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## European Specters

**A**ccelerating into the new millennium, more than a century and a half after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, we live in a world simultaneously Marxist, post-Marxist, and pre-Marxist. If the old man were to rise up from his uneasy sleep in London's Highgate Cemetery and hurry over to a newsstand to check on the global situation, he would in certain respects find a world instantly familiar to him—indeed the world of the *Manifesto*. Globalization; megamergers; transnational supercorporations; economic meltdown of entire countries; chasms between rich and poor; commodification of everything possible and of some things one would have thought impossible; the desacralization of all relations; the planetary interconnection of stock exchanges and the corresponding flow of capital, investment, information, and panic around international circuits, in a market that never closes; so that if it is time to shut up shop in New York, it is a new day in Tokyo; if there are tremors in Kuala Lumpur, there will be rumbles in London. . . . How could he resist crowing: "I told you so!"

But the celebration would, of course, be mistaken. For—apart from his surprise at finding that capitalism was near ubiquitous—he would also discover, to his greater astonishment, that the gravediggers he had confidently expected to be attendant at the funeral had themselves been interred: communist parties globally dissolved and discredited; self-styled socialist states either defunct and dismembered unions or strange "market Stalinist" hybrids; oppositional workers' movements largely impotent or integrated into capitalism; his own ideas universally derided and disgraced as nineteenth-century anachronisms. It would be a world he recognized, but a world that no longer recognized him: Marxist in the

politico-economic domination by capital he had so presciently delineated; post-Marxist in its ideological domination by neoliberalism and free-market theory. Expecting to be able to toast the demise of class society, he would find instead that he and revolutionary communism were the ghosts at the bourgeois banquet—and not even respectable bogeymen anymore, but pathetic shades incapable of frightening anyone.

How did this come about? There are, of course, numerous explanations, some competing, some complementary. What I want to suggest is an important contributory cause that has not, I think, received sufficient theoretical attention. I will suggest that if the world we inhabit is both Marxist and post-Marxist, it is also in crucial respects pre-Marxist. I do not mean this in the sense of the discredited teleology of a secular predestinarianism, according to which a brave socialist future is still somehow just around the corner. Rather, I mean that one central set of the “objective conditions” Karl Marx presupposed to exist in his time has even now, a century and a half later, not really materialized; and in its absence it is questionable how successful socialism as a global movement could ever have been. For in the gathering of ghosts above, one specter remains unmentioned and unexorcised: the European specter that we know as race.

### THE SOCIAL ONTOLOGY OF MODERNITY

Those who come to Marx's texts for the first time are often surprised at how little he actually has to say about socialism. Expecting political manuals on how to bring about the classless future, they find instead analyses of the class-dominated past and present. For what Marxism is, above all, is a way of analyzing society and a theory of history: historical materialism. Changing the world was to be made possible by an interpretation of the world superior to those previously advanced. And as a theory of history, Marxism was for generations an illuminating holistic paradigm for intellectuals who sought to discern and explain global patterns of social evolution. The “materialism” promised a realism, a revelation of what actually mattered, a cutting through surface appearances to the underlying causes. Some things were just more fundamental than others, and Marxism knew what those things were. Thus the theory provided a *social ontology*,<sup>1</sup> in the sense of a mapping of the basic determining social existents: the central political actors—classes; the real forces motivating them—class interests; the nature of humans, and what kinds of concerns and identities were fundamental to their existence—class membership and class being, the relation of the worker to his product, alienation and the hope of self-realization through labor.

Now one way of situating this theory is as a particular account of modernity. Indeed Marshall Berman's well-known book on the subject, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1988), takes its title directly from the *Manifesto*. Marxism could be seen to be offering an account of modernity that, while opposed to the Whig theory classically associated with liberalism, is nonetheless still part of the larger European Enlightenment narrative. So there is the mainstream Enlightenment and the radical Enlightenment, but from a broader perspective they are in certain respects still operating within a common framework of assumptions.

The respectable mainstream story will talk about the impact of new ideas and values—liberty, equality, fraternity, personhood; the radical story will admit the force of ideas and values but stress the underlying “material” changes that generated and made people more receptive to them. The orthodox narrative will speak unqualifiedly of the American and French Revolutions; the Left narrative, more picky, will qualify them as bourgeois revolutions. The mainstream account will describe an inspiring egalitarian transition from ascriptive hierarchy to meritocracy, from birth-to-death membership in feudal estates to a world of free and equal self-making individuals; the Marxist account will contest this picture, arguing that actually one kind of class society is overthrown by another in which class no longer announces itself. For both stories, then, modernity is intimately tied up with the end of the status distinctions of the ancient and medieval world. But for Marxists, the new moral and juridical egalitarianism that exists at the level of exchange is systematically undercut by the economic compulsions and domination existing at the level of production. Modernity's promise can only be fully realized when these material, nonnormative barriers—largely unacknowledged by the atomic ontology of classic liberalism—are also removed.

A familiar tale, then, whether in its orthodox or radical version. What I now want to point out is how Eurocentric this narrative is.<sup>2</sup> I don't just mean the obvious and trivial sense that it focuses on Europe (and Europeans in the “New World”). Nor do I mean the less trivial sense that it involves assimilating all the world to a basically unilinear path of development, with other nations destined to be impressed into the European line of industrial march: “traditional” and “modern” societies for the mainstream view; “slave,” “feudal,” and “capitalist” for the Marxist view; with some awkward, ad hoc categories like the “Asiatic mode of production” stuck on. Rather it is Eurocentric in a deeper, more theoretically important sense. It projects as a global model of tectonic normative change and moral transition what is really true only for Europe and Europeans (and not, of course, true for women). And it ignores the emergence and consolidation of a new normative structure of moral inequality that is equally

fundamental to the making of modernity. I refer to race, the specter that, emanating from Europe, comes to haunt the modern world.

Consider, for example, Will Kymlicka's well-known introduction to political philosophy. In the opening chapter of this book, Kymlicka says that: "[T]he idea that each person matters equally is at the heart of all plausible [modern] political theories" (1990, 5). So the thesis is that: though liberalism, conservatism, libertarianism, communitarianism, socialism, and so forth, will differ on other points, they will all have this commitment to moral egalitarianism in common. Kymlicka does not in the least mean this as a controversial claim. It is rather a liberal shibboleth, a banality, an obvious point that one makes as a preliminary to discussing more important matters. Yet if one thinks about it for a moment, one should see that for the classic ("modern") political theorists of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, it is—far from being axiomatic—patently false. The reflexive, automatic, knee-jerk assent it evokes in us (if I may locate myself among the "us" here) derives from our considering only the European context. It is here, on this continent, and among its representatives on other continents, that it becomes "obvious" in the modern period that all men are normatively equal. But these theories of liberalism—whether Lockean, Humean, Kantian, or Millian—are being put forward by thinkers who did *not* believe all people mattered equally. John Locke's proscriptions in the *Second Treatise* against hereditary slavery seem, strangely, not to apply to the captured Africans in whose enslavement he was earlier an investor (Glausser 1990; Welchman 1995). Hume says explicitly that: "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men" (Hume 1997, 33). Kant's anthropology, credited by some as the first systematized theorization of modern (i.e., "scientific") racism, differentiates humanity into four tiers—white, yellow, black, and red—of which only the white European tier have the capacity to become fully autonomous persons (Eze 1995; Bernasconi 2001; 2002). And Mill reminds us in *On Liberty* that of course he does not intend that his antipaternalist harm principle, which prohibits interference with individuals for their own good, should be extended to those barbarian nations where "the race itself may be considered as in its nonage" (Mill 1989, 13; Souffrant 2000).

