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Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

In this issue of our *Newsletter*, Dr. Stephen C. Ferguson, Jr., provides us with a comprehensive essay/review of John H. McClendon III's *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?* Ferguson points out that McClendon's book, the first complete text devoted to James's magnum opus, is a seminal contribution to Marxist-Leninist philosophy as well as to the scholarship on the Trinidadian revolutionary activist/intellectual C. L. R. James. Ferguson astutely surveys other secondary literature on James and offers conclusions based on a fine analysis of McClendon's method of internal critique of James in contrast to those who seek to push James from his ideological/philosophical foundation in Marxism-Leninism.

Also in this issue, we are delighted to publish Dr. Clarence Sholé Johnson's responses to his critics *vis-à-vis* his important book *Cornel West & Philosophy*. Dr. Johnson's responses to his interlocutors were given at the "Author Meets Critics Session on *Cornel West & Philosophy*" at the APA Eastern Division Meeting, December 27-30, 2003. So as to capture the flavor of Dr. Johnson's "speakerly" voice, the Editors decided not to edit his original responses.

Dr. Leonard Harris provides us with an insightful review of Darryl Scriven's *A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations with David Walker*. Both the review and the Scrivens text explore interrelated issues concerning racism, philosophical anthropology, and theodicy.

Dr. Clarence Sholé Johnson also provides a review of Kwasi Wiredu's new edited volume entitled *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Johnson makes it clear that although Wiredu's text is described as "a 'companion' text, deriving its nomenclature from the Blackwell Companion series to which it belongs, the book is anything but a secondary text."

ARTICLES

An Essay-Review of John H. McClendon's C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left-Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?

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While there has been a relative resurgence of James scholarship, many address James in an anachronistic manner. By anachronistic manner I mean, imposing interpretations linking James to contemporary political and ideological fads and trends. Such readings interpret James in the mode of an external retrospective instead of from the standpoint of an internal critique. This external retrospective in tandem with an anachronistic reading infiltrates and distorts the integrity of James's corpus; it is in a word 'imperialist', disrupting the actual course of changes and development in his actual ideological formation. This anachronistic reading misses the mark because it is arrogantly presentist in orientation and it abjectly fails to understand James within his own ideological milieu.

—John H. McClendon III, *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left-Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?*²

James was one of the first Marxist-Leninists to appreciate the symptomatic value of mass media culture. But his dialectical brand of cultural criticism can be reappropriated by the fashionable trend in Cultural Studies only at the risk of positivist vulgarization.

—E. San Juan, Jr., *Beyond Postcolonial Theory?*²

Introduction

In an earlier article, I stated that there existed no published works whose central focus of inquiry was C. L. R. James's philosophical magnum opus *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel-Marx-Lenin* (1948).³ James considered this work to be one of his lasting contributions to the Marxist theory.⁴ Now that has all changed with the publication of John McClendon's book *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left-Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?*

McClendon has produced a truly remarkable book and certainly one of the most intellectually stimulating treatments of James I have read. In the first chapter, “Reminiscences of the James Legacy,” McClendon informs us that he received a personal copy of *Notes* from James (after being on a panel with him addressing the issue of Pan-Africanism) in 1972.

This book—without a doubt—will be the definitive book on James’s legacy as a Marxist-Leninist philosopher. One of the central claims that McClendon makes is that—though James broke from the views of Leon Trotsky and always held great disdain for Joseph Stalin—he did not conceive of his theory and practice to be anything other than Marxist-Leninist. *Prima facie*, this would appear to be a rather trivial point to make given James’s many assertions concerning his ideological, political, and philosophical commitments.

However, a vast number of recent studies on James have found it convenient to interpret him as anything but a Marxist-Leninist. These days, it seems as if everyone and his uncle possesses his own, private C. L. R. James, as Kent Worcester has poignantly noted. So, the net result of the explosion of books on James has been a substantially distorted picture of one of the great radical intellectuals of the twentieth century. As McClendon remarks,

The decided proclivity [of recent studies on James] to judge his work from a presentist standpoint and by means of an anachronistic reading has substantially distorted the real picture of James’s personal motivation and political actions within the Marxist tradition. Such interpretations attempt to dislodge James from his place within the Marxist-Leninist tradition.⁵

This trend began with the publication of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* in 1983. Since that time, there has been an ideological and philosophical debate concerning James’s legacy as a Marxist-Leninist theorist and activist. From Robinson’s ideological lenses, James was a critical theorist and member of a Black Marxist trend not only unique to the Black intellectual tradition but standing apart from a supposed “White Marxism.” Robinson, in his now classic tome, puts forward the view that James belongs to an ideological formation and intellectual history, which Robinson coins as “The Black Radical Tradition.” Robinson asserts that the Black Radical Tradition is historically distinct from and substantially antithetical to Marxism-Leninism.⁶ In a similar fashion, the African American philosopher Lucius Outlaw claims that James is a critical Black nationalist (or what he terms a “left-nationalist”), that is, he was a nationalist committed to a socialist/communist agenda and strategy.⁷

Perhaps the most outrageous contention made to date has been that James is a poststructuralist or deconstructionist. Commentators on James such as Aldon Nielsen, Sylvia Wynter, Paget Henry, and Paul Buhle have, to various degrees, classified James as a poststructuralist cultural critic and/or postcolonial theorist. My task in this review-essay is to demonstrate (via McClendon’s reading of James’s *Notes on Dialectics*) how the poststructuralist reading of James is involved in a philosophical and ideological strategy that uproots James from his Marxist-Leninist moorings.

Deconstructing James: The Poststructuralist Assault on James

Such figures as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, cultural historian Michel Foucault, and philosopher and literary critic Jacques Derrida, among others, have come to be collectively referred to as poststructuralists despite the many differences in their

critical orientations and approaches. Poststructuralism is representative of several developments within the broader movement of postmodernism. As an intellectual tendency primarily within philosophy and literary criticism, it is characterized by antirealism, radical skepticism, and antifoundationalism.⁸

According to poststructuralist thought, there is no stability of meaning or, in Derrida’s terminology, no “metaphysics of presence” in language. Derrida’s deconstructive method (for example, through a reading of texts by thinkers as diverse as Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, and Saussure) uncovers the contingency of meaning embedded in all texts, rather than strives to reveal a unified meaning. Consequently, we are left with the view that no text can possess a determinate meaning. This may mean two things. Instead of one unitary and unambiguous meaning, there can be multiple meanings. Or a text can take any interpretation whatsoever. (As we will see, this is the approach taken by poststructuralist readings of James’s work.⁹) Moreover, Derrida’s deconstructive method has as its object the pointing out the “blind spots or ellipses” within the dominant interpretation of a text.¹⁰

Sylvia Wynter’s article, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis,” focuses on the “deconstructive thrust” in James’s work, which she argues subverts “the labor-centric categories of orthodox Marxism.” By subjecting James to a poststructuralist reading, Wynter intends to “deconstruct” James and thereby substitute a poststructuralist semiotics for James’s Marxist-Leninist world outlook. She proclaims,

The Jamesian poiesis, taken as system, the theoretic providing a reference for the esthetics and vice-versa, provides the condition of possibility for the emergence of a Jamesian doctrine, one that subverts its own center—the labor conceptual framework. This doctrine—pointing as it does toward a global model of multiple modes of accumulation and of multiple concomitant modes of coercion—begins the relativization of the Marxian factory model of exploitation; it projects the future through conceptions of the past and representations of the now, which lends coherence to all the Jamesian writings.¹¹

Wynter aims to give a systematic character to James’s writings. She further argues,

