

## Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization

In this essay my basic aim is to put forward a conception of black theology of liberation which is simultaneously anchored in the prophetic christian tradition and the progressive Marxist tradition.

My strategy shall be as follows: First, I shall examine briefly the evolution of the black prophetic consciousness in the liberation. It is my argument that a black theology and theology of liberation as a critique of capitalist civilization, is the present expression of this prophetic consciousness in our troubled times. Second, I will attempt to explain what I mean by the vague phrase "critique of capitalist civilization". Third, I shall probe the theological dimension of my project and suggest that the adjective "black"—viewed symbolically and literally—describes a crucial aspect of this dimension owing to the unique role and particular plight of black people in the emergence, duration and decline of capitalist civilization.

In order to grasp more fully the evolution of the prophetic stream in the black Christian tradition (which I assume here to be linked to the prophetic Christian tradition), it is important to make a distinction between the activity of black theological reflection and the codification of this activity in highly visible and widely accessible books and articles. The activity of black theological reflection began the moment African slaves, laboring in sweltering heat on plantations owned and ruled by primarily white Christians, tried to make sense of their lives and understand their situation of servitude in light of Biblical texts, Protestant hymns and Christian testimonies.<sup>1</sup> This activity of black theological reflection is inseparable from the African (or black) Christian Community

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<sup>1</sup>For the most recent full-length treatment of this neglected phenomenon, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford, 1978).

of believers, the Black Church. The Black Church, a mere rubric which designates the set of black Christian communities of various denominations (primarily those of the Left-Wing of the Reformation, e.g. Baptist, Methodist, Pentacostal) came into being when African slaves decided, often at the risk of life and limb, to make "Jesus their choice" and to share with each other their common Christian sense of purpose and similar Christian understanding of their circumstances. Similar to the traditions of other Christian communities, this sharing contained many streams, some more prophetic than others. The evolution of this multiplicity of streams constitutes the rich diversity within the history of the activity of black theological reflection. The recent highly visible and widely accessible codification of the activity of black theological reflection is part and parcel of the christian tradition which ushers forth from the Black Church.<sup>2</sup> This holds for both the prophetic and priestly streams in black theological reflection and action.

In this essay I shall focus only on the prophetic stream in the black Christian tradition. I suggest that this prophetic stream has passed through four stages and is presently entering a fifth stage. These stages are characterized by particular theological responses to the perceived source of oppression most directly and immediately impinging upon black people.

The first stage can be viewed roughly as: Black Theology of Liberation As Critique of Slavery. This stage, lasting approximately from the mid-seventeenth century to 1863, consisted of black prophetic Christian viewpoints and actions grounded in the black slave experience and critical of the institution of slavery. Many petitions of black Christians during the first two centuries of slavery express this prophetic viewpoint. For example, black Christian slaves wrote in 1779 to the General Assembly of Connecticut:

we perceive by our own reflection, that we are endowed with the same Faculties with our masters, and there is nothing that leads us to a Belief, or Suspicion, that we are any more Obliged to serve them, than they us, and the more we Consider of this, matter, the more we are Convinced of Our right (by the laws of Nature and by the

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<sup>2</sup>It is important to note that black churches in the United States evolved as independent churches, separate from white control. Therefore black religious leadership and black theological reflection could arise autonomous (or at least, relatively so) from white censorship, as is not the case for black people in Catholic and Anglican churches in Latin America and Africa. It is no accident that Pentacostalism—the denomination which vigorously promotes the development of indigenous religious leadership free from the control of church bureaucracies—was founded by black Baptists, principally Rev. W. J. Seymour in Los Angeles, California in 1906. Pentacostalism is the only denomination of the Christian faith founded by black people and is one of the fastest-growing denominations in the world, especially among oppressed people.

whole Tenor of the Christian Religion, so far as we have been taught) to be free. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The prophetic Christian view that the gospel stands unequivocally opposed to slavery led, in some cases, to unsuccessful slave revolts spearheaded by black Christians. In 1800 Gabriel Prosser a young Christian, derived his self-understanding of being the divinely elected deliverer of black people from the Samson story of the Old Testament. Subsequently he engaged in the first thoroughly planned and overtly revolutionary attempt to liberate black people from slavery. This attempt involved, according to conservative estimates, over six thousand black Christian and non-Christians.<sup>4</sup> Like most other slave insurrectionists, young Gabriel was executed. The famous examples and executions of Denmark Vesey (leader of a slave insurrection in 1822) and Nat TURNER (leader of a slave insurrection in 1831) also exemplify the cost black prophetic Christians were willing to pay in their Christian-inspired fight for liberation.

