

CHAPTER

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION



Any discussion that attempts to assay the beginnings of radical Black historiography and intends to assess the significance of that tradition must take into account two figures: W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James. Du Bois, being the older (he was born in 1868), will be accorded pride of place.

Du Bois and the Myths of National History

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was one of the finest historians ever developed in the United States. The writing of history, though, was but one of his achievements. Though excruciatingly shy, he combined statesmanship and political activism with scholarship. In this way he managed to influence the lives and thoughts of legions. And notwithstanding the rigors of research he found the time to inaugurate the systematic development of Black Studies; to found and edit for more than twenty years, *The Crisis*, the most influential Black political journal of its time; to command the intellectual leadership of the American Black movement; to catalyze the development of Pan-Africanism; and at the end of his days, to assume a role of leadership in the post-World War II peace movement. These, however, were merely the outlines of a complex life that extended over more than ninety years.¹ He was not, though, an entirely benign figure nor was his work consistently accorded the respect it was due. One might conclude that it was the multitude of Du Bois's activities that obscured his significance as a historian. But, as we shall see, it was not his range that was at issue

with his detractors. The opposition to Du Bois was grounded on deeper reservations: the recognition that his work had origins independent of the impulses of Western liberal and radical thought. Thus, when his contribution to the American historical tradition should have been celebrated by its historians and scholars, the reaction of the academy was often vilification and neglect. And when he should have been recognized as one of the deans of radical historiography—in his seventh decade he became one of the two most sophisticated Marxist theorists in America²—the orthodox and “authorized” intellectuals accused him of Marxian heresies, racial chauvinism, and flawed conceptualization. There were, however, much more historic reasons for the intolerance found toward Du Bois’s works. These reasons can only be identified and understood by a review and analysis of the historical, intellectual, and ideological contexts from which they arose.

It is by now generally understood that the formation of nation-states and political reigns precipitate the development of founding myths—myths of origin, in the language of anthropologists.³ Though the process may have been obscured by time in more distant eras, the emergences of the bourgeoisies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made it explicit. Their use of print and press, their appeals to and seductions of the classes they wished to dominate, made the fabrication of national myths quite evident. These myths were to be recognized in the official instruments of class hegemony: national creeds, social ideologies, philosophical tenets, constitutions, and the like, their function was to legitimate the social orders that had come into being. These myths made the new order a necessary one, an inevitable and benevolent event. They indicated to the national populace that the strains of historical novelty, the insecurities and anxieties accompanying the break with established forms were temporary, that change was natural, organic, and right. Founding myths were substituted for history, providing the appearance of historical narrative to what was in actuality part fact and part class-serving rationales. Endlessly elaborated, these myths were produced by ideologues who identified with the dominant creed and depended upon those classes in the society that possessed power and the capacities to extend social privilege.⁴

The formation of the American state provided no exception. The American Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the considerations raised in the Federalist Papers were all expressions of the interests and creed of the American bourgeoisie.⁵ Soon they were to be augmented by the myths of Frontier, the paternal Plantation, the competitive capitalism of the Yankee, the courage of the Plainsman, and later supplemented by the tragedy of the War between the States, the Rugged Individual, the excitement of the American Industrial Revolution, the generosity of the Melting Pot. Such were the romantic fictions that came to constitute the social ideology of the nation’s bourgeoisie.⁶ There was, though, an even older mythology, one that preceded the development of an American bourgeoisie with its nationalist sentiments and war of independence. Colonialism in America had required a different rationale: the Savage. Conveniently, as we have seen in the previous chapter, English colonialism had had available to it the savagery of the Irish to draw upon. The notion had traveled

well. When the need was for labor, the Irish, the poor of the metropole's cities, the African and the native American were comfortably herded together under the notion of savagery. When the issue had been the expropriation of the lands of the natives, there was little cause to respect the claims of savages or to comprehend their resistance as anything more than savagery.⁷ Indeed, colonial thought expected quite the opposite. The colonists were the "advanced civilization." Such societies proved their historical significance by the destruction or domination of savage and backward peoples.

Eventually, of course, the ideologies of the pre-bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie had fused. As the systems of manufacturing, plantation slavery, and farming had closed together into an integrated national economy sharing the exploitation of land, labor, and natural resources, the social ideology and historical consciousness of the ruling classes acquired two domestic enemies, the Indian and the Negro. In the early nineteenth century, the destruction of the native savage and the domination of the imported one became dual proofs of the superiority of the new nation. And once the native American peoples became incapable of resistance, they were further transformed and trivialized, becoming the romantic residue of an archaic past, living museum pieces.⁸ For the Negro, however, it was a different story.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the African remained a substantial labor force for the further development of the country. As a consequence, the political, social, and cultural significance of the African was more enduring. This meant, as Craven suggests in the following example from seventeenth-century Virginia, that the efforts taken to resolve the opposition of the Black in American thought were so often deliberate and constant that they remained obvious and conscious:

The crude humor with which shipmasters or purchasers drew upon ancient history or mythology for the names of Caesar, Hannibal, Nero, Jupiter, Pluto, or Minerva; the *Primus* and *Secundus* who headed one list; and the use more than once of Ape or Monkey for a name records principally an all-too-prevalent attitude of the white toward the black.⁹

During the era that followed, when manufacturing became the most advanced form of production and democratic institutions the most significant political creed, the African was represented as chattel in their economic image, as slaves in their political and social image, as brutish and therefore inaccessible to further development, and finally as Negro, that is without history. And later, during the industrialization of the country's economy, when individuality and manipulative acumen were at a premium, the Black was a pathetic sharecropper, unskilled and unambitious—the "happy darkies" for whom the society possessed a paternalistic obligation. Finally, in our own time, with the development of corporate structures and the myth of the intensively rationalized and rational society, Blacks became the irrational, the violent, criminal, caged beast. The cage was civilization and Western culture, obviously available to Blacks but inexplicably beyond their grasp.¹⁰

Black historiography developed in opposition to this cloned thought and sen-

sibility in American consciousness. This was not the intention. Nor, in its beginnings, did it seem likely, since the first efforts at writing the history of the race had occurred some decades after the ending of the ennobling literature that had accompanied the abolition movement. With the Emancipation signed, there was no longer a demand for historical excursions into the Negro's African past to substantiate their humanity and its irresistible degradation by slavery. The noble savage had ceased to have a function. But reconstruction had rekindled the ideological attack on Black people. Sixty years after the assault had been renewed, Du Bois would unhesitatingly designate its source:

The real frontal attack on Reconstruction, as interpreted by the leaders of national thought in 1870 and for some time thereafter, came from the universities and particularly from Columbia and Johns Hopkins.

The movement began with Columbia University and with the advent of John W. Burgess of Tennessee and William A. Dunning of New Jersey as professors of political science and history.¹¹

Their collective judgment of Black people, their "silence and contempt" as Du Bois characterized it, became American history. And since men such as these were also intimately involved in the construction of the nation's agenda for the academic study of its political processes and structures, their shared assessment of Blacks was also a prescription:

In order to paint the South as a martyr to inescapable fate, to make the North the magnanimous emancipator, and to ridicule the Negro as the impossible joke in the whole development, we have in fifty years, by libel, innuendo and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it is almost unknown. . . . It is not only part foundation of our present lawlessness and loss of democratic ideals it has, more than that, led the world to embrace and worship the color bar as social salvation and it is helping to range mankind in ranks of mutual hatred and contempt, at the summons of a cheap and false myth.¹²

The stakes had been high during the decades of the post bellum. As Thomas Rainboro had seen it in England's convulsive seventeenth century, the question posed in the years following the American Civil War was "Either poverty must use democracy to destroy the power of property, or property in fear of poverty will destroy democracy."¹³ As ideologues for both victorious northern industrial capital and a now chastened southern agrarian capital, the white intelligentsia—academician and otherwise—reweave social and historical legends that accommodated the exploitative projects of those ruling classes. The political consciousness of Black labor, white labor, and immigrant labor were to be smothered by the social discipline implicit in the legends. Complemented by the terror of state militias, company police, and security agents, the persistent threats of immigration controls, the swelling ranks of reserve labor, racialism was reattired so that it might once again take its place among

the inventory of labor disciplines. Driven by the necessity to respond quickly to the rush of working-class mobilizations following the war, capital and its ideologues had not dallied:

In the year 1877, the signals were given for the rest of the century: the black would be put back; the strikes of white workers would not be tolerated; the industrial and political elites of North and South would take hold of the country and organize the greatest march of economic growth in human history. They would do it with the aid of, and at the expense of, black labor, white labor, Chinese labor, European immigrant labor, female labor, rewarding them differently by race, sex, national origin, and social class, in such a way as to create separate levels of oppression—a skillfull terracing to stabilize the pyramid of wealth.¹⁴

This new repression of Black labor was the immediate cause and the circumstance of the profusion of protest materials produced by the Black intelligentsia in the last decades of the nineteenth century. And Black history was their desperate invention.

Stunned by the suddenness of the reversal of both their own fortunes and those of the Black masses, the most representative spokesmen of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* responded with the journalistic and literary eloquence that they believed had so well served them and the slaves in previous eras. While the Black masses organized—sometimes secretly but increasingly openly, to protect their political rights, and then when they were lost, in order to emigrate to the American hinterlands or to Liberia—the Black intelligentsia remained wedded to the tactics of supplication. These representative colored men, as Painter has characterized them,¹⁵ insisted on the identity they presumed to share with their white, class counterparts. As the editor of a Black newspaper in San Francisco had declared in 1862, as far as he could see Black Americans were “moved by the same impulses, guided by the same motives, and [had] the same Yankee-like go-aheadativeness of the white Americans.”¹⁶ Like many others of his station, he begged his audience’s indulgence for being Black and thus obscuring his truer colors. Still it was a most disheartening period for many of them. They worked hard in their newspapers, pamphlets, their public lectures and Congressional appearances at establishing their Americanism, only to be rebuffed out of hand by the nation’s dominant ideologues.¹⁷

Inevitably, it had occurred to some members of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* that their disadvantage in the ideological fray lay in part with their failure to engage the American legend. In the midst of a country whose ideationists were desperately attempting to forge a historically grounded national identity, their lot was reduced to an identification with the horror with which slavery had been concluded. In an America that was now being reconstituted by its ideologues on the mantle of a Manifest Destiny presumably inherited from its European origins,¹⁸ the Black intelligentsia had a historical basis that was too shallow to support their demand to be included in the nation’s destinies. Legend as history denied to them that right and, as well, their capabilities.¹⁹ The aspirations of the Black middle class required a history that would, at once, absolve their guilt by association with the catastrophic ending of

slavery; lend historical weight to the dignity they claimed as a class; and suggest their potential as participants in the country's future. They required a Black historiography that would challenge their exclusion from the nation's racial parochialisms while settling for those very values. When their historiography did begin, it was not so much a bold initiative against the certainties of nationalist and racist histories as a plea for sympathy.

Black history thus began in the shadow of the national myths and as their dialectical negation. Consequently, it contained its own contradictions (e.g., the trivialization of social action) while enveloping those that occurred within the dominant American history. Generations later it would give rise to a more critical and truer opposition, but for the time being, it was to match American history in the coin of the realm; monument for monument, civilization for civilization, great man for great man. George Washington Williams, the first of the major Afro-American historians, left no doubt about these concerns.²⁰ In 1882, Williams had published his mammoth classic, *A History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*; it consisted of two volumes totalling almost 1,100 pages. One may have already surmised that despite his titular boundaries, Williams had not confined himself to the events that began in the seventeenth century. Indeed, like many of his contemporary spokesmen,²¹ he had found it appropriate to begin his search into the past by reviewing the role of Africans in the pre-Christian eras when "Western civilization," owing its immediate stimulus to Egyptian culture, had been centered around the Mediterranean. The contrast between these eras, the apogee in Williams's mind of African development, and the centuries of Negro enslavement that followed two millennia later, provided him with the opportunity to enunciate his beliefs:

His [the Negro's] position, it is true, in all history up to the present day, has been accidental, incidental and collateral. . . . His brightest days were when history was an infant; and since he early turned from God, he has found the cold face of hate and the hurtful hand of the Caucasian against him. The Negro type is the result of degradation. It is nothing more than the lowest strata of the African race. . . . His blood infected with the poison of his low habitation, his body shrivelled by disease, his intellect veiled in pagan superstitions, the noblest yearnings of his soul strangled at birth by the savage passions of a nature abandoned to sensuality,—the poor Negro of Africa deserves more our pity than our contempt.²²

The confusion in Williams's thought was real. He wrote from both a Puritanical perspective with its echoes of God's election, but was, as well, mindful of the racist nature of his people's degradation and oppression. But in the latter, he was again perversely diverted since his resolve to write a "true history of the Black man" stemmed from his wish to "incite the latter to greater effort in the struggle of citizenship and manhood." While attacking the most extreme ideological forms that hatred of Blacks had assumed ("sons of Ham," the "curse of Canaan") and while denouncing the institution of slavery, he still demonstrated a certain ambivalence. Tacit but un-

spoken, of course, was the notion that only a Black elite could realize the task of Negro resurrection.²³

