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# **The Black Church and Marxism:**

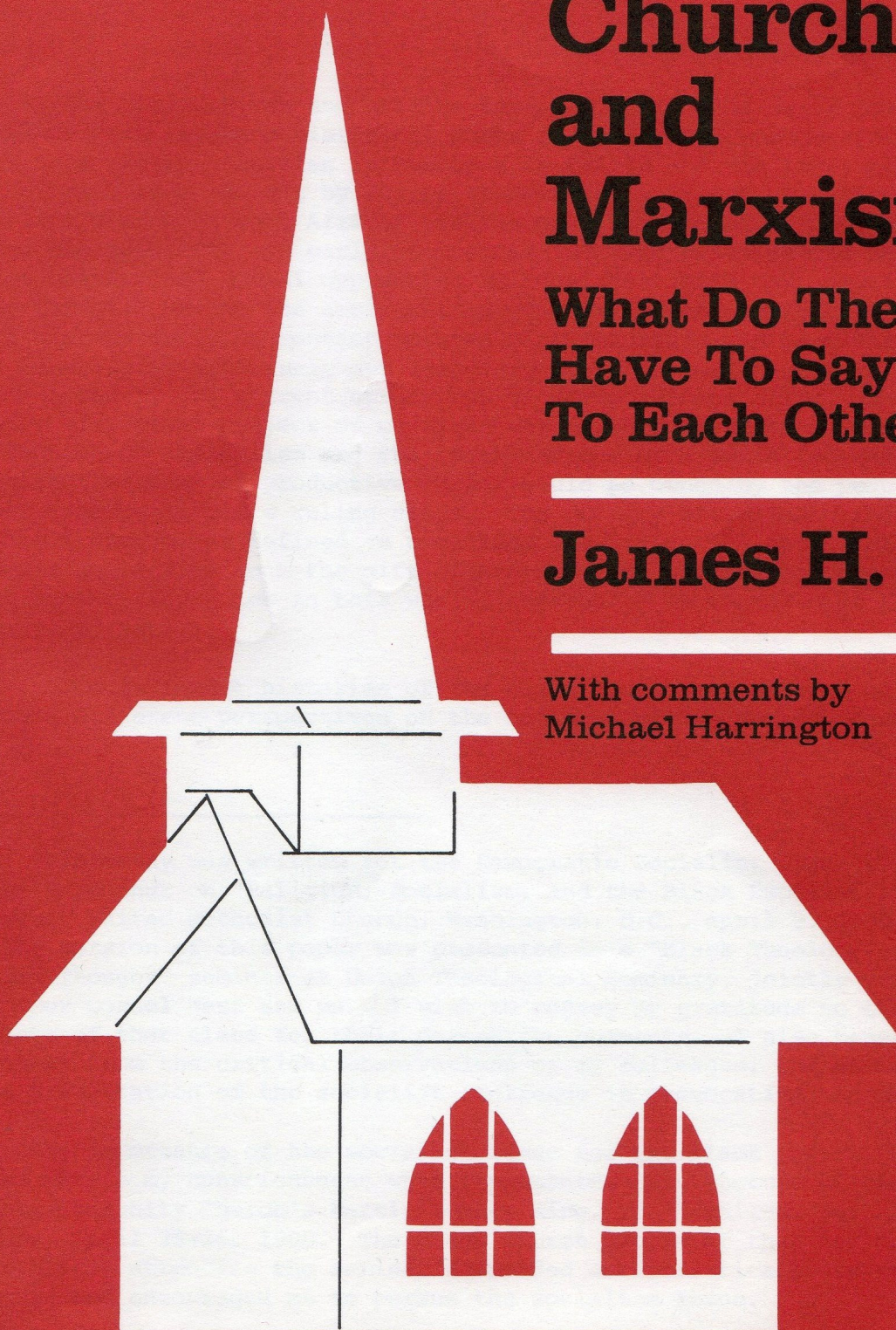
**What Do They  
Have To Say  
To Each Other?**

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**James H. Cone**

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With comments by  
Michael Harrington





THE BLACK CHURCH AND MARXISM:

WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO SAY TO EACH OTHER?

by

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The black church and marxism have emerged on the North American continent from separate historical paths and thus have encountered each other only rarely. Marxism is European in origin and was imported into the United States in 1851 by Joseph Weydemeyer, a friend of Karl Marx. The black church is both African and European in origin. It was created during the late 18th and early 19th centuries when black people refused to accept slavery and racial oppression as consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. During the early period of their existence in North America, there was virtually no contact between black churches and marxists. Both were preoccupied with their own immediate projects, which were sharply contradicted by the current structures of American capitalism. The primary historical project of marxists was defined in terms of the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society in which the means of productive forces would be owned by the people rather than by an elite ruling class. The primary historical project of the black church was defined as preaching and living the gospel of Jesus in order to receive both the gift of eternal life and the courage to fight against injustice in this world, especially as represented in slavery and racism.

