

Black Radical Theory and Practice: Gender, Race, and Class

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This essay is an analysis of Black feminist interventions into the Black radicalisms of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The focus is on certain strands of Black radicalism, especially the Black revolutionary nationalism which emerged in the United States in the mid-1960s through mid-1970s and a new Black radical formation of the early 21st century, The Black Radical Congress. The idea is to break open the race/class dialectic embedded in traditional Black radical theory and practice by utilizing a gender critique.

Black radicalism is defined here as those philosophies and practices which articulate deep level social transformations in the lives of Black people, requiring the dismantling of systems of oppression. Nonetheless, this is not an easy space from which to argue for a gender, race, and class analysis, since from the outset, concern with "the race" and with white supremacy and capitalist economic exploitation has been the driving force behind Black radical theory and practice. My position is that "the race" and class must be understood in the context of complicated gender, race, and class scripts. Given such complexity, I focus here on: 1) Black revolutionary nationalism as an emancipatory strategy heavily articulated in the late 1960s to mid-1970s, and how Black women interrogated this stance for its failure to include a critique of patriarchy; 2) the impact of some Black feminist interventions into Black radical theory and practice during the past three decades, and how these interventions have opened up our understanding of race and class; and 3) the emergence of the Black Radical Congress and the initial impact of radical Black feminism on its principles of unity and organizational practice, with implications for 21st Black freedom struggles in Africa America.*

We must be very clear that the problems of people of African descent have never been simply the expression of racial practices. The complicated race/class/gender histories reflect the permutations and deep interconnections of these processes. These are complex social relations involving multiple sites of oppression, occurring in conjunctive, disjunctive, and contradictory ways to generate a system of race, color, gender, sexual, and class oppression (Brewer, 1993). It is within this conceptual frame of multiplicity that the continuation of Black exclusion, economic exploitation, and state violence must be understood. And the gender dimension is key. At the center of the global economy are women whose labor is used to further enrich a small economic elite but who also do the socially reproductive work of the world-cleaning, cooking, caring-unpaid labor and super exploitation that goes unnamed and unchecked. In its public expression, the female incorporation into the logic of transnational capital too often means the disruption of traditional women's informal economic sectors. As these are destroyed so are the interstices of communal life-communities with some degree of economic autonomy and social cohesion. So, too, is destroyed the spiritual and cultural glue of many black communities, the possibility for whole communities of African descent to survive and thrive. For Black men, this global division of labor frequently means deep economic marginalization, or being locked into the illegal economy the prison-industrial complex, where they make up half or more of the population.

Significantly, patriarchal relations infuse the global economy. That is, it is male dominated. A small elite of male capitalists own most of the wealth of the planet. Mies (1986) calls this patriarchal capitalism. This is a racist, capitalist, patriarchal dynamic. Moreover, these political economic and state realities are infused with cultural and ideological meanings. The discourses of inferiority, unworthiness, criminality are used to justify and rationalize deep levels of exploitation and inequality. These ideological and material processes are now being remade in the context of

transnational, global capital, but the historic exploitation of Black people has been intimately tied to the evolution and growth of the capitalist economy, patriarchy and racism—the racialist/capitalist/patriarchal state—since its very inception.

Marable (1993) is explicit in defining the state in the U.S. as being racist and capitalist. He argues that this demystifies the notion that the U.S. state is democratically constituted. It is racially and class constituted. Analyzing and resisting this race/class logic is deeply embedded in the Black radical tradition. However, this view of the race/class dynamic has been contested. Cox (1970), for example, argued that capitalism has a tremendous leveling impact, despite its intense exploitation of workers. In his view, neither ethnic identities nor racial oppression would exist long in its wake. Since the early 16th century, under the powerful and irreversible pressures of capitalist culture, the whole world entered a process of assimilation and unification. This made it necessary for workers to organize above all against the intense class exploitation that characterizes industrial capitalist societies. So Cox went on to argue that "demographic and ecological imperatives would increasingly force the total population to deal with the resources of the planet as a whole."

Ethnicity for Cox, then, was a regressive social relation centered in traditional ties. Cox felt that under the push of capitalist modernity such cultural bonds would loosen. Race and racism, too, would go. Race as a socially constructed category whose signifier is the physical, and since the 15th century heavily skin color, was created and could be dismantled. The illogic of race and racism as the ideology of white supremacy worked to divide the class struggle, noted Cox. None-the-less, class dynamics would ultimately constitute a more powerful social force.

