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As they say, all good things must come to an end. This issue of the APA Studies on Philosophy and the Black Experience will be my last one as the editor of this publication. For the last five years, Stephen C. Ferguson II and I have worked tirelessly to provide essays and book reviews related to African American philosophy. Ferguson is to be commended for working closely with me to produce this publication, even after he was no longer officially an editor of it. With respect to this issue, he was responsible for soliciting the tributes and articles celebrating the life and work of Charles Wade Mills. He also contributed an article on Mills’s life and legacy to this issue.


Wiredu was born in Kumasi, Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), in 1931, and attended Adisadel College from 1948 to 1952. He was later admitted into the University of Ghana, Legon, in 1952. After graduating in 1958, he went to University College, Oxford. At Oxford University, Wiredu was taught by Gilbert Ryle (his thesis supervisor), Peter Strawson (his College tutor), and Stuart Hampshire (his special tutor). He wrote a thesis on “Knowledge, Truth, and Reason.” Upon graduating in 1960, he was appointed to a teaching post at the University College of North Staffordshire (now the University of Keele), where he stayed for a year. He then returned to Ghana, where he accepted a position teaching philosophy at the University of Ghana. He remained at the University of Ghana for twenty-three years. From 1987 until he retired, he was an Emeritus Professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He was ninety years old when he died. Two of his authored works are Philosophy and an African Culture (1980) and Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective (1996). He was also the editor of A Companion to African Philosophy (2003). Most recently, Barry Hallen wrote a study of Wiredu’s philosophy titled Reading Wiredu (2021).

In this issue, I am happy to have contributions from Stephen C. Ferguson II, John H. McClendon II, Liam Kof Bright, Eduardo Mendieta, and Yubraj Aryal.

Given Mills’s prominence within the discipline of philosophy, Ferguson has collected several essays that focus on his life, legacy, and philosophical contribution. Liam Kofi Bright offers us a moving tribute to Mills. Bright originally published his tribute to Mills on his blog, The Sooty Empiric, on September 21, 2021. Ferguson offers an assessment of Mills’s philosophical journey from “Analytical Marxism” to “Black Radical Liberalism.” He, in addition, explores the limitations of “Black Radical Liberalism” as a political philosophy. And McClendon offers us an ideological and philosophical assessment of Charles Mills, particularly with respect to Black intellectual culture and Marxism.

Next, John H. McClendon II offers an assessment of Cornel West’s conception of Marxist philosophy. McClendon argues that West’s The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought is an anti-Marxist text. By painting Marx as radical historicist, West hopes to convince people that Marx is a pragmatist rather than a dialectical and historical materialist. This essay is a part of a larger manuscript that McClendon is working on, which critically assesses West’s prophetic pragmatism.

And, lastly, we have two reviews of Leonard Harris’s collection of essays, A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader. Eduardo Mendieta’s “Hoping in the Darkness of Necro-Being: On Leonard Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader” is a thoughtful review essay on A Philosophy of Struggle. In it, Mendieta contends that A Philosophy of Struggle provides readers with a representative collection of Harris’s contributions to several areas of philosophy. These areas include metaphysics, philosophy of race, especially in the ethics and epistemology of racism; normative ethics; moral psychology; and history of philosophy. He then writes about the significances of Harris’s actuarial account of racism and his writings on honor and dignity. He ends the essay by asking two questions about Harris’s philosophical project. The first question is about whether Harris is wrong in his criticism of King and that Black Americans were, in fact, honored along with King for their contributions to American society. The second question (or, more accurately, “quandary”) he poses to Harris is about Harris’s criticism of democracy. In fact, he challenges Harris’s view that democracy, particularly the US version of constitutional democracy, cannot motivate people who belong to the dominant group to recognize and respect the dignity of those who have been historically (and continue to be) disrespected and subordinated.

Yubraj Aryal provides us with an appreciative review of A Philosophy of Struggle. Aryal does not take the traditional approach to writing an academic book review. Rather, Aryal
identifies a few of the main themes in Harris’s writings throughout his career. Aryal ends the review by declaring that the twenty-first century will be the Harrisian century in African American philosophy. Perhaps we should leave it up to philosophers in the distant future to judge whether Aryal’s assessment is a plausible one.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

APA Studies on Philosophy and the Black Experience is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between ten and twenty pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between five and seven pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.philbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

Beginning with the spring 2023 issue, Anthony Neal will take over the position of lead editor and Bjorn Freter will take on the position of associate editor.

DEADLINES
Fall issues: May 1
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FORMATTING GUIDELINES
• APA Studies adheres to The Chicago Manual of Style.

• Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (–).

• Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:


ARTICLES

Personal Tribute to Charles Mills
Liam Kofi Bright
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Like many in the philosophical world today, I am in dismay at the loss of Charles Mills. I feel compelled to honor him with a public tribute, as he meant more to me than almost anyone else in the profession and I think socialized affection and grief are a fitting response to this sort of tragedy. I’ll try and say a bit about why Mills was so special to me personally, but I think that the characteristics I saw in him would be familiar to many who interacted with him. In this way I hope that my idiosyncratic impressions and experiences will give some more general idea of the man we have lost.

Professionally. By the time I met Mills, he was already an international superstar. His work had long been of interest to Black or Africana thinkers, but by the mid 2010s when I got to know him he was well established among the white mainstream of political philosophy. As Mills himself would have been first to point out, there are more of them and they have more money for keynote lectures and the like, so his newfound status among this crowd represented a somewhat new experience of the profession. As is implicated in the Daily Nous tribute to Mills, this degree of fame and respect came somewhat late in Mills’s career, and I believe it was the perspective he had as someone who had been on the outside for much of his career that gave him a great degree of empathy with those of us who had not yet to (or will not ever) make it to the same degree.

In any case, for whatever psychological reason, from the very first interaction we had, Mills acted as a supportive mentor to me, giving me intellectual and professional advice while being incredibly generous with his time. In fact, I think our first interaction resulted from me cold emailing him some half-baked idea I had in response to his work. He responded with generous feedback in short order, and then agreed to have a video chat with me. I now realize that this is very much supererogatory, but I would never have known it at the time. He made it seem like the most natural thing in the world that he wanted to help me out and had lots of time to give, despite not knowing me from Adam.

Down the years this continued. We’d make a point of meeting up at conferences and exchanged emails fairly regularly. I’d turn to him for advice or just to check in on what he thought of professional trends or the like. Always, in every encounter, he was wise, kindhearted, eager to help, and so naturally these things that one never felt a burden. I have no doubt at all that whatever measure of professional success I have and will achieve owes no small part to him.

Intellectually. Mills’s work has been groundbreaking. No survey of Black political thought would be complete without him. His most famous work, The Racial Contract, is
now an acknowledged modern classic. It is typical of Mills in its attempt to bring to bear the work of contemporary (especially Rawlsian) political philosophy, combined with his deep knowledge of and respect for the classical liberal tradition, to understand the problems of contemporary societies. In particular, he sought to show how aforementioned political philosophy served an obfuscatory role, but nonetheless provided intellectual resources that could allow us to get a theoretical handle on how it is that unjust hierarchies are maintained. Thinking through these themes led to another of his most influential papers, *Ideal Theory as Ideology*, which has been agenda setting in metaphilosophy, as it pushed philosophers to try to attend more to the concrete details of contemporary reality, or at least explain how it is that our abstract reflections relate to the goings-on of everyday life. Probably his most culturally resonant work was his essay *White Ignorance*, which applies the approach advocated for in *Ideal Theory as Ideology* by bringing together work in naturalistic epistemology, social psychology, history, and sociology to make the case that there are predictable irrationalities that will be displayed by white-majority populations when it comes to reasoning about the situation of a Black (or non-white) underclass. And in his recent work (such as this essay *Black Radical Kantianism*) he has once again been drawing on the liberal tradition, this time in a reconstructive vein, to try to draw from Kantian ethical thought to develop principles for reasoning about how to move towards a just society given a history of injustice.

This is just a tiny survey of a grand career’s worth of writings. I think he was among the leading lights of contemporary liberal theory, and at a time when the legitimacy of that mode of society is subject to severe scrutiny and skepticism, his loss is a great blow to that tradition (so it has been somewhat amusing, in a grim sort of way, to see Mills singled out as an example of postmodern anti-rational illiberalism by some contemporary reactionaries).

And for me personally Mills’s thought has been incredibly fertile. It was actually on his encouragement that I got involved in thinking about the demographics of philosophy and what that means for the work that gets done, which led to my very first publication and continues to be part of my work. My most recent paper was a response to the issues he raised in *White Ignorance*. More generally, the vision of philosophy as able to speak to contemporary realities, deeply informed by interdisciplinary social scientific study, while at the same time conversant with the best of the historic tradition—this inspires me, this is what I want to be. Charles Mills provided the model which I am still trying to live up to.

**Personally.** That first video chat I mentioned above opened with Mills taking a look at me and saying “Ah, so I see you’re one of those light-skin brothers like me, eh?” He said it with a sparkle in his eye and a cheeky smile. His point was to disarm and somewhat shock, but without doing anything to be off-putting, put me at ease by a humorous display of overfamiliarity. It worked. You would deeply misunderstand Mills if you got the impression of him above as a sort of pious sage figure, dispensing kindly advice with his face always turned towards righteousness. That captures something of him, but it misses out on the irreverent, earthy humor of the man.

His deeply underrated essay *Do Black Men Have a Duty to Marry Black Women?* contains one of the few lines of analytic philosophy that genuinely made me laugh out loud when I first encountered it:

> Many pornography catalogs have a specialty section of black-on-white videos where “big black studs meet blonde sluts.” (How do I know this? you casually inquire, a friend of a friend, I quickly reply) . . . .”

And to understand Mills you have to get that aspect of him too. The topic is a serious one, the context is the cultural disrespect and visceral disgust (intermixed with eroticized fascination) Black people’s sexuality can evoke. If you read the essay, it’s clear that Mills understands those stakes, and indeed the whole essay is an exercise in taking seriously and reasoning through something that can deeply matter to people’s everyday lives, yet which is often ignored by the professional mainstream. But for all that, Mills would combine it with self-deprecating joking aside, a none-too-pious ability to see the absurdity of the whole situation and our place in it. To laugh rather than cry in the face of the slings and arrows of outrageous historical fortune.

I just cannot overstate how much this means to me personally. This element of Mills, the ability to take things seriously while laughing at them, made me feel more at home in the field than anything else. I often feel in philosophy, even and maybe especially the bits of the field I like, there is a kind of dour, protestant sensibility of moral seriousness. It’s not that I think this is wrong per se, but it’s just deeply unfamiliar to me. I grew up discussing big issues of politics and society with my family, and for all we deeply cared about such things the norm is and was to be lighthearted, to be able to see the funny side and not take oneself too seriously. Mills’s sense of humor, and unselfserious, down-to-earth way of being in the field, was a visible proof that I could make it; I could work on the things I care about while still retaining elements of
my personality and upbringing that feel essential to being me.

My absolute favorite memory of Charles Mills is also the last time I saw him in person, three years ago. I had been offered a job at the LSE, and it was the last summer before I was due to move to London and take up the post. We met up for lunch at a conference and went to some basement cafe somewhere a bit out of the way. We laughed and gossiped and lamented the state of the field. Towards the end of the meal, with a serious look on his face, he told me that given that there are so few Black professors in the UK I had a responsibility to represent Black philosophy, and then after a beat followed it up with “well, at least until we can find someone better.” I will miss him so much.

NOTES

“Black Radical Liberalism” and the Retreat from Class: The Life and Legacy of Charles W. Mills

Stephen C. Ferguson II
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

The news of Charles Mills’s death hit many people—including myself—with a deep sense of sadness. The death of Charles Mills, however, is not just the death of a singular and remarkable individual. No doubt, he was a revered figure in contemporary philosophy. Yet, his life, philosophical thought, and legacy embody a whole political problem: How do we understand exploitation and oppression in the world? When people like Charles Mills die, dew-eyed celebration should not replace critical examination. We fail to do Mills’s philosophical thought justice if in reflecting upon his life and legacy we do so uncritically.

In the aftermath of Walter Rodney’s assassination, on June 13, 1980, by the political regime of Linden Forbes Burnham in Georgetown, Guyana, C. L. R. James gave a talk in January of 1981 titled “Walter Rodney and the Question of Power.” In light of Burnham’s repressive state apparatus, James castigates Rodney for making a serious “political mistake” by not giving serious thought to the question of seizing state power.

Both James and Rodney were towering figures in the Pan-African movement and Marxist circles. In fact, James and Rodney were not just friends. But more importantly, they were comrades in the world communist movement. As Jodi Dean notes, to be comrades entails “a political relation, a set of expectations for action toward a common goal.” Therefore, James’s critical examination of Rodney was in the spirit of being comrades in revolutionary struggle. With dew-eyed sadness about the death of a comrade, James went beyond celebration and offered a critical assessment of Rodney’s “political mistakes.” While I am not implying that Mills was a revolutionary in the same sense as Rodney, I do hope that my essay is taken in the spirit of comradely criticism of Mills’s political mistakes.

I can remember when I first came across the writings of Charles Mills. It was around 1994. And it was before he became famous with the 1997 publication of The Racial Contract. I was an activist and budding Marxist-Leninist. At the time, I was reading everything and anything I could get my hands on related to Marxism-Leninism. I was reading Harry Haywood’s Black Bolshevik, V. I. Lenin’s What Is To Be Done?, Karl Marx’s Capital, V. I. Lenin’s Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy, and Kwame Nkrumah’s Consciencism. At some point, I came across three articles by Charles Mills: “Ideology” in Marx and Engels,” “Is it Immaterial that there’s a ‘Material’ in ‘Historical Materialism’?” and “Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?” In Charles’s early philosophical essays, I found what I thought was a kindred spirit. (At this point, I didn’t know what “Analytical Philosophy” or “Analytical Marxism” were.) Mills’s early philosophical work displayed a philosophical depth and critical understanding of Black culture and history. His early writings appeared to be refreshingly different from most of the Black philosophers I was reading at the time, particularly the anti-Marxist idealist pathetic (Christian) pragmatism of Cornel West.

When I became aware of Charles, he was an associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago. At the time, I was working with John H. McClendon III (who was the director of the Black Culture Center at the University of Missouri–Columbia). And we were in the planning stages of organizing a conference on Black philosophy. We had already invited the African American Marxist thinker Bob Rhodes and Mizzou philosophy professor Robert N. Johnson. But we wanted another progressive Black philosophical voice on the panel; so I suggested to McClendon that we invite Charles. We both called Charles and spoke with him. We briefly discussed his work on Marxism and hoped that we could eventually meet in person. Unfortunately, he had a prior commitment and was unable to attend the conference. We eventually asked the Black philosopher Johnny Washington (Saint Xavier College, BA, 1972; Stanford University, MA, 1976, PhD, 1978) to participate. He was teaching at Southwest Missouri State University (Springfield, Missouri).

When I started graduate school at the University of Kansas (KU) in the fall of 1996, doing a dissertation on Charles Mills’s The Racial Contract was the farthest thing from my mind. I wanted to do both my master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation on a straightforward Marxist topic. As it was, the only person working in the area of Marxism in my department was the prominent business ethicists and anti-Marxist Marxologist Richard T. DeGeorge. What a character he was! Eventually, I wrote a master’s thesis on G. W. F. Hegel, C. L. R. James’s Notes on Dialectics and the ‘Notion’ of Freedom (working with Julie Maybee). Starting in about 2001, I started working on my doctoral dissertation on Charles Mills’s The Racial Contract—under the direction of analytical feminist philosopher Ann Cudd. While working on my dissertation, I had the good fortune...
to personally meet Carole Pateman! In our conversation we talked extensively about the ideological and philosophical differences between she and Charles on contract theory. These differences would become the subject of their book, *Contract and Domination*, published in 2007.

From 1995 to 2003 (when I completed my dissertation), a lot changed in the philosophical world! Of course, The *Racial Contract* was published in 1997. Still to this day, it is one of the best-selling philosophy books by a Black philosopher—as Mills has noted on several occasions. I had the good fortune to study with one of the leading feminist contractarians of our times—Ann Cudd. And I was tackling Marxism-Leninism from below. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the fact that I was able to study with John ‘Mac’ McClendon III—day and night for three years—while we were at KU. Many folks may not realize that ‘Mac’ started his doctorate in 1996 and finished in 1999. (John had enrolled in the doctoral program in African Studies at Howard Universities in the late 1970s. But he never finished the program. That’s another story—for another time.)