One result of this extended critical analysis has been a methodology that employs a pluri-conceptual framework. In this framework the dynamics of multiple modes of domination arising from such factors as gender, color, race, class and education are nondogmatically integrated. Consequently, it challenges not only the basic categories of colonial liberalism, but also the labor-centric categories of orthodox Marxism. Displacing but also reincorporating the latter’s notion of labor exploitation is a dynamic conception of domination as a process that operates along a number of dimensions. Against these various faces of domination, James pits the creative determination of women, workers, dominated races, and other groups to resist and affirm themselves.¹²

Marxism (or what she putatively terms “the factory model of exploitation”) is not foundational to the systematic ordering of James’s works, Wynter suggests. Rather, James’s methodological approach is grounded on causal pluralism (or a pluri-conceptual framework), is not dogmatic, and

incorporates “multiple modes of domination.” Wynter’s supposition, the need to supply systematic character to James’s work, hinges on the premise that Marxism-Leninism is one-dimensional. And since James is obviously not one-dimensional, it follows there must be a transformation of his ideological position. In the reduction of Marxism-Leninism to merely the “factory model of exploitation,” what we have in fact is Wynter’s one-dimensional conception of Marxism, something that James does not concede. Despite her talk of pluralities, Wynter is committed to a one-sided analysis and hence grossly distorts the reality of the Marxist-Leninist approach to history and James’s location in this tradition. Wynter’s poststructuralist reading completely disfigures James’s legacy. Perhaps the greatest insult comes in the following passage. Wynter declares, after quoting Michel Foucault on bourgeois somatic conceptions,

James was aided in the task of deconstructing these conceptions by his identity as Negro. Here one must contradict James and suggest that it is not only nor even primarily because he is an adherent of the Leninist “policy” that his solution to the Negro question emphasizes the autonomy of the race question, however much he insists on the hegemony of the labor question. Rather, it is because of the multiplicity of his consciousness, a multiplicity shaped by the complex structures of both the British-Trinidadian social system and the historical processes that had shaped this system.¹³

Rather than accept James’s pronouncements wherein class relations serve as the ground for racism and national oppression, she finds a need to contradict his self-consciously formulated position. Here, Wynter exhibits an anachronistic reading of James. It is most apparent that Wynter intends to substitute poststructuralist semiotics for James’s Marxist-Leninist world outlook. To be more to the point, Wynter is guilty of blatantly falsifying James’s allegiance to Marxism, both in ideological and philosophical terms. Moreover, by resorting to psychologism, Wynter imposes her own ideological perspective on James. Wynter goes to the extreme of deconstructing James’s own abilities to consciously adhere to Marxism-Leninism. However, such is the way of an anachronistic reading; James himself did not and could not know his own ideological identity.

Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, in their article, “Caliban as Deconstructionist: C. L. R. James and Post-Colonial Discourse,” also argue that James is a deconstructionist (or, more appropriately, a poststructuralist cultural critic). Both Henry and Buhle, however, recognize that there are deep-seated philosophical problems ancillary to interpreting James as deconstructionist. The most important problem that Henry and Buhle bring to our attention is that James did not have to include an “explicit philosophy of language.”¹⁴ “James’s discourse includes a major deconstructive undertaking,” we are told, “without the tools of semio-linguistics and through social, existential, and dialectical ones.”¹⁵ Their proposal is for adjoining James’s socio-politically focused, “postcolonial” analysis to the deconstructionist textually and linguistically-centered approach.

A cursory observation of the history of philosophy demonstrates that poststructuralism, despite its leftist pretensions, is metaphilosophically akin to the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition, for both are parasitic on the putative linguistic turn. This linguistic turn for both analytic and poststructuralist philosophy eschews the epistemological centeredness of modern philosophy, originating with

Cartesianism, and the ontological/metaphysical focus of classical Western philosophy.

James, however, openly dismisses the linguistic turn as an unnecessary metaphilosophical presumption. For James, philosophical tasks are not essentially and intrinsically rooted in a philosophy of language, whether the method employed is of syntactical, semantic, or pragmatic derivation. The absence of a philosophy of language is not due to some oversight on James’s part as Henry and Buhle would have us believe. Rather, it is due to James’s initial metaphilosophical point of departure, namely, Marxism-Leninism, that he adopts an antithetical posture to the linguistic turn, which is central to the poststructuralism qua deconstruction.

When we inspect James’s work *Facing Reality*, and particularly the chapter “The End of a Philosophy,” this metaphilosophical difference is manifestly transparent. James discerningly remarks,

[T]oday the great stream of European philosophy has various evil-smelling stagnant pools or a little streams that babble as a aimlessly and far less usefully than Tennyson’s Brook. One of the stagnant schools...begins from the premise that all previous philosophies misconceived language, and they have set out to make language more precise. For them a sentence which states ‘The future of humanity is in peril’, has no meaning. This they demonstrate by devoting twenty pages to the word ‘the’, forty pages to the word ‘future’, and so on. A popular tradition has it that at the end of the great age of Catholicism the theologians debated with a passion how many angels can dance on the point of a needle. Today they do not seem so absurd in light of the number of professors who can dance on the point of a needle. In this way, inquiring youth is corrupted and shepherded into passivity before the crimes and evils of the day.

He continues,

These learned obscurantists and wasters of paper are of value in that they signify the end of a whole stage in the intellectual history of mankind. Philosophy as such has come to an end.¹⁶

James is extremely adamant and boldly stringent in his metaphilosophical criticism of philosophies and philosophers encumbered by the linguistic turn. Far from being remiss or negligent in developing a philosophy of language, James’s metaphorical images of bourgeois philosophy, in the age of the linguistic turn, dauntlessly proclaim his refusal to enter the “evil-smelling stagnant pools” of Anglo-American philosophy. Wittgensteinian language games and the discourse of discursive practices of Foucault, from James’s Marxist-Leninist perspective, represent the obscurantism and absurdities of a moribund philosophical worldview. They signal, for James, the very termination of philosophy as a mode and means of liberation, offering to us as a substitute a philosophic mode for masking capitalist corruption and exploitation.

Quite ironically, Henry and Buhle never see James’s commitment to the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism (that is, dialectical materialism) as raising a problem for interpreting James as a deconstructionist. In fact, Henry and Buhle go through much effort to dislodge James from any open association with Marxism-Leninism. Henry and Buhle write,

James’s view of post-colonial society, although strongly influenced by socialism, was never permanently marked by a fixed ideological content.

The narrative aspects of his discursive framework stood in the way of such totalizing constructions because it required filtering their generalities through biographical self-projections. To the extent that his socialism can be characterized, it was marked by a commitment to maximizing the possibilities for working-class participation and self-expression available within a given set of sociohistorical circumstances.¹⁷

Such conceptual acrobatics by Henry and Buhle! When we examine the above citation, we discover that Henry and Buhle engage in an indirect attack upon James as a Marxist-Leninist, mediated by means of connotation. So, James was “strongly influenced by socialism,” yet he was “never permanently marked by a fixed ideological content.” To argue that James was strongly influenced by socialism, but his commitment to socialism was never marked by a “fixed ideological content” leaves us with an rather indeterminate abstraction. In my estimation, Henry and Buhle skirt James’s determinate and unequivocal perspective: that socialism, for him, emanated directly from and was affixed to Marxism-Leninism.

By characterizing James’s conception of socialism as unhampered by a “fixed ideological content,” Henry and Buhle bring into bold relief the historicist analysis of their analysis. From the historicist perspective, to be fixed is to be static, synchronic, determinist, universalizing, and ahistorical *vis-à-vis* dynamic, diachronic, transgressive, particularistic, and historicist, respectively. By a resort to the magic of words, to a linguistic sleight of hand, Henry and Buhle convey to us the following claim: the fact that James was influenced by socialism (that is, Marxism-Leninism) does not mean that he embraced its fixed ideological content (that is, he was not ideologically committed to Marxism-Leninism). So, while James was influenced by Marxism-Leninism, it is not the case that he was ideologically a Marxist-Leninist. Now we can see, whether it is the more orthodox approach of Sylvia Wynter or the revisionists Henry and Buhle, the poststructuralist assault is a frontal attack on James’s ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism.

