

SIX:

COMMUNITY AND HISTORY

Walk on water, walk on a leaf,
hardest of all is to walk on grief.

Anonymous Black

Community is the last of the four critical spheres of social life addressed in this book, and in many ways it is the most difficult to theoretically comprehend. It is as difficult to define succinctly as was politics. Identifying the common element uniting different kinds of community activity such as religion, nationalism, art, and racism is not always easy. The community sphere is frequently more diffuse than other spheres of social life because it is often not centered around one key institution. And finally, the actual character of any particular society's community sphere is as likely to be determined by the nature of the interface between that community and others as from the operation of internal forces.

In light of all these additional complications, perhaps it is not so surprising that formalized leftist ideologies such as orthodox Marxism, feminism, and anarchism have so consistently underestimated the importance of community issues.¹ To make the point bluntly: If one were asked to cast all ideological predispositions aside and draw the single most important lesson from the raw data of history of the twentieth century to date, that lesson might easily be the power of nationalism, racism, and cultural identification as motivating forces in human affairs. An inadequate appreciation of the nature and power of these forces is perhaps the single largest blind spot in formal left theory.

The Inadequacy of the Base/Superstructure Framework for Understanding Culture

As we have seen, in the orthodox Marxist analysis economic relations are basic and cultural relations derivative. Of course their "derivation" may be more or less direct and the derived cultural realm can feedback on material relationships. But in the final analysis it is material interests stemming from economic relations that determine cultural norms and habits, however imperfect or delayed the translation from economics to culture may sometimes be.²

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MARXISM AND SOCIALIST THEORY

Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel

Though this orthodox view is largely discredited among many neo-Marxists, it nonetheless hangs on tenaciously in a variety of ways.³ Most debilitating, many Marxists are inflexibly unwilling to ask whether non-economic factors can have an important impact on cultural forms. Underestimations of non-material human needs have seriously constrained most Marxist treatments of subjects such as what constitutes good art and the source of nationalism's power.⁴ But we should take this discussion one step at a time.

Marx himself said, "Certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization."⁴ That is, these "periods of highest development of art" escape the base/superstructure logic of the Marxist orthodoxy. One might argue that such moments of "high" art are infrequent enough so that the orthodox position can be preserved, in the main, even against its originator's protest. But if one claims that art—merely one facet of a people's complete culture which embodies not only artifacts, but language, customs, and norms of intercourse—is essentially a reflection of material relations, how does one explain the enduring beauty that a Greek play or vase has for modern admirers?⁵ We certainly live within a very different web of material relations than did the Greeks responsible for this object of our pleasure. Moreover, most of us know nothing of the social relations of production reigning in the times of Greek tragedy and certainly have never experienced those relations. Nor is our interest entirely due to curiosity concerning our historical roots.⁶ The explanation is less "materialist": all art has an "aesthetic" which

* An interesting passage from a recent Marxist volume which forebodes many concerns we will raise—though the author avoids addressing the issues in any detail at all—is found in Melvin Rader, *Marx's Interpretation of History*, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 82: "We are confronted by a whole nest of questions. Can we explain religious beliefs and practices by simply paying attention to the way in which people make their living? If we were given enough information about feudal economy would we see that a certain form of religion (Catholicism) must ensue? If so, is this a logical as well as a causal entailment? Are the religion and the economy united in a larger organic configuration? Is the economy the more basic causally at all times and places? If not, what accounts for the difference? Until a Marxist can answer these questions he or she has not solved the puzzles of historical explanation, but perhaps neither has anyone else."

speaks to humanity across time and across modes of production and consumption. Artifacts from prehistoric or unfamiliar modern cultures that have appeal here in the United States today offer graphic evidence of the point we're making. As Herbert Marcuse expressed it: "However correctly one has analyzed a poem, play, or novel in terms of its social content, the questions as to whether the particular work is good, beautiful, and true are still unanswered."⁷ And if art transcends economic determination, might not the broader sphere of culture as a whole do so as well?