My dissertation, titled *Racial Contract Theory: A Critical Introduction*, was completed sometime in 2003—a year after my son’s birth. I wrote it as a Marxist-Leninist critique of Charles Mills. I wrote the following in my abstract:

> Although the novelty of racial contract theory has been greatly praised in various disciplines ranging from philosophy to political science, few philosophers have felt it necessary to subject it to critical review and/or analysis. For that reason alone, this dissertation represents a valuable contribution. This dissertation has a two-fold purpose: interpretive and critical. It, therefore, is, in aim, a scholarly study and introduction to racial contract theory. Here my aim is to critically examine his theoretical model and the validity of its explanation of the dynamics of white supremacy in its global articulation. This dissertation also has the additional task of rendering a critique from a Marxist-Leninist philosophical perspective, that is, dialectical and historical materialism. My polemical encounter with Mills centers not only on conceptual or methodological issues but also constitutes an external (ideological) critique of Mills’ contractarianism. I demonstrate that Mills adopts an idealist conception of history to explain the historical emergence and continued existence of white supremacy. Furthermore, Mills’ racist approach ignores the central role that the class structure of capitalism and capitalist exploitation play in the founding and continued reproduction of white supremacy. [Italics Added]

I would not change one word of the abstract today. My assessment was spot on. In many respects, I anticipated that Mills’s ideological journey would take him rightward to what he would later label as “Black radical liberalism.”

After leaving KU, I published two chapters from my dissertation with the journal *Cultural Logic: Journal of Marxist Theory & Practice*: “Social Contract as Bourgeois Ideology” (2007) and “Contractarianism as Method: Rawls contra Mills” (2008). Despite my critical treatment of *The Racial Contract*, Charles was always ready to give me a mischievous and playful smile along with a few sarcastic comments whenever I saw him at various American Philosophical Association (APA) meetings. I vividly remember on one occasion that Mills chided: “Hey! This is the guy who has been criticizing my work from a Marxist-Leninist perspective! This guy thinks he is going to be successful in the philosophy profession by being a Marxist.” And on more than a few occasions—I like so many others—asked Charles to write several recommendations and function as a reviewer for my promotion and tenure. Charles always graciously said yes! While I have determinate ideological and philosophical differences with Mills, I will always appreciate his kindness, humor, and creative philosophical mind. In fact, in my estimation, Mills’s best work is not *The Racial Contract*! Mills is at his best when he engages with the Black experience.

**CHARLES MILLS: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Born on January 3, 1951, in London, England, the Afro-Caribbean philosopher Charles Wade Mills died on September 20, 2022, in Evanston, Illinois. Tragically, in May of 2021, he was diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic cancer.

His parents—Winnifred and Gladstone Mills—met on a “banana boat” from Jamaica to England in 1948. As Mills recounts, “My father, Gladstone, had actually completed a degree at the London School of Economics a few months before, and was now returning to England to become liaison officer for the British colonial office for West Indians students there. . . . My mother, Winnifred, was headed for Westminster Hospital as a student nurse.” Shortly after Mills was born, his parents moved back to Kingston, Jamaica, where Mills spent his formative years. His parents would later give birth to another son, Raymond. From 1960 until 1990, Gladstone Mills was part of the anti-colonial nationalist intelligentsia who were responsible for transforming Jamaica from a British colony into an independent nation. In fact, Gladstone Mills taught at the Mona, Jamaica, campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI). During his time with UWI, he served as head of the school’s Department of Government from 1963 to 1980, and as dean of its Faculty of Social Sciences from 1967 to 1970. Under Mills’s leadership as dean, the school introduced its bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and doctoral programs in the field of public administration.

Charles Mills attended the prestigious all-boys high school Jamaica College. After completing his secondary education, Charles Mills attended the University of the West Indies and received a BSc in physics in 1971. Afterwards, Mills taught for a while at the Jamaican equivalent of a junior college. He taught physics in Kingston from 1971 to 1973 at the College of Arts, Science, and Technology, and from 1976 to 1977 at Campion College. After completing his undergraduate degree, a Commonwealth Fellowship took the young Mills to the University of Toronto. Subsequently, he worked on his graduate degree in philosophy at the University of Toronto from 1976 to 1985. While at the University of Toronto, Mills was politically active with several organizations including being a member of the Workers Party of Jamaica, a Marxist-
Leninist political party aligned with the Soviet Union. He also helped to unionize teaching assistants. Under the supervision of Frank Cunningham and Dan Goldstick, Mills completed a dissertation titled *The Concept of Ideology in the Thought of Marx and Engels.* Charles was not the first Black philosopher to do a dissertation on Marxism. Several Black philosophers have done dissertation topics related to Marxism: Leonard Harris, Lucius Outlaw, Cornel West, John P. Pittman, Tommy Shelby, and John H. McClendon.

After receiving his doctorate in philosophy, he began teaching at various philosophy department in the United States. Discussing his “years in America,” Mills makes the following observation: “In coming to the US to work after I got my PhD in Canada, I was changing race, becoming part of an unambiguously subordinated ‘Black’ American racial group, while equipped with the inherited cultural capital and privilege of my ‘brown’ Jamaican middle-class origins and education.”

Initially, he taught at the University of Oklahoma (1987–1990) and then later at the University of Illinois at Chicago (1990–2007) where he was a UIC Distinguished Professor. Before his appointment as Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center, CUNY, in August 2016, he was John Evans Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Northwestern University. In 2016, he delivered the John Dewey lecture, “The Red and the Black,” at the American Philosophical Association Central Division meeting. He was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017. And he gave the prestigious Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 2020 on “Theorizing Racial Justice,” at the University of Michigan. Giving the Tanner Lectures was a recognition of Mills’s “extra-ordinary” achievement as a thinker. Past lecturers have included John Rawls, Karl Popper, Michel Foucault, Amartya K. Sen, Jürgen Habermas, Toni Morrison, Carol Gilligan, Amy Gutman, K. Anthony Appiah, Isabel Allende, Spike Lee, Neil deGrasse Tyson, among others. A long-delayed forthcoming book, *The White Leviathan: Nonwhite Bodies in the White Body Politic,* is scheduled to be published under Oxford University Press’s new book series, “Critical Philosophy of Race.” It will continue Mills’s “Black radical liberalism” project by examining the racialization of the body politic in the United States and the corresponding need for corrective racial justice.

**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: THE POLITICAL ODYSSEY OF MILLS**

Being raised in a petit-bourgeois family (which was relatively prominent in Jamaica), Mills grew up in an intellectual environment that allowed him to develop into what he describes as a “British schoolboy in blackface or brownface” with an interest in science fiction and fantasy novels.

Mills’s political consciousness shifted in 1968 as he entered the Mona (i.e., Jamaican) campus of the University of West Indies. Mills’s *crisis of class consciousness* was influenced by the mass protests following the expulsion of the Marxist historian Walter Rodney from Jamaica on October 15, 1968, by the government of Jamaica, led by Prime Minister Hugh Shearer. The Rodney Affair, as it came to be known, incited a response throughout the Caribbean world and opened a whole new ideological world for Mills. Mills was introduced to Marxism, both in “independent” and party-linked Marxist-Leninist forms; varieties of black nationalism demanding “Black Power,” a slogan taken over from the American movements of the time but still very relevant in the Jamaican context given the socioeconomic exclusions I have sketched; a newly respectable Rastafari consciousness, buoyed by the growing international success of Bob Marley, and attracting middle-class conversions; and debates at the university on dependency theory, underdevelopment, the Plantation School as a model for understanding Caribbean economies, the Cuban Revolution, the enduring manifestations of race and color privileging in the region, and so forth.

Fellow Jamaicans like Peter Figueroa also played a role in influencing him to join the Marxist-Leninist political party Workers Party of Jamaica.

Mills belonged to a generation who are affectionately referred as the 68ers—the generation born at the end of World War II and politicized by the rebellious spirit of the late 1960s. For these children of Malcolm X, Mao, Che, Amilcar Cabral, the fight against imperialism and colonialism was the defining formative political experience. During the harsh climate of anti-Communism, many 68ers such as Jamaicans Brian Meeks and Rupert Lewis embraced Left-Radical ideas and/or Marxism. Mills eventually joined the Workers Party of Jamaica (which was aligned with the Soviet Union) during this period as a reflection of his growing political radicalism.

Mills also belongs to a long history of Caribbean intellectuals who, on the one hand, tend to exaggerate the character of racism in the United States while simultaneously discounting the determining character of capitalism, class, and class struggle in the United States. Mills and some Caribbean intellectuals are, on the other hand, able to discuss the ways in which capitalism, class, and class struggle shape the Caribbean world.

With respect to Mills’s early career, philosophical worldview, and politics, he consistently frames himself as “a Marxist and a fairly orthodox one at that.” This claim by Mills is rather odd given his adoption of “Analytical Marxism.” It is probably more accurate to characterize Mills as a democratic socialist who was sympathetic to classical Marxism of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and V. I. Lenin. Despite his anti-imperialism, Mills was a fellow-traveler and not firmly committed to Marxism. Despite his radical activism in Jamaica, Canada, his dissertation and early essays, Mills fundamentally adopts a petit-bourgeois form of “Marxism,” “Marxism” without Marx, that is, “rational choice” Marxism. In fact, quite interestingly, by 1994, he was supportive of *Black Marxism,* the anti-Marxist book written by Cedric Robinson.
During this early phase of his career, we find Mills wrestling with conceptual matters—questions of ideology, the precise significance of “materialism,” the status of morality, Stalinism—from the standpoint of “Analytical Marxism.”

Beginning with G. A. Cohen’s Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence (1978), Analytical Marxism aimed to marry analytical philosophical methodology and neoclassical economics with the Marxist critique of capitalism. It is imperative that I note that “Analytical Marxism,” does not entail a systematic philosophical doctrine; better yet, it is a plethora of various intellectual currents, principally in the disciplines of philosophy, political science, history, sociology, economics, and economic philosophy. It seems to possess, nevertheless, a saliently coherent intellectual current, which emanates from moorings in and affinities to neoclassical economic theory and analytical philosophical methodology.

In contrast to Mills, I contend, “Analytical Marxism” has deep roots in the intellectual tradition of classical revisionism as exemplified in the Social Democratic views of Eduard Bernstein. Amplifying this point, Marxist theorist Alex Callinicos observes,

> The difficulty . . . for analytical “Marxists” is that any such view of Marxism as a relatively unified body of theory possessing a hard core (the central propositions of historical materialism, perhaps, plus the principal theses of Marx’s analysis of capitalism) will simply highlight the question implicit in the direction of their work has taken: given the rejection, particularly by the rational-choice theorists such as Elster and Roemer, of most of Marx’s principal theories, and the use of mainstream social science, in what sense does calling them Marxists refer to more than facts about their individual political and intellectual biographies.

Callinicos in his comments on G. A. Cohen, one of the pioneers of analytical Marxism, further states, “But even he [Cohen] had by the mid-1980s settled for political objectives little different from those espoused by contemporary social-democratic thought—a workers’ cooperative mixed economy with fiscal devices to ensure rough equality’. Whether analytical Marxism represents a development of, or an exit from, the revolutionary socialist tradition therefore remains to be seen.”

“Rational-choice Marxism” was most systematically expounded by Jon Elster in Making Sense of Marx (1985). It rested on two theses: first, methodological individualism—social structures must be interpreted as the unintended consequence of individual actions; second, human actors must be regarded as instrumentally rational, in the sense of selecting the most efficient means for securing their ends. The first thesis was associated with the ideological offensive waged against Marxism by Karl Popper and Friedrich August von Hayek at the height of the Cold War; the second was a generalization of an animating assumption of neoclassical economics. How could an approach with such anti-Marxist credentials come to be associated with an attempted reconstruction of Marxism? Classical Marxist philosophy and analytical “Marxist” philosophy are mutually exclusive and therefore any merger, at best, can only result in syncretism. The prime occlusion, at the level of political economy, is the respective antithetical conceptions of value. Marxist political economy maintains an objectivist theory of value and “Analytical Marxism” upholds a subjectivist one. Let me be clear and direct. “Analytical Marxism” is an exit from the revolutionary theory of Marxism.

Mills’s third book, From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism (2003), which brings together essays from the late 1980s until 2001, showcases his intellectual development from Rational Choice “Marxism” and/or “white Marxism” to “Black radical liberalism.” Mills characterizes this as a “red shift,” which implies a “new” political development that is progressive in nature. But, more appropriately, the “red shift” of Mills is actually in ideological and political terms a rightward shift away from Marxism.

By 1994, Mills’s transition is evident. He describes his position as “a ‘black,’ or at least racially informed, Marxism” similar to the Black Radical Tradition associated with Cedric Robinson. He further explains that his philosophical outlook is racially—as an African-American in a largely white profession—and theoretically—as somebody who, despite everything, still considers himself a Marxist (albeit in some appropriately hyphenated and qualified sense whose details I have yet to work out).

And he begins to repeat bourgeois nationalist critiques of Marxism:

> Unfortunately, First World Marxism, being largely white Marxism, has historically (following the founders) had little useful to say about race. In part this is a corollary of the general weakness of Marxist theory on issues of national identity and ethnicity, “backward” local particularisms which Marx and Engels envisaged as being swept aside in the universalizing drive of a progressive globalizing capitalism, producing a workingman who had no country. But the pattern of neglect has been perpetuated, more culpably, by subsequent generations of white Marxists, who have tended to write off race consciousness and black nationalism as an obfuscatory digression from the necessary focus on class.

And

What would a convincing Marxist theorization of race be like? The challenge that such Left accounts as have been given have generally failed to meet is the capturing of the phenomenological dimension of a racialized existence, the centrality of racial identity to the polity, the extent to which race structures one’s life and penetrates to one’s ontic bones. Race has been seen as epiphenomenal, the
tool capitalists use to divide the workers, the "false consciousness" which needs to be demystified so that the underlying proletarian identity can assert itself and we can all get on with the important thing, the class struggle.\(^\text{18}\)

By 1999, Mills claims he no longer believes in Marxism. Pillars of Marxism such as the labor theory of value, as Mills remarks, rest on a set of highly controversial propositions, all of which would be disputed by mainstream political philosophy (liberalism), political science (pluralism), economics (neo-classical marginal utility theory), and sociology (Parsonian structural-functionalism and its heirs). But the irony is that all of these claims about group domination can be made with far greater ease with respect to race, relying not on controversial Marxist notions, but undeniable (if embarrassing) and well-documented (if usually ignored) facts from mainstream descriptive social theory, and on conventional liberal individualist values from mainstream normative social theory.\(^\text{19}\)

By 1999, Mills's shift from philosophical materialism to idealism is complete. This reflected a political shift from being a card-carrying Marxist to "Black radical liberalism."

It is an understatement to say that Mills was not prepared for the raw and merciless racism he experienced in the United States. The contrast to his Caribbean world was sharp. If Mills had kept a journal, he surely would have written something similar to his fellow Jamaican Claude McKay: "It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable. . . . I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter."\(^\text{20}\)

In fact, Mills turn to liberalism and away from "white Marxism" can be explained in terms of the perceived differences between the place of race and racism in the United States and class and class exploitation in Caribbean societies. Arguably, in the Caribbean, the population was also divided along class lines that cut through the various racial groups such as people of East Indians and Chinese origins. In fact, Mills describes Jamaica as one of the countries with "the most inequitable income distributions in the world, an oppressive class system interlocking with and exacerbated by the racial and cultural subordination of the Black majority."\(^\text{21}\) Whereas in the United States there is the perception that race and only race dominates all spheres of civil society and the State. The color of one's skin, for Mills, is the most fundamental fact in the lives of Black folk and that race takes precedence over any other allegiances, such as religion, their identity as citizens, and, most importantly, their class. For Mills, race trumps class, particularly when analyzing the United States.

Mills subsequently reduces class relations into race relations when analyzing the United States. As Mills noted in 1999, "the irony . . . is that in the United States the Marxist material mode of group identification in a society does not work for class but works very well for race."