McClendon on James: An Internal Criticism from the Standpoint of Marxism-Leninism

The poststructuralist assault on James gives us a clear indication of the significance of McClendon’s book. By way of an internal criticism, McClendon explores and reveals the structure of James’s thought, paying particular attention to his philosophical method and principles. McClendon takes as his point of departure James’s *authorial intention*. Here, McClendon presupposes that James understood why he wrote *Notes on Dialectics*. Based on James’s stated intentions, McClendon presumes that James’s *Notes* is within the philosophical tradition set forth by Marx, Engels, and Lenin and, as such, a critical study of Hegel’s dialectical method from a materialist perspective. Therefore, James’s worldview is motivated by his allegiance to Marxist-Leninist ideology and socio-political theory. Dialectical materialism is foundational and serves as a guide to grasping Marxist theory and especially its connection to practical political struggles. And, finally, James is a foundationalist on epistemological and ontological matters as opposed to the anti-foundationalism found among poststructuralists/postmodernists. Concerning James’s intention, McClendon makes the following point of great magnitude:

Although a stated commitment does not of necessity entail the successful accomplishment of intended aims and intentions, nonetheless, it is critical and crucial as an analytical starting point. Even if his stated commitments and aims might fall short of the mark, nevertheless, to ignore James’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism is to overlook what is primary and fundamental and thus occludes the task of serious scholarship of and investigation into his work.¹⁸

This is a rather important point because McClendon forcefully demonstrates that James committed serious and fundamental methodological mistakes with regard to his general conception of Marxist philosophy and, more specifically, his treatment of dialectics. McClendon dedicates a great deal of space to James’s idealist *philosophical method*, which he characterizes as Left-Hegelian. McClendon conclusively argues:

The method James advances, in his *Notes*, consists of identifying the Hegelian dialectical method of categorial (philosophical) motion with the concrete (empirically grounded) historical movement of the international proletariat i.e., its political practice. This two-fold mode of inquiry, James thinks, is the correct means to concretizing a dialectically formulated philosophical mode of cognition and, in turn, providing the proletarian class struggle with a philosophically grounded political theory. James in adopting such a method, I contend, falls prey to Hegelian idealism.¹⁹

Hence, by assuming an immediate relationship between philosophical cognition and political practice, James adopts an idealist method rather than a materialist one. In chapter four, “Hegel’s Idealism: Marxist Materialist Reading and Inversion,” and chapter six, “Comparing Notes: James and Lenin on Hegel and Dialectical Materialism,” McClendon compares James’s methodological approach to Hegel with that of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. McClendon makes an important contribution to Marxist philosophy when he develops the distinction between a materialist *reading* and a materialist *inversion* of Hegel’s dialectic. A materialist reading that is an internal philosophical inquiry uncovers the progressive and, indeed, materialist content embedded in Hegel’s dialectical idealism. Here, Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* (Collected Works, vol. 38) is cited as a classic example. On the other hand, a materialist inversion of Hegel’s dialectic extends beyond the limits of philosophy. It is an empirical (albeit dialectical) investigation in that it entails a concrete scientific investigation of bourgeois social relations. Examples of a materialist inversion of Hegel’s dialectic are Marx’s materialist conception of history, critique of political economy, and investigations in historical science.

For James, the fundamental line of demarcation between a materialist and idealist conception of dialectics is not important. He fervently states:

Hegel talks about world-spirit, etc. For our purposes it does not matter a damn. Whether you say with Marx that schema reflects the material basis or with Hegel that the material basis reflects the schema which is only Mind working itself out, the point is the connection between the two. ...Logic is the analysis of this movement of philosophical cognition, but movement of the different stages of philosophical, i.e. correct cognition, gives us the movement of the

object. ...And one can learn plenty from Hegel about the Method and ignore his eternal mind.²⁰

If we take note of the above quote from James, we will find what I consider a non-metaphysical approach to Hegel's philosophy, particularly his dialectical logic. By non-metaphysical, I mean replacing Hegel's abstract metaphysical concepts, such as God and Absolute Spirit, with what James considers to be concrete concepts, for example, the proletariat. This non-metaphysical approach, which is foundational to James's philosophical method, fails to subject Hegel's dialectical method to a materialist reading and inversion.

McClendon concludes, after a close reading of *Notes*, that (1) James's philosophical method is grounded on an idealist assumption, namely, philosophical cognition (consciousness) is identical to political practice (material reality), which leads James (2) to identify Hegel's idealist dialectic with the materialist dialectic of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. This assumption undermines James's intention of recovering the materialist dialectic of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. (I should note that McClendon develops, by far, the most insightful discussion of Lenin as a Marxist philosopher to date.) The materialist dialectic differs from Hegel's idealist method at both the metaphysical and metaphilosophical level, a difference that James neglects to consider in his philosophical project. Here, McClendon rightly points out, the fundamental mistake that James makes does not lie in his intention—to return to Marx and Lenin via Hegel. Rather, his mistake is the misappropriation of the dialectical method on idealist, and not materialist, terms.

Perhaps the most intriguing and demanding chapter of the book is chapter three, "James on Understanding and Reason: Kant, Hegel and German Idealism." In this chapter, we are introduced to the import of classical German Idealism from the standpoint of Marxist philosophy. McClendon astutely brings to our attention that the notion of spontaneity, the active side of thought, is one of the chief characteristics of German idealism (see Marx's Theses on Feuerbach.) James makes a real blunder on this crucial point in *Notes*. James wants to capture the essence of dialectical thinking by contrasting the formalism of Kant's Understanding to the dialectical Reason of Hegel. James's critical assessment of Kant centers on the apparent immobility of his categories. Consequently, James views spontaneity as the line of demarcation separating Kant from Hegel. In turn, James's idea of the self-movement or self-activity of the proletariat derives from a misunderstanding of Hegelian dialectics.

Conclusion

Given limitations of time and space, there is no way I can comment on all of the issues covered by McClendon. Suffice it to say, this book is an outstanding contribution to James studies in particular and Marxist philosophy in general. For years to come, this book will be the authoritative study of James's *Notes on Dialectics*. Moreover, it couldn't have come at a better time. As we have seen, many scholars within what is now termed James Studies have distorted the nature of James's political, theoretical, and ideological commitments. Despite the de facto Left Hegelianism in James's philosophical project, McClendon never questions James's commitment to Marxism-Leninism. In fact, McClendon argues that James's significance, particularly now, rests in his recognition of the import of *dialectical* materialism.

