

BLACK MARXISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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The oppression of African Americans in the United States has been marked by several defining eras since the birth of the country. From slavery to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Era, these moments have been the subject of countless academic inquiries.⁷⁹ However prominent these topics remain in historical conversations, there is still debate regarding what historiographic lens should be used to best understand these turbulent periods in American history. Disagreements arise mainly over whether economic or social mechanisms created the conditions that led to the oppression of African Americans in the U.S. Of all the voices involved in the historical conversation, I have chosen to focus my research on those who have attempted to apply a Marxist or Anti-Capitalist framework to the examination of the history of race relations in America. For my project, I will evaluate the effectiveness of these theories. I will argue that although a materialist interpretation may be useful in explaining the ways in which functions of class have been used to economically subjugate African Americans, such as the exploitation of black labor during Reconstruction and continuing into the 20th century, it is obsolete in its account of racial discrimination. This is primarily because Marxist interpretations deal only in broad concepts of economy and fail to describe the ways that issues such as white supremacy affect instances of racism in America.

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79 Claire Parfait, "Rewriting History: The Publication of W. E. B. Du Bois's 'Black Reconstruction in America' (1935)," *Book History* 12 (2009): 266-94.

For many writers, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who penned *Black Reconstruction*, one of the earliest critiques of post-Civil War capitalism, subjugation of African Americans during and after slavery can be explained largely in economic motivations of wealthy Southerners.⁸⁰ Later historians like Jack Bloom would expand upon this logic by offering the detailed material class analysis *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, in which he asserts that racism has been a tool used throughout U.S. history to repress a working class.⁸¹

Not every historian agrees with this pure economic interpretation of American racism. Other writers have asserted that within America there exist unique social conditions that account for racism experienced by African Americans. In Cornel West's *A Genealogy of Modern Racism*, he argues that the deeply entrenched notion of white supremacy that had been passed down through countless generations by Europeans, and later to their American descendants, accounts for racism in the U.S.⁸² While West does not refute economic oppression as a contributing factor, he does not see it as the main cause for racial tensions. In Andrew Curran's *The Anatomy of Blackness*, the racism that would allow for the creation and continuation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has distinct origins in the European enlightenment where whites sought to rationalize their superiority via newly developed 'sciences'.⁸³ By examining the different ways people have analyzed race in America, I will demonstrate how Marxist theory best succeeds in describing the different circumstances of racial tension throughout American history as well as the areas that it may prove insufficient.

As noted, America has a long tradition of racial oppression, one that began as soon as the first Europeans arrived carrying notions of racial superiority. Although for many scholars such as Cornel West, this legacy can be explained as a unique confluence of social and cultural factors that have existed in the U.S. since its inception, to others

80 W.E.B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), 182-195.

81 Jack Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2-20.

82 Cornel West, "The Genealogy of Modern Racism," in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, ed. Philomena Essed et al. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 91-109.

83 Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 4-28.

like Du Bois or C.L.R. James it is no more than another instance of a rich ruling class subjugating the working class in order to maintain profit and prevent resistance. For these people, the economic theories of Karl Marx have proven the most effective in justifying their claim. The materialist ideas that Marx developed allow for a unique insight into the coercion of black labor in the U.S. specifically the ways that race has prevented the proletariat class from effectively unifying. In order to gain this insight we must first be aware of the fundamental concepts employed by black Marxists in describing the condition of black people in America.

Marx viewed the world in largely economic terms. According to his theories, material needs, such as food, shelter and clothes, dictate the course of humanity. As a result, the human race is constantly preoccupied with the production of materials to satisfy these needs.⁸⁴ This ongoing process, Marx argued, naturally divided society into groups or classes based on their position within the production of material. Eventually, as industrialization increases, two major classes are created: the bourgeoisie, or the owners of the means of production, and the proletariat, or working people who run the factories.⁸⁵ For Marx, it was the proletariat class who were the true "producers" and driving force behind production in general. He predicted that in an ultimate act of revolution the proletariat would seize the means of production, thus overturning the corrupt capitalist system. This overturning, he insisted, would be the final historic act of mankind. Within the context of black Marxism, writers like Du Bois and James have sought to apply this theory to the plight of African Americans in the U.S. By identifying the black labor force in America as part of the "proletariat" class, these historians could then apply the rest Marx framework to describe their condition.