So the vaunted egalitarianism that supposedly characterizes the modern period is really a white one—that is, all *whites* are equal. The traditional liberal narrative of modernity is fundamentally misleading because it represents as a *global* normative change what is an *intra-European* normative change: a shift from the world of ascriptive hierarchy to a world of

equal individuals that is true, at best, for (male) Europeans. In fact, a new system of ascriptive hierarchy is established by the European expansionism (white settlement, slavery, colonialism) that is the other face of modernity and that creates the material basis for European superiority to the rest of the world.

In understanding the ramifications of this system, actual Marxist theory (if not necessarily a potential, reconstructed Marxist theory) has also been inadequate. If liberals describe a transition from caste society to egalitarian individualism, then Marxists describe how bourgeois revolutions equalize normative standings but leave economic privilege intact. Formal equality has been achieved, in this society of "persons" without formal differentiation; but another kind of revolution will be required to overcome the structures of economic disadvantage that make these persons actually radically unequal. In this narrative, then, race does not officially exist. The social ontology (at least in the official narrative) is class-based, and it leaves no room for race; but no room is necessary, since the ontology is supposedly universal, colorless, and all-inclusive. Thus, in *The German Ideology*, in the first developed theoretical statement of their new worldview, Marx and Engels proclaim that they, unlike the Young Hegelians, begin from "real, active men," not "men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived," but "as they *actually* are, i.e., as they act, produce materially . . . as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these" (CW 5, 35–36). This statement is not supposed to be an empiricist banality, but a deep theoretical claim about what is putatively most "real" and "actual" about these "men." And what is ostensibly most fundamental about their situation is their level of technological development and the production relations in which they're enmeshed, which shape their being in a profound way and from which all the basics of their existential situation can be read off.

Yet the characterization offered implicitly makes it plain that Marx and Engels' colorless, raceless workers are actually *white*. Only for them have ascriptive hierarchy and caste distinction been abolished. The significance of the French Revolution is appreciated; the significance of the Haitian Revolution—and why there had to be a Haitian Revolution—is not (James 1989). If we were to give Marx and Engels the benefit of the doubt, it is clear, then, that at best there was no perception on their part that the peculiar situation of people of color required any conceptual modifications of their theory. And if we are less charitable, we must ask whether their contemptuous attitude toward people of color does not raise the question of whether they too, like the leading liberal theorists cited above, should not be indicted for racism and the consignment of nonwhites, particularly blacks, to a different theoretical category. It is a familiar criticism, as

pointed out in the previous chapter, that, following Hegel's distinction between world-historic and non-world-historic peoples, Marx and Engels were Eurocentrists who sometimes spoke about "barbarian" nations (Munck 1986). But in addition, in their more unguarded moments in the correspondence, we sometimes find them talking about "niggers." Thus, Marx, on a trip to Algiers, describes a "dancing grinning nigger," and he observes of his mixed-race son-in-law Paul Lafargue that he "has the blemish customarily found in the negro tribe—*no sense of shame*, by which I mean shame about making a fool of oneself" (CW 46, 225, 231–32, 374). Engels casually refers to "amusing" "nigger waiters"; he remarks jocularly of Samuel Moore (translator of volume 1 of *Capital*) that in taking up the post of Chief Justice of the Territories of the Royal Niger Company, he has "consented to become Lord Chief Justice of the Niger Niggers, the very cream of Nigrition Niger Niggerdom"; he suggests that Lafargue is "in his quality as a nigger, a degree nearer to the rest of the animal kingdom than the rest of us"; and he speculates about some alleged political blunder of Lafargue's that he "can only suppose that it's the eighth or sixteenth part of negro blood which flows in Lafargue's veins and occasionally gains the upper hand that has led him into this quite inexplicable folly" (CW 48, 209, 337, 52–53; CW 49, 302). So even if there is no explicit articulation and defense of racist ideology as such in their work, it can be seen that they shared the common-sense conviction of their time of European racial superiority.

I have argued elsewhere (Mills 1997; 1998), following the feminist example on gender, that it is a mistake, as the mainstream secondary literature too often does, to bracket and segregate such passages from the philosopher's thought, as if they had no implications for the actual boundaries of the population covered by his [*sic*] theory. If the philosopher in question really meant white males when he said "men," he likely had somewhat different descriptions and prescriptions in mind when it came to women and people of color. My focus in those writings was on the normative apparatus of personhood and rights utilized by liberal theorists, and on the question of where nonwhites really fitted in this moral topography. But a parallel analysis could obviously be done of the Marxist apparatus of sociohistorical agency and determination, with its supposedly colorless workers. Consider, for example, this revealing passage from an 1882 letter of Engels to Karl Kautsky on the prognosis for the anticolonial struggle:

As I see it, the actual colonies, i.e. the countries occupied by European settlers, such as Canada, the Cape [South Africa], Australia, will all become independent; on the other hand, countries that are merely ruled and are inhabited by natives, such as India, Algeria and the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions, will have to be temporarily taken over by the proletariat and guided as rapidly as possible towards independence. How this process will develop

is difficult to say. India may, indeed very probably will, start a revolution and, since a proletariat that is effecting its own emancipation cannot wage a colonial war, it would have to be given its head, which would obviously entail a great deal of destruction, but after all that sort of thing is inseparable from any revolution. . . . Once Europe has been reorganised, and North America, the resulting power will be so colossal and the example set will be such that the semi-civilised countries will follow suit quite of their own accord. . . . What social and political phases those countries will then have to traverse before they likewise acquire a socialist organisation is something about which I do not believe we can profitably speculate at present. (CW 46, 322)

The set of contrasts in this passage speaks volumes: on the one hand, the "civilized" white settler states; on the other hand, the "semi-civilized" countries that are inhabited by natives. The former are already fit for independence; the latter are not, and ideally they should be guided to independence ("when they become ready"—a familiar colonial trope) by a "proletariat" whose color is not indicated but, by the logic of the passage, are clearly the *white* European working class. "A colonial war" is ambiguous: Surely Engels couldn't possibly mean a war of counterinsurgency *against* Indian independence? (That would be a remarkable interpretation of proletarian internationalism!) But even on the more charitable reading, it is obvious that Europeans must be in charge to make sure things go right. Using Marxism's own famous contrast between what a theorist says and what he means, then, we could conclude that: if classes are the sole, or main, existents in Marxism's *official* social ontology, it would seem that nonwhite races nonetheless have a being that, in Marx's *actual* ontology, definitely involves a somewhat different dialectic of social emancipation.