The major codified theological expression during this stage is found in David Walker's "appeal to the coloured citizens of the world", which appeared in 1829. Walker's appeal, as it came to be known, is one of the most powerful theological critiques of slavery to emanate from the black Christian tradition. Gayraud Wilmore, a noted Black Christian social ethicist and historian, goes as far as to state:

... Walker's appeal is steeped in Biblical language and prophecy. It is certainly one of the most remarkable religious documents of the Protestant era, rivaling in its righteous indignation and Christian radicalism Luther's "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," published in Wittenberg in 1520.<sup>5</sup>

In his theological anti-slavery text, Walker proclaims that slavery,

... is ten thousand times more injurious to this country than all the other evils put together; and which will be the final overthrow of its government, unless something is very speedily done: for their cup is nearly full.—perhaps they will laugh at or make light of this; but I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone! For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!<sup>6</sup>

The second stage can be viewed as: Black Theology of Liberation As Critique of Institutional Racism. This stage, which occupied a little over a century (1864-1969), found black prophetic Christians principally focussing attention on the racist institutional structures in the United States which rendered the vast majority of black people politically pow-

<sup>3</sup>Quoted from Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (New York, 1973), p.49

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

erless (deprived of the right to vote or participate in governmental affairs), economically exploited (in dependent positions as sharecroppers or unskilled jobs) and socially degraded (separate, segregated, unequal eating and recreational facilities, housing, education, transportation and police protection). This period contains the vicious lynchings of thousands of black people alongside the historic refusal of President Woodrow Wilson to sign an anti-lynching law in 1916; and the migration of millions of job-hunting black people into rat-infested delapidated ghettos in the urban North which triggered the historic race riots of 1919, 1943, 1964, 1967, and 1968.

It is no accident that many of the salient black prophetic Christian leaders—such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey—favored during this stage a return of black people to Africa. They were led to this viewpoint from their theological critique of institutional racism in the United States. They held that this institutional racism so deeply pervaded and permeated U. S. society that only emigration to the black hoomeland could rid black people of their immediate oppression.

The most effective Christian during this stage was, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. Upon the strength of the black prophetic Church and liberal white allies, he mobilized and organized black and white people against blatant institutional racism and waged a successful struggle for black civil rights—integrated transportation, eating and recreational facilities, and most importantly, the right to vote. The tragic murder of King in 1968 triggered not only some of the worst race riots the United States has ever witnessed, including the National Guard protecting the White House for the first time since the Civil War. King's death, along with the Black Power movement led by Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, also precipitated a great wave of the academic expression of black theological reflection.

Besides pioneer works by Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey and a few others, black prophetic Christians had not systematically codified their viewpoints.<sup>7</sup> But with the publication of Albert Cleage's The Black Messiah (1968) and James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power (1969) a third stage commenced: Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of White North American Theology. In this stage, which lasted less than a decade (1969-1977), we witnessed the first full-fledged academic expression of liberation theology in general and black theology of liberation in particular in the United States. James Cone's

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<sup>7</sup>Benjamin E. Mays, The Negro's God (New York, 1938). Howard Thurman, Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death (Friends United Press, 1975)—the first book was originally published in 1945, the second in 1947. Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Nashville, 1949). George D. Kelsey, Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man (New York, 1965).

second book, A Black Theology of Liberation (1970) deepened a theological discourse in which many black theologians played a crucial role, including figures such as Cecil Cone (James Cone's brother), Major Jones, William Jones, Charles Long, J. Deotis Roberts, Joseph Washington, Leon Watts, Preston Williams and Gayraud Wilmore.<sup>8</sup>

This particular stage was an intellectually creative one—partly in response to the spontaneous rebellion of black people in the streets, the more disciplined political praxis of Black Power groups and the paralysis of most white North American theologians. Yet the conception of black theology was, in retrospect, understandably narrow: It focussed principally on the failings of white North American theology, especially its silence on racial justice and the white racism within mainstream establishment churches and religious agencies. In response to this criticism, echoed partially by Cecil Cone, Charles Long and Gayraud Wilmore, James Cone attempted in his next two books—The Spirituals and The Blues (1972) and God of The Oppressed (1975)—to broaden his focus by delving into black cultural sources for theological reflection, such as the spirituals, blues, folktales, sermons and stories. As Cone notes:

. . . I have learned much from this discussion on Black religion and Black Theology, because there is a basic truth in the critiques of Long, Cone and Wilmore . . . If the struggle of the victims is the only context for the development of a genuine Christian theology, then should not theology itself reflect in its speech the language of the people about whom it claims to speak? This is the critical issue. When this assumption is applied to Black Theology, I think that Black religion or the Black religious experience must become one of the important ingredients in the development of a Black Theology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Albert Cleage, The Black Messiah (New York, 1968). James Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York, 1969). James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia, 1970). Cecil Cone, The Identity Crisis in Black Theology (Nashville, 1975). Major Jones, Black Awareness (Nashville, 1971). Major Jones, Christian Ethics for Black Theology (Nashville, 1971). William Jones, Is God a White Racist? (Garden City, 1973). Charles Long, "The Black Reality: Toward a Theology of Freedom," Criterion (Spring-Summer 1969), pp.2-7 and "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the U. S." History of Religion Vol. 2 (August 1977), pp. 54-66. J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation Theology (Philadelphia, 1974). Joseph Washington, The Politics of God (Boston, 1967). Joseph Washington, Black Sects and Cults, (Garden City, 1972). Leon Watts, "Transcendence and Mystery in Black Theology" IDOC International Documentation, Vol.71 (March-April 1976), pp. 60-75. Preston Williams, "The Black Experience and Black Religion", Theology Today, Vol.26 (October 1969), pp. 246-261 and "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic", Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 65 (October 1972), pp. 483-494. Gayraud Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Garden City, 1973).

<sup>9</sup>Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, 1979), p. 618. James Cone's essay in this volume entitled "Epilogue: An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians" is the best available treatment of the discussion and dialogue among black theologians of this stage.

The fourth stage—and the stage black prophetic theologians are presently transcending—can be viewed as: Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of United States Capitalism. With the appearance of the Black Theology Project's (which is part of a progressive interethnic, interracial, interdenominational Christian organization called, Theology in The Americas) "Message to The Black Church and Community" and James Cone's essay "Black Theology and The Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here"—Both papers presented at a Black Theology Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 1977—black theological reflection focused on united states capitalism as a major enemy of black people. In the section entitled "The Roots of The Crisis", the Black Theology project collectively stated:

The issue for all of us is survival. The root problem is human sinfulness which nurtures monopolistic capitalism, aided by racism and abetted by sexism.

Our crisis is spiritual, material and moral. Black people seem unable to effectively counter disruptive forces that undermine our quality of life. We seem unable to collectively define our situation, discover the nature of our problems, and develop sustained coalitions that can resolve our dilemmas.

Exploitative, profit-oriented capitalism is a way of ordering life fundamentally alien to human value in general and to black humanity in particular. Racism and capitalism have set the stage for despoliation of natural and human resources all around the world. Yet those who seriously challenge these systems are often effectively silenced. We view racism as criminality and yet we are called freaks. The roots of our crisis are in social, economic, media and political power systems that prevent us from managing the reality of our everyday lives.

It is this intolerable, alien order that has driven us to Atlanta seeking a word from the Lord out of the wellsprings of black theological tradition.<sup>10</sup>

And in his essay, Cone explicitly notes,

There is little in our theological expressions and church practice that rejects American capitalism or recognizes its oppressive character in third world countries. The time has come for us to move beyond institutional survival in a capitalistic and racist society and begin to take more seriously our dreams about a new heaven and a new earth. Does this dream include capitalism or is it a radically new way of life more consistent with African socialism as expressed in the Arusha Declaration in Tanzania?<sup>11</sup>

This focus was deepened and sharpened by two of my own essays—"Black Theology and Marxist Thought" (1979) and "Black Theology and Socialist Thought" (1980)—which, in a sense, initiated a dialogue between black prophetic theologians and progressive Marxist thinkers, as well as practicing socialists and communists.<sup>12</sup> In these essays, black theologians are primarily criticized for their lack of a clear-

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 355-356.

<sup>12</sup>My first piece is found in the Wilmore-Cone volume, pp. 552-567. the second article appeared in The Witness, Vol. 63, No. 4, April 1980, pp. 16-19.

cut social theory which impedes them from putting forward a precise idea of what constitutes socioeconomic and political liberation. I harshly suggest that without some version of a Marxist social theory their conception of socioeconomic and political liberation,

... roughly equates liberation with American middle-class status, leaving the unequal distribution of wealth relatively untouched and the capitalist system of production, along with its imperialist ventures, intact. Liberation would consist of including black people within the mainstream of liberal capitalist America. If this is the social vision of black theologians, they should drop the meretricious and flamboyant term "liberation" and adopt the more accurate and sober word "inclusion."<sup>13</sup>

I also praise black theologians (and subsequently criticize vulgar Marxists) for stressing the positive role culture and religion can play in the struggle for liberation and noting the complexity of racial oppression.