In terms of his analysis and critique of the capitalist framework, Marx identifies several significant ways in which the proletariat is exploited and marginalized by the bourgeoisie. Perhaps the most crucial form of oppression Marx described was the alienation of labor. This term was meant to encompass the ways by which a worker may become estranged from his humanity while living in a class ruled society.⁸⁶

84 Friedrich Engels, "Letters on Historical Materialism," *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 760.

85 Karl Marx, "Society and Economy in History," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 133.

86 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), 119.

Alienation occurs largely as a result of the highly mechanistic functions workers play in an industrialized setting.⁸⁷ This lack of agency and choice deprives the worker of the ability to forge his own path in life. Rather than working in anyway to achieve his own goals, his directive is dictated purely by the owners of production. Additionally, through this process the worker is prevented from indulging in the fruits of his own labor. In other words, the workers could not afford the products that were created through their own labor value. These were seen as some of the greatest potential consequences of the increased specialization of the work environment.

Also central to Marx's theory is the idea of capital as a unique form of wealth. Unlike other existing forms of wealth, such as land, capital can reproduce and expand. The most effective way of expanding the potential of Capital is through human labor.⁸⁸ Production owners will then later extract this increased value in the form of money. By this logic, the bourgeoisie creates a situation known as "surplus value," where the worker begins to produce more value than he gains personally.⁸⁹ In order to remain competitive with other industrialists, owners must perpetually reinvest this surplus to sustain an operation of increased profits. According to Marx, this occurrence often leads to a phenomenon known as "overaccumulation," where reinvestment of capital no longer produces profits. This in turn produces wage stagnation and devaluation of capital. Marxists would later identify events such as the Great Depression of the 1930's as a reflection of this principle. This fundamental contradiction of capitalism was cited by Marx as one of its greatest flaws. These concepts are critical to understanding Marxism because they represent the shortcomings of capitalism, which Marx believed would eventually force the proletariat to stage an upheaval of the status quo.⁹⁰

Together these ideas represent the basic tenets of Marx's critique of capitalism. They also embody the means by which black Marxist writers have sought to understand the condition of black people within American society. For those who believe the history of black oppression in the U.S. stems from economic origins, ideas like

87 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 61.

88 Karl Marx, "Wage and Labour Capital," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 207.

89 Karl Marx, "Crisis Theory" in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 443.

90 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

alienation and wage stagnation have proved incredibly useful. Many of these thinkers believe the black population in America should be viewed as a subset of a larger proletariat class, whose labor is continually exploited within the capitalist system.⁹¹ Even Marx himself would observe that the enslavement of black people in the Americas, from the 16th to the 19th century, coincided with the birth of modern capitalism and was the result of a desire for maximum profit by an elite few. In this circumstance, the plantation owners acted as a bourgeoisie class seeking to extract the most extreme surplus value available. As Cedric Robinson points out, slavery was not an "aberration" or "mistake," but the strategic asset of a predominantly bourgeoisie society.⁹²

Many writers insist that this trend of exploitation would continue far after the emancipation of slavery in the U.S., and that the inherent traits of capitalism would continue to ensure the suffering of African Americans. People such as W.E.B. Du Bois used the same framework to discuss the Jim Crow Era when Southern farmers used an abusive system of sharecropping to protect their accumulation of capital.⁹³ The culmination of racial tensions that would ultimately boil over in the 1960's has also been explained in Marxist terms as an oppressed working class seeking retribution from abusive and exploitative conditions.⁹⁴ Upon examination, it becomes clear that principles of alienation, over accumulation, and surplus value can account for a majority of Marxist conversations regarding African American history.

The use of Marxist ideas to explain issues of race began almost as soon as they were committed to page and published. Marx himself famously stated, "the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."⁹⁵ For the mind that originally conceived of a materialist dialectic, the idea of exploitation of black labor and capitalism were inexorably linked. Further cementing his position on the subject Marx elaborated, "Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc.

91 W.E.B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 182-195.

92 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (New Chapel: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 200.