The different histories of the black church and marxism as well as their different perspectives on the human condition confirmed their

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Note: This essay was written for the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee's seminar on "Religion, Socialism, and the Black Experience," held at Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., April 9, 1980. An earlier version of this paper was presented in a "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" seminar at Union Theological Seminary, jointly taught by Professor Cornel West and me. I wish to convey my gratitude to the students of that class for their perceptive comments. I also benefited immensely from the critical observations of my colleague, Cornel West, whose presentation of the socialist challenge is provocative and appealing.

The importance of the socialist issue for the black church was reinforced within my consciousness when I presented this lecture at the Shaker Heights Community Church's Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute for Racial Justice, April 25-26, 1980. The black church people of that church and other blacks attending the seminar responded enthusiastically to my analysis and encouraged me to pursue the socialism issue.



separateness in the society and thus laid the foundation for their misunderstanding of each other. Because both the black church and marxism have been marginal in American society, they have been preoccupied with their own survival and have taken little notice of one another. However, to the extent that marxists and other socialists have been concerned historically with the black community, they have almost always encountered the black church, because the church has been, and to a large degree still is, the most important institution in our community. Similarly, to the extent that black churchpeople have been concerned with creating a completely new society, they have looked in the direction of marxism. Although the socialist tradition among black churchpeople is small, it is still present and we black theologians and historians should rediscover it in order to enhance our vision of liberation.

The lack of contact between black churchpeople and marxists has resulted in distorted views of each other's perspectives. They only know each other from a distance and usually only through the white capitalist media. While rejecting what their mutual enemy says about themselves, they seem to accept readily what is said about each other. As far as I know, this is the first occasion that marxist-socialists and black Christians have come together for dialogue looking toward doing some things together to make this society more humane. In this initial encounter, it would be wise not to gloss over sharp differences in our perspectives but also to avoid stressing the minor aspects of our viewpoints. We must be keenly aware of our history in relation to each other so we can build on our strengths and avoid our past mistakes.

#### MARXISM AND THE BLACK CHURCH: HISTORIC ATTITUDES

In the history of relations between black churchpeople and marxists, we can easily identify three attitudes: indifference, hostility, and mutual support. The most frequent of these has been indifference. In 1911 Thomas Potter, a black socialist from Patterson, New Jersey, wrote: "Let me say in the most emphatic terms that if there is one blot on the record of the Socialist Party, it is that of its utter apathy and indifference toward the negro."<sup>1</sup>

Mutual indifference can be seen by the absence of references to each other in their respective expressions of radicalism in the United States. For a black person finds it strange that in books on the history of socialism there are few if any references to black radicalism in the United States. The only period in which a few comments are made is in connection with the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960's. It is as if black radicalism does not exist for white socialists until the appearance of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael. White socialists seem not to know or care about the radicalism of the 19th and early 20th century of black churchpeople. A similar invisibility obscures early black socialists, like Peter Clark and the Reverend George Washington Woodbey.



Peter Clark, a principal and teacher from Cincinnati, Ohio was the first black to declare himself a socialist. "In 1878, he was chosen as a member of the National Executive Committee of the newly formed Socialist Labor Party,"<sup>2</sup> but had to resign a year later because, in his words "the welfare of the Negro is my controlling motive."<sup>3</sup> The Socialist Labor Party completely ignored the situation of blacks during the late 19th century, and the same is true of other socialist groups, including the Socialist Party, organized in 1901.

The Reverend George Washington Woodbey was a member of the Socialist Party, attending the national conventions in 1904 and 1908. In 1908 he was nominated but rejected by the convention as Eugene Debs' running mate in the 1908 presidential elections. He wrote several books reconciling socialism and Christianity, including What to Do and How to Do It or Socialism vs. Capitalism and The Bible and Socialism: A Conversation Between Two Preachers.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately black socialists are invisible in the histories of socialism written by white intellectuals. Such works as Michael Harrington, Socialism<sup>5</sup> and Daniel Bell, Marxian Socialism in the United States<sup>6</sup> have almost no references to black people's involvement in the socialist movement. Although James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America<sup>7</sup> and Ambiguous Legacy<sup>8</sup> devoted a few pages to blacks in each book, it is quite clear that black people's relation to socialism is not an integral part of his analysis. The conspicuous absence of any reference to the importance of black presence in the Socialist Party or to black radicalism outside the socialist movement can only mean that most white socialists themselves are indifferent to the black struggle for liberation as defined by black people.<sup>9</sup> For anyone who is seriously interested in why more black people are not socialists should read Philip Foner's American Socialism and Black Americans.<sup>10</sup> For the socialists' history in America in relation to black people (to quote Engels' in another connection) "proves how useless is a platform--for the most part theoretically correct--if it is unable to get in contact with the actual needs of the people."<sup>11</sup> It was the strange indifference of the Socialist Party in relation to racism that made W.E.B. DuBois ambivalent about his commitment to it, even though he clearly believed that socialism provided a better social arrangement than capitalism. As early as 1913, DuBois said: "The Negro problem is the great test of the American socialist."<sup>12</sup> In succeeding years white socialists, along with the rest of white society, failed that test. Many socialists, like white Christians, seem to be unaware that there is a serious credibility problem as they are analyzed from a black perspective of reality. Like white Christians who appear to be white first and Christian second, white socialists also seem to be white first and socialists second. Such an identity will always present difficult problems in the context of dialogue with black people.

