Prophesy Deliverance!

An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity

40th Anniversary Expanded Edition

Cornel West

Edited and with a foreword
by Jonathan Lee Walton

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Contents

Foreword

There are few grand intellectuals whose work shapes several fields across multiple generations. Think of W. E. B. Du Bois, Simone de Beauvoir, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Toni Morrison. The corpus of Cornel West clears this incredibly high bar.

Over the past four decades, the name Cornel West has become synonymous with philosophical nuance and a signifier for progressive cultural criticism. His genius is undeniable. His influence is unmistakable. For those who have read any of his many published books, experienced one of his spellbinding lectures, or witnessed his grace and gravitas while debating with interlocutors on the political right or left, you know that his vocation rests upon three interrelated principles: defend the personhood and rights of the most vulnerable, challenge the supremacist logics of empire, and encourage democratic dialogue across categories of difference.

Herein lies the power and continued importance of the book that you now hold in your hands, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. This wholly original and enduring text did more than inaugurate Cornel West's eminent and illustrious academic career in which he has held distinguished appointments at Yale, the University of Paris, Harvard, and Princeton. Of his many published works, *Prophesy Deliverance!* best conveys Cornel West's prophetic call and courageous Christian witness.

Prophesy Deliverance! proposes a Christian response to the dehumanizing and degrading tendencies of the late capitalist, postmodern age. The author mines the rich diversity of the Black experience in America to offer what he calls an Afro-American revolutionary Christianity. This particular form of Black critical thought is informed by the best of the Black evangelical tradition blended with what he deems the most usable dimensions of academic philosophy, namely neo-pragmatism and critical Marxism. This book captures this then twenty-nine-year-old professor's historical, philosophical, and theological dexterity.

At the time of the book's publication, Cornel West had recently become the first African American to earn a PhD from the philosophy department at Princeton University. His dissertation focused on the ethical dimensions of Marxist thought. The project identifies early Christian influences that had a profound, though often unacknowledged, influence on Karl Marx, namely Marx's identification with human suffering and the poor. Thus, West sought to identify an indisputable link between Marxism and Christianity.

West had also recently begun his teaching career on the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York City (where he now holds the distinguished Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair in Philosophy and Christian Practice). Here, West was immersed in some of the best liberal and liberationist theologies. His influences included not only the neo-orthodox legacy of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, whose work took human suffering and catastrophe seriously considering the horrors of the twentieth century, but also the liberation and emerging feminist theologies that were coming to shape Union and the broader progressive wing of the church and academy. Being in regular dialogue with deep thinkers like James Cone, James Melvin Washington, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Michele Wallace enriched the spiritual imagination of this philosopher who was as comfortable quoting Hegel, Barth, and Kierkegaard as he was Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

These are some of the significant intellectual trends Cornel West brings together in *Prophesy Deliverance!* Like the Black musicians who animate and narrate his life, this work embodies analytic freedom and creativity. This self-professed "bluesman in the life of the mind" builds on the best intellectual contributions toward analyzing the present. *Prophesy* blends genres and transverses traditional categories, often placing otherwise isolated academic frameworks in creative tension. Thus, like the blues, his ideas come across as a dialectic exercise that tracks the human condition—joy and pain, hope and doubt, faith and despair.

From a historical perspective, the book aims to address the specificity of the African American predicament. Since 1619, Black people have faced the perennial challenges of self-conception and self-determination in North America. Nevertheless, Cornel West argues in the first chapter that one cannot address the specificity of the African American predicament without interrogating the conditions that produced a particular white American subject in the modern world.

West appeals to double consciousness—a category first introduced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and popularized by W. E. B. Du Bois's description

of Black life in America—to argue that the first stage of American culture was defined by intensely self-conscious insecurity vis-à-vis European culture. White Americans were essentially incomplete and alienated Europeans who obscured their self-professed intellectual inferiority regarding the Old World with an obsession with wealth and material expansion in the New World. Herein lie the roots of the American bourgeois capitalist order. Whites of the colonial period experienced their own double consciousness of being culturally provincial yet financially prosperous, or, as West states, "genteel Brahmin[s] amid uncouth conditions" (p. 17).

Philosophically, *Prophesy Deliverance!* leverages the insights of poststructuralist thought to trace the emergence of white supremacy in the modern West. The author appeals to the insights of French philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to identify and unpack gestures of exclusion that pushed Black identity outside of "enlightened" possibility. Chapter 2, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," invites us to consider the prevailing metaphors and controlling categories that established the intellectual and discursive norms of our society. Cornel West uncovers the ways that this "structure of modern discourse" essentially excludes the idea of Black freedom and equality.

Contrary to popular liberal opinion, ideas of freedom and racism were not developed in opposition. West argues that notions of freedom and white supremacy are conceptual allies. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century established the classical aesthetic and cultural norms of beauty, intelligence, and knowledge. These included the valorization of the Greek body and mind as epitomes of beauty and brilliance. Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century built upon these ideas to further concretize conceptions of empirical validation and authority. Nineteenth-century thinkers appealed to these categories to encode natural history with scientifically authorized racism. The accepted view became that Black and Brown people could not meet the rational capacity that freedom necessitates. Such "enlightened" and "scientific" discourses foreclosed the possibility of equality in Black intelligence, culture, or character. As a result, any concept of Black freedom becomes unintelligible in the modern West.

Prophesy Deliverance! thus provides the genealogical account of modern racism that has now become the standard historical chronology among intellectual historians. Four decades before Tyler Stovall's masterful text *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea,* Cornel West interrogated the symbiotic relationship between freedom and race as a central theme of modern society born of the Enlightenment.

This is no small point. As Professor Brandon Terry points out in his reflection on chapter 3, "The Four Traditions of Response," it is easy for today's students of intellectual history and philosophical theories of race to underappreciate the importance and originality of *Prophesy*'s interventions. Not just in terms of the racialized history of the Enlightenment but also regarding West's avant-garde treatment of African American political response. That a despised and degraded people would have such valuable moral and ethical treasures to enrich both the Christian faith and the larger American body politic was, and largely remains, a revolutionary idea. Nevertheless, West combs through the most influential cultural and political resources of the African American experience toward providing a usable history.

Another feature of *Prophesy Deliverance!* is how it displays Cornel West's unapologetic, Christian-informed worldview. Like the philosophical tradition of pragmatism to which Cornel West is intellectually indebted, *Prophesy* displaces epistemology (a concern with the origins and methods of knowledge) as the ultimate goal of philosophy in favor of ethics (a concern with the right, just, and fitting moral responses). For West, however, social and political notions of freedom should not be confused with a more fundamental existential freedom. Here we see the indelible imprint of Afro-Protestant evangelical piety that shapes so much of Cornel West's moral imagination.

By existential freedom, West refers to a conception of freedom not measured by one's material conditions. Nor is one's sense of self reducible to prevailing views. The adage that best sums up existential freedom is, "It's not what folk call you. But rather what you answer to." This is Cornel West's understanding of Christian freedom. Long before he started reading Jean-Paul Sartre or wrestling with Søren Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective truths, it was at Shiloh Baptist Church in Sacramento where Clifton and Irene B. West reared their children into this spiritual tradition. Thus, West's rhythmic, tripartite writing style is just one reflection of Afro-Protestantism's profound influence. The other is a faith community, led by Cornel West's childhood pastor Reverend Willie P. Cooke, who could approximate visions of hope and possibility despite obvious external constraints.

Such a capacious view of freedom expands the terrain of justice in *Prophesy Deliverance!* Like his progressive Afro-Protestant influences—Jarena Lee, George Washington Woodbey, Martin Luther King Jr., and Pauli Murray—Cornel West uses *Prophesy* to champion a radical notion of democracy that provides a preferential option to those who

are most likely excluded from any liberal consensus. A narrow focus on freedom circumscribed by flat conceptions of individuality should not obscure or erase the dignity of those society has deemed different or even deviant. Jesus's powerful parable in Matthew 25 best captures this point. How we treat the most vulnerable, violated, and victimized is how we treat God.

Cornel West's philosophical approach is certainly informed by progressive Afro-Protestantism, but is not exclusive to Christianity. West makes it clear in *Prophesy* that a progressive and prophetic Christian witness must be willing to reach across socially and intellectually constructed barriers. Tribes, ideologies, and uncritical commitment to any doctrine or dogma amount to crass idolatry, particularly when it blinds us to human suffering. Racial, religious, or national identity cannot trump moral affinity. Nor ought class, gender expression, sexuality, and any other social construct delimit or overdetermine human personality. Each of us has a moral responsibility to see and affirm the divine in each other, namely those that our cultural patterns and social structures have rendered most vulnerable.

As a result of this latter point, *Prophesy Deliverance!* moves toward a conclusion in its final two chapters with a challenge to what West considered the major limitations of the Black theology project at the time: its inability to account for the varying forms of oppression plaguing Black communities, that is, economic exploitation, gender discrimination, and intra-racial class hierarchies. West argued that if Black theologians were genuinely committed to a progressive approach to social change, they must take class conflict and intraracial class hierarchies more seriously. West used *Prophesy* to extend Martin Luther King Jr.'s critique of capitalism and labor exploitation. As King often asked while increasingly expanding his voice from desegregation to economic injustice, "What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"

West thus appeals to progressive Marxism as a sobering corrective that offers prophetic Christian thought a more robust social analysis. Pulling baby Moses from the Nile River is one thing. Identifying, interrogating, and undoing Pharoah-like structures that foreclose futures is another. Similarly, at its best, prophetic Christianity offers progressive Marxism a sobering corrective to what Cornel West considers its naive utopianism and narrow focus on socioeconomic conditions at the expense of existential and cultural realities. All the while he recognizes that both traditions could use a more robust view of the tragic

dimensions of life: disease, dread, and despair. Acknowledging historical and human limits can temper the twin temptations of romantic sentimentality on the one hand and pessimistic cynicism on the other.