93 W.E.B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 182-195.

94 Jack Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 2-20.

95 Karl Marx, "Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist" in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1867).

Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry.”⁹⁶ It was no coincidence, he argued, that the enslavement of Africans and their transport to the United States occurred just as nations across the globe began the process of industrialization. Later, as slavery began to die out internationally, only the economic boom in the cotton industry would perpetuate its existence in America decades after it was outlawed in European nations.

Although he touched on the issue, Marx would never fully commit any serious work to the discussion of race. Seeking a more thorough groundwork of race relations understood through a Marxist framework, black intellectuals soon applied these concepts in their own discussions. Perhaps the most notably successful of these applications is W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* published in 1935, which served to outline the role of black labor and participation in the reconstruction of the post-Civil War South. In doing so, Du Bois would lay the foundation of black Marxist dialogue for the next century. By framing the African American population of the South as an exploited proletariat class, Du Bois could describe the intense opposition faced at the time in terms of a struggle that was shared by all working class people.⁹⁷ Slavery and the Jim Crow Era that followed were the result of capitalist enterprise where the maximum amount of “surplus value” is “filched” from the black proletariat.⁹⁸ In describing the condition that perpetuated the racism of the South, Du Bois noted, “the espousal of the doctrine of Negro inferiority by the South was primarily because of economic motives and the inter-connected political urge necessary to support slave industry.”⁹⁹

For Du Bois, the motivations behind slavery in the U.S. were purely economic and the “color caste” which supported it were “founded and retained by capitalism.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the ideologies of racial superiority found in America were developed as means of justifying an exploitative relationship that is natural within the capitalist system. Notions of white superiority that had existed during slavery solidified once again after the Civil War and prevented the poor white and black working classes

96 Karl Marx, “The Metaphysics of Political Economy” in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/ch02.htm>.

97 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 182-195.

98 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 16.

99 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 39.

100 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 31.

from effectively uniting against the bourgeoisie, i.e., the former plantation owners.¹⁰¹ To Du Bois this divide would be responsible for a senate majority being regained by white Democrats and ultimately the failure of Reconstruction in the South.

Du Bois was not alone in his attempts to understand American racial history through a lens critical of modern capitalism. In describing the economic collapse of the 1930’s, writer George Padmore elaborated on the idea of white and black workers sharing a common burden as the exploited proletariat class. In his work, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, Padmore asserts that the sudden decline in living standards amongst black workers had led to increasing radicalization.¹⁰² The awakening of “class consciousness” would allow black workers to bridge the gap between themselves and white workers. To Padmore, the mutual alienation experienced by both the white and black workers would result in a unification of the proletariat that could effectively overthrow of the bourgeoisie class.¹⁰³ As Du Bois had also argued, Padmore would further insist that the racism manifested in groups like the KKK were an attempt by the ruling class to prevent this unification from occurring.¹⁰⁴ By inciting terror in the South, these groups hoped to “distract...the worker from the common class interest.”¹⁰⁵ Once again, the American racial setting was being successfully explored through a Marxist framework, this time in explaining the economic crisis of the Great Depression.

Historians and writers would continue to use Marxist theories to analyze the history of African American oppression in the U.S. Writer and intellectual C.L.R. James focused his efforts toward a Marxist interpretation of the labor rights movements of the 1940’s. In a speech delivered to the Socialist Workers Party in 1948, James stated, “the development of capitalism itself has not only given the independent Negro movement this fundamental and sharp relation with the proletariat. It has created Negro proletarians and placed them as proletarians in what were once the

101 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 623.

102 George Padmore, *The Life and Struggle of the Negro Toilers*, 1931. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1931/negro-toilers/ch04.htm>.

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*

most oppressed and exploited masses.”¹⁰⁶ As a result, James believed that the black population had become a crucial “vanguard” of the labor movement in general.¹⁰⁷ Where previously the black worker had been denied entry into the movement due to racial lines, they had now become an irreplaceable pillar in the struggle for workers’ rights. This is another example of Marxist theories being applied to explain a crucial era in African American history. Here, James sought to understand the intersection of black labor with labor in general. Following in the shoes of Du Bois and Padmore, James too cited the common interests of the proletariat as a unifying factor between white and black workers. In this instance, the “divide” which Du Bois saw as preventing the successful overthrow of the bourgeoisie class was potentially being overcome through a gradual understanding of mutual interests within the working class.

