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New Negroes, Black Communists, and the New Pluralism

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Until the 1990s, scholars almost universally accepted an uncomplicated narrative of black Marxist history. Conventional wisdom held that the relationship between communism and black struggle was inherently corrupt. Critics of African American cultural arts frequently portrayed the affiliation between "white communists" and black intellectuals as a kind of reenactment of the colonizer-colonized encounter, where black creative workers were expected to submit to a racist agenda. But, in 1989 Cary Nelson's inclusive Repression and Recovery suggested that in modernist period literary study such an account was fraught with difficulty. Looking at the 1930s, Barbara Foley's chapter on "Race, Class, and the 'Negro Question'" in her Radical Representations a few years later challenged decades of received wisdom. The genealogy of the reading, which assumes that blacks were expected to adopt an inferior status in communism, is traceable to historians and critics in the 1960s and 1970s. The views of such scholars exhibited a popular...

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separatist narrative that reflected the ideology of U.S. black cultural nationalism.\textsuperscript{3}

In recent years scholars of the Black Renaissance and Great Depression, early to mid-century radicalism and Marxism, black Atlantic studies, and whiteness studies have seen the publication of several valuable recovery projects. Along with Foley, James A. Miller, in Bill Mullen and Sherry Linkon’s \textit{Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture}, has challenged prevailing views of black-white radical affiliation.\textsuperscript{4} George Hutchinson’s monumental accomplishment \textit{The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White}, though not attentive to radical commitment, has also confronted predominant notions of the color line between the wars, contending that the portrayal of a division between blacks and whites working in the cultural arts is inconsistent with the material evidence.\textsuperscript{5} Now two distinguished publications have arrived, one a persuasively sustained re-visioning of black and white Marxism in the U.S., the other a reprint of an invaluable study of black Marxist history and theory. William J. Maxwell’s \textit{New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars} offers a vital reassessment of black American radicalism and proletarianism in the early decades of the twentieth century. And the University of North Carolina Press’s reissue of Cedric J. Robinson’s \textit{Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition} finally makes accessible this early 1980s vision of the origins of Marxist activism and black liberation struggle.

\textit{Black Marxism} is divided into three parts: the history of European capitalism and radicalism, the origins of black radicalism, and black radicalism’s relationship to Marxism. The first section examines European socio-economic history, and its chief purpose is to analyze how “racial capitalism” developed. Now a familiar theoretical position, Robinson argues that the rise of industrial capitalism was built on a culture of racial construction. Emergent labor classes and ethnic minorities could be assembled through national identity formations—pitted against one another—to serve the dominant ideology. The Irish peasants’ relocation to England during the Great Hunger of the 1840s, for example, occasioned the opportunity for “an ideological and physical drifting apart of the two ‘races’”: English and Irish (41). Thus “race” as a strategic mechanism for social control led to the immanence of “racialism” in Western civilization. Racialism ordered “the very values and traditions of consciousness through which the peoples of
these ages came to understand their worlds and their experiences” (66). Radicalism then rose in Europe as a revolt against capitalism but also as a resistance to nationalism, racialism, and racial capitalism.

Black Marxism’s inquiry into the constructedness of both the “Negro” and whiteness in the next section, “The Roots of Black Radicalism,” is also now familiar territory. Despite its early appearance in the trajectory of “race construction” theory, Robinson’s study of slave ideology’s arrogation of cultural identity cannot be classified merely as prologue, as this comment illustrates:

The “Negro,” that is the color black, was both a negation of African and a unity of opposition to white. The construct of Negro, unlike the terms “African,” “Moor,” or “Ethiope” suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity that might command consideration. (81)

Having established the context for the development of race construction under industrial capitalism, slavery, and imperialism, Black Marxism then provides a concise history of black resistance in the Caribbean, Brazil, North America, and Africa (140–66), thus preparing the way for the final section on black radicalism’s relationship to Marxist theory.