The indifference of socialism toward the black church is mirrored in the indifference of the black church toward socialism. There were black preachers who became advocates of socialism, but either such advocacy remained on the periphery of their message or the preachers themselves remained on the periphery of the black church. In 1896 Reverdy C. Ransom, later a bishop in the AME Church, wrote an article entitled "The Negro and



Socialism" in which he advocated socialism. He said that when the "Negro comes to realize that socialism offers him freedom of opportunity to cooperate with all /people/ upon terms of equality in every avenue of life, he will not be slow to accept his social emancipation."<sup>13</sup> During the 1890's The Christian Recorder and the AME Church Review carried on a dialogue on the strengths and the weaknesses of socialism, with the writers of the Recorder rejecting socialism and the writers of the Review supporting it. But even the black ministers who supported socialism did not view socialism as central to their perspective on the gospel.

The same is true of black preachers and theologians today. They are indifferent toward socialism, because they know little about it and because they believe that the reality of racism is too serious to risk dilution with socialism. When one reads the histories of black churches in the works of Joseph Washington,<sup>14</sup> Carter G. Woodson,<sup>15</sup> E. Franklin Frazier,<sup>16</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore<sup>17</sup> and others, it is revealing that there are no references to black socialist preachers.

The one event that presented the radical black church movement of the 1960's with an opportunity to consider the marxist question was when James Forman issued The Black Manifesto in Riverside Church, May 4, 1969.<sup>18</sup> While the National Conference of Black Churchmen supported Forman, their support ignored the "Introduction" of the Manifesto because it was marxist. The black preachers of NCBC strongly endorsed the demands of the Manifesto. However they sidestepped the marxist justification of the demands, using instead their own nationalist arguments. While James Forman was referred to as a modern-day prophet by NCBC and other black churchpeople, no black church person, to my knowledge, endorsed his perspective on marxism. In fact, during all the discussions I attended on the Manifesto issue, no one even raised the issue of marxism.

It was an intellectual failure on my part that I did not deal with marxism and socialism when I wrote Black Theology and Black Power<sup>19</sup> which was published in 1969. Neither did the issue of socialism appear in my A Black Theology of Liberation<sup>20</sup> (1970) and God of the Oppressed<sup>21</sup> (1975). But after encountering serious socialists who were also serious Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America,<sup>22</sup> I began to re-evaluate my silence on this theme. As a result I raised the socialism issue at the first Black Theology Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, August 1977 in a lecture entitled: "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?"<sup>23</sup> Since that time, I have been convinced that the black church cannot remain silent regarding socialism, because such silence will be interpreted by our Third World brothers and sisters as support for the capitalistic system which exploits the poor all over this earth.

For example, between 25,000 and 50,000 people die each day from starvation, a cause that is directly related to the persistence of national and international economic orders that foster distorted development. The former secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, well known for his racial slurs, said it bluntly: "Food is a weapon. It is now one of the principal tools of our negotiating kit."<sup>24</sup> Sixty percent of the world's population are



malnourished, 20% are starving, and one-third have less than \$3.00 per week on which to live. Never before in human history has there been so much food production and also so much suffering from hunger. According to the United Nation's Conference on Trade and Development's report in October 1976, the developed countries with 20% of the world's population have almost 67% of the world's income while the poorest 30% of humanity have only 3% of the world's income. It is little wonder that the nations of the world spend 300 billion annually on military weapons (about 34 million every hour) and over one-third of the total being spent in the United States. What is reflected in the international economic order in terms of the maldistribution of wealth is found also on the national scene in the United States. One percent of the people in the USA own 30% of the wealth.<sup>25</sup> From these economic realities, it ought to be clear that black churches cannot simply continue to ignore socialism as an alternative social arrangement. We cannot continue to speak against racism without any reference to a radical change in the economic order. I do not think that racism can be eliminated as long as capitalism remains intact. It is now time for us to investigate socialism as an alternative to capitalism. One result will be to rediscover black socialist preachers, like George W. Woodbey, who were relegated to the periphery of the black church tradition, because of their strong advocacy of socialism.