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the ideological construction of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* had achieved its maturity. The tendency of the Black intelligentsia toward an elitist consciousness of race—a synthesis of Eurocentric racism and the preoccupation with imperial political forms—had achieved its broadest and most articulate expression. The social, and concomitant psychological and intellectual processes of the formation of a Black middle class begun in the eighteenth century had, by then, obtained an extensive and objective configuration.²⁴ No longer retarded by the political and economic structure of slavery and its hegemonic envelopments, freed from the moral compulsion of social identification with the Black peasantry and peons by the slaves' counterfeit freedom,²⁵ the ambitions of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* found realization in institutions consciously designed by themselves and sponsors for class's maintenance and augmentation.²⁶ With their position as a broker stratum seemingly secured from above by a ruling class that proffered them increments of privilege while ruthlessly repressing mass Black mobilization,²⁷ the ideological restraint that had been so much a part of the character of the class's earlier generations became less evident. The Black *petit bourgeoisie* could now indulge in the delusion of being capable of challenging the capitalist world system on what they took to be its own terms: race power.²⁸ The political ideology that emerged from their "Negro" universities and colleges, the pulpits above their denominationally stratified congregations, their professional associations, their creative literature, and their historiography was persistently mystically chauvinist,²⁹ authoritarian, and paternalistic. From the post-Reconstruction on into the next century, the logic of the formation of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* and its intelligentsia was building to these conclusions. As Jeremiah Moses argues:

It was becoming apparent to the post-bellum generation of black leaders that individual accomplishments offered little protection from the threats and abuses of the caste-like American system. The middle class Negroes would remain victims of prejudice, so long as the masses remained untutored, impoverished, and demoralized. The goal of uplifting the freedmen was similar to the goal of uplifting Africa, and was to be carried on for the same purposes as the old antebellum African civilizationism. The building of an Afro-American culture would demonstrate to all the world that blacks were able and willing to make a contribution to American life, and were, therefore, fit to be United States citizens. As the masses were elevated, the bourgeoisie would rise correspondingly.³⁰

These were the purposes that inspired Bishop David A. Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) to form the Bethel Literary and Historical Association in 1881,³¹ which in 1897 was incorporated into the American Negro Academy by its founder, the Black Presbyterian Cambridge-trained missionary, Alexander Crummell;³² which complemented the studied feminism of the National Association of

Colored Women (formerly the National Federation of Afro-American Women) catalyzed into being by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Margaret Murray Washington and others in 1895;³³ and provided a specific martial character to some Negro colleges.³⁴ Inevitably, spokesmen were driven to cosmetic excess: William Ferris declared that he preferred “Negrosaxon” to Negro, while Boston’s mulatto elite appropriated “Afro-American” to itself, and earlier, William C. Nell had employed “Black Saxons,”³⁵ but Crummell saw no need for equivocation. For him, the identity, function, and nature of their class were obvious:

Who are to be the agents to raise and elevate this people to a higher plane of beings? The answer will at once flash upon your intelligence. It is to be affected (*sic*) by the scholars and philanthropists which come forth in these days from the schools. *They* are to be the scholars; for to transform, stimulate and uplift a people is a work of intelligence. It is a work which demands the clear induction of historic facts and their application to new circumstances,—a work which will require the most skillful resources and the wise practicality of superior men.³⁶

According to W. J. Moses, it was Crummell who initiated the synthesis of his class’s interests into a coherent ideology.³⁷ But it was others, I would suggest, like George W. Williams and Carter G. Woodson who codified it into a historiographic expression negating the national legend.³⁸ Still, what they achieved was but a fragile construction, its integrity subject to challenge whenever capitalist indulgence, the foundation upon which it rested, might dissipate or be withdrawn. Mercifully, perhaps, it was also true that the possibility of this occurring was beyond the comprehension of most of them. Neither Social Darwinism nor their comfortable gospels suggested anything but the most temporary diversions as possible. When the crisis did come and Black people mobilized to struggle against it, the Black petit bourgeoisie was again largely unprepared to abandon their illusory partnership with power. Du Bois, like his predecessors and contemporaries, William Brown, Carter Woodson, Bishop Henry Turner, George Williams, and the West Indian-born Edward Wilmot Blyden,³⁹ had been deeply implicated in the “race uplift” historiographic tradition.

Du Bois was among the forty black intellectuals enlisted in the American Negro Academy of which Crummell was the first president. In the Academy’s *Occasional Papers*, Du Bois published his Crummellian essay, “The Conservation of Races,” showing that he was hardly out of step with the conservative Crummell during his years with the American Negro Academy. . . . The classical black nationalist traits of mysticism, authoritarianism, civilizationism and collectivism were strong elements in “The Conservation of Races.” Du Bois called upon the Academy to exercise a firm leadership and to become “the epitome and expression of the intellect of the black-blooded people of America.” The black leaders were not to organize for such mundane purposes as the stealing of political spoils, nor “merely to protest and pass resolutions.” Black leadership should be united in its efforts to improve the black masses, to fight against loafing, gambling, crime, and prostitution . . . to

strive for "the rearing of a race ideal in America and Africa, to the glory of God and the uplifting of the Negro people."⁴⁰

In the earliest phase of his career, under the direct influence of Crummell, the Academy, and the omnipresent organizational politics of Booker T. Washington, Du Bois had found the notion of an elite, a Talented Tenth, appealing:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.⁴¹

At the time he saw the difference between his design and that of Washington as quite significant. In time, he knew better. In his last autobiography, written in the "last decades of his 95 years," he made it clear that in the intervening years he had come to recognize that the differences between them were insignificant when compared to what they did not comprehend. Their dispute was not over ideology but power:

I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted. . . . Mr. Washington, on the other hand, believed that the Negro as an efficient worker could gain wealth and that eventually through his ownership of capital he would be able to achieve a recognized place in American culture. . . . [H]e proposed to put the emphasis at present upon training in the skilled trades and encouragement in industry and common labor.

These two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory. Neither I nor Booker Washington understood the nature of capitalistic exploitation of labor, and the necessity of a direct attack on the principle of exploitation as the beginning of labor uplift.⁴²

What Du Bois did resent, more and more, was the power that enveloped Washington and circulated through his fingers:

Not only did presidents of the United States consult Booker T. Washington, but governors and congressmen; philanthropists conferred with him, scholars wrote to him. Tuskegee became a vast information bureau and center of advice. . . . After a time almost no Negro institution could collect funds without the recommendation or acquiescence of Mr. Washington. Few political appointments of Negroes were made anywhere in the United States without his consent. Even the careers of rising young colored men were very often determined by his advice and certainly his opposition was fatal. . . .

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that his Tuskegee Machine was not solely the idea and activity of black folk at Tuskegee. It was largely encouraged and given

financial aid through certain white groups and individuals in the North. This Northern group had clear objectives. They were capitalists and employers of labor. . . . These Negroes were not to be encouraged as voters in the new democracy, nor were they to be left at the mercy of the reactionary South. They were good laborers and they could be made of tremendous profit to the North. They could become a strong labor force and properly guided they would restrain the unbridled demands of white labor, born of the Northern labor unions and now spreading to the South and encouraged by European socialism.⁴³

It was not entirely the case, as Lawrence Reddick suggested in 1937,⁴⁴ that the “uplift” tradition from which Du Bois would eventually emerge possessed a deeply ingrained naivete. It would appear that the major part of its obtuseness resulted from the masks of deception behind which the struggle over power within the Black petit bourgeoisie was taking place. It was not merely an etiquette of intra-class divisions that made deception necessary.⁴⁵ The material stakes were high: in 1903, for example, Andrew Carnegie had extended a gift of \$600,000 to Tuskegee.⁴⁶ Most significantly, however, the Black petit bourgeoisie was bound by a class strategy that narrowed their political range: the protests of the masses of Blacks could not be allowed to move beyond a diffuse state but at the same time must give the appearance of racial solidarity. The premium for which Du Bois challenged Washington was power not leadership. It was, however, the nature and setting of this struggle that propelled Du Bois beyond the accepted parameters of intra-class conflict.

The radicalization of Du Bois took place during a historical period characterized by a reintensification of the suppression of Blacks in the United States and the subsequent massive Black response. In the South and the Midwest, the Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, spurred by the conversion crisis of world capitalism and with its third-party aspirations built around an alliance between white and Black farmers/peasants and organized labor, had once again mobilized the Black masses.⁴⁷ Legal and illegal violence, election corruption, and a renewed emphasis on white supremacy were the combined responses of the ruling classes, industrial and planter, which orchestrated state and federal power and the instruments of propaganda.⁴⁸ Electoral restrictions stripping poor Blacks and whites from the vote were enacted in several states; lynchings accelerated (with the number of Black victims surpassing that of whites in 1889); and the Populist movement was transformed into a shambles by the unleashing of racial maneuvers.⁴⁹ The most dramatic response of the Black masses was migration. And when the cycle of drought, then heavy rains and the boll weevil vermin decimated cotton production in the years of 1915 and 1916 was combined with war industry and the cessation of European immigration, the migration of the Black masses became the Great Migration:

[E]arly migrations were dwarfed by the surge of black people northward after 1900, and especially after 1910. According to various contemporaneous estimates, between 1890 and 1910 around 200,000 black Southerners fled to the North; and between 1910 and 1920 another 300,000 to 1,000,000 followed. The Department of

Labor reported that in eighteen months of 1916–17 the migration was variously estimated at 200,000 to 700,000.⁵⁰

A Black presence in the northern industrial sectors of the country became a new fact of the American experience.⁵¹

The most important consequence of these mass mobilizations, that is both the short-lived alliance with the agrarian rebellion of Populism and the urban migration, was that they amounted to a visible renunciation of the Black petit bourgeoisie's "leadership" by the Black peasantry. Hundreds of thousands of Blacks demonstrated that they were no longer willing to tolerate the social and economic insecurities of living in the rural South, to work in semi-slavery as the nation's cheapest labor, and to perish under the dual oppressions of the racist patronage of the white southern ruling class and the class opportunism of an ambitious and presumptuous Black petit bourgeoisie. It is not surprising, then, that in these circumstances some members of the Black middle class should discover in this an occasion for renouncing those among them who dominated their class's political and historical vision. In the same act, these renegades were drawn into the orbit of the masses of Blacks and the radical tradition. William Monroe Trotter, Du Bois's Harvard classmate, preceded him in this realization, and within the nexus of the Niagara Movement, begun in 1905, certainly disciplined Du Bois in this new militancy. Trotter, more than any other single individual, was responsible for transforming Du Bois from a cautious critic to a militant activist.⁵² It was Du Bois, however, who by temperament, training, and experience would be capable of bringing this revolt to fruition; as his work certifies, it was to build in his intellect slowly, ineluctably. The evidence of his development was to be apparent from his evocation of the militancy of *John Browns*⁵³ published in 1909; through his short essay with the socialist movement,⁵⁴ his analysis of the imperialist basis of the Great War;⁵⁵ his reactions to Bolshevik Russia;⁵⁶ and the frustrations and compromises suffered as a race advocate operating in the national and international arenas of "bourgeois democratic politics" responsive to only one racial consciousness: white superiority.⁵⁷ By the time the most profound crisis in the history of world capitalism occurred, Du Bois was consciously divorced from the legend as well as its permutations.

Du Bois and the Reconstruction of History and American Political Thought

In 1935, Du Bois published his third historical work on the economic forces and ideological dynamics that gave nineteenth-century America its character. Unlike the two previous studies, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade* and *John Brown*, which were more conventional in narrative and analysis, *Black Reconstruction in America* possessed a theory of history—a theory based on a foundation of economic analysis and class struggle.⁵⁸ It was not simply a historical work, but history subjected to theory. The emphasis was on the relations of things.

Du Bois, however, had not neglected the play of history, its scenario. He had intended to—and did—trace the critical phenomenology of the American Civil War and its aftermath, the Reconstruction. From his research there emerged a fundamentally revised construction of those periods that stood as a critique of American historiography with its racial biases, domineering regionalisms, and distorting philosophical commitments. Methodologically, moreover, *Black Reconstruction* possessed a rigor consciously designed to match and supersede Ulrich B. Phillips's earlier "classic" work on slavery, *American Negro Slavery*. Du Bois, in his attempt to authoritatively identify what he took to be the truer character of the Reconstruction era, seems to have realized the necessity of returning to the experience and training in historical research and writing he had gathered at Harvard University and the University of Berlin in the late nineteenth century but had eschewed in *John Brown*. His radical, and radically different interpretation of the war and its aftermath would conform formally to the methodological canons of historiography so that he might subvert the substance of that tradition.

Black Reconstruction, however, was more the result of another purpose, a concern that was quite different from the task of historical revision. Du Bois committed himself to the development of a theory of history, which by its emphasis on mass action was both a critique of the ideologies of American socialist movements and a revision of Marx's theory of revolution and class struggle. From the integument of America's Civil War and the Reconstruction, Du Bois attempted to identify the unique character of mass praxis, class consciousness, ideology, and contradiction as they had occurred in the dialectics of American social and historical developments. In so doing, he was going beyond the argument of American "exceptionalism" that had persisted in the ideology of the American Marxist Left.⁵⁹ He was seeking to identify historically and analytically the processes that during the Depression years had given American social dynamics their character and potentialities.