... Black theologians recognize that cultural and religious attitudes, values, and sensibilities have a life and logic of their own, not fully accountable in terms of class analysis. Subsequently, racist practices are not reducible to a mere clever and successful strategy of divide-and-conquer promoted by the ruling class to prevent proletarian unity. Rather, racism is an integral element within the very fabric of American culture and society. It is embedded in the country's first collective self-definition; enunciated in its subsequent laws; and imbued in its dominant way of life.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the works of two major Marxist theorists of culture, Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams, I try to show how the black prophetic religious tradition can become a more counterhegemonic, anticapitalist force in the United States. This move toward a neo-Marxist theory and praxis of culture and religion is based on the fundamental claim that,

a refusal to come to terms with class inequality results in a highly limited view of black enhancement.<sup>15</sup>

James Cone's latest essay, "The Black Church and Marxism: What Do They Have To Say To Each Other?" pursues this crucial dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Yet it seems to me, the prevailing conception of black theology of liberation remains inadequate. I believe that a new conception of black theology of liberation is needed which preserves the positive content of its earlier historical stages, overcomes its earlier (and inevitable) blindnesses and makes explicit its present challenges. I view the positive content of the earlier conceptions of black theology of liberation as follows:

- 1) The theological claim (or faith-claim) that God sides with the oppressed and

<sup>13</sup>Cornel West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought", op. cit., p. 556.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 560.

<sup>15</sup>Cornel West, "Black Theology and Socialist Thought", op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>16</sup>This important essay was jointly published by the Black Theology Project of Theology in The Americas and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. This joint effort signifies neither James Cone's nor the Black Theology Project's support of DSOC's social democratic political stance.

acts on their behalf.

- 2) The idea that religion of the oppressed can either be an opiate or a source of struggle for liberation.
- 3) The idea that white racism is a cancer at the core of an exploitative capitalist U.S. society.

I understand the limitations and shortcomings of earlier conceptions of black theology of liberation to be:

- 1) its absence of a systemic social analysis, which has prevented black theologians from coming to terms with the relationships between racism, sexism, class exploitation and imperialist oppression.
- 2) its lack of a social vision, political program and concrete praxis which defines and facilitates socioeconomic and political liberation.
- 3) its tendency to downplay existential issues such as death, disease, dread, despair and disappointment which are related to yet not identical with suffering caused by oppressive structures.

I claim that the present challenge to black theologians is to put forward an understanding of the Christian gospel in light of present circumstances which takes into account the complex ways in which racism (especially, white racism) and sexism (especially, male sexism) are integral to the class exploitative capitalist system of production as well as its repressive imperialist tentacles abroad; and to keep in view the crucial existential issues of death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment that each and every individual must face within the context of these present circumstances. I believe this theological perspective requires a move into a fifth stage: Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization. In short, I think that black theological reflection and action must simultaneously become more familiar with and rooted in the progressive Marxist tradition, with its staunch anticapitalist, antiimperialist, antiracist, antisexist stance and its creative socialist outlook; and more anchored in its own proto-Kierkegaardian viewpoint, namely, its proper concern with the existential issues facing individuals.

In this section I will try to explain what I mean by the vague phrase "critique of capitalist civilization". I shall begin by defining what I mean by "critique". First, I understand this term in a Marxian way; that is, critique is not simply moral criticism of a state of affairs. Rather, critique is a theoretical praxis which

- 1) presupposes a sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics or power relations of a society or civilization. This understanding requires a social theory whose aim is to demystify present ideological distortions or misreadings of society, to bring to light who possesses power and wealth, why they do, how they acquire, sustain and enlarge it and why the poor have so little.
- 2) is integrally linked with a praxis of faith or political movement which is capable in the near future of fundamentally transforming the present order.
- 3) is capable of ushering forth a new order, of organizing, administering and governing a more humane social order.

Therefore the crucial characteristics of an acceptable and appropriate critique are moral sensitivity to the plight of the exploited and oppressed; high-level social analysis of the sources of exploitation and oppression; objective possibility of weakening the present order; and praxis of faith or political movement with organization, power and social vision, with leaders of impeccable integrity.