When Mills discusses the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, he gives priority to class relations. Mills's fetishism of race prevented him from making a rigorous analysis of the facets of class structure and class struggle that underlay racism in the United States. Unfortunately, Mills never understood the need to examine class domination and the class nature of power in the United States and the world at large. He never understood the historical necessity of developing a philosophical perspective that is consistently anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist (but not anti-white) and that speaks to the exploitation and oppression of all peoples. The conclusion that Mills reached was one of political defeatism, that is, the struggle for socialism was a utopian in character. Rather than return to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Mills resorted to ideological mystification, racial reductionism, and bourgeoisie liberalism.

The advent of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan represented the beginning of major offensives against the workers' movements in Britain, the US, and throughout the world that not only inflicted major defeats—such as the decertification of Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (or PATCO) in 1981 and the British miners' strike of 1984–1985—but inaugurated right-wing political policies that by the 1990s had become a normative model for capitalism as a whole. With the decline of the Black Left in the 1970s, the rise of the Right in the 1980s, and collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in the 1990s, the study of Marx became in Mills's words "dead in the water" and forced a shift to race in his intellectual focus and an embracing of liberalism. Normally, such an ideological transition would not be celebrated. However, in my estimation, Mills wanted to hold on to the subjective perception that he was still a radical of sorts. However, the sad truth is that Mills's political odyssey ends with the reactionary ideological outlook that he labels as "Black radical liberalism." At the end of the day, similar to Cornel West, Mills—like an alchemist—sought to give ideological legitimacy to liberalism as a radical alternative to Marxism-Leninism.

**THE LIMITATIONS OF THE BLACK RADICAL LIBERALISM PROJECT: THE ODYSSEY OF PETIT BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY**

Clearly, Mills's biggest contribution to African American philosophy has been exploring the nature of white supremacy. Arguably, however, Mills restricts the scope of African American philosophy:

Those African American philosophers who do work in moral and political theory tend either to produce general work indistinguishable from that of their white peers or to focus on local issues (affirmative action, the black 'underclass') or historical figures (W. E. B Du Bois, Alain Locke) in a way that does not aggressively engage the broader debate.\(^\text{22}\)

What is the "broader debate" that Mills is referring to? For Mills, the Racial Contract is "a global theoretical framework for situating discussions of race and white racism."\(^\text{23}\) As such, it constitutes the only valid means, for Mills, of
challenging the assumptions of white political philosophy. Contrary to the dominant—if not popular—view, *The Racial Contract* is self-consciously not an exercise in African American or Africana philosophy since it addresses global issues as opposed to “local issues.” (How ironic is that! A Black philosopher who wants to address global issues but sees “Black issues” as local!) Consequently, we could argue that Mills does not offer a broad conception of African American or Africana philosophy because their focus is on “local issues.” As such, for Mills, to the extent that he is engaging African American/Black philosophy, it is limited to the philosophy of race and racism. In effect, Mills did not fully appreciate the extent to which the particularity of Black intellectual culture could broaden the universal character of philosophy.24 “Though white supremacy fosters false universality (a distorted conception of the global),” as John McClendon has observed, “universality in and of itself is not false. Universality if it is not reduced to an arid abstraction must be mediated via particularity.”25

What is the “rational kernel” to be extracted from Mills’s philosophy? Fundamentally, we must see that the “Black radical liberalism” offered by Mills functions to legitimate liberalism as a radical alternative to right-wing populism/fascism. “Black radical liberalism” is fundamentally a liberal bourgeois project. Mills’s conventionalist epistemology of race along with racial/racialist ideology consistently obscures the nature of the material contradictions grounding race, racism, and white supremacy. At the end of the day, race analysis separated from a critique of capitalism and its material conditions can only achieve at best superficial descriptions and at worst a distorted conception of reality.

What “political mistakes” are embedded in Mills’s philosophy? First, the cornerstone of Mills’s philosophy relies on counterposing African (continental and diasporan) to Western thought as a mode of ideological critique. From the very beginnings of the Black Studies movement until now, Black nationalist proponents have declared an inextricable connection between a white ideology and the white academy. Traditional academic arguments supporting value-free scholarship, objectivity, non-partisanship, and universality were all scrutinized and such claims were ultimately deemed to be ideological. The social sciences, in particular, were deemed to be bastions of white ideology. This white ideology was proclaimed to give intellectual legitimacy and support to white supremacist policies at all levels of civil society as well as the State. Objectively, Black nationalists were responding to the pervasive presence of racism and national oppression. They thought the ideological struggle against white supremacy required, both inside and outside the academy, the development of a militant Black ideology. The terms “Black” and “white” intrinsically convey specific epistemological orientations. To use postmodern language, “Black” and “white” represent a particular “gaze” from which one views the world. Mills’s framework builds on the work of this ideological tendency in African American Studies. Think of Mills’s essay, “The Whiteness of Political Philosophy.”

To imply that all of Western political philosophy is racist or white supremacist neglects a crucial point. Western thought encapsulates more than capitalism and the ancillary rise of white supremacy. This perspective is problematic because it is ahistorical, as well as too indeterminate and vacuous. It leaves out the crucial details of Western thought and history that would enable us to mark African slavery’s emergence into the arena of world capitalism. Prior to the emergence of capitalism, white supremacy did not exist. Capitalism is only a definite stage in, and not the complete history of, the Western world.

Mills’s framework is built on the usage of Black and white as categorical stipulations for a particular intellectual/phosphilosophical/political orientation. This empirically fallacious and unsupported distinction between a white ideology and Black ideology, white freedom and Black oppression, and the epistemology of ignorance associated with white people contrasts with the more accurate social epistemology of Black people. The result of this reasoning, for instance, leads to bifurcated notions about Marxism—where based on a presupposed antithesis holding between people of African and European descent, it must follow that such racial/cultural differences mark distinctions of an essentially philosophical import for adherents of Marxism. Consequently, we see Mills constantly talking about “Black Marxism” contra “white Marxism,” or “Black liberalism” contra “white liberalism.” Somehow or other, Blackness produces a change in the philosophical content of Marxism and/or Liberalism. Here Mills makes a crucial mistake in assuming that Blackness signifies a description of the method or theory of African American philosophy.

The truth of the matter is the following: Marxism is neither Black nor white (African or European). To be a Marxist is to employ a dialectical and historical materialist (scientific) analysis and critique aimed at concrete conditions that may include the evaluation of social relations, practices, and institutions that are established on racist grounds within the framework of the capitalist mode of production.

For the standpoint of Mills’s racialist ideology, Marxism is reduced to just another white (Western) ideology. The real irony to Mills’s framework is that he seeks to revamp contractarianism although it is equally a part of the Western (or, more accurately, bourgeois) tradition.

Second, Mills belongs to a political tendency that formulates racial inequality as a problem rooted in whiteness, white privilege, or white supremacy. For Mills, everything is reducible to white supremacy—from slavery to various types of colonialism to contemporary versions of neo-colonialism to imperialism. The work of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones are representative of this *racial reductionist* political trend. As historian Eric Arnesen pointed out in a critical overview of the whiteness studies literature, “Whiteness is, variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for ‘white supremacy,’ an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial ‘others’ and one-self that can be rejected through ‘treason’ to a racial category.”26 While I don’t have the space to adequately address the limitations of whiteness studies, Gregory Meyerson, Cedric Johnson, and others have presented detailed discussions.27 By relying on a problematic “retrospective psychoanalysis,”

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24. The Racial
25. APA STUDIES | PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
26. The Racial
27. APA STUDIES | PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
Johnson notes, whiteness studies fails to develop a critical analysis and the historical rigor necessary to understand class and power in the United States. Johnson observes,

The academic and popular discourse of whiteness is concerned with the “souls of white folks” if you will, their predilections, behaviors and reactionary tendencies, often relying on retrospective psychoanalysis to discern the interior lives and private motives of the antebellum crowd, the minstrel show audience, southern lynch mobs and middle class suburban strivers alike, even when evidence of those motives and interests is scant.

He continues,

Whiteness has come to function not so much as an analysis of interests in historical motion, but rather, it functions as catechism—America’s original sin is racism and redemption in the post-political hereafter lies in white atonement. With respect to class struggle and the maintenance of consent and order by dominant classes, the devil is in the details of history, details that fall out of focus when we evoke “white interests” as a metanarrative of what is wrong with American politics. Roediger’s work has advanced an approach to thinking about history and contemporary politics that reifies whiteness, even as it explores its social construction, presupposes that racial identity is the foremost shaper of working-class thought and action, and silences interracial solidarity.28

Second, Mills uses a racial-caste framework to discuss contemporary race relations in the United States. In Mills’s framework the ruling class is magically transformed into the ruling race. Mills confounds class and caste; and subsequently confutes race and class (where ruling race becomes ruling class). This results in Mills’s analytical distinction between (white) freedom and (Black) subordination, and ruling (white) race and subordinate (Black) race. As Mills explains:

I unconsciously took the theoretical apparatus I knew best—Marxism—and shifted its terms from red to black and white. . . . I took the Marxist way of approaching class and applied it to race. . . . Now what I have belatedly realized is that in my theorization of race, I basically adapted most this apparatus and changed the identities of the players. Where Marxists talked about capitalism, or, more generally, class society, I was working with the concept of white supremacy. Whites and nonwhites are the two key players; racial exploitation is taken to be central; whites constitute the “ruling race”, the Herrenvolk, whose rule is consolidated by the state and the legal system. . . .

The problem is that Mills ignores the fact that class stratification among both white and Black people exists. And it produces differing class interests for the Black and white working class in contrast to the Black and white bourgeoisie. A Black and white worker share more in common in terms of their class interest than a white worker shares with Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, or Elon Musk. All workers sell their labor power, which is privately appropriated by the bourgeoisie. This objective phenomenon of socialized production is shared in common by all workers—despite racism, segregated communities, differences in culture, chauvinism on the part of white workers, etc. The struggle to overthrow capitalism and the fight against racism and chauvinism are not mutually exclusive but are integrally united.

Third, Mills fundamentally offers no progressive solution to the “Racial Contract.” Because Mills disconnects the roots of racial inequality from the political economy of capitalism, capitalism—despite being the material cause of slavery, racism, Jim crow segregation, gentrification, and poverty—functions as a presumptive context for the solution to any and all social and political problems. At best, all that Mills can hope for is welfare state capitalism as providing the solution to white supremacy. But why not go farther and argue for socialism as providing the solution to racism/white supremacy?

Mills’s racial analysis unfortunately overlooks the reason that Africans were enslaved, and, consequently, subjected to somatic fragmentation and designated as three-fifths of a person. As the Black sociologist Oliver C. Cox informs us,

It should not be forgotten that, above all else, the slave was a worker whose labor was exploited in production for profit in a capitalist market. It is this fundamental fact which identifies the Negro problem in the United States with the problem of all workers regardless of color.29

In essence, the development of capitalism in the United States involved a racially differentiated process of proletarianization. Beyond a doubt, the African slave came to be the most thoroughly exploited of the working class. They were, however, not the only exploited people in the American colonies. Prior to the enslavement of African men, women, and children, European indentured servants were exploited. From the beginnings of slavery until the end of the Civil War, the vast majority of white people did not benefit from the exploitation of Black labor.

More significantly, Mills seems particularly unwilling to pursue the implications of class, capitalism, and class struggle with all that entails. In fact, Mills claims that the picture presented in The Racial Contract is “roughly accurate.” Subsequently, he argues that when we look at the long arc of United States history, “historically white racial solidarity has overridden class and gender solidarity.”30 Here Mills’s work, despite its historical affectations, still remains to a considerable extent within the methodological conventions of contemporary bourgeois political philosophy, abstracting political theory from the social realities that underlie it.

Why did Mills choose to employ contractarianism as a heuristic method to understand white supremacy as a political system? Why bother? Is it simply a matter of sharing a common language with his orthodox colleagues in analytical philosophy? Did Mills want to break down...
the walls separating him from friendship, collaboration, journal publication, peer approval, grants, promotion, big-time lecture fees, bourgeois success, and other pleasures of professional acceptance? What is the practical and theoretical value of the contract idea? Oddly enough, Mills never gave us a straightforward answer to these questions. Mills, for example, argues,

The notion of the Racial Contract is, I suggest, one possible way of making [a] connection with mainstream theory, since it uses the vocabulary and apparatus already developed for contractarianism to map this unacknowledged system. Contract talk is, after all, the political lingua of our times.31

He continues,

The “Racial Contract,” then, is intended as a conceptual bridge between two areas now largely segregated from each other: on the one hand, mainstream (i.e. white) ethics and political philosophy, preoccupied with discussions of justice and rights in the abstract; on the other, the world of Native American, African-American, and Third and Fourth World political thought, historically focus on issues of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, white settlement, land rights, race and racism, slavery, jim crow, reparations, apartheid, cultural authenticity, national identity, indigenismo, Afrocentrism, etc.32

He also claims

The value of formally articulating a group domination contract, then, is to provide a device for making vivid, within the framework of contractarianism, the actual historical record, and thus counteracting the misleading and mystified historical picture most white contractarians have.33

But, perhaps, the most telling reason for Mills’s adoption of contractarianism is the following comment Mills makes in response to those on the Left who argue that contractarianism is a form of bourgeois ideology:

socialism is not, to put it mildly, around the corner. Possibly the socialist movement can be revived at some stage, but for a long time to come we’re going to be stuck with capitalism and neoliberalism. Surely, then, it is better to have a nonpatriarchal, non-white supremacist capitalism and a degendered and deracialized liberalism than what we have now.34

The truth of the matter is that Mills’s employment of contractarianism is a sign of ideological defeatism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc, we are to believe that Mills was left without a political and ideological anchor and, subsequently, had no choice but to turn to the latest fashion in philosophy, contractarianism. Perhaps the best way of understanding Racial Contract Theory is that it is grounded in a liberal democratic paradigm that is essentially petit bourgeois in its class outlook. His theoretical framework has become the “common sense” of contemporary American liberalism. It is a form of American liberalism that recognizes the realities of American slavery in addition to Jim and Jane Crow.

Let me conclude with the following. Mills constantly argued that Marxism was incapable of addressing racism and/or white supremacy. To make this argument, Mills has to consistently ignore his early political life and political friendships that he developed with Black leftists. In the history of Africana thought and practice, many of the most progressive among anti-imperialist movements, organizations, and leaders eagerly adopted Marxism as an ideological tool to combat imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, national oppression, and class exploitation. In fact, it has been empirically demonstrated in numerous historical works that the ideological divide between left and right, in the Africana world, rests on the fact that the left has advocated socialism/Marxism and the right—in conformity with ruling class ideology and interests—has opposed socialism/Marxism.

A cursory examination of the Africana experience in the twentieth century provides numerous examples of Black Communists/Marxists in the United States, Caribbean, and continental Africa who presented Marxist perspectives on racism, national oppression, imperialism, and colonialism. Hubert Harrison, C. L. R. James, Walter Rodney, Paul Robeson, Amilcar Cabral, Maurice Bishop, Harry Haywood, Abdul Rahman Mohamed Babu, Alex Dupuy, Hilbourne Watson, Kwame Nkrumah, Doxey Wilkerson, Abram Harris, Claudia Jones, Maude White Katz, George Jackson, Alpheus Hunton, Charlene Mitchell, John H. McClendon, among others not only provided theoretical analyses of white supremacy, but also were in the vanguard in the fight against racism, national oppression, colonialism, and imperialism.

NOTES


5. In 2005, Southwest Missouri State changed its name to Missouri State University.


8. Dan Goldstick is a longtime member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada and a former member of its Executive Committee, working closely with Miguel Figueroa and Elizabeth Rowley. Goldstick is the founding editor of the Communist Party’s theoretical journal, The Spark.


Reflections on Charles W. Mills’s Key Intellectual Imperative: Mapping His Philosophical Course After Departing from Marxist Thought

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AN INTRODUCTION

This concise expository presentation constitutes my succinct reflections and critical appraisal on how Dr. Charles Wade Mills tackled mapping his philosophical course after departing from Marxist thought. Keep in mind that unlike an exclusively direct political break from Marxism—which in some way ultimately entails various matters such as political tactics and strategy, ideological leadership, organizational structure, political tasks, or even personal differences—the context of philosophical ruptures correspondingly mandates providing an analysis within the realm of philosophical discourse. If philosophical differences are the deciding issues under contention, then in-kind alternatives by way of philosophical argumentation—with comparable ancillary justifications—should prevail as cardinal points of deliberation. With this in mind, Mills’s departure from Marxist philosophy principally involves two interrogational steps of monumental importance for our analysis.
Our first set of interrogations include the following: Imperatively, does Black intellectual culture have any significant influence on Charles Mills’s formation as philosopher? If not, what serves as the intellectual context during and after his encounter with Marxist philosophy? From the standpoint of method, how does Mills establish the grounding framework for his critique of white supremacy?