These are just a few of the reasons why religious progressives still have much to learn from *Prophesy Deliverance!* In an age where, unfortunately, evangelical piety has essentially become indistinguishable from a rabid will to unbridled power, *Prophesy Deliverance!* strikes a different note. Idolatrous jingoism is out of key for this moral musician who views the world through the suffering of those perennially crushed by the weight of unfettered capitalism, imperialism, and market-based morality. He offers an inclusive, radically democratic, and antidogmatic vision of society at a time when our communities need less certainty and more faith. In this regard, this powerful text is not only a bold proclamation. It is also a humble plea. *Prophesy Deliverance!* is a sincere prayer.

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Preface to the Fortieth Anniversary Expanded Edition

A Prophetic and Poetic Approach to Catastrophe

Two decades ago, in the preface for the twentieth-anniversary edition of this text, I professed my abiding love for this book that lays bare my fundamental moral commitments. Forty years have now passed since I put pen to paper. Now, more than ever, I can still say that *Prophesy Deliverance!* remains my favorite work.

I am thankful to Westminster John Knox Press and my dear brother, former student, and forever friend Jonathan Lee Walton for pulling together an exemplary group of brilliant minds to discuss this book's lasting import. That *Prophesy Deliverance!*—despite its youthful ambition and unapologetic urgency born of the "Reagan revolution"—still speaks to subsequent generations is both humbling and heartbreaking. It is humbling insofar as human hope grounded in Christian love is the central tenet of the text. To God be the glory that *Prophesy Deliverance!* continues to offer intellectual, spiritual, and political resources to those who seek existential and sociopolitical freedom divorced from cruelty and cynicism. Though it is heartbreaking that despite the gains of a privileged Black elite in all spheres of American society, to view Black people as fully human modern subjects worthy of honor, dignity, and respect continues to be a largely novel idea in 2022.

As I look back on this work forty years later, I see one major shift in my thinking. It has to do with my embrace of the tragicomic. The sense of the tragic was undoubtedly present in my thinking in 1982. Yet, like the tradition of philosophy, I deployed pragmatism to wrestle with the problematic. Since then, I have embraced the tragicomic to confront better what I now regard as the catastrophic. It began in the mid-1990s. For one, I've always known that no true philosopher can avoid wrestling with death. What was once abstract became real on May 26, 1994, when my beloved father, Clifton L. West, died of pancreatic cancer. Never had I felt such grief and loss. During this same period, my grief was coupled with political outrage. As reflected in the Clinton administration's mendacious welfare and unconscionable crime bills,

the meanness directed toward America's working people sickened me. So for someone like myself, shaped by US culture, I fell back to a different language of love—the blues. It's a tradition that says that I want to be unflinchingly honest about catastrophe, not just in the sense of extreme moments in life. It is a tradition that reminds us that there is no deep love without deep sorrow. There is no hope without deep despair.

In *Prophesy Deliverance!* I acknowledged my indebtedness to the blues. But I had not begun thinking of myself as what I now refer to as a Chekhovian Christian, based on the tragicomic genius of Anton Chekhov. I first discovered Chekhov studying philosophy, grand figures like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. Yet when I read Chekhov, I found a kindred spirit with the blues. Like the blues, Chekhov confronts the narrative of catastrophe head-on. What I saw in Chekhov was precisely a democratizing of the catastrophic—the steady ache of misery in everyday life, the inescapability and ineluctability of coming to terms with the catastrophic effects. And this is very important because the catastrophic is not to be reduced to the problematic, a prominent feature of *Prophesy Deliverance!* Philosophers, like the philosophical pragmatists and Marxist tradition that I juxtapose in this text, are interested in solving problems. Whereas with the blues and Anton Chekhov's writings, there's no resolution at all. Fundamentally life is about the quality of your stamina, your perseverance. And since my initial encounter with Chekhov, I have come to consider him even more profound than the blues and thus instructive to my own Christian faith in recent decades.

Now, why would Chekhov be deeper than the blues? Three reasons. The first reason is that the blues itself is not just American but profoundly Romantic. One limitation of *Prophesy Deliverance!* is the way such romanticism might constitute a backdrop for the concluding chapter. There's no Romantic backdrop in Chekhov. He's both attuned to catastrophe and driven by profound compassion and empathy. There's no utopian projection there, no easy solutions, no solutions at all—no projection of a future of fundamental transformation that can be realized. But he still refuses to yield to cynicism or to paralyzing despair.

There's also Chekhov's critical approach to the faith that could not eradicate its indelible impact. Anton Chekhov was a former choirboy who endured great pain. Like the great American sage James Baldwin, he suffered paternal abuse, became alienated from religion, yet

remained informed by the biblical text. And like Baldwin, though he left the church, he was still a love warrior. The dogma, hierarchy, and hypocrisies of institutional religion became too much to bear. Just as Shatema Threadcraft points out in her wonderful reflections on gender hierarchies and masculinist forms of abuse within the Black evangelical tradition, these are religious realities of which we must be truth-tellers. Chekhov was one such truth-teller, and we cannot understand his commitment to such truth-telling without acknowledging the productive backdrop of his religious formation. Like Baldwin and the unmistakable genius of Toni Morrison, Anton Chekhov's writings are religiously musical. Which is to say, if you are profoundly religious, these writers are still for you. Because his words resonate with religious folk. He's not going to flatten them out in the name of some secular positivistic sensibility. Nevertheless, as I understand both Baldwin and Morrison as representatives of a grand marginalist tradition of Black political response, if you try to enlist such thinkers into your religious army, it's not going to happen. These are free artists.

Finally, Chekhov is what I would call an existential democrat—somebody who, above all else, emphasizes the dignity of ordinary people in all of their wretchedness and in all of their sense of possibility. This means he's highly suspicious, as ought to be every small-*d* democrat, of the arbitrary power deployment. He demands accountability with regard to the most vulnerable. But we know it's not just a matter of speaking truth to power. You also have to speak truth to the relatively powerless. So it's a human thing across the board for Chekhov. That's why for him, ideology is too Manichaean. It's too adolescent. It's too easy to think that somehow your own side is not also corrupted by some of the things that you're struggling against. But that doesn't in any way mean that his fundamental solidarity is not with the most vulnerable. That's what he writes in his will to his sister: help the poor, take care of the family.

His solidarity goes deeper. It's no accident that he's the greatest Russian writer who sided with Dreyfus in the Dreyfus affair. All the great Russian writers were shot through with the anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred that had been part and parcel of the history of the Russian Empire. Chekhov lost his best friend Suvorin over this issue. Suvorin said, you're making the biggest mistake of your career, you're going to lose your Russian readers; Chekhov said, I don't give a damn. That's solidarity based on integrity. There's a certain moral witness there, along with the tragicomic complexity that we see in his work. So he's

going to be highly suspicious of consolidated forms of power wherever they are.

This is the sort of solidarity and prophesying deliverance that aligns with the most vulnerable that I sought to express in this text forty years ago. This book acknowledged the blue note that Black people gifted to modernity that engenders a steely resolve that is unconquerable, unstoppable, and unsuffocatable in the face of dread and despair. The blues is the raw material of hope. But as a Chekhovian Christian, I now better understand the difference between talking about hope and being a hope. Being a hope is a matter of movement, not a virtue in an abstract way but an activity. And to prophesy—identifying concrete evils and staring them in the face—is not just an activity but a spiritual orientation informed by a tragicomic sensibility. In a market-driven America that is obsessed with overnight panacea, push-button solutions, so utilitarian, so consequentialist, my Chekhovian-informed faith is what pushes me to keep prophesying deliverance for all God's people.

Cornel West

Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition

The Tragicomic and the Political in Christian Faith

After two decades of detours and digressions—as a part of painful development, this book remains my favorite work. Despite its overreaching ambition and adolescent aggression, this text lays bare the fundamental concerns of my corpus: to plumb the depths of Afro-American experiences in order to disclose the terrifying truths of our modern human predicament. My writings rest upon two revolutionary assumptions of modern times—that Black people are full-fledged human beings, and that their doings and sufferings have something distinctive to say about what it means to be modern, American, and human. Yet this work is not simply interpretive, analytical, or poetic in aim; it also seeks to be political in its attempt to enrich and enable the struggle for freedom.

Although my explicit intention in this book was to put forward a prophetic interpretation of the Christian tradition rooted in the Afro-American struggle against white supremacy, informed by progressive Marxist theory and fallibilist pragmatic thought and tempered by a profound tragic sense of life, my underlying motivation was to understand the complexities and ambiguities of modernity through the lens of an enslaved, Jim-Crowed, and hated people of African descent in the United States of America. In other words, I tried to reconceive modern Western civilization in the light of its weak will to conceive of Black people as either modern, Western, or civilized (or even civilizable!). Needless to say, all of us are more than simply modern, Western, or civilized. But the bold attempt in 1982 to view Black people in the United States as the primary agents through which we interpret Western modernity and civilized humanity was relatively novel—building on the pioneering work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and especially the great Black musicians. My effort to articulate an Afro-American philosophy was predicated on the notion that Black voices—mediated through European languages and American realities—had significant insights for the human quest for wisdom and the struggle for freedom.

Like much of my work, this book is primarily a historical interpretation—shot through with dialogical encounters and democratic ends—that tries to illuminate the past and present in order to inspire courageous action for a better future. To prophesy is not to predict an outcome but rather to identify concrete evils. To prophesy deliverance is not to call for some otherworldly paradise but rather to generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom. For me, to be a Christian is not to opt for some cheap grace, trite comfort, or childish consolation but rather to confront the darker sides, and the human plights, of societies and souls with the weak armor of compassion and justice. The fundamental human mystery is how and why this weak armor—in a cold and cruel world—is not snuffed out just as the Christian mystery is, how and why love so thoroughly crushed by evil forces is not fully extinguished. Afro-American quests for wisdom and freedom provide some crucial insight and inspiration regarding these unfathomable mysteries.

