

THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN RADICAL DEMOCRAT OF AFRICAN DESCENT

My close friends and comrades Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff—the long-distance runners of the American Left—convinced me to publish a version of my philosophy dissertation in 1991. My diligent and supportive editor, Susan Lowes, suggested that I write an autobiographical introduction. I have yet to write a more probing and revealing piece about my personal and intellectual development in order to situate myself and my work after the fall of Soviet communism and the Velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe.

A WHOLESALE CRITICAL INVENTORY of ourselves and our communities of struggle is neither self-indulgent autobiography nor self-righteous reminiscence. Rather, it is a historical situating and locating of our choices, sufferings, anxieties and efforts in light of the circumscribed options and alternatives available to us. We all are born into and build on circumstances, traditions and situations not of our own choosing; yet we do make certain choices that constitute who we are and how we live in light of these fluid circumstances, traditions and situations.

The most significant stage-setting for my own life pilgrimage has been neither academic life nor political organizations, but rather my closely knit family and overlapping communities of church and friends. These pillars of civil society—my loving parents, siblings, and communities—transmitted to me ideals and images of dignity, integrity, majesty and humility. These ideals and images—couched within Christian narratives, symbols, rituals and, most importantly, concrete moral examples—provided existential and ethical equipment with which to confront the crises, terrors and horrors of life. The three major components of this equipment were a Christian ethic of love-informed service to others, ego-deflating humility about oneself owing to the precious yet fallible humanity of others, and politically engaged struggle for social betterment. This Christian outlook, as exemplified in our time by Martin Luther King, Jr., serves as the basis for my life vocation.

As a youth, I resonated with the sincere black militancy of Malcolm X, the defiant rage of the Black Panther Party, and the livid black theology of James Cone. Yet I did not fully agree with them. I always felt that they lacked the self-critical moment of humility I discerned in the grand example of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Such humility has always been a benchmark of genuine love for, and gratitude to, ordinary people whose lives one is seeking to enhance. I witnessed this same kind of integrity and dignity in the humble attitude to black folk of my early heroes: the Godfather of Soul, James Brown; the legendary baseball player Willie Mays; my pastor, Rev. Willie P. Cooke (of Shiloh Baptist Church in Sacramento, California); my grandfather, Rev. C. L. West, of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma; and my older brother, Clifton L. West III, to me an exemplary human being. In this way, Martin Luther King, Jr., has always been not so much a model to imitate, but *the* touchstone for personal inspiration, moral wisdom and existential insight. I heard him speak in person only once, when I was ten years old (1963), and I remember not his words, but his humble spirit and sense of urgency.

My first noteworthy political action—besides marching with my family in a civil rights demonstration in Sacramento—was the coordination of a citywide strike of students demanding courses in black studies. At the time there were four black student body presidents in Sacramento high schools (including myself). My good friend Glenn Jordan and I decided to launch this effort during the 1969–1970 school year, and we had good results.

My critical self-inventory highlights the fact that I was born eight years after the end of the Age of Europe (1492–1945). Much of who and what we are has to do with where and with what our immediate ancestors confronted the advent of modernity during the Age of Europe. And for most of us there is no escape from the effects of European modernity in that, by the early twentieth century, the handful of states located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural mountains (in addition to the former British colony, the United States) controlled more than two-thirds of the land and peoples on the globe. My perspective on the achievements and deficiencies of this Age of Europe is shaped and colored by being a descendant of seven generations of Africans in the Western Hemisphere, enslaved and exploited, devalued and despised by Euro-Americans; and three generations of African-Americans, subordinated and terrorized by legal racist practices in the South. Both of my parents were born in Jim (and Jane) Crow Louisiana in the late 1920s and early 1930s. With the post-World War II decentering of Europe, the dwarfing of European populations, the demystifying of European cultural hegemony, the deconstruction of European philosophical systems and, most important, the decolonization of the Third World, I came of age during the eclipse of one epoch and the emergence of another.

My early formative years were spent during what Henry Luce called the “American century”—a period of unprecedented economic boom in the United States, the creation of a large middle class, i.e., a prosperous working class with a bourgeois identity, and a mass culture primarily based on African-American cultural products (music, style, etc.). I arrived on the scene just when black, and