Du Bois, too, grappled with class. He raised the issue of how the Black elite became wedded ideologically to capitalism and grew alienated and contemptuous of the Black masses. According to Robinson (1983), although Du Bois early in his career had pushed the idea of a talented tenth educated class, he would gradually move away from this philosophy. In his work on Reconstruction, Du Bois reluctantly came to the conclusion that the idealism of the Black petite bourgeoisie had been transformed into an ideology which served to hold the Black community as a semi-preserve for the more effective exploitation by its elite. This realization helped precipitate his early radicalism (Robinson 1983).

Although Du Bois would go through a number of ideological and intellectual changes, his critique of the petite bourgeoisie remains relevant today. But it is clear from recent Black feminist scholarship that his position on gender must be carefully scrutinized. The work of James (1997), for example, calls for a complex reading of his position. This is especially important given the conflicts surrounding Anna Julia Cooper and Du Bois in the NAACP (James 1997). What is clear is that he did not place gender in the center of his critical readings of race and class. Thus neither he nor Cox *systematically* addressed gender oppression.

The racialist capitalist order is indeed heavily gendered. bell hooks names this systemic dynamic "racist, patriarchal capitalism." Black women's inequality is at the center of this system. But analyses of race and class with regard to Africa America have been isolated from gender. A race/class analysis that erases gender misses the gendered face of the global working class. This face is female. By extension, the deindustrialization of much of the Black urban core has marginalized a generation of young Black men and some women from work. Some Black women and a few Black men, on the other hand, do the work of the new global economy, low paid service work. It keeps them in poverty. The structure of the economy is gendered, raced, and classed.

Thus I contend that any discussion of Black radicalism must extend beyond the race/class dialectic which has so consumed the theory and practice of the Black freedom struggle of the 20th century into the 21st. This is because even when radicals have carved out alternative frameworks for living outside the existing order or revolutionarily transforming it, the gender lens has been missing (Wallace 1995). This omissive thinking and practice is strongly embedded in a generic notion of African American life. That is, the complexity and multiplicity of Black life has been rendered nearly invisible, especially regarding a progressive gender vision. Nonetheless, simultaneous with the race/class debate of the past decades is a less recognized shift: the articulation of a gendered analysis of Black life, of "the race." With this feminist intervention, old frameworks are beginning to be destabilized.

Difficult is probably the best way to conceive of Black women's historic relationship to feminism in the U.S. This is understandable given the separate and unequal, but simultaneously intertwined, realities of Black and white women's lives. Although the historical and anthropological record is mixed regarding the status of women in many African societies, what is incontrovertible is that colonialism, enslavement, and imperialism imposed a model of white male patriarchy and racism on these cultures and peoples (White 2001). The resulting inequality is still a dominant world force giving rise to Black radical, oppositional sensibilities.

We do know that under enslavement Black women were socially constructed as producers and reproducers, exploitable as laborers in production and oppressed as women in reproduction. Nonetheless, it is arguable that Black women forged a resistive, self-defined, even feminist identity in America. These women might be called the original Black feminists (Dill 1979). More formally, Black women were active in anti-slavery societies, which gave rise to the first wave of feminism in this country as well as contributing to the Black radical sensibilities of African descent people. Allen (1983) makes it clear that Black women were independently active throughout the 19th century, organizing to challenge stereotypes about their so-called immorality and lack of virtue. A good deal of their energy, according to Allen, was centered on educational uplift, protesting lynching, or standing up for their own dignity.

By 1920 when women's suffrage was finally enacted, white women foresook anti-lynching as a platform, acquiescing to racism to gain southern support. Thus, traditional norms of racism superseded sisterhood. White women got the vote and turned their backs when Black women, as well as many Black men, were refused the vote because of their race. White racial chauvinism won the day, and few white women were concerned enough to raise a voice (Dill 1983).

Later, the Civil Rights movement emphasized race first, as would the Black Power movement following in its wake. It has often been assumed that the majority of Black women in the movement put race first. But this is too simple a reading of the times. White (1983) points out that by the early 70s Black lesbian feminists had organized the Combahee River Collective, and a group of Black women came together to form the National Black Feminist Organization. This latter group failed because the women could not come to an agreement on the meaning of Black feminism.

