Recovering the Dialectic of Race and Class Struggle in the USA

written by Joseph G. Ramsey | August 31, 2021

[Editors' note: This article is a further contribution to the Symposium on Black Lives Matter and the US Left begun in the Winter 2019 issue of New Politics with an initial essay by Cedric Johnson, "Who's Afraid of Left Populism." All the articles in this discussion can be accessed here.]

Cedric Johnson's contributions to this *New Politics* Symposium challenge us to confront the complexity of actually existing Black political life without falling back on the homogenizing assumptions of a "Black exceptionalism" that denies African Americans the same level of class, cultural, regional, and ideological diversity routinely extended to other similarly-sized groups (such as, for instance, the entire population of Canada). Johnson further urges us to recognize, in light of "Black Lives Matter," that slogans which may "galvanize" street mobilization can also "enshroud" crucial underlying issues. Just because a banner or slogan is suddenly popular is not a reason to refrain from critical thinking about it—which is not necessarily to say that such a slogan should be dropped entirely, either. The question then, is *how* to approach such "race-first" tendencies in light of our broader historical and materialist analyses and socialist politics.

Johnson rejects the hardening of 'standpoint theory' into a racially essentialized outlook that fetishizes ascribed identity and enforces ethno-territoriality on critical discourse, policing who is allowed to speak about what, irrespective of the content of what they may have to say. He warns us against demonizing the white working-class and calls out ruling elite attempts to baptize corporations as "progressive" by way of multicultural "blackwashing." Consistently, he attends to the deeper forces that are driving the contemporary policing crisis in the United States, which are considerably more complex than prevailing meta-stories of transhistorical racism allow. If we want to grasp where exactly the Trumpist "Blue Lives Matter" current is coming from, Johnson reminds us, then we need to grapple with the actual historical and material conditions giving rise to that tendency, even as doing so may trouble cherished movement shibboleths. Overall, Johnson makes a compelling case for orienting socialist politics towards the majoritarian goal of connecting working-class people across ethno-racial lines, uniting all those who are affected negatively by systemic injustices—from mass incarceration and militarized policing, to unemployment and poverty wages—in order to build a popular force capable of making the actual transformations we seek, while outflanking the enemies we face. His work helps us move beyond a simplistic 'Black and white' view of the history and problems before us.

The core of the Symposium critics' response to Johnson seems to be that there is still nonetheless something productive, illuminating, and necessary in foregrounding the injustices of race and racism 'as such' (even while noting the importance of class, too). Kim Moody, for instance, suggests the need for both universal and class-based programs and race-based interventions, warning of the danger of equating the established national unions of the Democratic Party with "labor" or "the

working-class." Lester Spence unites with Johnson on the need for broad left and class-based universal programs (like Medicare for All), but also insists on the need to focus on hyper-incarcerated populations, who may be so isolated and disconnected from broader social institutions that they can't be reached without more targeted action. (Note that Spence appears to assume that those affected by such hyper-incarceration are non-white.) Brian Jones, for his part, referring to the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the #BlackLivesMatter upsurge, asks "Can these two developments be fused?" Jones concedes that what "galvanizes" may often mystify with regards to race, but nonetheless reminds us of the value—from an anti-capitalist perspective—of a good deal of the popular #BlackLivesMatter-aligned writing that has broken through in mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times*, including regular appearances from the likes of Michelle Alexander, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Ibram X. Kendi. Even if the focus in such venues is generally on the history of racism and contemporary racial inequality rather than capitalism per se, Jones suggests, that frame allows anti-capitalist voices and ideas to gain ground.

A stronger version of Jones' claim might go on to argue that so entwined are the histories of racism and capitalist exploitation in the USA that one cannot excavate the former without calling the latter into question as well. "You can't have capitalism without racism," Malcolm X famously said. Perhaps we could invert and update the saying: "You can't popularize anti-racism without stirring up anti-capitalism." It is an appealing notion, suggesting that any expression of anti-racism, even if not consciously committed to socialism or working-class power, is nonetheless creating space for such politics, laying bare the fundamental injustices, inequalities, and violence that structure American capitalism and empire. But is this notion, however appealing, true? Does anti-racism automatically create space for anti-capitalism? Might even the "anti-racist" corporate trainings of Robin DiAngelo and Co. be paving the way for more radical possibilities?