It is true that art appeals in *historical* context, often resonating with feelings arising from our current economic or social situation. But art also appeals to our species being and our innate aesthetic sense which, however it may be socially and historically molded, also has an element of permanence. We can distinguish art from factual reporting. We can appreciate art across great spans of time and social organization. Marcuse says, "it seems that art expresses a truth, an experience, a necessity which, although not in the domain of radical praxis, are nevertheless essential components of revolution."⁸ Brecht says, "a work which does not exhibit its sovereignty vis-a-vis reality and which does not bestow sovereignty upon the public vis-a-vis reality is not a work of art."⁹ That is, for Brecht the very character of escaping determination by another aspect of society—principally the economy—is a prerequisite for terming a particular production art.

Simplifying for the present purpose, we can identify three "sensitivities" of artistic communication. First, and this is what orthodox Marxists recognize, there is a historic/social sensitivity. That is, we relate to the content of art which addresses our historical predicament. This could be the art's spirit or tone—militant or somber—or its actual meaning, for example, a poetic clarification of the essence of human alienation. Second, there is a universal *social* sensitivity. There are existential feelings, moods, and textures that are simply a part of being human in society. These relate, for example, to the phenomena of birth, death, friendship, love, aging, learning, loneliness, etc. Though of course these are socially mediated, when considered in the abstract, they are more "universal" than "historical." Art that resonates with this social sensitivity speaks across time, space, language, custom, and experience. Finally, there is what we might call a biological sensitivity attuned to shape, rhythm, tone, color, pace, texture, etc.

This too expresses itself only historically: we develop a greater or lesser taste for jazz, rock and roll, or classical music and for one tonal scale or another depending on many social and historical factors. But the genetic substratum which recognizes and reacts to lines, curves, tones, colors, and rhythms is innate and gives human continuity to this aspect of aesthetics. Surely these three sensibilities often work together: consider audience response to a Shakespearean play, a Picasso painting, or a Bruce Springsteen concert. There is identification in all three cases with historical, human, and physical sensibilities.

So certainly there are intimate relations between art—as one part of culture—and the economic relations of the society within which it is created. But once one assumes that this relation operates predominantly in one direction—from the economy to art (or to culture as a whole)—there is little reason to investigate artistic processes themselves as autonomously important forms of human activity. If art is an economic reflection, we need not search for its roots other than in the economy. If culture is but an ideological deposit of material relations, we needn't ask if it arises from non-economic needs and has attributes "of its own." But however this assumption may benefit the economist, whose science is thereby elevated to great heights, it does little to shed light upon the real dynamics of cultural creativity and activity. And though these general problems concerning art and culture arise from assuming a reflective base/superstructure theory, they do not disappear as soon as one becomes sophisticated enough to allow for "mutual causality" or for a moment of "relative autonomy" for culture.*

*It is important to note that beyond crippling one's understanding of culture, the base/superstructure conceptualization also embodies an implicit Euro-centric racism. For if one says that history is fundamentally a function of economic (read: "forces of production") development, then one can naturally equate "primitive" technology with backwardness in all other social realms as well. If the tools are close to "stone age" so must the culture, polity, kin patterns, and other social life characteristics be barbaric. There is no capacity in this orthodox Marxist, materialist approach for understanding that a culture might consciously opt against "technological advance," nor that there can be cultural, political, and ethical wisdom alongside what western science might call "technological ignorance," nor even that this so-called ignorance may be ecologically enlightened in a way our own atomic awareness is not.

Rather, to transcend the orthodoxy's inability to understand the reasons why people create, defend, live and die for cultures, it will be necessary to make more than "reformist adjustments" in the central concepts and categories of orthodox analysis. One way to develop a further understanding of the radical kinds of changes required is to move from the problems of art to the dynamics of another cultural instance, race.

The Failure of Orthodox Understandings of Race

In one orthodox analysis racism is a tool the capitalist class employs to divide workers. In this view, the dynamics of capital accumulation tend to unify all wage laborers. As this is potentially threatening to capitalists, they must find ways to counteract the tendency.* One way is to play diverse groups of workers off against one another: use one group to supervise the work of another; allow one group better accommodations, wages and services; reserve higher status occupations for one group; use one group as strikebreakers against another. In general, produce mistrust and antagonism where there would otherwise be a dangerous threat of unity. Create super-exploitation on one side and coopted allies on the other by making it appear to the favored group that they have something worth protecting in the capitalist order.¹⁰ In this view racism is only a subterfuge. The real issue is working class solidarity. It is therefore imperative for the left to appeal to commonalities rather than confront differences. "If racism was simply a device by the capitalist class to divide the workers, then it followed that the workers could be expected to join forces to oppose racism."¹¹

*In a still prior view which is however not uncommon even today, racism is seen as not that important a problem, period. For the logic of capitalist accumulation itself is expected to continually overcome racist spillovers from earlier periods. This idea of capitalism's logic being independent of and counter to racial divisions—in turn seen as feudal residues—and of this logic eventually blurring all but class distinctions derives from the classics. For example, it is clearly expressed in *The Communist Manifesto* and in the *German Ideology* about which Horace Davis writes: "Marx here speaks as if the working class already dissolves the several nationalities within itself in the existing society, and the constant efforts of Marxists like Lenin was to make this aspiration an actuality."