DEATH AND DESIRE

Modern Black existence is not simply circumscribed by concrete forms of death; it is obsessed with dealing with varieties of death. American slavery—the dominant form of social death in Western modernity—not only imposed severe limits on Black lives; it also promoted distinctive kinds of psychic and spiritual death that constituted lived presuppositions for Black people. Needless to say, it also assured premature physical death for many Afro-Americans. Like Russian and Spanish cultures (for complex reasons), Afro-American life spawned forms of death-obsessions unprecedented in American civilization. Yet, as Leo Tolstoy and Federico García Lorca bear witness, this obsession may yield intense engagement with life, its joys and sorrows, ecstasies and pains. Those who read my book primarily as an attempt to provide a tension-ridden synthesis of prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism through the prism of Black oppression and resistance have a point, but they miss my deeper point: to transform abstract talk about God and suffering into concrete enactments of existential and political struggles with no human guarantee for ultimate victory. In short, the human dialectics of death and desire, extinction and eros, failures and foibles are the basic movement and notion in *Prophesy Deliverance!* Hence, hope—human hope—is the basic theme of the text. But

it is a hope severed from bitterness and bigotry, cruelty and cynicism, revenge and resentment. To put it bluntly, it is a hope grounded in Christian love (often far removed from Christian practices and quite different from Nietzsche's misguided genealogies).

The Black prophetic Christian tradition—from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer—exemplifies a courage to hope in the face of undeniably desperate circumstances rooted in a love that refuses to lose contact with the humanity of others or one's self. And the Black musical tradition—from the spirituals and blues to jazz and hip-hop—embodies a desire for freedom and a search for joy in the face of death-dealing forces in America. My book tries to make explicit this quest for hope and freedom, love and joy in Black life. Needless to say, Black people have no monopoly on such quests. Yet, as with all human beings, these quests are filtered through the arts, culture, and politics. The human cry for help and the mortal effort to find a way out of one's trapped predicament always bear the mark of one's cultural, political, and economic contexts. Since the weight of white supremacy has shaped distinctive Black cries and efforts, Black desires in the face of forms of Black death require serious probing. *Prophesy Deliverance!* was one such inquiry. My bedrock conclusion was that the Black creative appropriation of Christianity has disproportionately shaped the form and content of these Black cries and efforts—for good and bad. Good, because Christian faith has sustained a hope against hope for despised people with severely limited options in an American civilization that prides itself on its liberties, opportunities, and possibilities. Bad, because Christian outlooks have downplayed the fundamental role of economic structures and institutions in subjugating peoples and individuals in an American society that views itself as the land of upward mobility and social experimentation. To put it crudely, my aim in *Prophesy Deliverance!* was to Afro-Americanize the profound insights of Kierkegaard's critique of bourgeois Christendom and Marx's critique of bourgeois capitalism in order to enhance the human quest for wisdom and freedom. "Afro-Americanization" here means roughly to show that Kierkegaardian and Marxist insights were reached by key prophetic Christian and progressive leftist figures in Black history. This operation is unabashedly circular and, at worst, self-serving. Yet it is useful in that it sparks a serious challenge to Black prophetic religion and Black progressive politics. I remain a card-carrying Kierkegaardian—with a strong Chekhovian twist—and a Marxist-informed radical democrat with a tragicomic sense of life. The relative absence of the great Chekhov and

the grand Coltrane—whose shadows color my later work—loom large in *Prophesy Deliverance!* Yet small bits of them are discernible.

DOGMATISM AND DIALOGUE

Prophesy Deliverance! is also a call for dialogue—not simply between Christians and Marxists—but more fundamentally in the face of all forms of dogmatism, including those of Christians and Marxists. In fact, my self-styled allegiance to American pragmatism and American jazz is first and foremost a commitment to polyphonic inquiry and improvisational conversation. For me, prophetic Christianity is a deep suspicion of any form of idolatry—of any human effort to evade or deny the contingency and fragility of any human construct (including religious ones). Modern attempts to ossify, petrify, or freeze human creations of method, technique, rationality, sexuality, nationality, race, or empire are suspect. The best of progressive Marxism simply reveals the operations of power and forms of subordination beneath such idolatries (including Marxist ones). The centrality of dialogue in my text—and subsequent work—puts a premium on imaginative narratives and dynamic stories that connect subversive memories and inseparable traditions to lived experiences. Hence, the crucial presence of nuanced voices and delicate bodies—that is, the tone, texture, tempo, and timbre of the arts—in my work. I try to highlight the creative tensions—without reducing the complexities—between the poetic, political, and philosophic dimensions of intellectual reflections, especially those in the humanities. I tend to highlight music—as in the Afro-American humanist tradition—because it takes seriously transfigured human cries and transforming eloquent moments of silence. Again, my Kierkegaardian sensibility gives existential issues of death, dread, despair, and disappointment a crucial—though not exclusive—weight in serious and substantive dialogue. And my Marxist heritage calls for a revolutionary patience in the face of an ice age that aborts any immediate chance for fundamental social change.

DOMINATION AND DEMOCRACY

If there is a master term in my text—and work—it is democracy. I understand democracy as a mode of being, a way of life, a disposition

toward the world that is a flexible, protean, and improvisational existential practice. Courage, freedom, and experimentation are inseparable in my philosophic outlook. Yet the relentless self-criticism and self-correction of this outlook preclude viewing democracy as an idol. So even my existential democratic ideal may be wrong—or inappropriate for some contexts. The keys here are humility and empathy—the need to remain vigilant in the face of any form of domination that may trump the quest for wisdom and freedom (including forms of democracy). The obstacles are arrogance and indifference that stifle Socratic self-examination and societal critique.

Existential democratic practice is fueled by the comic. All systems of domination—be they religious, political, social, or economic—fear the incongruity disclosed by the comic. And any subversive program suspicious of the comic reveals its tendencies toward domination. So any attempt to eliminate—or even tame—the comic is antidemocratic, a cowardly effort to hide and conceal the mendacity and hypocrisy of a system of domination. And since all traditions, hierarchies, and systems attempt to do so, including democratic ones, all existential democratic practices are fugitives in history—surfacing at select moments only to be thwarted. Like love in Christian narratives, existential democratic practices are perennially crucified only to be resurrected and again betrayed by false prophets and grand inquisitors. Hence, democracy in history is a tragicomic phenomenon—a sad yet sweet dialectic of courageous agency and historical constraints, a melancholic yet melioristic interplay of freedom and limitations that identifies and confronts social misery only to see its efforts to overcome such misery often fall short of their mark. Hence, it is neither sentimental nor cynical. Rather it is relentless and resilient—with compassion—yet usually disappointed with its results.

This tragicomic conception of existential democracy—linked to the ecstasies and erosions of the body and body politic—is alien to much of *Prophesy Deliverance!* Yet it is central to my present Chekhovian Chris tian view of radical democratic being and doing. Needless to say, the relative absence of the comic in the Christian and Marxist traditions (and pragmatism too!) delayed the move to my present outlook. Now Lucian means as much or more to me than Socrates, Erasmus much more than Luther, Chekhov far more than Du Bois. This outlook enables me to embrace the best of the prophetic Christian and progressive Marxist traditions—their anti-idolatrous and compassionate praxis—and also affirm the Beckett-like character of love and justice in human history.

In some ways, I arrive where I began—with the blue note that Black people injected into modernity that accents dissonance in the midst of sentimental harmony and defiance against social misery (or private agony). This blue note, or tragicomic gesture, does not preclude revolutionary agency or even collective insurgency; it simply requires that we thoroughly scrutinize ourselves so that we preserve the intellectual honesty and existential humility necessary for any quest for wisdom and freedom. To then prophesy deliverance is to link our wit to any wisdom and our funk to any freedom—it is to connect a loving Jesus who laughs to an inquiring Du Bois who breakdances.

Acknowledgments (1982)

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CW

I believe that philosophy in America will be lost between chewing a historic cud long since reduced to woody fiber, or an apologetics for lost causes, or a scholastic, schematic formalism, unless it can somehow bring to consciousness America's own needs and its own implicit principle of successful action.

John Dewey
"The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy"

What had an old slave to do with humanity? Perhaps it was something that Woodridge had said in the literature class back at college. I could see him vividly, half-drunk on words and full of contempt and exaltation, pacing before the blackboard chalked with quotations from Joyce and Yeats and Sean O'Casey; thin, nervous, neat, pacing as though he walked a high wire of meaning upon which no one of us would ever dare venture. I could hear him: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record . . . We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture.

Ralph Ellison
Invisible Man

Introduction

The Sources and Tasks of Afro-American Critical Thought

The object of inquiry for Afro-American critical thought is the past and the present, the doings and the sufferings of African people in the United States. Rather than a new scientific discipline or field of study, it is a genre of writing, a textuality, a mode of discourse that interprets, describes, and evaluates Afro-American life in order comprehensively to understand and effectively to transform it. It is not concerned with "foundations" or transcendental "grounds" but with how to build its language in such a way that the configuration of sentences and the constellation of paragraphs themselves create a textuality and distinctive discourse which are a material force for Afro-American freedom.[1]

FIRST SOURCE: PROPHETIC CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Afro-American thought must take seriously the most influential and enduring intellectual tradition in its experience: evangelical and pietistic Christianity. This tradition began the moment that African slaves, laboring in sweltering heat on plantations owned and ruled primarily by white American Christians, tried to understand their lives and servitude in the light of biblical texts, Protestant hymns, and Christian testimonies.[2] This theological reflection—simultaneously building on and breaking with earlier African non-Christian theological reflection—is inseparable from the Black church.[3] This "church," merely a rubric to

designate Black Christian communities of many denominations, came into being when slaves decided, often at the risk of life and limb, to "make Jesus their choice" and to share with one another their common Christian sense of purpose and Christian understanding of their circumstances. Like the tradition of other Christian communities, this took many forms, some more prophetic than others, and its multiplicity of streams made possible the rich diversity of contemporary Black theological reflection which encompasses both prophetic and priestly streams, the visionary and quotidian components, of the tradition. Afro-American critical thought must focus on the former of these streams, the prophetic. This has been guided by a profound conception of human nature and human history, a persuasive picture of what one is as a person, what one should hope for, and how one ought to act.[4] It also proposes the two fundamental moral norms of individuality and democracy as the center of Afro-American thought. I will not stress here the obvious opposition of prophetic Black Christianity to racism, but rather its character as an underlying prophetic worldview.