Let us now look briefly at the capitalist system of production which undergird what I call "capitalist civilization". Capitalism is an anti-democratic mode of socioeconomic organization in that it requires the removal of control of production from those engaged in production. Capitalism is a particular system of production in which capital accumulation for profit-maximization is achieved at the expense of excluding democratic participation (of those principally responsible for production) in investment decisions. Presently, capitalism is inseparable from imperialism in that the latter is an extension of capitalism across national borders and political boundaries. Imperialism is a system of capital accumulation for profit-maximization based on a developed countries' acquisition of control over the land and means of production in less developed countries. This control is preserved and protected by the military and political resources of developed countries. Multinational corporations—the materialization of international capital—are the principal controllers of the land and means of production in less developed countries.

The anti-democratic character of capitalism is seen most clearly in its present imperialist manifestation. On the one hand, capital accumulation for profit-maximization requires that multinational corporations promote its products no matter how appropriate these products may be for the less developed countries; and the effect of the multinationals' stronghold on the local economy is to restrict local entrepreneurs to low return routine kinds of production. On the other hand, the products promoted by multinationals (principally luxury consumer goods) find their market primarily among the elite groups in less developed countries.

This mode of capital accumulation contributes to anti-democratic conditions in two basic ways. First, it encourages the exclusion of producers—and casts the organizing efforts of workers in a negative light—since an increase in wages would threaten the attractiveness of a less developed country as a site for multinational corporate investment. Second, this mode of capital accumulation contributes to gross economic and class inequality since it ensures a market for multinational products geared principally to the affluent. This dialectic of capital accumulation and political exclusion often leads to military rule and abominable repression—under the guise of "development" or "democratic openings".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The best recent treatment of these issues I know are Peter Evans's Dependent Development (Princeton, 1979) and the superb collection of essays in Contemporary Marxism, No.

Let us now look briefly at what I mean by "civilization". Civilization is often understood on an achieved condition or way of life characterized by refinement and order.<sup>18</sup> I understand "civilization" in my phrase "capitalist civilization" as those self-images and self-identities, values and sensibilities, institutions and associations, ways of life and ways of struggles which are shaped and molded by the four major kinds of oppression in our time: imperialist oppression, class exploitation, racial and sexual oppression. The concrete consequences of these forms of oppression are not only poverty, disease, lack of self-esteem and despair but also the suppression of individuality (or self-realization within community). Ironically, the ethos of rapacious individualism in capitalist civilization prohibits the flowering of individuality.<sup>19</sup>

Capitalist civilization is circumscribed primarily by the two major modern historical events and processes: the industrial revolution and bourgeois political revolutions. These two epoch-making historical processes reinforced the four major types of oppression—and these kinds of oppression persist in so-called "postindustrial" capitalist societies. Let us look briefly at both the Industrial Revolution and the American bourgeois political "revolution" to see why this is so.

The Industrial Revolution can be defined as "the triumph of capitalist industry which results in the creation of a mechanized production unit which yields such vast quantities of goods and products and at such rapidly diminishing cost as to be no longer dependent on existing demand, but to create its own market."<sup>20</sup> The Industrial Revolution, as is well known, emerged and escalated in the late 18th century in Britain. Britain was the fertile soil for this flowering, not because of its scientific advancement or technological superiority—France and Germany were far ahead in these areas—but rather owing to its rapid and propitious dissolution of the feudal British peasantry and the strong commitment of its government to economic development. Britain had, by various means (e.g. Enclosure Acts, etc.) transformed its old collective economy of the feudal village into a capitalist mode of agricultural production, that is, into a few profit-oriented landlords and a moderate number of tenant-

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1, Synthesis Publications, special issue on Strategies for the Class Struggle in Latin America.

<sup>18</sup>Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 48-50. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 13-16.

<sup>19</sup>This is a central theme in the noteworthy writings of C. B. Macpherson. See his *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962); *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford, 1966); *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford, 1973).

<sup>20</sup>My understanding of the Industrial Revolution follows closely the Scenario painted by E. J. Hobsbawm in his classic work, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York, 1962), pp. 44-73.

farmers who employed a large number of landless hired laborers. This capitalist mode of agricultural production was geared primarily to feed a rising non-agricultural, urbanized population and to yield a surplus for the accumulation of capital to be used for further industrialized differentiation in the economy. Primarily due to overseas colonial trade and the cheapest labor available—namely, African slaves in the diaspora—the cotton industry was the first major industry to be revolutionized. The cotton industry, whose raw materials were literally picked by the hands of African slaves, was the first to secure a large export market and thereby insure rapid expansion. It also was the first major industry to establish mass production, as witnessed in the famous Lancashire mills, the very symbols of the first stages of the Industrial Revolution. In short, the cotton industry was the *modus operandi* of the early stages of the industrial revolution, the heart of Britain's economy. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted,