This view that racism divides the working class and that class analysis fostering class solidarity is central doesn't deny the impact racism can have, nor suggest ignoring it tactically or even strategically. But it does preclude asking whether there are seeds of racism other than those planted by capitalists. It does fail to explain why, though capitalists exploit all differences among workers, racism is particularly enduring and incendiary. It doesn't explain why, though Black people demand social equality and the right to live and move about freely, when given the choice they generally prefer to live and marry in Black communities. It doesn't fully explain the ways whites benefit from racism and why they often display racist attitudes that go well beyond anything capitalists seek to inculcate. Nor does it explain the wide variety of cultural differences that make whites, Blacks, and Chicanos different from and "strange" to one another. These differences make communication difficult and often suspicious and fearful. We talk, eat, dance, move, and celebrate differently. Is it realistic to speak and act as if "unite and fight" is an obvious and achievable aim? The orthodox approach precludes examining any strategy for overcoming racism other than integration. It relegates racism to a tactical and strategic concern, rather than treating it as a matter of highest principle.¹² The orthodox approach ignores Amílcar Cabral's injunctions that cultural differences between social communities may have fundamental impact on their receptivity to socialism and on the energy with which they will struggle for it.*

In a similar vein, Marx and Engels often spoke of the benefits that imperial expansion could bring "backward" peoples, for example "energetic yankees" could aid "lazy Mexicans." As Horace Davis sums up, "the idea that the 'backward peoples' might get farther if they resisted the encroachments of Saint Bourgeois and made their own selections of the blessings of civilization in their own time, was indeed slow in penetrating Marxism." *Nationalism and Socialism: Marxist and Labor Theories of Nationalism to 1917*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1967, p. 61.

*"In the thorough analysis of social structure which every liberation movement should be capable of making in relation to the imperative of the struggle, the cultural characteristics of each group in society have a place of prime importance. For, while the culture has a mass character, it is not equally developed in all sectors of society. The attitude of each social group toward the liberation struggle is dictated by its economic interests,

The highest orthodox principle is class unity. Racism is a problem primarily because it is a division of that unity. Once racial division is overcome class struggle can resume with the working class significantly strengthened. Logically, "no matter how vocal the Communists were, for example, on 'Negro rights,' in the final analysis they looked upon the white labor movement as the dominant factor and considered the 'Negro' as the most oppressed worker and therefore the paradigm proletariat: when integration is achieved it will be the Black workers who lead the class struggles, as workers to be sure."¹³ Regarding racism, this vision recognizes an economic dynamic, but no independent cultural one.

Abstracting from issues of motivation or underlying analysis, integrationist strategies have both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand there is an assertion of equal humanity and political rights. But on the other there is a loss of dignity and self-respect and a denial of legitimate separate history and culture that accompanies being integrated from below. Widespread Marxist support for integration as the main aim for Negroes was largely insensitive to this duality. In this light frequent Marxist hostility to Black nationalism—a movement sensitive to the positive aspects of Black history and culture—should come as no surprise. "What the Marxists called 'Negro-white unity' within their organizations was, in reality, white domination."¹⁴ For it was at best an assimilationist unity which presumed the superiority of white norms and the expendability of "Blackness."