In addition to the dominant attitude of indifference among marxists and black churchpeople, there have also been instances of hostility and mutual support. An example of the hostile attitude is found among the communists during the 1920's. One communist said of the black preacher: "The duty of the preacher is not alone to detract the mind of his congregation from their wretched conditions. It is also to serve the white plantation owners as their best agents in spying upon the activities of the rural populace. For so faithfully serving their masters, these lackeys often receive excellent wages."<sup>26</sup> This attitude continued until the early 1930's when the communists began to change from hostility to support. They supported Father Divine and later Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Powell said of the communists in 1945: "Today there is no group in America, including the Christian Church, that practices racial brotherhood one-tenth as much as the Communist Party."<sup>27</sup>

Because of their separate paths to radicalism and their mutual marginality in this society, marxists and black church people continue their misunderstanding of each other, unnecessarily perpetuating their historic-indifference and hostility to each other. As part of the present effort to move beyond massive neglect and occasional sniping, let us consider the unfavorable assumptions by which marxists and black churchpeople have held one another at arm's length. I shall start with the black viewpoint and continue with the marxist one, commenting on each point along the way.

#### THE BLACK CHURCH'S VIEW OF MARXISM

1. According to the black church, marxist philosophy is atheistic and therefore must be rejected. How can the black church embrace a philosophy that denies God's existence, when the church is based on the faith that God will make a way out of no way? It appears that this fundamental objection would end dialogue before it begins.



However, the fact is that many people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America call themselves marxists and Christians at the same time. They do so by distinguishing between marxism as world view (Weltanschauung) and marxism as an instrument of social analysis, rejecting the former and enthusiastically taking up the latter. Black churchpeople in this country may find themselves able to do the same thing. Marxism may be understood as a scientific tool for analyzing the economic, political and social structures of this society so that we will know how to actualize in the world the freedom that we affirm in faith.

2. Blacks also observe that marxism is European in origin and therefore white. Whiteness as such is of course no problem but in the black experience whiteness almost always means racism. In the past marxists and other socialists have been predominantly racist by excluding blacks from their vision of the new socialist society. Some socialists advocated that blacks should be exported to Africa, and others claimed that their vision of a socialist society did not in any way eliminate racial segregation. Others, like Eugene Debs, one of the founders of the Socialist Party in the early 20th century and a frequent Presidential candidate, remained ambivalent on the issue of racism. When the Socialist Party did take a stand against racism during the 1904 and 1908 conventions, the stand was weak and nothing was done to implement it. The party was concerned not to offend southern white socialists who made it quite clear that there was a special place for black people and not even socialism can change that fact.<sup>28</sup>

I think that blacks can overcome the problem of marxism being white and racist the same way we overcame the problem of Christianity being white and racist. We can indigenize marxism, that is, reinterpret it for our situation. We do not refuse to ride in cars or airplanes, nor do we reject any other useful instrument just because they were invented by whites. Why then should we reject marxism if it proves to be of use in our struggle for freedom?

3. Many white marxists, especially the communists during the 1920's, referred to black preachers as ignorant and to their religion as superstition, a description that is not likely to win friends among black churchpeople. My comment on this is that I am sure that white Christians, Democrats and Republicans have said and done worse things to us, and I do not hear black Christians saying that we should cease being Christians or reject Republicans and Democrats because some whites in these groups call us bad names.

4. When marxists have been forced to face the question of race, they have always made it secondary to the economic question and the class struggle. While this may be scientifically correct, the way in which marxists put forward their perspective on race and class is usually offensive to the victims of racism.<sup>29</sup> The black church is a nationalist, race-oriented institution whose identity is inseparably connected with the struggle for freedom in this life as well as the eternal freedom believed to be coming in God's eschatological future. How then can the black church embrace a philosophy which by definition makes the elimination of racism



secondary? This is a critical question and its implications point to the heart of the conflict between the black church and marxism. The question is whether the black church in particular and the black community generally has anything specific and unique to contribute to the struggle for liberation in this society. Marxists seem to deny that we have anything to contribute, and that is why they seldom turn to our tradition for insight and guidance. Like other whites, they seem to think that they have the whole, pure truth.

#### A MARXIST VIEW OF THE BLACK CHURCH

1. According to marxists, the black church preaches salvation as a reward to be received in heaven and not as justice on earth. In such a context, black religion serves a similar function in the black community that religion serves in the white community. It is a sedative, an opiate that masks the pain of injustice on earth by directing people's attention toward the joy of heaven. Such a perspective makes people exclusively dependent on God to change the world and encourages them to exclude social analysis and the need for human beings to act on behalf of their own freedom. As Karl Marx said: "The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself."<sup>30</sup> It was in this context that Marx also described religion as "the opium of the people."<sup>31</sup>

As with the matter of atheistic ideology, the religion-sedative equation is part of the marxist world view, which may be ignored while taking up marxism as a tool of social analysis. To the marxist claim that black religion is an opiate, we reply merely that sometimes it is and sometimes it is not.