Part three recovers the history of a diaspora of the black intelligentsia, examining principally how such figures as Du Bois, James, and Wright responded to Marxism. Black Marxism argues not only for an awareness of the centrality of Marxist consciousness in black radical thought, but contends as well for a recognition of the centralization of black resistance and liberation struggle in the historical development of radical internationalist labor politics. In other words, while Marxism helped shape black radicalism, black resistance contributed significantly to the formation of twentieth-century Marxism. Robinson insists, moreover, that the formations of organizations like the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) and even the United Negro Improvement Association “would have enormous consequence for the American Communist Party’s efforts at organizing Blacks”(213). The ABB began as a black revolutionary nationalist organization; then, as Caribbean members like Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and W.A. Domingo grew to be Marxist in consciousness, the Brotherhood soon “came to be influenced by the socialism of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and state Bolshe-
vism” (217). Robinson also historicizes the rise of Caribbean Leftism, anticipating Winston James’s *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America*.

*Black Marxism* depicts how the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association’s agitation against imperialist-capitalist oppression would influence C.L.R. James’s move toward Marxism (241–86).

Finally, Robinson recovers Richard Wright’s Marxist orientation, characterizing Wright’s complex disposition toward American communist orthodoxy in a way that sounds very much like one of the central messages of *Black Marxism*. That is, although Wright saw that the “Negro” was an invention of oppressive ideology, Robinson argues, Wright also understood that the enforcement of an institutionalized poverty and an alienation from bourgeois culture positioned blacks perfectly for engaging in radical proletarian struggle (305). At the end of *Black Marxism*, Robinson’s champions are Du Bois, James, and though it may surprise those who have not encountered this book, Wright, a figure who, like Ralph Ellison, has for decades served as a source for many received assumptions about the “failure” of black Marxism.

William Maxwell’s *New Negro, Old Left* takes the kind of work Robinson’s recovery project performs and, in a logical extension of *Black Marxism*’s premise, charts a new direction, one which reflects the critical aims of a new pluralism. Maxwell takes up the problem of ostensibly estranged black and white radical traditions and argues against the prevailing view: “*New Negro, Old Left* is motivated by the belief that inseparability of these two histories qualifies among the least understood features of modern black writing” (2). Recognizing the influence of such denunciations of American communism as those by Ellison and Harold Cruse, Maxwell contends forcefully that to portray African American writers of the Black Renaissance as either solely outsiders among Marxist politics or, in exclusion of all else, exploited by the party machine is not only to disregard what was really a pluralistic history but also to elide black agency:

> With its appetite for evidence of white seduction and betrayal of black mouthpieces, the cautionary history joins fifty years of red squads in assuming that black intellectuals were incapable of transforming their party or their white radical counterparts, save through denunciations issued after escape. Such history thus begins by denying African-American literary Communists what it would seem finally to prize: a historically consequential self-direction. (5)
Undertaking to reintroduce neglected black communists and fellow travelers to the history of pre-Popular Front radical movements, Maxwell deploys Bourdieu’s “cultural field” theory. In an insurgent act of poststructuralist critical theory piracy, moreover, Maxwell achieves this theoretical encounter by critiquing another study of black-white affiliation that uses Bourdieu’s approach, Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, in effect looting then applying the same theoretical strategy used by the object of his critique. Maxwell acknowledges that Hutchinson’s scholarship is undeniably authoritative but contends with the work’s exclusion of the “signs of renaissance radicalism” (20). Bourdieu’s theory, Maxwell says, offers the Marxist who is performing a recovery project a methodology for interpreting “the field of forces and struggles in which literature and its producers are cultivated” (61). Just as the cultural field theory permits Hutchinson to recoup the interaction of white and black intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance, Bourdieu’s theory permits Maxwell to reintroduce nearly forgotten fellow travelers like Andy Razaf back into the cultural field of the Black Renaissance (19). Razaf, poet, “black bolshevik,” and musical collaborator with Fats Waller, “should not remain an invisible man” (61).

Moreover, Maxwell reintroduces the historical fact that the CPUSA was popular with black laborers not only throughout the 1930s but during the 1920s, as well. Such a gesture contends with the orthodox periodization of the Harlem Renaissance. The periodization mechanism has sustained the notion that during the 1920s black cultural artists existed in a kind of aesthetic Paradise, only concerned with such supposedly “indirect” dissident activities as resurrecting Africanist civilization, while during the Great Depression thousands of black workers misguided followed the god of communism and thus lost their way in history. Among Maxwell’s interests in *New Negro, Old Left* is to interrogate the historian’s wish to segregate the 1920s from the 1930s, to sequester the vestal “renaissance” originating in Jazz Age Harlem from the contaminated black proletarianism of the Great Depression. Maxwell’s deperiodization stretches received historical boundaries of the Black Renaissance beyond even as late a date as the Harlem Riot of 1935, pushing the limits of New Negro struggle up to the beginning of the World War II.