As we will continue to argue, the economic analysis of the roots and dynamics of racism was totally insufficient to the task of addressing both Black needs and aims as well as the receptivity of white workers to the manipulative tactics of their bosses. Certainly the capitalists, as one among many tactics, played upon racism, but

but is also influenced profoundly by its culture. It may even be admitted that these differences in cultural level explain differences in behavior toward the liberation movement on the part of individuals who belong to the same socio-economic group. It is at this point that culture reaches its full significance for each individual: understanding and integration into his [or her] environment, identification with fundamental problems and aspirations of the society, acceptance of the possibility of change in the direction of progress." Amílcar Cabral, *Return to the Source*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973, p. 44.

why were these endeavors so successful? Why did working people often respond to nationalist, racist, and religious appeals so forcefully? As was the case in our discussion of orthodox analyses of sexual dynamics, the fact that there must be some form of accommodation between economic and other relations, means that an economic analysis of racism will necessarily embody partial truth and yield some understanding. Thus, explanations of racism based on the idea of "white skin privilege"—that is, based on material advantage—do explain part of what goes on. But the roots and tenacity of the non-economic racial (or patriarchal) phenomena are invisible to such an approach. The influence of neighborhood and family life, and the role of image, psychology and culture are all ignored. When Harold Cruse wrote, in 1969, "The coming coalition of Negro organizations will contain national elements in roles of conspicuous leadership. It cannot and will not be subordinate to any white groups with which it is allied. There is no longer room for the revolutionary paternalism that has been the hallmarks of organizations such as the C.P.,"¹⁵ the part of the left infected with orthodox Marxist ideas was incapable of hearing what he was saying. The problem was a *misunderstanding of Black nationalism*, another side to the failure of orthodox Marxist analyses of race.

Nationalism Is Neither Bourgeois Nor Proletarian

If one sees culture as an embodiment of the implications of economic relations and racism as a product of ruling class manipulation, it makes some sense to speak of a "common or international culture of the proletarian movement,"¹⁶ and to work towards it. But this orientation insures that "desiring to see the Negro group as an appendage to the main body of white workers, the Marxists have been unable, theoretically and practically, to set the Negro off and see him in terms of his own national minority group existence and identity inclusive of his class, caste, and ideological stratifications."¹⁷ Communist Party historians would examine Negro history in a way to glorify what they liked and obscure what they did not like (in particular, nationalist heroes and aspirations). Herbert Aptheker, for example, fails to even acknowledge the existence of Marcus Garvey and the nationalist Garvey movement

even while analyzing Negro activities during the period of Garvey's heyday. As Harold Cruse says of this, "The causes for these omissions are, of course, apparent: orthodox western Marxism cannot incorporate nationalism into its scheme."¹⁸ Similarly, according to Robert Allen, Communists study Black history and the history of racial oppression but they do not address the history of white supremacy as a cultural formation. The point is that the orthodox intellectual framework steers the analyst away from examining Blacks and whites as communities with different cultures, and only toward class relations as they cut across community lines. Frantz Fanon makes a similar point though perhaps implicitly accepting more of the orthodox approach than we do: "In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence: you are rich because you are white; you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem."¹⁹

Cruse says that the Marxists "use their method of analysis not to understand the Negro but to make some outstanding Black leadership symbol fit the political line of their own preconceptions."²⁰ But why does such behavior occur? For the orthodox Marxist, Black nationalism is seen as a product of Negro false consciousness. The Black nationalist takes the superficial appearance for reality just as the racist white worker is deceived into taking a superficial appearance (hostility between communities) for reality. The issue underneath these appearances is class structure and the consciousness that must replace black nationalist aspirations as well as white supremacist notions, is class consciousness. In this view class struggle confronts the real enemy and race struggle is a misplaced diversion. It follows that Leninists should seek to use Black organizations primarily as recruiting grounds for the "working class party."²¹

Naturally the definition of the "national question" (and the "woman question") is couched in class terms. Eugene Genovese makes the point well in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Afro-American and Southern History*:

Until recently, American Marxists like many others viewed racism as simply a class question. They regarded racial discrimination as a 'mask for privilege'—a technique by

which the ruling class exploits minorities and divides the working class. According to this view, capitalism generated slavery, and slavery generated racism; but the destruction of slavery did not end the economic exploitation of black people that racism justified and perpetuated. As an oppressed proletariat, the blacks had class interests identical with those of the white working class and a clear duty to join with their white brothers in bringing down the capitalist system: 'Black and white, unite and fight!'²²