Certainly the black church is not a consistent model of liberation. As long as we have the Reverend Ikes, we know that all is not well with what is known as black religion. However, the black church did define the gospel as liberation and institutionalized its definition by creating separate, independent denominations in the early 19th century. We must not minimize the historical and theological importance of Richard Allen, Henry H. Garnett, David Walker, Henry M. Turner and Martin Luther King, Jr., all of whom, as well as many others, related the gospel to the black freedom struggle. When we speak of the black liberation struggle, we are talking about a movement that was created in and supported by the black church.<sup>32</sup> We have always known that religion is political and the presence of white preachers as slaveholders and at the Klan rallies reinforced that fact within our theological consciousness. Accordingly, many blacks have found in religion not an opiate but tonic that gives courage and strength in the struggle of freedom.

2. Marxists often claim that when the black church does manage to come down to earth with its message of freedom, it focuses exclusively on racism as if that is the only problem with American society. It does not offer a critique of capitalism or seek to construct a completely new society. Such a limited vision, the marxists claim, seems to suggest that the black church is a capitalist institution and its members are upset with American society only because they want a larger piece of the capitalistic pie. For the marxist, the black church is reformist and not revolutionary.



Black churchpeople need to take this critique seriously. We can say that in the history of our struggle, the oppression of black people was so extreme in every segment of our community that there was no opportunity for a comprehensive scientific analysis of American society, including a critique of capitalism and a consideration of socialism. Blacks were not a part of a European intellectual class but the descendants of African slaves. They simply responded to the most pressing contradiction in their historical experience, namely slavery and racism. They did not define their struggle as being against capitalism per se, and they did not recognize the need for a revolution as defined by marxism. Blacks wanted to end racism as defined by slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow laws. Now, however, we have a small group of black intellectuals in the church and in other areas of black life who can provide the necessary leadership. They can and should offer black people a critique of capitalism and an alternative vision of social existence.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I would like to offer the following suggestions in order that the dialogue between the black church and marxism might be deepened. Both marxists and black churchpeople must be open to hear what each is saying regarding their respective projects for justice. Without an openness from both sides, there is no way that a meaningful dialogue can occur.

The openness about which I speak must include on the part of marxists a willingness to take seriously the uniqueness of black oppression in the world generally and the United States in particular. The uniqueness of black oppression is not to be understood theologically as if blacks are elected by God but only scientifically. It is a fact that most people who suffer in the world are people of color and not European. And it is a fact that the people responsible for that oppression are white Europeans. Marxists have to be open to hear the meaning of that fact by asking whether fascism is inherent in the very nature and structure of western civilization. But marxists and other socialists do not like to focus on their racism, and they try to make us blacks believe that racism will be automatically eliminated when capitalism is destroyed. In every European socialist society I have seen, including Cuba, the elimination of capitalism has not eliminated racism.

Marxists must further consider whether the black church has something distinctive to contribute to the struggle to create a new socialist society. Unless white socialists are willing to acknowledge our unique contribution to the struggle, then we have nothing to talk about. I will not participate in a dialogue with any group which assumes that their philosophy of social change is the only true one.

Another aspect of the openness about which I speak is the willingness of black churchpeople to think about the total reconstruction of society along the lines of Democratic Socialism. We must be willing to recognize that a social arrangement based on the maximization of profit with little regard to the welfare of the people cannot be supported. Even "if modern marxism gives the wrong answers, at least it asks the right



question."<sup>33</sup> Marxism is at least right in its critique of capitalism and in its affirmation of the class struggle. I do not believe that it is morally right for multi-national corporations to have a monopoly on the ownership of the means of production of goods needed for human survival. The earth is the Lord's and its resources are intended for all. No one has a right to control by private ownership the necessities of human life. If black churches do not take a stand against capitalism and for democratic socialism, for Karl Marx and against Adam Smith, for the poor in all colors and against the rich of all colors, for the workers and against the corporations, how can we expect socialists, marxists and other freedom fighters to believe us when we sing:

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!  
 Oh Freedom, I love thee!  
 And before I'll be a slave  
 I'll be buried in my grave,  
 And go home to my Lord and be free.

There cannot and should not be any serious dialogue between black churches and socialists, if the former are unwilling to consider socialism as an alternative social arrangement.

Regardless of what happens in the dialogue between black churches and socialists, it is clear that we blacks must begin to think of a radical and total reconstruction of this society from its material, economic base. This reconstruction must include political freedom, racial and sexual equality, in short, the opportunity for all to become what we are meant to be. We must ask whether it is possible to end racism in a capitalistic society, whether a society based on the maximization of profit for a few corporate rich while the majority are dependent on wage-labor for survival can ever create freedom for black people? While a few "middle class" blacks may benefit from the creation of a new intellectual, and managerial class by corporations, we must ask about the masses of blacks: that 30% underclass, permanently unemployed, that 40 to 60% unemployed black youth, and a host of other blacks who have little control over their survival? How do we propose to eliminate this extreme form of oppression? Can we deal effectively with our situation as oppressed blacks with the tactics used by our grandparents?