As racial tensions continued to shift and fluctuate in the U.S., writers in the following decades would continue down this path of exploring the systems of racial oppression through a Marxist critique. For historians like Ahmed Shawki, the 1960’s represent a time of extensive Marxist dialogue surrounding race.¹⁰⁸ By reviewing the political tendencies of prominent figures involved in the Civil Rights movement, Shawki demonstrates that the movement can be characterized in terms of its relationship to the worker’s struggle.¹⁰⁹ Even Martin Luther King Jr., who would come to symbolize the struggle for racial equality of that decade, espoused ideas either critical of capitalism or directly citing the Marxist tradition. Although King publicly denounced the Marxism theory, he nevertheless maintained rhetoric doubtful of capitalism, especially towards the end of his life as his efforts were focused increasingly towards issues of poverty in the U.S.¹¹⁰

While the Marxist framework has been successfully applied in the analysis of racism’s relation to economic systems and conditions, it may fall short in its appreciation of racism’s origins. In other words, the macroscopic approach of Marxism fails at times to account for instances of racism that are separate from economic and

106 C.L.R James, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in America,” 1948. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1948/revolutionary-answer.htm>

107 *Ibid.*

108 Ahmed Shawki, *Black Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 170.

109 Shawki, *Black Liberation and Socialism*, 170.

110 Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement.” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 456-71.

financial gains. For instance, racial discrimination towards black people began prior to true semblance of modern capitalism. When the first European ships arrived in Africa, their navigators arrived with preconceived notions of black inferiority. Prior to any notion of enslavement or economic profit, white European were still keen on making a hierarchical distinction between themselves and the Africans they encountered on their earliest explorations. In part, this effort was of a religious making, as the bible accounted for black skin through the tale of Canaan. Dark skin is explained as a curse passed down to Canaan’s children as punishment for seeing his father’s naked body.¹¹¹ In addition to the religious pretext, modern racism also found its origins through scientific means. During the Enlightenment, society moved away from embracing the irrational and towards reason and empiricism. It was in this time that people began attempting to apply science to the discovery of a physical explanation of white superiority.¹¹² Most Marxist theorists would argue that this was done to justify then-current power structures existing within an emerging capitalist economy. However, since the desire to so definitively distinguish between white and black is so evident and predates any profit from that relationship, a better explanation of racism’s origin may be required. As Cornel West argues in his “Genealogy of Modern Racism,” a tradition of white supremacy and not capitalism had defined the African American experience in the U.S. While modern capitalism may perpetuate and benefit from the rendering of black people as second-class citizens, it is not directly responsible for its existence.¹¹³

Cedric Robinson identifies another shortcoming of the Marxist framework when it is applied to situations of race in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. According to Robinson, the theories of Marxism rely too heavily on European models and experience.¹¹⁴ Because of this, they often overlook the importance of African American participation in the struggle for change. If radical change is to come to the African American community, it must do so through a model, which draws from the experience of black people. In outlining a history of Marxism, Robinson shows that this Eurocentric vision of the world makes the theory

111 David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Hamm: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 100.

112 Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 216-20.

113 West, “The Genealogy of Modern Racism,” 91-100.

114 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 160.

obsolete when describing black radical resistance within the U.S. This represents a distinct departure from the previous historiographies that have sought to apply Marxism to these issues.

Countless histories have been written on issues of race in America. Of these accounts, those that use the ideas of Marx to answer for the ways African Americans have been economically marginalized are generally successful. Through the arguments presented in this essay Marxist writers like Du Bois and James hoped to explain racial tensions in the U.S. However, these accounts also tend to overlook important social factors, such as religion or white supremacy. In doing so, they offer a portrayal of history that is perhaps reductive in its assessment of capitalism's role in racial politics of the U.S. This oversimplification is not enough to discount a Marxist assessment of race entirely, but rather an admonition to proceed fully aware of the theory's limitations.

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