Cotton manufacturers formed between 40 and 50 percent of the annual declared value of all British exports between 1816 and 1848. If cotton flourished, the economy flourished, if it slumped, so did the economy.<sup>21</sup>

This brief yet important illustration of the first major industry to be revolutionized displays the central presence of the four types of oppressions mentioned earlier. Forms of class exploitation occurred in both the cotton plantations in the Americas and in the mines in Britain; imperialist oppression took place in Britain's control of territory, resources and people in the Americas; racism provided the chief ideological justification for the use of Africans as slaves in the Americas; and sexism was employed to defend the abuse of women on both the plantations in the Americas and within the mills in Britain.

This crude example can serve as a kind of microcosm of the kind and associations, ways of life and ways of struggle required and reinforced by the capitalist system of production. Already we can see the contours which partially shape and mold capitalist civilization: how the profit-maximizing activity of a few is integrally linked to the dehumanization of the many; the collapse of organic communities and the growth of impersonal bureaucratic control; the prohibition of individual norms of possessive individualism; the richness and plurality of cultures discouraged in lieu of a shoddy, homogenizing cosmopolitanism. And most importantly, the early stages of the Industrial Revolution embody and prefigure, promote and encourage the idea of white supremacy and male supremacy. In short, from its emergence through its duration to its decline, capitalist civilization remains racist and sexist at its core and based upon class exploitation and imperialist oppression.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

The four major types of oppression also set the framework for our view of the American bourgeois political "revolution". This event, along with the crucial French Revolution, provided the emerging capitalist civilization with its liberal political language, its rhetorical self-understanding. The grand ideals of liberty and equality, the principles of procedural justice and the notion of participatory democracy were—and remain—restricted and restrained by the cancers of class exploitation, imperialistic oppression, racism and sexism. Even the most cherished idea of bourgeois political revolutions—namely, that of the nation-state or nationalism—is opposed by the profit-making activity of firms (and later corporations) of capitalist civilization which have more loyalty to self-aggrandizement than allegiance to their native territories. And, of course, at its inception, the United States government excluded African (or fifth generation black natives) from the human race, all women from participation in government (as well as propertyless men) and had its eyes on further territorial expansion and imperialist dominion over indigenous and Mexican people.

In this last section, I will present the theological dimension of my critique of capitalist civilization and suggest that the adjective "black" describes a crucial aspect of this dimension owing to the peculiar role and particular plight of black people in the emergence, duration and decline of capitalist civilization by putting forward three crucial theological commitments which inform my critique.

- 1) my commitment to a christian notion of the self-realization of each and every individual within community.
- 2) my commitment to a christian notion of original sin.
- 3) my commitment to an understanding of the Christian gospel as inescapable penultimate tragedy and the persistent hope for ultimate triumph.

I shall begin with my first commitment. I believe that the basic ideological contribution of Christianity to the world—and its fundamental moral message—is that each and every person, regardless of class, country, caste, race or sex should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her capacity or potentiality. I shall call this radical egalitarian idea: the christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality within community.<sup>22</sup> The notion of a transcendent, Wholly Other god before whom all men and women are equal endows the well-being and salvation of each person with equal value and significance. Needless to say, the

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<sup>22</sup>Hegel makes a similar claim (or at least related claim) regarding the Christian principle of self-consciousness or subjectivity in his *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), pp. 19, 319-334. for a treatment of the Christian principle of individuality within the history of Afro-American thought and praxis, see my conception of the Afro-American humanist tradition in "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience". *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. IX, Nos. 2-3, pp. 117-148.

Christian principle of self-realization of human individuality within community has been, in many instances, narrowed and distorted e.g. the salvation of souls (individuality) in heaven (community). This narrowing and distorting has never been accepted by the prophetic elements in Christian communities down through the centuries. Instead, this prophetic tradition has insisted that socio-economic well-being as well as existential salvation of persons has equal value and significance in the eyes of God. In fact, I suggest that a major reason Marxist analysis and praxis is attractive to many committed prophetic Christians is that the principle of self-realization within community is deeply embedded in Marx's own writings.<sup>23</sup> Similar to the history of Christianity, the history of Marxism exemplifies, in many instances, the narrowing and distorting of this principle in Marx e.g. the socio-economic well-being of persons regimented by bureaucratic control.