It is time for us to consider a radically new social arrangement. The question is whether Democratic Socialism offers us such an alternative. Will it protect the freedoms we now enjoy and eliminate the evils that now exist? When the words socialism and communism are mentioned, most people think of Soviet Russia, Cuba, China, Eastern Europe and other such places--all of which would be decisively rejected by Democratic Socialists as examples of "state capitalism." The problem with Democratic Socialism is that there are no historical models to which we can point in order to make our claims and goals concrete. White American capitalists often ask radical social critics, "Why don't you go somewhere else and live?" Or if they are more polite, they ask: "Where does such a socialist society exist, if the ones that adopt the name are not in fact socialist?"



These are hard questions, even if they do come from people who represent the consciousness of the ruling class. But I contend that the absence of an historical model should not deter us from our attempt to create one. For hope in black religion is based on a vision not present in, but created out of, historical struggle. If we limit our hope to what is, then we destroy it. Hope is the expectation of that which is not. It is a belief that the impossible is possible, the "not yet" is coming in history. Without hope, the people perish. Hope is what enabled Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King to actualize historical projects of freedom which others said were impossible. If we blacks today limit our hope to what is, that is, to the Democratic and Republican parties, then our vision is severely limited. If we define our struggle for freedom only within the alternatives posed by capitalism, then we have allowed our future humanity to be determined by what people have created and not by God. To believe in God is to know that our hope is grounded in Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord whose resurrected presence creates a new hope for a better world. Why not think that the "not yet" is possible? Why not think of a completely new society and begin to devise ways to realize it on earth? For if our heavenly visions have no earthly realizations, then they can only serve as a sedative that eases the pain of an unbearable present. Is that the extent of black religion's essence? Why are there no genuinely radical and independent voices coming from our leaders today? Why do they pose alternatives that exist only within capitalism, a system which offers no hope for the masses of blacks? Personally I like Andy Young, NAACP, Urban League, SCLC, Jessie Jackson and our black elected officials, and I do not wish to minimize the hard work and devotion they have given on our behalf. The same is true for our ministers and theologians of the gospel. But what I find missing in what they propose are genuinely new visions of the social order. Perhaps what we need today is to return to that "good old-time religion" of our grandparents and combine with it a marxist critique of society. Together black religion and marxist philosophy may show us the way to build a completely new society. With that combination, we may be able to realize in the society the freedom of which we sing and pray for in the black church.



### Notes

1. Cited in Philip S. Foner, American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 205.
  2. Ibid., p. 57.
  3. Ibid., p. 59.
  4. For an excellent analysis of Woodbey's perspective on socialism as well as other black socialist preachers, see Ibid., Chapter 7. See also Cornel West's, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" in G. Wilmore and J. Cone's, Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 564f. See also two additional essays by West, "Socialism and the Black Church," New York Circus: A Center for Social Justice and International Awareness, October-November 1979, Vol. 3, No. 5, pp. 5-8; and "Black Theology and Socialist Thought," The Witness, Vol. 63, No. 4, April 1980, pp. 16-19.
  5. (New York: Bantam Book, 1973). See also Harrington's, Toward A Democratic Left: A Radical Program for A New Majority (New York: Macmillan, 1968); The Twilight of Capitalism (New York: Touchstone Book, 1976).
  6. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967).
  7. Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925 (New York: Vintage Books, 1969). See also his The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State 1900-1918 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
  8. Weinstein, Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975).
  9. The invisibility of the black radicals in the writings of writers on the left is also found in Peter Clecak's, Radical Paradoxes: Dilemmas of the American Left: 1945-1970 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974); T.B. Bottomore, Critics of Society: Radical Thought in North America (New York: Vintage Books, 1969). In the 1968 revision of this book there is added a "Postscript" and it covers Bottomore's interpretation of the civil rights and Black Power movements.
- Christopher Lasch, The New Radicalism in America: 1889-1963 (New York: Vintage Books, 1965) is also conspicuous for its absence of any references to black radicalism. However, in his The Agony of The American Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), there is a penetrating analysis of "Black Power: Cultural Nationalism as Politics." But even here, he is silent on earlier black radicals in the black church and other segments of black life.
10. See also Robert L. Allen (with the collaboration of Pamela P. Allen),



Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States (New York: Doubleday, 1975). The most perceptive critic of the white left is Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: Morrow, 1967); see also his Rebellion or Revolution (New York: Morrow, 1968).