Ultimately, *Black Reconstruction* was a political work. In the confrontation with the nationalist and reactionary American intelligentsia at the level of historiography, in the confrontation with the political Left in terms of the theory of capitalism and the ideology of emergent socialism, Du Bois presumed to alert and instruct revolutionary Black leadership.

With regard to these several concerns, he had made his position quite clear in 1933—a period coincident with the writing of *Black Reconstruction*—in a remarkable lecture delivered before the participants of a Rosenwald Fund-sponsored conference at Howard University. Addressing himself to the role played by the American intellectual elite, Du Bois had argued:

If we give Mr. Roosevelt the right to meddle with the dollar, if we give Herr Hitler the right to expel the Jew, if we give to Mussolini the right to think for Italians, we do this because we know nothing ourselves. We are as a nation ignorant of the function and meaning of money, and we are looking around helplessly to see if anybody else knows.

This is not, as some assume, the failure of democracy—it is the failure of education, of justice and of truth. We have lied so long about money and business, we do not know now where truth is.⁶⁰

Unequivocally, Du Bois was associating the failure of the American nation to achieve an effective policy in the midst of the Depression with “the fact that it has no intelligent democracy. . . .” This, he believed, was a consequence of the ideological deceptions and misconceptions that characterized liberal American thought. Turning to the American Left, Du Bois was no less critical. Of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), Du Bois declared:

The task that I have recently been setting myself is to blunt the wedge the Communist party is driving into our group . . . and I do this, not because of any enmity or fear or essential disagreement with the Communists. If I were in Russia, I should be an enthusiastic Communist. If the Communist party in the United States had the leadership and knowledge which our situation calls for, I certainly should join it; but it is today ignorant of fact and history and the American scene and is trying to over-emphasize the truth that the natural leaders of the colored people, the educated and trained classes have had goals and interests different from the mass of Negroes.

There is a partial truth in this, and a partial falsehood. . . . American race prejudice has so pounded the mass of Negroes together that they have not separated into such economic classes; but on the other hand they undoubtedly have had the ideology and if they had been free we would have had within our race the same exploiting set-up that we see around about us.⁶¹

Immersed in research into post-Civil War “labor history,” Du Bois was conscious of the problems that had beset mass movements bringing together whites and Blacks—problems that he felt spokesmen for Communism ignored.⁶² Though now clearly ambivalent toward the Black petit bourgeoisie, he was still relying on the notion of racial solidarity (imposed from without) to defend his class from attacks from the Left. But by now Du Bois had begun to temper his own “Talented Tenth” program of social mobilization. At the conference he seemed mildly distressed with the “vanguardism” with which he had been earlier identified. In point of fact he had appeared to reverse his position. The Black elite of which he had been so optimistic in its “natural” function of leadership of the Black masses was now understood to be ideologically reactionary, a lesson he was learning within the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.⁶³ This question of ideology and its impact on human motives and social relations would become a dominant theme of *Black Reconstruction*. But here, its immediate significance was its toll on Du Bois’s thinking. It had forced him to reassess the Black masses and their revolutionary significance. He had at last begun to form a committed response to the indictment of the Black middle class and its intelligentsia, which the recent events of the late 1920s and early 1930s represented: the emergence of the mass movement, the Universal Negro Improvement

Association; the formation of the militant nationalists into the African Blood Brotherhood; and the Scottsboro debacle, which pitted the conservative NAACP against the Communist Party's International Labor Defense.⁶⁴ In accord with his criticisms of the American Communist Party, Du Bois was addressing himself directly to the problem of the alienation of the Black elite from the Black masses. He did this in part by reminding that elite, subtly, of its dependence upon the masses.⁶⁵ Yet he still had not himself reached the level of historical comprehension that he would demonstrate in *Black Reconstruction*. There he would come to a realization of the historical forces emergent from the people, specifically the capacities of the Black masses to take steps decisive to their own liberation.

Finally, in the Rosenwald Conference lecture, we find that Du Bois's analysis of the Depression, which international capitalism was experiencing in the 1930s, parallels his analysis of the crisis brought on by slavery in the earlier stage of American capitalist development. Both economically and politically, the Depression and the crisis of slavery would fundamentally transform the mode of capitalist relations. Furthermore, both had precipitated revolutionary movements and revolutionary social change.⁶⁶

[T]he matter of greatest import is that instead of our facing today a stable world, moving at a uniform rate of progress toward well-defined goals, we are facing revolution. I trust you will not be as scared by this word as you were Thursday [Du Bois was referring to the audience's reaction to a speech by Dr. Broadus Mitchell of Johns Hopkins University]. I am not discussing a coming revolution, I am trying to impress the fact upon you that you are already in the midst of a revolution; you are already in the midst of war; that there has been no war of modern times that has taken so great a sacrifice of human life and human spirit as the extraordinary period through which we are passing today.

Some people envisage revolution chiefly as a matter of blood and guns and the more visible methods of force. But that, after all, is merely the temporary and outward manifestation. Real revolution is within. That comes before or after the explosion—is a matter of long suffering and deprivation, the death of courage and the bitter triumph of despair. This is the inevitable prelude to decisive and enormous change, and that is the thing that is on us now.

We are not called upon then to discuss whether we want revolution or not. We have got it. Our problem is how we are coming out of it.⁶⁷

On review, then, Du Bois had remarked on the weakness of American culture and its political institutions in the face of a deep crisis in its economic structure. He was concerned about the inability of the American Left as represented by the CPUSA—recall he had already tried the American Socialist Party and found it wanting 21 years before this lecture was given—to clearly identify the material force of racism as it related to the Left's struggle to destroy capitalism and replace it with socialism. He had exposed the ahistorical and materialistic ideology that dominated the Black elite and Black leadership. And, finally, he had indicated the failure of American revolu-

tionists to recognize that one of the objective conditions for revolution, one which goes beyond the onslaught of economic crisis and emiseration, is a consciousness of the social processes of revolution.

Du Bois, however, was concerned for why these things had become true for American society in the 1930s. He was interested in determining how it was possible that American culture and its institutions had become so estranged from the democratic ideal with which they had so long been structurally and ideologically identified. Moreover, how was it possible that American socialists could be so ill-equipped to deal with the Black worker, the Black community, and the social relations of Black people? How had the Black elite become wedded ideologically to capitalism and grown alienated and contemptuous of the Black masses? Why was twentieth-century American revolutionary theory so ill-conceived, the revolutionary movement unrecognizable, and revolutionary change and transformation a matter of contingency rather than praxis? He believed the answers to these questions resided in the history of the Republic. More specifically, he pursued them in the contradictions of that history.

Slavery and Capitalism

In the beginning of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois identified the fundamental contradiction in American history; the contradiction that would subvert America's founding ideology, distort its institutions, traumatize its social relations and class formations, and, in the twentieth century, confuse its rebels and revolutionists:

From the day of its birth, the anomaly of slavery plagued a nation which asserted the equality of all men, and sought to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed. Within sound of the voices of those who said this lived more than half a million black slaves, forming nearly one-fifth of the population of a new nation. (p. 3)⁶⁸

It was thus the black worker, as founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world, who brought civil war in America. He was its underlying cause, in spite of every effort to base the strife upon union and national power. (p. 15)

Now let us pay close attention to what Du Bois was saying: slavery was the specific historical institution through which the Black *worker* had been introduced into the modern world system. However, it was not as *slaves* that one could come to an understanding of the significance that these Black men, women, and children had for American development. It was as *labor*. He had entitled the first chapter to *Black Reconstruction*, "The Black Worker."

The terms of his analysis were quite important to Du Bois. They were a part of his beginning of the transformation of the historiography of American civilization—the naming of things. In the changing of the names of things, he sought to provide the basis for a new conceptualization of their relationship. In the first three chapters of his

work, Du Bois established the rules of his analysis. The institution of American slave labor could not be effectively conceptualized as a thing in and of itself. Rather, it was a particular historical development for world capitalism that expropriated the labor of African workers as primitive accumulation. American slavery was a *subsystem* of world capitalism.

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America. (p. 5)

And American slavery would also consist of social relations given their character by the ideology of white racial superiority.

[T]here was in 1863 a real meaning to slavery different from that we may apply to the laborer today. It was in part psychological, the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with hat in hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual. (p. 9)

[The South's] subservient religious leaders reverted to the "curse of Canaan"; [its] pseudo-scientists gathered and supplemented all available doctrines of racial inferiority; [its] scattered schools and pedantic periodicals repeated these legends . . . a basis in reason, philanthropy and science was built up for Negro slavery. (p. 39)

All of this was necessary for the persistence of slavery through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and for its meteoric development in the early nineteenth century. The tissue of the nation would develop, coded by its slave past.

Labor, Capitalism, and Slavery

Du Bois was arguing that once slavery was addressed in comprehensive terms, in world-historical terms, its true nature was revealed. Beneath its appearance as a "feudal agrarianism" lay the real relation of slavery to the emergence of modern capitalism. As America was a critical subsector of this developing system, the conflicts between American creed and reality, the contradictions of American society, the distortions of its social structures and political institutions ensued from its dependence on slavery and would resound throughout the system into the twentieth century.⁶⁹ Slavery, then, was not a historical aberration, it was not a "mistake" in an otherwise bourgeois democratic age. It was, and its imprints continued to be, *systemic*.

Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. Words and futile gestures avail nothing. Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human breasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power

veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black. (p. 16)⁷⁰

In America, “free labor”—the vast majority of it supplied by immigrant Europeans from Ireland, England, Italy, and Germany—was also profoundly affected:

The new labor that came to the United States, while it was poor, used to oppression and accustomed to a low standard of living, was not willing, after it reached America, to regard itself as a permanent laboring class and it is in the light of this fact that the labor movement among white Americans must be studied. The successful, well-paid American laboring class formed, because of its property and ideals, a petty bourgeoisie ready always to join capital in exploiting common labour, white and black, foreign and native. (p. 17)

Eschewing the traditions forming in the European labor movements that would mature into the nineteenth century’s socialisms of the First and Second Internationals, syndicalism and anarchism, the transplanted European workers became preoccupied with the possibility of accumulating wealth and power, of becoming capitalists.

Thus it was that American liberalism in the nineteenth century, with its ideals of individualism and its antagonisms to socialism, became manifest in a particular way. Its character was molded by an economic order that severely delimited material well-being and a racial consciousness that at one and the same time removed an entire section of the working classes, the Blacks, from the possibility of access to that well-being while also supplying a fictive measure of status to non-Black workers.

The wisest of the leaders could not clearly envisage just how slave labor in conjunction and competition with free labor tended to reduce all labor toward slavery. (p. 19)

It was only a minority of these non-Black workers that would join with liberal intellectuals and freedmen to form the abolitionist movement.⁷¹ Du Bois had stated as early as 1915 that the “labor aristocracy” that was the result of the trade unionism of a materialistic labor movement—in Germany, England, and France as well as in the United States—was a crucial support to the imperialism and colonialism of the late nineteenth century.⁷² In the United States, Black and non-Black labor became politically opposed “instead of becoming one great party.” The northern non-Black working-class movement effectively excluded the freedmen, the slaves *and* the five million poor whites of the South. (It was even more specifically exclusionist after 1850 as it concentrated on a base of skilled industrial workers and craftsmen.) But it was a more generalized antagonism that would envelop Black and non-Black workers. During the Civil War itself, this conflict would erupt into race wars against Blacks. With the enactment of the Draft Laws in 1863, and with the encouragement of “pro slavery and pro-Southern” Copperheads from the North, the frustration of the non-Black workers, with their living and working conditions and the war, were turned

against Blacks. In the summer of 1863, hundreds of Blacks were killed by mobs of workers in New York City.

The report of the Merchants' Committee on the Draft Riot says of the Negroes: "Driven by fear of death at the hands of the mob, who the week previous had, as you remember, brutally murdered by hanging on trees and lamp posts, several of their number, and cruelly beaten and robbed many others, burning and sacking their houses, and driving nearly all from the streets, alleys and docks upon which they had previously obtained an honest though humble living—these people had been forced to take refuge on Blackwell's Island, at police stations, on the outskirts of the city, in the swamps and woods back of Bergen, New Jersey, at Weeksville, and in the barns and out-houses of the farmers of Long Island and Morristania." (p. 103)

More than once, in *Black Reconstruction*, in his editorials in *The Crisis*, and other works, Du Bois would return to this period in order to identify the roots of racial violence in the labor movement of the twentieth century. It also provided, he believed, an explanation for the tradition of skepticism found among Blacks for organized labor.

What was true for the mainstream of the American labor movement was also a factor in the radical traditions in the country. Though mid-nineteenth-century socialism had been largely transferred from areas of Europe where antipathies toward Blacks were inconsequential, its adherents, too, had not been capable, generally, of resisting the corrosive influences of slavery. This had been the case for both Marxist and non-Marxist socialists. The precedents established during this period would be of no substantial help to twentieth-century socialists whether their programs directly or indirectly addressed themselves to "the Negro Problem."