Following the introductory chapter, *New Negro, Old Left* provides two much-needed re-readings of the poet, novelist, journalist, activist,
and diaspora traveler Claude McKay, an author who as a current recovery project seems finally to be gaining the kind of attention he deserves. The first of the chapters on McKay enters practically untouched critical terrain, McKay’s *The Negroes in America*. This literally singular text exists only in translated Russian—the original English language version is evidently no longer extant—found by McKay’s biographer, Wayne Cooper, while exploring the stacks of the New York Public Library. Maxwell sees the document as anticipating “both the expansive horizon and uneven adroitness of cultural studies at its most ambitious” (76). Areas of *The Negroes in America* that deal with the sexualized black body and its association with labor Maxwell identifies as “the cultural chapters.” Such sections, in other words, open up cultural readings of black-white interaction:

> As a whole, the cultural chapters of *The Negroes in America* unveil McKay as a precursor—and Marxian pre-critic—of black cultural studies. They mingle high and low forms, culture, power, and national propaganda without yielding aesthetic valuation, the criterion of self-representation through artistic production, or a caustic awareness of the material limits on creative reception. They insist that the approach to culture as a site of struggle over the meaning of race will be impeded or exploited by those capitalizing the fights, the plays, and the novels. (87)

This chapter, moreover, registers the importance of Robinson’s *Black Marxism*. Maxwell credits Robinson’s scholarship by arguing that the list of seminal black intellectuals found in *Black Marxism* could be expanded by the centralizing of McKay, as well, particularly in light of *The Negroes in America*:

> With its chief emphasis on the pressure of race within U.S. capitalist development, *The Negroes* takes a place at the opening of Black Marxism, the theoretical articulation of European working-class radicalism and black resistance in the African diaspora that Cedric Robinson traces through Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. McKay’s pre-echo of more recent, more exclusively academic work in African-American history, whiteness studies, cultural studies, and a post-Soviet Marxism without guarantees is valuable for its challenges as well as its flattering symmetries. Yet the Marxism of *The Negroes in America* is to my mind most significant for its moments of unassimilability within contemporary dialogues and genealogies and for its honored place within currently unclaimed Soviet lineages. (88–89)

The second McKay chapter offers a reconsideration of the McKay-Mike Gold dispute over the leadership of *The Liberator* in 1922.
Maxwell interrogates decades of assumptions about the rift between the co-editors. The received narrative portrays McKay's departure occurring as a consequence of Gold's supposed racist attitude. During the McKay-Gold phase, however, *The Liberator* moved toward engaging much more with race matters; both editors sought this policy change, not just McKay. Although historians, following Cruse's lead, have determined that the now mythic McKay-Gold dispute functions as a kind of microdrama for all black-white interaction during the 1920s and 1930s, whatever occurred between the two editors has been made obscure by McKay's 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*. By the late 1930s, McKay was as disillusioned with institutional forms of American communism as Wright would become. However, to complicate an objective analysis, McKay's Great Depression autobiographical narrative provides a questionable representation of his years as a fellow traveler during the 1920s (100). Maxwell's reading of *A Long Way from Home* is compatible with the historical record. McKay was communist in affiliation and affinity for far longer than his autobiography asserts, so it is very likely that the tale he relates of the conflict with Gold is consistent with McKay's late 1930s' identity, not the McKay of the early 1920s.

The chapter titled “Scottsboro Delimited: White Bait, Red Triangles, and Interracialism Between Men” revisits the relationship between the CPUSA and African Americans throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Maxwell reminds us of how popular the CPUSA was with black laborers, particularly in the South. A significant factor of this reassessment is an exploration of the southern white proclivity for sexualizing black communist resistance. In order to achieve this re-reading, Maxwell deploys Eve Sedgwick's theory on homosocial desire and Robin D.G. Kelley's work, which locates attitudes toward the intervention of communist organizers in the South during the 1930s within lynching ideology (127–30). Maxwell ends the chapter by re-reading the work of poets like Langston Hughes in the mid-1930s, asserting the unreliability of prevailing critical beliefs in the representation of Depression-era Black Renaissance literary art: “It is somewhat facile . . . to conclude that Hughes’s verse or politics was overhauled by the [Scottsboro] case; the settling on a Scottsboro conversion is one sign of the general desire to insulate the 1920s from the 1930s, Harlem's renaissance from the Depression ‘birth’ of black proletarianism” (134).