It is crucial to point out that this narrowing and distorting never been accepted by the progressive elements in Marxist communities and societies down through the decades. Instead, this progressive tradition has insisted that political liberties and cultural diversity as well as socio-economic well-being are indispensable for any acceptable community or desirable society. In short, participatory democracy is imperative for a socialist regime.

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<sup>23</sup>I will quote from three major works from Marx to illustrate this theme in his thought;

In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality. . . . In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. ("Manifesto of the Communist Party", The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York, 1972, pp.347, 353.) . . . the communal relationship, into which the individuals of a class entered and which was determined by their common interests over against a third party, was always a community to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only insofar as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class—a relationship in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class. On the other hand, it is just the reverse with the community of revolutionary proletarians who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control. (The German Ideology, excerpts therefrom in Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, ed. and trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, Garden City 1967, p. 460.

The barrier to capital is that this entire development proceeds in a contradictory way, and that the working-out of the productive forces, of general wealth, etc., knowledge etc., appears in such a way that the working individual alienates himself [sich entausst]; relates to the conditions brought out of him by his labour as those not of his own but of an alien wealth and of his own poverty. But this antithetical form is itself fleeting, and produces the real conditions of its own suspension. The result is: the tendentially and potentially general development of the forces of production—of wealth as such—as basis; likewise, the universal development of the individuals from this basis . . . (Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy, trans. Martin Nicolaus, New York, 1973, pp. 541-542.)

My critique of capitalist civilization is based, theologically and morally, on the Christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality within community. My understanding of this principle rests upon the prophetic Christian tradition and the progressive Marxist tradition. This principle, in my judgment, unequivocally condemns class exploitation, imperialist oppression, political liberties, cultural diversity and existential salvation of persons.

My second theological commitment is to a Christian notion of Original Sin. In fact, my support for a socialist civilization, in which the socio-economic well-being, political liberties, cultural diversity and existential salvation (if chosen) of persons is promoted, is grounded in my deep belief in a Christian notion of Original Sin. My understanding of this notion is that human beings in any society, culture or community have basic drives and impulses characterized by a will to survive and live which usually takes the form of human proclivities toward selfish, self-centered behavior. I believe human beings can change their conditions and change themselves, but neither perfect their conditions nor perfect themselves. Therefore my viewpoint precludes the possibility of human perfection and hence human utopias. Instead, it claims that conditions and circumstances can always be improved, that persons, communities, societies and civilizations can always be better than they are. Therefore, I hold that human selfishness and self-centeredness must be expected and entertained, hence discouraged and restrained, rather than naively believed to be eliminable and replaced, hence forgotten and disregarded.

My acceptance of this Christian notion of Original Sin leads me to give the notion of human accountability to other persons the high priority in my social vision. People and institutions must be accountable to the people they purport to serve. This accountability occurs primarily when people have a voice in and control over the people and institutions which serve them. This is why I believe that peoples' participation in the decision-making processes within institutions that regulate and govern their lives is essential for the actualization of the Christian principle of self-realization within community. This principle, along with my acceptance of a Christian notion of Original Sin, renders genuine democratic participation—in the spheres of the production and distribution of goods and services, governmental affairs and cultural activities—indispensable for socialist civilization.

It is worth noting that the formal idea of human accountability to other persons is found in capitalist civilization. This idea is articulated by the liberal vision within capitalist civilization. This vision was—and is—the grandest vision capitalist civilization has to offer. But it is limited to the sphere of governmental affairs (in an abstract way), corrupted by the institutionalization and legitimation of the ideas of white supremacy and male supremacy and rendered nearly obsolete by unaccountable eco-

conomic power principally in the form of unaccountable multinational corporations.

My third theological commitment is to an understanding of the Christian gospel as inescapable penultimate tragedy and the persistent hope for ultimate triumph. I believe that any social vision, political praxis or existential concern must take seriously the tragic aspects of our fallen, finite conditions and circumstances. To take seriously the tragic aspects of being human means to acknowledge the inevitable gap between human aims and human accomplishments, between human aspirations and human achievements. The tragic aspects of being human should not be taken seriously in solely an intellectual way, for such a response leads to an ironic skepticism, cynicism and narcissistic detachment from the lives and plight of others. Instead, the encounter with the tragic aspects of human life must be not simply intellectual but existential—of putting one's whole self in the midst of struggle, responsibility, commitment and engagement.

