African life.”<sup>111</sup>

Wright maintained that Asian and African elites recognized that to stave off recolonization or to avoid incorporation into the Soviet Union, they would ultimately have to break the grip that tradition and religion held over their people. But they were reluctant to use the necessary methods (which would likely include something akin to dictatorship), for they thought this would be tantamount to fascism.<sup>112</sup> But Wright believed they must overcome this hesitancy, for political realism demanded it.<sup>113</sup>

106 Wright, *Black Power*, 410.

107 Wright, *Black Power*, 280–88; *Color Curtain*, 541–42.

108 Wright, *Black Power*, 77.

109 Wright, *Black Power*, 410–11.

110 Wright, *Black Power*, 415.

111 Wright, *Black Power*, 417.

112 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 684.

113 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 684–87.

He emphasized that not every oppressed person of color has a “mangled” personality.<sup>114</sup> Some, “a minority of minorities,” manage to cultivate a cosmopolitan, postconventional, and scientific outlook. They don’t divide the world into races, classes, religions, or nations. They see the commonality in all humankind and regard the earth as belonging to us all, with no social group having its assigned continent, regardless of the group’s ancestral origins. This attitude is found mostly among Asian and African artists and intellectuals, many of whom have been educated in the West. It also exists among the Asian and African elite leadership (e.g., Nkrumah, Nasser, and Nehru). The West must therefore not attempt to overthrow or delegitimize these leaders, for they are the only hope for a peaceful, just, and cosmopolitan future.

Indeed Wright would demand much more from the West. The communiqué document from the Bandung conference was implicitly addressed to the West. It was a kind of jeremiad, “A LAST CALL OF WESTERNIZED ASIANS TO THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE WEST!”<sup>115</sup> Wright expressed the hope that this call would be heeded, that it would usher in a “de-Occidentalization” of humanity. On this vision—which is fundamentally economic rather than “racial”—the earth’s resources and technical know-how are to be fairly shared across nations and colored nations are not to be made dependent on the West for their material health. But, he hastens to add, this would naturally mean that the average white Westerner would have to adjust to a lower standard of living, for Westerners would no longer be able to live on the forced sacrifices of the rest of the world.

However, Wright did not believe that such a program of global economic justice would be sufficient to solve the cultural problems of Asia and Africa.<sup>116</sup> Widespread ignorance, irrationality, and superstition, particularly dangerous religious and racial passions, would remain, retarding social progress and posing a threat to the West. He therefore contended that these remnants of premodern and colonial life must be swept away and that this urgently needed reform would inevitably involve Western assistance in industrializing those that Western nations formerly exploited.<sup>117</sup>

Wright was convinced that parts of the Western world were grounded in a secular and scientific outlook. It is this rational perspective on life that makes it permissible, according to Wright, for the West to play a role in the development of Africa and Asia. Because the African and Asian elites have been educated in the West, they too share this rational outlook. Wright imagines an alliance between the progressive forces in the Western world and the African and Asian elite that would speedily drive out racial and religious attitudes and customs. He suggested that if

<sup>114</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 678–81.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, in 593.

<sup>116</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, 596–97.

<sup>117</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, 600–606.

the democratic nations of the West will not play this role, the communist nations will do so, with all the terrible losses of freedom that this entailed in Russia.<sup>118</sup>

Europe must acknowledge its role in creating these problems and accept its responsibility to provide redress.<sup>119</sup> The African and Asian elite must not be left to go it alone. In a striking and memorable passage, Wright emphasizes that the world has inherited from Europe many good things but also many evil things: “Europe must be big enough to accept its Descartes and its Cortés and what they did. Europe must be big enough to accept its Hume of England and its Leopold II of Belgium and what they did. It must possess enough stern responsibility to accept both its Goethe and its Hitler.”<sup>120</sup> While acknowledging that the white West should offer Africa industrial techniques, machinery, gifts, and loans, Wright thought that one of the most important things the Western powers could do for Africa was accept responsibility for all the wrong they did and the havoc they caused. This public and sincere acknowledgment would provide assurance that they wouldn’t attempt to colonize Africa again, removing much anxiety among African peoples. The African elite could then modernize their societies without worrying about threats from the white West.<sup>121</sup>

Wright never wavered in his opinion that European imperialism was exploitative, brutal, and wrong.<sup>122</sup> But he thought an unintended beneficial consequence of colonialism was that it put in motion the destruction of the irrational religious and traditional practices of Africa and Asia.<sup>123</sup> This process would ultimately be liberating. But the Europeans left a void that they did not and could not fill. This emptiness was to be remedied by Western-educated Asian and African elites, who were in many ways more Western than Western whites. They were the bridge between East and West; they were the agents who must act to create one rational world. And the white West must aid them in their efforts by giving them *carte blanche* to use whatever methods, including “quasi-dictatorial” ones, were necessary to modernize their nations.<sup>124</sup>

### Realizing Western Ideals

Wright regarded himself as “much more the diagnostician than the scribbler of prescriptions”; as he says, “I’m no Moses.”<sup>125</sup> This is a fair self-assessment. Yet

118 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 607–9.