The second set comprises the following questions: What intellectual or theoretical concerns brought about his departure from Marxist philosophy? What is (and why does) Mills’s key notion about philosophical inquiry, which is fastened to his text, *The Racial Contract*, initially set the stage for his alternative project to Marxism? Please note, this configuration of interrogations shall not be presented in strict chronological order. Rather, the composite structure—as the sustained content generating the discussion—emerges as our heuristic framework, which accordingly guides our deliberation.

Undoubtedly, more can be said about Mills’s prodigious legacy, yet time and energy restrain a more ambitious undertaking. Obviously, there is abundantly more to the intellectual legacy of Charles Mills. My immediate objective in this essay highlights the focal point for this exercise, yet it is not the only point of equivalence with Mills’s broader philosophical scope. Indeed, I comment—in an earlier publication—on the scope of his work. There I pointed out that the magnitude of his scope actually precedes his magnum opus, *The Racial Contract* (1997).

Mills is a significant voice among the small cadre of Black philosophers committed to the correction of and expansion beyond the Eurocentric myopia of professional philosophy. In his previous scholarship he demonstrates not only that he is insightful, critical and creative, but that he also grapples with questions and issues that few other philosophers, (including fellow Black philosophers), have dared to address. Of particular note is his provocative article, “Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women” (*Journal of Social Philosophy*, July 1, 1994).¹

More recently, fellow Jamaican scholar Dennis Scott quite appropriately offers his personal judgment about Mills in the March 2022 issue of *Small Axe*. For our readers less familiar with West Indian scholarship and Caribbean intellectual legacies, this journal still remains as one of the foremost publications on the Caribbean contemporary scene. Scott notes, “The lamentable death of the philosopher Charles W. Mills, on 20 September 2021, has not only stunned us but left us all the poorer intellectually, the more so, I believe, for the want of an adequate framework for appreciating the real scope of his contribution. Easily, Charles was one of the most formidable Jamaican intellectuals of his generation.”²

Certainly, Scott’s commentary opens one of the several doors to Mills’s manifold legacy. Furthermore, I observed many other (quite similar) statements, including one that appeared in a German publication.³ Undoubtedly, Mills’s intellectual impact remains far-reaching and, accordingly, we duly acknowledge the numerous memorial activities—around the world—in his honor. With Scott’s statement, we have a gripping comment in eulogy-like fashion. Lastly, in response to Scott’s remark on the lack of “an adequate framework for appreciating the real scope of Mills’ contribution,” my essay offers an initial step in the direction of forging such a vitally important framework.

**ON THE FRAMEWORK OF BLACK INTELLECTUAL CULTURE AND ITS RELEVANCE**

Upon hearing of Charles W. Mills’s death on September 20, 2021—to a certain degree—it was not an unexpected occurrence or matter of surprise. Instead, it stands for me as another powerful indication respecting the inevitable fate of this particular—and, more personally, my own—generation of aging Black intellectuals. After all, we are the senior members in the continuum of Black intellectual culture. Certainly, given our elderly status, therein death occurs more frequently than for other subsequent generations. Significantly, I contend that with death there arises the pertinent and compulsory intellectual obligation for both sober reflections and critical appraisals on the past life of those now deceased.

This essential (intellectual) matter of self-scrutiny—in the wake of death—is not reducible to offering eulogies. For eulogies are principally—and rightly so—celebrations of life, specifically in view of death. Contrastingly, self-scrutiny (in broader cultural terms of the collective-self) demands critical examination. It follows that celebration without critical examination thus encompasses emotional expressions sans rational consideration. The rational consideration of life—in the wake of death—precisely demarcates philosophical assessment from the act of eulogizing. This continues as true of all forms of eulogy; which is to say, it matters not if eulogies assume either religious or secular utterances.

Our primordial context of Black intellectual culture in framing our deliberation on Mills is a perceptive choice—because we acknowledge that the very nature of any particular (organic) intellectual culture deeply involves the development of its own intrinsic measure. One which is substantially compounded with a higher degree of self-reflection, along with the decisive measure of accompanying critical assessment.

Without these vital components not only will individual members die over the course of time—an inevitable biological necessity—significantly, what emerges as the primary outcome is more tragically a failure of intellectual obligation, wherein sober reflection and critical assessment are absent. Since with the failure of not fulfilling our required obligations, we ultimately encounter—at our future expense—the very demise of this invaluable edifice of intellectual culture. In sum, what is at stake transpires as the destruction of the concretely established and historic embodiment of our intellectual culture, in all of its entirety.

Notwithstanding, the death of individuals—given its biological characterization—need not dictate the matter of sustained existence respecting the determinate intellectual
culture from which that given individual sprung. The persistent life of a particular intellectual culture, in part, issues from fulfilling the specified (intellectual) obligations of its corresponding members. Importantly, sustainability of intellectual culture permits the retrieval of past traditions and contributions that have relevance for contemporary purposes. We can reflect upon and draw from such traditions and contributions—moreover, learn from past mistakes and failures—when confronting present-day concerns and future aims. Undeniably, the sum of such activities constitutes the continuation of the life of such cultural formations.

However, we must ask, what happens to those designated intellectual cultures that cease to live on? Frankly, it is quite difficult to pinpoint the precise moment in time or point in social space that comprise when (and where) such cultures suffer the fate of death. Since death is an event, which is preceded by the ambiguous nature of its ongoing process of movement, in a word—dying, which is often chiefly internal rather than external in character. In short, the mediated nature of dying—as continuous movement—is often less discernible than the actual (immediate) moment designated as death. This is why the coroner’s report on the time of death is more complicated than what meets the eye.

Comparably, the process associated with dying for an intellectual culture can extend beyond decades. In dialectical materialist terms, what we have is a descending line of regression or degeneration rather than an ascending line of development. In more abstract philosophical language, we have the concrete motion of ceasing-to-be, rather than coming-into-being. Yet, in terms of revolutionary political/intellectual culture, the process of “coming-into-being” is inevitably bound in cumulative relation to another (if not aspect of) culture that ceases-to-be. Life and death stand as the hallmarks of revolutionary political culture and its attendant material conditions.

This is why philosophy cannot reside as an apolitical instrument. On this point concerning the political nature of philosophy, Mills was quite attentive. He argued that white (supremacist) philosophy as political ontology additionally generated an epistemology that hides the facts about how racism as structural impediment remained affixed to the interpretation of political philosophy. Whatever criticism may be directed toward his way, Mills was not ensnared by the ruse that philosophy has no politics. Political philosophy was foremost politics, and issues forth political ontology as well as epistemology as reinforcements. He argues,

Now if the ‘Racial Contract’ is right, existing conceptions of the polity are foundationally deficient. There is obviously all the difference in the world between saying the system is basically sound despite some unfortunate racist deviations, and saying that the polity is racially structured, the state white-supremacist, and races themselves significant existents that an adequate political ontology needs to accommodate. So the dispute would be not merely about the facts but about why these facts have gone so long unappreciated and untheorized in white moral/political theory.

The overriding question remains as to the type of politics he thought should be rendered as the suitable idealization. It was another West Indian intellectual, a generation before Mills’s generation, that embarked on the road of analyzing the nature of what constitutes a dying political/intellectual cultures relevant to people of African descent. Particularly related to the colonial experience, Frantz Fanon expertly mapped a course for our political and philosophical intervention.

We—of the older generation—cannot forget Fanon’s grand contribution via his text, A Dying Colonialism. Accordingly, this text not only described what happened but also takes part in the revolutionary struggle in Algeria. As cultural text, A Dying Colonialism extends beyond the boundary lines of the political autopsy on colonialism. For it aptly explicates the birth of the revolutionary process leading to the death of colonialism. What is the cardinal lesson we must gain from Fanon’s explication on cultural death and the revolutionary rebirth of new cultural moorings, in the broad sense of its meaning?

Namely, it is that through rigorous investigation, we can slowly disclose various stages in the process of a dying (colonial) culture and with some degree of approximate accuracy point to its alternative replacement. The complexity surrounding the examination stubbornly persists, since the actual process ancillary with dying cultures itself slowly exhibits a discernible process of regressive degeneration toward eventual termination. In formal academic fashion, the graveyard of such past/dead cultures now emerges as the province of cultural anthropologists, the philologists’ scrutiny of “dead” languages and for the historians of lost antiquities.

Since bourgeois philosophers have a greater propensity toward ahistorical frameworks, then we discover it is more generally the case that the distinction between what is living contra what comprises the dying or actual corpse is often lost in the shuffle. Frequently, the initial discounting of vibrant possibilities—for addressing current challenges—transpires into outright dismissal. In concurrence, the social context of imperialist hegemonic rule permits fossilized fragments to attain classical status and subsequently preserved as the fountain of cultural expression. For Mills, the aforementioned descriptive account accurately denoted Marxism.

From my appraisal, in stark contrast, this mapping is paradigmatic of capitalism and effectively locates bourgeois intellectual culture and its subsidiary white supremacy in all of its manifestations. The key point of departure between Mills’s direction and my location centrally reduces to diametrically opposed assessments on Marxism as philosophical compass.

Furthermore, I submit my accounting—with careful detailed inquiry—can eventually offer some degree of insight into why Black intellectual culture—and its attendant African American philosophical traditions—continually evaded Mills’s grasp. It follows, we must query, why did Mills not draw from the reservoir of Black intellectual culture? Expressly, when he decided that Marxist philosophy was
a moribund venture. Why did Mills assume that bourgeois philosophy could provide life to those under the yoke of class exploitation, imperialism, and white supremacy?

I contend that the source of the problem remained Mills’s bifurcation on what he construed as global alternatives, where such options rested on either socialism—adjoined to Marxism—or capitalism affixed to liberalism, though shorn of white supremacy. With his departure from Marxist philosophy, Mills readily presumed that socialism was a failed option. Thus, he concluded that he had no other choice than return to capitalism and its accompanying bourgeois intellectual culture by way of political philosophy and ethics. Mills reached this conclusion by way of the idea that the failure of Marxism explicitly indicated that the only successful outcomes of a socio-political sort were affixed to capitalism and its adjacent liberal political theories.

Principally, Mills committed his wager from the viewpoint of engagement in a zero-sum game. Wherein, if Marxism fails, therefore it stands to reason that capitalism succeeds. It follows that since the former socialist (Marxist) Soviet Union collapsed, therefore we can readily confirm—and thus conclude—that US capitalism, along with the rest of the world capitalist system, decisively won the battle of contending social systems.

In a more direct fashion and practical (political) manner, Mills was formerly a member of the Jamaican Workers’ Party—with others such as his childhood friend Brian Meeks. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies, which formed the world socialist bloc, Mills apparently fell into the morass of despair and defeat. Notably, Mills never provided any biographical information about his former political association with—the Soviet aligned—Jamaican Workers’ Party.

However, he does point out the following: “My shift away from working on Marx, then, had several causes. Obviously, one macrocause was the demise of the left in the Caribbean, and the later global collapse of the socialist ideal. . . . So the collapse, as we all now know, did not lead to the rebirth of a cleansed and purified socialism, disassociated from Stalinism, but with the wholesale repudiation of left theory.” He continues, “increasingly I got a sense of talking, if not to myself, and maybe to a half dozen people around the country. I had been on the organizing committee for the 1994 APA Central Division Meetings in Kansas City, and help push for a market Socialism panel, as the only plausible form of socialism left.”

Yet, the silence about his past political work within the Jamaican Workers’ Party creates a considerable lacuna that cannot be addressed in this essay. Hence, a certain shroud of mystery hovers over our assessment of Mills’s departure from Marxism and how it specifically impacts on his resultant philosophical stance. Alas, our analysis must remain limited to strictly philosophical and broader intellectual matters.

However, Marxist and West Indian scholar Hilbourne Watson captures a salient point that is relevant to our analysis of Mills. Watson declares, “Defeatism becomes all the more comfortable to endure when Marxism is declared dead and reduced to nostalgia.” So therefore, Mills’s search for an alternative cultural framework—away from Marxism—could only result in returning to the clutches of bourgeois culture. Albeit, Mills’s cardinal proviso, accordingly founded on an idealist premise (that the complete realization of capitalism in regaining its full potential), pertinently demands the removal of white supremacy from its structural locus. In so doing the possibility emerges for developing a reconstructed liberalism—as the concrete alternative to Marxism—with its emphasis on capitalism and its adjoining political theory of liberalism.

In fact, as late as 2021, in a rather engaging interview, Mills queried, “What should progressives do with liberalism?” His following evaluation is instructive.

With Mills’s centralization of white supremacy as the pivotal structural problem and the congruent primary matter of systemic concern, he consequently decided to push capitalism away from serious analytical consideration. Since white supremacy is the prime structural and systemic matter of global importance, then its eradication becomes the springboard to Black liberation. In comparable terms, just as we witness that some have argued smoking can stunt healthy growth and development of human beings, Mills concludes white supremacy as structural impediment retards bourgeois society of its full development. Get rid of white supremacy and one can fully breathe in the air of bourgeois political culture. One that is stamped by contractual relations, which sequentially fosters individual freedom and democratic principles accordingly encapsulated in liberal political philosophy and ethics.

The entry of his “Racial Contract” into the professional philosophical discourse, Mills believed, was a foundational aspect on the way forward to fundamental social changes in the system of white supremacy. The notion of the Racial Contract, Mills claimed, effectively replaced Marxism and its critique of the capitalist system. This results since the prevailing hegemonic system was not capitalism and its imperialist stranglehold. Rather, for Mills, the hegemonic system is white supremacy as the global system of oppression that vampire-like haunts the world of people of color. Herein, we uncover that Mills believes that he can provide the needed philosophical solution for the problems at hand. Mills noted that

[The] related reason that the “Racial Contract” should be part of the necessary foundation for contemporary political theory is that our theorizing and moralizing about the sociopolitical facts are affected in characteristic ways by the social
structure. There is a reflexiveness to political theory, in which it theorizes about self and later theorists critique the blindness of earlier ones. . . . Our characteristic patterns of understanding and misunderstanding of the world are themselves influenced by the way the world is and by the way we ourselves are, whether naturally or as shape and molded by that world.9

From Mills’s perspective, the world—in its material reality—preeminently comprises the system of global white supremacy. Here it is transparent that Mills’s departure from Marxism comes about by exacting a method of substitution. Whereby Mills replaces capitalism as the material foundation of primary international importance with the global system of white supremacy. Mills’s method of substitution functions as a transformative action parasitic on the realignment of Marxist categories. He openly proclaims:

For illustration, I had never done a course of any kind, whether sociological, political, anthropological, or philosophical, on race. In retrospect, what I have come to recognize is that I unconsciously took the theoretical apparatus I knew best—Marxism—and shifted its terms from red to white and black. I don’t mean (to quickly exempt one natural misunderstanding) that I reduced race to class; rather, I took the Marxist way of approaching class and applied it to race.10

Prima facie, materialism persisted as an operational conceptualization vis-à-vis ontological questions in Mills’s project. Thus, Mills viewed his break from Marxist philosophy not in terms of an alignment with philosophical idealism. He considered the Racial Contract agenda as consistently materialist. He adamantly declares,

And the best tradition of oppositional materialist critique of hegemony idealist social theory, the “Racial Contract” recognizes the actuality of the world we live in, relates the construction of ideals, and the non-realization of these ideals, to the character of this world, to group interest and institutionalized structures, and points to what would be necessary for achieving them. Thus it unites description and prescription, fact and norm.11

Hence, Mills’s method of substitution actually penetrates into and benignly draws from the Marxist theoretical framework including its materialist ontology. Pertinently, the most prevalent substitution is the replacement of class analysis—in its centrality—with a racist analysis or Black ideology as the decisive point of analysis. Thus, whatever the function that class had—as the key category within Marxism—Mills substituted the notion of racialist perspectives into the framework of white supremacy.