Yet, Burnham (2001) makes it quite clear that the historical origins of recent Black feminist theorizing, which emphasizes the simultaneity of oppressions of race, class and gender and the interlocking structures of systems of subordination, can be traced to the activism of the Black women of SNCC. It was largely the insights and struggles of the Black Women's Liberation Committee (first within and then outside SNCC) that account for the emergence of Black feminist thinking today. Frances M. Beal was a critical thinker and architect of the Black Women's Alliance emerging out of SNCC. Burnham points out:

Thus the idea of "both/and," later to be fully elaborated in the academy, first emerged in the context of a highly charged struggle to establish the legitimacy of the Black female voice speaking on her own behalf. Beal also insisted that it was not the identification of sexism as a substantial problem within the Black community that was divisive and counter-productive, but rather the suppression of Black women's initiative, especially their initiative in the political arena (2001: 268).

Nonetheless there is contestation around the meaning of Black feminism. This is evident today. The philosophical splintering ranges from a mild form of feminism which weakly chastises men for sexism (stressing the significance of complementarity in African life), to womanism in its various expressions, some of which more directly challenge sexism, to radical Black feminism which centers patriarchy and capitalism in the context of racism. For example, some versions of womanism root it deeply in African principles rather than in what is referred to as white European women's culturally saturated feminism (Hudson-Weems 1993). This Afrocentric feminist perspective locates itself squarely in a framework articulating the centrality of African culture, especially the principles of complementarity, self-determination, self-definition, and race first. These ideas coincide, of course, with the basic tenets of a more conservative Black nationalism which has historically emphasized male and female complementarity: playing equally valuable but different roles.

But the broader history of gender and the Black freedom struggle in the 1960s and 1970s is more complex and radical. Sometimes women did fight for gender power. Thus it is also important to distinguish womanism from radical Black feminism, which directly confronts patriarchy and explicitly articulates the intersectionalities of capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Indeed there have been tensions between womanists, who emphasize culture and race, and Black feminists, who emphasize class, gender, and race. These were the Black radical women who began to articulate the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender (Burnham 2001).

Still, the majority of radical Black women of this period did not obtain powerful leadership roles in organizations such as the Black Panther Party. However, the belief by some analysts that Black women did not resist these unequal gender arrangements is incorrect. In fact, Allen points out (1983) that in the late 1960s a group of Black women addressed an open letter to the Black power movement regarding the movement's position on birth control. Reproductive rights would collide with nationalist thinking about the gender responsibilities of Black women. This gender/race/class tension saturates the framing of Black struggle even to the present time.

Nevertheless, whatever the philosophical bent, Black women's feminist organizations have been defined broadly. Organizations such as the Combahee River Collective (Hull et al. 1981) stressed the simultaneity of oppressions: race, class, gender, sexism, and heterosexism. This was in many ways in reaction to the Black politics of the day, which were aligned with much narrower notions of male/female relations. Ultimately, for the Combahee Collective, nationalist thinking was found wanting, as was white feminist thinking. It became apparent to a number of Black women activists and scholars that more complex paradigms would be needed to explain Black life. What was needed was theory and practice articulating the complexity of race, class and gender oppressions (Hull et al. 1981, Wallace 1995, Collins 1990).

If the class and race debate characterized much of the intellectual tension regarding Black life through the late 1960s, the absence of a systematic gender lens was hardly noticed by the male combatants. It would take the emergence of a group of Black feminist activists and

intellectuals to bring the issue of gender to the fore.

Capitalist patriarchy profoundly shapes male/female relations general, but is quite complicated when racial dynamics are considered (hooks, 1984). However, in general, the inequality of African American women is not systematically treated in discussions of racial inequality, especially Black radical treatises on race and class. The recent work by E. Frances White (2001) makes this point quite tellingly. She cogently demonstrates the erasure of Black women's lives by Black male revolutionaries and white feminists. At issue for White and other radical Black feminists is the untenability of mounting a struggle for social transformation without taking into serious consideration the mutually reinforcing impact and complexities of race/gender/class. Thus gender as the social construction of maleness and femaleness situated in a structured hierarchy of male domination must be more definitively articulated and theorized in the context of the Black freedom struggle. Without such an articulation, true emancipatory struggles are not possible.

Black radical feminists also understand that race is at the center of a gender and class logic in the U.S. (White 2001). They argue that a feminist framework, rooted in white privilege and power, too often imposes a conceptual logic on women of color that distorts or misrepresents that experience (Collins 1990). Yet, the difficulties of multiplicity within Black communities, cross-cut by age, region, ethnicity, class, are not easily resolved. For example, the tradition of Black women's economic exploitation, rooted in the expropriation of Black women's productive and reproductive labor (Jones 1985), and the precarious economic position of African American men, mark a long-standing social logic in which Black womanhood is defined. This is a more complicated space than simply asserting that Black Women are exploited.