Maxwell offers two more related chapters revisiting, as does Cedric Robinson, the case of Richard Wright and communist politics. The first
of these also looks at another notorious debate, the critical quarrel over Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. The dispute is centered in Wright’s ostensive antipathy toward the kind of “black folk ideology” that Hurston celebrates, an aversion that Wright, despite his personal history as a southern migrant, is supposed to have exhibited after he embraced communism. Maxwell argues that Wright was far from alienated from the power of folk consciousness and that this sensibility in fact offers assistance in understanding his 1930s radicalism: “Depression-era Communism, I want to suggest, did not stand like a stone wall between folk ideology and the world’s most celebrated black Communist author but instead offered him a temporary passport to Eatonville’s environs” (157). It is reasonable to assume that many African Americans carried analogous complex notions of culture and diaspora.

The conclusion of New Negro, Old Left presents a shrewd reading of Wright’s complex disposition toward American communism. Maxwell achieves this reading by resurrecting the Wright-Nelson Algren affiliation. To reconsider Wright’s view of radical socialism in Black Marxism, Robinson argues that Wright believed in a kind of special historical situatedness for black people. In other words, the enforced estrangement from bourgeois culture made blacks those best positioned for radical engagement. Maxwell contends, however, that rather than turn his back on his “folk roots,” Wright’s creative response to Marxist thinking was an “African-American folk Communism,” an integration of communist theory with African American folk ideology. Maxwell believes that Wright’s response to the rupture between internationalist proletarian struggle and the “Negro Question” of the 1930s, particularly as a means for evaluating the violence against rural southern black cultures, permitted him a position, following the model of Algren, from which he could “draw on the founders of Communism to elucidate a native son unaligned with either side of the bourgeois/proletariat and fascist/Communist divides” (192). Maxwell concludes that in this way both Algren’s and Wright’s representations of their respective American native sons “challenge revolutionary certitude while exalting the revolutionary classics” (192).

Before concluding, a note is warranted on the attention Robinson’s work deserves. Robin D.G. Kelley’s newly added foreword to the 2000 edition of Black Marxism ponders why the book has not been conferred more critical attention, and indeed it is puzzling that Black Marxism has
not been as influential as it deserves to be. Echoing Cornel West’s review essay a few years after its publication, Kelley notes that few reviews of *Black Marxism* ever appeared; although West expresses somewhat mixed opinions of Robinson’s work, he notes how the book unfortunately “fell through the cracks” (xviii). Moreover, the foreword chastens Paul Gilroy and Winston James for slighting *Black Marxism*: Gilroy for his brusque criticism of Robinson’s thesis in *The Black Atlantic*; James for omitting any mention of Robinson’s scholarship in *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*. Kelley suggests that a “conspiracy of silence” cloaks the history of the text’s public notice (xv). There is very likely something to this argument, as West himself suggests. The fact that both Gilroy and James have spent much of their time working in the U.K. does not absolve their inattention. Nonetheless, another, albeit probably ancillary reason in the regrettable lack of attention accorded this work is the reality that *Black Marxism* has been a bit challenging to locate. Published by Zed Press in the U.K. in 1983, availability has been limited in the U.S. (and, one suspects, limited even in Britain). The academic community should be grateful to the University of North Carolina Press for making this vital text finally so widely accessible.

As for the historic consequence of Maxwell’s work, the aim of *New Negro, Old Left* may be seen as similar to Robinson’s, not only in its attempt to portray the significance of Marxism in black liberation struggle but also in its insistence that such authors as McKay and Wright be attended to with the critical acumen that they themselves allotted the forming of their convictions. Maxwell’s important book therefore offers new routes for several critical communities, including literary studies of U.S. modernism and radical intellectualism, black Atlantic historicism and diaspora studies, and studies in African American radical literature and other cultural arts. The history of internationalist politics and ethnic resistance has been complex, but to draw a line down the middle of the cultural map, refusing to consider the participation of ethnic intellectuals, workers, immigrants, and many others in pluralistic radical movements, not only clouds what was manifestly an inclusive history but also buries the work toward enfranchisement that so many performed.
NOTES