Even when the Marxian ideas arrived, there was a split; the earlier representatives of the Marxian philosophy in America agreed with the older Union movement in deprecating any entanglement with the abolition controversy. After all, abolition represented capital. The whole movement was based on mawkish sentimentality, and not on the demands of the workers, at least of the white workers. And so the early American Marxists simply gave up the idea of intruding the black worker into the socialist commonwealth at that time. (pp. 24–25)

Though there had been exceptions,⁷³ the lack of an identity between the interests of Black and non-Black workers was fairly consistent in the labor movement. Wherever one looked—among those who saw the movement in political-electoral terms, or those who advocated revolutionary violence, or those who were committed to economic trade unionism—the labor movement was most often at best ambivalent toward Black liberation and progress. The ideology of racism in combination with self-interest functioned to pit immigrant and poor white workers against the Black worker and the slave. And after the Civil War, the same social consciousness divided the working classes—immigrant and white—from the ex-slave. More than twenty

years before the appearance of *Black Reconstruction*, and while his experience with the Socialist Party was still fresh in his mind, Du Bois had recognized this as a contradiction in the labor movement.⁷⁴ And during the intervening years, his anger had not dissipated. When it reappeared in *Black Reconstruction*, it was no longer simply a warning to a negligent labor movement, but an indictment. By then, the labor movement and capitalism were older and in deep crisis. By then, Du Bois spoke as a Black radical:

Indeed, the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded, and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863. The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world's laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression. And this book seeks to tell that story. (p. 30)

Slavery and Democracy

We have already noted how the idea of slavery, to Du Bois's mind, was opposed to the ideals of democracy. The ideology necessary to rationalize slavery disallowed the further development of liberal democracy except as a myth. But Du Bois understood that the relationship between slavery and democracy was not a question of the clash of ideas. His approach to history was similar in this respect to that which Marx and Engels had presented in *The German Ideology*:

This conception of history . . . comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into "self-consciousness" or transformation into "apparitions," "spectres," "fancies," etc., but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to this idealistic humbug.⁷⁵

For Du Bois, the creation of those political institutions and structures identified with American democracy involved congruence with the country's economic character, that is, with the slave system and capitalism. And so, though the American Constitution reflected the power of the plantocracy only in its devices for electoral representation, that had been sufficient advantage for the domination of the federal government by that class during the Republic's first several decades. This had meant a domination by a class that consisted of 7 percent of the South's population:

It had in American history chosen eleven out of sixteen Presidents, seventeen out of twenty-eight Judges of the Supreme Court, fourteen out of nineteen Attorneys-General, twenty-one out of thirty-three Speakers of the House, eighty out of one hundred thirty-four Foreign Ministers. (p. 47)

Consequent to this power, the plantocracy had established a legal structure that effectively eliminated the civil rights of the nine million Black and poor white workers to be found in the South in the mid-nineteenth century. This perversion of the apparatus of representative democracy had survived the Civil War and the Reconstruction, and had persisted into the next century despite the challenges of Populism, organized labor, political radicalism, the Depression, and the mass Black movement of the UNIA.⁷⁶ Federalism had evolved into states' rights, the ideological dressing for first, slavery, and then the Black Codes, Jim Crow, and more contemporary forms of repression. Each shift in the apparatus of repression had been associated with the changing forms of exploitation as Blacks moved from being slaves to being sharecroppers and peons, and finally, to being proletariats or a labor reserve.

In the North, "the dictatorship of property" had been manifest in capital and investment. Not as rich or as powerful as the plantocrats in the beginning, the northern merchants, manufacturers, and industrialists had developed on the backs of southern agriculture and European labor. The North exploited its labor more efficiently, not having to absorb the costs of developing it during its nonproductive years. Those costs were incurred by the socioeconomic sectors of Ireland, Germany, Italy, and England. The North supplied the middlemen between the South and its European and domestic markets; it supplied the shipping and transportation for the South's produce. It was also in the process of developing a national economy of total integration before the Civil War, while the South was becoming increasingly dependent.

In the world market, the merchants and manufacturers had all the advantages of unity, knowledge, and purpose, and could hammer down the price of raw material. The slaveholder, therefore, saw Northern merchants and manufacturers enrich themselves from the results of Southern agriculture (p. 41). His capitalistic rivals of the North were hard-working, simple-living zealots devoting their whole energy and intelligence to building up an industrial system. They quickly monopolized transport and mines and factories and they were more than willing to include the big plantations. . . . The result was that Northern and European industry set prices for Southern cotton, tobacco and sugar which left a narrow margin of profit for the planter. (p. 37)

Capital, both industrial and financial, continued to grow until the northern industrialists could challenge the political power of the plantocrats. And while it grew, it too undermined the structures of democracy:

The North had yielded to democracy, but only because democracy was curbed by a dictatorship of property and investment which left in the hands of the leaders of industry such economic power as insured their mastery and their profits. Less than this they knew perfectly well they could not yield, and more than this they would not. (p. 46)

Once the industrial class emerged as dominant in the nation, it possessed not only its own basis of power and the social relations historically related to that power, but it

also had available to it the instruments of repression created by the now subordinate southern ruling class. In its struggle with labor, it could activate racism to divide the labor movement into antagonistic forces. Moreover, the permutations of the instrument appeared endless: Black against white; Anglo-Saxon against southern and eastern European; domestic against immigrant; proletariat against share-cropper; white American against Asian, Black, Latin American, and so on.

Reconstruction and the Black Elite

One of the most revealing aspects of *Black Reconstruction* was Du Bois's assessment of the Black petit bourgeoisie, that element of Black society with which he had been most closely associated for most of his then 67 years. For the first time in his public pronouncements, he was resolved to expose the extent to which his beloved elite, through the logic of its own development, had moved apart from the Black masses. As he reckoned it, the process of bourgeoisification and alienation that had begun during slavery had not revealed its contradiction until the Reconstruction. Suddenly, the petit bourgeoisie were confronted with the political expression of Black labor:

The difference that now came was that an indefinitely larger number of Negroes than ever before was enfranchised suddenly, and 99 percent of them belonged to the laboring class, whereas by law the Negroes who voted in the early history of the country were for the most part property holders, and prospective if not actual constituents of a petty bourgeoisie. (p. 350)

Still, during these first heady days following the Emancipation and the ending of the Civil War, the Black petit bourgeoisie had presumed to lead. Quite soon, however, its ideological and political vacuity had begun to be apparent, its leadership nominal and at its best mere mediation between the demands of the Black masses and the power of the ruling classes:

When freedom came, this mass of Negro labor was not without intelligent leadership, and a leadership which because of former race prejudice and the present Color Line, could not be divorced from the laboring mass, as had been the case with the poor whites. . . . Free Negroes from the North, most of whom had been born in the South and knew conditions, came back in considerable numbers during Reconstruction, and took their place as leaders. The result was that the Negroes were not, as they are sometimes painted, simply a mass of densely ignorant toilers. . . .

It was, however, a leadership which was not at all clear in its economic thought. On the whole, it believed in the accumulation of wealth and the exploitation of labor as the normal method of economic development. But it also believed in the right to vote as the basis and defense of economic life, and gradually but surely it was forced by the demand of the mass of Negro laborers to face the problem of land. Thus the Negro leaders gradually but certainly turned toward emphasis on economic emancipation. (pp. 350–51)

Inevitably, however, even these tenuous links between the elite strata and Black labor had disintegrated. Du Bois now believed he understood the forces that had made a mockery of the racial solidarity that had been the elite's evangelism.

First there was the ambivalence of the Black petit bourgeoisie:

The Negro's own black leadership was naturally of many sorts. Some, like the whites, were petty bourgeois, seeking to climb to wealth; others were educated men, helping to develop a new nation without regard to mere race lines, while a third group were idealists, trying to uplift the Negro race and put them on a par with the whites. . . . In the minds of very few of them was there any clear and distinct plan for the development of a laboring class into a position of power and mastery over the modern industrial state. (p. 612)

They were to pay, sometimes with their lives, when the changing order of privilege concomitant to the continuing development of northern industrial wealth left them vulnerable:

The bargain of 1876 . . . left capital as represented by the old planter class, the new Northern capitalist, and the capitalist that began to rise out of the poor whites, with a control of labor greater than in any modern industrial state in civilized hands (p. 630). A lawlessness which, in 1865–1868, was still spasmodic and episodic, now became organized, and its real underlying industrial causes obscured by political excuses and race hatred. Using a technique of mass and midnight murder, the South began widely organized aggression upon the Negroes. . . . Armed guerrilla warfare killed thousands of Negroes; political riots were staged; their causes or occasions were always obscure, their results always certain: ten to one hundred times as many Negroes were killed as whites. (p. 674)

The violence and terror that descended upon Blacks during the fifty years that followed Reconstruction, left the Black elite shaken and pared down to its opportunists:

Negroes did not surrender the ballot easily or immediately. . . . But it was a losing battle, with public opinion, industry, wealth, and religion against them. Their own leaders decried "politics" and preached submission. All their efforts toward manly self-assertion were distracted by defeatism and counsels of despair, backed by the powerful propaganda of a religion which taught meekness, sacrifice and humility (pp. 692–93). This brings us to the situation when Booker T. Washington became the leader of the Negro race and advised them to depend upon industrial education and work rather than politics. The better class of Southern Negroes stopped voting for a generation. (p. 694)

Through its wealth and educational institutions the Black elite survived, growing more remote from the masses of Blacks as its ability to reproduce itself developed:

They avoided the mistake of trying to meet force by force. They bent to the storm of beating, lynching and murder, and kept their souls in spite of public and private

insult of every description; they built an inner culture which the world recognizes in spite of the fact that it is still half-strangled and inarticulate. (p. 667)

In this relative social isolation, its culture continued to adopt forms from the class peers from which it was estranged by race. But by the constant terror, the entire Black community had been turned in on itself; and by the persistence of poverty, its social stratifications had been stabilized. However, the resources of the Black community were too few to support a mobility of more than incremental significance. With the Black migration to the North and West, which occurred at the turn of the century, this situation would change but only slightly.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, though Du Bois still could not admit it, the idealism of the Black petit bourgeoisie had been transformed into an ideology that served to hold the Black community as a semi-preserve for the more effective exploitation by its elite. As he had made clear at the Rosenwald Conference, racial solidarity still overrode a radical critique of his class:

We must rid ourselves of the persistent idea that the advance of mankind consists of the scaling off of layers who become incorporated with the world's upper and ruling classes, leaving always dead and inert below the ignorant and unenlightened mass of men. Our professional classes are not aristocrats and our masters—they are and must be the most efficient of our servants and thinkers whose legitimate reward is the advancement of the great mass of American Negroes and with them the uplift of all men.⁷⁸

Du Bois, Marx, and Marxism

There is, however, a final aspect of significance in *Black Reconstruction* that demands close attention. From the vantage point of a Black radical historiography, Du Bois was one of the first American theorists to sympathetically confront Marxist thought in critical and independent terms. Undaunted by the political and personal concerns of Blacks in the American Communist Party, which frequently manifested themselves as a search for ideological orthodoxy in their work and writings, Du Bois had little reason or awareness for cautiously threading an ideological position between Ruthenberg, Lovestone, and Foster in the CPUSA or Trotsky, Bukharin, and Stalin in the Communist International.⁷⁹ As such, he could attempt to come to terms with Marx himself unmediated by Lenin or the emerging doctrines to be known as Marxist-Leninism.⁸⁰ And in so doing, he was articulating in theoretical terms the intersections between the Black radical tradition and historical materialism only vaguely hinted at in the formal organizations of the time. It was in those then irreconcilable roles—as a Black radical thinker and as a sympathetic critic of Marx—that Du Bois was to make some of his most important contributions concerning Black social movements. However, unless we continue to evoke a consciousness of the historical moment in which Du Bois was working, we have little chance of recognizing the nature of the thought to which he addressed himself in *Black Reconstruction*.