Black feminist thinkers and activists began to argue explicitly for the simultaneity of oppression. It is not just race or class. This critique goes to the heart of Black radical thinking. The demand is that gender inequality be recognized as an essential dimension of the Black freedom struggle. Even today, much of the discussion of inequality in the U.S. is centered *either* on race *or* on gender, erasing their intersection. Such analysis renders invisible the experiences of Black women.

Black Radical Response in Late 20th Century Africa America: A Brief Overview

Revolutionary Black nationalism embodied the Black radical spirit of the late 1960s. Groups such as the Republic of New Africa, the Black Panther Party, and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) are some examples. Although centered in the idea of self-determination, revolutionary nationalism was rooted in a critique of capitalism. While racial consciousness played out in the assumptions of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panther Party, both groups argued that economic exploitation was at the center of Black exploitation. Indeed, there was a crucial class analysis, but neither group articulated a progressive gender position. However, the Black women of SNCC had begun to articulate a *both/and* perspective. Especially notable is the work of Frances Beal and the Black Women's Alliance as well as the Combahee River Collective (Burnham, 2001).

For those women who were involved in the political struggles of revolutionary Black nationalism (e.g., the Black Panther Party) and cultural nationalism (the Congress of African People), the gender issue was a potent one. Woodard (1999), for example, argues that the Black Women's United Front emerged out of the nationalism of the Congress of African People. He contends that the press was on for gender equality in that organizing. Amina Baraka was at the center of the push for gender equality and played a leading role in the Afrikan Women's Conference. According to Woodard, her group placed pressure on conservative men for full equality in the Black national

political arena. Apparently the two major figures of cultural nationalism, Amiri Baraka and Ron Karenga, both softened their stances on gender inequality. White (2001) contends that a stint in prison re-centered Karenga's gender perspective from a complementarity framework rooted in unequal male and female power to full gender equality within the movement.

In the Black Panther Party, the gender question was an open sore. Like their cultural nationalist counterparts, revolutionary nationalists began with traditional gender frameworks, some so harsh that women left the party (Brown 1992). Structurally the Black Panther Party was organized as a male hierarchy. The gender division of labor placed men front and center and women in traditional support roles. As noted in her controversial autobiography, *A Taste of Power*, Elaine Brown occupied a very problematic leadership space. And, of course, her position did not dominate. Indeed, there were numerous complaints of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Ultimately, Huey Newton, in words if not deeds, critiqued sexism in the organization (Jones 1999), but the party never centered gender and sexism as a source of inequality to be deeply struggled against. And under the terror of Cointelpro the Panthers were destroyed. Whether a deeper gender analysis would have emerged is an open question.

But it was at the level of struggle, with radical Black women in the Black Women's Alliance, the Combahee River Collective, and other revolutionary nationalist organizations, that Black feminist thinking and practice intervened significantly in the Black freedom struggle. This work would continue into the academy, but the intervention was most explicit initially in the challenges Black activist women presented in cultural and revolutionary organizations. Today a Black feminist sensibility is incorporated into the "Principles of Unity" of the Black Radical Congress. Fran Beal and other radical Black feminists have played a key role in this BRC process. The organization also has a radical Black feminist caucus. Indeed, an explicit commitment to eliminate sexism and homophobia is embodied in the "Principles of Unity." Thus the challenge to the sexual division of labor and sexism running through Black political history is an important aspect of contemporary Black feminist interventions.

Given this recent history of class, gender, and race, the current political economy offers additional challenges. In fact, the squeeze is on for Blacks under current state reprivatization. A new generation of African Americans are finding themselves in an extremely vulnerable position in the public and private sectors. The operation of the economy and the state are implicated in the structuring of racial divisions and the generation of class inequality in contemporary Black life in the U. S. (Carnoy 1994). These dynamics are cross-cut by gender. Racial capitalism operates somewhat differently for African American women and men. The global economy has marginalized many Black men and a number of Black women find themselves in the poorest paying service sector.

So understanding the current period for African Americans means centering class in the context of gender and race. The Black Radical Congress attempts to take seriously this charge, albeit in context of complicated internal and external dynamics.