Noteworthy, Mills’s adoption of race as the surrogate for class did not necessarily entail fostering the idea of the social construction of race, fashionable among the postmodernist advocates. In Mills’s estimation, the implicit voluntarism associated with the idea “race as social construct” essentially undermined the materialist integrity of white supremacy as hegemonic structural framework. In accord, Mills’s departure from Marxism specifically eschewed joining the various trending notions such as post-structuralism associated with the subjective idealism fastened to the popularity of “cultural” politics. Mills comments,

White supremacy is the overriding structural framework as global system. Thus, the process of being shaped or molded by the world effectively reduces to the hegemonic rule and structural dominance of white supremacy. Mills’s commentary on Marxism is instructive in this regard. He states, “What has been the most influential radical critique up until recently, the Marxist analysis of the state as an instrument of class power, so that the liberal-democratic state is supposedly unmask as the bourgeois state, the state of the ruling class.”12

The fact that Mills elects to italicize “bourgeois” as an adjective before “state” speaks volumes. The distance between class analysis and racist analysis is an important space that Mills renders in accord with his conception of the state. He grants that under the hegemony of white supremacy, it follows the “liberal-democratic state” readily functions as racist institution. Nevertheless, given his alternative Racial Contract paradigm—based on racial-orientation—the same liberal-democratic state can effectively (magically?) reside outside of its designated class function and ancillary social position as bourgeois in character. Hence, the liberal-democratic state comes to occupy a significantly different political space by simply changing the conceptual point of departure with regard to analytical framework. All that it requires—to use Mills’s terminology—comprises the appropriate “shift” from Marxist class analysis to the racialized concept of the state. Mills emphatically makes this point. He declares in no uncertain terms:

My claim is that the model of Racial Contract shows us that we need another alternative, another way of theorizing about and critiquing the state: the racial, or white-supremacist, state, whose function inter alia is to safeguard the polity as a white or white-dominated polity, enforcing the terms of the Racial Contract by appropriate means and, when necessary, facilitating its rewriting from one form to another.14

What are the normative principles that ground Mills’s alternative to Marxism? Under close inspection, Mills admits
he embraces contractarianism as his normative principle. He discloses that his particular take on the Racial Contract is that “commensurability of the graded norm and critique, and bring them together in an epistemic union. . .”

Moreover, it is explicitly predicated on the truth of a particular metanarrative, the historical account of the European conquest of the world, which has made the world what it is today. Thus it lays clean the truth, objectivity, realism, the description of the world as it actually is, The prescription for a transformation of that world to achieve racial justice—and invite criticism on those same terms.

On my account—based on Marxist philosophical inquiry—the connection between capitalism and its bourgeois intellectual culture cannot be readily jettisoned from white supremacy sans foundational (revolutionary) transformation of bourgeois relations itself. The locus of Black intellectual culture is institutionally fastened—in a particular subordinate manner—to the edifice of capitalism and its corresponding ideological superstructure. Hence, its progressive aspect emerges as a dialectical dimension within any potential confrontation with white supremacy. Mills only partially comprehended this hard reality. He asserts,

If “Blackness” denotes a position of global racial subordination in modernity, as it does, then we would expect from the assumptions of standpoint theory that the racially oppressed are going to be better positioned to understand the true character of the Euro-imposed world order than the racial beneficiaries of that order. Social experience and collective group interest in social liberation will tend to have a jointly demystifying epistemic effect. Whose testimony on slavery is more likely to be reliable: Thomas Jefferson’s or Frederick Douglass’s? Yet, this particular example did not provide a compelling reason for Mills to dig deeper into the intellectual and political economic terrain that issues forth this contradiction. Instead, we have the cursory nod toward Black intellectual culture and standpoint epistemology without the full measure of the philosophical import concerning, for example, Douglass with nineteenth-century African American philosophical traditions.

Mills’s twofold process cannot be overlooked when offering an assessment of his simultaneous departure from Marxist philosophy. Although Black and a professional philosopher, Mills publicly directed his announcement to the bourgeois scholarly establishment that the real foundation for his offering to the alter of legitimate scholarship was not restricted to Black intellectual culture, along with its attendant philosophical traditions. The matter of the legitimacy of Mills’s agenda entirely rests on the presupposition that approval is anchored in residence within bourgeois culture sans its white supremacy and racist proclivities.

What Mills fully appreciated is that if he was to openly link himself to African American philosophical traditions, then in no way would it be possible to gain a seat at the big table and what he conceived as its global stage. This conundrum sufficiently explains why Mills was caught in the quagmire of trying to escape identification with African American philosophical traditions; although, we discover that white scholars—firmly attached to the bourgeois academy—did not grant Mills a pass to exit out of African American philosophy. The litmus test was the virtual and continued neglect of his work by white bourgeois scholars. This perpetual neglect of his work he repeatedly lamented about over the years.

After his break from Marxism, Mills continued to emphatically declare he was not of the opinion that bourgeois intellectual and political culture was a dead dog that needed to be buried in the cemetery of past reactionary ruminations. Unfortunately, Mills encountered deaf ears among the philosophical establishment, with the exception of that segment of white liberals that were attracted to the message of Black radical liberalism. This message contained vestiges of Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream” speech and James Baldwin’s exhortations on racism and white hypocrisy. After all, Mills’s project eventually involves the reconstitution of liberalism with the aim of fighting white supremacy and racism. As one of Mills’s liberal supporters adamently argues,

I urge Mills to stay his lonely course and press even harder to reconstruct liberalism into a political philosophy capable of adequately addressing racial injustice. I do not mean to suggest he is the only liberal political philosopher attentive to racial injustice. . . None of them, however, seeks to infuse the entirety of liberal theory with racial reflexivity; none of them, in other words, seeks to attune rightwing libertarianism, leftwing Rawlsianism, and all the positions in between to (1) the historical depth and reality of white supremacy and (2) the imperative of developing conceptual tools to address it. It is this ambition that sets Mills apart.

Since Turner, as a fellow liberal thinker, shares the same ideological blinders worn by Mills, he cannot comprehend that the political distance between libertarianism and Rawls’s notions about contractarianism in reality considerably falls short of any viewpoint concerning the rightwing versus leftwing divide. As Stephen C. Ferguson astutely comments,

While Mills’ naturalized account of the contract is structurally different from Rawls’ idealized, hypothetical account of the contract, both Rawls and Mills adhere to a liberal political philosophy which occludes the reality of inequalities at the level of bourgeois productive relations. Hence, neither Rawls nor Mills comes to terms with the significance of the class structure of capitalism and the nature of capitalist exploitation in limiting the possibility for a just democratic society.
Notwithstanding that Mills lacked any inclination for critiquing capitalist class contradictions vis-à-vis the specter of white supremacy, he also failed to take the full plunge into Black intellectual culture. Such waters were too dangerous and threatening for mainstream philosophers and the subsidiary institutional networks that comprise the profession of philosophy. No longer a Marxist philosopher, Mills drew his map for entry into the gates of hegemonic legitimacy, which is only afforded to those that effectively demonstrate mastery of the mandatory rules of the game.\(^{21}\)

One chief rule that Mills readily acknowledged was the stipulation concerning “do not get enmeshed in the insurgent movement to upend the primacy of bourgeois philosophy.” Given the fact that bourgeois philosophy remained perpetually encapsulated in European forms of racist adornment, then claims about Black intellectual culture serving as a viable alternative clearly present a considerable threat. This emerges as the cardinal point of contention because Mills’s entry onto the bigger stage of the white academy would be effectively impeded.

Mills very well understood what was at stake. Since his arrival in the United States, the question about the meaning of his own Black identity was indelibly inscribed into his formative West Indian consciousness as “Red” man. Furthermore, Mills’s brush with public criticism relating to his employment via affirmative action—early in his professional career—certainly provided sufficient evidence that embracing African American philosophy as the medium for professional expertise would not elevate him onto the big stage.

For illustration, although political theory and ethics allows for some measure of legitimate space regarding philosophy of race, nonetheless, specialization concerning the history of African American philosophers/philosophy primarily remains today largely disregarded in academic circles. Thus, this subject matter continues as an absent chapter in the canonical histories of philosophy.\(^{22}\)

In view of this scenario, this crucial point respecting African American philosophical traditions remained as marginally existent on Mills’s own agenda. He viewed serious attention to this subject matter—African American philosophical practices or more generally the history of Black intellectual thought—as merely localized interventions, falling short of the major arena, which is situated on the global plane of the critique of white supremacy. He stated:

> Those African American philosophers who do work in moral and political theory tend either to produce general work indistinguishable from that of their white peers or to focus on local issues (affirmative action, the black “underclass”) or historical figures (W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke) in a way that does not aggressively engage the broader debate.\(^{23}\)

Although Mills identified as Black or African American—in the wider sense of the Americas and not in the limited manner of the United States—along with identifying as philosopher, he did not locate his corpus—broadly framed as the Racial Contract, Black Radical Liberalism, and even Black Enlightenment—as constituent with Black/African American philosophical traditions. Mills set out on a journey that erected detours so that he need not cross the path of African American philosophical ruminations; even the idea of an occasional intersection was adroitly avoided. Mills deftly created his philosophical map not only for departure from Marxist thought, but also in careful avoidance of any hint of admixture with Black intellectual (cultural) elements.

Simply put, the Racial Contract project was self-consciously not an exercise in African American or Africana philosophy. This is because the intended global dimension of Mills’s project excluded considerations on placing his philosophical agenda within the designated standpoint Black/African American philosophy. Despite all appearances, Mills’s sustained project—from the Racial Contract to Black Radical Liberalism—does not consciously share whatever the conventionally designated essential attributes that are associated with most other African American philosophical thinkers and their corresponding issues attendant with African American philosophy.

Foremost, Mills thinks his philosophical viewpoint particularly stands—in terms of requisite principles—on the grounds of a different kind of object of investigation where the object of investigation (subject matter) constitutes the liberal critique of white supremacy. Mills’s liberal critique was less a concern to uphold Black intellectual culture and its critical posture; more readily the concern was in resurrecting liberalism sans white supremacy. The eradication of racism from the discourse, he surmised, allowed for an open deliberation among like-thinking philosophers established on a firm commitment to liberal principles.

Therein, we observe that the Racial Contract/Black Enlightenment/Black Radical Liberalism continuum readily departs and openly excludes itself from belonging to the conceptualizations associated with African American philosophical traditions. While Mills often theorized about “white ignorance,” his solution was not in any manner an entry into Black intellectual culture. Mills’s mapping of his philosophical course was not a fortuitous step; rather, it was a well-calculated thrust on the path toward gaining a place in what he determined was the global stage of discourse.

Simply put, Mills’s precise execution (or should I say exclusion) of his works, significantly follows from his conscious design in reaching a suitable locus within professional (philosophical) circles. About this pressing concern, several decades ago, I stated,

> My main criticism centers on Mills’s perspective on the typology of the African American philosophical tradition with regard to moral and political theory. Mills (correctly) views his own text as a global theoretical framework for the analysis of race and racism. This global focus in turn directly confronts the presuppositions of the dominant white political theory. Mills assumes that those African American philosophers doing moral and political philosophy either simply pursue mainstream philosophy or are more local in their focus. By local in focus he means addressing questions of affirmative...
action, Black “underclass” or investigating African American philosophers (historical figures), e.g., Du Bois and Alain Locke, such that the broader debate is left undone.24

I continued with the following remarks:

However, if we recognize Mills’ claim that the racial contract is central and not marginal to a conception of the global, then the examination of the history of African American philosophers must not be seen as local in focus but as the (particular) vehicle to rethink what constitutes true universality. Though white supremacy fosters false universality (a distorted conception of the global) universality in and of itself is not false. Universality if it is not reduced to an arid abstraction must be mediated via particularity.25

Mills explicitly articulated that his “Racial Contract” formulation was far from a localized treatment of the Black experience. He presumed that his formulation occupied a more expansive intellectual terrain, which was closer to the main arena of academic discourse. He argued:

What is needed, in other words, is a recognition that racism (or, as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties. The notion of the Racial Contract is, I suggest, one possible way of making this connection with mainstream theory, since it uses the vocabulary and apparatus already developed for contractarianism to map this unacknowledged system. Contract talk is, after all, the political lingua franca of our times.26

Mills understood his own work via the initiative of The Racial Contract as global in character as well as in scope. In terms of its global character, it should not be overlooked, the socioeconomic dimension Mills identified with his formulation effectively replaces capitalism and its respective exploitative structures as the foundational system of or material basis for the internationalized forms of white supremacy. From the slave trade, slavery, and various types of colonialism to contemporary versions of neo-colonialism, for Mills, they all are reducible to global white supremacy. With respect to countering its global scope, he confidently presupposed his work could not be easily disposed into the “Black ghetto dustbin.”

Mills thought the way forward was to adopt the hegemonic terminology consistent with the prevailing “lingua franca,” expressly the language centering on contractarianism. Mills reasoned that the discourse of counter-white hegemony would gain a better reception by the philosophical establishment. The key was in the adoption of hegemonic terminology of contractarianism itself. After all, language is not merely a grammar or syntax, but also a conceptual framework.27 In essence, Mills’s suggestion is more than merely changing one’s linguistic expression within political theory. Crucially, it is his summons to adopt the conceptual framework of contractarianism. Having dispensed with Marxist philosophy, in Mills’s estimation, the notion of contract theory in regards to political theory is no longer problematic at its core.

In hindsight, we observe what resulted was a certain air of irony. Although Mills’s work was published by Cornell University Press—an Ivy League press to boot—it was ignored by most mainstream (read white) academics and scholars. In short, Mills’s initial text was treated in the same manner as works within the traditions of Black/African American philosophy. Mills’s intention of creating a substantial distance—from the presumed localized nature of Black philosophy—and thereby facilitating a common language with conventional mainstream liberalism, for his magnum opus, utterly failed to impress the powers that be within the white academy.

Nonetheless, Mills insisted that penultimately it was white academia’s loss. For his work—although critical of white supremacy—accurately belongs within the framework of bourgeois intellectual culture. Indeed, Mills’s entire corpus—he thought—at root provides the necessary enhancements for (and correctives to) bourgeois intellectual culture and scholarship. Crucially, Mills consistently (in fact, persistently) argued The Racial Contract comprises the needed idealization for realizing the full potential of the Western guiding principles of enlightenment, rationality, democratic rights, individuality, and so on. Mills unequivocally stated, “My response to unqualified criticisms of the Enlightenment has always been that what we need is not an oppositional anti-Enlightenment, but rather an Enlightenment that lives up to its ostensible norms and principles rather than systematically violating them.”28

In conclusion, Mills’s statement establishes why the Racial Contract encapsulates his decisive break from Marxist philosophy. Also, it explains what he expected to pursue as committed philosopher, given his return into the fold of bourgeois intellectual culture. In my view, his departure from Marxism amounted to a detour, a wrong turn away from effectively giving life to the ongoing progressive journey, in the fight against white supremacy and its material groundings in international capitalism. Despite his noble intentions and dedication as an intellectual in the field of professional philosophy, he departed from “The Long March” in hopes that the restoration of enlightenment would provide the answers.

I have not—in this essay—ventured to speak about the nobility of Charles W. Mills. Undeniably, he was a noble person of high ideals and character. However, my essay is not in the fashion of a eulogy—although I have given quite a few over the years—rather, it is a rational consideration of Charles W. Mills based on my philosophical considerations. In sum, I have exercised my critical examination. I will leave it to the attentive reader to subsequently reach the necessary conclusions of its worth.
INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Philosopher, theologian, lay preacher, and cultural critic, Cornel West is arguably the most publicized personality among contemporary African American intellectuals. A renowned public lecturer, he frequently appears on the television airwaves, along with other forms of mass and social media. Likewise, West is a prodigious writer and his various publications are sometimes, if not often, intriguing, astute, insightful, and engaging. I will not assume, in this short chapter, the Herculean task of critiquing his vast corpus. Better yet, I embark on the rather modest aim that entails the critique of West’s conception of Marxist philosophy. Ergo, I submit my critical reflections on the text The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought.

The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought exemplifies West’s most comprehensive treatment of Marxist philosophy. This book—originally his doctoral dissertation—has a clearly formed thesis with accompanying sustained argumentation. Conceivably, this text represents one of West’s best philosophical endeavors, if not his most popularly acclaimed production. In regard to popular appeal, I think most pundits would venture that Race Matters continues as the most acclaimed among his body of work.