The anachronistic reading of James's corpus by poststructuralists such as Wynter, Henry, Buhle, and others does a travesty to James's life as a revolutionary. It is important to see that what is ostensibly an academic debate about James's legacy is fed by an ideological struggle against Marxism-

Leninism. At minimum, we would expect the poststructuralist reading of James to be faithful to what is said in James's works and not to say things that are obviously false. But what can we expect when a poststructuralist reading remains within the limits of the text, hatching its eggs within the flesh of the host? Rather than ascertain the meaning of a text without reference to authorial intent, as in the case of Derrida's deconstruction, McClendon places James in the tradition of dialectical materialism and analyzes his philosophical work in relation to the social, ideological, and political context that gave rise to it. Although McClendon has effectively demonstrated that James's commitment to Marxist-Leninist philosophy fell short of the mark, McClendon does not ignore James's intended aims and stated commitments. While I don't contest the right of Wynter and others to perform an external (ideological) reading of James's work, they could at least present us with a charitable reading. In my estimation, what ought not be under contention and open to debate is James's commitment, in a serious way, to Marxism-Leninism and, more specifically, to Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

Endnotes

1. John H. McClendon III. *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), 18.
2. E. San Juan, Jr. "Beyond Postcolonial Theory: The Mass Line in C. L. R. James's Works." In *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 248.
3. Stephen C. Ferguson II, "C. L. R. James, Marxism and Freedom," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, 2 (Spring 2003): 72-82
4. There is a growing number of articles related to James's *Notes on Dialectics*. For recent critical commentaries on *Notes*, see Anthony Bogue's *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C. L. R. James* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997); Lou Turner. "Epistemology, Absolutes and the Party: A Critical Examination of Philosophic Divergences within the Johnson-Forest Tendency, 1948-1953." In *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995): 193-204; Rick Roderick. "Further Adventures of the Dialectic." In *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995): 205-211; Alrick Cambridge. "C. L. R. James: Freedom through History and Dialectics." In *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean Vol. 1 Spectre of the New Class: The Commonwealth Caribbean*, edited by Alistair Hennessy (London: Macmillian Press, 1992): 163-178; Cedric J. Robinson. *Black Marxism* (London: ZED Books, 1983): 389-396. In addition, there is a brief discussion of James's work on dialectics in Kevin Anderson. *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 198-209; Harry Cleaver. *Reading Capital Politically* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), 43-49; and Santiago Colas. "Silence and Dialectics: Speculations on C. L. R. James and Latin America." In *Rethinking C. L. R. James*, edited by Grant Farred (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1966), 131-164.
5. McClendon, *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?* xvii.

6. See Cedric J. Robinson. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Cedric J. Robinson. "C. L. R. James and the World-System." In *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995), 245. See also Charles Mills. *Blackness Visible* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997).
7. Lucius Outlaw depicts James as a left nationalist (or what I term critical Black nationalist), see Lucius T. Outlaw. *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 81.
8. For a similar approach within the analytical tradition, see Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
9. See Hugh J. Silverman, "French Structuralism and After: de Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault." In *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. 8), edited by Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 1994), 390-408; Simon Critchley and Timothy Mooney, "Deconstruction and Derrida." In *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. 8), edited by Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 1994), 442-473; Thomas Docherty. "Postmodernist Theory: Lyotard, Baudrillard and Others." In *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. 8), edited by Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 1994), 474-505.
10. For an overview of the poststructuralist project, particularly Derrida, see Richard Kearney. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1994); Jere Paul Surber. *Culture and Critique: An Introduction to the Critical Discourses of Cultural Studies* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998). For a Marxist critique of poststructuralism/postmodernism, see Alex Callinicos. *Is There A Future for Marxism?* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982).
11. Sylvia Wynter. "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis." In *C. L. R. James's Caribbean*, edited by Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 64.
12. *Ibid.*, 63.
13. *Ibid.*, 68.
14. Henry and Buhle, "Caliban as Deconstructionist," 131-32.
15. *Ibid.*, 113.
16. C. L. R. James. *Facing Reality* (Highland, MI: Friends of Facing Reality Publications, n.d.), 65.
17. Henry and Buhle, "Caliban as Deconstructionist," 127.
18. McClendon, xvii.
19. *Ibid.*, 22.
20. C. L. R. James. *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel - Marx - Lenin* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1980), 26.

Author Meets Critics Session on Cornel West & Philosophy at the APA Eastern Division Meeting, December 27-30, 2003: Response to My Critics

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I want to begin by thanking Drs. Cindy Willett, Al Mosley, and Robert Bernasconi both for their very insightful observations about my analysis of Cornel West and for being very gracious in their comments. It is indeed always rewarding when one's colleagues take the time to read one's views very carefully, as each of these critics has done, and to find time for further discussion of their observations. So, again, I thank each of these colleagues. By way of gratitude, therefore, I shall address a few points that have been raised this evening, not so much as rebuttals, but rather as further clarifications of my position. But I would not rule out the possibility that some points of clarification might sound like rebuttals. I will begin with Cindy Willett's comments.

I

Willett has called attention to a dimension of West's philosophical orientation that I ignored or bypassed, namely, his progressivism. West's progressivism reflects somewhat of a shift from his earlier Marxism. The issue, for Willett, is that the shift in West's philosophical focus is reflected in his emphasis on family/community issues such as the right of parents (or the war against parents), medical leave, healthcare for the ordinary citizen, and the like. This progressive focus of West is thus a challenge to liberal individualism and at the same time that it is non-Marxist.

But even as West advances the progressivist position, he leaves the impression that economics is the root cause of social issues. And, if so, then remove the cause, and the effect, too, disappears. Concerning the manner in which the cause is to be removed, West's Marxist view is well known: collective ownership of the means of production. But in light of the comments we have just heard, and assuming that there has been a shift in West's position, his current view is open to speculation. This much is certain: we do not hear a trumpet call for the wholesale destruction of capitalism. Can it then be an accommodation of what I have called reformed (or refurbished) capitalism?¹ If so, then maybe there is really no rift as such between West and myself. Let us wait and see. In any case, Willett's criticism of my position is that, at the very least, I could have given some consideration to West's progressivist thinking. Mosley echoes a similar sentiment in saying that I did not take into account West's evolution (i.e., from West's earlier Marxism to a variant of what I am now describing as a reformed liberal capitalism). Had I done so, I might have seen that my position is not very different from West's. Or, as Mosley puts it, "Clarence and Cornel are more alike than different" (Mosley 3).

I confess it is a fair criticism. Indeed, I was much too preoccupied with West's tendency to offer a class analysis of social problems while at the same time downplaying (or evading) the racial dimension, the latter of which is vital to the Black experience of racial injustice. Consequently, I failed to notice, let alone attend to, the virtues of his progressivist insights. But I do concede Willett's observation about the social utility/value of West's progressivist concerns and the construal of those concerns as essential elements/components of his politics of love. The politics of love is undoubtedly a

direct repudiation of the abstract and absolute individualism of the Enlightenment and liberal individualism. And whatever its limitations, it offers us a familial/social concept of self, the earliest formulation of which we find (I think) in Hume. And we have variants of this familial/social concept of the individual in contemporary feminist thought. For example, Virginia Held speaks of the relational concept of self, and Iris Marion Young has effectively argued that the social unit/group is ontologically and socially prior to the individual.² So, West's attention to and emphasis on the community/family setting into which the individual is born is both a repudiation of liberal individualism and in tandem with contemporary feminist reconceptualization of the self.

II

If we are to read West's progressivism as compatible with what I have described as a reformed (or reformulated) capitalism, however, then it is imperative that I elucidate the very concept of reformed (or reformulated) capitalism. What might such a notion entail? Given that liberal capitalism had its essence in the Enlightenment, Willett appropriately wonders whether one can intelligibly advocate social justice within such a framework. The thrust of Willett's concern may be stated as follows. The concept of liberal capitalism involves, among other things, the valorization of reason, radical individualism, the wielding of White male power over others, the subordination and oppression of the Other, and overall social injustice against non-Whites. This being the case, is it possible to obtain social justice within a structure that, by its very essence, is unjust?