Since its inception, Marxism has meant to some a critical scientific system, a way of

working class unity. She then called on Garvey to take a stand in relation to her communist overtures. Garvey was polite but noncommittal. The final stroke in Briggs' strategy was to have ABB delegates to the convention introduce a motion for endorsement of the communist program. The motion was debated and tabled. The ABB, piqued at this setback, then immediately published a *Negro Congress Bulletin* on August 24, almost entirely devoted to a scurrilous misrepresentation of the UNIA convention.¹²²

Whatever motives Briggs and his associates might have had, this pattern of contradictory approaches to the UNIA would characterize the relations of the two organizations until the demise of the Brotherhood in the 1930s. In the Party, Briggs, Moore, Haywood, Otto Hall, Fort-Whiteman, and others found a complementary radical element and a potential international ally for the struggle against colonialism and world capital. Within the UNIA, Garvey for one, felt much more sympathy for the Russian Communists than for the Brotherhood and its American Communist colleagues.¹²³

Blacks and Communism

In its beginnings, the American Communist movement required no special policy with regard to Blacks. Having been constituted from the rebellious Left Wing of the socialist movement did not signify for these communists a departure from the presumption that Blacks were simply a segment of the unskilled working classes.¹²⁴ Moreover, with the American socialist movement drawn predominantly from immigrant ethnic and national minorities, the notion of class solidarity was of substantial importance to the movement, theoretically and practically. It provided a category of political activity through which the diverse social elements of the revolutionary movement—ethnics and nationalities, workers and intellectuals—could be reconciled, transcending their several particular interests. The absence of such a class consciousness among Blacks, and in its stead the presence of a racial consciousness, was seen by early American Communists as both an ideological backwardness and a potential threat to the integrity of the socialist movement itself.¹²⁵ To the degree that the early movement became aware of Black nationalism, that, too, would be unacceptable. Black nationalism was intolerable to a movement so constantly close to foundering on national and ethnic divisions. This concern was made manifest by the frequency with which “Back to Africa” ideologies were described as “Zionist” and compared to “Back to Palestine” movements among the Jews—a substantial and influential minority in the early socialist movement.¹²⁶ The party consistently opposed Black nationalism until its own variant: self-determination, emerged in the Soviet Union in 1928. The UNIA, as the strongest organization among Blacks with a nationalist ideology, was characterized as a bourgeois reactionary group and made a focus of the attack on Black nationalism. American racism did not justify the program of Black nationalism. European immigrants with other than Anglo-Saxon origins were also targets of racist abuses and discriminations. Racism, then, was merely

an element of ruling-class ideology and white “chauvinism” its political position. Thus the social context of Blacks was adapted by ideologues in the socialist movement to the social experience of European immigrant workers.¹²⁷

The Communist parties did not actively recruit Blacks until 1921. This change in policy seems to be largely the responsibility of Lenin, and is even more remarkable when we recall that Lenin’s name was barely known to any of the national elements in the American movement four years earlier.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, it was Lenin who raised the “Negro Question” at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. And it was Lenin who wrote to the party in America, “some time in 1921 expressing surprise that their reports to Moscow made no mention of party work among Negroes and urging that they should be recognized as a strategically important element in Communist activity.”¹²⁹ The American Communist Party then began its recruitment of Blacks, primarily, though, radical Black intellectuals and nationalist organizers. The nucleus, as we have pointed out, was those who made up the majority of the Supreme Council of the African Blood Brotherhood. Still, the historical and theoretical antecedents of the American Communist Party’s work among American Blacks and its eventual positions on Black nationalism were substantially drawn from the experiences of Russian revolutionists.

In the same year that Lenin had addressed the Second Congress of the Comintern, he had written in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism—An Infantile Disorder*:

[T]o reject compromises “on principle,” to reject the permissibility of compromises in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which it is difficult even to consider seriously. . . . There are different kinds of compromises.¹³⁰

Here Lenin was mounting an attack on what he termed “left opportunism,” that is, political action and judgment that used the texts of Marx and Engels to criticize and oppose Lenin and the Bolshevik Party’s leadership. The setting was 1920. In Russia, the civil war was still undecided; and in Europe, the revolutionary movement had been “temporarily” defeated. Lenin was urging a tactical retreat. This document was meant to stem criticism that emerged from other Russian revolutionists who insisted that the revolution must maintain an international arena and scope, and could not be secured in one national territory. Through the document and other activities, Lenin hoped to defuse the “left deviationists” before they became an unmanageable and disruptive force at the Second Congress, and broke the Bolshevik Party’s control and direction of the Third International. Despite its logical inconsistencies, historical omissions, and distortions, and its contradictions of Marxist theory, his document became one of the most significant works of the first decade of the Third International. Much of this was to be attributed to Lenin’s authority in the movement as the world’s most powerful Communist; but as important was the work’s legitimation of accommodation to world capitalism and imperialism. It provided a pragmatic *modus vivendi* for Communist parties elsewhere to survive while maintaining the illusion of being revolutionary rather than reformist.¹³¹

The thread of Lenin’s argument and his political declarations could be traced

stylistically to his critique of the “Left Communists” in 1918, when in writing “*Left-Wing*” *Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality*, Lenin had been forced to defend the development of state-capitalist bureaucracy and the Brest Treaty with the Ukrainian government. Substantively, the thread could be found in his characterization of the revolutionary party as the vanguard of the revolutionary masses:

By educating the workers’ party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and *leading the whole people* to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organizing their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.¹³²

To Lenin, the party was the possessor of true historical consciousness, and was the true instrument of history. The party was Marxist theory in practice. It did what it did because the proletariat had demonstrated that it was insufficiently class-conscious.¹³³ It followed, then, for Lenin, that opposition to the tasks defined for itself by the party could only come from two sources: the reactionary bourgeoisie on the right, and the pseudo-Marxist, petit bourgeoisie “intellectual” opportunists on the left. If, in order to survive, the party acting as the state compromised with Germany, Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey (the Quadruple Alliance) at Brest-Litovsk, it could not be accused of compromising *in general*. The alternative had been continued war and defeat. One must distinguish, Lenin argued, between “obligatory” compromises (preservation) and those compromises that transformed one into “accomplices in banditry.” The Bolshevik Party made only obligatory compromises . . . except when it made “minor and easily remediable” errors. With a bit of sophistry, Lenin declared:

What applies to individuals also applies—with necessary modifications—to politics and parties. It is not he who makes no mistakes that is intelligent. There are no such men, nor can there be. It is he whose errors are not very grave and who is able to rectify them easily and quickly that is intelligent.¹³⁴

Programmatically and tactically, Lenin was laying the grounds for member parties of the Comintern in Europe and elsewhere to assume nonrevolutionary positions for the moment. Party members were instructed to join parties, movements, and organizations and to attempt to influence policy toward reformist demands necessarily intolerable to capitalism. “Communists should not rest content with teaching the proletariat its ultimate aims, but should lend impetus to every practical move leading the proletariat into the struggle for these ultimate aims.”¹³⁵

In 1920, and again in 1921, Lenin had indicated disappointment in the direction and organizational priorities established by the American Communist Party. He suggested further that Blacks should play a critical role in the party and in the vanguard of the workers’ movement since Blacks occupied the most oppressive sector of the American society, and were clearly to be expected to be the most angry element in the United States. All of this was somewhat characteristic of Lenin as he rationalized the basic opportunism that had dominated the history of the Bolshevik movement.¹³⁶

However, Lenin had found no basis of support for his declarations within the American delegation to the Second Congress. Indeed, in the person of the Harvard-trained revolutionary writer, John Reed, the American delegation, preoccupied with the image of the UNIA, repudiated Lenin's position:

Reed defined the American Negro problem as "that of a strong racial and social movement, and of a proletarian labor movement advancing very fast in class-consciousness." He alluded to the Garvey movement in terms that ruled out all Negro nationalism and separatism: "The Negroes have no demands for national independence. All movements aiming at a separate national existence for Negroes fail, as did the 'Back to Africa Movement' of a few years ago. They consider themselves first of all Americans at home in the United States. This makes it very much simpler for the Communists."¹³⁷

For the time being, the Comintern was satisfied by a vague plan to invite Black revolutionists to a future congress.

Two such figures attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922: Otto Huiswoud, as an official delegate, and Claude McKay, as an unofficial and non-Communist observer. McKay and Huiswoud ("the mulatto delegate," as McKay would refer to him in his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home*) tended to complement each other in both official and informal discussions of the "Negro Question."

When the American Negro delegate was invited to attend meetings and my mulatto colleague went, the people asked: "But where is the *chorny* (the black)?" The mulatto delegate said: "Say, fellow, you're all right for propaganda. It's a pity you'll never make a disciplined party member."¹³⁸

And with the aid of the Japanese revolutionary, Sen Katayama, who had spent some time in the United States working as a cook and other things on the west and east coasts, had been a founder of the unified and Bolshevized American Party, and now sat on the commission for national and colonial questions,¹³⁹ McKay and Huiswoud successfully presented to the Comintern sessions a more realistic basis for discussion. And it was at the Fourth Congress that the Comintern made its first formal declaration of policy toward American Blacks: Early the following year, Rose Pastor Stokes, the radical wife of J. C. Phelps Stokes one of the NAACP's millionaire-sponsors, returned to the United States and reported to her fellow party members:

One of the most significant developments in the Fourth Congress of the Communist International was the creation of a Negro Commission and the adoption of the Commission's Thesis on the Negro Question which concludes with the declaration that "the Fourth Congress recognizes the necessity of supporting every form of Negro Movement which tends to undermine capitalism and Imperialism or to impede their further progress," pledges the Communist International to fight "for race equality of the Negro with the White people, for equal wages and political and social rights," to "exert every effort to admit Negroes into Trade Unions"

and to “take immediate steps to hold a general Negro Conference or Congress in Moscow.”

Two American Negroes were guests of the Congress. One, a poet, the other a speaker and organizer, both young and energetic, devoted to the cause of Negro liberation and responsive to the ideals of the revolutionary proletariat. They charmed the delegates with their fine personalities.¹⁴⁰

According to Mrs. Stokes, the Negro Commission itself was international in its membership, made up of delegates from the United States, Belgium, France, England, Java, British South Africa, Japan, Holland, and Russia. The perspective of the Commission was thus international, reflecting the internationalism of Marxist organization, the theory of capitalism, and its membership. As the chairman of the Commission, Comrade Sasha [Stokes] had announced:

[T]he world Negro movement must be organized: in America, as the center of Negro culture and the crystallization of Negro protest; in Africa, the reservoir of human labor for the further development of Capitalism; in Central America (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Colombia, Nicaragua, and other “Independent” Republics), where American Imperialism dominates; in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Santo Domingo and other islands washed by the waters of the Caribbean . . . in South Africa and the Congo . . . in East Africa.¹⁴¹

The work among Blacks in America, then, was to be one sector in a world movement against colonialism and imperialism as the contemporary stages of world capitalism. The Communist International was to be the vehicle through which the enslaved white workers of Europe and America and the “revolutionary workers and peasants of the whole world” would converge on the common enemy:

It is the task of the Communist International to point out to the Negro people that they are not the only people suffering from the oppression of Capitalism and Imperialism; that the workers and peasants of Europe and Asia and of the Americas are also the victims of Imperialism; that the struggle against Imperialism is not the struggle of any one people but of all the peoples of the world; that in China and India, in Persia and Turkey, in Egypt and Morocco the oppressed colored colonial peoples are rising against the same evils that the Negroes are rising against—racial oppression and discrimination, and intensified industrial exploitation; that these peoples are striving for the same ends that the Negroes are striving for—political, industrial and social liberation and equality.¹⁴²

Notwithstanding its contradictions and ideological formulations, this *Theses on the Negro Question* was a quite remarkable document. Certainly its New World-centric view limited it (for example, the proposition that the “center of Negro culture and . . . protest” was in America). Certainly the presumption that a proletarianized Black people in America was the most advanced sector of the Black world was more a vulgarization of Marx than a product of analysis. But just as certain, this statement

was a more sophisticated presentation of the world system than had been developed in the earlier internationalism of the UNIA. The Commission had successfully urged the Fourth Congress to recognize the relationship between the “Negro Question” and the “Colonial Question.”

The intention behind the Negro Commission of the Fourth Congress was to substitute system- and class-consciousness for race-consciousness among American Blacks. Yet one enduring lesson learned from the UNIA was that Blacks were capable of organizing on an international scale. The Negro Commission suggested that the UNIA’s was only a particular form of race-consciousness and that it was possible for race-consciousness to be transformed into a progressive force. A world-historical race-consciousness, recognizing the exploitation of Blacks as Blacks, but as part of and related to the exploitation of other workers could develop from the earlier form. The historical problem posed before the Comintern and its member parties—and especially for American Communism—was whether the Communist movement had the capabilities to perform this transformation. Starting with the efforts of Huiswoud, McKay, and Katayama, it had become increasingly clear to the leadership of the Comintern—Radek, Zinoviev, Trotsky, Lenin, and later, Stalin—that only a special program could attract large numbers of Black workers to the movement. After 1922, the tutelage and training of Black cadres in the Soviet Union was taken quite seriously. The most critical of the results was the formulation of the “nation within a nation” thesis announced by the Sixth Congress in 1928.

Haywood Hall (Harry Haywood) was one of the American Blacks brought to the Soviet Union to study at the University of Toilers of the East (КУТВА). When he arrived in April 1926, he joined a small colony of Black students that included his brother Otto Hall (John Jones) O. J. and Jane Golden, Harold Williams (Dessalines), Roy Mahoney (Jim Farmer), Maude White (who arrived in December 1927), and Bankole (a Gold Coast inhabitant).¹⁴³ Of the seven Black students at КУТВА¹⁴⁴ and the Blacks who arrived in the Soviet Union as delegates to the Sixth Congress in 1928, Haywood alone advocated the position of “self-determination” for American Blacks. Haywood’s own conversion had come in the Winter of 1928 when in preparation for the Congress, he had responded to a dismissive report on the UNIA authored by his brother, Otto:

In the discussion, I pointed out that Otto’s position was not merely a rejection of Garveyism but also a denial of nationalism as a legitimate trend in the Black freedom movement. I felt that it amounted to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. With my insight sharpened by previous discussions, I argued further that the nationalism reflected in the Garvey movement was not a foreign transplant, nor did it spring full-blown from the brow of Jove. On the contrary, it was an indigenous product, arising from the soil of Black super-exploitation and oppression in the United States. It expressed the yearnings of millions of Blacks for a nation of their own.