11. Cited in Daniel Bell, Marxian Socialism in the United States, p. 36.
12. Cited in Foner, American Socialism and Black Americans, p. 219.
13. Cited in Ibid., p. 85. Foner's treatment of black socialist preachers in chapter 7 of this volume is excellent. Other articles by black socialist preachers include Bishop James T. Holly's "Socialism From the Biblical Point of View," The AME Church Review, Vol. 10, 1894; George F. Miller, "Enslavement of the Worker," The Messenger, Vol. II, No. 7, July 1919; "Socialism and Its Ethical Basis," The Messenger, Vol. II, No. 7, July 1919. I am especially appreciative to my colleague, Professor James Washington, for sharing copies of the Holly and Miller articles with me.
14. Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
15. The History of the Negro Church (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1972).
16. The Negro Church in America (New York: Schocken, 1962).
17. Black Religion and Black Radicalism (New York: Doubleday, 1973).
18. For an account of the events and responses to The Black Manifesto, see G. Wilmore and J. Cone's, Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979. The Black Manifesto is included in that volume also.
19. (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).
20. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).
21. (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
22. For a partial account of the impact of Third World Theologians upon my theological perspective, see my "Black Theology and Third World Theologies in Wilmore and Cone, Black Theology: A Documentary History, pp. 445-608.
23. This essay is included in Wilmore and Cone, Black Theology: A Documentary History, pp. 350-359.
24. See Christianity and Crisis, January 24, 1977.
25. See G. William Domhoff, The Powers That Be: Processes of Ruling Class Domination in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); see also his Who Rules America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967).



26. Cited in Ralph L. Roy, Communism and the Churches (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1960), p. 48.
27. Adam C. Powell, Jr., Marching Blacks (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), p. 67. Originally published in 1945.
28. For a comprehensive account of socialist's attitude toward blacks, see Foner, American Socialism and Black Americans.
29. My personal encounter with white marxists who emphasized that racism is secondary and class is primary occurred in dialogues with Latin American liberation theologians and so-called white liberation theologians in North America. My response to that emphasis was to say: Even if that were true, no white person has the right to say it to a black person. People who do not suffer from a particular form of societal oppression have no right to say to people who do that their suffering is secondary and that the real struggle is located in another area. Furthermore when I think that it is the descendants of slave masters, the enslavers of my grandparents, who are saying such things, I get a little upset and wonder what kind of enslaving game is being planned for black people in the name of socialism.
30. The Marx-Engels Reader, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, Second Edition, 1978), p. 72.
31. Ibid., p. 54.
32. The best account of the black church's involvement in the black church's involvement in the black struggle for freedom, see Gayraud S. Wilmore's, Black Religion and Black Radicalism.
33. A comment by Denys Munby cited in J. Philip Wogaman, The Great Economic Debate: An Ethical Analysis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 55.



By Michael Harrington

James Cone's paper on The Black Church and Marxism is subtitled, What Do They Have to Say to Each Other? That is precisely the question to ask, and we are in Cone's debt for having done so in clear and forthright fashion. As a white Marxist--if, but only if, you grant me my own definition of Marxism as a democratic, undogmatic theory and praxis of freedom under modern conditions--I want to respond to his invitation to dialogue. I make no pretense at presenting a paper as thoughtful and far-reaching as Cone's; I simply want to take up three points which were suggested to me by his essay.

First, on the failure of Marxists in America to recognize black history and black socialist history in particular.

There is no question that the Debsian Socialist Party, in its period of greatest influence (1901-1920), often tended to reduce the question of racism to an epi-phenomenon of the class struggle and to see black workers as workers but not as blacks. Indeed, as Herbert Hill pointed out some time ago, there was a workingclass, and even socialist, racism which first arose on the West Coast and was directed against Asian Americans. There were anti-Asian labor parties; the Socialist Party itself dodged many of the complexities of the immigration issue which was the focal point of that racism; and there were even socialists, like the novelist, Jack London, who sometimes talked in terms not too far distant from white supremacy. Even after A. Philip Randolph entered the socialist movement after World War I, some of those illusions persisted. One reason was that it was possible to think that Randolph was adopting the old notion that class was all and race fairly unimportant.

In fact, it was precisely as a black that Randolph advocated a united front of the black and white workingclass. For him, that was part of a strategy against racism rather than an evasion of the issue. That became quite clear during the March on Washington movement (MOW) right before World War II. The premise of that magnificent exercise in black political power was that it was intolerable for a nation committed to fighting fascist racism to perpetuate its own racism at home. Out of that struggle came Roosevelt's Presidential fair employment practices ruling for the war industries--and the greatest relative gains ever made by blacks in the economy, before or since. And Randolph further sharpened that point when he publicly advocated black civil disobedience if white America tried to draft blacks into a Jim Crow army after World War II.

My point is that the issue is not class analysis (and action) or race analysis (and action), but the class analysis of racism and the racial analysis of the American class structure (which, as I pointed out in The Other America, provides a de facto institutionalization of segregation



even after de jure segregation has been abolished). Randolph understood that complexity. Most socialists did not, and Cone is right to emphasize how that fact was to make dialogue difficult, if not impossible.

There is another aspect of this problem, one which is also associated with the life and work of A. Philip Randolph. The American Communists were the first radicals in this country to make anti-racism a major priority in their work. Ironically, that very sound conclusion was, like many other conclusions, good and bad, imposed upon the Communists by their Soviet comrades in Moscow (Theodore Draper's history of American Communism documents these developments). Even so, the Communists did systematically organize on this question, and a fair number of black activists of the Thirties first became involved in the struggle in, or in cooperation with, the Communists.

