

Paths to critical theory

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I came to politics in the 60s from a black leftist household—Catholic, liberal-left mother and the Party not too far back in my father's past. When I left home for good, in college, he was still conducting a bitter fight through the

mail with Sidney Hook, an old professor toward whom he maintained a reciprocated enmity.

Circumstances often had us in situations that made issues of the day alive and tangible: New York, where we lived the Wallace and Marcantonio campaigns; Washington, where we worried about loyalty oaths, wiretaps and witch-hunts in the McCarthy years. Somewhere along the way I remember crying at my mother's explanation of the Rosenbergs' plight; a son was my age. The White House evoked fear as well as awe as I fed squirrels across the street. My father's first teaching job had us forty miles from Little Rock when Central High was integrated; when the 101st Airborne was flown in to protect the integrating students. Black troops weren't allowed to do riot duty and were deposited at an arsenal near us, from which they served as a color guard at my father's college's football games.

My high school years were in New Orleans, where I experienced the revolution in Cuba and its aftermath with an otherwise very conventional grandfather who privately vented his nationalist pride at Castro's victory. With the Missile Crisis the witch-hunting fears returned as we fretted that he might be deported.

One of the first six schools in the city to be integrated was around the corner from my house, and I had to walk past dogs, barricades and police to take the bus to school. Our principal kept us in late to stop us from fighting with hostile Irish and Italian teenagers downtown.

Predictably, therefore, the books that stand out to me from the 60s didn't really shatter illusions about the United States or "our way of life" or capitalism; they structured thinking that was confused and ambivalent between the old left and the new. Identification with Marxism was hardly new; I had thought of myself as a Marxist since deciding against the priesthood in early adolescence—defense of the Soviet Union as the hope of the world's oppressed and all that. (I was well into my twenties before realizing that 1956 in Hungary was not simply the likes of Zsa Zsa Gabor trying to overthrow workers' power.)

When the Black Power storm swept the airwaves, Malcolm X spoke to my spirit and Carmichael captured the rage I felt; I yearned, as did so many others, to spit with him into the faces of power. Black power was murky as a political program, and I waited for a systematic articulation, only to be disappointed when the Carmichael and Hamilton *Black Power* tract finally appeared as very ordinary pluralist claptrap cum rhetorical flourish.

Around this time I discovered Fanon, via a copy of *Wretched of the Earth* that my parents had around the house. Sartre's wild introduction was properly cathartic; however, the famous chapter that all the "militants" were to appropriate (apparently without having read it) for their side of the absurd violence/nonviolence debate struck me as a powerful statement of the dehumanizing effects of oppression. More impressive still was the "Pit-

falls of National Consciousness” chapter that gave new fire to my rejection of the class bias of civil rights—and eventually Black Power—ideology. I read Fanon compulsively and flirted with the colonial analogy.

Other authors come to mind from that period: Cleaver, whose *Ram-parts* essays I read with interest, though I didn’t quite know what to feel about *Soul on Ice* (I should have known: rape, after all, is simply rape and cannot be dressed up as anything less vile); Laing, whose *Politics of Experience* was perhaps a curious impetus to begin to read Freud through eyes other than Stalin’s; Baran & Sweezy, who grounded a critique of American society in empirical political economy and economic history and reinforced what I didn’t yet realize was becoming a leaning toward Third Worldism. I believe that I first read *One-Dimensional Man* around that time but didn’t really appreciate Marcuse until later; I simply grafted him onto Fanon, Baran & Sweezy and a still orthodox reading of Marx. The hodge-podge of this list reflects both the rapid pace of time and the swirling ambivalence—between old and new lefts, Marxist orthodoxy and nationalism—that lived in my head.

In the midst of this swirl, several months prior to the King assassination I jumped into the Trotskyist movement and became an SWP youth group campus operative. Fittingly, this first new left organizational affiliation was “new in form, old in essence”. The attraction to Trotskyism signalled, in addition to something like generational rebelliousness, some feeble internalization of my peers’ rejection of what Jacoby calls “conformist Marxism” as well as a growing desire to act, also characteristic of the time.