So, I would support that the subsumption of the experience of the colonized and the racially subordinated under orthodox Marxist historical materialist categories is doubly problematic. These raceless categories do not capture and register the specificities of the experience of people of color; and though they are now deployed race-neutrally, they were arguably not intended by the founders to extend without qualification to this population in the first place.

This conceptual opacity, or at least insensitivity, is reproduced by Marx's intellectual heirs: for example, in Lenin's classic booklet on imperialism (1996), originally published in 1916. Though Lenin does describe "a world system of colonial oppression" divided between the advanced capitalist nations and the "subjected countries and peoples" (5, 83), the very word "race" is mentioned only twice (104, 114), once in reference to J. A. Hobson's work, and it certainly gets no theoretical treatment. Since class exploitation is the central form of domination, subordinated nonwhite peoples have their situation characterized in terms of national oppression and



superexploitation. That is, whereas the abstract colorless (but actually white) worker, as a "wage-slave," has surplus value extracted from him during "normal" free wage labor, the literally enslaved and those carrying out forced labor in the colonies do not even get the chance to sell their labor power. But while such differential exploitation is certainly part of the story of racial subordination, it is not remotely the whole story. The distinctive reality of race and the profound shaping effect it has on one's life, for both the privileged and the subordinated, are not explored. The benefits to the metropolitan white working class are conceptually cashed out in terms of payment from "super-profits" to a "labour aristocracy" (7), but not in terms of joint stockholding benefits in whiteness itself. So though this may be a "new capitalism," its newness essentially inheres in "the domination of finance capital" (43, 58); and racial oppression makes no appearance on the list of its "five essential features" (90). Racial domination and racial struggle can have no reality of their own, since while "the forms of the struggle may and do constantly change in accordance with varying, relatively particular, and temporary causes . . . the essence of the struggle, its class content, cannot change while classes exist" (75). Even when the significance of race seems to be admitted, as by Oliver Cromwell Cox (2000), where race is linked as a global formation to imperialism, it is still ultimately reduced to class.

So with a few laudable exceptions, such as Victor Kiernan's work (1996), the orthodox white Marxist tradition has been impaired by a general theoretical failure in appreciating the reality of race as itself a system of oppression. Not accommodated within the terms of the theory is the idea that European expansionism and European imperialism bring race into existence as a global social reality, a structure of domination in which, on the planetary scale, Europe dominates the other continents; and within these continents, whites dominate nonwhites. Racial domination is not itself seen as a system of political oppression because it is not viewed as *racial* oppression, but rather as "really" something else, as class oppression in one of its many manifestations, or as national subordination. Typically, racism has been seen as a set of ideas and values imposed on the working class by the bourgeoisie, a particular variant of bourgeois ideology. Since the worker (defined by relationship to the means of production) is essentially raceless and has no country, the fact that the United States, for example, has historically been "a white man's country" has no bearing on his class being. In the classic Marxist social model of (materialist) base and (ideal/ideological) superstructure, class is in the base, and race is ideal. So in terms of a social ontology, class is metaphysically "deep," but race is not. A social ontology of class, certainly; a social ontology of race, no.

Moreover, these omissions and evasions are not just features of the past, but the recent present. As an example, let us turn again to the five repre-

sentative anthologies in Analytical Marxism cited at the start of chapter 1: Ball and Farr (1984); Roemer (1986); Callinicos (1989); Ware and Nielsen (1989); Carver and Thomas (1995). (Anthologies are more useful in illustrating the point, since omissions in a single-authored book can always be attributed to the shortsightedness of the individual author.)

Together these five books run to sixty-five chapters and seventeen hundred pages. (I am counting the long introductions in Callinicos, and Ware and Nielsen as chapters.) One might expect, then, that in all these words looking at a global theory of history, there would be some treatment of a subject, race and racism, that has obviously been pretty central to that history—especially when the pretensions of Analytical Marxism are to have jettisoned the dogmatism and Left catchphrases of the past; to be examining Marxism critically; and to bring it up to date in the light of modern sociology, economics, and political science. But the actuality is that: not only is it not the case that several chapters are dedicated to the subject, not even one chapter is dedicated to the subject; not only is it not the case that several sections in different chapters focus on the subject, not even one section in one chapter focuses on the subject. There are two brief discussions and some scattered sentences in a few chapters, but there is no systematic treatment.<sup>3</sup>

So this is an indication of the state of affairs in what could be regarded as a “white” Marxism: neither in the founders’ original work nor in the subsequent elaborations of (most of) their intellectual heirs has sufficient attention been paid to race. The understanding of the growth of capitalism is not crucially linked—as it would be in a “black” Marxism—to imperialism’s role in establishing a world-system of racial domination (Cedric Robinson 2000). And the political conceptualization of particular countries, such as the United States, is inadequate in that the significance of structural white privilege for their makeup is not appreciated. Since the workingman has no country, even less does he have a race. There is no need, then, to develop a theorization of the significance of race in a general theory of history and society, despite the centrality of race to that history and despite the fact that most of the authors in the anthologies are Americans, and thus citizens of what is one of the most race-conscious societies in the world, with a history hundreds of years old of white supremacy (Fredrickson 1981; Anthony Marx 1998).

### “RACE AS THE PRIMARY CONTRADICTION”

In 1996 I was invited by the Radical Philosophy Association (RPA) to participate in one of those “after the fall”/“rethinking the Left”/“which way forward” panels that were so prevalent in the post-1991 period.<sup>4</sup> Having

been musing for some time on the issues discussed in the previous section, I decided that—instead of the usual ritualistic Left genuflections and pieties—I would raise the question of whether there might not be some deeper problem not addressed in white American Left theory. Originally, I had meant to complete a paper, as well as a handout to go with it; but in the end, pressed for time, I simply expanded the handout to become the paper. I here reproduce in full that handout (only slightly edited), distributed to the jaw-dropping consternation of the panel organizer and most of the audience, not to mention the outrage of many present:

#### RACE AS THE PRIMARY CONTRADICTION

Or, "Does White American Radical Theory Rest on a Mistake?"

Or, "Why Is There No Liberalism in the United States?"

Or, "Why White Marxists Should Be Black Nationalists"<sup>5</sup>

Or, "Socialism in Our Time: A 500-Year Plan"

**BASIC THESIS:** The original white radical orthodoxy (Marxist) was that: (i) there is a primary contradiction, and (ii) it's class. The present white radical orthodoxy (post-Marxist/postmodernist) is that: there is no primary contradiction. My radical thesis is that both of these orthodoxies are wrong. Instead, the truth is that: (i) there is a primary contradiction, and (ii) it's race.