119 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 697.

120 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 697.

121 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 810.

122 For a detailed and charitable discussion of Wright’s anticolonial stance in relation to Africa, see Kevin Kelly Gaines, “Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora,” *Social Text* 67 (2001): 75–101.

123 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 718–22.

124 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 725.

125 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 646.

basic ideals do structure his political thought, ideals that Wright associated with Western modernity. Modernization in the West is not just a set of social processes that mark the break from European feudalism to liberal capitalism (or to authoritarian communism). It is a moral framework and an institutional arrangement, a schema of fundamental values and a mode of social organization.

Among these values is a secular worldview that denies the existence of magic and maintains a strict separation of church and state. In *Pagan Spain*, Wright argues that Spain is not really a part of “the West” despite the fact that it is in Europe and despite outward appearances to the contrary.<sup>126</sup> In fact, in his estimation Spain wasn’t even a Christian nation but remained mired in its pagan past. The fundamental trouble with Spain, according to Wright, was that it had not gone through a process of secularization. It had retained its deeply irrational religious consciousness, which thoroughly structured Spanish social life. Rather than a human invention to secure liberty and to advance the common good, even the *state* was viewed as sacred. This, for Wright, was a sign of backwardness. Moreover, he condemned the lack of religious freedom and the failure to separate church and state, and he even compared the condition of Protestants under the Catholic Church to the oppression of black people under Jim Crow.

Closely connected to secularization is a scientific worldview.<sup>127</sup> There are no occult forces that escape the causal nexus or the laws of nature. Science is the highest expression of human rationality and intelligence, and it should be the epistemic basis on which we formulate our beliefs about our environment and ourselves. A scientific worldview fosters a spirit of pragmatism, a healthy fallibilism, and a willingness to rely on the method of trial and error (rather than dogma or wishful thinking) to make progress. Science also gives us both the know-how to maintain and improve human health (including mental health) and the technology to control our environment, making it serviceable to our needs.

Wright vehemently opposed capitalism, finding it exploitative and wasteful, and he thought it appealed to our basest instincts—greed, selfishness, and materialism. But he strongly favored industrialization. Machine-based production not only saves time and labor (a practical application of science that creates more efficient means for meeting human needs) but shapes human personality in a progressive direction, breaking down reactionary forces of tradition that cause degrading forms of stasis. Industrialization includes the training needed to use complex technology and the cultivation of habits that allow individuals to meet the dynamic demands of urban life.

A rational society, according to Wright, includes centralized government: “A central government is an absolute necessity if man is to live at all rationally. How can you trade with nations of the world, how can you educate your children, how

126 Wright, *Pagan Spain* (orig. 1957; Jackson, MS: Banner Books, 1995), 228–29.

127 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 708–9.

can you wipe out disease, how can you defend yourself against aggression unless you have a strong central government?"<sup>128</sup> A crucial function of government is to ensure mass education and spread literacy, which are bulwarks against demagoguery and communism.<sup>129</sup> Without an educated public, democratic governance is unworkable and fascism is an ever-present threat.

Wright was committed to the liberal values of freedom, tolerance, and individualism: "I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the same."<sup>130</sup> There should be freedom of thought and expression without restriction from state or church. Wright maintained that human life has inherent dignity and value apart from any religious mandate.<sup>131</sup> Respect and concern for the individual, he insisted, should be the highest value, compromised only under extreme circumstances.<sup>132</sup> Even his opposition to racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation was based as much on the ways they wrongly restrict individual freedom as on their irrationality and insult.<sup>133</sup>

It is not sufficient for the ideals of Western modernity to be realized in laws, social institutions, and public rules. They must also be embodied in human personality and individual outlook. Wright believed himself to be a modern Western man in search of a rational and free society to call home. His self-understanding as a civilized Western person therefore gives us another window into his normative perspective.

Wright had a self-conception as a freedom-loving, rational, and cosmopolitan individual: "I have no religion in the formal sense of the word. . . . I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free. I have only the future."<sup>134</sup>

The conception of freedom that Wright endorsed was not restricted to liberal values (for example, the limits on a state's authority to interfere with individual choice). Existentialist values also played a role.<sup>135</sup> In particular, Wright did not accept that there was some predetermined form of life that each must affirm and show fidelity to if one is to live authentically. Individuals who are regarded and

128 Wright, *Black Power*, 274.

129 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 701-2.