The very late 20th century marked the emergence of a Black radical organization articulating the intersection of oppressions in its principles of unity. It is broad-based in its radicalism, embracing revolutionary nationalism, socialism, feminism, resisting hetero- sexism. This is the Black Radical Congress, officially launched in Chicago in the summer of 1998, after several months of meetings and planning. The BRC, while being explicitly anti-capitalist, is accommodative of the remaining strands of revolutionary Black nationalism. These include a number of small organizations concentrated on the east coast, such as the December 12th organization in New York City (Bush

1999). The role of these political formations must be viewed in the context of the earlier discussion of Black feminist interventions in the Black Freedom Struggle.

The founding of the Black Radical Congress opens up new possibilities, raising again the prospect of revolutionary change in Africa America. The organization, built on a set of radical principles, argues that the time has come to transcend incorporative strategies of the non-transformative variety, as embodied by Black conservatives and liberals. The Congress reflects the shifts of the last thirty years as Black feminists and gays and lesbians press for transforming gender and sexuality hierarchies in Black life. These struggles, indeed, extend the Black Freedom Movement into spaces not historically attended to.

The BRC is Black-controlled; to become a member depends on being defined as "Black." Thus the concept of turning inward before forming coalitions with whites is a basic underlying principle of the Congress. Leadership and decision-making should be in Black hands. These principles reflect the Black nationalist influence on the organization. Indeed, revolutionary Black nationalism is one of several critical left tendencies making up the BRC.

The Black Radical Congress expresses several new and old positions, concretely articulating an anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-homophobic politics. The impact of Black feminist thinking is clear here. The organization has also been centrally concerned with a radical political economic critique of capitalism and imperialism and their impact on African peoples. The organization's goal is to connect scholar activists with movement activists and activist scholars in the context of local organizing committees. This connection to community has been quite difficult, and building organizing committees has been a central challenge, as has fund-raising. The Black community is not in the midst of the widespread mobilization that marked the Civil Rights and Black Power phases of the Black freedom struggle. Corporate globalization and deindustrialization mark the current period. Class contradictions have been sharpened, with a growing class divide within the Black community as well as in the broader society (Lusane 1997). Organizing is far from simple. Certainly the BRC faces the same challenges from within and without as did many earlier Black radical organizations, and as do left movements in the U.S. in general: How does a radical collectivity cohere? What is its real connection to on-the-ground struggles? What is its vision for social transformation? And, of course, there are the tensions surrounding gender in the context of race and class. Indeed, developing a truly transformative praxis as well as changing the day-to-day dynamics of the organization, to dismantle sexism and heterosexism, have been real challenges for the Black Radical Congress. But the BRC is a call to action. Black radical intellectuals, revolutionary nationalists or marxists, feminists or socialists, have been forced to contend with the fact that many sectors of the Black population in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and the diaspora are confronting deadly social, economic, and political crises. The political space in the U.S. is increasingly fascist (Bush, 1999). The most recent expression of this reality in advanced capitalist societies is the dismantling of the social wage, destruction of welfare state supports that reach the poorest women and children, and the growth of the prison industrial complex in the midst of genocidal police brutality.

In the global south—those parts of the African diaspora that live out the legacies of colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism—life is extremely harsh, as the realities of global capital and imperialism hold sway, through policies of structural adjustment implemented by the World Bank and the IMF. Intense privatization in the U.S. and globally often has bloody consequences for the women, children and men of these societies. The new world order is one of ever increasing wealth concentration, and many of the poorest of the poor, both within the U.S. and globally, are African peoples.

These are the burning class issues for Black radicals. Moreover, it is evident within the U.S. that the reemergence of overt racism, attacks on affirmative action, and strengthened institutional racism, are part and parcel of this same logic. Consequently, it is at the intersection of politics, economics, race, class, gender, and culture that what is happening in this period can be understood. Although it is a difficult period, the Black Radical Congress signals a chance for resistance and change.

The challenge for the BRC is to reconnect to a radical perspective that understands a complicated global economy, racism, and sexism. Self-determination predicated on strictly racial grounds does not capture the complicated gender, class, and racial realities of the current period. The American state would eliminate the most militant forms of Black resistance in the 1960s (Marable 1985) and will also attempt to do so today. On this terrain the BRC will be formed. The BRC must reconnect to a radical tradition and create a Black radicalism that understands and acts on complex realities. This racialized patriarchal capitalist society raises hard questions around the role of activism and Black intellectuals and, for sure, the politics of Black liberation.

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