#### 1. Prelude: A Short Brechtian Exercise for the White Radical Reader

Look at yourself in the bathroom mirror (other mirrors can do as well, but it may be best to do this in private), and ask yourself the following question: What am I doing here? After all, I am not Apache, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Pueblo, Navajo. The tribe of which I am a member is the European tribe, the white tribe. What entitles me to be here is that I am a descendant of white settlers in a white settler state established by taking this land by force from its native inhabitants. The structure of moral and political entitlements that legitimated this taking was condensed in "race." This is not ancient history, like the Fall of Rome, or even more recent history, like the Norman Conquest. The last battles were still being fought little more than a century ago. Yet this structure remains largely unexamined, ignored, naturalized, taken for granted, in white radical theory. What does this say about white radical theory? What does this say about me?

Do this once every morning for a week, or at least until you start feeling worse.

#### 2. Race as the Primary Contradiction: What I Don't Mean

Here are some possible misunderstandings of my claim: (i) Race as the oldest oppression—obviously false (gender has that honor), since race only comes into existence over the last five hundred years or so. (ii) Race as the progenitor of all other oppressions (gender, class, etc.)—obviously false, given that it's not the oldest. (iii) Race as involving the highest rate of exploitation (in the techni-

cal Marxist sense)—not necessarily; the metropolitan white working class may be more exploited than nonwhites in the Third World. (iv) Race as biological, transhistorical, transworld—no (see [i]), race is constructed. (v) Race as exhaustive of the political—no, the political is broader than race. (vi) Race as the only important oppression—no, other oppressions are important also.

### 3. Race as the Primary Contradiction: What I Do Mean

Race as the central identity around which people close ranks (no transracial gender bloc; no transracial class bloc; but transgender and transclass racial blocs). Race as the stable reference point for identifying the “them” and “us” which override all other “thems” and “us’s” (identities are multiple, but some are more central than others). Race as the best predictor of opinion on a myriad public issues. Race as what ties the system together, and blocks progressive change.

### 4. Why Gender Isn’t the Primary Contradiction

White women are oppressed, but gain at least a virtual personhood/personhood-by-proxy through their appropriate relation to the white male (father, husband, brother, etc.), and share materially in white male wealth through family and racial group relations in a way that nonwhites do not. Straight white women (the vast majority of white women) routinely hang out with, date, sleep with, marry, have kids with “the enemy” (this is the truth in lesbian separatism)—obviously not a basis for systemic opposition. The “enemy” are their fathers, brothers, cousins, friends, workmates, children. (White lesbians are a tiny minority and in any case generally hook up with other white lesbians.) Thus at the end of the day, when the consciousness-raising sessions and the feminist demonstrations are over, white women return in the main to the white-male-centered household.

### 5. Whites as a Cognitively-Handicapped Population

Whites as multiply handicapped in seeing this system because (i) *motivationally*: whites benefit from the existing order, and so have a vested interest in not seeing it; (ii) *experientially*: whites don’t experience racial oppression themselves, and live in a largely segregated white lifeworld—raised in white families, growing up in white family/school/social circles, hanging out with other white people, dating and marrying their fellow whites—thereby having little opportunity to gain access to nonwhites’ divergent perceptions; (iii) *discursively/ideologically/conceptually*: whites inhabit a white cognitive universe, whose dominant categories block apprehension of the centrality of race.

### 6. White Radicals as (Sorry Guys, No Hard Feelings) a Subset of the Above

White American radicals import their radical categories from across the Atlantic, the theories following the same immigrant route as their bearers. But European models of radicalism, predicated on a system where race is much less domestically/internally important (race as the external relation to the colonial world), operate with a basically raceless (at least nominally) conceptual

apparatus. Race then has to be “added on.” What white radicals fail to realize is that European expansionism brings into existence in the United States and elsewhere a *new* kind of polity—white supremacy—and that it cannot be conceptualized within the orthodox left frameworks. “Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production,” and “Not only in its answers, even in its questions there was a mystification” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* [CW 5, 35, 28]). But instead white radicals start with white people (differentiated from red natives and black slaves) conceived of merely as abstract “workers” and “capitalists” in a white settler state conceived of simply as “capitalism.” They then ask (when they deign to notice it at all) where “racism” comes from. Better question: where do “white” people come from?

### 7. Why White Marxists Should Be Black Nationalists

Imagine you’re a white male Marxist in the happy prefeminist, pre-postmodernist world of a quarter-century ago. You read Marcuse, Miliband, Poulantzas, Althusser. You believe in a theory of group domination involving something like the following: The United States is a *class* society in which class, defined by *relationship to the means of production*, is the *fundamental* division, the bourgeoisie being the *ruling class*, the workers being *exploited and alienated*, with the state and the juridical system *not* being neutral but part of a superstructure to maintain the existing order, while the *dominant ideology* naturalizes, and renders invisible and unobjectionable, class domination.

In other words, you believe a set of highly controversial propositions, all of which would be disputed by mainstream political philosophy (liberalism), political science (pluralism), economics (neoclassical marginal utility theory), and sociology (Parsonian structural-functionalism and its heirs). But the irony is that all of these claims about group domination can be made with *far greater ease* with respect to race, relying not on controversial Marxist notions, but undeniable (if embarrassing) and well-documented (if usually ignored) facts from mainstream descriptive social theory, and on conventional liberal individualist values from mainstream normative social theory. As demonstrated below:

CLASS	RACE
FOUNDATIONAL CATEGORY (Genealogy/Origins/Meta-Narrative)	
Class society—capitalism	European expansionism—white settler state—white supremacy
Class as the fundamental social division	Race as the fundamental social division
Class as the relationship to (ownership of/dispossession from) the means of production	Race as the relationship to (entitlement to/exclusion from) full personhood

Base (relations of production) supposedly determines the superstructure (state, legal system, ideology)

Racial "base" (relations of personhood) definitely does determine the superstructure (state, legal system, ideology)

State ostensibly a bourgeois state, dominated by the capitalist class, owners of the means of production

State clearly a racial state, dominated by whites, the full persons

Bourgeoisie as the ruling class—polity supposedly a bourgeois democracy even with universal suffrage

Whites as the ruling race—polity obviously a *Herrenvolk* democracy even with universal suffrage

Legal system establishes and consolidates capitalism, though it undergoes changes over time (laissez-faire to state interventionist)

Legal system establishes and consolidates white supremacy, though it undergoes changes over time (de jure to de facto)

Hegemonic bourgeois ideology naturalizes/justifies class domination

Hegemonic white settler ideology naturalizes/justifies racial domination

Workers as alienated from their product, supposedly affecting their being fundamentally

Nonwhites as alienated from their personhood, unquestionably affecting their being fundamentally

Workers as exploited (labor theory of value) at the point of production; transfer of surplus to the bourgeoisie, who benefit from class exploitation

Nonwhites as exploited through slavery, land expropriation, market discrimination, rent, lower wages, general denial of equal opportunities; net transfer of wealth, land, surplus, opportunities in general to the white population, who benefit from racial exploitation

Class interests—notion of privileged classes having vested group interest in class order

Racial interests—notion of whites having vested group interest in racial order

Sociohistorical trends are supposed to lead (but haven't) to workers' becoming "class conscious," so that the system can be changed

People are already (and have been for hundreds of years) "racially conscious," with the white majority intent on retaining the system unchanged

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So if—despite the manifold theoretical obstacles—you were able to believe the claims in the left-hand column, you should have no difficulty believing the

claims in the right-hand column, which are far better substantiated. (You can pick up your Malcolm X cap at the door.)