As I pursued this logic, a totally new thought occurred to me, and for me it was

the clincher. The Garvey movement is dead, I reasoned, but not Black nationalism. Nationalism, which Garvey diverted under the slogan of Back to Africa, was an authentic trend, likely to flare up again in periods of crisis and stress. Such a movement might again fall under the leadership of utopian visionaries who would seek to divert it from the struggle against the main enemy, U.S. imperialism, and on to a reactionary separatist path. The only way such a diversion of the struggle could be forestalled was by presenting a revolutionary alternative to Blacks.

... I was the first American communist (with perhaps the exception of Briggs) to support the thesis that U.S. Blacks constituted an oppressed nation.¹⁴⁵

N. Nasanov (Bob Katz), a Russian representative of the Young Communist League, having spent some time in the United States, was already convinced that American Blacks constituted a national question. Katayama was as well, and suggested to Haywood that Lenin had supported the idea. But they, and similarly minded Soviet Communists, had found difficulty in locating any American Blacks to support their position.¹⁴⁶ Nasanov heard Haywood's arguments and promptly requested his collaboration. From the moment Haywood voiced his commitment to Black nationalism, the momentum was established for the self-determination line that would become the Comintern's official policy after the Congress. The resolutions and discussion papers drafted by Haywood and Nasanov eventually culminated in the language on the "American Negro Question" included in the Congress report, "Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies," 12 December 1928:

In those regions of the South in which compact Negro masses are living, it is essential to put forward the slogan of the Right of Self-determination for Negroes. A radical transformation of the agrarian structure of the Southern States is one of the basic tasks of the revolution. Negro Communists must explain to non-Negro workers and peasants that only their close union with the white proletariat and joint struggle with them against the American bourgeoisie can lead to their liberation from barbarous exploitation, and that only the victorious proletarian revolution will completely and permanently solve the agrarian and national questions of the Southern United States in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the Negro population of the country.¹⁴⁷

Black self-determination was presented to the American Communist Party as a fait accompli. And for years the true origins of the line would be a mystery to members of the American Communist movement as well as to its historians.¹⁴⁸ Its meaning, however, was clear: as Josef Pogany (John Pepper) characterized it (or as Haywood argues, caricatured it) in the line's first American exposure, the logic of self-determination would conclude in a "Negro Soviet Republic."¹⁴⁹

As a strategy, Black self-determination addressed itself to several concerns within the Comintern and the American movement. First of all, by the procedure through which it was established, it underlined the leadership of the Comintern over its national parties. Moreover, legitimated by the existence of other national liberation

movements as well as the earlier history of American Blacks, it also relieved somewhat the disappointments of some Third Internationalists caused by the failure of an immediate world revolution to develop—national liberation struggles were by their nature protracted ones. As a political model, it was also useful as a means of expression for those nationalisms and chauvinisms of longer duration in the American Communist Party: many ideologues in the American movement identified their own nationalist sensibilities with Black nationalism.¹⁵⁰ Finally, it was believed it was the most effective means of approaching one of the oldest American peoples, the “Negro,” first through its radical nationalist intelligentsia, and then its masses. Not only should self-determination attract Blacks, it was argued, but it could also be the litmus for determining the degree of progressiveness among non-Black party militants while weakening the ruling class by jarring the Bourbon pseudo-aristocracy from its industrial and finance-capitalist sponsors.

Still the theoretical basis for the party’s identification of Blacks as a nation was quite unorthodox in terms of Marxist theory. Marx and Engels had both distinguished between “nations” and “nationalities,” recognizing in the former the capacity for independent economic existence and in the latter an incapacity. Engels had expressed himself quite clearly:

There is no country in Europe where there are not different nationalities under the same government. . . . Here, then, we perceive the difference between the “principles of *nationalities*” and the old democratic and working-class tenet as to the right of the great European *nations* to separate and independent existence. The “principle of nationalities” leaves entirely untouched the great question of the right of national existence for the historic peoples of Europe; nay if it touches it is merely to disturb it. The principle of nationalities raises two sorts of questions: first of all, questions of boundary between these great historic peoples; and secondly, questions as to the right to independent national existence of those numerous small relics of peoples which, after having figured for a longer or shorter period on the stage of history, were finally absorbed as integral portions into one or the other of those more powerful nations whose greater vitality enabled them to overcome greater obstacles.¹⁵¹

The logical extension from Marx or Engels would have been to identify the Blacks of America as a national minority or as a nationality, but not as a nation. For Marx and Engels, the nation was a quite particular historical phenomenon:

Since the end of the Middle Ages, history has been moving towards a Europe made up of large national states. Only such national states constitute the normal political framework for the dominant European bourgeois class and, in addition, they are the indispensable prerequisites . . . without which the rule of the proletariat cannot exist.¹⁵²

Engels’s historicism branded the nation as an instrument of the bourgeoisie; its emergence was concomitant to the development of a bourgeois society, a capitalist

society. And once nation and then the transnational became realized, it was possible for an international revolutionary movement to command the society that had produced it. For Marx, both language and culture appeared to be secondary phenomena, the first to be associated with nationality, the second, with the dominant class. Unfortunately, throughout the nineteenth century and into the next, much of the theoretical grammar brought by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other Marxists to the analysis of American phenomena and processes was similarly naive. It was naive because of its ahistoricity and its tendency toward the use of aggregative concepts to the point of superfluosness. Ultimately, its naivete was contradictory: at the historical point of massive immigration, the application of race and class, the grammar's two most fundamental categories, presumed the existence among the majority of American workers of a white working class; thus the eventual appearance of a Black nation suggested an opposite historical momentum.¹⁵³ Lenin proved to be the theoretical and ideological midwife, but it was Stalin, it came to be believed in the American Communist Party and by its historians, who had provided the theoretical basis for the party's position that Blacks were a nation within a nation. "If there was a 'genius' in this scheme," Theodore Draper would declare, "it was undoubtedly Stalin."¹⁵⁴ However, the contrast between Stalin and Engels and Marx was dramatic. In what was to be one of the most frequently cited justifications for the Comintern's "Negro program," Stalin had entirely forsaken analytical sophistication:

A nation is a historically established, stable community of people, coming into existence on the basis of a community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological constitution, which manifest themselves in a community of culture.¹⁵⁵

This extraordinary passage is perhaps characteristic of Stalin's theoretical contributions to Marxist thought and to world knowledge. First, it too is ahistoric, since no contemporary nation has emerged in this way; second, it is abstract and vague, utilizing such phrases as "psychological constitution"; third, it is tautological: community manifests itself as community; and finally, it is not Marxian, tending as it does toward an evolutionary paradigm as opposed to that of historical materialism. Its one apposite feature was that it was in keeping with the ideological and programmatic opportunism that characterized Stalin's immediate predecessor. The policy implications of this passage fit quite well into the rationalizations found in *"Left-Wing" Communism*. This is, perhaps, another sort of proof that the policy was a gloss on the history of Black movements and not the independent product of the Soviet Union's political elite. Like formulations on other national liberation struggles one discovers in Comintern declarations, it was political opportunism searching for theoretical justifications. It thus represented the critical importance to the Soviet Party of forming alliances with movements that were emerging from theoretically "precapitalist" societies. Given historical necessity, Marxist-Leninism compromised itself theoretically with nationalism, and as such institutionalized the force that had brought the Second International to its submission. It might be said in the most simple-minded

reading of the dialectic, that the Third International was a synthesis of the thesis (socialism) and anti-thesis (national chauvinism) of the Second.

As the official policy of the American Communist Party, self-determination—the Black Belt Thesis—would survive Stalin, but only barely. And even while Stalin was a dominant figure in the world Communist movement, it would have its ups and downs, responding to the national and international dynamics of the revolutionary movement.

The policy of Negro self-determination has lived twice and died twice. After overthrowing Lovestone's "revisionism," Browder made self-determination one of the cardinal articles of faith of his leadership. In November 1943, long after it had ceased to show any signs of life, he delivered a funeral oration over the corpse of self-determination; he explained that the Negro people had already exercised the historical right of self-determination—by rejecting it. After overthrowing Browder's "revisionism," Foster made self-determination one of the cardinal articles of faith of his leadership. In 1946 self-determination was reincarnated in a slightly watered-down version—as a programmatic demand and not as an immediate slogan of action.

In 1958, the Communist leadership again buried the corpse of the right of self-determination. It decided that the American Negro people were no longer a "stable community"; that the Negro national question was no longer "essentially a peasant question"; that the Negroes did not possess any distinctively "common psychological make-up"; that the main currents of Negro thought and leadership "historically, and universally at the present time" flowed toward equality with other Americans; that the American Negro people did not constitute a nation; and therefore that the right of self-determination did not apply to them.¹⁵⁶

Lenin had compelled the American Communist Party to take the Black American as a critical element in its policy and organization. Stalin, himself a member of a Russian national minority, had been the authority through which the Comintern and the American Communist Party had come to recognize Blacks as an oppressed nation.¹⁵⁷ And for a while the policies directly influenced by these two Bolsheviks had been successful: thousands of Blacks came into the CPUSA during the 1930s in response to the party's attentions and expressed intentions.¹⁵⁸ However, in the background were the UNIA and the Brotherhood. They had established the political and ideological preconditions for the party's policies and its successes. It was the UNIA that had embodied the Black radical tradition and primed the Black masses with a sense of nationhood. It was the UNIA and the ABB through which many of the early Black activists in the party had passed. And it was the UNIA and the Brotherhood that had demonstrated the capacities of Blacks to organize politically and respond ideologically. It remains a telling point on the nature of the early American Communist movement that the significance of these examples had to depend upon Soviet-directed policy to be revealed.

In the light of this account of Russian and Comintern intervention into the affairs of the American Communist Party, it would appear to be a historical irony that it was through Du Bois's work that a first reassessment of Marxian revolutionary theory was attempted. It was Du Bois who introduced into American Marxism a critical interpretation of the nature and significance of revolution—based in large measure on the developments of the Russian Revolution and the American Reconstruction period.

Du Bois and Radical Theory

As a Black, Du Bois was sensitive to the contradictions in American society, in particular to the material force of racism. He was even more *conscious* of racism since in his early years he had been cocooned from it. He was a young man by the time he was forced to openly confront the culture of racism. Later, as a Black scholar, he had had an immediate and profound experience with the false histories produced in that culture. Both his training at Harvard with its history department largely influenced by German historiography, and his studies in Berlin had left him with an acute sensitivity for myth and propaganda in history. And as we have suggested earlier, as a critic of Marx, Du Bois had possessed no obligations to Marxist or Leninist dogma, nor to the vagaries of historical analysis and interpretation that characterized American Communist thought. Given these attributes, enveloped by the events of the post–World War I period, Du Bois obtained the skills to seize the advantage created by this crisis of capitalism:

[S]omebody in each era must make clear the facts with utter disregard to his own wish and desire and belief. What we have got to know, so far as possible, are the things that actually happened in the world. . . . [T]he historian has no right, posing as scientist, to conceal or distort facts; and until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we are going to render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over. (p. 722)

He had written these words with American historiography in mind. But we may also assume he had an additional application at hand.

Among the several truths that Du Bois set out to establish in *Black Reconstruction*, there were a number that related directly to Marxist and Leninist theory. Specifically, his ideas concerned the emergence of capitalism; the nature of revolutionary consciousness; and the nature of revolutionary organization. As we recall, first Du Bois would insist on the world-historical significance of American slavery in the emergence of modern capitalism and imperialism. In this, he went no further than Marx, but this is merely where he began. Next, he would demonstrate, historically, the revolutionary force of slave and peasant laborers—this in opposition to a reactionary industrial working class. Finally, with Lenin in mind, Du Bois would question the presumed roles of a vanguard and the masses in the development of revolutionary consciousness and effective revolutionary action.

With regard to the first issue—the relationship between the destruction of slavery and the emergence of modern capitalism and imperialism—Du Bois argued that the American Reconstruction period was *the* historical moment in the developing world system. This was the moment when world capitalism assumed the character that would persist into the twentieth century:

The abolition of American slavery started the transportation of capital from white to black countries where slavery prevailed, with the same tremendous and awful consequences upon the laboring classes of the world which we see about us today. When raw material could not be raised in a country like the United States, it could be raised in the tropics and semi-tropics under a dictatorship of industry, commerce and manufacture and with no free farming class.

The competition of a slave-directed agriculture in the West Indies and South America, in Africa and Asia, eventually ruined the economic efficiency of agriculture in the United States and in Europe and precipitated the modern economic degradation of the white farmer, while it put into the hands of the owners of the machine such a monopoly of raw material that their domination of white labor was more and more complete. (p. 48)

According to Du Bois, this was not a necessary development but the one that followed upon the dismantling and destruction of the “dictatorship of labor” established in the southern United States during the Reconstruction:

[T]here began to rise in America in 1876 a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor. . . .