Naturally the well-read Trotskyist will argue that Black (and women's) organizations which form at a time of relative class quietude are progressive, having the potential to spur class struggle. But once class struggle deepens and once the working class becomes militant, anti-racist (and anti-sexist) demands must be pursued in context of a class movement and subject to the discipline of a class-based party. Separate attempts to address these issues by racially (or sexually) defined organizations will only be construed as peripheral if not hostile to socialist struggle. They will be diversionary. They will not promote working class solidarity—the goal, after all—but impede it. As such, they will finally be either bourgeois or petty bourgeois. For movements can only represent class interests, and movements outside the working class movement must therefore express the interests of other classes.²³ So as far as a program for Black people, and as far as a vision of something other than white supremacy, the orthodox Marxists of the Communist Party and many other Leninist organizations offer little more than the integrationist program of the NAACP, save that these "revolutionaries" attach a call for "socialism" which is, however, defined only economically.²⁴ True, some will be prodded by the activism of Black movements to modify their orientation adopting slightly altered views and acceding to some nationalist demands, but as long as the orthodox Marxist retains a guiding theory which has no place for analysis of non-economic bases for racial divisions and aspirations, any race sensitivity inspired by struggle will be tenuous. It will prove opportunistic and disappear every time the working class and its production-based organizations give even the slightest sign of growing militance.

Harold Cruse relates a passage put to him by a white Com-

munist Party organizer in Harlem: "You are for consolidating the Harlem ghetto as if it were a 'nation.' That is wrong. The Party is for breaking up the ghetto and integrating the Negro people all over New York City."²⁵ The cadre's view is propelled by a desire for integration as a means to end racism. The view attributed by the cadre to Cruse is propelled by a nationalist desire for autonomous culture and heritage. Can the two be reconciled? Is there a single theoretical perspective which can embody the positive attributes of each orientation? Obviously this must be the goal of a truly revolutionary understanding but before going further into the theoretical requisites for such an advance, more should be said about practical experiences within the United States.

Weakness of White Leninist "Community Practice" in the U.S.

In his brilliant book, *Reluctant Reformers*, Robert Allen chronicles major portions of the history of racial struggle in the United States. It is a story of racist depravity on the one hand and of profound resistance on the other. But it is also a story of multi-faceted alliances between whites and Blacks, based upon the United advance of both groups, in which in the end the Blacks are left behind. It is a story of paternalistic anti-racism wherein white groups fight for general Black interests and yet simultaneously exclude and otherwise oppress more accessible local Blacks.

For example, Allen tells of the abolitionist movement's attempts to widen its base of support by excluding Blacks from meetings and general membership. "Those white abolitionists who sought to deny membership to blacks were calculating that by excluding Blacks they could gain wider support for the cause..."²⁶ But what exactly was "the cause"? Certainly not an end to white supremacy. Rather, for these abolitionists the issue was getting rid of slavery and the associated mentality that Blacks were simply animals deserving no rights whatsoever, and adopting more benign forms of stratification in its place—segregation—and a moderated consciousness that Blacks are indeed people, but inferior people requiring aid and administration if they are to accomplish all they can for themselves and for society. "As late as 1826," Allen reports, "some 143 white controlled anti-slavery societies excluded Blacks and women from membership."²⁷

Considering post bellum organizing efforts among farmers and workers in the South and throughout the country, Allen notes that two pressures affected the possibilities. On the one hand workers and farmers were pushed by a shared class perception toward some sort of unity against big capital. On the other hand, however, the requirements of maintaining white supremacy propelled white farmers and workers to oppose the Blacks in pursuit of equality. As Allen documents, there was more at work than the simple divide-and-conquer machinations of some bosses. Even when movement leaders actively pursued alliances, pressure from the rank-and-file propelled racist outcomes and molded the leaders in turn. Allen goes to lengths we can't repeat here in addressing the history of populist and women's suffrage experiences to demonstrate these points.

And when analyzing the development of the labor movement in the U.S., Allen shows the shallowness of pointing to the use of Blacks as strikebreakers as a fundamental cause of racism among whites. In fact, argues Allen, it is the other way around. Widespread racism allows the boss to employ Blacks in such ways as to break strikes, but only because the mental disposition called racism is present among whites in the first place. "Race prejudice causes the Black strikebreaker, even though he may be only a few among hundreds of white scabs, to be singled out for special slander and violence."²⁸ The press and racist commentators of all kinds inflate the impact of Black scabs all out of proportion and make little mention of their white counterparts. Certainly this creates a climate of violence and division that is beneficial to the boss. But the workers are on the scene. Why do they believe the inflammatory rhetoric? Scare stories about their own tactics are not so effective in disrupting their perceptions. Regrettably white workers have a disposition to believe the lies in the first place, even before they are told. And when in some instances solidarity becomes so powerful that no such fragmenting can work, of course the movement is stronger and the demands more often won. But does racism disappear as a result? Not at all. Once the strike ends white workers return to relatively better work at relatively better pay and go home to relatively more comfortable environs and better schools, and the momentary solidarity begins to erode once more. Blacks have been used—even if they were the most militant fighters and leaders of the