130 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 709.

131 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 708-9.

132 Wright, "I Choose Exile" (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

133 Wright, "I Choose Exile."

134 Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 21.

135 For a discussion of Wright's relation to existentialist thought, see my "Freedom in a Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, ed. Glenda R. Carpio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 121-38. Also see Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," *MELUS* 5 (1978): 39-51; and Nina Kressner Cobb, "Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism," *Phylon* 40 (1979): 362-74.

treated as “Negroes” needn’t let their “blackness” fix who they understand themselves to be or limit who they will become. Wright valued our freedom to engage in self-fashioning, to strive to realize ideals of life we have autonomously chosen. To submit to tradition, either spontaneously or because one feels one cannot do otherwise, is to live in bad faith.<sup>136</sup>

Part of Wright’s self-understanding as a rational person is constituted by his commitment to a scientific worldview, one that includes the social sciences and psychology. As he says, “It was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me.”<sup>137</sup> And in his written work he sought to fuse the insights of scientific study and artistic imagination. The other dimension of Wright’s view of himself as “rational” is his militant rejection of religion and superstition, a theme he pursues, in various ways, in all his published books, fiction and nonfiction. He describes himself as “areligious”—that is, without religious belief.<sup>138</sup>

But Wright’s opposition to religion is about more than being a rational person. It is also a manifestation of his love of freedom: “I refuse to make a religion out of that which I do not know. I too can feel the limit of my reactions, can feel where my puny self ends, can savor the terror of it; but it does not make me want to impose that sense of my terror on others, or rear it into a compulsive system.”<sup>139</sup> Like communism and fascism, religion is an expression of an unacknowledged desire to dominate: “Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed Wright’s love of freedom was so profound that he insisted that “unless I feel free to let my instincts range, free to come and go as I please, free to probe and examine my environment, I languish, I wither, I die.”<sup>141</sup>

Finally, Wright considered himself a citizen of the world, at home on any part of the globe and capable of connecting with people of diverse national backgrounds. He describes himself as “rootless,” as not in need of many emotional attachments and allegiances.<sup>142</sup> Being alone in the world, he believed, is natural, and he was at peace with it. It is an inescapable if unsettling feature of the human condition that he embraced.

<sup>136</sup> This existentialist ideal of freedom also extended, for Wright, to the political realm, where one selects allies and enemies. See Lori J. Marso, “Solidarity sans Identity: Richard Wright and Simone de Beauvoir Theorize Political Subjectivity,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 13 (2014): 242–62.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xvii.

<sup>138</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 168.

<sup>139</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 130.

<sup>141</sup> Wright, “I Choose Exile.”

<sup>142</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 647.

## Conclusion

As a political thinker, Wright was wide ranging, intrepid, and astute. Despite his fame as a writer, he remains an underappreciated political philosopher and social theorist. The vision he articulated, while rich and creative, is not of course wholly original. Despite his repudiation of communist dogma, the influence of Marx (particularly historical materialism and the theory of ideology) on his outlook was quite strong. His theory of modernity and its psychological consequences draws heavily from Weber (perhaps filtered through the Chicago school of sociology) and Freud. His view of religion, fascism, and communism as rooted in the all-too-human (though generally unacknowledged) desire to dominate others owes much to Nietzsche. Moreover, Wright seems to have consciously refused to place his ideas within the history of black radical thought, almost never giving credit to those who came before him. The absence of explicit engagement with Du Bois (an elder but contemporary) is particularly odd, given how much Du Bois's post-*Souls* writings (for example, *Darkwater*, *Dark Princess*, *Dusk of Dawn*, and *The World and Africa*) overlap with Wright's postexile themes. This unfortunate tendency on Wright's part could give some readers the impression (perhaps intended) that he was the first or only prominent left-wing black American writer to offer a global perspective on problems of race, economic exploitation, and imperialism.