some white, blood, sweat and tears broke the back of an apartheid-like rule of law in the South and overturned discriminatory laws (though not *de facto* practices) in employment, housing and education. In 1970, when I entered Harvard College, I became part of the first generation of young black people to attend prestigious lily-white institutions of higher learning in significant numbers—institutions still coping with the new wave of Jewish faculty and students who had confronted an earlier tribal civility, snobbish gentility, and institutional loyalty of primarily well-to-do white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Owing to my family, church, and the black social movements of the 1960s, I arrived at Harvard unashamed of my African, Christian, and militant decolonized outlooks. More pointedly, I acknowledged and accented the empowerment of my black styles, mannerisms, and viewpoints, my Christian values of service, love, humility and struggle, and my anticolonial sense of self-determination for oppressed people and nations around the world. But I soon discovered that this positive black identity, these persuasive Christian values, and this deep commitment to struggles for freedom were not enough. Given my privileged position (as a student—only about 18 percent of black young people were enrolled in college at the time) and grand opportunities, I needed a more profound understanding of history, a deeper grasp of the complex, conflict-ridden dynamics of societies and cultures and a more flexible perspective on human life.

My passionate interest in philosophy was—and remains—primarily motivated by the radical historical *conditionedness* of human existence and the ways in which possibilities and potentialities are created, seized and missed by individuals and communities within this ever changing conditionedness, including our inescapable death, illness and disappointment. This attention to the historical character of all thought and action has led me to be suspicious of intellectual quests for truth unwilling to be truthful about themselves, including my own. So though I find delight in the life of the mind—inseparable from, yet not identical with, struggles for freedom—I do not put primary value on intelligence or book knowledge. Rather, I believe we have a moral obligation—for the quality of human life and protection of the environment—to be wise, especially about the pitfalls and shortcomings of mere intelligence and book knowledge.

My three decisive years at Harvard College empowered me in a variety of ways. Although I first majored in philosophy and then changed to Near Eastern languages and literature (especially biblical Hebrew and Aramaic) in order to graduate a year early, my major focus was on history and social thought. I learned much of the former from Samuel Beer, H. Stuart Hughes and Martin Kilson; of the latter from Talcott Parsons, Hilary Putnam, Preston Williams, Terry Irwin and John Rawls. My political involvement consisted of daily work (beginning at 6:00 A.M.) in the breakfast program in Jamaica Plain with left black friends like Steven Pitts, weekly trips to Norfolk State Prison with fellow supporters like

Valerie Hepburn, and campus activism led by the Black Student Organization. The major action of this student group was the legendary 1972 takeover of Massachusetts Hall (including the president's office) to oppose Harvard's investments in Gulf Oil and to support the anti-imperialist forces in Angola. Randall Robinson, founder of TransAfrica but at that time a Harvard law student, played a crucial and courageous leadership role, as did the chief undergraduate spokesman, Harvard Stephens. I could not go into the building with my comrades because of trumped-up charges brought by the Cambridge Police Department and two Hebrew tests I had to take in order to catch up with my class. Instead, I joined the support work outside, which culminated in a march of 5,000 people on the first weekend of the takeover.

In the early 1970s, varieties of black nationalism were predominant at Harvard. Imamu Amiri Baraka's Congress of African People (CAP), Ron Karenga's early writings, the politics of the Republic of New Africa (RNA) and, to some extent, the Nation of Islam were attractive to black student activists. As a product of the black church I have always acknowledged some of the tenets of black nationalism, namely, black intelligence, beauty, character and capacity, and their subjection to vicious attack by white-supremacist practices. The fundamental issue of black identity—the affirmation of African humanity and ability—is a precondition for any black progressive politics. Yet my Christian universalist moral vision and my progressive international political perspective—derived from my readings of Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah and Karl Marx (promoted by the Black Panther Party over what Huey Newton called “porkchop nationalism”)—made me deeply suspicious of the politics of black nationalists. I worked with them on antiracist issues—and we discussed, laughed and partied together weekly—but I always staked out my Christian version of democratic socialist values and politics.

My conversations with Trotskyists—especially the provocative lectures given by Peter Camejo—reinforced an anti-Stalinist stance I had already adopted, exposed me to a Leninist view I remained unpersuaded of and promoted an appreciation of black nationalist insights within a larger multiracial organization. I learned much from readings of Trotskyist intellectuals like Leon Trotsky himself, C. L. R. James, Perry Anderson and others, but I was not convinced. At this time, my major intellectual influences on political matters were the early Reinhold Niebuhr (of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*), R. H. Tawney (especially *The Acquisitive Society and Equality*), Julius K. Nyerere (*Essays on Socialism*), the early Leszek Kolakowski (*Towards a Marxist Humanism*) and the dissenting Marxist humanists Marković and Stojanović I was most excited by the powerful essays by Harold Cruse in *Rebellion or Revolution*, a book I much preferred over his classic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Yet I remained critical of Cruse's cultural nationalist followers at Harvard, most of whom were my close friends. At that time, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a grand example of integrity and sacrifice but, in sharp contrast to Malcolm X,

not a distinct voice with a credible politics in our Harvard conversations. Malcolm X's voice was as fresh as ever. We were all convinced that Malcolm X would hold *our* position and have *our* politics if he were alive. We rarely if ever asked this question of King in those days, even Christians like myself, principally owing to our blindness to his affirmation of democratic socialist politics and our downplaying of (read: ignorance of) his anti-imperialist (not just anti-Vietnam war) stance. King was for us the Great Man who died for us—but not yet the voice we had to listen to, question, learn from and build on. This would change in the next decade.