8. Gee, Thanks for Explaining Everything; But Now That You've Pointed It Out, It All Seems So Obvious—How Come I Didn't Realize All This Before?

You're welcome; see (5) and (6) above.

9. Socialism in Our Time: A 500-Year Plan

As pedants know, if nobody else, the new millennium doesn't actually start until the year 2001, so this gives RPA members several years to prepare a 500-year plan, to be passed on to their grandchildren:

2001–2100: Struggle against white supremacy/majoritarian domination  
 2101–2200: Struggle against white supremacy/minoritarian domination  
 2201–2300: Struggle for social democracy  
 2301–2500: Struggle for socialism

Get your black diapers now!

### THE OPPRESSION SYMMETRY THESIS

Now one can appreciate that with such a handout I was bound to get myself in trouble in many ways, with many different sectors of the audience. For the unreconstructed Marxists, it was, of course, heretical that anything but class could be central. For the post- and never-Marxists, it was, of course, heretical (that quasi-Maoist title!) that anything at all could be central. Who after all, in these postmodernist times, believes that anything, let alone race, can be "primary"? But what I was trying to capture, however inadequately expressed, was my sense, first, of the reality of race as itself a system of domination and, second, of the *asymmetry* between race and other systems of domination in the United States. In other words, it is not merely that, as a black philosopher talking to a predominately white audience, I was saying that "this is an issue that has received insufficient theoretical attention from you white folks" (in the kind of scene that has taken place with black intellectuals many times over the decades). I was also making a more radical claim: that actually, in a way I found hard to tease out, race might well be of *greater* importance. (In subsequent weeks, I suggested in correspondence with various attendees that a more accurate title might have been "Race as of Differential Causal Significance in a Society of Multiple Systems of Oppression," especially since I didn't mean "primary contradiction" in the original Maoist sense of that term. Not quite as catchy, perhaps.)

The first point was itself noteworthy enough. Once I sat down and started to compile the list (under the seventh item in the handout) I was

struck by how much more easily the argument for racial domination can be made. There is, once one thinks about it, a kind of obviousness to it—the obviousness of the natural, of the purloined letter. Why had I not seen it before? Because it is there in plain sight and so is not seen. For it should not be thought that I had had these ideas worked out clearly in my mind all along and that I was chafing at orthodox white Left theory's refusal to recognize them. Rather, though I was uneasy with the myopias of Left theory, my account is in part about my discovery as a black person from the Third World of the scales on my own eyes (an unnoticed layer beneath the previous, already fallen scales). In part, I was wondering at myself, at my failure to register what was so "obvious" once it was written down. Why had I not seen this before? Because of the categories of orthodox Left theory, which here had served as ideological blinkers. Whites and nonwhites don't really exist, because race is not real. So the exploitation involved is the exploitation of capital. Capitalists exploit everybody, though nonwhites may be somewhat more exploited. And exploitation is what takes place in the factory. So in a sense, I had not seen what was there because I did not have the apparatus to see it. Mentally colonized in my own way by the orthodox Left narrative, I had not discerned what was now "obvious" to me: that white supremacy was itself a system of domination, that whites in general (and not just capitalists) were advantaged by it, and that whites benefit from this system not merely at the point of production but much more broadly.<sup>6</sup>

But the second point, that racial domination could in any sense be "primary," is obviously the really controversial one. There are two lines of response here: first from the (few) unreconstructed Marxists who would insist on the continuing primariness of class; and, second, from the much larger audience who would deny the primariness of anything. I want to begin with the latter.

I think that many radicals nowadays subscribe to what could be termed (I hereby dub it) the "Oppression Symmetry Thesis." In other words, there is supposed to be a symmetry about all oppressions, or at least the Big Three: class, race, gender. I don't mean a structural or experiential symmetry; people are not necessarily assuming that class, racial, and gender domination are all structured the same way or experienced the same way. I mean a moral and/or causal symmetry: the moral claim that all oppressions are equally morally bad; and/or the causal claim that all oppressions are of equal causal significance for determining the overall workings of the society.

In my opinion, the "Oppression Symmetry Thesis" (henceforth, the OST) has several confluent sources:

*The reaction against Marxism.* Marxism claimed, or was standardly interpreted to be claiming, that class was the primary oppression and that



other oppressions could be understood in terms of class, or at least traced to class (if not always reduced to it). So Marxism, especially in the base-superstructure model of society, was classically committed to the fact of asymmetry, which in part is the significance of "materialism." The theoretical and political-practical failure of this analysis, manifested in the rise of the so-called new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (though some, such as black American struggles, were actually much older, long predating this period), led to a backlash against any such claims, whether made by Marxists or others.

*The failure of the grand synthesis.* In the heyday of socialist feminism, the hope was that a "dual-systems theory" could be synthesized from the insights of Marxist and radical feminists so that a synoptic view of "capitalist patriarchy" could be developed. (See, for example, Eisenstein 1979.) But socialist feminism has largely collapsed with the decline of Marxism, and the most important contemporary feminisms are not influenced by class theory.

*Poststructuralism.* As we all know, the whole point of the rise of postmodernism, as classically expressed in Lyotard (1984), was an "incredulity" toward metanarratives. So claims about causal priority, objective truth, global pictures, and so forth, are seen as illegitimate.

*Politeness.* Finally, the simple but important point: that people who are trying to organize radical, or any kind of, political movements do not want to alienate groups that they're trying to ally with; and announcing a hierarchy of moral and causal priority seems a pretty sure way to do this.

So there are many obvious causes for people believing in the OST (or at least tacitly operating as if they believed in the OST). But obvious causes need to be distinguished from good reasons. I suggest that the OST is false, at least as a general truth valid for all societies for all times, and that, in fact, only a moment's thought should be necessary to demonstrate its obvious falseness.

Apply a good old-fashioned taxonomical philosophical apparatus, and ask yourself the following question: What is the status of this thesis supposed to be? Is it an analytic a priori truth, guaranteed by the meanings of words? Obviously not; nothing is conceptually inherent in the definition of "oppression" that necessitates symmetry of all oppressions. Well, is it a synthetic a priori truth then, such as those Kant thought he had discovered? But Kant's candidates had a much stronger claim, and even they have not survived later philosophical judgment. Then it has to be an a posteriori statement, an empirical generalization about the world; and as such it

needs to be based on empirical investigation, cross-comparisons of different societies, and so forth. But no such investigation has been done; rather, it *is* held basically as an a priori truth. Yet its obvious falseness can be shown most simply by the fact that not all the oppressions even *exist* in all societies, so clearly they could not then be equally significant. Gender oppression comes closest to being universal, but class oppression is not a feature of hunting and gathering societies; and, as earlier noted, racial oppression has been argued by many to be a feature distinctively of the modern world.