In respect to the history of African American intellectual culture, no other non-Marxist philosopher, besides West, has been willing to tread—in a rather particularized manner—the content and contours of Marxist philosophy. Prima facie, one may even conclude that West is not only a Marxist philosopher but as well could surmise that he has substantially and creatively contributed to Marxist thought. Alas, one should not confuse appearance with essence, for things are not always what they seem; skim milk sometimes masquerades as cream.

I now offer six questions, which shall correspondingly frame our discussion about West and Marxist philosophy. First, how does West, as non-Marxist philosopher, conceptualize Marxist philosophy? Second, does this conceptualization diverge from Marxist philosophy? Third, if it’s the case that we have a departure, in what sense does it deviate from
Marxism? Fourth, can it be said that the extent of West’s departure amounts to anti-Marxism? Fifth, what are Marx’s actual notions about his own philosophical moorings? Sixth, how do we discern whether Engels shares the same philosophical conceptualizations, which we must anteriorly uncover as associated with Marx?

This aggregation of questions pertinently comprises our heuristic framework, hence effectively mapping our ongoing discourse. It follows we must sustain a thorough intervention respecting The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought. Correspondingly, we have the accompanying mandate that we rigorously investigate and subsequently compare this text vis-à-vis the relevant works of Marx and Engels. Importantly, our key concern (throughout this paper) goes beyond the fact that West is not a Marxist philosopher. Additionally, he harbors an anti-Marxist philosophical perspective. Paradoxically, West’s anti-Marxism transpires within his very attempt to explain the theory and method of Marx, especially with his claims that identify Marx as radical historian. Indeed, radical historicism functions as the lynchpin for West’s depiction of Marx’s philosophy.

Of primary concern, given that Marx embraces the historical method in his analysis of philosophy, we must not confuse radical historicism—which rejects the idea of the materialist foundation for social consciousness— with historical materialism and its genesis within the sphere of philosophical (dialectical) materialism. Marx’s historical materialism provides a scientific critique of the material basis that grounds not only contradictory social (class) relations but also the manifold forms of social consciousness in view of determinate modes of production. By means of a requisite concrete analysis of this essential difference, I think my thesis about West’s anti-Marxism will unfold as manifestly transparent, at least for most readers with a critical mindset.

PATHETIC PRAGMATISM AND KARL MARX: RADICAL HISTORICIST OR DIALECTICAL MATERIALIST?

Of special interest, West’s notion of radical historicism has an accompanying theoretical alignment directly with his own personalized form of neo-pragmatism. Noteworthy, West— in a previous publication—asserts that his neo-pragmatism is crucially linked to the "Prophetic Tradition" derived within the context of African American Christian thought. The notion "Prophetic Pragmatism" indicates that West is steadfastly committed to a religiously inspired form of idealism, regarding his general philosophical orientation. This orientation alternatively stands as oppositional to Marx’s philosophical position, customarily designated in terms of dialectical and historical materialism.

My examination centrally focuses on the philosophical thrust of Marx and Engels’s work, wherein the analysis comprises a comparative approach, rendering their collective authorship in contrast with West’s composite argumentation. The import of this comparison materializes as our pivotal methodological concern. Explicitly, our critical investigation decisively tackles what West would have us believe about Marx’s philosophical methodology.

In The Ethical Dimensions, West tenders that Marx’s philosophizing (i.e., Marx’s own philosophy) stands in sharp contrast to conventional notions about the nature of Marxist philosophy. For example, Engels claims that Marxist philosophy is none other than dialectical materialism. Significantly, this entails definitive features of Marxist philosophy inclusive of both its epistemological and ontological dimensions, with adjacent materialist foundational characteristics.

Sequentially, West submits that Marx—contra Engels—is foremost an idealist, wherein Marx’s idealism—as with West—is firmly within the parameters of neo-pragmatism, radical historicism, and its subsidiary anti-foundationalism. My critique attends to West’s own allegiance to idealism and how it prominently stands in sharp conflict with Marx’s adherence to philosophical materialism.

Marx and Engels establish that philosophical materialism remains as foundational vis-à-vis the inquiry on epistemological and ontological matters. Since West clings to anti-foundationalism, we discern that what correspondingly results is the overt rejection of any systematic approach to philosophical foundations. In conjunction with his anti-foundationalism, West argues that ethics transpires as the chief feature associated with Marx’s philosophy.

For West, the principal questions are not the ontological and epistemological foundations of Marx’s philosophy. Nor is it how Marx and Engels creatively founded a comprehensive research program aimed at the scientific critique of bourgeois social relations, institutions, and practices. Instead, West claims that Marx’s philosophy preeminently assumes the task of theorizing about ethics. On close inspection, West’s book title—The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought—conceals more than what it actually reveals about the ethical aspects of Marx’s thought. On first appearance, the emphasis on questions pertaining to moral judgments seemingly implies that while ethical concerns are primary, nevertheless, there remain other key dimensions to Marxist thought.

However, we must go beyond the apparent implication suggesting that West attends to multiple dimensions within Marx’s philosophy. Our critical inquiry discloses that the presupposition with regard to manifold dimensions only cryptically addresses the real locus of ethical matters. This is because West recommends that when we read Marx, it reduces to one key methodological issue. Namely, Marx’s thought boils down to the manner by which he theorizes about moral concerns. West’s concerted efforts evolve into his overriding and comprehensive justification. And this justification is based on a singular methodological approach, via the employment of ethical reductionism.

By means of ethical reductionism, West sets the stage for Marx’s grand entrance into the very realm of West’s own thought. Marx’s philosophy effectively becomes an ethical project, cemented within neo-pragmatism and radical historicism. In relation to West’s philosophical commitments, Marx holds an insider’s position and shares, with West, a common philosophical point of departure. West confidently
now assumes that his own philosophical vantage point remains sufficiently consistent with the philosophy of Marx.

Unequivocally, the specific combination of idealism, anti-foundationalism, and anti-systematic philosophical inquiry emerges as the prime buttress in West's explication of Marxist philosophy—an explication that continues as stringently anti-materialist and accordingly embodied within an equivalent anti-scientific framework. Undoubtedly, West's confirmation of idealism directly aligns with his broader presumptive reference point, which removes Marx from any connection to dialectical materialism and scientific socialism.

By means of counter-positioning—what West designates as—Marx's "theoretic" approach, we observe that "theoretics" consecutively stands in sharp distinction to conventional modes of philosophical inquiry. In adhering to theoretics, West asserts that Marx effectively discards the need for rational justifications—which are based on notions about objective and universal principles—respecting ethical concerns. It follows that historical context—via the method of radical historicism—eliminates all reliance on assumption about objectivity and universality as necessary foundations for theoretical inquiry.

Furthermore, West claims that the aim of philosophical investigation and its ancillary search for foundational certainty in epistemology and ontology can be readily dismissed, especially in light of his presumption that Marx travels along the road of radical historicism. Alternatively to embracing philosophical materialism as foundational in Marx's evolutionary formation, he argues that Marx remains strongly committed to radical historicism in all of his pragmatist glory. In sum, West concludes that Marx elementally sides with anti-foundationalism and its subsidiary idealism.

In opposition to West, I argue that correctly apprehending Marx's philosophical evolution points not to an ethical dimension, but rather to his evolving scientific research program in conjunction with studies in political economy. Marx's transition from philosophy to the critique of political economy comprises the logical outcome attached to his philosophical materialist frame of reference. Concomitantly, we uncover that the materialist underpinnings of scientific inquiry effectively correspond to and, moreover, continue as deeply inscribed within Marx's practice of political economic analysis. In other words, the scientific character attendant with Marx's critique of the political economy of capitalism and its attendant political economy is integral to his emergent philosophical locus.

Nevertheless, this scientific characterization, attached to dialectical materialism and consecutively to the critique of political economy, does not require the eradication—from Marxist philosophy and political economy—of their specifically formed and determinately styled normative dimensions. This normative aspect gains particular relevance when concretely taking into account how the critique of capitalist political economy actually points in the direction of proletarian material interests, class consciousness, and class struggle.

The hallmark behind the Marxist notion of the social sciences is that scientific inquiry extends beyond merely providing descriptive accounts of the most immediate appearances. Unmasking the nature of definitive social (class) interests in accord with the underlying contradictions of a structural manner continues as paramount. Engels's observation concerning the importance of Marx's treatment of surplus value is one sterling example. Engels explains the nature of Marx's treatment on how profit emerges from surplus value. Marx scientifically rejects the idea that profit constitutes an attached revenue to capital as a factor of production. He demonstrates that capital when conceived not as a reified economic factor—in relation to land and labor—but as a definitive social relationship, gives rise to new possibilities. It becomes possible to discover—with this penetrating scientific concept—how the category of "capital" necessarily entails the exploitation of the working class.

With this discovery, Marx uncovers the prime social and political implications constituted as the normative guidelines adjoining with the proletarian class struggle. The material interests of the working class objectively stand in contradiction to bourgeois-class interests and thus confronts the very edifice of capitalism. The basis for socialism evolves from the contradictions within capitalism as mode of production. Moreover, this conclusion about capitalism and socialism does not render a moral judgment. The distance between West's radical historicism and Marx's historical materialism and its attendant political economy emerges as light years apart.

Instead of West's ethical thesis, we have Marx's scientific conclusions about bourgeois social reality. Additionally, we must not overlook that the accompanying and foundational philosophy of science—based on dialectical and historical materialism—issues forth a different sort of normative parameters. Consequently, what prevails with the Marxist pursuit of scientific examination cannot be equated with the positivist conception of science.

Positivism mandates—on principle—the removal of all axiological issues and concerns as relevant to the scientific method. Hume's fork is prominently on display at the positivist/empiricist table. It follows that scientific analysis becomes descriptive in character. This reduces the overriding problems associated with value judgments, thus remaining as no more than emotive acts, sans factual importance.

Marx's critique of the political economy of capitalism is certainly a scientific value judgment of immense significance, and is thus rooted in revolutionary norms of the highest scientific character. What cannot be ignored is that dialectical materialism functions as the philosophical grounding for the scientific nature of Marx's political economic critique. Contra West, we must acknowledge that Marx does not approach capitalism from the standpoint of ethical dismay or moral consternation. Although it rejects an ethical assessment, the Marxist political economic critique of capitalism retains a normative aspect that is class driven. The dynamics of class struggle is the pivotal concern animated by the norms affixed to proletarian (class) interests.
Therefore, my elaboration on the normative dimension of Marxist philosophy stands far from sanctioning West's ethical dimension thesis. Particularly, the thesis that Marxist philosophy stands paramount as an ethical project. The ethical project thesis, inter alia, functions to subvert the scientific qua materialist nature of Marxist philosophy. Thus, West's premise—based on the ethical project thesis via radical historicism and anti-foundationalism—actually undermines Marx's philosophical roots, within the grounds of dialectical and historical materialism.

It reasonably follows, if the claim about Marx—as radical historicist—has any warrant, West must suitably ascertain the precise trajectory of Marx's philosophical evolution. I contend that West starts with dismissing the centrality of Marx's dialectical materialist philosophy. This effectively takes place in locating radical historicism as the culmination of Marx's philosophical concatenation. Such action results from discounting Marx's philosophical projection from Hegelian (dialectical) idealism to (dialectical) materialism. For illustration, the historical process of Marx's materialist inversion of Hegelian idealism via The German Ideology West willfully ignores. Despite the fact that Marx readily and publicly acknowledges that The German Ideology is the key text in his evolution to philosophical materialism. Some readers are keenly aware that Marx co-authored this formidable text with Engels. The German Ideology plainly and affirmatively established how philosophical—dialectical—materialism crucially remained as foundational to their critique of German idealism. It follows that Marx and Engels's collaborative efforts seriously challenge how West portrays The German Ideology as well as the philosophical worldview of these two comrades-in-arms.

When we inspect The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought, the first three chapters center on the evolution of Marx in relation to the disciplinary scope of philosophy. West claims that Marx ultimately rejects "philosophy" as a mode of inquiry and its encumbering foundationalism. Instead, Marx adopts "radical historicism" along with its "theoretic" modes of discourse. The import of this claim, with respect to the tradition of Marx philosophy, is that it demonstrates how Marx stands apart from designated others within "Marxist" philosophical traditions. Wherein Marx pursues radical historicism, the other identified thinkers all follow "philosophical" agendas, which are quite distinct from Marx's theoretics and radical historicism.

Specifically, West argues that Engels—antithetical to Marx—continues to be immersed in what constitutes the "Teleological Quest" (chapter four); Kautsky, in turn, has his "Naturalist Quest" (chapter five); and with Lukács there's the "Ontological Quest" (chapter six). The concluding chapter is a summation of the fundamental divide between Marx's radical historicism and all of the prior forms of Marxism. For them in misguided quests, which emanate from not embracing radical historicism, West tells us, they are all in some manner constrained by philosophical foundationalism and the pursuit—in some form—of its corresponding quest toward epistemological certainty.

Therefore, Marx's theory is not only outside of philosophy tout court, but also more critically stands apart from what is generally acknowledged and depicted as various kinds of Marxist philosophical traditions. On West's account, Marx is neither positioned within the classical tradition of Marxist philosophy (typically associated with Engels) nor the Social Democratic trend (the tradition of Kautsky) and not even "Western Marxism," commonly associated with Lukács, among others.

Yet, West miraculously argues that closer to the "mark" (or should I say "Marx") stands the pragmatist John Dewey, along with the prophetic neo-pragmatist himself, Cornel West. Paradoxically, our pragmatists encapsulate what is most significant in Marx's philosophy than Marxists such as Engels, Kautsky, and Lukács. With this startling revelation, one does not know whether to jump with joy or instead cry out in pain. Unmistakably, if we have more to gain—by way of Marx and Marxism—in reading Dewey and West in contrast to scrutinizing the works of Engels, it certainly follows that seriously studying Engels—not to mention Lenin, which West excludes from any consideration—amounts to a great deal of wasted time and effort.

Transparently, West's claim entails that our time and effort could have been more productively spent with learning from the advocates of pragmatism. For those of us that considered Engels and Lenin as foundational for comprehending Marxist philosophy, we can only cry out in pain that we missed a very important opportunity. However, among the consorted individuals not prone to wasting time on Engels and Lenin, they can now with certainty rejoice and rest comfortably knowing the road to Marx's philosophy comprises the magic key of pragmatism.

On second thought, why stop with John Dewey as the other prime candidate (in addition to West) from the pragmatist camp? Most students of the pragmatist school know that Sidney Hook had more thoroughly examined Karl Marx than Dewey. In the introduction, West even states, "there is no doubt that my interpretation of Marxist thought is influenced by the works of John Dewey, the early Sidney Hook, and Richard Rorty." Therefore, we ask, why not reclaim Sidney Hook along with Dewey?

Certainly, West is aware of Hook's prior characterization of Marx as pragmatist. Furthermore, West is quite cognizant that Hook had been a student of Dewey. This comes as no surprise, since West previously published an entire work on pragmatism, The American Evasion of Philosophy. Going all the way back to the 1940s, Hook contends that Marx was essentially located within the pragmatist tradition. Incidentally, the 1940s was the time period just before Hook became a fervent anti-Communist, i.e., during the formative stage of "The Cold War." In his capacity as bourgeois intellectual, Hook was a prominent voice, especially among liberal (anti-Communist) "Cold Warriors." Although liberals debate conservatives on the efficacy of reforming capitalism, they still remain staunch defenders of capitalism and bourgeois culture.

When West decided to publish The American Evasion, lo and behold, the liberals bought into the efficacy of
pragmatist politics. Historically speaking—from Emerson to Dewey—there persisted a measured acknowledgement— in the United States—that pragmatism was a viable political instrument, albeit in liberal reformist terms. However, the liberal character of pragmatism was not an attractive feature for all concerned with changing the landscape of capitalism.

The American Evasion—West acknowledged—failed to attract some partisans on the left. Unlike the liberals, the left/socialist contingent did not buy into how pragmatism was a suitable philosophical weapon. Sequentially, West could not comprehend why they deemed pragmatism as undesirable. Clearly, the reason why they rejected his offer is that pragmatism, given its liberal reformist makeup, could not serve as either the theoretical guide or “practical” means for socialist transformation. Subsequently, he shouts out in frustration that his promotion of pragmatism, “as both a persuasive philosophical perspective and an indigenous source of left politics in America perplexed many people.”