When I arrived at Princeton's philosophy department—by far the best in the country at the time—I anticipated three basic intellectual challenges: the undermining of my Christian faith by the powerful tools of analytical philosophy; the way in which the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein—my philosophic hero at the time—were interpreted by Princeton's philosophy department; and how the department's social philosophers might regard the Hegelian Marxist tradition, i.e., Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School, whom I had recently been seduced by. I quickly discovered the first issue was an irrelevant one for my teachers and peers. Nobody cared about religious faith—though Walter Kaufmann and Richard Rorty regarded the issue with historic curiosity. So I kept my Pascal, Kierkegaard, Montaigne, Thurman and Unamuno close to my heart and read Frege, Carnap, Quine and Kuhn.

My eye-opening and horizon-broadening encounter with Richard Rorty made me an even stronger Wittgensteinian, although with gestures toward Dewey. Rorty's historicist turn was like music to my ears—nearly as sweet as the Dramatics, the Spinners, or the Main Ingredient, whom I then listened to daily for sanity. My allegiance to the Hegelian Marxist tradition was deepened by Sheldon Wolin—the major influence, along with Rorty and C. P. Macpherson—on my thought at the time. It was during the two short years at Princeton that I became convinced that the values of individuality—the sanctity and dignity of all individuals shaped in and by communities—and of democracy, as a way of life and mode of being-in-the-world, not just a form of governance, were most precious to me. This is why, when I returned to Harvard as a Du Bois Fellow to write my dissertation, I turned first to T. H. Green, the British neo-Hegelian of the late nineteenth century, and then to the ethical dimensions of Marxist thought. Marx's own debts to the Romantics' preoccupation with many-sided personality and full-fledged individuality (as in Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*) and to the early socialists' focus on universal suffrage, women's rights, abolitionism and workplace democracy intrigued me. I became convinced that Marx's own intellectual development should be understood in terms of this fascinating tension between the moral conviction of the flowering of individuality under wholesale democratic socioeconomic and political conditions and the theoretical concern of

explaining scientifically the dynamics and tendencies of profit-driven capitalist societies that foster a narrow individualism and a truncated political democracy.

This book, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, written over a decade ago when I was in my mid-twenties, was my attempt to understand Marxist thought as one grand stream, among others, of the larger modern articulation of historical consciousness, an articulation fanned by Romantic quests for harmony and wholeness and fueled by concrete revolutionary and reformist movements for freedom, equality and democracy. Such quests and movements may result in aborted authoritarian arrangements or be crushed by powerful capitalist powers. Yet the precious values of individuality and democracy that can guide and regulate such quests and movements sit at the center of Marx's own thought. Hence I take the reader, step by step and text by text, through Marx's own intellectual development in order to show how he incorporated modern historical consciousness (as he constructed and understood it) in relation to his ethical values of individuality and democracy, and how these values clashed with what he viewed as the pernicious and vicious effects of the fundamental class-ridden capitalist processes of capital accumulation and the commodification of labor. My brief examinations of subsequent Marxists, like Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky and Georg Lukács, try to show that their diverse conceptions of modern historical consciousness in relation to ethical issues differ greatly from that of Marx.

The scope of this essay is limited, yet its focus on Marxist ethical reflection regarding methodology and substance is timely. There is not only a paucity of highly detailed interpretations of Marx's intellectual development, but also a need for more investigation of the kind of turn toward history and social theory Marx made and how it contrasts with that of subsequent noteworthy disciples and followers. And though I wrote *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* six years after my dissertation, there is no doubt that my interpretation of Marxist thought is influenced by the works of John Dewey, the early Sidney Hook and Richard Rorty. My basic claim is that Marx's turn toward history resembles the antifoundationalist arguments of the American pragmatists, yet Marx wants to retain a warranted-assertability status for social explanatory claims in order to understand and change the world.