The world wept because the exploiting group of New World masters, greed and jealousy became so fierce that they fought for trade and markets and materials and slaves all over the world until at last in 1914 the world flamed in war. The fantastic structure fell, leaving grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy, staring at each other across World Depression. (p. 634)

But rather than seeing this process as inevitable due to the contradiction between the modes of production and the relations of production, Du Bois argued that it was made possible by the ideologies of racism, and, to a lesser extent, individualism. It was these ideologies as historical forces that had precluded the emergence of a powerful labor movement in the United States—a movement whose nucleus would have consisted of the nine million ex-slave and white peasant workers of the South. The force of these ideologies manifested itself after the war when these workers did not move to the next logical step: the institutionalization of their historical convergence in order to dominate the Reconstruction’s “dictatorship of labor.” Without this movement, the revolution begun in 1855 with John Brown’s Kansas raids could not continue.¹⁵⁹ The failure to achieve a consciousness of themselves as a class was not a consequence of the absence of the concentration of production in agriculture, as some Marxists might presume, for in the North workers had had this experience, yet their labor movement was predominantly trade-unionist.¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, in the South, where the

character of production with regard to the concentration of labor was more ambiguous, it was these workers, Black and white, who had produced the "General Strike" decisive in ending the Civil War.

The General Strike had not been planned or consciously organized. Instead, what Du Bois termed a "General Strike" was the total impact on the secessionist South of a series of actions circumstantially related to each other: some 200,000 Black workers, most of them slaves, had become part of the Union's military forces. These, and an even larger number of Blacks, had withdrawn their productive labor and paramilitary services from the Confederacy, transferring a substantial portion of them to the Union. In addition, tens of thousands of slaves and poor whites had emigrated from the South. The former were escaping slavery, the latter their poverty and the demands and ravages of a war in which they had no vested interest. The result was to critically weaken the secessionists. The ordering of these diverse actions was then a consequence of the social order to which they were reactions. The contradictions within southern society rather than a revolutionary vanguard knit these phenomena into a historical force. After the war, a different ordering would be required to integrate these phenomena into a political movement. This could be accomplished if only the ruling ideologies of the society were transcended. This was not done.

[T]he power of the Negro vote in the South was certain to go gradually toward reform.

It was this contingency that the poor whites of all grades feared. It meant to them a reestablishment of that subordination under Negro labor which they had suffered during slavery. They, therefore, interposed by violence to increase the natural antagonism between Southerners of the planter class and Northerners who represented the military dictatorship as well as capital. . . .

The efforts at reform, therefore, at first widely applauded, one by one began to go down before a new philosophy which represented understanding between the planters and poor whites. . . . [I]t was accompanied by . . . eagerness on the part of the poor whites to check the demands of the Negroes by any means, and by willingness to do the dirty work of the revolution that was coming, with its blood and crass cruelties, its bitter words, upheaval and turmoil. This was the birth and being of the Ku Klux Klan. (p. 623)

But it was not merely a matter of the antagonisms of the poor whites against the Blacks being revitalized by the prominence assumed by the latter during the Reconstruction. The "deep economic foundation" for these antagonisms was in fact being challenged by proposals to radically alter land tenure put forward by Black legislators. Rather, it was the remnants of the southern ruling class that focused the attention of poor whites on to the Black workers. The ruling class had been so weakened by the war that for the first time it was forced to aggressively recruit poor whites as its allies. "The masters feared their former slaves. . . . They lied about the Negroes. . . . They forestalled the danger of a united Southern labor movement by appealing to the fear

and hate of white labor. . . . They encouraged them to ridicule Negroes and beat them, kill and burn their bodies. The planters even gave the poor whites their daughters in marriage" (p. 633).

It was in this fashion that the bond between the two elements of the southern working class failed to materialize. By necessity, Du Bois felt, Blacks fixed class alliances with northern capitalists and petit bourgeois Radical Republicans. Both alliances were by nature short-lived. Once Northern capital had sufficiently penetrated the southern economic sector so as to dominate its future development, it ceased to depend on Black electorates and state legislatures responsive to Blacks and the radical petit bourgeoisie. The alliance ended with the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South and the destruction of the governments supported by the bureaucracy of occupation. By the 1880s, the under-capitalized character of southern agrarian production was established and the need for external sources of raw materials more than apparent. In Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, the Caribbean and Pacific islands, and elsewhere, northern capitalists constructed their own forms of slavery: but ones for which they could not easily be held accountable or among which they would be compelled to live.

Turning now to the question of revolutionary consciousness and organization, it is again Du Bois's presentation of the General Strike that provides a critique of Marxist thought. But first we should recall just what constituted Marxist theory in America at the time.

At the time of Du Bois's writing of *Black Reconstruction*, Marxism came in several forms depending on which revolutionary or intellectual tradition one considered. Raphael Samuel has maintained that such "mutations of Marxism" were to be expected and, indeed, had been preceded by changes in Marx's own writings:¹⁶¹

In Russia Marxism came into existence as a critical trend within populism, in Italy in the form of a syncretism with positivist sociology, in Austria—and Bulgaria—in tandem with the thought of Lassalle. Second International Marxism was a heterodox affair, with numerous tendencies competing for political attention, and nothing approaching a finished body of doctrine. Marxism was necessarily superimposed on preexisting modes of thought which it incorporated rather than displaced, and which were regarded as being intrinsic to the new outlook. . . .

The contours change radically in the period of the Third International, but Marxism, despite its increasingly Party-minded character, was very far from being hermetically sealed. In the 1920s there was a vigorous, indeed furious, philosophical debate within the Soviet Union itself, with rival schools contending in the name of dialectical materialism.¹⁶²

But generally, in the order of prestige in revolutionary socialism, first were the available works of Marx and Engels and their nearest contemporaries in Europe and Russia.¹⁶³ These constituted the classical texts of Marxism. Second, there were the works of the Soviet intelligentsia, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky, and Stalin.¹⁶⁴

From 1917 on, these writings became more significant to the socialist movement. With the bureaucratization of the Russian Revolution and the institutionalization of the Comintern, Stalin and his interpretations of Lenin's thought ultimately superseded all other Marxist writers in authority.

All serious theoretical work ceased in the Soviet Union after collectivization. Trotsky was driven into exile in 1929, and assassinated in 1940; Ryazanov was stripped of his positions in 1931 and died in a labour camp in 1939; Bukharin was silenced in 1929 and shot in 1938; Preobrazhensky was broken by 1930 and perished in jail in 1938. Marxism was largely reduced to a memento in Russia, as Stalin's rule reached its apogee.¹⁶⁵

In the United States, dichotomies reflecting the conflicts in Europe and Russia could be found. But in America, Party propagandists were much more prominent than independent theorists. The presence of theorists in the party had been substantially reduced by the events of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The expulsions of a "Trotskyite" left followed by the "Lovestone" right; the spectacle of the purges of veterans of the Russian Revolution from the Bolshevik Party; the compromises of the Popular Front period after 1933; and the protracted demise of capitalism, had all taken their toll, especially on revolutionary theory:

Marx's emphasis upon the historic inevitability of revolution had diminishing importance for Party members and left intellectuals alike in the thirties. Communists may have claimed Marxism as their own, but it was merely a ceremonial claim after the Popular Front had been announced. There were, however, few times in CP history when Marxist theory was applied in a serious and sustained analysis of American society. And even the non-Communist intellectual . . . made only infrequent and incomplete stabs at such analyses.¹⁶⁶

Revolution had been relegated to the background while more pressing needs—like support for the New Deal; the pursuit of "collective security" for the Soviet Union; the organization of the new unionism represented by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO); and the fight for state assistance to the unemployed and elderly—assumed priority. Finally, though Marxism might continue to develop elsewhere within the nexus of Communist Parties, in Europe its further elaboration in the thirties seems to have been confined to Germany, France, and Italy. And even then, as Perry Anderson suggests, the tradition was strained:

Astonishingly, within the entire corpus of Western Marxism, there is not one single serious appraisal or sustained critique of the work of one major theorist by another, revealing close textual knowledge or minimal analytic care in its treatment. At most, there are cursory aspersions or casual commendations, both equally ill-read and superficial. Typical examples of this mutual slovenliness are the few vague remarks directed by Sartre at Lukács; the scattered and anachronistic asides of Adorno on Sartre; the virulent invective of Colletti against Marcuse; the amateur

confusion of Althusser between Gramsci and Colletti; the peremptory dismissal by Della Volpe of Althusser.¹⁶⁷

Still, much was in disarray.

Despite the shared premise that human emancipation was to be identical with the achievement of the socialist revolution, the writings produced by Marxian theorists contained serious disagreements and differences with respect to the historical processes and structural elements involved in the emergence of the revolution. Among the areas of contention were questions regarding the nature of class consciousness; the role of a revolutionary party; and the political nature of the peasantry and other “precapitalist” laboring classes. Since it is impossible to even summarize the volume of conflicting opinion to be found in Marxist literature, we will concern ourselves with only those aspects to which Du Bois addressed himself.¹⁶⁸

Marx and Engels had argued that the alienation intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production, the contradictions arising between that mode and the social relations accompanying it, and the extension of expropriation could result in a socialist revolution led by the industrial working classes. Though the revolution itself was not inevitable (that would have amounted to economic determinism), the role of this specific kind of worker in such a revolution was certain.¹⁶⁹ The historical dialectic identified the industrial worker—the proletariat—as the negation of capitalist society; the force produced by capitalism that could finally destroy it. Capitalism pitted one class, the bourgeoisie, against another, the proletariat. This was the specific character of the class struggle in capitalist society. However, since there were more than two classes in all the nineteenth-century societies that Marx and Engels studied, it became necessary for them to identify and assign to these other classes particular historical roles. The *petit bourgeoisie* were both nominally and historically the middlemen of capitalism: its managers, technicians, small merchants, and shopkeepers. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the *petit bourgeoisie* did not own or control the means of production. Still, it was a class whose members recognized their dependence on the bourgeoisie for social privileges. Their political loyalties were to the bourgeoisie and as such they were understood to be reactionary by their class-nature.¹⁷⁰ A fourth class, the lumpen-proletariat, too, was reactionary. The class was characterized as one that fed off the proletariat in a parasitic manner. The lumpen-proletariat were the thieves, the thugs, the prostitutes, “people without a definite occupation and a stable domicile.”¹⁷¹ It was from this class that the society recruited many of those who would form its coercive instruments: the army, the state militias, the police. The fifth class was the peasantry. This was the class that came closest to the poor whites and Black workers of the antebellum period in terms of its systemic relationship to industrial capitalism, its social organization, and its historical origins.¹⁷² For Marx and Engels, the peasantry was a remnant of the precapitalist society. But unlike other residues from feudalism, for example, the clergy, the aristocracy, and the artisan-craftsmen, the peasantry continued to be of importance in capitalist society. Both the peasantry and the bourgeoisie had been negations of feudalism, however the peasantry’s “narrow-minded”

self-interest had been intent on destroying feudalist relations by moving historically backward to small, individual land-holdings and away from the inclusive, nationally integrated economic structures for which the bourgeoisie aspired. In feudalism, the bourgeoisie had been a historically progressive contradiction, and the peasantry a historically reactionary negation. With the destruction of feudalism by capitalist forces, the peasantry became reactionary in a different way. The peasantry was now a potential ally of the bourgeoisie to be poised against the political force of industrial labor and the socialist revolution.

Lenin and Trotsky, coming from Tsarist Russia, a society dominated by a peasant-subsistence or “backward” economy, saw the peasantry differently from Marx or Engels.¹⁷³ In the central and western Russian countryside at the end of the nineteenth century, the remnants of Russian “feudalism” were to be found in the aristocracy and the poor peasantry. There were, too, the *kulaks* consisting of a rural bourgeoisie supported by capitalist agriculture, and a middle peasantry essentially locked into modified forms of subsistence agriculture. The roving peasantry, the rural proletariat, according to Lenin, emerged from the poor peasants who worked either for the *kulaks*, the landlords or some exceptional middle peasants. Both Lenin and Trotsky agreed that the rural relations of production were subject to “internal” antagonisms of class struggle (*kulaks* versus poor peasants) and, most importantly, that the peasantry could be an ally to the working-class movement. In 1901, for example, Lenin had observed:

Our rural laborers are still too closely connected with the peasantry, they are still too heavily burdened with the misfortunes of the peasantry generally, to enable the movement of rural workers to assume national significance either now or in the immediate future . . . the whole essence of our agrarian programme is that the rural proletariat must fight together with the rich peasantry for the abolition of the remnants of serfdom, for the cut-off lands.¹⁷⁴

But in 1905, after several years of recurring peasant uprisings, his view of the “rural proletariat” was more sanguine: “We must explain to it that its interests are antagonistic to those of the bourgeois peasantry; we must call upon it to fight for the socialist revolution.”¹⁷⁵ Though Trotsky and Lenin were opposed to the “Black Partition” (Marx’s term for the extra-legal seizure and breaking up of land into small, individual holdings), they saw it as a tactic for momentarily attracting the peasantry to the side of the revolution. Once the dictatorship of the proletariat was secured, other arrangements could be made for the peasants.¹⁷⁶

Part of the reason for the judgments made by Marx or Engels of the peasantry had to do with the conditions of work that circumscribed peasant production and the social relations that fixed the peasants into prescribed links of exchange. Marx saw the peasantry as a “vast mass” consisting of functional clones: simple cultivators, proximate but without significant intercourse; lacking in all but the most rudimentary political organization or consciousness.¹⁷⁷ Engels, too, was impressed by the “great space” that peasants occupied, and ascribed to them a tradition of submissiveness and

loyalty to particular masters.¹⁷⁸ Neither suggested that the peasantry was capable of independent political action. And if we compared the descriptions found in Marx and Engels of peasant life with those of Du Bois concerning the slaves and poor whites, we would discover striking and important similarities. Of the slave workers, Du Bois commented:

[B]efore the war, the slave was curiously isolated; this was the policy, and the effective policy of the slave system, which made the plantation the center of a black group with a network of white folk around and about, who kept the slaves from contact with each other. Of course, clandestine contact there always was; the passing of Negroes to and fro on errands; particularly the semi-freedom and mingling in cities; and yet, the mass of slaves were curiously provincial and kept out of the currents of information. (pp. 121–22)

In the masters' domiciles, the complexities of the relationships between labor and the exploiters of labor many times included bonds of sentiment, but more importantly and persistently the house servants had realized "The masters had stood between them and a world in which they had no legal protection except the master." And that "The masters were their source of information" (p. 123). Earlier in the work, Du Bois had suggested, "Any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully" (p. 57). And of the poor white workers, ignored as he believed by the American labor movement, the abolitionists, northern capitalists and southern planters, Du Bois reckoned similarly pessimistic judgments could be made. He reiterated Francis Simkins's and Robert Woody's bleak description of their conditions:

A wretched log hut or two are the only habitations in sight. Here reside, or rather take shelter, the miserable cultivators of the ground, or a still more destitute class who make a precarious living by peddling "lightwood" in the city. . . .