The basic contribution of prophetic Christianity, despite the countless calamities perpetrated by Christian churches, is that every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentialities.[5] This first and fundamental norm is the core of the prophetic Christian gospel. A transcendent God before whom all persons are equal thus endows the well-being and ultimate salvation of each with equal value and significance. I shall call this radical egalitarian idea *the Christian principle of the self-realization of individuality within community.* This is often interpreted as simply the salvation of *individual* souls in heaven, an otherworldly community. But such a truncated understanding of the core of the Christian gospel accents its otherworldly dimension at the expense of its this-worldly possibilities. The fuller prophetic Christian tradition must thus insist upon both this-worldly liberation and otherworldly salvation as the proper loci of Christianity.

The quite similar fundamental thrust of Marxism, despite the numerous brutalities perpetrated by Marxist regimes, is the self-fulfillment, self-development, and self-realization of harmonious personalities.[6] Marxism is a child of nineteenth-century Romanticism to the extent that it subscribes to a steadfast hope in an earthly paradise and invests in politics a passion previously monopolized by Christianity. Since Romanticism was, as M. H. Abrams demonstrated, a naturalization of the Christian worldview, a secularization of the Christian gospel, it is no

accident that Marxism and Christianity share a similar moral impulse.[7] Socioeconomic well-being has remained at the center of Marxist dogma, but the political liberties and diverse cultural activities of individuals have, for the most part, been ignored by it. Thus, the historical roots of the notion of individuality are found in the Christian gospel and the Romantic worldview, a moral core which Marxism has also appropriated. The norm of individuality reinforces the importance of community, common good, and the harmonious development of personality. And it stands in stark contrast to those doctrinaire individualisms which promote human selfishness, denigrate the idea of community, and distort the holistic development of personality. The norm of individuality conceives persons as enjoyers and agents of their uniquely human capacities, whereas doctrinaire individualism views them as maximizers of pleasure and appropriators of unlimited resources.[8]

Two further fundamental elements in the Christian gospel are the dignity of persons and, likewise, the depravity of persons: human beings possess the capacity to transform prevailing realities for the better, and yet are prone to do so imperfectly. The dignity of persons is their ability to contradict what is, to change and be changed, and to act in the light of that which is not-yet. The depravity of persons is their proclivity to cling to the moment, to refuse to transform and to be transformed. The Christian gospel accents decision, commitment, engagement, and action which transform what is in the light of that which is to be. The Christian gospel also acknowledges that such contradiction and transformation are circumscribed by human imperfection.

Contradiction and transformation are at the heart of the Christian gospel. The former always presupposes what presently is; the latter, the prevailing realities. For Christians, this "what is" and these "prevailing realities" are products of fallen, finite creatures, products that bear the stamp of imperfection. *This dialectic of imperfect products and transformative practice, of prevailing realities and negation, of human depravity and human dignity, of what is and the not-yet constitutes the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history.* Each element of the dialectic is inextricably bound to the other, as are human nature and human history.

This emphasis on process, development, discontinuity, and even disruption precludes the possibility of human perfection and human utopias. Human beings possess the capacity to change their conditions and themselves, but not to perfect either their conditions or themselves. Human history dooms human beings to problems and

problematics, obstacles and obstructions, to relative achievements and relative accomplishments.

For Christians, the realm of history is the realm of the pitiful and the tragic.[9] It serves as the context for passive persons who refuse to negate and transform what is and for active persons who reject and change prevailing realities. The pitiful are those who remain objects of history, victims manipulated by evil forces; whereas the tragic are those persons who become subjects of history, aggressive antagonists of evil forces. Victims are pitiful because they have no possibility of achieving either penultimate liberation or ultimate salvation; aggressive antagonists are tragic because they fight for penultimate liberation, and in virtue of their gallant struggle against the limits of history they become prime candidates for ultimate salvation. In this sense, to play a tragic role in history is positive: to negate and transform what is, yet run up against the historical limits of such negation and transformation, is candidacy for transcending those limits.

Penultimate liberation is the developmental betterment of humankind, the furtherance of the uncertain quest for human freedom in history. Ultimate salvation hopes for the transcendence of history, the deliverance of humankind from the treacherous dialectic of human nature and human history. The process of penultimate liberation can culminate within history, whereas the process of ultimate salvation is grounded in history but promises to proceed beyond it.

For prophetic Christianity, the two inseparable notions of freedom are existential freedom and social freedom. Existential freedom is an effect of the divine gift of grace which promises to sustain persons through and finally deliver them from the bondage to death, disease, and despair. Social freedom is the aim of Christian political practice, a praxis that flows from the divine gift of grace; social freedom results from the promotion and actualization of the norms of individuality and democracy. Existential freedom empowers people to fight for social freedom, to realize its political dimension. Existential freedom anticipates history and is ultimately transhistorical, whereas social freedom is thoroughly a matter of this-worldly human liberation.

The prophetic Christian dialectic of human nature and human history produces *democracy* as its second fundamental norm. Democracy requires that accountability—of institutions to populace, of leaders to followers, of preachers to laity—be the center of any acceptable social vision. This accountability exists when people have control over the leaders and institutions that serve them. Democratic participation of

people in the decision-making processes of institutions that regulate and govern their lives is a precondition for actualizing the Christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality in community. The norms of individuality and democracy are in this way inseparable. The former rests upon the moral core of the Christian gospel, the latter upon its historical realism.

The prophetic Christian norm of democracy reflects the dignity of persons in that it accents potential for human betterment. It recognizes the depravity of persons in that it acknowledges human disabilities. The Christian dialectic of human nature and human history makes the norm of democracy necessary and possible; yet only the praxis of imperfect human beings renders it desirable and realizable.

As with the Christian gospel, negation and transformation lie at the heart of Marxism. What is must be overcome; prevailing realities must be changed. Instead of a dialectic of human nature and human history, Marxism posits a dialectic of human practice and human history: human nature is nothing other than human practice under specific historical conditions, conditions which themselves are both results of past human practice and preconditions for it in the present. This *collapse* of human nature into human practice and into human history—as opposed to a dialectical relation of human nature to human practice and to human history—is the distinctive difference between Christianity and Marxism. The Christian espouses a dialectical historicism which stresses the dignity and the depravity of persons, whereas the Marxist puts forward a full-blown historicism in which the eventual perfectability of persons within history is inevitable. The Christian worldview is a clandestine complaint against history, the Marxist an avowed apotheosis of it.

The contribution of prophetic Christian thought as a source for Afro-American critical thought is twofold. First, it confronts candidly the tragic character of human history (and the hope for ultimate transhistorical triumph) without permitting the immensity of what is and must be lost to call into question the significance of what may be gained. In this way, it allows us to sidestep what Baudelaire called "the metaphysical horror of modern thought" and take more seriously the existential anxiety, political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation of actual human beings. Second, prophetic Afro-American Christian thought elevates the notion of struggle (against the odds!)—personal and collective struggle regulated by the norms of individuality and democracy—to the highest priority. To be a prophetic Afro-American Christian is to negate what is and transform

prevailing realities against the backdrop of the present historical limits. In short, prophetic Afro-American Christian thought imbues Afro-American thinking with the sobriety of tragedy, the struggle for freedom, and the spirit of hope.

SECOND SOURCE: AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

The basic notions in American philosophy that ought to play a significant role in the formation of Afro-American critical thought are primarily the products of the reforming orientation of the pragmatic movement.[10] This began with a series of papers that Charles Peirce wrote in 1872, continued in a more visible manner after 1898 in William James, and was elaborated in detail by George Mead and, above all, by John Dewey. The pragmatic movement questioned the subjectivist turn in European philosophy, the idea that knowledge requires philosophical foundations in direct personal awareness, through intuition or unmediated insight. For American pragmatists, the quest for such certainties and foundations could only be misguided.

John Dewey recognized that philosophy is inextricably bound to culture, society, and history.[11] For Dewey, an autonomous philosophy would be culturally outmoded. Like its first cousin, theology, philosophy was once an autonomous discipline with its own distinct set of problems, most of which now lie at the mercy of psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology.

Despite this, however, the normative function of philosophy remains. It becomes the critical expression of a culture and the critical thought of a society, sacrificing in the process its delusions of autonomy. Philosophy is, thus, the interpretation of a people's past for the purpose of solving specific problems presently confronting the cultural way of life from which the people come. For Dewey, philosophy is critical in that it constantly questions the tacit assumptions of earlier interpretations of the past. It scrutinizes the norms these interpretations endorse, the solutions they offer, and the self-images they foster.

American pragmatism rejects the idea of knowledge as a private affair where one begins with uninterpreted givens, theory-free entities, self-authenticating episodes, or intrinsically credible beliefs, and builds all other knowledge upon them. Rather, it conceives of knowledge as within the conceptual framework of intersubjective, communal inquiry. Of course, some norms, premises, and procedures must be taken for

granted, but these are never immune to revision. For American pragmatists, the myth of the given must be demythologized. Knowledge should not be a rummaging for foundations but a matter of public testing and open evaluation of consequences. Knowledge claims are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activity of an individual subject. The community understands inquiry as a set of social practices geared toward achieving and warranting knowledge, a perennial process of dialogue which can question any claim but never all at once. This self-correcting enterprise requires neither foundations nor grounds. It yields no absolute certainty. The social or communal is thus the central philosophical category of this pragmatist conception of knowledge. It recognizes that in knowledge the crucial component is not intuition but social practice and communal norm.

The pragmatist movement also bursts the narrow conception of experience of the Cartesian tradition and its historical successors. In contrast to the narrowness of Cartesian individualism, the pragmatic conception of experience is broader in scope and richer in content. And, lastly, pragmatism's primary aim is to discern, delineate, and defend particular norms through highlighting desirable possibilities present in the practices of a specific community or society. The goal of reflection is amelioration, and its chief consequence is the transformation of existing realities. This process is guided by moral convictions and social norms, and the transformation is shaped by the interpretation and description of the prevailing communal practices.