Marx wisely shuns any epistemic skepticism (as promoted by the deconstructive critics of our day) and explanatory agnosticism or nihilism (as intimated by those descriptivist anthropologists and historians bitten by the bug of epistemic skepticism). Instead, Marx refuses to conflate epistemic and methodological issues, philosophic and social theoretical ones, matters of justification for the certain or absolute grounds for knowledge—claims and matters of explanation that provide persuasive yet provisional (or revisable) accounts of social and historical phenomena. Like so many critics today, Marx's immediate followers often made a “category mistake” of collapsing epistemological concerns of justification in phi-

losophy into methodological concerns of explanation in social theory. This unwarranted collapse is the basic reason why antifoundationalists in epistemology became full-fledged skeptics and why descriptivists in the social sciences shun subtle explanations of change and conflict in society and culture. Needless to say, the complex relation of epistemic skepticism and explanatory nihilism to the sense of political impotence and historical cynicism among such critics—even as they monotonously invoke slogans that knowledge is culturally constructed, historically constituted and politically laden—cries out for explanation. One major reason is that they are reacting against narrow conceptions of social theory, especially positivistic, economistic and reductionist versions of Marxism. This book shows that, despite the deep tensions in Marx's thought, there are other and better versions of Marxism put forward by Marx himself in his best moments. My point here is not that Marx's social theory fully accounts for all social and historical phenomena; rather, it is that social theory wedded in a nuanced manner to concrete historical analyses must be defended in our present moment of epistemic skepticism, explanatory agnosticism, political impotence (among progressives) and historical cynicism.

So it is necessary to discredit the fashionable trashing of Marxist thought in the liberal academy. Besides predictable caricatures of Marxist thought by conservatives, this trashing principally proceeds from ironic skeptics and aesthetic historicists. The former shun any theory that promotes political action with purpose; for them, any social project of transformation reeks of authoritarian aims. The latter highlight wholesale contingency and indeterminacy, with little concern for how and why change and conflict take place. So we have disciples of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault who talk about the subtle relations of rhetoric, knowledge and power, yet remain silent about concrete ways in which people are empowered to resist and what can be gained by such resistance. In addition, we have the so-called new historicists, preoccupied with "thick descriptions" of the relativity of cultural products, including those formerly neglected by traditional bourgeois male critics—while thoroughly distrustful of social *explanatory* accounts of cultural practices.

Needless to say, crude Marxist perspectives warrant scrutiny and rejection. Yet in these days of Marxist bashing, it is often assumed that vulgar Marxist thought exhausts the Marxist tradition—as if monocausal accounts of history, essentialist conceptions of society or reductionist readings of culture are all Marxist thought has to offer. One wonders whether any such critics have read Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, *Class Struggles in France* or the *Grundrisse*.

Faddish ironic skepticism and aesthetic historicism are contemporary assaults on the twin pillars of Marxist social theory: historically specific accounts of structures such as modes of production, state apparatuses and bureaucracies and socially detailed analyses of how such structures shape and are shaped by cultural

agents. These pillars require that one's understanding of history, society and culture highlight latent and manifest multifarious human struggles for identity, power, status and resources. More pointedly, it demands that one bite the explanatory bullet and give analytical priority to specific forms of struggle over others. For sophisticated Marxists, this does not mean that class explains every major event in the past or present or that economic struggles supersede all others. It simply suggests that in capitalist societies, the dynamic processes of capital accumulation and the commodification of labor condition social and cultural practices in an *inescapable* manner. How such practices are played out in various countries and regions for different races, classes and genders in light of the fundamental capitalist processes will be determined in an experimental and empirical manner. Like other refined forms of historical sociology, Marxist theory proceeds within the boundaries of warranted-assertable claims and rationally acceptable conclusions. Its assertions can be wrong in part because they are believed to be right.

The high intellectual moments of Marxist theory—Marx's own historical and economic analyses, Georg Lukács's theory of reification and Antonio Gramsci's conceptions of hegemony—are those that bring together explanatory power, analytical flexibility and a passion for social freedom. Yet certain crucial phenomena of the modern world—nationalism, racism, gender oppression, homophobia, ecological devastation—have not been adequately understood by Marxist theorists. My rejoinder simply is that these complex phenomena cannot be grasped, or changed, without the insights of Marxist theory, although we do need other theories to account for them fully.

Efforts to link the fundamental capitalist processes of capital accumulation and the commodification of labor to progressive traditions of ordinary people are not a call to revive old debates about base and superstructure. Similar to the best work of Raymond Williams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Eugene Genovese and Simone de Beauvoir, I am suggesting that we focus on the oppositional cultures of oppressed peoples that extend far beyond their workplaces. In other words, we need a serious Simmelian moment (as in Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*) in Marxist theory that probes into the lived experiences of people in light of fundamental capitalist processes. The aim here is not to reduce cultural efforts to ideological battles, but rather to discern and determine the distinctive elements of the structures of feeling, structures of meaning, ways of life and struggle under dynamic circumstances not of people's own choosing. In this way, Marxist theory can give social substance and political content to postmodern themes of otherness, difference and marginality. And limited epistemological debates about foundationalism and skepticism, realism and pragmatism can give way to more fruitful exchanges about clashing methodological, theoretical and political conceptions of how to understand and change contemporary cultures and societies.