Parallel with this *NP* Symposium, another contemporary critical framework has been growing popular, in part on its promise to address both race and class simultaneously: the discourse centered around the notion of "racial capitalism." Associated with Cedric Robinson's 1983 work *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, this tendency has been especially influential since this book's reintroduction by Robin D.G. Kelley in 2000, with a third edition released in late 2020, in the wake of the massive George Floyd upsurge. One might assume that, among various avowedly anti-racist trends today, the critique via "racial capitalism" would represent the proof of the strong proposition above, with attention to racial inequities developing organically to challenge capitalist social relations. Yet the situation is not so simple; *Black Marxism*'s treatment of anti-capitalist Black radicalism in fact closes down as many avenues as it opens. I've recently offered a detailed critique of this book—and Robinson's deployment of the notion of "racial capitalism"—in my January 2021 *Socialism & Democracy* article "Sifting the Stony Soil of *Black Marxism*: Cedric Robinson, Richard Wright, and Ellipses of the Black Radical Tradition."

I should mention that my own engagement with Robinson grew out of a three-pronged paradox. First, *Black Marxism* has been enjoying tremendous influence, with its key concepts of "racial capitalism" and "the Black Radical tradition" taken up by significant sectors of the academic-activist left. Second, amidst the Black Radical embrace of recent years—which has helped elevate voices like Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin—Richard Wright, long thought of as central to the Black left, has seemed to be somewhat excluded from the renaissance. Third, upon returning to *Black Marxism*, I realized that, contrary to my expectations, Richard Wright was himself a key—indeed foundational—figure in Robinson's own text.

How, I wondered, could this be? How could *Black Marxism* be experiencing such a revival even as Wright, one of its central figures, was being muted or marginalized? Furthermore, I wondered, what was it about Cedric Robinson and *Black Marxism* that so many academics and activists were finding so appealing? And what was it about Richard Wright that made him increasingly anathema, even

amidst a virtual Black Radical revival? These linked concerns led me to set out on a close critical interpretation of Cedric Robinson's ubiquitous magnum opus, through the lens of his treatment of Wright's work—which I've been studying for years.

The title of my *Socialism & Democracy* piece, "Sifting the 'Stony Soil' of *Black Marxism,*" speaks to my approach, which aims not to deny the value of Robinson's work, but to 'sift' through it, critically distinguishing what is fertile from what is an obstacle to left theory and practice. The appeal of *racial capitalism* is easy enough to discern. Likewise, the *Black radical tradition*. But the problems—or potential problems—embedded in such terms may not be so easy to spot. So I set out to explicate some of the ways these terms, whatever their value or mobilizing power, could also be prone to blind-spots, narrowing our sense of what we might call 'actually existing Black Marxism.'

The term "stony soil" alludes to Richard Wright's crucial 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," where Wright, from a Marxian and pro-socialist perspective, addresses what he saw as the contradictory appeal of Black nationalism (associated then with Marcus Garvey's massively popular, but by the '30s declining, United Negro Improvement Association). As I discovered, this essay is also a symptomatic point that reveals the serious limitations of Robinson's opus as an approach to actually existing Black Marxism.

The short of Wright's take—which warrants re-reading–is that, so long as the American scene continues to be characterized by "white chauvinism" and racist inequality, its "stony" terrain will continue to give rise to Black nationalism, including distorted and unhealthy variants (such as those at the time cheerleading for Japanese imperialism). And yet, the paradox for Wright was that while the growth of such nationalist currents in Black life was understandable—maybe even inevitable—their growth was still not on its own adequate to emancipating people from this terrain and could in fact create new problems, deepening rather than escaping the various ruts in which working and oppressed people were stuck.

In "Blueprint," Wright conducts a two-fold struggle: on the one hand opposing the 'class reductionists' of his own day with an argument as to the historical necessity and unavoidability of race and nationalistic consciousness for Black writers and the socialist movement alike; and, on the other, problematizing that nationalistic consciousness itself as inadequate to challenges before us, despite its understandable roots. Against the two poles, Wright calls for a critical dialectical engagement with the nationalist currents in Negro life, and also for creating culture and organization to promote unity and trust among Black and white writers and workers, as a means of reducing the suspicion and alienation that, in his view, gave rise to Black nationalism in the first place. (Only once this second goal was achieved could nationalist reaction be truly overcome.) At the same time, Wright does not discourage Black writers from engaging the undeniable racial condition of their lives—how could they not?—but he urges them to do so in ways that reveal the need for that nationalistic consciousness to *transcend* itself.

What does it mean to "transcend" Black nationalism in this context? Was Wright asking Black writers to 'put race aside' or to embrace a kind of 'race-blind' working-class unity that rendered racism a secondary 'epiphenomenon'? Clearly not—as the centrality of racialized struggles to Wright's own major works demonstrates, from his earliest poetry, to his collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938/40), to his blockbusters *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945/77). By 'transcendence,' Wright meant not a minimizing, side-stepping, or leaping over race, but rather a particular approach to it. As he wrote: "It means a nationalism that knows its *origins*, its *limitations*; that is aware of the *dangers* of its position; that *knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable* within the framework of capitalist America" and that recognizes "the *interdependence* of people in modern society" (emphasis added).