Bernasconi, too, makes this a major concern in his comments, as we have just heard. Indeed, Bernasconi bluntly says that he is unconvinced by my argument against West's proto-Marxian call for the wholesale eradication of capitalism. According to Bernasconi, it is virtually impossible for Blacks to obtain social justice "without a radical distribution of wealth." This is because, in his view, Black oppression derives not so much from race as from capitalism. In other words, race is incidental to Black oppression. And since, in his view, capitalism is inherently anti-redistribution, social justice cannot therefore be obtained "under a capitalist system" (Bernasconi, 5). Bernasconi advances this argument to challenge my contention that White supremacy is the chief cause of Black oppression and social injustice, for I had claimed that it is in virtue of the characteristics of Blackness that Blacks are victims of racial oppression and social injustice. And on the basis of that claim, I proceeded to reject West's call for a class-based affirmative action on the ground that it is out of step with the peculiar experiences of Blacks. As an alternative, I advocated a race-based policy.

It is clear that Bernasconi and I are on opposite sides on the race-class issue. Indeed, in response to my position, Bernasconi makes two allegations: first, my presentation of the issue in terms of an opposition between race and class is a false dichotomy; and second, the concept of White supremacy that underlies my position remains "mysterious." Let me therefore address these allegations presently. Thereafter, I will return to the issue of elucidating my view of a reformed (or reformulated) liberal capitalism.

To begin, I am not so sure I understand what Bernasconi finds so mysterious in my claim about White supremacy. Is it that I did not theorize its genesis? Is it that I did not try to establish its causal connection with European capitalistic endeavors? Or is it that I have advanced an argument that Locke upholds White supremacy by denying Black personhood and that analysis deviates from the standard reading? I think

the answer is all of the above. My short-cut reaction to Bernasconi is that, concerning the first two issues, my offense, if indeed it is that, is pardonable. The reason is that it is axiomatic that the inception of White supremacy is causally connected with European capitalistic endeavors and African enslavement. Anyone who is familiar with the nature of modernity knows that. So, I really do not know why he thinks it imperative that I elaborate what one might consider a near self-evident proposition. Indeed, my criticism of West on this score is not that he fails to pay attention to this fact about modernity. My criticism, rather, is that he does not provide a detailed and penetrating discussion of the significant contributions of philosophical icons such as John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and G. W. F. Hegel in advancing White supremacy and hence their various roles, through market capitalism, in promoting Black oppression. My contention is that these iconic philosophers have not been made to answer for their professional sins as have been others in the Enlightenment period. So, I am astounded that Bernasconi did not see this.

Of course, in speaking of White supremacy as I did, I certainly do not suppose that anyone would come away with the impression that prior to the eighteenth century there was no contact between Europeans and the so-called Other. Indeed, scholars of Black Diaspora Studies have documented that trade flourished between Europeans and Africans as far back as the fifteenth century. And there was no White supremacy then. Were there noted differences between the two groups? Of course there were. But it was in the eighteenth century that, with the formal characterization of distinct racial categories based on phenotype, trade in non-human commodities *included* trade in (question-beggingly) humans. And the *rationalization* of the inclusion of two-legged speech articulate entities as commodities turns on a denial of cognitive reason to them and hence a denial of their humanity. Indeed, according to Léon Poliakov, it was the French scientist François Bernier who first injected the word "race" into the discourse of classifying speech articulate entities.³ This was the beginning of raciology: the systematic, hierarchical characterization and classification of human beings into distinct racial categories. The classification included the ascription of psychological and normative characteristics to the different "races" as essential correlates of the physical characteristics of those "races." This issue is well-known to scholars of modernity. It is therefore not clear to me what Bernasconi sees mysterious in my account or critique of West on this issue.

Of greater significance in Bernasconi's discussion, however, is his exception to the manner in which I show that Locke, like many of his contemporaries, is guilty of endorsing White supremacy. Specifically, Bernasconi takes exception to my argument that is grounded on Locke's distinction between the concept of a man and that of a person in Locke's celebrated discussion of the issue of personal identity. The tendency among Locke scholars is to see a contradiction between Locke's well-known advocacy of individual liberty, even in a State of Nature, and his endorsement of slavery in the assertion that slave owners have an absolute and inviolable right over their slaves. On this standard view, to which Bernasconi seems to subscribe, Locke regards slaves (in this case Blacks) as persons, so to deny them their God-given liberties, *qua* persons, is obviously contradictory. One way of resolving (or explaining away) this apparent contradiction is to invoke the "just war" explanation in Locke's discussion. If Africans are taken as war captives, then they can be enslaved indefinitely until they draw death upon themselves in attempting to resist their enslavement.⁴

My quick response to this way of construing the issue is this: If the contradiction is as glaring as scholars have said, would it really have escaped Locke? Is Locke so careful to outline his position on issues and yet very careless and intellectually reckless when it comes to seeing such an obvious contradiction? These are rhetorical assertions on the basis of which I reject as untenable the attempts to resolve the supposed contradiction. My view, on the contrary, is that there is no contradiction in Locke's position at all insofar as Africans were concerned. This is because, consistent with the general intellectual current of the time, specifically raciology, of which Locke was undoubtedly versed, Locke did not consider Africans humans or persons. In my view, the distinction between the concepts of a man and of a person was merely a prelude to Locke's silent denial of personhood or humanity to Africans. But Bernasconi disagrees with me, as we have just heard, saying that Locke even advocated the baptism of slaves, and talk of baptism entails that slaves have souls and so are persons in Locke's view. My immediate response to this is that, during slavery, some White anti-abolitionists advocated the perpetual enslavement of Blacks, saying that Blacks were infantile; they were incapable of taking care of themselves, so they had to be enslaved *for their own good*. A Christian mission! So I doubt that we should put as much premium on Locke's talk of the baptism of slaves as Bernasconi is doing. On my view, there would be no contradiction in saying that Africans have souls and so are candidates for baptism, but that they are also less than human anyway. In other words, African soul is not of the same type as European soul. Such a view would be consistent with raciology, the doctrine that proclaims the superiority of the European to the African.

I am very serious, then, in saying that race is not merely incidental to Black oppression and experience of social injustice in contemporary society as some might be tempted to think. On the contrary, it is pivotal and always has been since the inception of raciology. It is in light of this view that I reject both West's class-based reductive analysis of Black oppression and his class-based affirmative action proposal. And I still do so even despite Bernasconi's attempt to defend West by directing attention to the centrality of class in the social inequity in Europe. Of course, I do not dispute the vital role of class considerations in the European milieu. But we cannot conclude from this that class universally reigns in all or even most forms of oppression. Oppression of Hutus by Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi, of Moslems by Serbs in Bosnia, and of Christians by Moslems in Sudan is not class based. So, while class may dominate Europe, I do not think it explains Black oppression in the United States. The way I see it, class is to Europe what race is to America.

III

Before I turn to the issue of reformed capitalism, I should say a word about Mosley's critique of my discussion of Black nihilism. I have emphasized a race-based solution not because I wish to rule out coalition politics as such, but because, in my view, I sense a tendency in the Black community—broadly construed as local and international—to look externally for solutions to problems that are internal. If Black nihilism is about Black experience, the immediate cause of which is in the Black community, as West seems to suggest, how and why, then, should coalition politics be the first line of defense? In my view, coalition politics should be secondary to both the diagnosis of the problem and the proposed solution. But this is not exactly what one gets from West. One gets instead the position that the problem is economic and cultural. That is, market morality and the disintegration of the traditional cultural pillars of support in the Black community—cultural pillars such

as the Black church and other civic organizations. The solution, however, is coalition politics (and the politics of love).

But consider closely the claim about the economic aspect of the problem. I am not aware that West challenged the economic class of the Black community to try and address some elements or other of the economic deprivation in the Black community. Indeed, it is to this failure in West's discussion that I tried to call attention in noting that he did not provide a thorough critique of the Black upper and middle classes that complement his critique of the Black political leadership and Black intellectuals. As he was considering a solution to Black nihilism, he should have brought to bear a similar critique upon the contemporary Black church and other cultural institutions in the Black community. Then, having provided a suggestion as to how both the economic and cultural institutions could be involved in addressing the nihilism, he can invoke coalition politics for greater societal involvement beyond the Black community. So, I did not wish to give the impression that coalition politics is wholly irrelevant to solving the problem of Black nihilism or that others have not experienced nihilism. All I meant to say was that coalition politics should not have taken precedence over local solution. I turn now to the issue of reformed liberal capitalism.