When I arrived as Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1977, one of my concerns was precisely this issue: defending sophisticated Marxist theory as an indispensable—though by itself inadequate—intellectual weapon in the struggle for individuality and democracy. I decided to teach at Union Seminary for three reasons: It was (and still is) the center of liberation theology in the country; it was one of the best places for black theological education in the country; and it allowed me to teach and read widely in philosophy, social theory, history, literary criticism and cultural thought. Union was the perfect place to become a broadly engaged cultural critic with a strong grounding in the history of philosophy and criticism. In fact, I received another education at Union from my supportive colleagues—especially my closest friend, James Washington, Professor of Church History. My faith was tested and deepened, my mind was stretched and refined, my soul was refreshed and readied for battle.

After serious intellectual exchanges with James Cone, Beverly Harrison, Dorothea Sölle, Tom Driver, James Forbes, Jr., David Lotz, Milton Gatch and Donald Shriver—and trips to Brazil, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Mexico, Europe and later South Africa—the incarnation of progressive thought in concrete struggles for freedom was no mere dream. Despite a relative quietism on the U.S. Left, I witnessed and participated in an intellectual and political ferment in these places reminiscent of our 1960s. At home, the Theology in the Americas movement—the major national progressive multiracial and religious activity in the country in the 1970s—culminated in a historic gathering in Detroit. The results were published in 1982 by Orbis Press in a volume entitled *Theology in the Americas: Detroit II*, coedited by Caridad Guidote (a professor and Filipina nun), Margaret Coakley (a white American nun) and myself. The same year I published *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Westminster Press), based in part on lectures I gave at Rev. Herbert Daughtry's House of the Lord Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn, New York. Rev. Daughtry was the founder and then head of the National Black United Front—one of the few progressive organized responses to the conservative Reaganite policies of the early 1980s.

Two crucial encounters shaped the kind of democratic socialism I would promote: the intense intellectual exchanges with Stanley Aronowitz and my membership in Michael Harrington's new organization, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In addition to James Washington and to my younger colleagues—Mark Ridley-Thomas, Anders Stephanson, Farah Griffin, Jerry Watts, Anthony Cook and Michael Dyson—I have never had a more enhancing intellectual interlocutor than Stanley Aronowitz. We read voraciously and talked incessantly about the impasse of the Left and the crisis of Marxism—he was then writing his important work *The Crisis in Historical Materialism*. His leadership of *Social Text*—the

major journal in which Marxism encountered cultural politics in the 1980s and 1990s—pushed me toward a serious engagement with the works and lives of Fredric Jameson, Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Cedric Robinson, Anders Stephanson, Edward Said, Bertell Ollman, Barbara Fields, Stuart Hall, Ellen Willis, Audre Lorde, Eric Foner, bell hooks, Rick Wolff, Sohnya Sayres and Michel Foucault. This engagement still sets the framework for how I relate Marxist thought to the cultural politics of difference, i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, age. This framework is an integral part of my work with the editorial collective of *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*—Paul Bové, Jonathan Arac, William Spanos, Michael Hayes, Daniel O'Hara, Donald Pease, Joseph Buttigieg, Margaret Ferguson and Nancy Fraser.

Michael Harrington's DSA in 1982 was the first multiracial socialist organization close enough to my kind of politics that I could join. I was then, and remain, a sharp critic and staunch defender of DSA. After seven years on the national political committee—and many protracted ideological struggles—I now serve as an honorary chairperson. My own Gramscian democratic socialism is not in the mainstream of DSA, but it is an acceptable and legitimate perspective within the organization, and one that is sharpened and refined by defenders of other versions of democratic socialism.

I put forward my own critiques of the late Michael Harrington's conception of democratic socialism in my book *Prophetic Fragments* (Africa World Press, 1988) and in my review of his last book, *Socialism: Past and Future*, in the *Nation* (6–13 January 1990). Michael Harrington meant much to me as a person and I learned tangible and intangible lessons from him as we interacted in meetings and on trips together. We shared three fundamental points: the necessity of rethinking and reinterpreting the insights of the Marxist tradition in the light of new circumstances; the need for a national multiracial democratic socialist organization that puts a premium on intellectual exchange and political relevance; and the necessity of articulating a distinctive U.S. road to greater freedom, justice and equality. Harrington was, despite some political faults and intellectual flaws, a masterful organic intellectual who held these three points together in creative tension better than anyone else of his generation.