workers' struggle. The division of communities that lies at the basis of racism in the U.S. is more substantial and abiding than any "capitalist trick" could ever be.

In his review of the history of CIO organizing drives, Allen argues that local white resistance to racial equality forced union leaders to a steadily more racist position: "In Illinois white workers even went on strike to maintain segregated toilets. CIO leadership opposed these strikes but the leadership itself was becoming less militant on the question of racial superiority"²⁹ as the desire of national union leadership to organize the South increased. For instead of viewing the rabid cries of Southern industrialists (and the threatened AFL) that they were "nigger lovers," "communists," "jew-boys," "carpet baggers," and the like as evidence of their strength, the CIO leaders appointed local anti-communists and racists as organizers and relegated Blacks to segregated locals. The point of Allen's analysis, it seems to us, was not to belittle the importance of class forces and capitalist machinations but to show that racism had independent roots among whites as well, and that it is critical to understand the non-economic roots of racism. What Allen's work points to is that racism is interwoven into every aspect of our existence—into cultural but also economic, kin, and political relations of all kinds—so that a partial approach to overcoming racism will always be insufficient. Even the anti-racists held their views only very tenuously. Pressures of various sorts could reduce their principles much more rapidly since they had no analysis of the desirability of Black cultural development. But what is the orthodox Marxist response to all this, for neither we nor Allen are the first to voice such complaints.

That communists were among the most staunchly anti-racist in their demands and programs during the thirties and forties cannot be denied for a minute, at least at the first level of analysis—at the same level of analysis that portrayed white abolitionists as paragons of anti-racism. But just as the abolitionist had a different agenda than the complete elimination of "white supremacy" and would even adopt racist policies to attract white support, so too Leninist organizations wanted to increase working class strength above all else, and fought racism only to achieve this end, dropping the fight whenever other means became more effective. This, at least, is the historical picture Black analysts like Allen and Cruse paint.

"Protestations to the contrary, the party's practices in fact reduced black people to the role of passive objects to be manipulated in accordance with priorities that had little or nothing to do with the economic or political objectives of black workers themselves."³⁰ The Communist Party, according to Allen and substantiated by a variety of historical lessons he brings to bear, had but one strategy: "to gain control of the Black movement and bring it in line with the current policy of the Communist International."³¹ The case of the National Negro Congress is indicative. Proposed in 1935 at a conference at Howard University, the Congress was to be an on-going organization bringing "unity to the Black movement by embracing Black labor unions, religious, reform, fraternal and civic groups."³² The Congress "adopted a long list of resolutions covering a wide range of problems affecting Black people."³³ Communists were members from the outset, and very concerned that the Congress also adopt an anti-fascist plank, as unifying anti-fascists was the main Communist Party aim at the time. And indeed such a plank was adopted, meeting with the "wholehearted approval of the Communists." The Congress was successful in setting up local and regional councils throughout the country and it rapidly became "one of the more important Black organizations of national stature."³⁴ But then came the Russo-German pact of 1939 and a change in line by the Communist International: anti-fascism was out, now the U.S. must be kept out of the war at all costs. The Party sought to convince Blacks that they had no stake in the "European war." The Negro National Congress had to be brought into line. The ensuing chaos succeeded in "decimating the ranks of this once promising organization."³⁵ But the critical thing to realize is that this was no cost at all, at least in the eyes of the Communists. Their class line was the basis for all programs. If a Black organization usefully fit in, that was good and beneficial. If such an organization did not comply, it was useless or worse.