Wright's political theory is also not without its flaws. His unflattering, and arguably ethnocentric, portraits of the peoples and cultures of Ghana and Spain are not firmly grounded in empirical research but in the casual observations of an outsider who lacked the native tongue. Wright, as has been often noted, sometimes depicts women, particularly black women, in an unsympathetic and arguably sexist way.<sup>143</sup> (However, there are some subtle treatments of black women in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *The Long Dream*.) His deep hostility and intolerance toward all forms of religion was not only unjustified but also illiberal (and contrary to his own professed commitments). Wright's extreme cosmopolitan rootlessness and quest to live beyond all tradition are hardly inspiring ideals, not even for artists and intellectuals.<sup>144</sup> His view of race consciousness and black solidarity as racist and suitable only for demagoguery cannot withstand scrutiny.<sup>145</sup> Wright was certainly mistaken in thinking that having a scientific worldview justifies interfering with the affairs of "less rational" peoples. Generally, "I know better than you" is insufficient reason (unless you are my child) for me to override your freedom to

<sup>143</sup> For a polemical but thought-provoking discussion of Wright on gender, see Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman."

<sup>144</sup> For a more defensible take on what it means to be cosmopolitan, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>145</sup> I have defended a nonracialist form of black solidarity in Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005).

conduct your affairs as you see fit. And I don't see any way to square Wright's firm rejection of communist and fascist authoritarianism with his (perhaps reluctant) embrace of the "militarization" of Africa under Western-educated black elites.<sup>146</sup>

Yet I believe there is much that we can learn from Wright. Though he no doubt exaggerated the threat, he was correct to emphasize that race thinking and religious dogma often function, sometimes together, as dangerous ideologies that legitimize injustice. The oppressed, including global black populations, should be wary of building their identities and ties of affiliation on such sources. Wright shows the limits of romantic black nationalist aspirations, and he throws cold water on Négritude and Afrocentric ideas about the essential cultural unity of all who have been racialized as black. His message is a wake-up call to those who seek to resist white supremacy by rejecting all ideas and practices associated with Western modernity. Liberalism, for example, has its virtues and needn't be allied with capitalism. Science, and the technical and biomedical know-how it makes possible, has been and can continue to be a force for good. Our task is to prevent it from being used mainly for private gain and exploitation. Wright was surely correct that European former colonial powers must accept responsibility for the consequences of imperialism and atone for their wrongdoing. Whether this should take the form of helping to industrialize postcolonial nations is, I take it, a matter of ongoing debate.

Wright wisely rejected the race-versus-class schema that still structures so much debate on the American Left. Nor did he engage in the futile attempt to "reduce" race to class—that is, to try to understand all matters of race in terms of interclass dynamics. He recognized that racial domination and its accompanying ideology of white supremacy would have long-term global effects, including cultural and psychological ones. This insight allowed him to steer a path between Marxism and black nationalism, the most promising route, in my view, for progressive black politics.

Wright believed in the agency of the oppressed but did not romanticize them. He understood and was unwilling to deny that oppressed people can respond badly, sometimes tragically, to their conditions. He saw that violence could be more than an expression of fear, resentment, or catharsis. It could be a perverse source of meaning for the oppressed (among others), particularly in an age where anomie was common. Wright was also onto something, I believe, when he explored the lure and loathing of "whiteness" among darker peoples. Staving off racial self-hate and a sense of inferiority is a challenge that many fail to meet. In many ways, people of color can be as obsessed with whiteness as so-called white people are. Wright therefore teaches the necessity of overcoming fear and servil-

<sup>146</sup> For a detailed and insightful treatment of the weaknesses in Wright's approach to decolonization and modernization in Africa, see Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 4.

ity to become fit for effective resistance. There must be an *ethics of the oppressed*, a set of values that guide the unjustly disadvantaged away from self-damaging and undignified conduct and toward self-respect if not liberation.

The “resentful millions” do have, as Malcolm X would later emphasize, revolutionary potential. But Wright correctly noted that they can just as easily become a reactionary force, by turning on each other, striking out against authority in fruitless and self-destructive ways, or submitting without recognizing that they’re doing so. This is why, anticipating Martin Luther King Jr. here, it is crucial for the leaders of the oppressed to defend and teach the ethics of resistance. It is unfortunate that Wright didn’t advocate this same approach for decolonization, settling instead for dictatorial and demagogic tactics. But leaders like Gandhi and Mandela proved him wrong.

Finally, Wright shows how a black person coming from impoverished circumstances and limited formal education can nevertheless find meaning in a life of the mind and make a difference in this world with his pen alone. Wright was able to do this without the unmatched oratorical gifts of Douglass or the extraordinary educational background and scholarly distinction of Du Bois. As a true proletarian writer, he won international recognition and lasting influence, and his trajectory not only is remarkable but remains inspiring.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>147</sup> For helpful feedback on previous drafts of this essay, I thank Glenda Carpio, Robert Gooding-Williams, Yogita Goyal, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Lori Marso, Melvin Rogers, Werner Sollors, Josef Sorett, and Jack Turner. Versions of the paper were presented at Columbia University, UCLA, and Yale University, and I thank these audiences for their questions and comments.