Why is this the case? It is precisely because with The American Evasion, we have pragmatism without any Marxist façade. In short, we garner an unadulterated pragmatism, sans any Marxist admixture. For those in tune with Marxism, West’s pragmatist alternative just didn’t smell right; moreover, it failed to provide the correct political fit. In a nutshell, West’s liberal philosophy was not sufficiently proletarian in its class character. Not to mention that pragmatism lacked the revolutionary theory associated with the relevant political objectives, namely, the proletarian struggle against state monopoly capitalism.

On the left of the political spectrum, some activists and scholars very well knew that in an earlier period of mass struggle against capitalism, Franklin D. Roosevelt not only aligned himself with Keynesian economics, but as well wholeheartedly embraced the tenor of Dewey’s brand of pragmatism. Roosevelt discovered that instrumentalism suitably fitted the pressing need for reforming the political economy of capitalism. Roosevelt’s instrumentalist proclivities become most transparent when he sought to gather the necessary nuts and bolts for forging a new path—from the prevailing economic notion of laissez-faire—toward state monopoly capitalism.

In the midst of capitalist crisis, Roosevelt laid the foundation suitable for the putative “Welfare State,” which is far from the advancement of socialism. The notion of the Welfare State effectively legitimated state intervention as the vehicle for market regulations, while in unison sustaining the monopoly capitalists’ tight grip over the economy. This move efficaciously aborted the intensification of the working-class struggle and adjacent prospects for socialism.

From the critical period of the Great Depression and throughout World War II, the Democratic Party emerged as the liberal reformist engine of US politics. The pragmatist approach to political economy undoubtedly had a practical outcome in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Scholars such as Harry K. Wells insightfully point out how pragmatism is intrinsically linked to capitalism and its imperialist— monopoly capitalist—interests.

As a result, we note that West’s claims concerning the power of pragmatism—as witnessed in The American Evasion of Philosophy—remains a rather unconvincing choice as an alternative philosophy, which accompanies socialist—revolutionary—transformation. We must remain clear, in our judgment, Marx was chiefly and foremost an advocate for scientific socialism. He maintained that an appeal to ethics—for attaining socialism—was merely illusionary and utopian. Both Marx and Engels persistently criticized what they dubbed as “Utopian Socialism.”

Consequently, Marx argued that the prospects for scientific socialism vitally included assigning a revolutionary role to the proletariat, which sequentially must overturn (instead of reforming) capitalism. Respecting the viewpoint on political practice, Marx’s materialist dialectics is fundamentally different from pragmatism. Pragmatism views matters of practicality from within the restrictions of the status quo and accepts the inevitability of bourgeois reality. In contrast, dialectical and historical materialism uncovers the contradictions and limits of bourgeois material conditions and the objective basis for its revolutionary overthrow. What follows transpires as the material possibilities for the subsequent transition—on a scientific basis—toward socialism. Hence, the Pragmatist notion of “practicality” should not be conflated with the Marxist—dialectical materialist—position on this matter.

FROM NON-MARXISM TO ANTI-MARXIST: THE PRAGMATIST SUBVERSION OF MARXIST PHILOSOPHY

Given the later publication of The Ethical Dimensions—when the dust was blown off the covers of his old doctoral dissertation—West thought that there would be a better reception for pragmatism from the left. Perhaps with a book demonstrating how Marx essentially remains a pragmatist, the left could see the light at the end of the tunnel. So, therefore, West dusted off his doctoral dissertation and set out to prove that Marx was basically a closet pragmatist.

West’s claim about Marx as pragmatist additionally demanded a cogent demonstration as to why previous Marxist philosophers incorrectly understood the nature of Marx’s philosophy. Incredibly, we discover this involves Marx himself. In other words, West proclaims that Marx sometimes deviates from radical historicism, i.e., whenever he ventures to collaborate with Engels and thus engages in the putative “Teleological Quest.” Successively, West thinks if he can somehow demonstrate to the left how to get Marx right—no pun intended—then pragmatism emerges as more palatable.

West’s efforts in winning over a left contingency, he astutely reasoned, required some measure of credibility among designated Marxist-reading audiences. In obtaining such a readership, West turned to one of the most well-established and widely respected socialist presses in the United States, Modern Reader. In accord, Modern Reader
assumed the chief responsibilities for the rather extensive publication and wide distribution of his book.

Furthermore, Modern Reader went the extra mile via its subsidiary publication, *Monthly Review*. We observe that this Marxist (scholarly) journal—*Monthly Review*—devoted an accompanying special issue to *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*. Moreover, if he could possibly receive the sanction of a “Marxist” publishing house with all the trimmings—including a special issue of its journal devoted to his book—what better façade for his claim that he was a legitimate voice on the left? If the longtime Marxist/ socialist trend (surrounding *Monthly Review* and Modern Reader) decided to jump on board, West assumed that others within the Marxist camp would follow suit. However, West’s hopes of shoring up pragmatism, under the guise of Marxism, hit an unexpected obstacle. Within the Marxist camp, the more perceptively inclined thinkers rejected any conversion into pragmatists.

For illustration, David Wood conveys that with *The Ethical Dimensions*, West strays from his previous allegiance to Marxism. Correctly, Wood duly notes how West’s characterization of Marxist thought is not consistent with a Marxist analysis. Unfortunately, Wood neglects that this work was—in reality—West’s first step toward scholarly attention to Marxist philosophy. Wood fails to see that what is before us is precisely West’s doctoral dissertation—now established as an officially published book. Nonetheless, Wood provides an important insight. West’s ostensible Marxism was simply a masquerade that willfully covered up his allegiance to pragmatism. Concurrently, *The Ethical Dimensions* ultimately functions as camouflage—in West’s attempt—for converting the leftist and Marxist partisans into the ranks of neo-pragmatists.

In his autobiographically styled introduction to *The Ethical Dimensions*, West candidly admits he is not Marxist. Yet, he thinks that this is not all bad nor any cause for alarm because West’s fundamental aim centers on demonstrating that even Marx is not “Marxist.” At least, not in the manner that Engels, Kautsky, or Lukács are so acknowledged. Noteworthy, given the absence of Lenin from West’s text, we can infer that accordingly Lenin and Leninism do not comprise an authentic representation of Marx’s thought. In an earlier published book, *Prophecy Deliverance*, West characterizes Leninism and Leninists by attaching the absurd tag of “Right-Wing Marxism.”

Nevertheless, West suggests that if we read Marx as radical historicist, at root, what we have are the theoretic seeds of pragmatism lurking in the background. He is self-reflectively aware of his own distance from Marxism. Ergo, West’s revelation—in the introduction—that he is a non-Marxist. The big kicker is that West thinks his own distance from Marxism, in leftist political terms, ought not be viewed as an aberration. Why is this the case? Because, we are persuaded to believe, West’s considerable distance from Marxism actually mirrors Marx. We must not forget our prior inspection of the conventional views about Marxist philosophy. Unmistakably, our inspection directly resulted in Marx’s philosophy as measurably different from Marxist philosophy. West’s claim entails a subtle terminological shift, alongside the ambiguous use of the terms Marxist versus Marx’s philosophy. It is the latter term, which functions as the chief point of departure for West’s deliberations on Marx. However, West ambiguously employs both terms; thus we have *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* as representative of Marx’s philosophy and the resultant exclusion of Engels and Lenin, among others, from the Marxist equation. Herein resides the springboard for West’s pragmatist subversion of Marxist philosophy.

This springboard permits West to share a close affinity with Marx. An affinity that results from their common intellectual ancestry in radical historicism. We must not ignore how radical historicism—rather than historical materialism—serves as the common denominator for West’s relationship to Marx. West is most transparent, he is not a Marxist philosopher, yet there is no harm with this acknowledgment. West’s central thesis is that Marx is not a “Marxist” nor is he a “philosopher.”

This presumption about Marx’s relationship to “Marxist philosophy” explains why West sets out to discard all of the various traditions routinely associated with Marxist philosophy. Crucially, West’s accurate claim that he is more than non-Marxist and essentially anti-Marxist—indeed, becomes the catalyst for the incorrect thesis on Marx, specifically, the thesis that Marx shares in the same radical historicism, which West advocates in his role as neo-pragmatist.

Importantly for our assessment, the matter of explicating the nature of West’s conceptual scheme is paramount. When we dig into its core, we unearth that his conceptual scheme relies heavily on Marx adhering to pragmatism. Accordingly, pragmatism is adjoined with a host of corresponding metaphilosophical presuppositions. This accounts for why and how such notions as radical historicism, anti-foundationism, and the method linked to “theoretics” gain preeminence in his overall conceptual scheme. The combined force of these concepts collectively functions to push Marx away from any connections to dialectical and historical materialism.

For example, Marx and Engels’s foundational proposition about the contradiction between materialism and idealism successively comprises the primary metaphilosophical question within Marxist philosophy. Yet West’s anti-foundationism emphatically rejects this proposition. Also, in its stead, West offers up “theoretics” as the prime candidate for Marx’s methodology. Theoretics stands in opposition to all forms of foundationalism including philosophical materialism.

In lieu of the idealism/materialism antithesis, theoretics bears the weight of metaphilosophical substitute for Marxist philosophy. Situated as a pedestrian of “theoretics,” West maintains, Marx willfully travels along the road to historical radicalism and pragmatism. On the basis of this metaphilosophical principle, we uncover the conceptual substance behind West’s anti-Marxism. For if we concede that Marx as dialectical materialist is not Marxist, then West can legitimately claim Marx as fellow traveler.
With that said, let us return to earth, to the material realities that Marx and Engels always have as their starting point. Where The Holy Family is correctly depicted as the material family in idealist distortion. Concomitantly, The German Ideology—comprehended in its historical context—is located in terms of its requisite concrete material conditions. In concert with the "radical historicism" prominently associated with the Left Hegelian tendency, we uncover that Marx and Engels subject to a relentless materialist critique.

It is imperative not to overlook the cardinal fact that the philosophical formation of Marxism—as a critical theory of materialist origins—gained its initial impulse by means of the critique of radical historicism. Particularly, the radical historian tendency firmly linked to Left Hegelian idealism. Marx and Engels in their sojourn—relating to the critique of German idealism—recognized that Hegel's immense shadow on German intellectual culture (in the nineteenth century) resulted in two concurrent trends within Hegelianism. Left- and Right Hegelianism both claimed the mantle of the German master, with the Left Hegelian trend identifying as potentially radical and the Right Hegelian forces committed to conservatism and the preservation of the Prussian state. Of prime importance, for our consideration, the Left Hegelian trend adopted precisely radical historicism as its point of departure.

Consequently, we cannot neglect how Marx and Engels collaborated to expose the pitfalls of Left Hegelianism, which they essentially considered as the primary philosophical and ideological detriment to forging a revolutionary worldview. The foremost danger, Marx and Engels thought, was not the openly reactionary position of the Right Hegelians. Instead, it was the pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric of the Left Hegelian trend. Developing a clear line on the philosophical underpinnings for progressive change in turn mandates confronting the obstacles attendant with Left Hegelianism and its fervently expressed "radical critique."

Despite all appearances, the so-called radical stance of Left Hegelianism was intractably enmeshed within the orbit of Hegel's idealism. Speculative idealism with its mighty roar—Marx and Engels demonstrated—was not an effective substitute for engaging in the serious task of scientific investigation, the object of which comprises material realities of a concrete sort. Hence, the worldview of scientific socialism—philosophically based on Marx and Engels's development of dialectical and historical materialism—stood in fierce opposition to German idealism. Crucially, this vitally included the materialist critique of Left Hegelian idealism via its propagation of radical historicism.

This stubborn (historical) reality regarding Marx and Engels's stance on radical historicism effectively exposes the gross distortion of West's narrative—a narrative that begins by constructing a sharp line of demarcation, which separates Marx from Engels. West's persistent claims concerning radical historicism—versus dialectical and historical materialism—transpires as the key signifier of the great divide. Given this state of affairs, we now uncover why West jettisons Engels from the Marxist equation. Subsequently, for our investigation, Engels's role in the formative stages of Marxist philosophical development emerges as decisive.

**NOTES**

3. West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*.

**REVIEW ESSAYS**

*Hoping in the Darkness of Necro-Being: On Leonard Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader*

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When I began to write this essay on Leonard Harris's *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader*, excellently edited and curated by Lee McBride III, I did so naively. I say naively because reading what is essentially a distillation of four decades of scholarship has been illuminating, inspirational, shocking, moving, and humbling. I must confess that there are many pieces in this anthology that I did not know, mostly because they were published in what one can call, without derogation, "out of the way" places. Now, these pieces will become key points of reference for my own work moving forward. And thus, though naïve, I have learned so much. And most importantly, I have got a better sense of Leonard Harris's own philosophy, a philosophy born of insurgency and ascendancy, a philosophy that is clearly not a scholarly, scholastic, professional performance, but a committed philosophy, a philosophy of and in partnership with a struggle, with a community in duress but also persistence and vibrant celebration of its resilience.

I would like to do these three things in this essay. First, I want to praise the structure of the book, and I want to offer a different way to read its territory. Second, I want to translate that territory into a philosophical map. Third, I want to focus on three key aspects of Harris's philosophical project and conclude by raising some questions, queries, and quandaries for that project.

**First:** McBride has divided the book into five parts, each consisting of three to five essays. They move from Harris's view of what philosophy should be; to racism; to honor and dignity; to an ethics of insurrection; to the question of tradition, canon, and building bridges to a different and more dignifying future. These divisions are felicitous and certainly give us a sense of the range of Harris's contributions. When I had finished reading the book...
and began writing notes on it, it became clear that this structure could also be mapped in terms of some headings of sub-disciplines in philosophy. Thus, the first part (“Part I: Prolegomenon”) is really about “the philosophy of philosophy,” i.e., metaphilosophy. Every philosophy worth its name is also a reflection on what it is doing and what it should do. Harris's metaphilosophy is eloquently proclaimed in the subtitle of the book: *philosophia nata ex conatu*. I cannot refrain from making two comments on this beautiful expression, namely, that it evokes, at least for me, Baruch Spinoza's ontology, ethics, and epistemology. Yet, Harris is neither a Spinozist nor a Hegelian. So, in what sense is the “nata ex conatu” to be interpreted, if it is not from the striving of *natura naturans*, or Being beinging/eventing? Clearly, *nata ex conatu* means from the midst of a leaning forward into the future out of a struggle within and for a given community. Hence, my second comment. “Philosophy born of struggle, striving, yearning” is a cardinal orientation for any philosophy and theology of liberation. It places orthopraxis before orthodoxy. This has been read by most philosophers and theologians of liberation to mean that all reflection begins from a locus of engagement, that is, from a praxis of commitment and transformation, and only then and subsequently, we reflect on the efficacy of praxis. If this sounds like Alain Locke's critical pragmatism, so it is, and so much the better for the convergence.

The second part (“Part II: Immiseration and Racism (Oppression as Necro-Being)”) is a combination of epistemology and axiology as they are refracted through the prism of “race/racism.” I think one of the virtues of Harris's work on racism is that he has taught us to see that “race” is a product of historically contingent, evolving, transforming, and institutionalized practices of racism: knowing and doing are linked in the production of the allegedly stable concept of race. Harris teaches us not to reify or make of race a fetish as an epistemic idol or icon. Prior to “race” is “racism,” and the former is a “conceptual” category that dissipulates, conceals, pacifies, and makes tolerable the violence, misery, immiseration, and despair that the institutions, practices, customs, habits, and traditions that gave birth to it. Here, I cannot refrain from a reference to Adorno's reflections on the violence that concepts do to subject and objects. But more than a mere epistemology and axiology of the “epistemic” uses and abused of the “unstable” concept of race, Harris's engagement with “race” is a virtue epistemology, i.e., an epistemology that is for living subjects and for subjects that assume ethical orientations towards the epistemic tools they avail themselves of. No knowledge is innocent, and ignorance is a crime, to paraphrase Toni Morrison and Barbara Christian.