My friendships with Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy began just as I was moving from Union to Yale Divinity School in 1984. In our work together on a special issue on religion and the Left for *Monthly Review* (July–August 1984), we realized that our versions of Marxist theory overlapped in significant ways. Their critical allegiance to historical materialist analyses that are magnanimously global in character yet meticulously specific in content fit well with my Gramscian accounts that link the rule of capital—the powers of transnational corporations, banks and political elites—to the race- and gender-skewed ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clad. As the caretakers of one of the oldest Marxist journals in the United States,

they have defended and updated Marxist theory while opening its pages to non-Marxist socialists like myself who share their concern about the significance of Marxist theory as an indispensable intellectual weapon for freedom fighters in the present.

I am a non-Marxist socialist in that, as a Christian, I recognize certain irreconcilable differences between Marxists of whatever sort and Christians of whatever sort. Since my conception of Christian faith is deeply, though not absolutely, historical, this disagreement is not primarily a metaphysical issue; rather, it is a basic existential difference in the weight I put on certain biblical narratives, symbols and rituals that generate sanity and meaning for me. My Christian perspective—mediated by the rich traditions of the black church that produced and sustains me—embraces depths of despair, layers of dread, encounters with the sheer absurdity of the human condition and ungrounded leaps of faith alien to the Marxist tradition. Like so much of black music, Christian insights speak on existential and visceral levels neglected by the Marxist tradition. This is not so because the Marxist tradition is Eurocentric—for there are traditions and figures in Europe that do speak to existential issues, e.g., Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Martin Buber, Susanne Langer. Rather, the Marxist tradition is silent about the existential meaning of death, suffering, love and friendship owing to its preoccupation with improving the social circumstances under which people pursue love, revel in friendship and confront death. I share this concern.

Yet like both Russian novelists and blues singers, I also stress the concrete lived experience of despair and tragedy and the cultural equipment requisite for coping with the absurdities, anxieties and frustrations as well as the joys, laughter and gaiety of life. In this deep sense, Marxism is not and cannot serve as a religion. And if it is cast as a religion, it is a shallow secular ideology of social change that fails to speak to us about the ultimate facts of human existence. To put it charitably, Marxist thought does not purport to be existential wisdom—of how to live one's life day by day. Rather, it claims to be a social theory of histories, societies and cultures. Social theory is not the same as existential wisdom. Those theories that try to take the place of wisdom disempower people on existential matters, just as those wisdoms that try to shun theory usually subordinate people to the political powers that be.

My writings constitute a perennial struggle between my African and American identities, my democratic socialist convictions and my Christian sense of the profound tragedy and possible triumph in life and history. I am a prophetic Christian freedom fighter principally because of distinctive Christian conceptions of what it is to be human, how we should act toward one another and what we should hope for. These conceptions—put forward in a variety of diverse streams and strains of the Christian tradition stretching back over centuries—have to do with the indispensable yet never adequate capacities of human beings to create error-proof or

problem-free situations, theories or traditions—hence the strong antidogmatic or fallible character of prophetic Christian thought and practice, which encourage relentless critical consciousness; the moral claim to view each and every individual as having equal status, as warranting dignity, respect and love, especially those who are denied such dignity, respect and love by individuals, families, groups, social structures, economic systems or political regimes—hence the prophetic Christian identification and solidarity with the downtrodden and disinherited, the degraded and dispossessed; and lastly, the good news of Jesus Christ, which lures and links human struggles to the coming of the kingdom—hence the warding off of disempowering responses to despair, dread, disappointment and death.

Prophetic Christianity has a distinctive, though not exclusive, capacity to highlight critical, historical and universal consciousness that yields a vigilant disposition toward prevailing forms of individual and institutional evil, an unceasing suspicion of ossified and petrified forms of dogmatism and a strong propensity to resist various types of cynicism and nihilism.

Prophetic Christian conceptions of what it is to be human, how we should act and what we should hope for are neither rationally demonstrable nor empirically verifiable in a necessary and universal manner. Rather, they are embedded and enacted in a form of life—a dynamic set of communities that constitute a diverse tradition—that mediates how I interpret my experiences, sufferings, joys and undertakings. There are indeed good reasons to accept prophetic Christian claims, yet they are good not because they result from logical necessity or conform to transcendental criteria. Rather, these reasons are good (persuasive to some, nonsense to others) because they are rationally acceptable and existentially enabling for many self-critical finite and fallible creatures who are condemned to choose traditions under circumstances not of their own choosing. To choose a tradition (a version of it) is more than to be convinced by a set of arguments; it is also to decide to live alongside the slippery edge of life's abyss with the support of the dynamic stories, symbols, interpretations and insights bequeathed by communities that came before.