The inescapable realities of human death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment must be faced with courage and hope. This also holds for the intense class struggles at the heart of capitalist civilization. The acceptance of a Christian notion of Original Sin means that these class struggles will more than likely continue to (or ultimately) take the forms of principled or unprincipled armed struggle. In this sense, human beings are condemned to life-and-death struggles between good and evil, forces of liberation and forces of oppression, with the hope for betterment of the present. And no matter how complex the world is or intricate the situation may be, one must choose sides. For Christians, this choice is grounded theologically in the understanding of the gospel and guided practically by our understanding of our circumstances. As a Christian, my choice is to side with the poor, oppressed, exploited and degraded, with the working classes and underclasses of capitalist civilization. This choice is grounded theologically in the Christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality within community. I understand this principle in light of the prophetic Christian tradition. I view the circumstances of the working classes and underclasses of capitalist civilization in light of the most sophisticated Marxist analysis available and work for the creation of a socialist civilization, which should reflect the best of the prophetic Christian tradition and the progressive Marxist tradition.

I believe this socialist civilization will neither perfect human beings nor eliminate many of the tragic aspects of being human. But it will be much better than our deplorable, abominable capitalist civilization. I also believe that it is a historical possibility, not historical necessity, that this socialist civilization will be established. And given the most probable means of establishing it—namely, ultimately by some form of armed struggle—it may be unlikely that a socialist civilization, which reflects

the best of both traditions, will ever be established. But for the committed prophetic Christian or progressive Marxist, it is a cause worth dying for.

This hope, for committed Christians, is grounded in the ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ. For committed Marxists, this hope rests upon the workings of the historical process. The distinctive identity of the prophetic Christian is that his or her hope—in the face of the tragic aspects of human life and against overwhelming odds in capitalist civilization—is founded on the paradoxical revelation of a transcendent God in historical clothing, who best exemplifies our humanity and provides for our fullest self-realization within community.

I suggest that the adjective “black” describes a crucial aspect of the theological dimension of my critique of capitalist civilization because the role and plight of black people in the emergence, duration and decline of capitalist civilization symbolize the underside of capitalist civilization—the working classes and underclasses of this civilization.

Without denying, overlooking or minimizing the atrocious poverty and abominable oppression of other peoples, I believe that the concrete plight of black people best signifies the inhumanity at the core of capitalist civilization for three basic reasons. First, Afro-Americans (a particular set of black people) are the most proletarianized and urbanized people in capitalist civilization. Over 98% of Afro-Americans are working class (or underclass) people and over 90% of Afro-Americans live in capitalist metropolises. Their working conditions of filth, danger, speed-ups, harassments; living conditions of dilapidated, rat-infested, twenty-story projects, inadequate health care, education and police protection—in the midst of the most prosperous country in the history of the world, in the heart of the monster of capitalist civilization—symbolize the inhumanity at the core of this civilization.

Second, black people represent an exploited yet believing people, an oppressed yet Christianized people. The Black Church is the central institution in the black community and this is especially so for the black lower working class and underclass. This Black Church principally stands for a gospel which identifies Jesus Christ as the one who liberates people from death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment out of a strong sense of dignity and self-worth. In this sense, the plight of black people and their Christian-inspired fight against oppression serves as an appropriate symbol for prophetic Christians regarding the inhumanity of capitalistic civilization and the Christians’ struggle against it.

Third, and this holds for black people wherever and whenever capitalist civilization has impinged upon their lives. Black people, I suggest, are unique among oppressed peoples in capitalist civilization in that they have not only suffered imperialist and class exploitation (and black women sexual oppression), but, also have had to endure racial oppression

which takes the form of denying the basic humanity of black people, a continual and systematic denial of membership in the human family. The "authority" of this denial is unprecedented in capitalist civilization. It has been supported and promoted for over two centuries in "scientific" textbooks, the halls of higher learning (from Oxford to Harvard, the Sorbonne to the University of Berlin), the Royal Academies of Science, popular folklore, national constitutions, legal documents, encyclopedias, film, television, radio, and, we must not forget, in the pulpits of Christian churches. No other oppressed people in capitalist civilization have had their humanity attacked and assaulted to this extent. In this regard, the plight of black people symbolizes the very worst and most inhumane aspects of capitalist civilization.

Is it providential that the first major industry to be revolutionized, the cotton industry, and hence to establish one of the earth pillars of capitalist civilization, was built primarily upon the blood, sweat and tears of black people? And that two centuries later, the plight of black people would not only symbolize the underside of this civilization, but that the adjective "black" would describe a crucial aspect of the theological dimension of a critique that seeks to undermine and promote the demise of this civilization—with a black triumph in South Africa more than likely hastening this demise? In the words of my black Baptist tradition, "God indeed works in strange and mysterious ways."