With no understanding of the basis for Black nationalism, save for grossly asymmetrical analogies between Blacks and national groups in the Soviet Union few had ever heard of, orthodox U.S. Marxists couldn't possibly understand the importance of autonomous Black organizations, much less their analyses and programs, especially as these were sometimes even contrary to the immediate desires of white working people. Richard Wright's career

and autobiography, *American Hunger*, testifies powerfully to the tensions between communism and nationalism in the U.S. Wright portrays the communists as seeing Black workers as paradigm proletarians all ready to lead an American revolution, when the truth was anything but. "The speakers claimed the Negroes were angry, that they were about to rise and join their fellow white workers to make a revolution. I was in and out of many Negro homes each day and I knew that the Negroes were lost, ignorant, sick in mind and body. I saw that a vast distance separated the agitators from the masses, a distance so vast that the agitators did not know how to appeal to the people they sought to lead."³⁶ Wright's account of his own efforts to diminish this gap and of the resistance from orthodox thinkers (including Blacks) to his thoughts and writing, is a testimony to the power of such a narrow vision to cloud and mystify the minds of even the most devoted fighters against oppression, as many of the Communists were.

But beyond offering a graphic illustration of how maintenance of views that fly in the face of obvious facts could only be accomplished by a tortuous mutilation of the critical consciousness of many Black communist activists, Wright demonstrates that party members were subject to the same defensive dynamics that plague all "communities" that have developed a hostile "we versus they" ideology:

While engaged in conversation, they stuck their thumbs in their suspenders or put their left hands into their shirt bosoms or hooked their thumbs into their back pockets as they had seen Lenin and Stalin do in photographs. Though they did not know it, they were naively practicing magic; they thought that if they acted like the men who had overthrown the czar, then surely they ought to be able to win their freedom in America.

In speaking they rolled their "r's" in Continental style, pronouncing "party" as "parrtee," stressing the last syllable, having picked up the habit from white Communists. "Comrades" became "cumrrades," and "distribute," which they had known how to pronounce all their lives, was twisted into "distrribuuute," with the accent on the last instead of the second syllable, a

mannerism which they copied from the Polish Communist immigrants who did not know how to pronounce the word...

An hour's listening disclosed the fanatical intolerance of minds scaled against new ideas, new facts, new feelings, new attitudes, new hints at ways to live. They denounced books they had never read, people they had never known, ideas they could never understand, and doctrines whose names they could not pronounce. Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met Communism.³⁷

Obviously American Communists themselves were subject to a negative community dynamic involving artificial cultural uniformity and demeaning views of others, and ideological defense mechanisms against contrary notions. If it is far fetched to argue that *this* whole phenomenon can be reduced to the product of economic forces or the manipulative powers of the ruling class, we would suggest that a similar reductionist analysis of racism between the larger Black and white communities is far fetched as well. Moreover, if the Communist Party was ever to have been able to address the situation of Blacks in the U.S., if it was to have had real social equality rather than only assimilationist racism within its own organizations, if it was to have been open to growth rather than continually defensively ruling out threatening ideas of all sorts; then, at a minimum, it would have had to have had a theoretical orientation sufficient to understand the broader roots of racism, nationalism, and sectarian community formation and activity in general.

Allen summarizes this point as follows: "The party responded to racism organizationally, (but never with caucuses) instead of ideologically. Individuals were purged but the virus of white chauvinism—an ideological phenomenon—was not attacked."³⁸ The party was against racism because it saw racism as a barrier to working class solidarity. That logically implied that racism should only be fought in ways promoting class solidarity. Blacks and whites would be urged to "unite and fight" so that class struggle could be heightened. But to support Blacks against whites, to fight racism in ways that temporarily aggravated tensions, or to recognize the merits of

strengthening an autonomous Black culture and community, were all considerations beyond the party's orthodox orientation. "The racism and sexism of American society found curious reflections in the social behavior of the party members."³⁹ And this curious fact, along with certain others also stemming from the narrowness of their theory and practice, eventually consigned the orthodox thinkers to the mechanical and defensive sectarianism Wright railed against.