Why then should the OST have such acceptance in radical circles? Apart from the reasons outlined above, there is also a kind of wrongheaded moralism that, on the normative issue, works like this. To deny equal moral significance to all oppressions shows a lack of respect for the group in question and only adds to their oppression. But this is a simple confusion: that all oppressions are morally bad does not imply that the extent of their moral badness is the same. Some things are worse than others; and though construction of a metric is not always straightforward, because of possible problems of incommensurability, one good test is one's own ranking of them in a list of dispreference. Being kicked in the shin is bad, but it is not as bad as suffering a broken leg, which in turn is not as bad as having one's leg amputated. Or on a less personal scale, consider Nazi Germany. The Nazis set out, and in many respects succeeded, in absorbing the German working class into the fascist corporatist state; confining women to *Kinder, Kirche, and Kuche*; and committing the genocide of Jews, Romani, and Slavic peoples. So the Nazis imposed class, gender, and race oppression. But surely it would be absurd to say that it is just as bad to have surplus labor extracted from you and to be restricted to traditional gender roles as it is to be herded into ghettos, medically experimented upon, starved, tortured, shot, and gassed. So the point is that the relative badness of oppressions in a given society is in part an empirical question, to be settled by looking at its structure. It is *not* an a priori truth to be determined in advance.

My real interest here, however, is the causal question, that is, the possibility of some structures of domination being of greater causal significance than others in shaping a particular society's overall dynamic. As noted, this position was always the central, distinctive claim of the Marxist tradition: class oppression was the most important; and not just the oppression of any class, but the oppression of the working class in particular. So Marxism is overtly committed to the Oppression Asymmetry Thesis: some oppressions *are* more important than others. One could try to cash out this claim in various ways: that other oppressions are brought into existence by the most important one; and/or that they can be reduced to the most important one. But both of these moves are problematic. Even if one form of oppression is brought into existence by another—as modern racism can plausibly be argued to have been brought into existence by imperialist capitalism (at least

as a systematic set of theories and practices)—this genealogy does not necessarily translate into continuing causal preeminence. And class, gender, and racial oppression all have distinctive features of their own that would seem to rule out a reductionist program, regardless of their respective genealogical relations. So if the claim of differential causal significance is to be defended, it will have to be on other grounds.

## RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

What could these grounds be? Let me now turn specifically to racial domination in the United States and at least gesture in what I think is the right direction—but first, a preemptive, anticipatory clearing up of possible misunderstandings. Saying that, because of the peculiarities of U.S. history, race is of differential causal significance here does not, it should be obvious, commit me to generalizations about all societies throughout history (though I do think my claim is valid for many other “New World” and postcolonial societies). Nor does it commit me to saying that other oppressions are of zero causal importance; the claim is comparativist, not absolute. Nor does it imply the obvious falsehood that racial domination precedes and/or generates class and gender oppression.

Well, what does it mean? To begin with, it is a claim about group self-identification, about who and what we are, and what interests we correspondingly have or take ourselves to have. We all have multiple hats, multiple identities, because of both group membership and social roles. But if one hat tends to remain in place, if one identity tends to trump others in cases of conflict, that seems to me to constitute a good *prima facie* case for regarding it as in some sense more important. And race does in general have this characteristic; that is, it *is* the white hat that historically has been most firmly fixed on the head. As I have written elsewhere: “[W]hite racial identity has generally triumphed over all others; it is race that (transgender, transclass) has generally determined the social world and loyalties, the life-world, of whites. . . . There has been no comparable, spontaneously crystallizing transracial ‘workers’ world or transracial ‘female’ world: race is the identity around which whites have usually closed ranks” (Mills 1997, 138). Because it is only comparatively recently that the perception of race as *socially* constructed has become widespread, this obvious truth has been read naturalistically; and it has been deprived of its appropriate sociological significance. But once we look at race as a social structure like class and gender, how can it be denied that, in the United States, it overrides the others?

Consider America’s original “primary colors” of red, white, and black. Do the wives and daughters of the invading male white settlers, in what is a white settler state, identify either with the wives and daughters of the

Native Americans with whom they are locked in conflict for over two hundred and fifty years, or with the women of the Africans they have enslaved? Do white workers reach out across racial lines to form class alliances with expropriated Native Americans and with blacks subordinated first as slaves and later as the victims of Jim Crow? Obviously, the answer in both cases is in general a resounding "No!" So how can it be denied that race *is* the primary social division and that, though there are secondary intraracial conflicts of class and gender, they take place within a larger structure of white racial domination, which white workers and white women benefit from and generally support?

In cases of class conflict, for example, to address the orthodox Marxist challenge, white American workers have historically tended to identify themselves *as* white, as struggling against white capital but as retaining their own capital in whiteness by excluding blacks from unions; discriminating against them in promotions; moving to segregated neighborhoods; failing to protest when the racial state dispenses benefits to them on a discriminatory basis; and tacitly and overtly supporting Jim Crow. David Roediger (1999; 1994) points out that there has been an embarrassment about these facts on the part of white Left labor historians: they have been played down or written out of labor history; or, when grudgingly acknowledged, they have not been given the theoretical attention they deserve. And this theoretical failure is conceptually linked, I would again suggest, to an imported social ontology in which the workers cannot in the end be "really" anything other than workers. Certainly they cannot "really" be white, because whiteness has no ontological significance. But this presumption is false. White workers really are white at the same time that they are workers. The refusal to recognize and theorize white supremacy as a system in itself leaves a theoretical hole that drains Marxist understanding of the ways in which race can be real. Presented with the theoretical alternatives (in a class ontology) of race as biological and race as nonexistent, white Marxists have chosen the latter; and they have blinded themselves to the ways in which white workers participate in, benefit from, and reproduce racial domination, thus making race socially real.

Where racial domination has grudgingly been admitted, it has been represented as really the domination of capital. But once you admit the possibility of a society of multiple systems of domination, it is not contradictory that the bourgeoisie dominate the workers *and* that whites dominate blacks. So, as workers, they are exploited by capital; as whites, they are themselves the beneficiaries of an overlapping but distinct system of exploitation that not only secures personhood and its benefits for themselves but also denies them to others. Their being is shaped in part by thinking of themselves as superior beings; and of having this "superiority" embedded in social structures, national narratives, law, the racial division of

labor, and public policy. The top-down manipulation and imposition model, by which race and racism are bourgeois inflictions on a colorless and innocent proletariat, ignores the reality that, as E. P. Thompson famously emphasized, the working class also make themselves; and in the United States, they make themselves as white (Roediger 1999, ch. 1). Indeed, the imposition model rapidly becomes a kind of self-parodic puppetry in which causality and agency are selectively vouchsafed to and withdrawn from the workers according to a circular agentic logic: when they do good things, they are acting on their own; but when they do bad things—organize lynch mobs, participate in race riots, have hate strikes to exclude black workers from factories, sign restrictive covenants to maintain segregated neighborhoods—it is at bourgeois behest. (One wonders how socialism was ever to be brought about by so capriciously causal a set of people!) Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks remind us that:

Fierce and prolonged discrimination against African-Americans produced a distinct underclass that was regarded as a race apart from white workers and their unions, and which, as a result, was excluded from their political projects, including socialism. Those who were the most exploited and who had the least to lose in militant class struggle—namely blacks—were distant from the political concerns of the working class as a whole. White workers were often as motivated to keep African-Americans out of their job territories as to battle employers directly for better conditions. (2000, 130–31)

Yet the grip of Marxist orthodoxy has been so great—and the categories, despite their being so illuminating elsewhere, have been so blinding here—that no absurdity or incongruity has been perceived in writing, as if these white American workers stepped straight out of the pages of *Capital*. What has not sufficiently, or at all, been recognized and thought through theoretically have been the implications of their being not the proletariat of a nineteenth-century England largely racially homogeneous, but participating junior partners in a white supremacist state.