I have always shunned the role of theologian because I have little interest in systematizing the dogmas and doctrines, insights and intuitions of the Christian tradition. Nor do I think that they can be rendered coherent and consistent. The theological task is a noteworthy endeavor—especially for the life of the church—yet my vocation uses Christian resources, among others, to speak to the multilayered crises of contemporary society and culture. So I am more a cultural critic with philosophic training who works out of the Christian tradition than a theologian who focuses on the systematic coherency or epistemic validity of Christian claims.

This vocation puts social theory, historiography, cultural criticism and political engagement at the center of my prophetic Christian outlook. I do not believe that

there are such things as Christian social theory, Christian historiography, Christian cultural criticism or Christian politics—just as there are no such things as Christian mathematics, Christian physics or Christian economics. Rather, there is prophetic Christian thought and practice informed by the best of these disciplines that highlights and enhances the plight of the loveless, luckless, landless and other victims of social structural arrangements. In this way, my prophetic vocation overlaps in significant ways with those of such Marxists as Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy. In the present methodological debate against ironic skeptics, aesthetic historicists, political cynics and explanatory agnostics, we stand together in defense of Marxist theory and socialist politics—even as we may disagree on how we conceive of Marxist theory or the kind of socialism we promote.

My move to Yale Divinity School in 1984 afforded me the opportunity to reflect on the crisis in American philosophy—as in *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (1985), edited by my good friend John Rajchman and myself, and in my book *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989). This coincided with an intense campus drive for clerical unionism at Yale (one of the few labor victories of the 1980s) and against Yale's investments in South African companies. Again, my arrest and jail resulted. This action served as a fine example for my wonderful son, Clifton, quickly approaching adolescence—an example he has followed as a progressive student body president of his predominantly black middle school in Atlanta.

Partly owing to this action, my request for leave was denied and I was forced to teach a full program at Yale (two courses) and the University of Paris VIII (three courses) in the spring of 1987. I commuted every five to seven days from New Haven to Paris from February to April. To be on the same faculty with Gilles Deleuze (who retired that spring) and Jean-François Lyotard was an honor. Yet I was amazed at the French students' ignorance of U.S. philosophy and the hunger for Afro-American history and culture. In my graduate seminar on John Dewey, Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell and Richard Rorty, brilliant students had never heard of Dewey—in fact, one wanted to study with him (unaware he had died in 1952)! My Afro-American intellectual history course was scheduled for twenty, but over a hundred students (many from African and Arab countries) enrolled. Student activism regarding educational reform was increasing at the time, and I participated in many lively discussions and actions.

When I returned from Paris, I decided to leave Yale—for personal reasons linked with my lovely African wife-to-be, Elleni Gebre Amlak—and went back to Union. But after a short year I decided to go to Princeton University, to teach in the religion department and direct the Afro-American studies program. My major motivation was to constitute a critical mass of black scholars—with the great Toni Morrison at the center—although I also was eager to learn from other superb scholars there.

At present, besides completing *Breaking Bread*, a book written with bell hooks

on the black crisis (including black male/female relations), a collection of essays (*Prophetic Criticism*) and a work on David Hume (seven years in the making), my focus is twofold: the battle in the arts, popular culture and the academy over Eurocentrism and multiculturalism, and the crisis in black and progressive leadership. In 1990, I coedited (with Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever and Trinh T. Minhha) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (MIT Press) for the New Museum of Contemporary Art. This landmark text may set the framework for the debate between conservatives like Allan Bloom, Africanist thinkers such as Leonard Jeffries, feminist theorists countering patriarchal canons like Elaine Showalter, and democratic socialists of African descent like myself. This battle will continue to rage well into the twenty-first century. My major aim is to rescue the ambiguous legacy of the European age from conservatives, to accent the racist, patriarchal and homophobic currents that still run through American intellectual and cultural life while criticizing any separatist politics or parochial outlook and linking the new cultural politics of difference to a democratic socialist perspective. My critical appreciation of the hip-hop culture of American youth, especially black youth, reflects this dialectical reading of our present moment. I applaud the spirit of resistance against racism, yet condemn its misogynist and homophobic elements.

The crisis of leadership in black and progressive communities is symptomatic of the paucity of credible strategies and tactics for social change in the United States. It also reflects the relative inability of the Left to mobilize and organize over time and space. Needless to say, there is no easy way out of this impasse.