Contemporary History

While we cannot present here any detailed analysis of the various organizational trends and experiences concerning relations between white and Black movements in the sixties and seventies, a few comments on one prevalent phenomenon might be revealing. For the sixties did see the emergence of a powerful Black organization that was both nationalist and committed to a Leninist formulation of socialist aims and imperatives: the Black Panther Party. On the one hand, many more white leftists and white left organizations tolerated Panther nationalism than would have been likely in the 30s and 40s. But could this have been in part—however unconsciously—because the Panthers were useful as 'victims' to expose the oppression of American capitalism? Or was there a feeling among members of white communist groups that the Panthers' disciplined cadre organization could act as a spur to the formation of (real?) white Leninist organizations? In any case, where the Black community was astute enough to realize that the revolution had not yet arrived, and that white people were not nearly ready to defend Black militants when push came to shove, the Black Panther Party was not so astute. And whether or not the failure of the Panthers to read the level of their actual support—not just the sympathy for their aims and great courage—in the Black community was partially due to their blind adherence to revolutionary models that had little to do with the situation or mindset of their natural constituents, they found themselves out on a limb as a result of an underlying societal racism that was easily focused into repression because of the party's overt militance and espousal of violence. The Panthers were sacrificed, literally, to the forces of the state.

The sixties were a profound moment in U.S. history replete

with courage and insight not often attained before or since. Yet the subservient behavior of many white leftists toward the Panthers—uncritical, blind support of an idealized reflection of what one wishes oneself to be, all experienced in relative safety—was a testimony to both the diversity of forms racism can take, and to the need for movements which address racism in *all* its cultural forms, head on. When the Panthers were unceremoniously moved off center stage, the white left developed a similar temporary infatuation with the American Indian Movement. But who now remains concerned over the fate of Means, Banks, and Camp? Who any longer spends a thought on the membership and constituency of AIM, much less on the plight of Native Americans?

The attention some white Leninist organizations continue to give to issues of racism is much like the adulation many whites had for the Panthers and Native American Indians. It doesn't stem from or necessarily grow into a serious understanding of cultural and community relations. It is not oriented toward a clearly enunciated goal which will protect and further develop diverse cultures. Almost always it is tactical. For it is built into Leninist analysis—the honest Leninist shouldn't really even be upset by the accusation—that support for "national democratic rights" is a means toward class solidarity and socialist revolution behind the vanguard party of the working class. We are not contesting that many Leninists are actively anti-racist, both in their personal behavior and in their political commitments. Rather we are saying that the orthodox, class focused theoretical approach, coupled with the vanguard and democratic centralist approach to strategy, consign even the most responsibly anti-racist individuals to a group dynamic which undercuts the basis, depth, and insight of their anti-racism. The primary lesson of this whole section on white and Leninist practice seems clear enough: we need a movement sensitive to the complicated relation between racial and class dynamics that does not relegate *either* to a derivative status. We need to understand and organize in cognizance of the specific community roots of both white supremacy and Black nationalism not assuming that these are merely ideological reflections of economic factors. And we need organizational forms and methods which embody principles which run counter to the logic of class and race oppression, rather than

ones which at the deepest level tend to reinforce the logic of these oppressions.*

Some Other Ramifications of the Orthodox Marxist Ignorance of Community

We have discussed, in very broad and general strokes, some issues regarding art, culture in general, and race. But there are related problems for the orthodox approach associated with other parts of the spectrum of cultural diversity in the United States. For example, by and large orthodox Marxists are insensitive to the importance and wisdom that may be gleaned from an on-going diversity of regional demarcations. For in addition to community differences along borders of race or ethnicity for that matter, there are also differences that arise due to geographic distances and the different experiences these may delineate. For example, urban and rural cultural norms are usually quite different. Moreover, in the U.S., people of Appalachia, the South, and Southwest don't like to be subsumed under East and/or West coast definitions of beauty, manners, linguistic norms, notions of celebration, morality, daily lifestyle, and pace. Even cities—New Orleans, Los Angeles, Boston, N.Y., Austin, Chicago—have their own characteristic cultural attributes as do different neighborhoods inside these cities, however further differentiated the same cities and neighborhoods may be

*The point here is comparable to points made earlier about the way economic, kinship, and political relations can invade the very contours of revolutionary movements. It isn't merely that such movements can have wrong positions or demands with regard to one or another aspect of social reproduction and struggle, but that the organizations of the movement can embody the oppressive characteristics of one or more realms. The division between conceptual and executionary labor may be present reproducing classist consciousness and behavior. A division between male and female modalities may be present reproducing patriarchal consciousness and behavior. A power hierarchy may be present reproducing political characteristics of the larger society. And similarly, an inter- and intra- community orientation may be present, usually in the form of sectarianism or the norms of dominant community groups, which reproduces the ways of thinking and acting constitutive of all types of inter-community oppression.