But if the American Communists could be ordered to be right on the black issue, they could also be ordered to be wrong. Sudden shifts in the Party line--from "Third Period" militancy in the early Thirties to support for Roosevelt after 1935--were reflected in policies carried out on the streets of Harlem and Chicago's South Side. Richard Wright has left us a haunting account of this experience, ending with his physical exclusion from a May Day parade after his expulsion from the Party. And Harold Cruse's account shows how the bitterness of blacks who decided they had been used sometimes reacted, not simply against Communists, but against Jewish Communists. Thus, if the Debsian Socialists often ignored the issue of race, the American Communists recognized it, which is very much to their credit, but also manipulated it in the course of following a line determined for them in the Soviet Union.

I obviously do not make these points in opposition to James Cone but rather to reinforce his point and insist upon the failure of all wings and tendencies speaking in the name of Marxism in this country.

Secondly, Cone raises the question of whether "...racism is inherent in the very nature and structure of western civilization." I think one has to be very careful on this count.

From a Marxist point of view, there are no "inherent" social attitudes, not racism, not capitalism, not socialism. All points of view arise in the course of history and within the matrix of an economic social formation. Given that meaning of "inherent"--as somehow embedded in the white, or western, psyche without reference to the white, western history--I would reject its use. But if James Cone is thinking of something much more complex--and the rest of his essay certainly suggests that he is--then a very important point is being made.

In the simplest reading of Marx, an economic "base" "determines" a cultural, political "superstructure." It is precisely such a vulgarization of Marx which allows one to treat of racism as a mere "superstructural" factor, bound to vanish with the transformation of the "base." But in Marx's own theory and practice, reality is seen in a much more sophisticated fashion. Greek art survives as a model of beauty in the century of the



industrial revolution; British aristocrats are the political agency of the triumph of the bourgeois economy; cultures lead and lag, are avant garde and retrograde. In this framework, the extraordinary shift in the organization of the world which began sometime around the Sixteenth century--when the West was culturally backward compared to both the Chinese and the Arabs--has psychological as well as economic consequences.

The development of a world capitalist economy utterly dominated by, and structured in the interest of, Western Capitalism made the white European civilization (which includes the United States) lord of the earth. And just as the poor whites in the American South were given participation in the ruling class to compensate for a poverty almost as bad as that of the blacks, so entire cultures were permeated by a sense of racial superiority. Workers, and sometimes even radical workers, were infected by this disease: there were labor imperialists in Nineteenth century England; there are Communist, workingclass racists in present-day France; and so on.

This racist consciousness is not genetically or culturally "inherent;" but it is a historic product which has taken on a life of its own. Therefore, the triumph of socialist movements in Europe or the United States would not necessarily put an end to racism within those societies or between them and the Third World. Such a victory would create the optimum framework for the struggle against that racism--but a specifically anti-racist struggle would still be required. That is, I think, a profoundly Marxist point, and it is what I take James Cone to be saying.

Thirdly, Cone comments that "in every European socialist society I have seen, including Cuba, the elimination of capitalism has not eliminated racism." This raises one of the most hotly debated questions in the modern history of Marxism: the nature of Communist (capital C Communist societies). Those countries--the Soviet Union, Cuba, Eastern Europe--are certainly not capitalist. The bourgeoisie has been eliminated; private property in the means of production has been abolished; and so forth. But does post-capitalism equate with socialism? I think not. One of the momentous facts of late Twentieth century life is that there is not one, but two, alternatives to capitalism. Both are collectivist, one is democratic, the other is authoritarian or totalitarian.

For a Marxist, I would argue, socialism is not collectivism but collectivism of, by and for the working people. In a society where the state owns the means of production, the decisive question is, who owns the state? There is only one way for the people to "own" the state which owns the means of production: through the fullest and freest right to dictate policies democratically to that state, including the right to reverse decisions and fire personnel. In the absence of democracy in a statified economy, the state bureaucracy takes on class privileges and carries out the function of allocating the surplus product of the society.

Bureaucratic collectivism--which is my name for post-capitalist, non-socialist societies--is a form of class society. In the Soviet



Union, for instance, the ruling class has always been, and still is, disproportionately Russian in ethnic make-up. There is discrimination against the non-Russian, and particularly Third World, nationalities. Therefore, I would amend Cone's statement, broaden it. It is not only wrong to assume that the elimination of capitalism ends racism; it is also wrong to think that the elimination of capitalism automatically gives rise to socialism.

I have, it is clear, only raised some points with regard to this very important contribution to the dialogue between the Marxists and the black church. It is clear that James Cone's essay is the beginning of a beginning, and I am hopeful that the Institute for Democratic Socialism will be a significant actor in this important process.



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