Afro-American thought recognizes, of course, the major shortcomings of the pragmatist movement: its relative neglect of the self, its refusal to take class struggle seriously, and its veneration of scientific method and the practices of the scientific community.[12] And, in contrast to this, Afro-American Christian thought must, for its part, emphasize the uniqueness of human personality, the centrality of the class struggle, and the political dimensions of knowledge. But pragmatism's contributions are still enormous. Through its historicist orientation, for example, Afro-American thought can avoid both absolutist dogmatism and paralysis in action. Pragmatism also dethroned epistemology as the highest priority of modern thought in favor of ethics: not the professional discipline of ethics but the search for desirable and realizable historical possibilities in the present. Despite its limitations, pragmatism provides an American context for Afro-American thought, a context that imparts to it both a shape and a heritage of philosophical legitimacy.

Following its sources, I shall define Afro-American critical thought as an interpretation of Afro-American history, especially its cultural heritage and political struggles, which provides norms for responding to challenges presently confronting Black Americans. The particular historical phenomena interpreted and justified by it consist in religious doctrines, political ideologies, artistic expressions, and unconscious modes of behavior. These serve as raw ingredients to be utilized to interpret the Afro-American past and defend the existence of particular norms within it.

THE TASKS

The two basic challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans are self-image and self-determination. The former is the perennial human attempt to define who and what one is, the issue of self-identity. The latter is the political struggle to gain significant control over the major institutions that regulate people's lives. These challenges are abstractly distinguishable, yet concretely inseparable. In other words, culture and politics must always be viewed in close relationship to each other.[13]

The major function of Afro-American critical thought is to reshape the contours of Afro-American history and provide a new self-understanding of the Afro-American experience which suggests guidelines for action in the present.[14] It attempts to make theoretically explicit what is implicit in history, to describe and demystify cultural and social practices and offer solutions to urgent problems besetting Black Americans.

Afro-American thought is thus critical in character and historical in content. It is an interpretive activity which reveals new insights and uncovers old blindnesses about the complexity and richness of the Afro-American experience. Its first task is to put forward an overarching interpretive framework for the inescapable problematic of any such inquiry: What is the relationship between the African, American, and European elements in this experience? The prerequisite for a sophisticated response to this is an understanding of the emergence, development, and end of European modernity, the complex variation of it which evolved as American culture, and the intricate transactions between marginalized Africans—for the most part effectively excluded from the behavioral modes and material benefits of European life—and the American culture in which these dark bastard people were

both participants and victims. I will attempt to tackle this enormous problematic in chapter 1.

The second task of an Afro-American religious philosophy is to engage in a genealogical inquiry into the cultural and linguistic roots—in addition to the economic, political, and psychological roots—of the idea of white supremacy which has shaped the Afro-American encounter with the modern world. What is the complex configuration of controlling metaphors, categories, and norms which shape and mold this idea in the modern West? I try to put forward some plausible answers to this in chapter 2.

The third task of Afro-American thought is to provide a theoretical reconstruction and evaluation of Afro-American responses to white supremacy. In chapter 3 this takes the form of delineating four fundamental traditions in Afro-American thought and practice. I will endorse one of them.

The fourth task of Afro-American religious thought is to present a dialogical encounter between prophetic Afro-American Christian thought and progressive Marxist social analysis. The aim of this dialogue—put forward in chapter 4—is to demystify the deep misunderstanding and often outright ignorance each side has of the other. And since in Christianity and Marxism we are dealing with the most distorted traditions in the modern world, we have a difficult task before us. In my view, this effort is warranted by the fact that in an alliance between prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism—both castigated remnants within their own worlds—lies the hope of Western civilization. The destiny of Afro-Americans is inextricably bound—as is most of the world—with the fate of this civilization.

The last task of Afro-American religious philosophy is to provide a political prescription for—or strategic intervention into—the specific praxis in the present historical moment of the struggle for liberation. Therefore I bring the book to a close in chapter 5 by articulating practical and programmatic dimensions. Afro-American critical thought begins in a broad theoretical mode by situating the life-worlds of Africans in the United States and ends in a narrow practical mode steeped in those same life-worlds. This philosophical journey is mediated by value-laden interpretations of the Afro-American struggle for freedom; the major bias of this inquiry is the desire for freedom.

The articulation of an Afro-American religious philosophy presupposes access to and acquisition of certain kinds of skills, training, and knowledge. The skills, interpretive and descriptive, make use of

imagination, self-reflection, and logical analysis. The training requirements are open-ended and may range from those of a classical humanist to those of an autodidactic street philosopher. The crucial element is the ability for rigorous thought, clear exposition, and investment of one's whole self in one's thinking. Afro-American thought must also remove itself from the uncritical elements of mainstream Afro-American life. This is not a geographical or existential removal, but an intellectual one which acknowledges the demands of the discipline. Any critical and creative activity requires a certain degree of marginality. Intellectual activity certainly flourishes best when one is on the margin, not in an ivory tower but resolutely outside the world of aimless chitchat and gossip.

Afro-American philosophy expresses the particular American variation of European modernity that Afro-Americans helped shape in this country and must contend with in the future. While it might be possible to articulate a competing Afro-American philosophy based principally on African norms and notions, it is likely that the result would be theoretically thin. Philosophy is cultural expression generated from and existentially grounded in the moods and sensibilities of a writer entrenched in the life-worlds of a people. The life-worlds of Africans in the United States are conceptually and existentially neither solely African, European, nor American, but more the latter than any of the former. In fact, ironically, the attempt by Black intellectuals to escape from their Americanness and even go beyond Western thought is itself very *American.*

Any who would fashion a theory of American Negro culture while ignoring the intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to the larger society . . . is to attempt a delicate brain surgery with a switch-blade. And it is possible that any viable theory of Negro American culture obligates us to fashion a more adequate theory of American culture as a whole. The heel bone is, after all, connected, through its various linkages, to the head bone.

Ralph Ellison
Shadow and Act

When it is acknowledged that under the disguise of dealing with ultimate reality, philosophy has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions, that it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies, it will be seen that the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day. Its aim is to become so far as is humanly possible an organ for dealing with these conflicts.

John Dewey
Reconstruction in Philosophy

1

American Africans in Conflict

Alienation in an Insecure Culture

MODERNITY, COLONIAL PROVINCIALITY, LOCALISM

The Age of Enlightenment, from 1688 to 1789—roughly from the Glorious Revolution in England to the tumultuous French Revolution—constitutes the emergence of European modernity.[1] This occurred within an embryonic capitalist global economy that supported absolutist monarchies. It throve, mostly because of Black slavery in the Western Hemisphere and the exploitation of working men, women, and children in the rural household industry of western Europe. The most populous European country, France, was the chief industrial center. Holland, especially the vivacious city of Amsterdam, maintained its two-century dominance in commerce and shipping as the major financial center in Europe.

The basic features of early modern European culture were the increasing acceptance of the authority of science, the appearance of a new kind of pagan neoclassicism, and the subjectivist turn in philosophy. The intellectual defense and institutional support of the practices of scientists became more and more persuasive to the literate population. These practices were guided by an adherence to a new paradigm of knowledge, an experimental method that attempted to test hypotheses and yield objective conclusions by appealing to evidence and observation. The increasing acceptance of the authority of science resulted in assaults on the authority of the church and on its theology and religious practices.

This Enlightenment revolt against the prestige of the church was part of a search for models of uncensored criticism. It led to a recovery of classical antiquity and especially a deep appreciation and appropriation of the artistic and cultural heritage of ancient Greece. This classical revival—or neoclassical movement in eighteenth-century Europe—was partly the result of a four-hundred-year European love affair with Greece and Rome. This affair began in the Early Renaissance (1300–1500), intensified in the High Renaissance (1500–1530), cooled in the Mannerist era (1530–1600), and appeared again in full force during the Baroque period (1600–1750). In short, early modern European culture promoted a new, modern type of paganism.

The emergence of European modernity also witnessed a subjectivist turn in philosophy. This quest, initiated by Descartes, gave first place to concepts of the subject, the ego, or the self, and preeminence to the notion of representative knowledge. The subject, ego, or self constituted the starting point for philosophical inquiry, and mental representations by the subject, ego, or self supplied the principal means for subjects to make contact with objects, ideas to copy things, or concepts to correspond to the external world. Philosophy became the queen of the emerging scientific disciplines within this new paradigm as a metadiscipline which provided objective and valid grounds for knowledge claims put forward in the newer disciplines, especially physics. This turn in philosophy granted science a monopoly on truth in the marketplace of ideas, to the dismay of both artists and theologians. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted in our own time, this monopoly on truth entails a prejudice against prejudice, a supposed transcendence of prejudice through objectivity.

Immanuel Kant deepened Descartes's subjectivism by erecting new formal foundations upon a transcendental subject which builds an objective world by means of a universal conceptual scheme. In one grand stroke, he thus legitimated Newtonian science, vindicated Protestant morality, and set art in a realm of its own. The ultimate consequence of this architectonic endeavor was to isolate early modern European culture into separate spheres of goodness, truth, and beauty—and morality, science, and art—reinforcing meanwhile the role of philosophy as a tribunal of pure reason for the claims of culture.

Between 1776 and 1782 texts appeared and events occurred that were representative of this early modern period. These included Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), the American

Revolution (1776), David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Gotthold Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (1779), Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), and the first part of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781). In these are the intellectual agenda of the period: the rise of the bourgeois capitalist order, the struggle between Christianity and neoclassical paganism, the widening gaps between philosophy, ethics, and art, and the increasing alienation of the individual.

The end of this period was marked by the birth of the United States, the first new nation, through a colonial, not a social revolution. After a century and a half of the reconciling of self-imposed exile with a well-developed European social and political consciousness, the problem of provinciality had become central in the development of American culture.[2] It resulted primarily from the geographical displacement of European peoples from that European civilization whose superiority they openly acknowledged. Adding to this, an antagonism to the indigenous American peoples and an unwillingness to mingle with unchristian African slaves created an alienated, intensely self-conscious, and deeply anxiety-ridden society.