IV

For the purpose of this discussion, let us suppose the following to be the main characteristics of liberal capitalism. (1) Rugged individualism. (2) Unfettered market competition and free and unimpeded access to the market. (3) Unlimited and unregulated acquisition of wealth (or capital). (4) Unequal rewards (or benefits) as a natural outcome of unequal abilities and talents, and hence unequal performance or productivity. (5) Individual liberty to pursue (or even not to want to pursue) individual goals in the market. (6) The existence of certain structures of oppression and domination that constrain the individual from transforming the rights and freedoms that she/he is formally accorded into substantive rights and freedoms. In other words, these are constraints that prevent the individual from exercising *in a meaningful way* those rights and freedoms that she/he has by virtue of her/his citizenship in the polity. Among the structures of oppression and domination are race, gender, and disability. Following Iris Marion Young, I would also include marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence.⁵ And, finally, (7) the role of the government being limited to securing and ensuring the existence of the conditions for fair competition and unimpeded access to the market by any and all who wish to engage in competition.

Given these characteristics of liberal capitalism, Blacks in the United States unquestionably have experienced oppression and social injustice. Consider that the blatant denial of access to the market place on account of race necessitated governmental intervention in the form of affirmative action. This denial of access to the market place was also a denial of individual liberty to pursue goals in the market place. Not to mention that even those who succeeded in entering the market place received rewards that were negatively incommensurate with their productivity and performance. So they were exploited. And, finally, one cannot ignore the complicity of the government both in the exploitation of Blacks going back to slavery and, even after slavery, the failure of the government to provide protection from exploitation. So, surely, if this is what liberal capitalism has meant for Blacks, then is not the solution to Black oppression and racial injustice to dismantle the very capitalistic structure itself?

I have said no to this question and have suggested as an alternative a reformed (or reformulated) capitalism. There are two distinctive features of what I have described as

reformed (or reformulated) capitalism: (1) a slight expansion in the role of the government and (2) a reconceptualization of the relation between employees and employers (or investors). (I am very reluctant to use the term “worker” because of its socialist/Marxist connotations.)

The role of the government will be expanded to include providing the following services: (i) Fundamentally, to ensure the removal of those sociocultural structures of oppression and domination, the existence of which incapacitate/handicap the individual from realizing her/his full potential. Indeed, those structures actually prevent the individual from exercising the rights and freedoms that she is accorded in the polity. Only by the removal of those structures can individual rights and freedoms be made substantive. And the only entity that can erode those structures is the government, not the private sector itself. (ii) The government should guarantee the provision of universal healthcare for all citizens via normal or regular taxation in much the same way that the government provides for national security in defense under normal taxation. The point here is that no special taxes are required to provide for universal healthcare. (iii) The government would have to ensure not just universal access to education for all children but also, by tax incentives to the private sector, encourage further training of members of the work force. (iv) The government should also provide tax incentives to the private sector to set up establishments in economically depressed neighborhoods as a measure to facilitate employment in, and hence revitalization of, those communities. (v) Through incentives to the private sector, the government should pursue a policy of workfare as an alternative to welfare in order to break the cycle of underclass existence. And (vi) the government should undertake an annual review of the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation and cost of living.

It is obvious from the expanded role of the government in my reconceptualized liberal capitalist system that I reject the minimal state concept that some liberals (e.g., Robert Nozick) advocate. Inasmuch as I believe that, in a liberal capitalist society, the government should be kept on a short leash, I also believe that the government has a major role to play in certain spheres. Indeed, only the government can perform such roles. And the removal of such structural impediments to the realization of individual liberties as I have mentioned is one such important role of the government. I should note in this regard that the government’s implementation of an affirmative action policy, even despite the limitations of the policy, is clearly consistent with the position I am defending.

In terms of the second attribute of my proposed reformed capitalism, namely, a reconceptualization of the employee/employer relation, the following needs to be said. There is no a priori reason an employee cannot own shares/stocks in addition to being salaried in the establishment in which she or he works. Indeed, major corporations such as Microsoft, Dell, AVIS Car Rental, Home Depot, and BOEING, to name a few, have made this phenomenon part of their relation with their employees. So, rather than employees simply seeing themselves as working for abstract capitalist investors, they should see themselves in a dual capacity as employee/investors. They have a stake in the establishment, and their economic fortunes rise and fall with the establishment.

I am, of course, cognizant of the ENRON debacle. But this is where the role of the government again comes in. Executive misconduct in any form is interference with the market place. And since one of the roles of the government is to ensure the existence of a market place conducive to fair competition, any interference in the market environment therefore must be viewed as a very serious infraction that warrants drastic

penalty. Therefore, not only should there be laws against such executive crimes, but also, and more importantly, there should be very severe penalties, including mandatory incarceration, very heavy fines, and the dispossession of all properties acquired, as a result of such crimes.

In light of the foregoing considerations, it might be asked how does reformed liberal capitalism differ from market socialism? It differs in three ways. First, there is no government/state planning and regulation in reformed liberal capitalism. Market socialism accords to government/state a major role in planning and regulating economic activities. Second, market socialism advocates some form of equality among individuals particularly by taxing the rich. Did we not hear Bernasconi speak of radical redistribution of wealth? My proposed liberal capitalism, by contrast, favors economic inequity (i.e., inequality of rewards) as long as the inequity is contingent on individual ability, choice, and hence performance/output. Socialists and Marxists make economic equality a fetish. In my proposed liberal capitalist view, economic equality is not a God-given right. The only God-given rights are ontological equality and equality of opportunity. Finally, under market socialism, the acquisition of wealth appears to be criminal, the penalty of which is to tax the rich simply because they are rich. None of that with reformed liberal capitalism. It is not a crime to be rich. Wealth should be encouraged, not discouraged, and taxation should not be a weapon of mass destruction aimed at the rich.

Finally, given all I have said, are Cornel West and I more alike than different as Mosley has suggested? For that proposition to be true, the following conditions would have to be met: (1) West and I should subscribe to a significant role of the government in removing structures that delimit the scope of individual freedoms, (2) West and I should subscribe to rugged individualism, (3) West and I should subscribe to the belief in unregulated and unlimited pursuit and acquisition of wealth, and (4) West and I should subscribe to the belief in economic inequity. I believe that West would reject conditions (2)-(4). This, then, means that the only belief West and I share is in condition (1). If this is so, then surely West and I are more different than alike. I advocate reforming liberal capitalism. I can only venture to suggest that West might subscribe to a variant of market socialism. But that is debatable. Thank you.

Endnotes

1. I should note in passing that at least one critic claims that West has repudiated his Marxist stand, reflected in both *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* and *Prophecy Deliverance*, for a variant of liberal capitalism. See Mark David Wood. *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), chap. 4; cf. chap.1, pp. 45-62.
2. Virginia Held. “Reason, Gender and Moral Theory.” In *Ethics*, 2nd ed., edited by Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 686-690; and Iris Marion Young. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 43-48.3. *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1971), 135; cf. 143.
4. See, for example, Jennifer Welchman. “Locke on Slavery and Inalienable Rights.” In *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 25 (1995): 67-81.
5. Young, 1990, 48-63.

BOOK REVIEWS

A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations with David Walker

Darryl Scriven. (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2004).