These cabins . . . are dens of filth. . . . Their faces are bedaubed with the muddy accumulation of weeks. . . . The poor wretches seem startled when you address them, and answer your questions cowering like culprits. (p. 26)

Du Bois added that the poor whites were also bound to the master class: "Indeed, the natural leaders of the poor whites, the small farmer, the merchant, the professional man, the white mechanic and slave overseer, were bound to the planters and repelled from the slaves. . . . [T]he only heaven that attracted them was the life of the great Southern planter" (p. 27). Yet in the midst of the Civil War, it was these two peoples, the Black and the white workers, who had mounted the rebellions, the "General Strike," which had turned loose the revolutionary dynamics that Du Bois would describe as "the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen" (p. 358). One hundred thousand poor whites had deserted the Confederate armies and perhaps a half million Black workers had abandoned the plantations. It was the same pattern, indeed, that would come to fruition in Russia. Like the American slaves and the poor whites, in the midst of war the Russian

peasantry would desert their armies in the field. Their rebellion, too, marked the beginnings of revolution.

Like most informed men and women of his time, Du Bois was deeply impressed by the Russian Revolution and he believed he could write and speak of it without having “to dogmatize with Marx or Lenin.”¹⁷⁹ He had referred to what he considered a significant element of the revolution as early as 1917 when he criticized the American Socialist Party’s ideologues for praising the successes of the Russian peasantry while ignoring the achievements of American Blacks:

Revolution is discussed, but it is the successful revolution of white folk and not the unsuccessful revolution of black soldiers in Texas. You do not stop to consider whether the Russian peasant had any more to endure than the black soldiers of the 24th Infantry.¹⁸⁰

The processes of the Russian Revolution were a framework for his interpretation of Reconstruction because it, too, had begun among an agrarian, peasant people. It was a characteristic shared by all the revolutions that Du Bois linked in significance to the American Civil War and its Reconstruction: that is, France, Spain, India, and China (p. 708). In addition, since before his visit to the Soviet Union in 1926, he had been cautious about the nature of class-consciousness among workers in Russia, the United States, and elsewhere. In 1927, when he had returned from the Soviet Union, he had written:

Does this mean that Russia has “put over” her new psychology? Not by any means. She is trying and trying hard, but there are plenty of people in Russia who still hate and despise the workingman’s blouses and the peasant’s straw shoes; and plenty of workers who regret the passing of the free-handed Russian nobility, who miss the splendid pageantry of the Czars and who cling doggedly to religious dogma and superstition.¹⁸¹

And despite his note to the tenth chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, which explained why he was not using his original title for that chapter (“The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina”),¹⁸² Du Bois knew the Russian Revolution was a dictatorship of the proletariat that was less democratic and less dependent upon conscious action of the workers than was to be found in the post–Civil War period in America:

As the [Russian] workingman is today neither skilled nor intelligent to any such extent as his responsibilities demand, there is within his ranks the Communist Party, directing the proletariat toward their future dictatorship. This is nothing new.¹⁸³

And in 1938, Du Bois would declare:

When now the realities of the situation were posed to men, two radical solutions were suddenly resorted to: Russian communism and fascism. They both did away

with democracy, and substituted oligarchic control of government and industry of thought and action. Communism aimed at eventual democracy and even elimination of the state, but sought this by a dogmatic program, laid down ninety years ago by a great thinker, but largely invalidated by nearly a century of extraordinary social change.¹⁸⁴

Like Lenin, but for different reasons and in a different way, Du Bois had realized that Marx had not anticipated the historical transformations of capitalism, specifically, the complicating phenomena of imperialism. And caution, as well, was required in any application of Marx to the situation of American Blacks:

It was a great loss to American Negroes that the great mind of Marx and his extraordinary insight into industrial conditions could not have been brought to bear at first hand upon the history of the American Negro between 1876 and the World War. Whatever he said and did concerning the uplift of the working class must, therefore, be modified so far as Negroes are concerned by the fact that he had not studied at first hand their peculiar race problem here in America.¹⁸⁵

This left a monumental gap in the analysis of capitalism and its developments, assigning Marx's own work to a specific historical period. Du Bois would conclude, while working on *Black Reconstruction*, that "we can only say, as it seems to me, that the Marxian philosophy is a true diagnosis of the situation in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century despite some of its logical difficulties."¹⁸⁶

In American Marxism, Lenin had largely replaced Marx as the definitive revolutionary thinker by the early 1920s. Where Marx had anticipated and depended upon the rise of class consciousness, Lenin had posited the party in its stead. For Lenin, the party, a small group of trained, disciplined, and professional revolutionists, constituted a necessary first stage in the development of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The party would deliberately and scientifically create the conditions for the evolution of worker consciousness and for socialism. Where Marx had presumed that a bourgeois society established by a bourgeois revolution was a necessary condition for the evolution of a conscious socialist movement. Lenin, in April of 1917, would declare that the process had been completed in Russia in less than three months.¹⁸⁷

Du Bois had been skeptical of Marx and Lenin on both scores. In *Black Reconstruction*, he reviewed the events of the American post bellum with a Hegelian sense of the "cunning of Reason." The slaves freed themselves, Du Bois thought, not by way of an objective consciousness of their condition but rather by the dictates of religious myth:

The mass of slaves, even the more intelligent ones, and certainly the great group of field hands, were in religious and hysterical fervour. This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. It was the Golden Dawn, after chains of a thousand years. It was everything miraculous and perfect and promising. (p. 122)

And the other figures in the drama of emancipation, from Lincoln down to the poor whites, were just as much overtaken by the unintended consequences of their actions:

Lincoln had never been an Abolitionist; he had never believed in full Negro citizenship; he had tried desperately to win the war without Negro soldiers, and he had emancipated the slaves only on account of military necessity. (p. 153)

Freedom for the slave was the logical result of a crazy attempt to wage war in the midst of four million black slaves, and trying the while sublimely to ignore the interests of those slaves in the outcome of the fighting. (p. 121)

Leaders, then, led in increments. The northern field officers who put the fugitive slaves to work did not intend to free them . . . but they did. The Confederacy moved to preserve slavery . . . it helped to end it. Groups moved to the logic of immediate self-interest and to historical paradox. Consciousness, when it did develop, had come later in the process of the events. The revolution had *caused* the formation of revolutionary consciousness and had not been caused by it. The revolution was spontaneous.

To the second point, the precondition of bourgeois society, Du Bois maintained that no bourgeois society was the setting of this revolution. The dominant ideology of the society was that of the plantocracy, a dictatorship of labor and land with no democratic pretensions. But of more significance, the ideology of the plantocracy had not been the ideology of the slaves. The slaves had produced their own culture and their own consciousness by adapting the forms of the non-Black society to the conceptualizations derived from their own historical roots and social conditions. In some instances, indeed, elements produced by the slave culture had become the dominant ones in white southern culture. The process had spanned generations: “[T]he rolling periods of Hebrew prophecy and biblical legend furnished inaccurate but splendid words. The subtle folk-lore of Africa, with whimsy and parable, veiled wish and wisdom; and above all fell the anointed chrism of the slave music, the only gift of pure art in America” (p. 14). This was the human experience from which the rebellion rose. Torn from it were the principles of “right and wrong, vengeance and love . . . sweet Beauty and Truth” that would serve as guideposts to the ex-slaves. It was the tradition critical to the framing of the survival of these new people.

Du Bois, despite all the diversions and distractions of intellect, social origins, and ambition that had marked his even then long life, had at last come to the Black radical tradition. In the midst of the most fearsome maelstrom his age had seen, and with the pitiable reaction of the declared revolutionary opposition in mind, his purposeful interrogation of the past had led him to the hidden specter of Black revolutionists. Their revolution had failed, of course. And with its failure had gone the second and truer possibility of an American democracy. But until the writing of *Black Reconstruction*, the only mark on American historical consciousness left by their movement had been a revised legend of their savagery. Du Bois had understood, finally, that this was insufficient. “Somebody in each era,” he had written, “must make clear the facts.”¹⁸⁸ With that declaration, the first ledger of radical Black historiography had been filled.”¹⁸⁸

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois had striven to enrich the critique of capitalism

and bourgeois society that had merged into the dominant strains of Western radicalism. He had no choice if he was to comprehend the crises of war and depression that devastated the world system in his lifetime, and the rebellion and revolution in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the New World that were their concomitants. Du Bois came to believe that the preservation of the capitalist world system, its very expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had involved the absorption of new sources of labor power, not by their conversion into wage labor but by coercion. Characteristically, capitalist imperialism had magnified the capacity for capital accumulation by force variously disguised as state nationalism, benevolent colonialism, race destiny, or the civilizing mission. Except in scattered instances, the peasantries of the Third World had become neither urban nor rural proletariats but near-slaves. For most, their social development had been effectively arrested. The result, relative to their own recent pasts and the situation of European workers, was retardation. Indeed, whole populations had been eliminated either during “pacification” or through forced labor. The belief that capitalism would advance African and Asian and other peasantries had for the most part proved to be misplaced. Beyond Western Europe, the capitalist world system had produced social and economic chaos. No theory of history that conceptualized capitalism as a progressive historical force, qualitatively increasing the mastery of human beings over the material bases of their existence, was adequate to the task of making the experiences of the modern world comprehensible. For Du Bois, America in the first half of the nineteenth century, a society in which manufacturing and industrial capitalism had been married to slave production, had been a microcosm of the world system. The advanced sectors of the world economy could expand just so long as they could dominate and rationalize by brute force the exploitation of essentially nonindustrial and agrarian labor. The expansion of American slavery in the nineteenth century was not an anachronism but a forewarning. But so too, he believed, was its defeat.

It was also true, as Marx, Engels, and others had anticipated, that there were contradictions to the world economy and the systems of coercion upon which it depended. However, Du Bois came to perceive that they were not limited to the contradictions discerned by the radical Western intelligentsia. In the long run, that is, by the beginnings of the twentieth century, the vision of the destruction of bourgeois society entertained by Western socialists had been shown to be of only partial relevance. The working classes of Europe and America had indeed mounted militant assaults on their ruling classes. But in defeat they had also displayed their vulnerabilities to bourgeois nationalism and racialist sentiment. Elsewhere other realities had too come to the fore. The shocks to Western imperialism, which in the previous century had appeared to European radicals to be at the margins of the world revolution, were by the 1930s occupying center stage. The Indian Mutiny, the Boxer Rebellion, the nationalist struggles that had erupted in the Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Abyssinia, West and southern Africa, and carried over into the twentieth century—the “people’s wars”—had achieved major historical significance in the revolutions in Mexico, China, and Russia. And in every instance, peasants and agrarian

workers had been the primary social bases of rebellion and revolution. Nowhere, not even in Russia, where a rebellious urban proletariat was a fraction of the mobilized working classes, had a bourgeois social order formed a precondition for revolutionary struggle. Revolutionary consciousness had formed in the process of anti-imperialist and nationalist struggles, and the beginnings of resistance had often been initiated by ideological constructions remote from the proletarian consciousness that was a presumption of Marx's theory of revolution. The idiom of revolutionary consciousness had been historical and cultural rather than the "mirror of production." The oppositions that had struck most deeply at capitalist domination and imperialism had been those formed outside the logic of bourgeois hegemony. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois had tried to give these processes a concrete, historical appearance. Again he had had very little choice in the matter. The ideology of the Black struggle, the revolutionary consciousness of the slaves, had appeared to his Westernized eyes, part legend, part whimsy, part art. Yet he realized it had been sufficient to arouse them into mass resistance and had provided them with a vision of the world they preferred. Their collective action had achieved the force of a historical antilogic to racism, slavery, and capitalism.