The Trotskyist affiliation triggered the first shock of a two-stage paradigm crisis. My old-new left ambivalence left me with strong commitments to the antiwar movement, rigid class analysis and black power nationalism simultaneously; the thoroughly opportunist SWP was the only entity in the black or white lefts that sought to appeal to all three dispositions. Still, the anomaly of advocacy of nationalist organizing from within the white-dominated Trotskyist movement weighed steadily heavier. This burden was exacerbated by the clearly manipulative posture of the organization vis-à-vis racial issues, conflicts over the proper focus of political work, and, God forbid, a silent but no less guilt-inducing reluctance to submit to centralist discipline. My alienation grew, and finally, after an arduous strike of non-academic university employees, which did not fit the SWP’s priority of recruiting antiwar students, I encountered one of the two books of the decade that was both liberating and clarifying: Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

Timing may have had something to do with it. If I had read Cruse a year earlier, I might have glossed his insights. However, his critical reconstruction of the subordinate and manipulated status of black communists within the Party in the pre-World War II years cemented my decision to

sever the Trotskyist connection. His critique also crystallized for me much of the recent experience of the left, especially as the Black Panther/SDS nexus had begun to erode the one really important programmatic stance of black power, i.e., the cruciality of autonomous black political organization. Moreover, Cruse's historicized critique of Black Power and his interpretation of Afro-American social thought as a century's debate between nationalist and integrationist tendencies were powerful orienting ideas for many, but not enough, of us then. If one book stands out as seminal in its attempt to locate our efforts in the historical context that we so desperately needed, it is Cruse's *Crisis*. Another volume of equal quality is Lasch's *Agony of the American Left*. Lasch's book did for the left in general what Cruse's did for black radicalism; and in this sense *Agony of the American Left* is a companion piece to the *Crisis*, as Lasch's acknowledgement indicates.

Shortly before reading Cruse, my unstable, ambivalent synthesis received a major jolt from SDS's proclamation of the Black Panther Party (BPP) as the "vanguard of the black liberation struggle." Julius Lester responded in his *Guardian* column, charging SDS with paternalism in designating black vanguards. Kathleen Cleaver replied with what I recall as an outrageous, ad hominem attack on Lester in SDS's *New Left Notes*. At that point the Panthers made clear that they had opted for their tragic style of embodying the nihilistic fantasies of their white leftist allies. No amount of exaltation of and exulting in the imagery of the noble black revolutionary savage (what else was the cult of the "lumpen," which ironically has remained with us in depoliticized form as the suburban racist image of the "bad" ghetto buck ready to kick white ass?) could paper over the condition of clientage that mediated the Panthers' relation to their white patrons. My affinity for the BPP, which I'd hoped would generate an autonomous black Marxism, and their white supporters evaporated. Cruse blew away the residual vapors with his breath of fresh critical air.

Shortly thereafter I left the campus to work on a black GI/community organizing project that was part of the GI Coffeehouse movement. I remember Earl Ofari's *The Myth of Black Capitalism*; James Boggs' various writings, and Robert Allen's ultimately disappointing *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, along with Lester's work—which I still respect—for opening the dialogue with my co-workers who wore a skin-thin anti-Marxism they inherited from Pan-Africanism. Apart from these writings, I turned increasingly toward the third world, focusing on imperialism.

The final irony in this overly long tale is that as I became ill at ease about Leninism—and felt guilty about these petit-bourgeois doubts—my Pan-Africanist colleagues found Marxism in its most stultifying and dogmatic variety, Marxism-Leninism with Maoist slant. This is the context within which I encountered Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*. Leninism's elitism and denigration of consciousness had increasingly troubled me, but I feared I had no recourse without sacrificing a radical theoretical commitment.

Korsch opened an entirely new vista, the “hidden dimension” of Western Marxism, and led to Lukács, a serious reading of Marcuse and eventually the critical theoretical tradition.

Then, as the Ford Foundation broke up our community organizing efforts and the movement dried up around me, I went off, like so many others in similar condition, to the university to try to make sense of what had happened and what to do next. Like most of the others, I’ve been lurking around there pretty much ever since.