The first stage of American culture was thus saturated with colonial provinciality. The first Americans looked to their parent civilization for intellectual and cultural resources, applying these to very un-European conditions principally by means of crude imitation. The most provocative commentators on the problematic of provinciality in American culture have been Alexis de Tocqueville, George Santayana, and Van Wyck Brooks.[3] On de Tocqueville's view, American culture smothered intellectual life in pursuit of democracy and equality, thereby vitiating the aristocratic requisites for cultural vitality. To Santayana, the agonized conscience of Calvinism and the metaphysical comfort of transcendentalism weighted like a genteel incubus upon the American mind, partly explaining the odd American juxtaposition of intellectual conservatism with technological inventiveness. For Van Wyck Brooks, American vacillation between Puritan purity and vulgar materialism, echoing William James's "angelic impulses" and "predatory lusts," fragmented the intellectual tradition and generated an unrestrained quest for wealth.[4]

Colonial provinciality reached its zenith in the first major figure of the Genteel tradition, Jonathan Edwards. The most profound of European-American thinkers, he constructed his defense of Calvinism from a sophisticated blend of the empiricism of Locke, the determinism of Newton, and the idealism of Plato.

Edwards's valorizing of Newton bespoke his attitude toward the authority of science, an attitude close to that of his own lesser contemporary and rival, Cadwallader Colden.[5] Yet Edwards distinguished the domain of science from the special arena of religious knowledge, the intuitive realm where the sixth sense, that of the heart, reserved for the elect, reigns. His fierce struggle against the voluntaristic Arminians likewise defended complex versions of original sin and predestination familiar from European Calvinism.

The Enlightenment left a comparable European stamp on the area of political thought. Jefferson's doctrine of natural rights and theory of moral sentiments revealed his debts both to classical antiquity and to Locke, Shaftesbury, and Frances Hutchinson.[6] The anti-clericalism of Thomas Paine, and its concomitant defense of the freedom of conscience and speech, further exemplified the critical spirit of the European Enlightenment in America. Lastly, the radical environmentalism of Benjamin Rush and his humanitarian advocacy of the abolition of slavery and the rehabilitation of criminals revealed an Enlightenment belief in the unlimited possibilities of individuals in society when guided by reason.

American culture during the provincial period culminated in the Calvinist pietism, Enlightenment rationalism, and liberal republicanism of William Ellery Channing.[7] The vernal American Schleiermacher, Channing is the pivotal figure of the Genteel tradition, in its transition from Calvinism to transcendentalism, at the turning point between the colonial provinciality and the postcolonial provinciality in American culture. His revolutionary humanitarianism, bordering on utopian socialism, condemned slavery, bigotry, and pagan worldliness. He proposed to overcome these through Christian pietism, moral use of scientific knowledge, and the perfection of human nature through self-realization in democratic communities.

Channing's humanitarianism unfortunately did not serve either as guide or as norm for American practice toward Africans during the provincial period. The non-Christianity and black skin color of the dark pagan peoples threatened the self-identity of Puritan colonists inextricably bound to Christianity.[8] Since the absence of or even novel interpretation of Christian beliefs could often bring about mistreatment or banishment, the growing idea of white supremacy legitimated still harsher treatment for Africans.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently described a double consciousness in Black Americans, a dual lens through which they saw themselves.[9] For Du Bois, the dialectic of

Black self-recognition oscillated between being *in* America but not *of* it, from being Black natives to Black aliens. Yet Du Bois overlooked the broader dialectic of being American yet feeling European, of being provincial but yearning for British cosmopolitanism, of being at once incompletely civilized and materially prosperous, a genteel Brahmin amid uncouth conditions. Black Americans labored rather under the burden of a triple crisis of self-recognition. Their cultural predicament was comprised of African appearance and unconscious cultural mores, involuntary displacement to America without American status, and American alienation from the European ethos complicated through domination by incompletely European Americans.

This predicament was qualitatively different from that of other Africans in the diaspora, in the Caribbean, Canada, and Central and South America. Africans in the United States confronted a dominant Protestant European population whose own self-identity suffered from an anxiety-ridden provinciality. The Black American struggle for self-identity has always contributed constructively to the American struggle for self-identity, though the latter has only exacerbated and complicated it in return.

During the colonial provincial stage of American culture, Africans were worse than slaves; they were also denuded proto-Americans in search of identity, systematically stripped of their African heritage and effectively and intentionally excluded from American culture and its roots in European modernity. Their search for identity focused principally on indigenous African practices, rituals, religions, and worldviews they had somehow retained.[10]

The process of cultural syncretism which combined indigenous African practices and provincial American culture generated a unique variant of American life, one far removed from, yet still tied to, European modernity. Added ingredients in this were the distinctly antimodern values and sensibilities of the southern United States, the geographic cradle of Black America.

The first stage of African practice in America was neither barbarian nor provincial. Africans valued human life and sustained in their alien environment a religious cosmology which gave meaning to human existence. And it was not provincial, because it worshiped neither at the altar of British nor at the altar of American cultural superiority. Black people were relatively uninformed about British culture and not yet fully American. More pointedly, they had not yet arrived at a synthetic Afro-American identity.

HEYDAY OF MODERNITY, POSTCOLONIAL PROVINCIALITY, CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

The heyday of modernity, the golden age of the modern period, fell roughly between 1789 and 1871—that is, from the French Revolution to the unification of the German Empire. During it, early modern European culture took root and flowered in the authority of science, in modern paganism, and in the historicizing of philosophical subjectivism. The industrializing capitalist world order consolidated at this time, and nation-states emerged, both phenomena enjoying the confidence of the new bourgeoisie. The dominated classes—factory workers and the rural labor force—began to grumble, but since they had limited organization and vision, this yielded minimal results.

This was, above all, the German Age, and the year 1807 alone witnessed the completion of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* Goethe's *Faust,* Part 1, and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Yet despite the romantic reply to the bland universality, glib generality, and monotonous uniformity of the Enlightenment, the authority of science emerged with flying colors. Romanticism attacked scientific arrogance and pretense, yet the brunt of its assault fell not on science per se but rather on the crudely mechanistic model of Newton's popular imitators. The conceptions of the mind and the world characteristic of this model repelled the Romantics. Disgusted with superficial distinctions, they relegated the dissective power of the mind to the understanding (*Verstand*) and its integrative activities to reason (*Vernunft*), replacing mechanistic models with organic ones.[11]

The Romantics venerated a reason very different from that of the Enlightenment, which appealed ultimately to the experimental method and aimed to keep the imagination at bay. Romantic reason, on the other hand, is the epitome of a free creative imagination transcending the limits of the world of sense.

The Romantic movement, the golden age of European modernity, conveyed a sense of novelty.[12] The French Revolution, which in one stroke replaced feudal institutions with bourgeois capitalism, embodied the possibilities of social reconstruction and revolutionary transformation. The European exploration of other cultures and societies likewise buttressed curiosity about the unknown and brought to light distinctive features of its own emerging constituent national cultures. Lastly, widespread technological innovation and the increase of wealth

in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution reinforced belief in the capacity of humankind to master nature and enjoy its fruits.

With Napoleon, the Romantic dream of transforming the social order mellowed to temperate efforts at self-realization.[13] The fascination with exotic and primitive peoples illustrated by the popular myth of the noble savage persisted, yet it soon revealed the repressive imperialist regimes that often evolve in interaction with foreigners. The tremendous energies generated by the early Industrial Revolution continued, but alienations and the formation of new class antagonisms revealed unforeseen instabilities in bourgeois capitalism.

Hegel's historicizing of the subjectivism cast would-be academic philosophers into the social, political, and cultural struggles of the period. His grand project took, in some sense, however, the form of a Christian Christology gone mad. In place of Kant's presupposed subject of knowledge, Hegel put a transindividual subject that externalized itself in the world and progressively evolved within it in a dialectical fashion. This development can be discerned, of course, only by the most adroit philosopher, namely, Hegel himself. This development is simultaneously the freedom march of humankind and the progressive self-consciousness of that transindividual subject, what Hegel called the *Weltgeist,* or world spirit.

The year 1859 was momentous for cultural works that portrayed the central themes and concerns of the golden age: Darwin's *The Origin of the Species,* Mill's *On Liberty,* Marx's *Critique of Political Economy,* Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde,* George Eliot's *Adam Bede,* Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities,* Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,* Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King,* FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,* and Turgenev's *A Nest of Gentlefolk.* The dominant themes and concerns in these are the historical and evolutionary character of human existence, the scope of freedom and democracy in the prevailing order, and the emerging sentiments of European nationalism and of racism and sexism.

European hegemony over the life of the mind proved to be a major preoccupation of American culture during its provincial period. American artists and writers strove consciously to establish an autonomous national culture no longer dependent on that of Europe. American ought to sing its own songs, write its own poems, novels, and philosophy. America must look deep down within itself without using the lens of the parent civilization to do so.

The most important product of this self-absorptive mood in America was Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his famous lecture of 1837, "The American Scholar," Emerson portrayed Europe as the symbol of the dead past. The present task of American thinkers was to liberate themselves from slavish dependence on Europe. His message of self-reliance was not merely a reflection of a democratic and intuitive philosophy or a Jeffersonian vision of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer, but an attack on the prevailing provincialism of America in his day. Of course, without the idealism of Plato, the natural law theory of the Stoics, and the romanticism of Coleridge and Carlyle, there was little of intellectual substance left to "the sage of Concord," save his energetic spirit, charismatic style, and piercing wit. The postcolonial agenda of American culture called for homespun originality and indigenous inventiveness, despite the eclecticism and pretense this might entail.

Eclecticism and pretentiousness mark the most significant literary products of the American renaissance, as seen in the major works of Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Henry David Thoreau.[14] It is not that the works are artistic failures, but rather that they are products of a culture under the grip of provincialism, of a culture proud yet not solidified, boastful but not self-confident, eager to flex its muscles without agile flexibility.

Edgar Allan Poe, for example, with his English childhood and Parisian sensibilities, cared neither to imitate English literary models nor to write an authentic American tale. Instead, he created fantasies in which European aristocracy roamed about in bone-chilling German castles. James Fenimore Cooper's mythology loomed too large and his debt to the Scottish Sir Walter Scott was too pronounced. Walt Whitman, the effervescent American Goethe, was penetrating and provocative but hardly profound, a master of rhythmic and colorful language never able to attain a natural or comfortable idiom of expression. Though Whitman was, without a doubt, the most influential American poet of the period, his songs of himself and his democratic vistas of America seem too fabricated—or simply fail to ring true at all.