Unsurprisingly, then, it takes a black theorist—W. E. B. Du Bois (1998)—to do the conceptual innovation necessary to point out the existence of a distinctive “wages of whiteness,” a payoff that is multidimensional in character and far broader than that received by Marx’s European wage laborers. To begin with, they have a straightforwardly material benefit—which is part of the reply to an orthodoxy that would see race only as “ideal,” “superstructural.” Insofar as whiteness translates into guaranteed nonenslavement; entitlement to participate in the homesteading of the West; the racial reservation of certain jobs and opportunities (with correspondingly differential chances of employment, promotion, and good wages); residence in better neighborhoods; a prerequisite for full political membership; superior resource allocation for one’s children’s education;

increased access to local, state, and federally provided benefits; and the general return on one's investment in the social surplus produced by slavery and racial discrimination; in addition, insofar as whiteness tendentially underwrites the division of labor and the allocation of resources, with correspondingly enhanced socioeconomic life chances for one's white self and one's white children—it is clearly “material” in the classic economic sense, and it should have been long since recognized as such. If, referring back to chapter 2, we follow G. A. Cohen's gloss of *relations of production* as relations of effective power over persons and productive forces, then even by this orthodox criterion a case can be made that “whiteness” is part of the production relations—“whiteness is property,” argues Cheryl Harris (1993)—and so race would indeed be part of the socially determining “base” (in my broader, rather than Cohen's, narrower sense: see figure 2.3, p. 41).<sup>7</sup> One way to develop a specifically Marxist critical race theory, then, would be to follow up what the ramifications of this conceptual synthesis would be and what it would imply for the rethinking of orthodox Marxist categories. (Cf. the socialist-feminist innovation of “relations of reproduction” [Jaggar 1988].)

But there is an additional, deeper point I want to make about the need to reconceptualize Marxism properly to take race into account, which goes back to the issues raised at the beginning of the chapter. Du Bois spoke of other benefits also: a “psychological” wage linked with the status of whiteness. I prefer to think of this as “ontological,” linked with personhood, and arguably more profoundly “material” than the economic. If, as earlier emphasized, personhood is central to the emergence of the modern world, then the reality that has to be faced is that whiteness has historically been a prerequisite for full personhood, recognition as a full human being. In a medieval Christian world of lords and serfs, a higher community of souls exists in which independent of estate membership, all have their humanity guaranteed. But in a more secular modern world, where these tiers have been collapsed into “persons,” there is less temporal consolation for the racially inferior, whose subpersonhood lowers them to proximity to the animal kingdom. In his recent short history of racism, George Fredrickson points out that:

What makes Western racism so autonomous and conspicuous in world history has been that it developed in a context that presumed human equality of some kind. . . . If equality is the norm in the spiritual or temporal realms (or in both at the same time), and there are groups of people within the society who are so despised or disparaged that the upholders of the norms feel compelled to make them exceptions to the promise or realization of equality, they can be denied the prospect of equal status only if they allegedly possess some extraordinary deficiency that makes them less than fully human. (2002, 11–12)

So race then becomes tied up with our human dignity, our sense of ourselves as beings of intrinsic equal moral worth (or not). Being white is being fully human. Being nonwhite is not being fully human. One has an ontological stake in racial hierarchy because it is linked with one's sense of oneself as a human being, someone superior to lesser nonwhite beings. So even though the white working class are on a lower rung of the social ladder, the fact that they are on the ladder at all historically raises them normatively above blacks and Native Americans. The inadequacy of the Marxist thesis about social being is that, presupposing the European background, it can talk about the foundational shaping of the being of persons by the relations of production, of the psychological centrality of alienation from one's product and so forth, because it is the person population (whose full being is *already* ontologically guaranteed) that is being presupposed. But for those who are not in this population to begin with, their being will be shaped far more fundamentally by their *exclusion* from personhood.

Now what I want to argue is that Marx's own categories can be developed to accommodate this position as a variety of materiality. In chapter 2, I claimed that for Marx the material includes both the natural and (part of) the social, since the material is what is causally independent of us. Now apply this to race. If race is socially constructed, as we now know, then it is not itself biological; and so it is not an example of what I called there material<sub>1</sub>, but rather material<sub>2</sub>, like class. But unlike class, it is a social structure and social identity that roots itself *in* the biological, insofar as its identifiers move us to invest the physical with social significance. Thus Linda Alcoff (1999) has emphasized the centrality of the *visual* to race. We see others, we see ourselves, as raced, in a way that we do not see others or ourselves as classed. And this follows, of course, from the fact that it is on the body that race is inscribed. We can escape the workplace, we can come home from the factories; but our bodies are always with us. So one looks in the mirror and sees oneself preeminently as somebody of a certain race, since the criteria are, after all, written all over us, on the ineluctable physical part of ourselves. And this ineluctable racialization, I would submit, is not, of course, a naturalistic, biological materialism, arising from the intrinsic properties of these bodies (material<sub>1</sub>). Rather, it is a social materialism, through which political domination *becomes* incarnated (material<sub>2</sub>). It is because of the hovering European specter, the ghost inhabiting these fleshy machines, that we come to see these bodies as raced. But once these houses are so haunted, once this ghost is so incarnated, the spirit, the word, becomes flesh; so that it is as the material beings that we are that the body then shapes our self- and other-understanding. Not originally biological/natural, it becomes biologized/naturalized, the European specter penetrating the skin, incorporat-

ing our vision of ourselves and of others. Who am I? What am I? Who are you? What are you? We learn to see whiteness and blackness, seeing ourselves in our own eyes, and in the eyes of others, as equal, as superior, as inferior, but in all cases ineluctably (given a racialized social order) as a human of a certain racial kind. And this ineluctable racialization, I would further submit, is "material" in Marx's own sense—indeed at a deeper, more foundational level of his own sense—even if he himself did not develop the implications of his ideas in this direction because of his own racism and because of his focus on the class-disadvantaged, but racially privileged, white proletariat.