The third part (“Part III: Honor and Dignity: Reason and Efficacious Agency”) in my estimation is a combination of what we now call “moral psychology” and/or “virtue ethics.” Harris's work, however, brings a distinct and revealing approach to this moral psychology, one that is circumscribed by a lexicon: indignation-dignifying, dishonoring-honoring, abandon/disregard-intolerable, subordination-insubordination. Another word that is not used but is implied in Harris's lexicon is “outrage/anger.” Harris does use the expression “righteous indignation.” Against the moral psychology and virtue ethics of those who are responsibly ignorant of the violence of everyday racism, Harris calls for an ethics of righteous indignation, nay, outrage, and thus insurrection. In this insight, Aristotle, Mills, and Harris converge. Why be ethical, if to be ethical is not a “conatus,” i.e., a task, an orientation, a praxis, a striving that demands a north start? Ethics, proper, is neither a modus vivendi nor a *stabilis ordum*, but a perpetual vigilance and alertness to failure, harm, and injury. Ethics is a form of insomnia and wakefulness, to paraphrase Levinas. But what keeps us alert and awake? Righteous indignation.

The fourth and fifth parts (“Part IV: An Ethics of Insurrection; or, Leaving the Asylum (Virtues of Tenacity)” and “Part V: Bridges to Future Traditions”) have to do with the philosophy of history, writ large, or what we can call “futurology,” i.e., that the future, and thus, what calls it forth and what it leaves behind, has a logos, although not a telos. Harris brings us here, as in the other sections, to another aporia: how to think of the future without telos. Harris is blunt. For him, we live in an amoral universe, and neither nature nor history have a telos, or at least not one that can redeem the incalculable and imponderable suffering of the victims of not just racism, but sexism, pedophilia, and all forms of exploitation, subjection, derogation, vilification, and violence. For Harris, the question is how do we think of a future that is open to radical transformation that at the same time offers no guarantees of redemption, absolution, repair, and hope? For Harris, as for Camus, we should be the Sisyphus that laughs at the malevolent and absent gods of history. All meaning, joy, transformations, and moving forward (where forward is measured by how we abolish a social system of racist immiseration) is our effort and accomplishment.

For Harris, there is no “arch of the moral universe that nonetheless bends towards justice,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. believed. There is no moral universe, period. Yet, there are the practices of honoring that build up honor, practices of dignifying that build up dignity, and critical tradition making that transform how we think about our pasts and our possible communal futures. Indeed, we honor and dignify people in order to expand the circle of those to whom we own respect, loyalty, and solidarity. We also engage in these practices to transform our traditions, even dismantle and reject them, so as to “invent new traditions” with new heroes, archetypes, and role models. Every iteration of an ever-transforming tradition is a moral portrait of the generation that foolishly settled on that version of the tradition. Conversely, as Arendt notes, tradition is what has withheld the test of the process of transmission, i.e., rejection and preservation. Every tradition is a ship of Theseus: it is not the same as when it was launched, yet it retains some of its original characteristics, perhaps some of its original animus and orientation. Traditions, for Harris, do not have teloi, but they have orientations, which we afford them through our practices of honoring and dignifying. Thus, Harris's philosophy of history is linked to a politics. His is a politics of liberation with a dignifying intent that opens up the future. For Harris, then, an insurrectionist ethics is a way of opening up the horizon of the future to what Ernst Bloch called the *humanun*, i.e., a politics of creating human and humane futures.
Thus far, perhaps too obnoxiously and arrogantly, I have offered a different map of Harris’s four-decade-long philosophical itinerary. I have done so, however, in the spirit of hermeneutical generosity and, above all, gratitude. Let me now turn to some questions for Harris’s philosophical project. Before I do so, however, I want to highlight a couple of discussions in the book that were particularly revealing and generative. Harris has a style. His philosophy is “jazzed,” to quote an expression he uses in some of his writings. It is certainly not a Miles Davis kind of jazz, but a jazz that is inflected by the spirituals. This kind of jazz is the one spoken about by James Cone, Amir Baraka, Cornel West, and Angela Davis; it is a Blues Jazz, or a Jazzed Blues. It is fascinating to read nearly four decades of philosophizing that oscillates between red-hot outrage and cold analytical dissecting. I never knew what to expect as I read A Philosophy of Struggle: Was it going to be Carnap and Quine or de Beauvoir and Davis? Part of Harris’s style is also moderated by a philosophical playfulness. All cannot be anger or despair. In between them, there is irony, irreverence, and Rabelaisian carnival. Harris does this when he reverts to, or makes use of, his, what I would call, philosophical fictions.” I cannot celebrate enough Harris’s genre irreverence. If we are to philosophize “ex conatus,” then we must also create different ways to say, write, and transmit that, which is our conatus, our striving.

Among the many striking aspects of Harris’s work, I must highlight what he calls his “actuarial” account of racism. In his 2018 essay, “Necro-Being: An Actual Account of Racism,” Harris juxtaposes theories that try to explain racism as either virtue or epistemic failures, which in one way or another presuppose what he calls “methodological individualism.” Methodological individualism is the view that individuals are responsible for how they view race and how they may or may not be motivated to act in racist ways, over against “descriptions/depictions” of race. An actuarial account of racism is not an explanation, but a depiction of racism. I found this particular chapter extremely powerful, moving, illuminating, and inspirational. What is noteworthy about this chapter is that it was written before the COVID-19 pandemic, during which we have learned about the “pre-conditions” and/or “co-morbidities” that render some more vulnerable to the virus than others. Not surprisingly, race is a major indicator of “co-morbidities” that spread across a wide spectrum of circumstances and situations: from chronic unemployment, to no or minimum healthcare, to employment precarity, to health preconditions having to do with enduring immiseration. I think that Harris’s project of offering an “actuarial” account of racism potentiates both Foucault and Mbembe’s respective ideas of biopolitics and necropolitics by introducing a “temporal dimension” on racism. Racism is not what one individual does, and it is not what institutions do at any given time and space: it is about determining when someone dies and when someone does not die, how short someone lives and how long someone else does. Race is not simply a chronocratic and dermatological Manicheanism, it is also a chronotope of life, i.e., race as a chronotopology—as I have argued in some of my work. Life expectancy has become a way to gauge the justice of a society, and racist societies like ours do not do well on that measure, or alternatively, the disparities in life expectancy reveal how racist our society is.

The other fascinating contribution in Harris’s work is his counter to Foucault’s idea that the “panopticon” is the paradigmatic dispositif/apparatus of modernity. Harris offers a different paradigmatic apparatus, the barricado, namely, the barricade that slave ships were outfitted with to deal with the inevitable and frequent slave insurrection that would break out on their decks. The barricado would separate and protect the crew from the slave cargo, creating a quasi-moat that divides those that must live and those that must die or could die without too much expenditure. As someone who has said, what if instead of philosophizing from Sartre’s glass in front of him or Heidegger’s broken hammer or rural stone bridge, we were to philosophize from the deck of a slave ship? I find Harris’s offering of the barricado as a profoundly generative philosophical “tool” to think through how racism made modernity and how modernity created ever more modern racial regimes.

I want to close by raising two related questions. One has to do with Harris’s critical and challenging discussion of the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. in what we can call the ethics and politics of honoring. Harris notes that there are many other Black Americans who could and should have been raised to a special pedestal of collective honor. Perhaps King eventually earned the honor that he was granted/awarded by White America because his work was exemplary of a certain kind of attitude that one could easily read as those of acquiescence, patience, tolerance, and subservience, i.e., all those virtues and qualities that are the opposite of outrage, indignation, insubordination, i.e., all those virtues we associate with Malcolm X. Strikingly, Harris notes that while Martin Luther King, Jr. may have been awarded the honor and dignity by White America, such honor and dignity was not afforded to Black Americans. Here, I would have to ask whether Harris is not wrong. King was elevated to the pantheon of “American” and “global” heroes in part to give birth, or to give nurturance, to a new developing tradition and political mythology in the US. To that extent, in honoring King, “America” was honoring the indispensable role that Black Americans have played in “making of Americans” the better of versions of ourselves, as Obama put it. The question turns on a methodological distinction Harris makes that revolves around “methodological individualism,” i.e., King was the representative of both a movement and a “raciated ethnicity” that appealed to the better aspects of certain traditions that have defined the US. In tandem, I would have wanted to ask about Harris’s conception of dignity, which in large respects I embrace, for it is related to my own conception of “dialogical/communicative dignity.” All dignity is relational, and thus neither monolithic nor stable. Every struggle against insult, derogation, humiliation, dehumanization, pillage, and immiseration is a struggle for the dignity of every human being; and thus, conversely, assault on the dignity of one is the violation of the dignity of all. In this, we must follow Cicero, Pico della Mirandola, Kant, and Nussbaum.

The last question, or rather quandary, is related to the two prior concerns, but it has to do with a statement we can
find in the first sentence of the last paragraph on page 151: “Democracy does not provide a modus operandi for deciding what counts as appropriate forms of dignity.” This statement is echoed in the next page where Harris advocates for a critique of the state, the discourse of rights, and the institutions of citizenship. I take it that there is a bit of semantic work to be done here. Democracy is as much a descriptor as it is an aspiration; it is as much a tradition as it is a form of thinking about political power; it is as much a perversion of institutions as it is a normative critique of that perversion; above all, democracy, at least in the case of the US, is a shorthand for “constitutional democracy.” I could, but will not, quote the Federalist Papers on the imperative to disaggregate the powers of government. Nor will I refer to Thomas Paine, Tocqueville, or Habermas on the co-originality of the rule of the people and the rule of law by which people are governed. Does not “constitutional” democracy contain the seeds of what we could call “democratic dignity,” a dignity that one could say is spelled out in the Bill of Rights, where we can read an inchoate promise of subjective and symbolic dignity, and the promise of bodily integrity, or at least the constraint on undue, cruel, and unjustified suffering and pain, and all those other rights that derive from constitutional review of the thirteenth through fifteenth amendments and the subsequent amendments that derive from the constitutional constructivism that reads the US Constitution as a living document, rather than a dead parchment held in the Library of Congress? Isn’t this the case especially today in the wake of decades, even centuries, of police brutality and state sanctioned violence, i.e., lynching and Jim and Jane Crow, and the “anger,” “indignation,” and “insurrection” of White Supremacists that attempted to take over, desecrate and do violence on the Capitol, which was built by slaves and on the swamps drained by slaves and former slaves? Especially today in the shadow of January 6, 2021, an exemplar of a certain type of insurrection, indeed, especially today, don’t we have to take recourse to, appeal to, remember, and recall the democratic dignity promised by our Constitution? And, finally, can we hope to construct a future that is antiracist without the dignity promised by constitutional democracy? Indeed, there is no democratic hope without democratic dignity.

NOTES
2. See Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 133–34 and 245n3.
3. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 238–39.
4. For an explanation of what Harris means by “raciated ethnicity,” see Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 224–29.

“Philosophy Is Not an Algorithm but a Walkway”: A Review of A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader

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Leonard Harris has relentlessly challenged established philosophical traditions. Although Harris’s rigorous rejection of various canonical philosophers has often made his work difficult to read for those unfamiliar with his new ideas such as “necro-being” “ethics of insurrection,” “slavocracy,” and “eternal pluralism,” this collection of essays makes significant strides in explicating Harris’s critical reading of Western philosophical traditions. It also communicates to readers Harris’s call for philosophers to pursue the future of life-centric philosophy of struggle in their own work. Throughout his over forty years of work, Harris has sought to create new fields for epistemologies, metaphysics, and aesthetics based on “the voices of real people” who are “entrapped in their bane temporality, particularity, singularity, encrusted in their inferior race, trapped in their gender gowns, and forged in the wrong religion, nation, language, or culture.”¹ Harris wants philosophers to engage with the struggles of the oppressed people and provide a voice to their social condition. Human life should be the content of philosophy, not a conceptual theorization: “Philosophy should provide tools of poetry, imagery, evidential reasoning, inclusion of real people, and norms incommensurable with philosophy as a science.”² The aim of philosophy is not to look for “wisdom (end state perfection), truth (absolute, foundations), simultaneity, ultimate self/no-self, absolute reason’s reason inclusive of corporeality/the least of us.”³

For Harris, this means that philosophers ought to treat other human being in terms of “strife, tenaciousness, organisms striving,” and not in terms of concepts and abstractions. For him, philosophers ought to talk about the real corporal existence and its struggle, domination, exploitation, and potential liberation in their philosophies. He rejects any foundations or absolutes, any transcendential imaginations and idealisms in philosophy that try to essentialize human realizations.

In fact, abstract idealist quests for metaphysical truth, relations, principles, self, being, nothingness, and transcendence are not hopeful sources of knowledge. These are conceptual sophistries that make impossible to see the real realizations and experience of real beings and listen to the voices of real people. Harris is against such conceptual sophistries because “[they make] impossible real beings; the voices of real people cannot be heard. . . .”⁴ He is also against representationists whose philosophical thoughts essentialize the idea of “self” because he thinks that “it is dangerous to pick a sample of the voices considered representative of a kind—the sample necessarily excludes voices that, on reflection, may have been included, ad infinitum.”⁵
Harris further argues that these abstractions furnish an episteme that serve the oppressor or powerful. He urges philosophers to reorient their racist philosophical reasonings, values, and norms to actual and real live people’s struggles. This will involve them rejecting the traditional philosophical conceptions of representations, meanings, and truths. It will also involve them becoming radical insurrectionist philosophers who stand for a new political hope for the oppressed. I will explain what this means in more detail later in the essay.

An important idea expressed by Harris in this collection is the view that racism is “a form of necro-being: it kills and prevents persons from being born.”6 Racism as a form of oppression has imposed “irredeemable” and “irreparable” sorrows and sufferings on real people of color, and the pain of living for many of them is so tragic that no Aristotelian version of tragedy can redeem it. This tragedy has been perpetuated by Western philosophical traditions. These traditions have imposed “horrors” onto non-Western people and consciously or unconsciously created and facilitated control and slave ownership regimes (both old and new). The current forms of reason, virtues, and the ideas of self benefit the “racist rulers”—those who are in control of power in Western societies. Traditional philosophers and their mainstream philosophies are not sufficient for the liberation of the oppressed because they are unable to see the deaths, ill-health, struggles, and sufferings of the oppressed people. As I mentioned earlier in this essay, Harris contends that we philosophers need to adopt a different philosophical orientation, one which ground philosophy to people and their communities, especially to oppressed people and their communities.

Such philosophers would realize that if no tragedy (whether it be Aristotelian, Nietzschean, Beethoven, or any other kind of tragedy) can redeem the cursed beings under the dark skin, they would need to advocate for an ethics of insurrection. Such an ethics rejects the unity theory of virtue or any unitary conception of the self; rather, it demands a new ethics of liberation, an ethics of escape from oppression. Such an ethics teaches a slave or any other kind of oppressed person a new form of reasonings, new realizations, and new poetics, ones that aim for their liberation from oppressive conditions and circumstances. It also valorizes the virtues of tenacity when one lives under oppressive conditions.

Some may contend that Harris’s philosophy of struggle, with its imperative to liberate oppressed peoples from their concrete oppressive conditions, risks reducing philosophy to the status of an ameliorative and activist social science. I, nevertheless, see much need for philosophers to heed the Harrisian call for philosophy to provide oppressed people with the tools to liberate themselves and show them how to escape from oppression as an attempt to redirect philosophy for the service of the human needs. Philosophers should heed this call even though they may need to study the actual conditions of oppressed people and traverse the terrain of the social sciences.

Throughout this collection, Harris takes the reader through what a proponent of his version of a philosophy of struggle would say in response to the false affirmation of liberation promised by traditional philosophy. It shows how a philosopher of struggle in the Harrisian vein would negate essentialist conceptions of race and racism and reject the very idea of race itself. It also shows how a philosopher of struggle in the Harrisian vein would reject the modern Western incarceration regimes such as prisons because they put life into death prematurely. A Harrisian philosopher of struggle would additionally be open to creating multiple reasons and realizations advocating for liberation of oppressed peoples, based on their specific conditions and circumstances. This would require such a philosopher of struggle to adopt an “eternal pluralism”—a pluralistic understanding of human realities!

Reading Harris’s A Philosophy of Struggle makes me feel like the twenty-first century will be the Harrisian Century for African American philosophy. His philosophy inspires social activism for the freedom for the current and future generations of the oppressed.

NOTES
2. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 33.
3. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 33.
4. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 22.
5. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 32.
6. Harris, A Philosophy of Struggle, 273.