Postcolonial American culture's preoccupation with breaking away from Europe was far removed from the situation among Africans in the United States at the time. The initial tenacity with which Africans held on to their indigenous practices and the reluctance of many southern white slaveholders to teach Christianity to the slaves limited the Christianizing process in the early period. Even the Great Awakening of the

1740s, which swept the country like a hurricane, failed to reach the masses of slaves. Only with the Great Western Revival at the turn of the nineteenth century did the Christianizing process gain a significant foothold among Black people.[15]

The central questions at this juncture are: Why did large numbers of American Black people become Christians? What features of Protestant Christianity persuaded them to become Christians?

The Baptist separatists and the Methodists, religious dissenters in American religious culture, gained the attention of the majority of slaves in the Christianizing process. The evangelical outlook of these denominations stressed individual experience, equality before God, and institutional autonomy. Baptism by immersion, practiced by the Baptists, may indeed have reminded slaves from Nigeria and Dahomey of African river cults, but this fails fully to explain the success of the Christianizing process among Africans.[16]

Black people became Christians for intellectual, existential, and political reasons. Christianity is, as Friedrich Nietzsche has taught us and liberation theologians remind us, a religion especially fitted to the oppressed. It looks at the world from the perspective of those below. The African slaves' search for identity could find historical purpose in the exodus of Israel out of slavery and personal meaning in the bold identification of Jesus Christ with the lowly and downtrodden. Christianity also is first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good over evil. The intellectual life of the African slaves in the United States—like that of all oppressed peoples—consisted primarily of reckoning with the dominant form of evil in their lives. The Christian emphasis on against-the-evidence hope for triumph over evil struck deep among many of them.

The existential appeal of Christianity to Black people was the stress of Protestant evangelicalism on individual experience, and especially the conversion experience. The "holy dance" of Protestant evangelical conversion experiences closely resembled the "ring shout" of West African novitiate rites: both are religious forms of ecstatic bodily behavior in which everyday time is infused with meaning and value through unrestrained rejoicing.[17]

The conversion experience played a central role in the Christianizing process. It not only created deep bonds of fellowship and a reference point for self-assurance during times of doubt and distress; it also democratized and equalized the status of all before God. The conversion experience initiated a profoundly personal relationship with God,

which gave slaves a special self-identity and self-esteem in stark contrast with the roles imposed upon them by American society.

The primary political appeal of the Methodists and especially of the Baptists for Black people was their church polity and organizational form, free from hierarchical control, open and easy access to leadership roles, and relatively loose, uncomplicated requirements for membership. The adoption of the Baptist polity by a majority of Christian slaves marked a turning point in the Afro-American experience.

On the one hand, the major organization among Black Americans, the Christian churches, followed a polity farthest removed from modern bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of organization.[18] In this sense, the organizational form of most Afro-American churches, charismatic and often autocratic in leadership, neither promoted nor encouraged widespread respect for and acquisition of bureaucratic skills requisite for accountable leadership and institutional longevity. In short, the Christian churches' organizational form imposed considerable constraints on the administrative capabilities and institutional capacities of Black people.

On the other hand, this organizational form ensured autonomous control over the central institution in the Afro-American community, which set Blacks in the United States apart from other Africans in the diaspora. Independent control over their churches promoted the proliferation of African styles and manners within the Black Christian tradition and liturgy. It also produced community-minded political leaders, polished orators, and activist journalists and scholars. In fact, the unique variant of American life that we call Afro-American culture germinated in the bosom of this Afro-Christianity, in the Afro-Christian church congregations.

DECLINE OF MODERNITY, INDUSTRIAL PROVINCIALITY, INCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

The decline of European modernity between 1871 and 1950—from the unification of the German Empire to the emergence of the United States as the unquestioned supreme world power—occurred within the political and socioeconomic contours of an increasingly crisis-ridden monopoly capitalist world economy. This yielded devastating world wars, holocaust-producing fascist regimes, and sharp reaction against repressive communist governments. The dominated classes in industrial

nations—including victims of racist and sexist oppression—flexed their political muscles more in this period and embarked on various courses toward inclusion in and ineffective opposition to the liberal capitalist order. The proliferation of mass culture, especially luxury consumer goods, effected a prolonged entree of significant segments of the dominated classes into the bourgeois world of educational and occupational opportunities, middlebrow culture, and comfortable living.

In this modernist period, it seemed as if, for the West, "things fell apart; the center could not hold," to revise William Butler Yeats, the greatest English poet of the period. For science, a crisis set in. János Bolyai, N. I. Lobachevski, Karl F. Gauss, and Bernhard Riemann had already called into question the omnipresence of Euclidean geometry by discovering three-dimensional space and thereby making possible new, non-Euclidean geometries. Einstein's theory of special relativity undermined the prevailing Newtonian physics. Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg promoted the indeterministic character of quantum phenomena, which subsequently threatened classical laws of logic such as the law of distribution. Kurt Gödel demonstrated the incompleteness of mathematics, and L. E. J. Brouwer rejected two-value logic and the law of excluded middle, hence paving the way for intuitionist mathematics.

For modern paganism, despair also set in. This revealed itself most clearly in 1922. That year, the modernist year par excellence, witnessed within twelve months the appearance of the most profound and probing works in the history of the modern West. These included T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* James Joyce's *Ulysses,* Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha,* Osip Mandelstam's *Tristia,* Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie,* Bertolt Brecht's *Baal,* e. e. cummings's *The Enormous Room,* Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt,* Jean Toomer's "Song of the Sun," Wallace Stevens's "The Comedian as the Letter C," Max Weber's *Economy and Society,* I. A. Richards's (with C. K. Ogden and James Wood) *Foundations of Aesthetics,* and Sigmund Freud's essay on jealousy, paranoia, and homosexuality. These were published in the same year that Mussolini's Blackshirts marched on Rome; and less than a year after Lenin and Trotsky's suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion, a suppression that soured the hopes of many sympathizers of the Russian Revolution.

In philosophy during the modernist period, major attacks were also made upon the primacy of the subject. Despite Hegel's historicizing of the subjectivist turn in philosophy, academic philosophers managed to overthrow Hegelianism and replace it either with analytical realism in Britain, neo-Kantianism in Germany, and phenomenology in France,

themselves later attacked by structuralism, existentialism, and analytical behaviorism.

During the decline of European modernity the most precious ideals of science, politics, philosophy, and the arts were radically called into question. This period was thus well disposed toward apocalyptic, crisis-centered views of history which stressed shock, the violation of expected continuities, and a deep sense of futility. Lionel Trilling—with his Arnoldian outlook and tactful candor—suggests that the modernist element signifies nihilism, "a bitter line of hostility to civilization," "a disenchantment with culture itself."[19]

This modernist temper projects the sense of an abrupt break with all tradition, a radical disruption from the past which implies not so much a revolution but rather a devolution or dissolution. Virginia Woolf reflected this modernist temper when she wrote, "On or about December 1910 human character changed."[20]

The industrial provincial stage of American culture neither escaped nor engulfed the modernist temper.[21] New attempts appeared to extend the Genteel tradition—or provide metaphysical comfort for agonized consciences—in the form of highly sophisticated idealist philosophical systems, as in the works of Borden Parker Bowne, James Edwin Creighton, and, above all, Josiah Royce. The monumental literary achievement of the expatriate Henry James subjected the Genteel tradition to close scrutiny and detailed analysis, appraising it as a mere interesting habit of mind among a host of others. The Genteel tradition no longer survived as a holistic worldview, but rather as a subterranean sensibility upon which to build anew.[22]

During the modernist period, industrial provincial American culture presented clear-cut alternatives to its artists: either indigenize or become European. This dilemma was illustrated most graphically by the two exemplary American literary artists of the era, the seminal Mark Twain and the supercilious T. S. Eliot. For Twain, the aim was neither to resort to the eclectic strategies of Whitman or Melville nor to imitate the models and manners of Europe. Rather, it was to create the first genuine American idiom in literature. Similar to his fellow colleague and critic Ezra Pound, Eliot did not imitate Europeans, but rather became one. Although he expatriated to London, he had Paris on his mind and wrote his mature poetry under the influence of French symbolists and the classical European tradition of Homer, Ovid, and Dante. In this sense, Eliot was no longer from St. Louis and Pound no longer from Idaho. Both rested outside the gravity of industrial

provincial American culture, not simply because they removed themselves from it, but rather because they discarded it.

On the philosophical front, this either-or dilemma took the form of a choice between warmed-over idealism and indigenous pragmatism, between updating the Genteel tradition and promoting a new reformist orientation.[23] Just as a dialogue between the Twain and Eliot streams never materialized, so a debate between Royce and Dewey never occurred. Both streams avoided each other, partly because of the divergent roads they chose and possibly because of their fundamental incompatibility.

The either-or dilemma of industrial provincial American culture is found only in the trained and talented artists and intellectuals of the rising Afro-American petite bourgeoisie, such as Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Alain Locke, Richard Wright, Laura Wheeler Waring, and others. The almost exclusive priority of African practices in the United States in this period was to gain inclusion within the rapidly expanding American capitalist order. With the increase of xenophobic sentiments and movements, the escalation of crypto-fascist terror in the southern part of the United States, and the vast immigration of eastern and southern European laborers to urban centers in the northern section of the United States, achieving Afro-American inclusion within the mainstream of American society proved difficult.

Public discourse within the Afro-American community concerning this inclusion was shaped by the debate that took place between the early W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington—the two major spokesmen of the Afro-American petite bourgeoisie.[24] There were, of course, other interlocutors in the debate, including William Monroe Trotter of the Niagara Movement, Rev. James Bowen of the Methodist Episcopal clergy, and Rev. George Washington Woodbey of the Socialist Party, but the privileged positions and voices of Du Bois and Washington drowned them out.