Wright was in effect calling for cultivating a racially integrated, global anti-capitalist movement in part *through critical reflection on the historical injustices, experiences, and social distortions of race*. But, paradoxically, in Wright's (pro-Communist, socialist) view, a would-be Black nationalist movement could not realize itself without overcoming itself, on at least two levels:

1. *At the level of historical analysis*: it needed to grasp where and how "race" and racial divisions came into being in the first place (invocations of race never being enough to grasp racism's own origins—except through racists' eyes);
2. *At the level of political strategy*: facing the *limits of being a national minority* within the USA, it needed to seek out comrades and allies beyond its 'own' ranks. It further needed to *challenge capitalism*—as well as *imperialism*— since a majority of Black people in the US were exploited workers, and since oppressed peoples elsewhere shared many similar struggles.

If a project of Black liberation was to succeed, then, it needed to work for the liberation and unity of all working-class and oppressed people, *across race lines* and *across the world*; as well as to prioritize the struggles of the Black *working-class*—the great majority of Black folks, to be sure—against more petty bourgeois and bourgeois elements who were already struggling for control over the nationalist banner, even before the overcoming of Jim Crow. (At the same time, the more that the broader working-class movement took up these causes too, the less Black responses would need to assume a nationalist form.)

We could do a lot worse than to use Wright's breakdown of "transcendent" Black nationalism as a tool for evaluating and engaging different manifestations of #BlackLivesMatter and anti-racist discourse and movement today. Yet "Blueprint" remains a largely neglected treatment of the race/class problematic. And those who do mention the text often misread it, blunting its critical edge. Sadly—and symptomatically—*Black Marxism* here is helping to mislead the pack. Cedric Robinson foreground's Wright's "Blueprint," but he misleadingly strips it of its crucial dialectical hinge, literally excising (via use of ellipses when quoting from the piece: "…") Wright's insistence on the need for 'transcendence' and instead leaving us with a far more uncritically and affirmatively nationalist account that ignores Wright's concern about the dangers of nationalisms that fail to grow beyond immediate racial reaction. Robinson, to be sure, has lots of interesting and insightful things to say about Wright, and defends him against several influential detractors—from Robert Bone, to Harold Cruse, to James Baldwin. But his essentializing ideological commitment to a notion of "racialism" as a virtually transhistorical architectonic (one that, he claims, predates capitalism by as much as a millennium), and the corollary notion that Black militancy is therefore inherently "radical," leads him to elide Wright's crucial contributions to fit his own more nationalist frame. In effect, the "Black Marxism" (and the Black Radical Tradition) that Robinson puts forth narrows the breadth and thins the depth of *actually existing* Black Marxism.

So much for Robinson's treatment of Wright. How about the broader Black Radical trajectory that Robinson has helped to inspire and coalesce? Why has Richard Wright become so marginal within so much of this discourse, even though Robinson saw him as crucial? Increasingly it seems to me that the sidelining of Wright (Ibram X. Kendi and Ta-Nehisi Coates are notable examples) is not only unfortunate, but symptomatic of the limits of current academic, left and/or #BLM thought, specifically a widespread reluctance to embrace and engage a core insight of Wright's work: *oppression—though it certainly inspires resistance—also oppresses people*. As Wright theorized in "Blueprint," and most infamously expressed through the character of Bigger Thomas in his novel *Native Son*, the forms of spontaneous resistance that oppressed people are driven to in a racist capitalist society are often themselves marked negatively by that oppression. (Bigger certainly engages in heroic and innovative resistance; he also kills two different young women out of his desperate fear.) Contra Robinson, struggling Black people are not immune to the corruptive and alienating forces of the society in which they are forced to live. No one is. Yet, the current

preference for more affirmative race talk, favoring a more 'uplifting' portrait of the racially oppressed, tends to steer clear of the problems Wright was at pains to foreground.

Such reluctance is understandable, stemming perhaps from a fear of playing into racist stereotypes circulated by the "law and order" right-wing and racist "underclass" ideology, which has dogged policy towards African Americans for nearly a century since the Great Migration. (It may also reflect a middle-class academic aversion to looking the rough realities of proletarian life in the eye.) But whatever its rationale, a fixed stance of racial affirmation risks romanticizing the oppressed as well as suppressing crucial aspects of the strategic situation before us, while ignoring the urgent dialectic of racial oppression and social liberation which "Blueprint" outlines, in particular the ways in which racial nationalism that doesn't "transcend" itself can in fact compound rather than alleviate the trap we're in. At times, strains of Black Radical Thought today operate as if recognizing the complex entanglement of people's lives in poverty, desperation, vulnerability, violence, and social alienation, is somehow to co-sign a racist thesis about Black people's 'imbrutization' (Kendi). But while we must certainly distinguish a left critique from racist right-wing underclass demonization, we do our cause no favor by smoothing over the rough edges of the world we inhabit and the challenges we face.