Reviewed by Leonard Harris
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A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations with David Walker is the first full-length treatment of the philosophy of David Walker, the most notorious and influential of abolitionists. It also offers the final version of Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, thereby providing in one text a book that was banned throughout the antebellum south and an account of the philosophic anthropology definitive of the most provocative justification for slave insurrections in American history. The "Introduction," provided by Scriven, details the four "Articles" in Walker's *Appeal*; each article covers a different cause for the wretchedness of the slaves and the wretched motivations of slave masters. There are three chapters following the "Introduction" that unpack the deep structure of Walker's philosophy, providing arguments that allow Walker to speak to contemporary debates about the meaning of race, suffering, the problem of evil, and the difference between absolute pacifism, pragmatism, and deontological ethics of duty.

In the chapter "Race and Slavery," Scriven argues that Walker's concept of race is "motivated by an idea of race as ethnic and social kinship" and not, as is usually thought, by the idea of race as a distinct biological category.

Thomas Jefferson's comparison of Blacks to Whites, namely, contending that Black men preferred White women to Black women and this as analogous to male orangutans preferring Black women to female orangutans, was meant as a comparison of a lower order species preferring members of a higher order species. This was not, according to Scriven, a comparison of members of the same species having preferences for one group within the species over their own group members. Walker, however, was apt by contending that Jefferson had proffered an "insupportable insult."

Walker often contended that Whites were the natural enemies of Blacks, thereby giving the impression that he did consider racial categories natural categories and enmity between races natural. However, Walker's third and last version of his *Appeal* included a detailed account of what he meant by "natural." According to Walker, Whites "know that god made all, all the same," and thereby knowingly "treating us so cruel makes them natural enemies." That is, they knowingly act against what's natural.

Walker considers various accounts of creation, for example, the dual creation thesis that held God created two races, represented by Cain and Abel; however, the great flood in which all creatures were destroyed and humanity emerged from one family, for Walker, negates all pre-deluvian accounts of distinction, thereby leaving one human family. Racial essentialism, then, was definitively against the ideas of race proffered by Walker.

The causes of slavery for Walker were sordid avarice, ignorance, the preachers of Christianity, and efforts to disenfranchise Blacks. According to Scriven, "Being sold as property meant Blacks were treated as innately valueless qua

individuals, without souls, and thereby irredeemable." Blacks were beaten and abused. After the end of manumission by conversion to Christianity, there was no social redemption as well as no spiritual redemption for Blacks. As Christians, they were "inauthentic interlocutors," and as members of any other faith, they were just inauthentic. It is under these conditions that the servility of slaves appears voluntary; even as coping strategies, for Walker, servility, self-deprecation, or misogyny implies character traits akin to animal behavior, providing evidence that Blacks are inferior. Racial redemption for Walker, consequently, required objective evidence in the form of self-respecting behavior to both end slavery and make possible respect from others toward members of the Negro race, understood as an ethnic and family social kind.

The "Bible, Black Theology, and the Racial Problem of Evil" concerns the question: "How can an omnipotent God also be omnibenevolent in a world full of underserved suffering?" Pro-slavery advocates often noted that racial slavery existed because God ordained racial slavery; abolitionists countered this view in many ways. Scripture, for example, sanctions slavery, but the counter argument often appealed to exemplary lives, promotions of love, or biblical sentiments in favor of brotherhood. Given that White racists lived and died happily while directly causing massive underserved suffering, William Jones's provocative question, is God a White Racist? in his book, *Is God a White Racist?* bedeviled abolitionists. Walker rejected the view that God favored groups and that God was a champion of the oppressed, redeemer of the downtrodden, and avenger of the wronged. This view differs from the view promoted by liberation theology, particular James Cone's version in *The God of the Oppressed*. Black liberation theology held that God is partial to oppressed groups. Walker believed that God was on the side of the downtrodden, but he avoids the ontological problems with the view that God is on the side of groups because this view presumes groups are God-given or sanctioned and thereby oppressors are subject to have God as their groups' champion, especially since oppressors gain benefits made possible by God. Yet, the meaning of suffering remains a question. Booker T. Washington, as Scriven notes, held that slavery was not justified but Providence's hand in the making of slavery because Blacks fortunately became Christian, thereby saved from being heathens. Slavery was a schoolmaster; its teleology is conversion to Christianity. W. E. B. Du Bois, in the *Souls of Black Folks*, inquired into what was the meaning not just of suffering, but of Black suffering. Herein Scriven locates the racial problem of evil. What does it mean for the suffering to be race based?

Walker, as well as Cone, believes God preferred the uplifting of the oppressed over oppressors. However, Walker does not sanction a preferential option for groups. On Scriven's account, however, holding that God prefers the well-being of the oppressed does not entail the view that freedom for the oppressed is a part of the divine plan, let alone a teleological goal. Certainly, terrible suffering exists without any earthly relief for the miserable, and, consequently, it might seem, to use William Jones's phrase, there is divine racism. And for Walker and Cone, "evil originates, resides, and proliferates in those who do evil things." God's omnibenevolence is expressed in the existence of our free will.

Scriven finds his answer to the problem of racial evil in Jones's promotion of humanocentric theology rather than a theocentric theology. Rather than look for an answer to the problem of evil in scripture, Jones contends and Scriven concurs, theology should advocate for human freedom. There are two reasons Scriven offers for concurring with Jones. There

is no “method to detect its [omnibenevolence] presence in human affairs,” and suffering has no meaning for which any evidence is available to link “suffering” with a particular meaning and no singular scriptural contention about the meaning of suffering. Scriven contends that we should be “agnostic regarding God’s relationality to suffering.” Consequently, the unjust suffering of Blacks is just that, unjust race-based suffering. The elimination of that suffering was the objective of abolitionists.

In the “Resistance Tradition,” Scriven presents William Whipper, an absolute pacifist who believed in direct action civil disobedience and for that reason justified pacifism; Henry H. Garnet, pragmatic if not a pragmatist, promoted instrumentalist attitude and thereby nonviolence protest as well as violent insurrection was considered justified according to which strategy was most efficacious for achieving the object of abolition; and David Walker’s argument that insurrection was a moral duty. Scriven contends that the principal difference between their schools of thought is located in competing philosophic anthropologies. The quintessential feature of personhood for Whipper was humanity’s rationality. Like Kant, Whipper held that “whatever is Scriptural is right and whatever is right is reasonable.” And, for Whipper, reason suggested that fervor, passion, etc. were character traits associated with violence and animality, while compassion and love were associated with higher order reason. Garnet, however, considered personhood as a matter of fulfilling religious vows; slavery made that impossible. Character traits, such as nobility or frugality, were linked by Garnet to objective behavior such that we know a person or group has full personhood by examples of their behavior. Scriven contends Garnet was a pragmatist because, for Garnet, the warrant for a social strategy (and, for classical pragmatists, the warrant for a proposition as well) was measured in relation to its goal-achieving efficacy. The focus for Garnet was success, not the dictates of pure reason or the commands of categorically imperative moral duties. Walker, however, held that “one is lacking in character virtues if one does not kill, or at least attempt to escape from, her master.” Cowardice and servility were, for Walker, taken as evidence that Blacks were inferior. Only acts common to the species, such as defending one’s family, provided objective evidence. “Failure to resist species miscategorization,” that is, the categorization of Blacks as nonhuman or subhuman, resembles actions of lower species.