For both Du Bois and Washington, the pressing issues were neither impractical ones such as the redistribution of wealth, a more humane mode of production, or opposition to American imperialism (in Puerto Rico and the Philippines) nor impertinent ones such as the undesirability of miscegenation or the removal of the Christian taint on Afro-American culture. Rather, these two petit bourgeois leaders directed their attention to the form and content of Afro-American inclusion in American society.

Both agreed on the form: nonviolent reform within the legal, political, and economic channels of American life. They differed on the content: Washington favored self-help initiatives in the economic sphere and promoted a slow agrarian proletarianization process tied to increased Afro-American property holdings and wealth acquisition, whereas Du Bois opted for upward social mobility in the social and political spheres and supported a protest movement that would achieve equal legal, social, and political status for Afro-Americans in American society. They violently clashed, not simply because of their divergent viewpoints but, more important, because their limited access to resources and talent forced them to struggle for power on overlapping terrain.

The Du Bois–Washington debate set the framework for inclusionary African practices in the United States in this century. The numerous Black ideological battles between integrationism and nationalism, accommodationism and separatism are but versions and variations of the Du Bois–Washington debate.[25] For example, Marcus Garvey, the great Jamaican leader of the first mass movement among Africans in the United States, simply gave Washington's self-help orientation a nationalist slant and back-to-Africa twist; his personal admiration of Washington is indisputable.

The first minor attempt to burst out of the framework of the Du Bois–Washington debate was the socialist viewpoint set forth in the pages of *The Messenger,* edited by the Young Turks, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph.[26] This perspective, which echoed George Washington Woodbey's position more than a decade earlier, not only called into question the procapitalist assumption circumscribing the Du Bois–Washington debate but also linked the enhancement of Afro-Americans to the radical elements of the labor movement. This valuable addition proved to be premature at the time, especially given the racist character of the labor movement. But in decades to come, this perspective proved to be portentous. Randolph's long and distinguished yet flawed career bears out the depths of his foresight. In short, he was the pioneer on the frontier of Afro-American labor relations.

A second minor attempt to step outside the confines of the Du Bois–Washington debate consisted of the African Blood Brotherhood's amalgam of revolutionary Black nationalism and scientific socialism.[27] Its principal figures—Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, W. A. Domingo, Harry Haywood—were the first African communists in the United States. Their major contribution was that they put imperialist issues on the agenda of the Afro-American liberation movement. Yet such

issues—along with untimely revolutionary rhetoric—remained on the back burner for petit bourgeois intellectuals and entrepreneurs, proletarian preachers and parishioners in urban centers, and sharecroppers, tenants, and yeoman farmers in rural areas throughout Afro-America.

The major vehicles by which Black progress occurred in this period were patronage relationships with white elites and bosses in city machines, organized protest and boycott efforts (usually church-based) against discrimination, labor shortages during the two world wars, participation in the progressive labor movement (especially in the unionization of industrial workers), and achievements in athletics and entertainment. These diverse means of Afro-American upward social mobility constituted ad hoc measures which presupposed political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation as the prevailing realities and posited inclusion within the American liberal capitalist order as the desirable goal. Such inclusionary measures signified the Afro-American encounter with the modern world on a significant scale for the first time; they revealed the difficulties presented by racist American society, the desperation of a bastard people in hostile circumstances, and the determination of Africans in the United States, despite limited organization and vision, to be free.

END OF MODERNITY, POSTINDUSTRIAL COSMOPOLITANISM, DISPERSIVE PRACTICES

We live now three decades after the end of European modernity. The very term "postmodernism" reflects fear of the future; it is a backward-looking term. We witness the nuclear and ideological stand-off between the capitalist (not necessarily free) United States and the communist (definitely unfree) Soviet Union, both imperialist powers suffering immense internal decay. The dominated classes in industrial and postindustrial nations have accelerated the speed of their inclusion within the liberal capitalist regimes, accompanied by widespread tranquilizing and depoliticizing by mass culture. Poor, developing nations have launched successful political, anticolonial revolutions, yet often lapse into a neocolonial dependence on developed capitalist countries. A few developing nations even have had successful social revolutions, though they usually fall into the neocolonial Soviet orbit.

The recent stirrings of postmodernism can be illustrated in the following ways:

First, the crisis in science which emerged in European modernism is now becoming a more widespread crisis in the authority of science, in many ways similar to the crisis in the authority of the church in the Age of Enlightenment. This rudimentary state of demythologizing science relegates scientific descriptions and theories of the self, world, and God alongside rather than above religious, artistic, and moral descriptions and theories of the self, world, and God. This demythologizing process is promoted (usually unintentionally) by major figures in the philosophy of science, such as N. R. Hanson, Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and, above all, Paul Feyerabend.[28] This process signifies a deep authority crisis in knowledge, a kind of demonopolizing of science on truth and reality in the marketplace of ideas. It raises the prospect of a possible plurality of epistemic authorities on truth and reality as well as a frightening full-blown relativism or laissez-faire policy regarding access to truth and reality.

Second, the despair of modern paganism during the European modernist period has degenerated into various forms of cynicism, fatalism, hedonism, and narcissism in the lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow cultures of postmodernism. These attitudes and sensibilities—recently studied by Ihab Hassan, Raymond Olderman, Christopher Lasch, Heinz Kohut, Jerome Klinkowitz, and others—can be glimpsed in mass consumer culture, in popular movies, in television programs, and through disco records.[29] Postmodernist sentiments also can be found in such literary works as Jorge Borges's *Labyrinths* (1964), William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1962), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Ishmael Reed's *The Free-lance Pallbearers* (1967), John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1972), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). This degeneration—in mass culture and sophisticated literary texts—reveals, to a certain extent, the dead end to which modern paganism has come: impotent irony, barren skepticism, and paralyzing self-parody.

Third, philosophical attacks on the primacy of the subject are deepened and extended in postmodernism. In short, postmodernism is an accentuation and acceleration of the major developments and processes in European modernism. It is a deepening of the decline of modernity, with little sense of what is to follow, if anything at all. It bears the birth pains of slow epoch transition, the ironic excesses of prolonged

historical suspension, and the ecstatic anticipations of a new, though not necessarily better, era.

The postindustrial cosmopolitan stage of American culture—the prevailing situation with its avant-garde domesticated by absorption into the marketable mainstream, its artists as professors, academic critics as artists, and philosophers as technicians—witnesses the emergence of the United States as the cultural vanguard in postmodernism. For the first time, European audiences look to the United States for artistic and cultural leadership. This leadership is not simply a result of the hegemony of US world power or its supreme nuclear capacity. More important is the fact that it is an effect of a nation that has steadily gained cultural self-confidence while other leading European countries flounder in either self-pity (Germany), self-defeat (England), or self-obsession (France).

The point is not so much that the United States has come of age, but rather that the United States has seized Western cultural leadership in a declining and decadent age.[30] Of course, the United States has no Jean-Paul Sartre or Martin Heidegger, no Samuel Beckett or even Gabriel García Márquez. Yet cultural leadership in the West no longer requires such stellar figures; productive academic figures now suffice.

In postindustrial cosmopolitan American culture, the either-or dilemma of the previous period evaporates. Taking their cues from William Faulkner—without the size of his canvass, the complexity of his vision, and the depths of his talent—postmodern American artists are able to learn from Europe without a feeling of inferiority and of digging deep into American life without a sense of provinciality. In philosophy, the choice is no longer between the last of the Genteel tradition and the reformist orientation—idealism or pragmatism, Royce or Dewey—or even between the reformist orientation and the new realism. The very framework of such a choice has been eclipsed by the linguistic turn in philosophy, with its analytical rigor and technical argumentation.[31] Philosophy in the United States is no longer an arena in which comprehensive worldviews are adopted and intellectual attitudes cultivated, but rather a professional field of study where intricate puzzlelike problems are solved, resolved, or dissolved.

The professionalization and specialization at work in post-industrial cosmopolitan American culture find their counterparts in the process of differentiation currently proceeding in the Afro-American experience. This differentiation generates dispersive practices among

Afro-Americans; heretofore untouched intellectual territories, secular outlooks, business ventures, occupational positions, geographic locations, and even sexual experimentations are now being discovered and enacted by Afro-Americans. This differentiation—though an index of progress—has rendered the collective enhancement of Afro-Americans even more problematic.

The paradox of Afro-American history is that Afro-Americans fully enter the modern world precisely when the postmodern period commences; that Afro-Americans gain a foothold in the industrial order just as the postindustrial order begins; and that Afro-Americans procure skills, values, and mores efficacious for survival and sustenance in modernity as the decline of modernity sets in, deepens, and yearns to give birth to a new era and epoch. The Afro-American petite bourgeoisie make significant gains in such circumstances, but even they have a fragile economic position and vulnerable political status, and they experience cultural atrophy. At the same time, the Afro-American underclass and the poor working class exhibit the indelible traces of their oppression in modernity and their dispensability in postmodernity: relative political powerlessness and perennial socioeconomic depression, cultural deterioration reinforced by devastated families and prefabricated mass culture, and subversive subcultures dominated by drugs and handguns which surface as civil terrorism in Black ghettos and American cities.

The postmodern period has rendered the framework of the Du Bois–Washington debate obsolete, but presently there is little theory and praxis to fill the void. We shall focus directly on these urgent and pressing issues in chapter 5, but we have much territory to cover before we do so. Let it suffice to say that a noteworthy product of the dispersive practices of Afro-Americans in postindustrial cosmopolitan American culture is the advent of Afro-American philosophy.

The fact that, excepting some passages in John C. Calhoun, none of our important philosophic writings mentions the existence of slavery or of the Negro race, that liberal democratic philosophers like Jefferson could continue to own and even sell slaves and still fervently believe that all men are created free and equal, ought to serve as a reminder of the air-tight compartments into which the human mind is frequently divided, and of the extent to which one's professed philosophy can be entirely disconnected from the routine of one's daily occupation.

Morris R. Cohen
American Thought: A Critical Sketch

For the history of the American Negro is unique also in this: that the question of his humanity, and of his rights therefore as a human being, became a burning one for several generations of Americans, so burning a question that it ultimately became one of those used to divide the nation. It is out of this argument that the venom of the epithet *Nigger!* is derived.

James Baldwin
"Stranger in the Village"