The effort is more difficult due to the pervasive disarray of the progressive movement in the United States. Never before in our history has the U.S. Left been so bereft of courageous leaders of vision, intelligence and integrity. We simply do not have formidable figures that the public identifies with progressive causes. Aside from those preoccupied with electoral politics and admirable local activists with little national attention, there are no major leaders who articulate in bold and defiant terms—with genuine passion and analytical clarity—the moral imperative to address the maldistribution of resources, wealth and power, the escalating xenophobia, ecological devastation, national decline and spiritual impoverishment we are facing. This crisis of leadership adds to the balkanization of U.S. progressive politics—its fragmentation, isolation and insularity. Given the power of big business and cultural conservatism, the U.S. Left has potency primarily when strong leadership—rooted in extraparliamentary organizational activity—energizes and galvanizes demoralized progressives and liberals across racial, class, regional, age and gender lines. This usually does not last long—so the propitious moment must be seized.

We find it hard to seize this moment not only because of the establishment's strategies of repression and incorporation, but also owing to the consumer cul-

ture—with its addictive seductions and pacifying pastimes—which often saps and disperses our energies for collective struggle. Market morality engulfs us in such a way that it is difficult to arrange our lives so that communal activity supersedes personal pursuits. Market mentality makes it hard for us to believe our sacrificial progressive efforts will make a real difference in our busy and short lives. And since there can be no substantive progressive politics without oppositional subcultures, institutions and networks, the predominant “market way of life” presents a—maybe *the*—major challenge for progressive politics.

At the moment, the most explosive issues in U.S. society revolve around black bodies and women’s wombs—race and abortion. And, in a fundamental sense, the starting points—through not landing grounds—for progressive politics in the 1990s may be enhancement of the poor, especially those of color, and protection of women’s rights. Yet reform measures such as progressive taxation and appointment of liberal judges fall far short of what is required. We also need a progressive cultural renaissance that reshapes our values, restructures how we live and puts struggle and sacrifice closer to the center of what we think and do. Only then will our fight to turn back a market-driven, conservative United States—already far down the road to social chaos and self-destruction—be not only desirable, but also credible. The defense of the relevance of Marxist thought, including its ethical dimensions, after the Cold War is an indispensable weapon in this fight.

At the forefront of this fight stands Jesse Jackson. His historic presidential campaigns were the major progressive responses to Reagan’s conservative policies. His 1988 bid was the first time since the last days of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign—with the grand exception of Mayor Harold Washington’s election in Chicago—that the nearly *de facto* segregation in U.S. progressive politics was confronted and partly surmounted.

Yet Jackson’s courageous leadership is problematic. His televisual style—a style too preoccupied with TV cameras—relies on personal charisma at the expense of grassroots organizing. His brilliance and energy sustain his public visibility at the expense of programmatic follow-through. This style downplays people’s participatory possibilities—at the level of followership and leadership. More pointedly, it shuns democratic accountability. Pure democracy must never be a fetish for progressives. Work must get done; decisions must be made. But criticism and democratic practices are the lifeblood of any progressive organization worthy of the name. Jackson’s televisual style not only mitigates against this; it tends to preclude it. So despite his salutary social democratic politics, Jackson’s televisual style may be reaching the point at which it undermines his crucial message.

This televisual style must give way to a collective model of progressive leadership that puts a premium on grassroots organizing, criticism and democratic accountability. The future of U.S. progressive politics lies with those engaged local activists who have made a difference, yet who also have little interest in being in

the national limelight. They engage in protracted organizing in principled coalitions that bring power and pressure to bear on specific issues—especially issues of jobs, housing, health and child care, education and ecological protection. Without such activists there can be no progressive politics. Yet state, regional and national networks are also necessary for an effective progressive politics. This is why locally based collective (and especially multiracial and multigender) models of leadership are needed. These models must shun the idea of one national progressive leader; they must highlight critical dialogue and democratic accountability within and across organizations. These models of collective leadership will more than likely not be part of the lethargic electoral system riddled with decreasing revenues (i.e., debt), loss of public confidence, self-perpetuating mediocrity and pervasive corruption. Rather, the future of U.S. progressive politics lies in the capacity of a collective leadership to energize, mobilize and organize working and poor people. Democratic socialists can play a crucial role in projecting an all-embracing moral vision of freedom, justice and equality and making social analyses that connect and link activists together. In this way we can be a socialist leaven in a larger progressive loaf. Yet this loaf will never get baked if we remain separate, isolated, insular and fragmented. America's massive social breakdown requires that we come together—for the sake of our lives, our children and our sacred honor.

Source: "Introduction: The Making of an American Democratic Socialist of African Descent," *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), pp. xv-xxxiv.