Scriven offers several intriguing interpretations of Walker’s philosophic anthropology. In addition to Walker’s insistence on objective evidence to affirm the obvious, namely, full appropriate categorization in practice, analogous to Thomas Hobbes, Walker’s philosophic anthropology defined persons as agents motivated by voluntary and vital motions. Vital motions are inherent natural human properties. Reason is just one tool in the functioning of vital motions. There is, among the vital conditions of personhood, a tendency for persons to defend themselves. Slaves are thus misguided or lacking in character virtues, the type of virtues definitive of personhood, if they fail to insurrect. They thereby have a duty to insurrect. The character traits of aggressiveness, belligerence, or fervor are not, contrary to Whipper, unsavory. Rather, they are evidence of normality. Walker’s philosophic anthropology, consequently, supports insurrection to achieve the status of full persons in civil society.

A Companion to African Philosophy

Kwasi Wiredu, ed. (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Co., 2004), pp. iii + 587.

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Although described as a “companion” text, deriving its nomenclature from the Blackwell Companion series to which it belongs, the book is anything but a secondary text. There are seven sections in the book, and they examine issues that range from historical to metaphysical, epistemological, social political, and values. Many of the essays are original and appear for the first time in print. Some examples are Pieter Boele van Hensbroeke’s “Some Nineteenth Century African Political Thinkers,” Magabo More’s “Philosophy in South Africa Under and after Apartheid,” Claude Sumner’s “The Light and the Shadow of Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat—Two Ethiopian Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century,” Toedros Kiros’s “Zera Yacob and Traditional African Philosophy,” and Nkuri Nzegwu’s “Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender.” Because of constraints of space, I can only comment very briefly on a few of the essays that comprise the volume. However, I do consider the high quality scholarship of these essays as indicative of the book’s overall quality.

To begin, and from a historical perspective, I find the essays by Sumner and Kiros particularly edifying in light of the issue that once plagued discussions of African philosophy, namely, the very idea of an African philosophy either as problematic or as relatively modern. We should recall Henri Maurier’s categorical and emphatic negative assertion, “No, not yet” in response to the question, “Is there an African Philosophy?” (See his “Do We Have an African Philosophy?” In *African Philosophy*, edited by Richard Wright [Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1984].) Obviously, by his answer, the question was meant to be rhetorical. Similarly, W. T. Stace argues that Western philosophy owes nothing to African philosophy—indeed, that Western philosophy could not conceivably have derived anything from Africa—even despite the existence of Egyptian schools that taught mathematics, science, astronomy, etc. (See his *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967], 12-13.) If philosophic thinking epitomizes abstract rational thought as we understand it, then the implication of the views in question is that, at best, such capacity has yet to be exemplified in African intellectual productions. At worst, however, it would even seem an oxymoron to speak of “African philosophy.”

No doubt, a good many African philosophers and non-African Africanists have responded to such assertions as evidenced in the many anthologies and full-fledged monographs and books that have been written on the subject. Incidentally, I consider it an affront to Africana philosophers generally to be expected to prove that Africans are capable of abstract thinking as epitomized in philosophy. Thus I cast a dim view of the attempts of even the “responders” to such a demand, those who have been endeavoring to “disprove” the thesis in question by elaborating, for example, “Ibo metaphysics,” or “Yoruba epistemology,” or “Krio Ethics” and the like. In my view, any such attempt simply gives legitimacy, validity, and propriety to an otherwise illegitimate question. Of course, I am not disputing the fact that different ethnic groups hold different beliefs or worldviews and that those beliefs can and ought to be articulated. My objection, rather, is

to the articulation of those beliefs *in response to a demand and thus as proof* of the kind of speculative thinking that is characterized as philosophical. Thus it would be a grave misunderstanding of my position to say that I object to the chapters of the book that deal with issues in epistemology and metaphysics.

Even so, I find the essays about Zera Yacob and his student Walda Hewlett (by Sumner and Kiros) particularly instructive if for no other reason than that they exhibit the woeful ignorance of Maurier, Stace, and likeminded individuals. Evidently, such scholars had failed to do their homework. Indeed, Kiros, in a recent work in which he provides an extended discussion of Zera Yacob, has shown that Yacob was not only a contemporary of Descartes but also that, like Descartes, he was a rationalist philosopher who used reason to establish certain truths. (See Toedros Kiros. *Zera Yacob: Rationality of the Heart* [Lawrenceville, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: The Red Sea Press, 2005].) To that end, Kiros characterizes Zera Yacob as a modern philosopher in the historical sense of modernity. Among the subjects Zera Yacob engaged is human ontological dependence on God, and thus that humans should use their reason to discover their relation (i.e., of ontological dependency) with God. What is significant for my purpose is that, since Zera Yacob was philosophizing at the same time with Descartes and other “Enlightenment” thinkers, it is particularly striking that his philosophy went unnoticed. In any case, it is because of their historical value that these contributions by Sumner and Kiros are very important both to the volume and to the history of modern philosophy.

An issue that links a number of the essays in the section devoted to politics is how to conceptualize democracy. Central to the discussion is the following question: Should democracy be conceived of strictly and only in terms of formal structures such as representative government, separation of powers, the existence of checks and balances, and a “winner takes all” attitude as exemplified in Western societies? This subject forms the nucleus of the discussions particularly by Edward Wamala, George Carew, and Ajume Wingo. The contention here is that, since the aim of those structures is to produce a society in which individual prosperity is assured, social stability is obtained, and individual happiness is realized, then it stands to reason that, wherever these aims are upheld, the processes that ensure their realization should be construed democratic providing also that individual liberties are upheld and promoted. This proviso is important to distinguish between a democratic system and other forms of government, especially because the realization of these aims is quite compatible with a tyrannical system of government. By definition, if not by nature, tyranny is opposed to democracy. Assuming, then, the possibility of realizing the aims mentioned above *sans* the kind of structures that we find in Western societies, we should conclude that Western societies exemplify one form of democracy. Or, at least, this is how they should be viewed. More generally, we should speak of a variety of democracies, meaning that we are dealing with a pluralistic concept. I should note in this connection that Wamala’s view is a variant of what Wiredu characterizes as *consensual democracy*. (See Kwasi Wiredu. *Cultural Universals and Particulars* [Indiana U.P., 1996], chap.14.)

Finally, Nkiru Nzegwu’s “Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender” is instructive for studies in feminism particularly because Nzegwu challenges what she considers a homogenizing and universalizing tendency in Western feminist studies to construe gender issues narrowly in terms of male domination of women, of women as passive, and of emotion as female. According to Nzegwu, this tendency

is exemplified in the writings of Susan Moller Okin and Martha Nussbaum, two eminent women philosophers. Although in Western societies emotion is synonymous with weakness, and that in turn is identified with the feminine, Nzegwu contends that such synonymy and identification are not true of the Igbo society of Nigeria and possibly of other non-Western societies. In Igbo society, in particular, a male or female who fails to show emotion is considered psychologically dysfunctional and maladjusted, and such dysfunctionality has serious moral implications. For example, Okonkwo, the hero in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, epitomizes such dysfunctionality. Nzegwu is suggesting, therefore, that, while the claims about and analyses of gender issues by Okin and Nussbaum are true of Western societies, they are not necessarily true of other societies. Thus, care should be taken to avoid universalizing gender claims and analyses thereof that are based on specificities of Western societies on pain of distorting the social realities and particularities of non-Western societies.

The foregoing discussions exemplify the nature and kind of critiques contained in the volume. Each of the readings is a substantive contribution to the discussion, and, for this reason, I consider the book a major text in African philosophy.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Stephen C. Ferguson teaches in the department of philosophy at Auburn University. Ferguson recently received his doctorate from the University of Kansas in 2004, which he earned with honors. An astute scholar of C. L. R. James, Ferguson’s M.A. thesis (which was on C. L. R. James) was nominated for University Recognition at KU. Ferguson has also contributed an earlier article titled “C. L. R. James, Marxism, and Freedom” to the Spring 2003 issue of our *Newsletter*.

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