And this ontological stake, whether or not we want to think of it as "material," will shape interest calculations also. The economic payoff is usually coincident with the ontological one; but if they diverge, one may choose (as a white) to hold on to one's status of racialized privilege and thus may pass up the opportunity of certain economic benefits, in fear of being dropped to the level of those racial inferiors "beneath" one. The United States notoriously lags behind most other Western nations in crucial social indicators, and in recent decades in particular the country has experienced a massive transfer of wealth upward: "[The United States] is the only developed nation that does not have a government-supported, comprehensive medical system and it is the only western democracy that does not provide child support to all families. . . . No western democracy has as unequal a distribution of income as the United States once tax and transfer payments are included into the calculation" (Lipset and Marks 2000, 282). Similarly, Micaela di Leonardo cites research that shows "We now have the most poor and the smallest middle class, proportionately, in the First World" (1999, 57). Yet these growing inequalities have attracted little protest or political activism. Werner Sombart's (1976) old, turn-of-the-century question (originally posed in 1906) as to why there is no socialism in the United States has now become, with the rightward shift in the political center of gravity and the corresponding restriction of possibilities, the question of why there is not even any (Left) liberalism, any social democracy, in the United States. (In the 1970s, Rawls' welfarist *A Theory of Justice* [1971] was seen by many on the Left as bourgeois reformism, a book to be militantly critiqued and exposed. Now, of course, it represents a radical vision far outside the spectrum of political respectability.) And though white socialists for most of the century have generally ignored or downplayed it as a factor,<sup>8</sup> black intellectuals, from Du Bois in the early twentieth century to Derrick Bell in our own time (Du Bois 1998; Bell 1987; 1992), have long argued that race constitutes a major explanation for this seeming anomaly, with white workers' preferring incorporation in white domination, even as junior partners, to their joining a transracial class struggle that might endanger their privileged status.



Thus the reality—the reality that most white Marxists have not wanted to face—is that it is (perceived) *racial* group interests, not class interests, that have been the most important motivator in shaping people's decision making. Racial self-identification and group solidarity have generally trumped other identities and group belongings. If this has been hard to see, it is in part because racial choices have been so readily biologized that they have seemed natural, not even showing up on the conceptual radar screen. We do not question the fact—it does not strike us as a *political* fact—that race is the most important shaper of whites' lifeworlds, that as Thomas and Mary Edsall (1991) have documented, "many whites structure nearly all of their decisions about housing, education, and politics in response to their aversions to black people" (cited in Lipsitz 1998, 19). The failure to see racial domination as a political system has conceptually blocked a categorization of these as political decisions; yet in a profound sense they are political decisions—whites are making life choices in a way that generally maintains and reproduces their domination and privilege. Similarly, Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders' recent book, summarizing numerous attitudinal studies on racial issues, points out that "Among postindustrial democratic societies, the United States tends to finish near the bottom on measures of class polarization" (1996, 90); racial division, by contrast, eclipses any other kind of social differentiation:

Political differences such as these [i.e., on race] are simply without peer: differences by class or gender or religion or any other social characteristic are diminutive by comparison. The racial divide is as apparent among ordinary citizens as it is among elites. It is not a mask for class differences: it is rooted in race itself, in differences of history. (287)

And this attitudinal divergence turns out to be tied not to a perception of individual self-interest but *racial group interest*, in that, even where whites do not have racist views, they regard their group interests as threatened by the advance of black interests. The irony, then, is that in the United States the Marxist materialist model of group identification in a society does not work for class but works very well for race: that is, people are highly conscious of themselves as members of opposing groups; they feel the need for group solidarity; and they see their group interests as antagonistic to one another.

In a country where race has been so central, then, it seems to me dubious that socialism was ever really on the agenda, quite apart from factors of state repression of the Left and its stigmatized association with existing Stalinist regimes. To reply that socialism is the solution to racism is doubly problematic. In the first place, racism and white supremacy can continue under socialism. (The saying in the black community during the

1930s high period of Left activism, which I used as my epigraph, was: "Even after a revolution, the country will still be full of crackers.") And in the second place, the rational-choice decision making of white workers will itself be shaped by their racial privilege (a perspective not typically gleaned from the 1980s literature on the subject). I think that this judgment holds for many other countries also. And more generally, I would claim that on the international level, the underwriting of imperialism and its postcolonial legacy by race provided, first, an empathic barrier to First World (white) working-class identification with (largely nonwhite) Third World poverty and, second, a set of mystified schemas for explaining that poverty—both of which inhibited and continue to inhibit the solidarity that would have been necessary for a genuinely internationalist movement.

So one could say, only half-jokingly, that Marx was somewhat premature in his call to arms. If we detach the concept of a "bourgeois revolution" from class, and think of it, more generally, as a revolution against ascriptive hierarchy of all kinds, then one could say that this normative leveling has yet to be fully carried out. In a sense, Eurocentrism is written into the concept itself, in that it takes for granted that the main or only system of ascriptive hierarchy is that of feudal estates, while ignoring the significance of the system of racial estates. It is white domination, not the rule of lords and ladies, that is in many parts of the world the real *ancien regime*. And the political projects of those subordinated by this regime will be significantly divergent from those privileged by it. So the Marxist timeline—primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism—really has to be rewritten to take this actuality into account, with white supremacy (in particular nations and as Western domination) added to the list: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, racial/white supremacist/Euro-dominated capitalism, capitalism, and only then (if at all) socialism. A socialist revolution has to await the completed revolution against the socially pivotal form of ascriptive hierarchy remaining, the exorcism of the European specter haunting the planet. If we want to retain the term for the sake of irony and paradox, then we could say that Marxist revolutionary socialists now need (and in fact needed from the start)—disdaining to conceal their views and aims—to persuade white proletarians to lose their chains of whiteness and inscribe on their banners: "Toward the bourgeois revolution!"

## NOTES

1. Though the term is now ubiquitous in radical theory, it is Carol Gould who deserves the credit for first bringing it into English-language usage: see Gould (1978).

2. See, for example, Goldberg (1993), Gilroy (1993), Dussel (1995).

3. The closest thing to a sustained analysis is Allen Wood's discussion of "other forms of social oppression, such as racial and sexual oppression" (Wood 1986, 298–300). See also G. A. Cohen (1989, 157–58). There are one- or two-sentence references in Callinicos (1989, 34, 43, 60); Roemer (1986, 159); and Carver and Thomas (1995, 25–26, 63, 303). (Carver and Thomas also have a whole chapter on feminism, the only one of the five books to do so.) Unless I have missed some reference, there is nothing at all (i.e., not even a sentence) in either Ball and Farr (1984), or Ware and Nielsen (1989).

4. The panel was "Envisioning the Next Left," at the second national conference of the Radical Philosophy Association, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Nov. 14–17, 1996.

5. The term "critical race theory" was not at the time as well-established as it is now; today I would say "Why White Marxists Should Be Critical Race Theorists" (and also in paragraph 7).

6. Since that time some years ago, more and more work has been published on the subject, so that the case has become far easier to make. See, for example, Oliver and Shapiro (1995); Lipsitz (1998); Brown (1999); Conley (1999).

7. Note that since Cohen's definition is explicitly nonjuridical in character ("effective power"), it would also be extensible to the de facto white supremacy of the present.

8. See Lipset and Marks (2000, ch. 1): "[Racial heterogeneity] was generally ignored as a source of socialist weakness by socialist writers" (29).