Recently assembled violent crime statistics and the 2021 mayoral race in New York City both underscore the urgency of the issue, with a majority of even Black Brooklyn helping to elect a former police officer, notwithstanding militant movement calls to "Defund" or "Abolish" the police. The city of Chicago—Bigger Thomas's home—saw 774 homicides in 2020 alone, more than two killings per day, a 50% increase over 2019 totals. Such high levels of violence within contemporary US society cannot be laid narrowly at the foot of the favored movement target—racist police—alone, though the system they are trained to defend does bear ultimate responsibility. What are the concrete mechanisms that produce such violence? What must be transformed socially if we are to reduce such bloodshed, and thus abolish the alibi of the increasingly militarized 'thin blue line' that finds its self-justification in such social mayhem? What are the social pressures that stifle and distort the human potential simmering in our most oppressed communities? How is the growth of structural unemployment, and of a precarious surplus population 'useless' in the eyes of capital, compelling people to hustle and hunker down to survive? What are the material reasons that even many working-class people are compelled to seek out the limited (and often trigger-happy) assistance of the police (or the lure of Trumpian authoritarianism) in response to the more immediate social violence and insecurity that surrounds them? Can we speak openly about such material dynamics without being accused of demoralizing our side or of consorting with the enemy?

Wright himself was often criticized in his own time for his alleged pessimism, for dwelling on the negative, and foregrounding the way that systems of racism and capitalism intertwined and distorted the responses of oppressed people, Black and white alike. As Wright made explicit in his essay "How Bigger Was Born," he saw that the dangerous tendencies of 'Bigger Thomas' could appear—and increasingly were appearing—*across all racial complexions* in an increasingly alienated US society. And he further saw that in the hyper-alienated context of the USA, urbanized and proletarianized people could break either towards progressive socialism (and international communism) or towards nationalistic and reactionary fascism. In general, Wright refused to give his readers—leftists among them—the uplifting endings or heroic radical proletarians that some clamored for. And with good reason.

For a truly majoritarian socialist movement needs to be rooted in a deep honest grasp of the disparate forces that produce social alienation, desperation, and dysfunction. Such analysis can provide us with a map to trace these forces through to all who are linked by them across racial lines—whether the affected see those links themselves yet or not. This shared contact with social oppression may feel surprising or shameful at first, but in fact lays the basis for increasingly wide

networks of solidarity, connecting and dividing communities that otherwise may be seen as separate from—or even pitted against—one another. The very messiness and 'pessimism' of Richard Wright's work then, as well as its class-attentive, race-transcendent radicalism, arguably lends itself to exploring and 'sifting' our social terrain better than many other writers (creative and critical alike) who in one way or another give us more comforting Black and white assurances that, however bad things are, we know the nature of the people and problems and possibilities before us, without the need for any more burdensome investigation.

One might say something similar of Cedric Johnson's work—and contemporary reactions to it—though his thoroughgoing empirical critique of 20th-century Black nationalism goes even further than Wright's. (Indeed, Wright's dialectical "Blueprint" may look positively rosy and optimistic compared to the accounts of class conflict and ideological sectarianism that Johnson recovers in his book *Revolutionaries to Race Rebels: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*.) Nonetheless, in compelling us to address the messiness of historical inheritance, class contradictions that cross racial lines, and political struggle within and beyond the oppressed groups themselves, Johnson, like Wright, helps shake loose our thinking from comforting (and often anachronistic) beliefs about what the struggle for liberation must look like in the contemporary USA, insisting that our theory of the world be as nuanced and open to complexity and change as the world itself.

It seems clear that neither the Black Marxism of Richard Wright, nor that of Cedric Johnson, fits the now popular forge of "Black Marxism" laid out by Cedric Robinson and his followers. But their thought remains vital and necessary today regardless, even more so because of the way it challenges a "racial capitalism" discourse wherein the latter term may be eclipsed by the former. We can ill afford the dominance of "Black radical" frames that marginalize or suppress such brilliant and actually existing Black Marxists from view, narrowing historical materialism to nationalist militancy. Tacking on the word "capitalism" is not enough. We need all the tools that history has handed us for the difficult work ahead.